

'Superfluous Cheerfulness':
An Exploration of Henry Thoreau's Optimism

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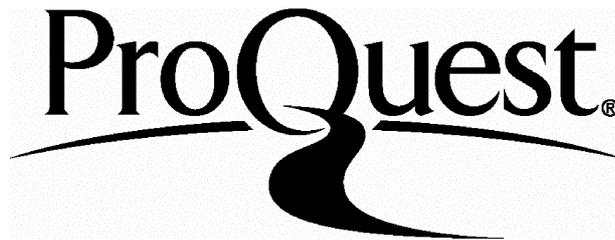
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ABSTRACT

My thesis explores the expression and development of Henry Thoreau's optimism throughout his work, with particular emphasis on the forms it takes in the *Journal* of the 1850s. The critical method I have used in this study is contextualised close reading. Thoreau's optimism, which can be described as his delight in the richness of life and determination to realise its possibilities, is not straightforward, as he is always haunted by a sense of imperfection. No matter how deeply nature thrills him or how far he advances in the direction of his dreams, he never feels quite contented; his hopes tend to overshoot the boundaries of the possible. Although Thoreau's basic desire to make the most of life remains the same, the ways in which he acts on this impulse change radically over the years. Each chapter focuses on one manifestation of his life-long search for fulfilment, starting with the extreme idealism of his early writing and his equally high-minded preoccupation with self-improvement in later youth. Subsequent chapters, which concentrate on the work of the 1850s, explore topics such as how Thoreau's optimism is affected by the transition around 1850 to a more objective approach to nature; his inclination to look ahead and anticipate seasons in the early 1850s; his longing for moments of intensity throughout his writing career; the more earthbound delight he takes in close contact with nature; the all-too-ambitious hopes he attaches to his late chronicling of the progress of the seasons; and the more serene optimism so beautifully embodied by one of his last objects of study, seeds.

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In memory of Snöfrid,
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An extract from Chapter 7 was presented as 'The Ecology of Thoreau's Late Landscape: Resilient but at Risk' at a conference devoted to *Literature and the Natural Environment*, University of Wales, Swansea, March 1997.

ABBREVIATIONS

Thoreau's works:

<i>CC</i>	<i>Cape Cod</i>
<i>Corr</i>	<i>Correspondence</i>
<i>CP</i>	<i>Collected Poems</i>
<i>EEM</i>	<i>Early Essays and Miscellanies</i>
<i>Ex</i>	<i>Excursions</i>
<i>FS</i>	<i>Faith in a Seed</i>
<i>Journal 1-5</i>	<i>Journal</i> (in the Princeton edition)
<i>Journal I-XIV</i>	<i>Journal</i> (in the 1906 Walden edition, 1962 Dover reprint)
<i>MW</i>	<i>The Maine Woods</i>
<i>RP</i>	<i>Reform Papers</i>
<i>Walden</i>	<i>Walden</i>
<i>Week</i>	<i>A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers</i>

Emerson's works:

<i>CL</i>	<i>Conduct of Life</i>
<i>EL I-III</i>	<i>The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson</i>
<i>EFS</i>	<i>Essays: First Series</i>
<i>ESS</i>	<i>Essays: Second Series</i>
<i>LBS</i>	<i>Lectures and Biographical Sketches</i>
<i>NAL</i>	<i>Nature, Addresses, Lectures</i>
<i>RM</i>	<i>Representative Men</i>

Other frequently cited works:

Harding	Walter Harding, <i>The Days of Henry Thoreau</i>
Paul	Sherman Paul, <i>The Shores of America</i>
Peck	H. Daniel Peck, <i>Thoreau's Morning Work</i>

Full bibliographical citations may be found in the *Works Consulted* section.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

I have used the Princeton edition of Henry Thoreau's Journal for entries up to March 8, 1853. This edition (five volumes to date) is indicated by Arabic numerals. For the remaining part of the Journal, I have relied on Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen's 1906 edition (1962 reprint in two volumes by Dover Publications), indicated by Roman numerals. See *Works Consulted* for full bibliographical details.

The text of Thoreau's writings has in almost all cases been quoted verbatim. 'Sic' has only been added when it seemed absolutely essential for ease of understanding, and occasionally a punctuation mark or other addition is supplied in square brackets. Any unacknowledged mistakes or other peculiarities can therefore be assumed to be Thoreau's own. Unless otherwise indicated, the emphasis in quoted text is the author's own.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most obvious, and yet most neglected, facts about Henry Thoreau is the role his optimism plays in his life and writing. A sense of possibility informs his every endeavour. It is a key motivating factor behind enterprises as diverse as his first literary efforts, his two-year settlement at Walden and his dedicated attention to nature in later life. Thoreau's optimism is closely related to his enjoyment of the world around him and sense of its inexhaustible beauty. The landscape seems so infinitely rich and full of wonder that sustained dejection would be an inappropriate response. Thoreau rarely succumbs to pessimism for more than short periods of time; his joy at living is so strong that it withstands occasional set-backs and can swiftly be restored. His hopes, on the other hand, often overshoot the boundaries of the possible. Moments of enraptured appreciation satisfy him, but they also make him long for more; for an existence that is better still, and that would be attainable if only the current mood could be sustained. Thoreau can be called optimistic because he never loses sight of the possibilities the world presents or the hope of living a life that is 'greater' (that is, more receptive and intense) than his present one. When his confidence is at its most extreme, it knows no bounds. As he puts it in one of his central statements about man's potential, the 'Conclusion' to *Walden*: 'The life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it' (*Walden*, p.332).

The optimism of other American mid-nineteenth century writers of affirmation, in particular Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, has received some attention, but Thoreau's optimism is rarely mentioned and has never been studied as an independent topic.¹ This may be because he does not announce it as boldly or in as universal terms as they do. He never calls it by name or suggests that the tragedies of life pale in the light of universal joy, as Emerson sometimes does and as Whitman's sweeping poetic visions imply.² Despite the extravagance of Thoreau's hopes, his optimism is more limited and realistic than that of Emerson and Whitman. Its scope is smaller and more private; he is primarily intent upon enhancing his own life and can be satisfied, at least on some levels, with the beauty he finds close by (which, for a Transcendentalist, provides a direct link to beauty on a more cosmic scale). In matters of optimism, as in most areas, Thoreau is prone to self-contradiction. For every statement he makes, the opposite claim can usually be found somewhere in his writings. Any reading of his work has to take this (carefully cultivated) habit into account. It is an approach that makes it possible for him to be *both* contented and dissatisfied with his state. It could also be argued that Thoreau's self-contradiction amounts to an act of rebellion against the very idea of fixedness.

¹ The most recent book-length study of Emerson's optimism is Gertrude Reif Hughes's *Emerson's Demanding Optimism* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1984). The subject was also frequently discussed around the turn of the century. Optimism has not been as thoroughly considered by Whitman scholars, but Arthur E. Briggs, among others, has written at some length about Whitman's optimism in *Walt Whitman: Thinker and Artist* (1952). He claims, for example, that Whitman 'with only human hope, with only faith in man, maintained an optimistic spirit despite his consciousness of the misfit of things in the realm of Nature, in God's Universe. Whitman could believe that in the large view of the Future it would end well' (Arthur E. Briggs, *Walt Whitman: Thinker and Artist* [New York: Philosophical Library, 1952], p.378).

² See for example section 15 of *Song of Myself*, in which Whitman surveys a cross-section of the American people and embraces them all alike. By accepting and levelling everyone and each phenomenon in the world, he (generously) avoids the very need for making judgements. For one of Emerson's most emphatic statements about his faith in the universe, see 'Compensation' in *Essays: First Series* (I discuss his ideas below, pp.15-19).

Nature itself is not fixed but infinitely rich and in constant flux, so why should his life and opinions have to be set in some narrow way? Through the rhetorical strategy of contradiction, Thoreau affirms the essential multiplicity and ambivalence of all things, optimism and attainment included.³

Even though Thoreau frequently yearns for something as unobtainable as perfection, he also seeks to realise his hopes by contracting rather than expanding the range of his desires. For example, he almost always concentrates his efforts on pursuits that are congenial to him, such as writing and observing nature. By embracing his own state in this way, to the exclusion of the alien and remote, the ideal life he so vividly imagines becomes more attainable. Figuratively speaking, he pulls the sky a bit nearer, and his particular spot of the world is enhanced in proportion to the amount of pleasure he takes in it. The beauty of Thoreau's optimism lies in the fact that it can easily provide its own rewards. The act of wanting so much from life heightens his experience of it and moves him closer to 'happiness' and fulfilment. Perhaps hope is, as he suggests, self-fulfilling: 'What is hope, what is expectation, but a seed-time whose harvest cannot fail, an irresistible expedition of the mind, at length to be victorious?' (*Journal IX*, p.275).

Thoreau's optimism can be defined in more specific terms as a tendency to expect the utmost from each day. This outlook is often curiously independent of external sources. Although Thoreau is interested and delighted in the fine details of the world around him, his hopes also thrive on hope itself; expectation is self-perpetuating and provides its own justification. His optimism is particularly striking in the work of the

³ Thoreau's affirmation of self-contradiction has much in common with Whitman's approach, which is summed up in the famous statement towards the end of 'Song of Myself': 'Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)' (Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. J. Loving [Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990], p.78).

1830s and 1840s, but it continues to be a dominant force throughout his life (as he approaches the end, he envisages even impending death as a source of joy and satisfaction). It is however difficult to determine to what extent Thoreau's Journal statements, his self-presentation in writing, can be taken as a reliable guide to his feelings. The apparent transparency of the diary form he used, which seems to provide a 'window into the soul' of its author, is to some extent misleading. It is undermined for example by the fact that the Journal, like many Transcendental diaries, was never meant to be kept private (Emerson, for one, read parts of it). Thoreau would have been very conscious of how he presented himself, seeking to create a persona that could withstand scrutiny both by others and by himself, one of his most severe critics. When discussing Thoreau's optimism, it is therefore the (carefully selected) attitudes and feelings he chose to preserve in writing I have in mind, his actual sentiments being forever hidden from view.

Judging by the Journal record, Thoreau's optimism goes through many stages. It changes and matures, and slips out of view at times, but it never loses momentum for long. Even though some of his preoccupations change, as when his early extreme idealism gradually disappears from his work in the 1840s, his aspiration remains constant. He is adept at transforming misfortune by a change of viewpoint, a shift that is made easier by an underlying faith in the way the world is ordered (a faith Emerson possesses to an even greater extent). When one of Thoreau's endeavours failed, as they frequently did in the early parts of his life, he was always ready to embrace a new and slightly different ambition, through which he could restore his hopes in a more or less untainted form.⁴

⁴ When Thoreau's brief spell of teaching at the Center School in 1837 ended in disagreement and he could not find any other work, he responded by turning to other pursuits, such as poetry writing, Journal keeping and involvement with the Concord Transcendentalists. The following year, he founded his own school with his brother. Later set-backs, such as his unhappiness as a tutor on Staten Island in 1843 and the failure of *Week*, affected him perhaps more deeply, but he was rarely at his wits' end, not even

This applies equally to his attempts to make a living and to his writing projects, areas that often coincide. If the rosiness of Thoreau's optimism is a healthy glow or the heightened hue of fever is open to debate. It is most probably both; after all, there would be no hope without a degree of illusion, and no life without hope. Thoreau urgently needed there to be hope and pushed himself to his limits to maintain his high expectations and, ideally, realise some of his dreams.

The fact that Thoreau's life was fuelled by optimism is at least partly a conscious choice. He may have been born with a natural propensity for this outlook and brought up in a way which encouraged it, but his determination to cultivate his optimism is indicative of a desire to make his life worthwhile in its smallest details. Choosing optimism means choosing life. If some of the more negative aspects of life have to be ignored to sustain this attitude, so be it. As William James puts it in 'The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness' in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 'systematic healthy-mindedness, conceiving good as the essential and universal aspect of being, deliberately excludes evil from its field of vision'.⁵ This act is perhaps morally dishonest but also quite natural, as 'evil' does not seem real when happiness prevails. According to James, we have to shut out the pervasive scent of the tragic to be able to be optimistic, or at least convert tragedy into a bracing good. His passage on this process is worth quoting at length:

Much of what we call evil is due entirely to the way men take the phenomenon. It can so often be converted into a bracing and tonic good by a simple change of the sufferer's inner attitude from one of fear to one of fight ... Refuse to admit their badness; despise their power; ignore their presence; turn your attention the other way; and so far as you yourself are concerned at any rate, though the facts

when by any logic he should have been. He had many resources, as his answer to the tenth anniversary questionnaire from his Harvard Class makes clear: 'I am a Schoolmaster—a private Tutor, a Surveyor—a Gardener, a Farmer—a Painter, I mean a House Painter, a Carpenter, a Mason, a Day-Laborer, a Pencil-Maker, a Glass-paper Maker, a Writer, and sometimes a Poetaster' (quoted in Harding, p.220).

⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London, New York and Bombay: Longman's, Green, and Co., 1902), p.88.

may still exist, their evil character no longer exists. Since you make them evil or good by your own thoughts about them, it is the ruling of your thoughts which proves to be your principal concern.

The deliberate adoption of an optimistic turn of mind thus makes its entrance into philosophy. And once in, it is hard to trace its lawful bounds. Not only does the human instinct for happiness, bent on self-protection by ignoring, keep working in its favor, but higher inner ideals have weighty words to say. The attitude of unhappiness is not only painful, it is mean and ugly. What can be more base and unworthy than the pining, puling, mumping mood, no matter by what outward ills it may have been engendered?⁶

Thoreau would certainly have agreed with James's opinion about the unworthiness of deliberately sustained unhappiness, considering the beauty of the world and the miracle of existence. Furthermore, one can often see the process James describes at work in Thoreau's writing. In 'Autumnal Tints', Thoreau considers the fall of leaves as an occasion for rejoicing. The potential 'evil character' of autumnal death (its connotations of ending and transience) is suppressed in his future-oriented description of autumn as a harvest time:

Consider what a vast crop is thus annually shed on the earth! This, more than any mere grain or seed, is the great harvest of the year. The trees are now repaying the earth with interest what they have taken from it ... We are all the richer for their decay ... It prepares the virgin mould for future cornfields and forests, on which the earth fattens. (*Ex*, pp.329-30)

The option to take a positive view of events in this way is often within our power, and whether we do so or not is a matter of choice. Thoreau, more often than not, chose to do so, and this willingness to hope and trust made him, like the earth, 'all the richer'.

Living an optimistic life is thus a matter of looking at events in a favourable rather than a negative light, and this can be done either consciously or unconsciously. In the one entry in the Journal that the editors of the 1906 edition, Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, list under 'optimism' in the index, Thoreau sides with hope rather than despair. His response is due at least as much to deliberate determination as to temperament, as his account of the event suggests:

⁶ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp.88-89.

Hosmer is overhauling a vast heap of manure in the rear of his barn, turning the ice within it up to the light; yet he asks despairingly what life is for, and says he does not expect to stay here long. But I have just come from reading Columella, who describes the same kind of spring work, in that to him new spring of the world, with hope, and *I suggest to be brave and hopeful* with nature. Human life may be transitory and full of trouble, but the perennial mind, whose survey extends from that spring to this, from Columella to Hosmer, is superior to change. I *will* identify myself with that which did not die with Columella and *will not* die with Hosmer. (*Journal VIII*, p.245; April 3, 1856; my emphasis)

By deliberately taking a longer perspective and emphasising the advantages of labour that may seem pointless in the short term, Thoreau side-steps the impulse to despair. His chosen optimism shields him from despondency; at the very least, it stops him from sinking too low. Sustained over a lifetime, this approach grows into a secure and near-indestructible stance; Thoreau readily retains his optimism by focusing on the most positive implications of events. According to the definition of optimism in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Second Edition, 1989), one of the three main meanings of the word is to take the most positive aspects of events to heart ('3. Disposition to hope for the best or to look on the bright side of things; general tendency to take a favourable view of circumstances or prospects'). When discussing Thoreau's optimism, this is the sense of the word I primarily have in mind, for this is exactly what he does. He is intent on the best and looks to the bright side of things, keen to cultivate an optimism that is strong enough to guide him through life.

The origin of the word 'optimism' and its other meanings are however also significant. The first sense relates to Leibnitz's coining of the word in the *Theodicy*, which was published in 1710. He used it to describe the doctrine that the actual world is the 'best of all possible worlds', as it was chosen by the Creator out of all the possible worlds that were present in his thoughts 'as that in which the most good could be obtained at the cost of the least evil'. It has subsequently been 'applied to any view which supposes the ultimate predominance of good over evil in the universe' (*Oxford English*

Dictionary).⁷ This original meaning of the word is not as far-fetched in relation to Thoreau's optimism as it may seem. Some of Emerson's statements, which influenced Thoreau strongly in his formative years, amount to a modern version of the doctrine that everything in this world is for the best, regardless of its immediate result.⁸ Emerson's

⁷ See for example Part One of 'Essays on the Justice of God and the Freedom of Man in the Origin of Evil' in the *Theodicy*, where Leibnitz sets forth the core of his argument about this world being the best of all possible worlds. He tries to convince the reader through pleading and reasoned argument rather than tangible evidence, thus acknowledging the uncertainty of our knowledge of such matters ('It is true that one may imagine possible worlds without sin and without unhappiness, and one could make some like Utopian or Sevarambian romances: but these same worlds again would be very inferior to ours in goodness. I cannot show you this in detail. For can I know and can I present infinities to you and compare them together? But you must judge with me *ab effectu*, since God has chosen the world as it is. We know, moreover, that often an evil brings forth a good whereto one would not have attained without that evil' [G.W. Leibnitz, *Theodicy*, ed. by Austin Farrer and tr. by E.M. Huggard (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1951), p.129]). This is however not the place for a full discussion of Leibnitz's concept of optimism or Voltaire's subsequent debunking of systematic hopefulness in *Candide* (1759), which brought the word into common usage. Voltaire's mockery of optimism can be summed up by a brief exchange between Candide and Cacambo on the borders of Surinam, after the encounter with a mistreated negro who has lost both a leg and a hand:

'Oh, Pangloss!' cried Candide, 'thou hadst not guessed at this abomination; it is the end. I must at last renounce thy optimism.'

'What is this optimism?' said Cacambo.

'Alas!' said Candide, 'it is the madness of maintaining that everything is right when it is wrong.' (Voltaire, *Candide*, Anonymous tr, [New York, Dover Publications Inc, 1991], p.49)

⁸ For some of Emerson's most unequivocal statements of his hyper-optimistic beliefs, see for example 'Compensation' and 'Spiritual Laws' in *EFS*. Although Emerson does not mention the *Theodicy* in his Journal, he was familiar with some of Leibnitz's works. During his early years of Journal-keeping (c.1819 to the mid-1840s) and occasionally thereafter, he refers to Leibnitz at least a few times in each volume, often in favourable terms. In November 1838 for example, he mentions Leibnitz (and Bacon) as examples of authors who retain their value and will not be surpassed, even by the most magnificent new inspiration: 'when we receive it [the new thought] we are beatified for the time. We seem to be capable of all thought. We are on a level with all Intelligences. We cast all books & teachers behind us. What have I to do with means, when I am in the presence of the Infinite Light? And yet familiar as that state of mind is [,] the books of Bacon & Leibnitz still retain their value from age to age' (Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. VII*, ed. A.W. Plumstead & Harrison Hayford [Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969], p.160).

faith in the essential justice of nature is transferred to Thoreau, who seldom doubts the way the natural world is ordered. In the Transcendental landscape Thoreau first came to know, every object is a direct correlative of a grand spiritual fact and hence utterly good, as it reflects divine power. Nature is furthermore an intimate force that can be trusted, not necessarily in theological terms but because the principle of life that perpetuates it is beyond criticism, even if it also takes tragic and destructive forms. This does not mean that Thoreau is blind to tragedy (in Leibnitz's terms, evil) or necessarily tries to rationalise it away, as Emerson sometimes does. Thoreau inherits Emerson's world view and adopts Emersonian ideas uncritically in the early stages of his work, but the nature of his optimism is different. It does not operate in as detached and analytical a way as his mentor's. Thoreau is too conscious of imperfection, in particular the imperfection of man, and too keen to address difficulties to be an optimist in any sense that resembles the pure tradition of Leibnitz (as he puts it in *Walden*, 'If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business' [p.98]). Thoreau's optimism resides in the fact that he wants things to be better and incessantly tries to make them so, not that he thinks that they are perfect as they are. His work draws much of its energy from this urgent sense of discrepancy between the actual and the ideal.

Emerson often seeks to rationalise misfortune by stepping back from it and setting it in a larger context, a cool-headed (and even cold-hearted) distancing that can undo the very need for grief.⁹ Thoreau faces adversity more directly, sometimes so directly that he

⁹ For an example of Emerson's approach, consider the attitude he proposes at the beginning of 'Spiritual Laws': 'When the act of reflection takes place in the mind, when we look at ourselves in the light of thought, we discover that our life is embosomed in beauty ... The soul will not know either deformity or pain. If in the hours of clear reason we should speak the severest truth, we should say that we had never made a sacrifice. In these hours the mind seems so great that nothing can be taken from us that seems much.'

is thrown into periods of depression or illness by it.¹⁰ But although personal and professional misfortunes affect him deeply, he never loses heart for long. His innate hopefulness, combined with his determination to be happy and the general heady optimism that fuels the Transcendental movement, ensure that there is little chance of any deep or enduring pessimism establishing a foothold. His trust is too great for that. Some small part of him probably does believe, like Emerson, that the universe is a carefully ordered place where things ultimately work out for the best.¹¹ Many of Emerson's *Essays: First Series* are suffused with this belief. 'Compensation' and 'Spiritual Laws' in particular emphasise the balance and justice of all things. In 'Compensation', Emerson goes as far as to claim that every negative event will have a corresponding positive result, so that each calamity can be seen as the beginning of a movement towards a 'good' outcome.¹² If all disappointments are outweighed by an equivalent amount of hope, a thorough and

All loss, all pain, is particular; the universe remains to the heart unhurt. Neither vexations nor calamities abate our trust. No man ever stated his griefs as lightly as he might ... For it is only the finite that has wrought and suffered; the infinite lies stretched in smiling repose' (*EFS*, pp.131-32).

¹⁰ When Thoreau's brother died suddenly after a razor cut in January 1842, Thoreau was so deeply shocked that he was stricken for weeks with paralytic symptoms that resembled his brother's lock-jaw. He then became severely depressed for most of the following spring, a state that is confirmed by the absence of Journal entries during this period (contrary to his normal habits, he did not write at all). Thoreau was completely thrown off course by this tragic event. At this early stage of his life, he was almost too sensitive and open to pain.

¹¹ In a discussion of Transcendental diarists, who include Emerson and Thoreau, Lawrence Buell points out that they were less likely to experience the overwhelming soul-struggles of traditional confession-writers (such as Augustine, Bunyan and Payson): 'They do of course confess to feelings of spiritual malaise, but for the most part they exhibit a basic serenity or optimism about their spiritual state which keeps their vision focused on the design of the universe rather than their own alienation from it' (Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973], pp.281-82).

¹² This essay contains some of Emerson's most extreme pronouncements along these lines, such as a description of the world as 'a multiplication-table, or a mathematical equation, which, turn it how you will, balances itself' (*EFS*, p.102).

fundamental optimism about the human condition is the logical conclusion.¹³

Emerson's optimism is seemingly unstoppable. He often embraces his hopes to the point of disregarding the past and the present. As he puts it in 'Compensation', 'The soul refuses limits, and always affirms an Optimism, never a Pessimism' (*EFS*, p.122). This approach can have curious results. At times, Emerson appears to be exactly the kind of optimist Voltaire mocks in Pangloss in *Candide*, the incurable idealist who utterly fails to take the facts of the situation into account. He is, for example, reported by Edward Everett Hale to have made the following remark about a good, young student:

I did not know that he was so fine a fellow. And now, if something will fall out amiss,— if he should be unpopular with his class, or if his father should fail in business, or if some other misfortune can befall him,— all will be well.¹⁴

Seeing only good when the events at hand are far from good is the absurd result of optimism taken too far. In *Cosmic Optimism*, Frederic William Conner comments on this incident, which he regards as a typical expression of Transcendental beliefs: 'This approaches caricature, to be sure, but the view of evil that it illustrates was not limited to Emerson or to an eccentric few. Rather it was the principal ethical consequence — some would say the *reductio ad absurdum* — of the century's transcendentalism'.¹⁵ According to Conner, the whole Transcendental movement could be characterised by Panglossian blindness to evil, a simplifying but fairly plausible conclusion.

¹³ See in particular 'Self-Reliance' in *Essays: First Series* for one of Emerson's most sustained and emphatic statements about man's ability to reshape and take charge of his fate. For a similar radical optimism regarding the possibilities of language, see *Nature* (1836).

¹⁴ Quoted by Frederick William Conner from H.D. Gray's *Emerson* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1917) in *Cosmic Optimism: A Study of the Interpretation of Evolution by American Poets from Emerson to Robinson* (Philadelphia: University of Florida Press, 1949), p.63.

¹⁵ *Cosmic Optimism*, p.63.

Many of Emerson's statements support Conner's view. In one of the most affirmative essays in *Essays: First Series*, 'Circles', he describes a predominance of 'the principle of good' both in nature and in the current moral climate:

I own I am gladdened by seeing the predominance of the saccharine principle throughout vegetable nature, and not less by beholding in morals that unrestrained inundation of the principle of good into every chink and hole that selfishness has left open, yea, into selfishness and sin itself; so that no evil is pure, nor hell itself without its extreme satisfactions. (*EFS*, pp.317-18)

Emerson's faith in the existence of such a 'saccharine principle' in the New England of his day, a faith that brings extreme hopes as well as 'extreme satisfactions', would be tried and tested by later experiences. It had already survived early misfortunes such as the death of his first wife less than two years into their marriage, and was about to be confronted with an even more devastating event: the death of his son Waldo in January 1842, soon after the publication of *Essays: First Series*. At its most extreme, Emerson's optimistic creed supplants religion. It provides a way of accommodating adversity so that it does not hurt him too much – an explanation of the ways of the world that is clearly influenced by the intellectual climate of the times. In *The American Idea: The Literary Response to American Optimism*, Everett Carter draws a link between Emerson's stance and nineteenth century mentality in general:

The basis for Emerson's hope for the future was a radical optimism that saw a completely beneficent universe; for Emerson life, joy, resurrection, comedy were positive; evil, terror, agony, tragedy were negative ... Since for him the world is not whim but order and plan and since the nineteenth-century mind must perceive it as such, there could be no basis for the tragic form.¹⁶

However hard to accept this refusal to take heed of tragedy may seem today, to Emerson, it was a system of belief that had cultural precedents (notably in Puritan conceptions of Providence) and made sense partly for this reason. Thoreau's attitude towards the tragic is more realistic, just as his universe is a far less well ordered place. Reading William

¹⁶ Everett Carter, *The American Idea: The Literary Response to American Optimism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), pp.81-82.

Gilpin in September 1852, he comments in the *Journal*: 'Some tragedy, at least some dwelling on—or even exaggeration of, the tragic side of life is necessary for contrast or relief to the picture ... The whole of life is seen by some through this darker medium—partakes of the tragic—and its bright & splendid lights become thus lurid' (*Journal 5*, p.330). The tragic should be emphasised rather than denied, as it serves as a necessary counterpoint to an excessively bright view of life. However, Thoreau clearly does not identify with those who see life exclusively through this medium, as his use of 'some' and 'lurid' suggests.

An optimistic faith in the possibilities of man is one of the key aspects of the Transcendental credo, and this requires a degree of suppression of the sense of the tragic. The vehemence with which some of the 'minor' Transcendentalists defend their optimistic stance can be seen for example in a letter George Ripley sent to *The Boston Daily Advertiser* in reply to Andrews [sic] Norton, which contains a denunciation of sceptical philosophy, including that of Voltaire:

Our differences of opinion arise from a radical difference in our philosophical views. You are a disciple of the school which was founded by Locke – the successor of Hobbes and the precursor of Condillac and Voltaire. For that philosophy I have no respect. I believe it to be superficial, irreligious and false in its primary elements. The evils it has brought upon humanity, by denying to the mind the power of perceiving spiritual truth, are great and lamentable. They have crept over Theology, Literature, Art, and Society. This age has no higher mission than to labor for their cure.¹⁷

Ripley has no time for pessimism and doubt, however well justified and rationally argued it might be. Reading passages of this kind, it is easy to see why the Transcendentalists are often defined by their optimism by later commentators. Modern literary historians tend to

¹⁷ George Ripley, letter in *The Boston Daily Advertiser*, Nov. 3 1836, reprinted in Perry Miller (ed.), *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1950), p.163. In his distrust of Enlightenment philosophy, Ripley followed in the footsteps of some of the English Romantics. Blake, for instance, wrote just as disparagingly of Voltaire and Rousseau's irreligious beliefs in the short poem 'Mock on, Mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau', which appears in his *Notebooks*.

single out the hopefulness of the Transcendentalists' world view as a defining factor,¹⁸ an identification that has long been current in discussions of the period. When listing the most important concepts adopted by the Transcendentalists in *The Rise of Transcendentalism, 1815-1860*, Alexander Kern includes 'an optimism about the potentialities of individual lives and the universe' as his concluding point.¹⁹ At the end of the nineteenth century, the Transcendental movement was often criticised for asserting a limp and facile optimism, as Perry Miller points out in the introduction to his anthology of key documents, *The Transcendentalists*:

...in America of the late nineteenth century, when religion became less of a battleground and anxieties were centered upon the economic problem, Transcendentalism – or what little was left of it – seemed no more than a harmless exhortation to self-reliance and optimism. Vice-presidents of banks have been known to hang framed mottoes from Emerson on the walls of their offices.

Thus the picture of the movement as a charming idyll in a pastoral America became, by the end of the century, the stereotype.²⁰

By the time the movement had run its course around the turn of the century, optimism and Transcendentalism had become inextricably linked. Evidence of a rather simplistic equating of the two abounds in critical works of the period. One of the few books that

¹⁸ See for example Barbara Packer's conclusion to her section on the Transcendentalists in the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, in which she emphasises their optimistic confidence (she is speaking of optimism in its most extreme Emersonian form, or in terms of the first sense of the word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*): 'Their minds were free to speculate (as Emerson said) because they were sure of a return ... The renovation they had first imagined thirty years earlier had not come about as they had imagined it, in peace and joy, but it had come nevertheless, and it proved what they had always believed – that the universe could be trusted' (Sacvan Bercovitch [gen.ed.], *The Cambridge History of American Literature, Volume Two: Prose writing 1820-1865* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], p.604). The linkage of optimism and Transcendentalism is also frequently relied upon in historical accounts of the period, such as Maldwyn A. Jones's *The Limits of Liberty: American History 1607-1980* in *The Short Oxford History of the Modern World*, which refers to optimism several times in its two-page section on the Concord group (pp.158-60).

¹⁹ Quoted in Walter Harding and Michael Meyer, *The New Thoreau Handbook* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1980), p.123.

²⁰ *The Transcendentalists*, pp.13-14.

takes Emerson's optimism as its main subject was published in the 1880s (William F. Dana's *The Optimism of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 1886), and Emerson was even anthologised in this respect at the beginning of the twentieth century.²¹

As Emerson's reputation fell into a steady decline this century (before a recent revival), one of the most common modes of attack was to describe him as a blinkered optimist who lost faith in his own philosophy by the end of his life. This reading of his work has recently been challenged, in particular by Gertrude Reif Hughes in *Emerson's Demanding Optimism* (1986). She makes a case against what is traditionally seen as the surrender of his optimism in works such as 'Experience' (published in 1844 in *ESS*) and *The Conduct of Life* (1860), in which the heady extremity of his early statements is toned down. She also claims that austerity and complexity already form a crucial part of Emerson's affirmation in the early writing.²² Although a full discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this study, it is significant that the optimism of other Transcendentalists should be currently receiving attention. This may be an indication that optimism as such is emerging from the obscurity and unfashionableness to which it has long been consigned.²³ Unlike Emerson's mode of belief, Thoreau's optimism needs to be

²¹ Emerson is the most frequently cited author (with seven entries) in *The Contented Mind: An Anthology of Optimism*, which was edited by Thomas Burke and appeared in 1914. His selection includes the often-quoted passage from 'Circles' which stresses the newness of every moment in nature and suggests that people should recognise this by remaining unsettled ('In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten' [*EFS*, p.319]).

²² As she puts it, 'His affirmations of a common yet individual power are not locker-room pep talks or revival-meeting evangelism. His hoping is austere, his believing dire. The more one recognizes that his affirmations function as challenges rather than reassurances, the less one will chide his later work for seeming, like his face, "a little thinner" than expected ... For the promises Emerson offers do not reassure, they make demands' (*Emerson's Demanding Optimism*, p.x).

²³ In the last few years, optimism has become a buzz word in particular in environmental literature. In 1996, Gregg Easterbrook predicted a growing optimism about the state and fate of the environment in *A Moment on the Earth: the Coming Age of Environmental Optimism*, taking the last few decades of single-minded pessimism to task.

outlined and defined rather than challenged in revisionary terms, and it is my aim to attempt such a preliminary description of it. The fact that his optimism is seldom overtly signalled makes it an elusive subject. Even though he deliberately cultivated his affirmation, it was still perhaps primarily an unconscious attitude, which was so deeply ingrained that he himself was hardly aware of the extent to which it determined his actions and words. I aim to describe Thoreau's optimism, whether it is radiant or oblique and in whichever form it takes, as it appears in his writing.

To gain a clear perspective on Thoreau's optimism, it is also necessary to look outside its immediate context, the Transcendental movement. Optimism was a crucial force in nineteenth century culture both in America and Europe, the result of rapid progress and expanding industrialisation, and a particularly vital part of the American ethos. It fuelled the whole project called America: the hope of betterment drove settlers across the ocean and on into the West. Although Thoreau redefined the meaning of improvement to suit his own needs (for example, he made it anti-materialist rather than materialist), his outlook was certainly related to this general dream. The fact that he was born into a culture that was rife with worldly and unworldly aspiration and that looked to the future rather than the past could not fail to affect him. In *The American Idea*, Everett Carter claims that 'the article of faith identified with America is its optimism', which he goes on to describe as 'a complex tone of which the primary ingredients are hopeful views of man's experience in this world and a sanguine regard for man's intrinsic value'.²⁴ According to Carter, the American idea, a term he borrows from Emerson's *English Traits*, amounts to an attitude to human history that can be summed up by the idea of

Other recent titles along similar optimistic lines include Ken Jones's *Beyond Optimism: A Buddhist Ecology* (1993).

²⁴ *The American Idea*, p.5.

progress and a belief in mankind that provides the foundation for this approach.²⁵

Many earlier commentators have also identified an optimistic faith in progress as the defining characteristic of American culture. In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville described a longing for betterment as central to the American psyche, although he thought the national outlook was limited by a narrow materialism: 'Every American is eaten up with a longing to rise, but hardly any of them seem to entertain very great hopes or aim very high. All are constantly bent on gaining property, reputation, and power, but few conceive such things on a grand scale'.²⁶ To Theodore Parker, writing a decade later, aspiration was an even more central part of the national mentality. In his blatantly optimistic lecture 'The Political Destination of America and the Signs of the Times' (1848), he describes the American as driven to a fault by impatient optimism:

All that we do we overdo. It appears in our hopefulness; we are the most aspiring of nations. Not content with half the continent, we wish the other half. We have this characteristic of genius: we are dissatisfied with all that we have done. Somebody once said we were too vain to be proud. It is not wholly so; the national ideal is so far above us that any achievement seems little and low.²⁷

Parker outlines what Henry Adams later calls 'the hyperbole of enthusiasm'; the particularly American 'sin' of fostering grand illusions: 'Even on his practical and sordid side, the American might easily have been represented as a victim to illusion. If the Englishman had lived as the American speculator did,— in the future,— the hyperbole of enthusiasm would have seemed less monstrous'.²⁸ In his chapter on 'American Ideals' in

²⁵ For works on the idea and history of progress, see for example J.B. Bury's classic study *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Origin and Growth* (1920). More recent works include Sidney Pollard's *The Idea of Progress* (1968) and Warren Wagar's *Good Tidings: The Belief in Progress from Darwin to Marcuse* (1973).

²⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Volume Two, ed. J.P. Mayer, tr. G. Lawrence (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company Inc, 1969), p.453.

²⁷ Included in Perry Miller (ed.), *The American Transcendentalists: Their Prose and Poetry* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), pp.357-58.

²⁸ Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America during the first administration of Thomas Jefferson, 1801-1805*, Vol.1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), p.172.

the first volume of *History of the United States of America*, Adams is sensitive to the element of fantasy that lies at the heart of the American's aspiration ('For himself he cared little, but his dream was his whole existence. The men who denounced him admitted that they left him in his forest-swamp quaking with fever, but clinging in the delirium of death to the illusions of his dazzled brain').²⁹ Literary historians too noted the centrality of optimism in American culture of the period. When writing *Main Currents in American Thought* in the 1920s, Verner Louis Parrington emphasised the material optimism of nineteenth century America.³⁰ Without the American dream of individual betterment and self-reliance, Thoreau would not have so stubbornly sought to realise his goals, in his own ways and by his own hands, by Walden Pond. In the context of the era, his outlook appears almost low-key. Emerson and Whitman, in their all-embracing confidence, may be more striking proponents of American optimism, but there can be little doubt that Thoreau's optimism, like theirs, is of its place and times: the ever-hopeful nineteenth century as it was lived in and around New England. But beyond that shared starting point, it is also uniquely its own. His attitude is nothing more, nothing less, than one individual's response to the challenge called life, which is determined as much by inner inclination as by outer cultural pressures. A sustained optimism is Thoreau's attempt to make the world meet his private visions of beauty and perfection, and it is worth exploring for the simple reason that he tries so touchingly hard.

²⁹ *History of the United States of America*, pp.173-74.

³⁰ See statements such as the following in the Introduction to Volume Two: 'The America that succeeded [when the sterner, more cautious eighteenth century America was dying] was a shifting, restless world, youthfully optimistic, eager to better itself, bent on finding easier roads to wealth than the plodding path of natural increase' (Vernon Louis Parrington, *The Romantic Revolution in America, 1800-1860* [New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927], p.iv).

By considering Thoreau's optimism roughly chronologically, from its idealistic beginnings in the writings of the early Journal to its more settled forms in later life, I hope to describe some of the manifestations it takes and thus enable us to see Thoreau in a new light. I place particular emphasis on the various forms of optimism in the Journal of the 1850s and 1860s, which is the primary focus of all except the first chapter.³¹ The reason for this is partly a matter of taste – like many recent critics, I find this material particularly evocative and intriguing – and partly to do with the Journal's role as Thoreau's main vehicle of expression in this period (for a discussion of the more 'mature' manifestations of his optimism, it has to be taken into account).³² Thoreau's writing always retains traces of the idealism that is so prominent in the early work, but he gradually arrives at a more realistic mode of believing and discovers ways of satisfying, or at least appeasing, his restless longing. We already have accounts of Thoreau the hermit eccentric, the misanthrope, the critic of others' folly, the social reformer, the friendless, the friend and sociable-after-all, the example for others to follow, the example never to be followed, the poet, the prose stylist, the formalist artist, the writer of postmodern distrust of definite positions, the self-contradictory, the dreamy idealist, the classicist, the orientalist, the Romantic, the avid reader, the pastoral myth-maker, the devoted naturalist, the amateur botanist, the philosopher of perception, the world-building settler, the traveller in inner and outer realms and many others, including the pessimist,³³ so perhaps the time has come

³¹ The Journal of this period is very substantial - in the original 1906 edition, only the first of the fourteen volumes contains material written before 1850.

³² John Hildebidle, William Howarth, Sharon Cameron and Michael Berger, to name but a few, have all written extensively on Thoreau's (previously often neglected) later work.

³³ In *Dark Thoreau* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), Richard Bridgman explores, among other things, what he considers to be Thoreau's pessimism. One of his main points is that Thoreau 'was a deeply pessimistic man who could rarely bring himself to admit it' (p.x). Bridgman is looking for signs of strain, weakness, negativity, violence, psychological imbalance and (perhaps more fruitfully)

to consider Thoreau the optimist. Optimism in general is seldom discussed. Literature exclusively devoted to the subject is virtually non-existent, apart from in the area of self-help books. This persistent unfashionableness may help to explain why Thoreau's optimistic outlook has not received much attention; in the troubled twentieth century, critics (perhaps not surprisingly) have been drawn to the dark side of things.

My first chapter considers the expression of optimism in Thoreau's writings of the late 1830s through to the early 1850s. This takes the form of an often extreme idealism, a vague and over-emphatic yearning that is brought out by his youthful interest in bravery and heroism and his later preoccupation with self-culture and self-improvement. It also contains a brief section on the Walden experience. Chapter 2 explores how Thoreau's optimism is affected by the shift that occurs in his approach to nature in the early 1850s. Around this time, he rejects Emersonian Transcendentalism for detailed observation of the landscape, a mode of living that stays with him for the rest of his life. How does his

incoherence in Thoreau's work. He deflates Thoreau's optimism as little more than a cultural inheritance he did not quite believe in: 'Morbidity and pessimism were consistent features of his mind. Both in his critical harshness and in his underlying pessimism, Thoreau exhibited classic features of the region's Calvinism, but, unlike his neighbors, he possessed no substantial conviction of an eternal recompense to come. His negativity was frequently in contest with the professed optimism of his era, which he had partially internalized. He tried to substantiate the transcendental hope in nature, but although he did experience moments of authentic affirmation in the domestic wilderness around Concord, he could not reconcile the persistent cruelty and destructiveness of the world (in which he participated, although he hardly seemed aware of it) with this new philosophy. Yet he felt obliged to maintain an affirmative stance, mocking the philistines publicly, and privately assuring himself that, seen with sufficient perception, this was an ideal world or, at the very least, a world ever improving. The problem was that he did not believe it' (pp.285-86). Bridgman's lack of sympathy towards Thoreau radically distorts his understanding of him. The result is frequently, as above, untenable categorical statements that assume insight into what Thoreau really believed (the question of to what extent Thoreau's optimistic outlook was 'genuine' is certainly worth raising, but such biographical matters are best treated in a more tentative way). According to Bridgman, Thoreau's whole life was a matter of evasion and human failure, carefully rationalised away. What Bridgman overlooks is the amount of pleasure, happiness, energy and hope that serves as a powerful counterpoint to the less smooth and successful aspects of his life.

optimism survive when it is tempered by such an overpowering immersion in facts and the 'real' texture of the world? And how does he combine his creative intent with his new-found ambition as a naturalist? Chapter 3 is concerned with optimism in the form of looking forward, and in particular, with Thoreau's rhetorical anticipation of seasons in the Journal of the first half of the 1850s. When commenting on the state of the landscape during this period, Thoreau constantly looks ahead to other times of the year, even though he often emphasises the importance of living as attentively as possible in the present. I address issues such as his inability to remain satisfied with the phenomena at hand and the significance of this restlessness. Chapter 4 also concentrates on Thoreau's more dreamy and easily enchanted side. It explores moments of intensity throughout his work as instances in which his hopes are realised and rewarded. This, in a sense, is as good as it gets, although the enjoyment such moments bring is elusive and likely to lead to a hunger for more. Chapter 5 addresses fulfilment in a more earth-bound vein: the satisfaction Thoreau derives from his intimacy with the landscape. He communes with roots and rocks and empathises with animals of all kinds; the mid- and late 1850s Journal is full of anecdotes of his encounters in the landscape. By choosing to spend much of his time alone in nature, Thoreau redefines the very notion of community, shifting it away from its usual human connotations. In Chapter 6, I consider the extent to which he manages to live less restlessly in the present in the late 1850s and early 1860s. He is now so closely involved with the details of the ever-unfolding present that he stops looking forward to other seasons of the year (and also of life), a process that involves a degree of loss in the midst of the peace it brings. Chapter 7 is concerned with seeds, Thoreau's last object of study. He concludes his work in a truly optimistic fashion: on a detailed and, at its best, imaginative and evocative exploration of this ultimate emblem of future life. I discuss

Thoreau's creative transformation of his factual material as an act of optimism, a way of taking charge and making the surrounding world correspond to his inner standards of beauty.

Thoreau's optimism took many forms during the course of his life. When one of its outlets lost its viability or glimmering appeal, he preserved his positive outlook by transferring it to a new ambition. However, his optimism was far from fickle; he was usually able to sustain his faith in his endeavours for long periods of time (sometimes beyond the boundaries of the reasonable, as with his persistent labour on his Kalendar charts). The question of how realistic Thoreau's optimism was may be superfluous, since its primary importance lies in its inspirational and energy-infusing effect. Optimism creates its own verification, whether or not it is viable. By hoping and learning to sustain his hope, Thoreau often lived with the kind of intensity he aimed for. An element of illusion is likely to be an intrinsic part of most optimisms, as one of the definitions of an optimist in the *Oxford English Dictionary* implies. According to the second sense of the word, an optimist is 'one who is inclined to practical optimism; a person who looks on the bright side of things; one disposed, *with or without sufficient reason*, to hope for the best or think favourably of circumstances' (my emphasis). To be optimistic 'without sufficient reason' is to be to some extent deluded, and such delusion can be taken to Panglossian extremes. As Lionel Tiger suggests in *Optimism: The Biology of Hope*, a study of optimism from a psychological viewpoint, certain optimisms can be considered to be pathological. Optimism may be the opposite of depression but it can be an illness nevertheless, and it is more likely to be regarded as such if it deviates from socially acceptable norms.³⁴ Although Thoreau's solitary life seemed peculiar to those of his

³⁴ In his discussion of optimism taken to extremes, Tiger emphasises the social factors involved in determining whether a belief is pathological or not. He uses extreme

townsmen who could not understand his motivations, it did not deviate enough (and certainly not on the grounds of his optimism) to lead to any accusations of insanity. Compared with the troubled and erratic lives of other Concord Transcendentalists, such as Bronson Alcott and William Ellery Channing, Thoreau's way of life would have seemed sane and reasonable. For even in its most extreme moments, his optimism tends to be offset by a practical awareness of his own limitations. Part of his being, at least, always remains in touch with reality.³⁵

In several essays in *The Will to Believe*, William James places particular emphasis on the subjectivity of all optimisms and pessimisms. He suggests that we can readily change the appearance of the world by changing our outlook. Thoreau does just this by adopting a consistently optimistic stance. As James puts it in 'The Sentiment of Rationality', 'All depends on the character of the personal contribution x ' (over the mass of external factors, which he calls M).³⁶ One of the key passages from this essay, which deals with the way we create our own worlds, is repeated elsewhere in the book. The

religious faiths within, and independent from, groups as an example: 'Alternatively [to analysing depression], we can make parallel comments about the psychological mood which is generally seen as antidotal or opposite to depression; the optimistic mood. Optimism, as I defined it at the outset, is not generally treated as an illness. But whereas certain kinds of collective optimism are socially acceptable, their private counterparts are often seen as pathological. Thus a group of people in Geneva or Albi or Utah or Jerusalem may decide on various theological grounds that they are the children of God and act accordingly, weaving a fabric of social life on this belief. But if an individual in another community were to take the same position, he or she would likely be regarded as aberrant' (Lionel Tiger, *Optimism: The Biology of Hope* [London: Secker & Warburg, 1979], pp.150-51).

³⁵ Thoreau is for example very aware of the fact that each of his enchanted, hope-suffused dreams would sooner or later fade. He is particularly susceptible to such self-consciousness about his hopes in the transitional early 1850s, but almost always able to remain sensibly grounded.

³⁶ William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York, London and Bombay: Longmans Green and Co, 1897), pp.102-3. Other essays on this subject in *The Will to Believe* include 'The Dilemma of Determinism' and 'Is Life Worth Living?'

sentence 'This world *is* good, we must say, since it is what we make it – and we shall make it good' from 'The Sentiment of Rationality' reappears in elaborated form in 'Is Life Worth Living?', as follows: 'This life *is* worth living, we can say, *since it is what we make it, from the moral point of view*; and we are determined to make it from that point of view, so far as we have anything to do with it, a success'.³⁷ In his Preface, James justifies this duplication by emphasising the passage's importance to his argument and the fact that he could not express its sentiment in a better way. Thoreau lived the kind of life James outlines here, a life of intent optimism. He was stubbornly determined to make the world good (at least his particular world) and his existence worthwhile. He sought to make his life a success not just from a moral point of view, though this was important too, but in even less measurable terms such as enjoyment and openness to experience. He would fill his days and nights with beauty, which in turn would fuel his optimism and bring him closer to a life of sustained intensity. When the world did not live up to its promise, he was usually able to revive his faith in it by, in James's terms, adjusting the personal factor, *x*, in the equation of optimism. In the following chapters, I will discuss some of the ways in which Thoreau's life-enabling optimism is reflected in his writings. I will argue that his optimistic attitude sets an energising and rewarding example from which much can be learned, both about Thoreau and about ourselves, and that this approach lies at the very heart of his work.

³⁷ *The Will to Believe*, p.102 and p.61.

CHAPTER ONE

Idealism and Self-Improvement

1.1 Heroic Idealism in the Early Work

We can conceive of a Bravery so wide that nothing can meet to befall it—So omnipresent that nothing can lie in wait for it—so permanent that no obstinacy can seduce it. The stars are its silent sentries by night—and the sun its pioneer by day. From its superfluous [sic] cheerfulness come flowers and the rainbow, and its infinite humor and wantonness produce corn and vines. (*Journal 1*, p.160)

This dream of invulnerable bravery ends MS 2, the second volume of the long succession of notebooks that make up Thoreau's Journal. Some seven months earlier, in December 1839, Thoreau had started this volume on a similarly lofty note, transcribing a series of high-minded passages from 'A Chapter on Bravery' into the new notebook. An extreme idealism, which often takes the form of a preoccupation with bravery and heroism, is apparent throughout *Journal 1*. It is most prominent in the first five of its nine manuscript volumes. These were written between October 1837 and September 1841, when Thoreau was 20 to 24 years old. Thoreau's heroic ideal is partly conventional; the hero should be strong, courageous and perfect in every way. However, he also thinks of heroism in more unconventional terms. Essential characteristics of the hero may include some relatively gentle qualities, such as the steadfastness and 'superfluous cheerfulness' in the above Journal entry, or even the ability to accept defeat when necessary. Thoreau's notion of heroism is, even at this early stage, often large enough to embrace failure as a potential way forward and, in all its complexity, it is at the centre of his early aspiration. When describing the hero, he is both (somewhat naively) staking out his goal and exposing his own ragged self in the shining mirror of perfection.

An interest in heroism is not unique to Thoreau. His ideas on the subject were influenced by Emerson and have obvious counterparts either in his mentor's work or in other texts of the period. Emerson lectured on the subject at length in the second half of the 1830s,¹ and the published version of Carlyle's May 1840 lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* reached Concord early in 1841. Much of Thoreau's early writing on bravery and heroism is immature material, which is steeped in abstraction to a degree that is foreign to his later, more concrete, writing. However, there are already some signs of a more realistic and complex vision of what a 'heroic' life might involve, and his fascination with heroism is closely related to his optimism. Despite the limitations of these early entries, they set the tone of idealism and incessant aspiration that continues unbroken throughout his work, and form part of the foundation of optimism on which his outlook rests.

While dreaming of bravery in the newly-started Journal, the 20-year old Thoreau was trying to stake out a path for himself. His own life was far from the steadfast ideal he was fond of imagining. After graduating from Harvard in 1837, he resigned from his first teaching job at the Center School and failed to find other employment, bursting into tears at his mother's suggestion that he should leave Concord to seek work. In September 1838, he took over the Concord Academy with his brother John and taught there with some success until March 1841. He was also becoming more and more involved with the Transcendentalist circle, joining the 'Hedge Club' in 1837, giving his first Lyceum lecture in April 1838, and contributing to *The Dial* from the first issue in 1840. His writing of this period can be striking, but it is often curiously absolute and impersonal. Many of Thoreau's early entries on heroism are simplistic in their conception of the hero,

¹ In particular in the *Biography* (1835) and the *Human Culture* (1837-38) series. See *EL II*.

reiterating received ideas of masculine heroic strength. This is particularly true of his idealisation of the soldier in 'A Chapter on Bravery'. What Thoreau is writing here is schoolboy heroism, as in the following description of the reception of the soldier, who is set apart in untouchable glory:

No pains are spared to do honor to the brave soldier. All guilds and corporations are taxed to provide him with fit harness and equipment—... Wherever he goes, music precedes and prepares the way for him. His life is a holiday and the contagion of his example unhinges the universe. The world puts by work and comes out to stare. He is the one only man. (*Journal 1*, p.94)

The naive idealism of this passage is to some extent mitigated by the intriguing suggestion that the soldier's example might 'unhinge' the universe. In 'The Service', the flawed essay intended for *The Dial*² in which Thoreau elaborates on his ideas from 'A Chapter on Bravery', glorification of the soldier's life is taken even further, into an outright celebration of war:

It is not enough that our life is an easy one; we must live on the stretch, retiring to our rest like soldiers on the eve of battle, looking forward with ardor to the strenuous sortie of the morrow ... To the brave soldier the rust and leisure of peace are harder than the fatigues of war. (*RP*, p.14)

Although the imagery of military life is mainly used as a metaphor for an inner attitude, a certain readiness to confront life, the very fact that he introduces it suggests that Thoreau is fascinated by the energy implicit in military heroism.³ He often uses imagery of war in a very exaggerated way during this period, often to indicate how difficult he feels life to be. In a Journal entry from December 1839, which is headed 'Bravery', this technique is

² Margaret Fuller rejected it, despite Emerson's mediation.

³ As indeed Emerson was. Thoreau's essay was partly inspired by Emerson's lecture 'Heroism', which was originally part of the *Human Culture* series (given the first time in Boston in January 1838), and later included in *Essays: First Series*. Emerson dwells on the 'attractiveness of war' and describes a combative stance as a plausible defence against the dangers and diseases of life: 'Towards all this external evil the man within the breast assumes a warlike attitude, and affirms his ability to cope single-handed with the infinite army of enemies. To this military attitude of the soul we give the name of Heroism. Its rudest form is the contempt for safety and ease, which makes the attractiveness of war' (*EL II*, p.340).

taken to extremes: 'Waterloo is not the only battle ground— As many and fatal guns are pointed at my breast now as are contained in the English arsenals' (*Journal 1*, p.87).

Thoreau's early comments on heroism and inner strength are written in black and white terms. In 'A Chapter on Bravery', he suggests for example that 'Bravery and Cowardice are kindred correlatives with Knowledge and Ignorance Light and Darkness—Good and Evil' (*Journal 1*, p.93). If bravery is good and cowardice evil in this way, no room is left for the very space in which life is likely to be lived, the grey area in between. Similarly, in 'The Service', the 'unmeasurable' greatness of the brave man is contrasted with the coward's total lack of resolution. Whereas the coward 'has never overtaken the present hour', the truly brave man is a man of perfect virtue:⁴ 'The state of complete manhood is virtue—and virtue and bravery are one' (*Journal 1*, p.92). This polarised way of thinking stays with Thoreau as a dominant mode well into the 1840s, and remnants can be found throughout his work.⁵ The equation of bravery and virtue reappears for example in a Journal passage in January 1842, more than two years after 'A Chapter on Bravery' was written. The entry opens: 'Virtue is the deed of the bravest. It is that art which demands the greatest confidence and fearlessness. Only some hardy soul ventures upon it—it deals in what it has no experience in' (*Journal 1*, p.354). Thoughts and phrases tend to 'migrate' through Thoreau's writings in this way. The same passage or turn of phrase often appears several times: in the Journal, in an essay, lecture or longer work, in the Journal again. Ideas thus work their way from the Journal to the text in progress as Thoreau tries to improve their expression or find a suitable context for them,

⁴ Virtue and heroic greatness are also linked in Emerson's essay 'Heroism', though this occurs in the context of a statement favouring simple life: 'The essence of greatness is the perception that virtue is enough. Poverty is its ornament. It does not need plenty, and can very well abide its loss' (*EFS*, p.255).

⁵ An example of this would be his tendency to set up oppositions, such as between man and nature or society and solitude, a habit he never abandons.

an organic process that makes it complicated to trace the exact origin and development of his attitudes.

The extreme idealism of Thoreau's early Journal entries was no doubt partly fuelled by his four years at Harvard in the 1830s. At Harvard, he came into contact with contemporary idealist thinking, if not quite with Transcendentalism itself.⁶ Some of the subjects he wrote on in his English classes fired both his idealism and his imagination, often in a rather stern way. Given a topic such as 'Whether Moral Excellence tend directly to increase Intellectual Power' during his last term at the college, in May 1837, the 19-year old Thoreau stressed that such excellence is the domain of the chosen few:

None, in fine, but the highest minds, can attain to moral excellence. With by far the greater part of mankind, religion is a habit, or rather, habit is religion, their views of things are illiberal and contracted, for the very reason that they possess not intellectual power sufficient to attain to moral excellence. ('Moral Excellence', *EEM*, p.107)

When he starts to keep a Journal just a few months later, in October 1837, Thoreau is full of aspiration to make his life match up to his high moral standards. In one of the first entries, tellingly headed 'Discipline', he earnestly explains that he hopes to improve his future life by taking note of past experience: 'I yet lack discernment to distinguish the whole lesson of to-day; but it is not lost—it will come to me at last. My desire is to know *what* I have lived, that I may know *how* to live henceforth' (*Journal 1*, p.11). During the first few years of Journal keeping, Thoreau's foremost object of reform is always himself. An inclination to change himself or the way he lives remains prominent throughout his

⁶ Walter Harding sums it up as follows: 'Yet [despite Thoreau's disparagement of his college training] unquestionably Harvard had a profound influence on Thoreau's thought. Although German Transcendentalism had not reached the Harvard curriculum in his day, the so-called Scottish "common sense" philosophers Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, and Thomas Brown had. These Scottish philosophers suggested the inadequacy of Locke's then prevalent theory of knowledge, especially with regard to moral values, and thus provided for Thoreau and some of his contemporaries a transition to the newly discussed philosophy of Transcendentalism' (Harding, p.51).

writing life, although it comes to exist side by side with an equally strong desire to reform the surrounding world. In the above passage, the sincerity of his desire to live a more worthy life has its own kind of beauty, a beauty which speaks of immaturity, but also of innocence and unabashed possibility. Thoreau's acute perception of his present limitations adds depth to his early entries on how to live a 'heroic' life. His vision of what an ideal life would involve is completely unrealistic, but his sense of his own failings is perhaps not as far off the point (he always sees ample scope for improvement). Thoreau's entries on heroism are the product of an urgent awareness of a discrepancy between ideal and real, and they are energised by a mind that is desperately longing to fuse the two. The unworldly starkness of these passages may be naive, but the entries can also be touching in their zeal for perfection.

A dream of serenity functions as an antidote to Thoreau's over-insistent yearning for improvement. Even at this early stage, he does not just think of bravery in terms of discipline or physical and mental courage. Bravery can very well be passive and serene, beyond the need for activity. The hero should be calm in the face of danger, partaking of nature's ideal peace. The main ingredients of a courageous life, as Thoreau conceives it in December 1839, are steadfastness and calmness:

—A rare landscape immediately suggests a suitable inhabitant—whose breath shall be its wind—whose moods its seasons—and to whom it will always be fair. —To be chafed and worried, and not as serene as nature—does not become one whose nature is as steadfast as she. (*Journal 1*, p.87)

This early entry is entirely consistent with the emphasis placed on calmness in Thoreau's later writing. Out of a rather commonplace and fairly immature interest in heroism, one can see Thoreau's distinctive outlook take shape. Some of his earliest comments on the subject are distinguished by the fact that they remain open to weakness, and often call for acceptance and inner peace (the very opposite of preoccupation with measurable

progress). In the opening sentence of 'A Chapter on Bravery', Thoreau sums up this understanding of bravery when he equates it with self-reliant rest ('Bravery deals not so much in resolute action, as in healthy and assured rest' [*Journal 1*, p.91]). Similar ways of thinking recur throughout *Journal 1*.⁷ Thoreau always takes pleasure in the thought of calmness, and does not hesitate to describe it as the best way forward: 'My most essential progress must be to me a state of absolute rest' (*Journal 1*, p.191). This approach is closely related to his advocacy of staying at home and appreciating the immediate surroundings, rather than dissipating oneself by exploring the globe. As he later puts it in *Week*: 'The hero then will know how to wait, as well as to make haste. All good abides by him who waiteth *wisely*; we shall sooner overtake the dawn by remaining here than by hurrying over the hills of the west'.⁸ This notion of progress through non-progression appeals deeply to Thoreau, who is keen to turn the whole idea of success on its head and celebrate defeat as the ultimate kind of victory.

Yielding may be the logical extension of a true knowledge of ourselves, promising success of a different and perhaps more urgent kind: 'There are two ways to victory—to strive bravely—or to yield. How much pain the last will save we have not yet learned' (*Journal 1*, p.134). This stoic approach is prominent both in Classical and Oriental tradition, which Thoreau was exploring at the time, and in his own New England culture.⁹

⁷ As indeed they do throughout *Journal 2* and *3*; calmness remains central to Thoreau's outlook.

⁸ *Week*, pp.128-29. John Aldrich Christie has shown that Thoreau, despite his advocacy of staying at home, in fact travelled extensively in both a literal and a literary sense. He explored his immediate neighbourhood; went further afield in New England and its surrounding states; further still to Canada and Minnesota; and he traversed the entire globe through his extensive reading of travel books.

⁹ See for example Thoreau's comparison of himself to Zeno the Stoic in one of the first *Journal* entries (*Journal 1*, pp.26-27), or his selections from *The Laws of Menu for The Dial*, now in *Early Essays and Miscellanies*, which include maxims such as 'The resignation of all pleasures is far better than the attainment of them' (*EEM*, p.129).

In *Young Man Thoreau*, his study of Thoreau's life up to the early 1840s that draws on the psychologist Erik Erikson's theory of life stages, Richard Lebeaux calls attention to the contradiction that lies at the heart of Thoreau's understanding of bravery:

It is entirely characteristic of this ambivalent man that he developed a paradoxical concept of bravery and heroism, a concept which would allow him, whenever it was psychologically necessary, to equate bravery with yielding, passivity, retreat, and defeat[.]¹⁰

Lebeaux's perceptive comment occurs in a discussion of Thoreau's rivalry with his brother about Ellen Sewall's affections. Lebeaux traces a dialectic between 'aggressive' pursuit and passive yielding in the Journal entries relating to Ellen around June 1840. He also discusses Thoreau's readiness to 'compensate' for failure by seeking out its positive side effects, a response that is entirely consistent with the New England mentality with which he was brought up. As Lebeaux puts it, 'Thoreau's capacity to find redeeming qualities in unpleasant experiences was almost limitless'.¹¹ To the ever-optimistic Thoreau, failure can be regarded in such a way that it makes perfect sense: 'Let us remember not to strive upwards too long, but sometimes drop plumb down the other way, and wallow in meanness: From the deepest pit we may see the stars, if not the sun. Let us have presence of mind enough to sink when we cant swim—' (*Journal 1*, p.133; June 20, 1840).¹²

Sunken, or rejected in love as Thoreau was, we can look to the stars and experience fulfilment of a different kind.

Despite his attempts to adopt a stoic attitude and stay calm at all times, Thoreau remains restless at heart and seldom lets go of his yearning. In the Journal of the late

¹⁰ Richard Lebeaux, *Young Man Thoreau* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), p.112.

¹¹ Ibid, p.144.

¹² The context would suggest that Thoreau is using 'meanness' to describe lowliness rather than mean-spiritedness. Such a usage is entirely consistent with the original, sixteenth century sense of the word, which would still have been current in Thoreau's day (the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates it back to 1556, and gives the following definition: 'the condition or quality of being mean; lowliness, insignificance').

1830s and early 1840s, he often dwells on the discrepancy between his own life and an imagined 'brave' life with an unmitigated sense of the difficulty involved in living. Heroism does not have to be particularly grand, as life is complicated enough for everyone, and requires a lot of unconscious courage: 'In their unconscious daily life all are braver than they know. Man slumbers and wakes in his twilight with the confidence of noon day—he is not palsied nor struck dumb by the inexplicable riddle of the universe' (*Journal 1*, p.91). In one of the first entries on heroism in the *Journal*, Thoreau describes man's (and more specifically, his own) inner conflicts in terms of a 'glorious strife', drawing on military imagery to celebrate this struggle in a simplified and idealistic way:

What a hero one can be without moving a finger—the world is not a field worthy of us, nor can we be satisfied with the plains of Troy— A glorious strife seems waging within us, yet so noiselessly that we but just catch the sound of the clarion ringing of victory, borne to us on the breeze. (*Journal 1*, p.49)

Glorious it may be, but it is still a strife, a battle of clashing impulses. Revealingly enough, the clarion rings of victory; to Thoreau in this blinkered mood, defeat is seldom in question. The same issue does however resurface in the *Journal* a few years later, in April 1841. This time, the strife is no longer noiseless, but an 'infinite din within', and more emphasis is placed on the effort required to control these raging inner forces:

The brave man does not mind the call of the trumpet—nor hear the idle clashing of swords—without, for the infinite din within[.] War is but a training compared with the active service of his peace—

Is he not at war? Does he not resist the ocean swell within him—and walk as gently as the summer's sea? (*Journal 1*, p.299)

The concluding image is a fitting emblem of Thoreau's divided mentality. Passionate 'swell' and gentle composure are subtly fused in one image, described as aspects of the same substance, the sea.

The question of how to control such conflicting emotions troubles Thoreau throughout *Journal 1*. Sometimes it takes the form of general moralistic comments about the need to check 'passion and appetite' with reason (p.73), or the way vice catches up

with virtue (p.260). At other times, it emerges in more personal observations about his own need to keep watch over himself, as at the beginning of MS 5: 'I find my life growing slovenly when it does not exercise a constant supervision over itself. Its deeds accumulate. Next to having lived a day well—is a clear and calm overlooking of all our days' (p.295).¹³ The calmness Thoreau describes is seldom completely spontaneous; the very fact that it needs to be reinforced by 'constant supervision' and scrutinised in frequent Journal entries calls attention to its vulnerable and artificial nature. Thoreau's calmness, like his optimism, is an innate but still somehow fragile force, which must be cultivated; it does not just flourish of its own accord.

Thoreau's strict supervision of himself is rooted in the moral demands of the New England tradition, a tradition which in turn has its roots in the beliefs of the early settlers. Spiritual and worldly amelioration was the duty of the individual and could be attained by deliberate labour; if you tried hard enough, you would succeed whether on earth or in heaven. Thoreau emphasises the importance of stubborn persistence already in one of his first college essays, 'Kinds of Energetic Character', which was written in May 1835. He praises tempered energy that is subordinated to judgement,¹⁴ and is quick to condemn those who are enthusiastic without perseverance:

Their energy is of an inconstant kind, it is not accompanied by calmness and deliberation; so that their success, if they meet with any, is not so much the effect of their own exertions, as the work of chance. (*EEM*, p.17)

¹³ The sheer effort Thoreau put into keeping watch over himself is suggested by the letter he wrote in 1847 to his former Harvard classmate Henry Williams, summing up his present employment: 'Indeed my steadiest employment, if such it can be called, is to keep myself on top of my condition, and ready for whatever may turn up in heaven or on earth' (*Corr*, p.186).

¹⁴ It could be argued that Thoreau was prompted into this way of thinking by the quotation he was given with the essay question ('One of a cold and of a constant mind, / Not quickened into ardent action soon, / Nor prompt for petty enterprise; yet bold' [*EEM*, p.16]). The passage is taken from Henry Taylor's 'dramatic romance' *Philip van Artevelde* (1834), Part I, Act III, sc. ii, ll.114-16.

A few years later, Emerson moralises in 'Heroism' on a similar theme:

The characteristic of heroism is its persistency. All men have wandering impulses, fits and starts of generosity. But when you have chosen your part, abide by it, and do not weakly try to reconcile yourself with the world. (*EFS*, p.260)

Emerson and Thoreau embrace the New England work ethic whole-heartedly, but also turn it into something more ethereal and intellectual than a moralistic call to stick with your task. Steadfast courage is the keynote of Emerson's concept of self-reliance, but the kind of steadfastness he has in mind is more thought-provoking and joyful than its practical and moral basis would suggest. Thoreau finds the fit words to express this 'new' mode, using detailed natural imagery in his intricate Journal entries on the subject, as in the following description of steadfast (but unaspiring) 'true greatness' from December 29, 1841:

All true greatness runs a level course and is as unaspiring as the plough in the furrow— It wears the homeliest dress and speaks the homeliest language[.] Its theme is gossamer and dew lines—Johns-wort and loosestrife for it has never stirred from its repose and is most ignorant of foreign parts. Heaven is the inmost place. (*Journal 1*, p.349)

The greatness Thoreau describes is as homely and settled as growing flowers, arriving at its full potential without ever having to stretch itself. In this it resembles the description of greatness in an entry from the beginning of the same year, in which he speaks of how 'unstrained' he would like it to be: 'To be great we do as if we would be tall merely—be longer than we are broad, stretch ourselves and stand on tiptoe. But greatness is well proportioned—unstrained, and stands on the soles of the feet' (*Journal 1*, p.274). In this simple but imaginative image, Thoreau gives substance to Emerson's ideal of calm and effortless self-reliance.

The thought of passive greatness and positive defeat suited Thoreau's character well, although such ideas were not exclusively his own. Emerson too was aware of the possibility of succeeding through passivity or failure, and most probably suggested this

outlook to Thoreau in the first place. Comments to this effect can be found in many of Emerson's essays. When he was working on 'Self-Reliance' in October 1840 for example, he made the following Journal entry on the subject:

And must I go and do somewhat if I would learn new secrets of self-reliance? for my chapter is not finished. But self-reliance is precisely that secret to make your supposed deficiency redundancy. If I am true, the theory is, the very want of action, my very impotency, shall become a greater excelling than all skill and toil. (*EFS*, p.390)¹⁵

If Thoreau's paradoxical concept of bravery originates in his somewhat 'deficient' nature, as Richard Lebeaux implies, this is not its only source; Emerson thought along similar lines. Emerson's and Thoreau's comments on resignation do however differ in terms of subjectivity and intensity. While Emerson calmly proposes a theory of impotence, a testable hypothesis, as in the above Journal entry, Thoreau's statements tend to be more urgent and personal, direct responses to experience. Even when he is reasoning about the failure of youthful aspiration with lucid acceptance, his comments are still strained by yearning:

Though I am old enough to have discovered that the dreams of youth are not to be realized in this state of existence yet I think it would be the next greatest happiness always to be allowed to look under the eyelids of time and contemplate the perfect steadily with the clear understanding that I do not not attain to it. (*Journal 1*, p.480)

The drawn-out impression this sentence makes, which is accentuated by the absence of punctuation, hints at the lack of resignation that is made explicit by the introduction of the double negative at the end of the passage. The frequent shifting between tenses, from the past ('to have discovered') via the future ('it would be') to the present ('I do not not attain to it'), also contributes to its strained and intriguing effect. Thoreau's acceptance is only surface deep; he still seems to be longing for perfection of some kind.

¹⁵ Emerson quoted this extract, from the entry for October 23, 1840, in the notes to 'Self-Reliance'.

One way of finding release from a sense of failure is through cultivating a mood of 'superfluous cheerfulness', which readily transcends such limitations. A great willingness to believe and attempt the best shines through Thoreau's writings, and is particularly notable in his most confident works, such as *Walden* and 'Walking'. One could perhaps think of this as the applied attitude of the brave man, who (optimistically and somewhat naively) seeks to dissolve any shades of despondency in his own incessant light:

The brave man never heareth the din of war; he is trustful and unsuspecting; so observant of the least trait of good or beautiful, that if you turn toward him the dark side of anything—he will still see only the bright. (*Journal 1*, p.91)

The brave man Thoreau sketches in the early Journal entries and essays draws on resources of optimism that are barred to others, seeking out 'the least trait of good or beautiful'. Both Emerson and Thoreau regard this outlook as an essential characteristic of the brave person. In 'Heroism', Emerson praises the 'good-humor' and 'hilarity' of heroes, and links their cheerfulness to their self-sufficiency:

But that which takes my fancy most in the heroic class, is the good-humor and hilarity they exhibit. It is a height to which common duty can very well attain, to suffer and to dare with solemnity. But these rare souls set opinion, success, and life at so cheap a rate that they will not soothe their enemies by petitions, or the show of sorrow, but wear their own habitual greatness. (*EFS*, p.255)

Like Emerson, Thoreau often tries to ignore the more negative aspects of human life, an approach that emerges as a result of his Panglossian willingness to believe the best.

Despite his characteristic solitary stance, he does have a great deal of faith in human nature; he tends to explain away inner and outer 'evils' whenever possible, perhaps by describing them as an inevitable part of the natural order. This optimistic approach is apparent already in some of the earliest Journal entries, such as the following comment from December 1837: 'No faculty in man was created with a useless or sinister intent—in no respect can he be wholly bad, but the worst passions have their root in the best—as anger—for instance, may be only a perverted sense of wrong' (*Journal 1*, pp.17-18). So

even when Thoreau's infatuation with idealist extremes was at its peak, signs can be found of his more hopeful and mature understanding of human qualities.

1.2 Thoreau's Heroic Models

Many of Thoreau's early preoccupations, including his fascination with heroism and bravery, can be traced back to the work of Emerson and Carlyle. Carlyle, whom Emerson had known since 1833, both lectured and published on the subject, and Emerson explored the notion of greatness in his lectures on *Biography* (given in Boston from January to March 1835), in the *Human Culture* lecture series (December 6, 1837 to February 7, 1838), in some of the essays in *Essays: First Series* (1841), and later in the lectures on *Representative Men* (December 11, 1845 to January 22, 1846, published in 1849). Thoreau would have been familiar with much of this. He read the manuscript of *Essays: First Series* in early 1841, and Emerson's ideas about biography and self-culture had been common property for some time, at the very least since the two lecture series. Apart from suggesting the subject, this influence is notable for two reasons. Firstly, the notion of heroism is important to Emerson's emerging ideas about self-reliance, which in turn would have a fundamental impact on Thoreau's approach to life. A life of courage and greatness was not just a theoretical possibility or a relic of the distant past; it was attainable to the confident and sincere seeker. Bravery runs like a golden thread through much of Emerson's work of the period. Secondly, Emerson and Carlyle were both fascinated by the examples set by past heroes and by what one could learn from the lives of the great. They contemplated the nature and purpose of biography, as well as exploring the 'lessons' of individual lives. Thoreau followed their example, often in a deliberate attempt to gather hints about how to live his own life.

In Emerson's essay 'Heroism', a rather rambling piece that mingles speculation with historical and literary examples, heroism and self-reliance are continually linked. In one of the more contemplative sections, Emerson, after discussing military bravery, describes heroism as 'a self-trust which slights the restraints of prudence' in the plenitude of its energy and power to repair the harms it may suffer (*EFS*, p.250). Something more than just conventional courage is implied here. Emerson is speaking of 'self-trust', a quality he goes on to call 'the essence of heroism' (p.251). He is thus pushing beyond a simple military view of heroism and towards the far larger notion of self-reliance. This is characterised precisely by the kind of self-trust, of unshakeable integrity, that Emerson here ascribes to heroes ('The hero is a mind of such balance that no disturbances can shake his will, but pleasantly and as it were merrily he advances to his own music' [*EFS*, p.250]).¹⁶ To be self-reliant is, in some sense, to be heroic; to have enough strength and independence to pursue one's own path. As Emerson puts it in 'Self-Reliance', 'Let a Stoic open the resources of man and tell men they are not leaning willows, but can and must detach themselves; that with the exercise of self-trust, new powers shall appear' (*EFS*, p.76).

Emerson's concept of heroic self-reliance is, like Thoreau's, both elitist and democratic. While stressing the rare perfection of the hero, in theory at least he is still teaching equal opportunity in matters of greatness. Everyone could potentially be a hero; all that is required is more self-trust, an intensification of the essential self. But it is equally clear that the heroism he describes is reserved for the few, a contradiction that

¹⁶ Emerson's description brings Thoreau's famous comment in the 'Conclusion' to *Walden* to mind: 'If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away' (p.326). The sense of the essential rightness of self-reliance is similar in both instances, despite the human vulnerability that permeates Thoreau's passage and its differing context.

destabilises Emerson's idea; it pushes in two opposing directions at once. Carlyle's understanding of heroism, as set forth in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, is more elitist still than Emerson's. Despite his ambition to develop new definitions of heroism that would be appropriate to his times, he still regarded the (religious, literary or political) hero as infinitely superior to ordinary men. As he describes his chosen subjects, 'They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain'.¹⁷ Carlyle wanted his hero to be strong enough to transcend the limitations of his times and single-handedly move history forward.

In the *Human Culture* lecture series, Emerson is moving away from this extremely hierarchical conception of the heroic. While attracted to the idea of perfection, he is also interested in people's equal potential for greatness, a notion eloquently stated for example in the Introductory lecture to the series:

I wish him [the individual], instead of following with a mendicant admiration the great names that are inscribed on the walls of memory, let him know that they are really marks and memoranda for his guidance, with which his own experience should come up. Let him know that the stars wash as benignantly on the hour of his advent as on any Milton or Washington or Howard. There is no combination of powers that comes into the world that is not new and not needed. (*EL II*, p.228)

Emerson's vision of greatness pushes the ordinary self into a foreground where Luther and Milton once towered sublime.¹⁸ However, Emerson's ideas about heroism and self-reliance are still beset with an insistence on absolutes that proved to be influential on Thoreau's earliest work. When Emerson summed up the points he had made about the heroic character in his lecture on 'Heroism', he emphasised the gulf between the hero and the ordinary man:

¹⁷ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1893), p.1.

¹⁸ In the *Biography* lecture series, some ten years earlier (1835).

In the last lecture I endeavoured to illustrate the leading traits of the Heroic character; and defined it as a concentration and exaltation of the Individual, he setting himself in opposition to external evils and dangers, and regarding them as measures of his own greatness. It was said then that the hero scorns the frivolous and sordid life of men around him, and delights in exhibiting by great action or passion the superior endowments of his own nature. ('Holiness', *EL II*, p.340)

Emerson's hero, like Thoreau in his more misanthropic mood, goes as far as to scorn the 'frivolous and sordid life' of others while basking in his own superior strength. Clearly, few could even hope to approach a state of such self-sufficiency. The elitist side of Emerson's conception of heroism keeps resurfacing in his works on the subject, coexisting in an unresolved way with the impulse to make greatness available to everyone.

Self-reliance aside, Thoreau was also influenced by Emerson's thoughts about biography and the uses of heroic models. Such models play an important part in both writers' ideas of improvement. They inspire, set standards and provide viable starting points. As Thoreau puts it,

What are Godfrey and Gonzalve unless we breathe a life into them, and reenact their exploits as a prelude to our own? The past is only so heroic as we see it—it is the canvass on which our idea of heroism is painted—the dim prospectus of our future field. We are dreaming of what we are to do. (*Journal 1*, p.148)

Past courage becomes truly useful when it is revived in this way, so that it can serve as a model for future greatness. In the above passage, issues such as whether the heroism in question is in the eye of the beholder are somehow beside the point. All history is partly imagined, and the heroism of the past may nourish our dreams 'of what we are to do' more powerfully for this reason. Emerson's later work *Representative Men* directly explores the lessons of the past by focusing on the inspirational value of a few select 'great' men. According to Emerson, it is important to contemplate these models, but this is primarily a step towards finding ourselves.¹⁹ The 'uses of great men' are temporary and limited,

¹⁹ Whitman applies an even more democratic version of the concept of succession in 'Song of Myself', giving us the poet/guide whose main achievement is that he shows us the way to ourselves: 'Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, / You must

subject to a natural principle of rotation.²⁰ Teachers are relevant only so far as they inspire us on our way; we drink in their power and move on, repelled by the sight of their limits.²¹ Great men help us along, but in the end we have to leave them, as staying too close could thwart our own progress.

The biographical sketch was employed by Emerson primarily as a means of getting to the heart of greatness, tracing the divine that shines through the 'merely' human. When he was working on the *Biography* lecture series in the mid-1830s, he applied a series of tests to the men he had chosen as subjects.²² Although he focuses on each individual, he does so mainly as part of a quest for an over-arching theory of greatness; he is ^{not} primarily interested in the details of individual biography. Following Emerson, Thoreau often contemplates the uses of biography in the early Journal and is keen to learn from the examples of other people. His interest stretches far further than 'great' men, and he is, at least in theory, more willing than his mentor to explore the minutiae of other lives. In October 1842, he writes about his longing to find out about the life 'of any man', setting no boundaries as to what would be worthwhile:

We do not learn much from learned books but from true—sincere—human books—from frank and friendly biographies— Let me know how any man thought—and wavered and resolved, succeeded and failed, what he did and refrained from doing— I only want to know more of the life of man—of any man. In a true biography—any would be great—and any small. (*Journal 2*, p.51)

travel it for yourself' (*Leaves of Grass*, p.73).

²⁰ 'We are tendencies, or rather symptoms, and none of us complete. We touch and go, and sip the foam of many lives. Rotation is the law of nature' ('Uses of Great Men', *RM*, p.19).

²¹ See the last few pages of 'Uses of Great Men'. This way of thinking, which will later become central to Harold Bloom's theory of anxiety of influence, culminates in an emphatic statement of optimism: 'Yet, within the limits of human education and agency, we may say, great men exist that there may be greater men. The destiny of organized nature is amelioration, and who can tell its limits?' (*RM*, p.35).

²² The tests he employed are well summed up by the list at the bottom of his working notes for the lecture series: 'Is he in earnest / Is he not selfish / Is he goodhumored / Is he an intellect-mover / Is he a believer in the Super human? / Is he able to appreciate things justly' (*EL I*, p.425).

As so often, the germ of this desire can be found in Emerson's democratic vision of greatness, but it was Thoreau who would live it out, taking the time to get to know and describe some of the people on the fringes of Concord society.

This emerging interest aside, Thoreau also read many biographical works²³ and wrote some biographical sketches in his early youth, in particular a piece on Sir Walter Raleigh. The sketch, which was originally given as a lecture in February 1843, is distinguished by a broad and tolerant vision of heroism. It reflects the rapidly increasing maturity of Thoreau's ideas on the subject (far more, perhaps, than it reflects Raleigh, although his versatile life as a courtier, explorer and writer provided a perfect model of complex 'heroic' achievement). Some of the material for the lecture was in fact culled from the Journal of August 1840 and the winter of 1841-1842, not long after 'A Chapter on Bravery' and 'The Service' were written. In the finished lecture, Thoreau sets forth a more solid and grounded view of the hero than he did in his earlier works on the subject. Commenting on the 'steady and cheerful bravery of Raleigh', Thoreau embraces the notion of courage as calmness, which is prepared to let go rather than respond with strictness:

To march sturdily through life patiently and resolutely looking defiance at one's foes, that is one way, but we cannot help being more attracted by that kind of heroism which relaxes its brows in the presence of danger, and does not need to maintain itself strictly, but by a kind of sympathy with the universe[.] (*EEM*, p.217)

Cheerfulness is repeatedly praised in this essay, as is the notion that the heroic life should be practical as well as intellectual.²⁴ Thoreau's understanding of heroism thus firmly

²³ This interest is easily confirmed by a look at the record of books he borrowed from Harvard College library. In 1833 and 1834, he took out for example Butler's *The life of Erasmus*; Banks's *History of the life and reign of Peter the Great*; Irving's *Life and voyages of Christopher Columbus* and Barney's *Biographical memoir of Com. Joshua Barney* (see K.W. Cameron's *Emerson the Essayist*, Vol. II, p.192).

²⁴ For Thoreau's description of Raleigh's steady good spirits during his imprisonment, see *EEM*, p.197, and for comments on the great cheerfulness of heroes in general, p.218.

accommodates the imperfect and the broadly human by this time, moving well beyond a simple equation of bravery and virtue:²⁵

With all his heroism, he was not heroic enough; with all his manliness, he was servile and dependent; with all his aspirations, he was ambitious. He was not upright nor constant, yet we would have trusted him; he could flatter and cringe, yet we should have respected him... (*EEM*, p.216)

Commenting on Sir Walter Raleigh, Thoreau now writes admiringly about a man whose qualities could not possibly be described as traditionally heroic. Perhaps the very act of writing this lengthy sketch taught him something about human imperfection, and helped him leave the most extreme aspects of his early idealism behind.

1.3 Idealism by Walden Pond

When Thoreau moved into his cabin by Walden Pond on the fourth of July 1845, his move not only marked a new beginning (significantly placed on Independence Day),²⁶ but also formed part of the shift from Transcendental idealism to a more realistic outlook that had been in the making for some time. The heady absolutes of the first phase of the *Journal* (1837 to approximately 1842), were already a few years behind him. Large parts of 1843 and 1844 had been taken up by practical matters, such as working as Emerson's handy man, tutoring on Staten Island, improving techniques for the family pencil business, and helping to build a new family home (the 'Texas house'). All this concrete activity both tempered his idealism and sharpened his desire to get on with what he saw as

²⁵ His subject must have forced Thoreau into this to some extent; Raleigh could not be understood in terms of conventional virtue. Elsewhere, Thoreau, contradictory as ever, occasionally reveals a very different attitude. He describes chastity as a requirement of heroism in the early *Journal*, and generally favours chastity well into the 1850s. See for example his essay 'Chastity & Sensuality': 'Chastity is something positive, not negative. It is the virtue of the married especially. All lusts or base pleasures must give place to loftier delights' (*EEM*, pp.274-75).

²⁶ Thoreau plays down the importance of this, dismissing the date as a mere coincidence (*Walden*, p.84).

the 'real' business of life, his writing. His move to Walden was an attempt to secure the space, opportunity and economic foundation for his work. It was also an attempt to fulfil his insistent longing for a life of continual deep feeling: a life that is not dissipated by trivialities, and in which no opportunities to experience the sunlight or the stirring breeze are missed (when he first moved in, the sun and wind would even reach him indoors, seeping in between the rafters of his unfinished house). Thoreau was no longer just dreaming of living a brave optimistic life, he was putting his dreams into practice, and in many ways succeeding. Even if his actual life at Walden was far from the confident progression towards (inner and outer) spring he describes in *Walden*, his life gathered momentum with the move to the woods. Under the arching pines by Walden Pond and close to its glimmering shores, there was finally room to breathe. The idyllic beauty of the landscape Thoreau chose for his settlement invited cheerfulness and optimism (as so memorably described in 'Solitude', nature's soothing charm preempts the very impulse to despondency). By staking out a life on his own terms in the woods, Thoreau found a practical, viable and rewarding outlet for his aspiration, which brought him much closer to realising his hopes than his earlier, more abstract, idealism ever could.

This is not to say that Thoreau abandoned his idealism when he moved to Walden. Although it faded from its former prominence in the middle of the 1840s, it only faded gradually, and partly as a result of his experiences in the woods.²⁷ Thoreau's experiment in living sobered him and altered his perspectives in ways he could hardly have foreseen. Being so close to nature for a sustained period of time opened up new interests and inspired reverence for its processes; his desire to get close to the landscape often made him forget about his nagging aspiration. Finding the courage to turn his back on society

²⁷ It could be argued that it never really dies out, lending an edge of yearning to Thoreau's work throughout his life.

for a while, he discovered a context that suited him perfectly and, more importantly, enabled him to find himself (or at the very least, a viable mode of living).

When Thoreau first moved to Walden, he was still rather dreamy and otherworldly, looking away from the landscape at least as much as he was looking at it. The notebooks he kept at the time are far more idealistic than the resulting work, in which his actual experiences and thoughts by the pond are filtered through his later outlook.²⁸ To the Thoreau who had just settled into his cabin, *The Iliad* was as important as surrounding nature. On July 7, 1845 for example, a few days after he moved in, he imagines himself in habitual heroic terms. His head is still sometimes high in the clouds, dwelling on literary figures rather than nature or his own neighbours:

I am glad to remember tonight as I sit by my door that I too am at least a descendent 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 ... 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? (*Journal 2*, pp.156-57)

Much like in early youth, Thoreau dreams of being a descendant of the heroes of former years. These passages often find their way into *Walden*, as the above instance does, but such instances are to some extent 'tempered' and held in check by the practical basis of the work. The 'Reading' chapter in particular stands out as a vestige of Thoreau's youthful aspiration. It is suffused with classical allusions, and the lingering idealistic strain is especially notable in the emphasis placed on 'heroic reading'.²⁹

²⁸ The fact that *Walden* went through seven drafts, right up to its publication in 1854, makes the finished work a complex hybrid of approaches. Idealism contends with pragmatic common sense, just as a record of the progress of the seasons exists side by side with literary readings in search of transcendence.

²⁹ Both in the 'Reading' chapter in *Walden* and in the notebooks of the period there are many passages on how 'Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written' (*Journal 2*, p.163), and how 'Our reading should be heroic—in an unknown tongue' (p.168). In early August 1845, Thoreau is displeased with himself for reading the 'indolent story' *The Crescent & the Cross*, instead advocating the hard labour of reading in a foreign tongue (in order to give ourselves over more generously to the work we are

One of the first entries in 'Walden 2', the notebook Thoreau started on his arrival at Walden for the purpose of literary drafts, is a (somewhat slap-dash) poem he later called 'The Hero'. Like the above entry, it retains some of his heady idealism, but a more realistic inclination is also apparent. The initial emphasis is on practical labour. His hero seeks a 'worthy task' to sustain him, and this should be closely in touch with the earth:

What doth he ask?
Some worthy task.
Never to run
Till that be done,
And that never done
Under the sun...
Happy and well
On this ground to dwell
This soil subdued
Plant and renew.
(*Journal 2*, p.197)

Revealingly enough, he now advocates farming rather than fighting as a suitable life for a hero. While living at Walden, Thoreau, like the hero in his poem, is 'giving nerve' to his slenderness by taming the landscape and cultivating the ground around his house. As he puts it above, this labour is an ongoing task whose goal is its own steadfast continuation. Thoreau himself found such a task for example in the growing of beans, a labour he lovingly describes in 'Walden 1', the diary notebook he started when he moved to Walden. But despite the grounded and practical nature of this labour, only the most reflective and idealistic passages of the later *Walden* chapter ('The Bean-Field') appear in the original notebook.³⁰ Thoreau was still so caught up in the dream of the ideal that he could not apply himself to practical tasks without looking for deeper meanings.

reading). He later suggests that such a capacity for 'heroic reading' is very rare: 'The works of the great poets have never yet been read, for only great poets can read them' (p.366). Intriguingly enough, Thoreau claims (at the beginning of 'Sounds') that he did not read books during the first summer at Walden, a statement his diaries readily disprove. Always contradictory, he was perhaps simply trying to juggle incompatible impulses, easily forgetting some sides of his life in the passionate pursuit of others.

³⁰ Compare the chapter to the entry he made in *Journal 2*, pp.158-59, where he

Thoreau spent most of his time at Walden neither cherishing idleness nor occupying himself with the day-to-day practicalities of living; he was busy writing. During his two years by the pond, he finished the manuscript of *Week*, a long lecture on Thomas Carlyle, notes on his first trip to Maine ('Ktaadn' to be), and the first draft of *Walden*, as well as notes towards other projects and regular Journal entries. His application to his writing works wonders; *Walden* is a vast improvement on *Week*, which never quite coheres but functions as a necessary prelude to the subsequent work. During this period, Thoreau also established a pattern of living he would stick to, more or less, for the rest of his life. This is his basic routine of writing or working for money (making pencils, later on surveying) in the morning, walking in the afternoon and reading or writing up his notes in the Journal in the evening. However, he always remained concerned about the 'insufficiency' of any such habits and was rebelliously delighted at the thought of overthrowing them, which he did almost as a matter of course. As he put it some time earlier, with prescience: 'Let us devise never so perfect a system of living, and straightway the soul leaves it to shuffle along its own way alone' [*Journal 1*, p.105]). As soon as Thoreau had perfected his brief but significant Walden life, he left it behind. But all he left was the physical setting; the finely tuned method of living he developed at Walden stayed with him and would serve him well. Thoreau 'shuffled along his way' with new confidence, two years' worth of memories, a few manuscripts and, perhaps most importantly, a more realistic outlook.

wonders about the purpose of his 'small Hercules labour' and about what he can learn from his beans.

1.4 Traces of Heroism in the Later Work

By the time he left Walden in autumn 1847, Thoreau had stopped making Journal entries about heroism in any overt sense; there are no more headed entries and the topic generally subsides into the background. However, it does survive for some time in one context: Thoreau's fascination with the heroism of earlier literary ages. It also returns with full force in the lectures about John Brown at the end of the 1850s. Beyond that, it informs much of Thoreau's writing in a subtle way, lending an edge of idealism to sections of *Walden* or living on in the strain of aspiration that continues throughout the Journal. The essay 'Homer. Ossian. Chaucer', which was originally written in 1843, contains many references to heroism. Large sections of the piece are used in near-unchanged form in *Week* in 1849. Much of this material is unremarkable, such as the suggestion that the hero and the bard have become separated in the literature of civilized ages (by which he means medieval times). Referring to Chaucer, Thoreau wrote: 'No hero stands at the door prepared to break forth into song or heroic action, but we have instead a homely Englishman, who cultivates the art of poetry' ('Homer. Ossian. Chaucer', *EEM*, p.163). Thoreau's idealisation of the heroes in Ossian, the elemental figures in a work he took at face value as 'Genuine Remains', is more interesting.³¹ Ossian's heroes serve as images of strength, part of a general celebration of the wild: 'Inside the civilized man stands the savage still in the place of honor. We are those blue-eyed, yellow-haired Saxons, those slender dark-haired Normans' (*EEM*, p.159). Thoreau's interest in the Ossianic poems produces some striking images, which are infused with an imaginative life that his generalisations about the literature of Chaucer's age lacks: 'If Ossian's heroes weep, it is

³¹ Thoreau did not know that James McPherson's work was a hoax (see for example Robert D. Richardson's account of his reading of Ossian in *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986], p.142).

from excess of strength, and not from weakness, a sacrifice or libation of fertile natures, like the perspiration of stone in summer's heat' (*EEM*, p.161).

Many of the ideas from 'Homer. Ossian. Chaucer' also reappear in 'Walking', which was published in 1862 but is based on Journal material from 1850-1852. In this later piece, Thoreau remains true to his emphasis in the earlier essay, still preferring 'wild' and uncivilized works (the *Iliad*, Scriptures, mythology) to 'tame' English literature.³²

Building on his earlier distinction, he now celebrates wildness as the very essence of life:

Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him. One who pressed forward incessantly and never rested from his labours, who grew fast and made infinite demands on life, would always find himself in a new country or wilderness, and surrounded by the raw material of life. ('Walking', *Ex*, p.277)

More playfully but no less significantly, Thoreau locates the old heroic spirit in the walker of modern times, creating a fine image of earth-bound heroism stripped of all pretension: 'The chivalric and heroic spirit which once belonged to the Rider seems now to reside in, or perchance to have subsided into, the Walker,— not the Knight, but Walker, Errant' (*Ex*, p.253). Although this is not its primary purpose, the image sums up the shift from idealism to realism that gradually takes place in Thoreau's work; his hero is no longer a soldier, supreme in strength, just a simple man walking the fields, mud-soiled but driven by hope. The last few pages of 'Walking' form one of the purest statements of optimism in Thoreau's work. Playfully initiated ('We hug the earth, — how rarely we mount! Methinks we might elevate ourselves a little more. We might climb a tree, at least' [*Ex*, p.300]), it culminates confidently on the road to the future: 'So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done' (*Ex*, pp.303-4). This trustful faith in the future is the result of a successfully integrated 'heroic' spirit, which is self-reliant enough to confidently embrace the future. Heroic aspiration

³² See 'Walking', in *Ex*, p.283.

for betterment thus continues to inform Thoreau's work when the hero as such has been left behind, granted a second life through his optimism and willingness to believe.

A man who was truly driven by his vision would eventually materialise in Thoreau's life. It was John Brown, the abolitionist martyr. Brown's example and fate moved him to think yet again in terms of ideal heroic virtue in the speeches he gave in 1859 and 1860. Thoreau's pleas idealise Brown in the strongest terms: 'Think of him— of his rare qualities! such a man as it takes ages to make, and ages to understand; no mock hero, nor the representative of any party. A man such as the sun may not rise upon again in this benighted land' ('A Plea for Captain John Brown', *RP*, p.136). Brown is even likened to Christ and called an 'Angel of Light' (*RP*, p.137). In his speeches on Brown, Thoreau is using a language of heroic extremes for rhetorical effect. This approach is particularly well suited to his impassioned discourse against the decision of the government ('We talk of a *representative* government, but what a monster of a government is that where the noblest faculties of mind, and the whole *heart*, are not *represented*. A semi-human tiger or ox, stalking over the earth, with its heart taken out and the top of its brain shot away' ['A Plea', *RP*, p.129]). When giving examples of Brown's heroic acts in 'The Last Days of John Brown', Thoreau, who tends to pride himself on his indifference to contemporary events, now calls it 'inexcusably far-fetched' to pass over 'the recent deeds and words of John Brown' (*RP*, p.145). By his encounter with a real-life hero, Thoreau's political consciousness was ignited as seldom before.³³

Thoreau's language reaches heights of strong expression in these lectures. He spares no measures, as in his description of John Brown's company ('Surely, they were the

³³ Thoreau's political engagement only flared up occasionally and was limited to a few areas, such as the issue of slavery and the right to freedom from state interference (following his refusal to pay poll tax in July 1846), but it was nevertheless deeply felt and proved to be inspirational for subsequent generations.

very best men you could select to be hung' [RP, p.132]), or in his comment about Brown's death: 'It seems as if no man had ever died in America before, for in order to die you must first have lived' (RP, p.134). Thoreau's imagery is equally inventive, if less blunt. One of the more curious examples occurs when he turns the moral notion that good seed inevitably leads to good fruit into a law applicable to heroes such as Brown: 'when you plant, or bury, a hero in his field, a crop of heroes is sure to spring up. This is a seed of such force and vitality, that it does not ask our leave to germinate' (RP, p.119).³⁴ The optimism of these pieces is relatively subdued, sobered by the tragedy of Brown's death, but present in images such as this. Thoreau urgently *wants* to believe that his death will be atoned for by general betterment in the future, channelling his anger into a sense of hope. When he returned to the rhetoric of heroism in his late work, his ideas on the subject were no longer as abstract as they used to be. The pleas for John Brown are rooted in an actual situation and aim for concrete results – Thoreau's heroic idealism has found a worthy cause.

Thoreau had turned his back on abstract hero-worship already in the mid-1840s. By this time, strength was individual and inner, nourished by nature rather than by heroic models. Strength was a sense of universal optimism, personally applied. Strength was exaggeration of self. Thoreau still thinks of heroism in idealistic terms in the late John Brown essays, but only within a polemical context, and he still uses some heroic imagery in *Walden*, but only rarely. The overt references to bravery in the latter work tend to be passing comments, sometimes of an unexpected turn, such as the passage about the bravery of commerce in 'Sounds'. On the one occasion where heroism plays a central role, in the celebration of morning in 'Where I Lived, and What I Lived For', the conventional

³⁴ The image makes sense in the light of the fact that Thoreau was studying seeds and seed dispersal around this time (a topic I consider in Chapter 7).

implications of the subject are assimilated into a Transcendental line of thought. The familiar idea of how 'Morning brings back the heroic ages' (*Walden*, p.88)³⁵ provides the foundation for an image of an inner 'heroic' morning, which is located entirely in the self:

All poets and heroes, like Memnon, are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at sunrise. To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. It matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. (*Walden*, pp.89-90)

Thoreau's earliness is a heady mixture of aspiration ('We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical ends, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn') and self-improvement: 'Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep' (*Walden*, p.90). Two closely related preoccupations are here coming into their own, fused in a new and distinctive expression.

The section concludes with a statement about the 'perfection' of each individual in itself being the highest task. Life should be an ongoing heroic endeavour: 'To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour' (*Walden*, p.90). To live like this, which is what Thoreau tried to do by Walden Pond, is heroic optimism applied, on a scale at once vast and commonplace. Greatness is ultimately a private matter, measurable only in the heart of each individual man. Thoreau's sense that life in its entirety is the most sacred of deeds goes back to some of his earliest entries on heroism. It is apparent already in 'A Chapter on Bravery', although only in terms of the lives of great men: 'The bravest deed, which for the most part is left quite out of history ... is the life of a great man. To perform exploits is to be temporarily bold ... but the exploit of a brave life consists in its momentary completeness' (*Journal 1*, p.98). Steadfastness,

³⁵ This connection frequently occurs in *Week*, as when the Thoreau brothers first set out on the river in the 'Saturday' chapter.

cheerfulness and courage goes into such a life. It is described from a different angle in 'Sir Walter Raleigh' ('Surely, it is better that our wisdom appear in the constant success of our spirits, than in our business or the maxims which fall from our lips merely' [*EEM*, p.216]), and from yet another one in *Week*: 'The true poem is not that which the public read. 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*' (*Week*, p.343). How to live a life that can withstand scrutiny was always a vital matter to Thoreau, challenging precisely because of its unattainable and open-ended nature; it could never be 'solved' by single heroic deeds. Throughout the 1840s, he was very aware that the most difficult task he faced was to work out how to live so that his life could withstand his own scrutiny (and beyond that, the scrutiny of others), seeing that he was so contradictory and ever-changing. When setting down his Journal entries, he often seems to be imagining an internal or external reader – a critical side of himself, or another person evaluating his thoughts. Like the Puritans of earlier generations, he was composing a kind of spiritual autobiography by which he would one day be judged (and in some ways, how right he was). Thoreau's high standards were encouraged both by deeply felt personal need, a sense of imperfection that could only be abated by incessant aspiration, and by the yearning for perfection that was current in New England culture at the time. And if he tried to turn his whole life into an heroic endeavour, which he most certainly did in his insistence on self-improvement, this was a way of grabbing it by the throat and making it possible.

1.5 Self-Improvement

In the late 1840s and early 1850s, Thoreau's optimism finds a new outlet: an intense concern with progress in terms of 'perfection' of the self. Some time after the comments on heroism have disappeared from the Journal, entries that can be brought together under the heading 'Self-Improvement' take their place, reaching a peak of intensity between summer 1850 and spring 1852. This is not an entirely new preoccupation, nor one that can be easily isolated from other concerns. Thoreau had long sought to realise his hopes through practical 'discipline' of various kinds, such as watching his diet, getting up early, adhering to strict routines of reading and writing, or indeed simplifying his life by moving to Walden Pond.³⁶ He had also written extensively on related subjects in the earlier parts of the Journal, dwelling for example on how one achieves one's true identity. In February 1841, he describes this as the very lesson nature teaches: 'We are constantly invited to be what we are; as to something worthy and noble. -- I never waited but for myself to come round; none ever detained me, but I lagged or tagged after myself' (*Journal 1*, p.245). In the transitional early 1850s, when Thoreau turned to nature more passionately than ever before and was becoming more objective in his approach to it, he was still deeply preoccupied with the self. In September 1850, the (somewhat bewildered) answer he suggests to the question of how to lift one's life onto a higher plane is to practise 'some new austerity' (the passage is later used in the parable of John Farmer in 'Higher Laws' in

³⁶ For an example of the former, see his 1848 comment in *Journal 3*, p.4: 'I find that I conciliate the gods by some sacrament as bathing—or abstemiousness in diet—or rising early—and directly they Smile on me. These are my sacraments'. Or for a later comment along similar lines, the entry for October 26, 1853: 'When, after feeling dissatisfied with my life, I aspire to something better, am more scrupulous, more reserved and continent, as if expecting somewhat, suddenly I find myself full of life as a nut of meat,—am overflowing with a quiet, genial mirthfulness. I think to myself, I must attend to my diet; I must get up earlier and take a morning walk; I must have done with luxuries and devote myself to my muse. So I dam up my stream, and my waters gather to a head. I am freighted with thought' (*Journal V*, p.456).

Walden):³⁷

A voice seemed to say to him [']Why do you stay here and live this mean dusty moiling life when a worthy & glorious existence is possible for you?' But how to come out of this and actually migrate thither– All that he could think of was to practice some new austerity. To let his mind descend into his body & redeem it. To treat himself with ever increasing respect. He had been abusing himself– Those same stars twinkle over other fields than this[.] (*Journal 3*, pp.112-13)³⁸

Thoreau's answer is the one that is nearest at hand: to change himself. Self-improvement through discipline of various kinds promises a viable method of transformation. In the early 1850s, it becomes one of the main vehicles for his optimism, a concrete version of his earlier rather vague aspiration to bravery and heroism. The greater realism of this 'new' practice (changing oneself is after all more likely to have some effect than dreaming of absolute bravery), is a reflection of the fact that his idealistic horizons were closing in a little.

In his concern with self-improvement, Thoreau is often thinking in just as stark terms as he did in the earliest parts of the *Journal*. His life is either high or low, either worthy and grand or utterly base. Such ways of thinking are not easily shaken off; they fit close like skin and resurface even when they appear to have been left behind.³⁹ The division is even harder to overcome as it is partly a cultural inheritance, passed down by centuries of religious doctrine and yearning for a higher state. Thoreau, like Emerson,

³⁷ *Walden*, p.222.

³⁸ A sense of the need to overcome the body permeates the passage, in both a sexual and more general sense. Physical self-denial is a very important aspect of Thoreau's approach to self-improvement.

³⁹ For a statement that sums up Thoreau's sense of co-existing opposites, see for example 'Higher Laws' in *Walden*: 'I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good' (*Walden*, p.210). Comments of this kind stem from his youthful dualism, and the tension described is far from as resolved as he would like it to be. When he contemplates chastity later on in the chapter, he explicitly denies the animal nature he earlier praised: 'Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open. By turns our purity inspires and our impurity casts us down. He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established' (*Walden*, p.220).

rejected the church but remained deeply influenced by its antithetical world view. In the late 1840s, Thoreau is still longing for absolute perfection, hoping, as here in a letter to H.G.O. Blake in May 1848, to correct every 'defect' he finds:

There is not necessarily any gross and ugly fact which may not be eradicated from the life of man. We should endeavour practically in our lives to correct all the defects which our imagination detects. The heavens are as deep as our aspirations are high. So high as a tree aspires to grow, so high it will find an atmosphere suited to it. (*Corr*, p.220)

Living so that our aspirations match the depth of the heavens is a serious obligation, requiring the kind of single-minded dedication Thoreau thrived on. Man *can* improve himself and should aspire to do so; he is in charge of his character and able to correct his faults. Like bravery, self-improvement was fashionable among the Transcendentalists, and like his Transcendental contemporaries, Thoreau considered it to be a moral duty. One's life bears witness of one's character, flourishing or destructive in perfect symmetry with inner inclination: 'It is a momentous fact that a man may be *good*, or he may be *bad*; his life may be *true*, or it may be *false*; it may either be a shame or a glory to him. The good man builds himself up; the bad man destroys himself' (*Corr*, p.221). At the heart of Thoreau's long-running concern with perfection of his life and character lies a deep idealism; a stubborn belief that improvement is possible. His quest was rather self-centred, focused as it was on building himself up to make the most of his life (and more importantly still, to develop his literary craft), but he still regarded it as a virtuous endeavour – his individual improvement might ultimately be of benefit to all.

Thoreau's preoccupation with self-improvement is however far more than just a moral matter; it is related to a desire to experience life deeply. To improve oneself means to prepare, by whatever means, for a life of greater capacity for emotion and insight.

Writing to H.G.O. Blake on April 3, 1850, he sets out his position on living to the full in the following terms:

Will you live? or will you be embalmed? Will you live, though it be astride of a sunbeam; or will you repose safely in the catacombs for a thousand years? In the former case, the worst accident that can happen is that you may break your neck. Will you break your heart, your soul, to save your neck? Necks and pipe-stems are fated to be broken[.] (*Corr*, p.257)

He continues this graphic description with a more confessional statement, in which he stresses that we should demand the utmost from life, while also revealing a degree of insecurity about his capacity to live that intensely:

Men make a great ado about the folly of demanding too much of life (or of eternity?), and of endeavoring to live according to that demand. It is much ado about nothing. No harm ever came from that quarter. I am not afraid that I shall exaggerate the value and significance of life, but that I shall not be up to the occasion which it is. I shall be sorry to remember that I was there, but noticed nothing remarkable,— (*Corr*, pp.257-58)

The goal is set out, but how to actually get there is a less clear-cut matter. How can one prepare oneself for the evanescent state of intensity? Can it really be done through some concrete strategy of improvement, such as asceticism or general simplification of life? In the summer of 1851, Thoreau was continually looking for intensity, often living at a peak of excitement that is reflected in his Journal entries:⁴⁰ 'How to live— How to get the most of life! as if you were to teach the young hunter how to entrap his game. How to extract its honey from the flower of the world. That is my every day business. I am as busy as a bee about it. I ramble over all fields on that errand and am never so happy as when I feel myself heavy with honey & wax' (*Journal 4*, p.53). The intensity Thoreau seeks often comes naturally. During this summer, his feeling for life is particularly extravagant. He is continually led on by a sense of wonder ('We are surrounded by a rich & fertile mystery— May we not probe it—pry into it—employ ourselves about it—a little?' [*Journal 4*, p.54]). However, Thoreau wants this excited state to become more permanent and reliable, and seems convinced that a life of intensity requires deliberate practice.

⁴⁰ This was after all the summer of moonlight walks, a time when Thoreau was more than usually driven to seek out beauty. See Chapter 4 for a further discussion of this period and Thoreau's longing for intensity in general.

Considering Thoreau's emphatic statements around 1850 and 1851, there is no doubt that his dream of self-improvement was much more than a dry educational matter. It was a deeply Romantic dream, imbued with a passionate longing for fullness. There is rapture in the very process of betterment, a process wonderfully worthwhile in itself:

What more glorious condition of being can we imagine than from impure to be becoming pure. It is almost desirable to be impure that we may be the subjects of this improvement. That I am innocent to myself. That I love and reverence my life! That I am better fitted for a lofty society today than I was yesterday to make my life a sacrament— (*Journal 3*, p.311)

The above extract comes from one of the longest and most emphatic statements about self-improvement in the *Journal*, an entry dated July 16, 1851. Although Thoreau is caught up in his own private longing to rise, he also acknowledges the vital role improvement plays in nature. The passage beautifully continues 'What is nature without this lofty tumbling', thus placing the aspiring self within a natural order of development and amelioration. The 'lofty tumbling' of improvement serves as a uniting force, as central to nature as it is to Thoreau's aspiring mind. To Thoreau in this mystical mood, the self may indeed be as alluringly strange as the outside world is, partaking of its wonder ('Let me forever go in search of myself— Never for a moment think that I have found myself. Be as a stranger to myself never a familiar— seeking acquaintance still' [*Journal 3*, p.312]). Thoreau is revelling in the mystery of his own existence and what he perceives as its immense potential for betterment: 'What temple what fane what sacred place can there be but the innermost part of my own being? The possibility of my own improvement, that is to be cherished. As I regard myself so I am' (*Journal 3*, p.312). If Thoreau is in fact as he regards himself, if the 'truth' about him is determined by his understanding of it, this leaves ample scope for realisation of his hopes; all that is required is a shift of perception.⁴¹

⁴¹ This suggestion resembles Emerson's claim (in *Nature*) that we can restore the

Thoreau was not alone among the Transcendentalists in dreaming of perfection and self-improvement. In the New England of his day, a great deal of attention was devoted to betterment through education; schooling was the starting point for elevation of the self.⁴² Progression towards an ideal state is also the keynote of two earlier Transcendental texts he knew very well; Bronson Alcott's 'The Doctrine and Discipline of Human Culture' and Emerson's *Nature*, both published in 1836.⁴³ Alcott speaks boldly of Human Culture as 'the art of completing a man';⁴⁴ of perfecting his spirit and revealing the true idea of his nature to him. As Alcott describes it, in vague but energetic terms:

It seeks to realize in the Soul the Image of the Creator.— Its end is a perfect man. Its aim, through every stage of influence and discipline, is self-renewal. The body, nature and life are its immediate materials. Jesus is its worthiest ideal.⁴⁵

Emerson's pleas for the cultivation of the individual are just as emphatic; he is dreaming of independence and absolute freedom. The last two parts of *Nature*, 'Spirit' and 'Prospects', are supremely confident about man's possibilities, as in the call to action towards the end of the latter section: 'Build therefore your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions'

original beauty of nature 'merely' by redeeming our own soul: 'The ruin or blank that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken in heaps, is because man is disunited with himself (*NAL*, pp.73-74).

⁴² This interest in self-improvement through education is reflected for example by the popularity of the Lyceum lecturing circuit and Horace Mann's Movement for Public Education, as well as by the publication of works such as Sampson Reed's *The Growth of the Mind* (1826), Elisabeth Peabody's translation of de Gerando's *Du perfectionnement morale*, which was published as *Self-Education* (1830), and Frederick Henry Hedge's 1840 *Dial* essay 'The Art of Life – The Scholar's Calling', which emphasised the importance of self-culture.

⁴³ When asked by Isaiah Williams to suggest some Transcendental works that would provide a good introduction to the movement, Thoreau recommended these two (see *Corr*, p.48, for Williams's reply, asking to borrow Alcott's work).

⁴⁴ Amos Bronson Alcott, 'The Doctrine and Discipline of Human Culture', in *Essays on Education (1830-1862)* (Gainesville, Florida: Scholar's Facsimilies & Reprints, 1960), p.32.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

(*NAL*, p.76).⁴⁶ In the 'Introductory' lecture to the *Human Culture* series, Emerson's ambitious attempt to describe the development of a multi-faceted, 'complete' person,⁴⁷ he speaks in equally emphatic terms about what he considers to be man's main duty, the realisation of his own nature: 'His own Culture,— the unfolding of his nature, is the chief end of man. A divine impulse at the core of his being, impels him to this' (*EL II*, p.215).

This concern with the 'unfolding' of man's potential lies at the heart of Emerson's imaginative world and influenced Thoreau greatly, but Emerson in turn had influential models for his thinking. He is primarily looking back to the notion of self-culture, originally a German educational doctrine which interested some of the precursors of the Transcendentalists. The Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, the uncle of Thoreau's eponymous friend, lectured on the subject in Boston in September 1838. Channing, like Emerson, speaks of the 'unfolding and perfecting' of man's nature, and assimilates such self-culture into a grand national vision. He describes it as an opportunity that is unique to the Americans:

In this country the mass of people are distinguished by possessing means of improvement, of self-culture, possessed no where else. To incite them to the use of these, is to render them the best service they can receive. Accordingly I have chosen for the subject of this lecture, Self-culture, or the care which every man owes to himself, to the unfolding and perfecting of his nature.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ This concern with perfection was at least partly influenced by some of the Oriental literature eagerly read by the Concord Transcendentalists. For similar high-minded ideas, see for example Thoreau's 'Ethnical Scriptures' selections from the Chinese *Four Books*, which were published in *The Dial* in October 1843: 'Perfection (or sincerity) is the way of heaven, and to wish for perfection is the duty of man' (*EEM*, p.149). It is likely that these selections were made by Thoreau, though it is possible that they were Emerson's (see *EEM*, p.385).

⁴⁷ In this series, Emerson treats the improvement of various human faculties (which are figured by representative parts of the body such as the Hands, the Head, the Eye and Ear and the Heart) each in turn, moving on to more abstract themes, such as Prudence, Heroism and Holiness.

⁴⁸ William E. Channing, *Self-Culture* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1838), p.11.

Self-cultivation is an essential task of man ('Unless we are roused to act upon ourselves, unless we engage in the work of self-improvement, unless we purpose strenuously to form and elevate our own minds ... very little permanent good is received'),⁴⁹ which is carried out for its own unworldly ends: 'But the ground of a man's culture lies in his nature, not in his calling ... He is to be educated because he is a man, not because he is to make shoes, or nails, or pins'.⁵⁰ It is furthermore described as a matter of 'total' education, which involves the systematic development of a broad range of faculties (Moral, Religious, Intellectual, Social, Practical, relating to the perception of Beauty, and so forth). To Thoreau's and Emerson's contemporaries, such self-culture was a viable and promising endeavour, for in these pre-Marxian days, fate could easily be thought of as the outcome of individual rather than social and political forces. As Channing puts it in a statement that sums up the optimism the Transcendentalists attached to the pursuit of betterment: 'Self-culture is something possible. It is not a dream. It has foundations in our nature'.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.12.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.29. See also the statement on page 34 of the lecture, which gives an indication of Channing's idealistic priorities: 'Undoubtedly a man is to labour to better his condition, but first to better himself'.

⁵¹ *Self-Culture*, p.12. Concern with self-culture continued sporadically throughout the century both in England and America; tracts were occasionally published, lectures were occasionally given. These calls for self-improvement took many shapes and forms; all sorts of beliefs could be accommodated by this heading and most of them left the original German self-culture far behind. Some were concerned with self-culture in the sense of working one's way up from poverty. The most famous of these is Samuel Smiles's *Self Help* (London: John Murray, 1859), which stressed the importance of perseverance rather than 'genius' and used numerous biographical examples of worldly success. Another example would be William Unsworth's *Self-Culture and Self-Reliance*, or, *The poor man's help to elevation on earth and in heaven* [London, 1861]). Others dealt with betterment through formal education (*Self-Culture* by Joseph Barker [London, 1863]). The American tracts often had either a religious slant (James Freeman Clarke's course of lectures *Self-Culture: Physical, Intellectual, Moral, and Spiritual* [Boston, 1881]) or a more bizarre phrenological one, teaching improvement within the strict limits of innate identity, which was fixed and readily deductible from physical characteristics (O.S. Fowler's *Education and Self-Improvement* [New York, 1879]).

Going further back, Thoreau had another significant predecessor in his quest for improvement, Benjamin Franklin. Although their goals were diametrically opposed, Franklin courting the materialism and worldly advancement Thoreau disclaimed, their methods of self-improvement had much in common.⁵² Both were obsessed with betterment and with the economic basis of life, preaching spartan living and careful saving. In his Preface to *Poor Richard Improved*, 'The Way to Wealth', Franklin describes a taste for luxury as a common cause of poverty in one of his most direct statements about frugality and simplification of needs:

Many a one, for the Sake of Finery on the Back, have gone with a hungry Belly, and half starved their Families; *Silks and Sattins, Scarlet and Velvets*, as *Poor Richard* says, *put out the Kitchen Fire*. These are not the *Necessaries* of Life; they can scarcely be called the *Conveniencies*, and yet only because they look pretty, how many *want to have* them. The *artificial* Wants of Mankind thus become more numerous than the *natural*...⁵³

Thoreau would no doubt have agreed both with this sentiment, sharing as he did Franklin's philosophy that rationalisation of needs is the first step towards improvement of one's condition. But such agreement is far from complete: Franklin is contented with worldly attainments, the achievement of wealth and well-being, while Thoreau longs for more amorphous and transcendent rewards.⁵⁴

Like Thoreau, Franklin went through a period when he was more than usually preoccupied with improvement. In Part Two of his *Autobiography*, he describes this as

⁵² Thoreau does not seem to have been familiar with Franklin's works. He never refers to them in the Journal and neither owned nor borrowed any of them.

⁵³ Benjamin Franklin, 'The Way to Wealth', *Autobiography and Other Writings* (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.270.

⁵⁴ In the 'Economy' section of *Walden* for example, Thoreau sets forth his doubts about the value of worldly, technical improvements, which could even have a detrimental effect on more vital kinds of improvement: 'As with our colleges, so with a hundred "modern improvements"; there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance ... Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston or New York' (*Walden*, p.52).

the time of his 'bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection.'⁵⁵ Franklin's phase of self-improvement was, like Thoreau's, a period of intense self-scrutiny in late youth (Franklin was 27 in 1733 when he started his 'bold Project', and Thoreau was in his early thirties at the beginning of the 1850s). Both phases were gradually left behind: Thoreau becomes less introspective as he shifts his attention to nature, and Franklin abandons his demarcation of faults (faults so surprisingly many) when his life gets busier:

After a while I went thro' one Course only in a Year, and afterwards only one in several Years; till at length I omitted them entirely, being employ'd in Voyages & Business abroad with a Multiplicity of Affairs, that interfered. but [sic] I always carried my little Book with me. (p.91)

By the time he leaves extreme self-scrutiny behind, Franklin has established both a pragmatic work ethic and a healthily sceptical attitude to perfection (more sceptical, perhaps, than Thoreau's attitude ever became). He can laugh at his earlier zeal and describe his youthful project with detached bemusement. As he puts it, by the end of his experiment in perfection he preferred '*a speckled Ax*' to 'a kind of Foppery in Morals', but he remains adamant about the general value of his scheme: 'But on the whole, tho' I never arrived at the Perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it, yet I was by the Endeavour made a better and a happier Man than I otherwise should have been, if I had not attempted it' (p.92).

If Franklin retained a healthy distance from his project of improvement, his Transcendental successors in the pursuit of perfection were not always as distrustful of their visions. Thoreau and Emerson were often deeply excited about the potential of self-culture. A genuine desire to improve can be a very powerful force. As Thoreau puts it, 'The man who is dissatisfied with himself—what can he not do?' (*Journal 3*, p.150). In 1850 and 1851, Thoreau comments frequently on the benefits of aspiration: 'Though my

⁵⁵ *Autobiography and Other Writings*, p.84.

life is low, if my spirit looks upward habitually at an elevated angle—it is, as it were redeemed— When the desire to be better than we are is really sincere we are instantly elevated, and so far better already' (*Journal 3*, pp.177-78; after January 10, 1851). Similar thoughts appeared in a letter to H.G.O. Blake a few years earlier, in a passage on the realisation of dreams: 'Did you ever hear of a man who had striven all his life faithfully and singly toward an object and in no measure obtained it? If a man constantly aspires, is he not elevated?' (*Corr*, p.216; March 27, 1848). As people are partly defined by their aspiration, sustained desire to improve is likely to have an impact on their nature, perhaps pushing them in the direction they desire; hopefulness can make hope come true. A man's aspiration may even be such an important part of his being that he cannot be properly understood if it is not taken into account; without an attempt to grasp his future being:

Some men's lives are but an aspiration—a yearning toward a higher state—and they are wholly misapprehended—until they are referred to or traced through all their metamorphoses. We cannot pronounce upon a man's intellectual & moral state until we foresee what metamorphosis it is preparing him for. (*Journal 4*, pp.145-46)

Thoreau is strongly aware of the fact that longing for improvement can be a vital part of identity, more vital, perhaps, than plain reality and the present state.

As the very impulse towards improvement seems beneficial to Thoreau, its fulfilment is (even if possible) not strictly necessary. In the longest statement about self-improvement in the *Journal* (July 16, 1851), Thoreau thinks of it as a process on which he has just embarked: 'I thought I was grown up & become what I was intended to be. But it is earliest spring with me. In relation to virtue & innocence the oldest man is in the beginning spring & vernal season of life' (*Journal 3*, p.312). No-one could really aspire to the 'virtue & innocence' Thoreau describes here, using distancing paradoxical terms. To arrive at flawless perfection is not the point. Self-improvement is rather a matter of being on top of one's condition more often, or raising one's aims a little; of being

'improved' enough not to let life go by unnoticed. As Thoreau beautifully puts it in October 1849, living in an improved way is a process with no other end than the perpetuation of itself: 'What sort of fruit comes of living as if you were a going to die? Live rather as if you were coming to life. How can the end of living be death? The end of living is life. Living is an active transitive state to life' (*Journal 3*, p.30). Motivated by the enabling conviction that 'living is an active transitive state to life', Thoreau could readily abandon modes of living that had fulfilled their function; his life with the Emersons, his settlement at Walden or the conscious pursuit of improvement. Overt self-culture was a far too self-conscious approach; it could not satisfy him in the long run. It was tainted and limited by the introspectiveness of youth, and the need to abandon it at some stage was implicit in its very nature.

Thoreau's self-improvement was always a contradictory matter. He used 'limiting' means (discipline, diet and spartan habits) to achieve a limitlessness of mind; he became mildly obsessed with the self in order to learn to forget about it; he used practical logic to create room for unworldly emotions. These oppositions were grounded in his contradictory response to the world, balancing as it was on the volatile edge between boundless yearning and rational resignation. He sought order, and not. He sought fulfilment, and not. He sat like John Farmer in the parable in 'Higher Laws' in *Walden*, listening enticed to the subtle suggestions of the flute from afar, yet happy to remain as he was and always had been. In the writings of the 1830s and 1840s, Thoreau shifts between emotionalism and stoic coldness as unpredictably and swiftly as wind ripples the surface of a pond, even one buried deep in the woods. Each (rhetorical) stance can be a mode of optimism, and Thoreau embraces both in ever-changing union, perhaps to ensure that he would never be hopelessly stranded. The record he has left us suggests that he wanted to

change himself to match his elevated ideals (ideals very much of the times), but could equally well accept a 'lowly' life and consider his faults as virtues if necessary. So when he abandoned his explicit concern with self-improvement in the early 1850s, as he had previously left his interest in bravery (and other passing fads) behind, he continued it still; he simply subsumed this preoccupation into other ways of shaping the self, such as his evolving routine of observation and Journal-keeping. This he would carry on to the near end of his life, a testimony, if one is needed, to his stubborn determination.

CHAPTER TWO

Turning to Nature

One of the clearest patterns of change in Thoreau's Journal is the shift from subjectivity to objectivity which becomes apparent in the early 1850s, when he begins in earnest his exhaustive mapping of the seasons. A comparison of the very beginning and ending of the Journal gives a good idea of the nature of this significant shift. In 1837, he opened the Journal with mottoes about the value of solitude and self-scrutiny drawn from Renaissance literature, such as this extract from George Herbert's 'The Church Porch': 'By all means use sometimes to be alone, / Salute thyself. See what thy soul doth wear. / Dare to look in thy chest; for 'tis thy own: / And tumble up and down what thou find'st there' (*Journal 1*, p.4). At the earliest stage of the Journal, nature tends to be subordinated to the self or to a 'transcendent' purpose; it is used as raw material for further speculation. His comments on nature's cycle of death and regeneration on the second page of the Journal thus lead straight back to thoughts of himself: 'The oak dies down to the ground, leaving within its rind a rich virgin mould, which will impart a vigorous life to an infant forest ... So this constant abrasion and decay makes the soil of my future growth. As I live now so shall I reap' (*Journal 1*, p.5). At the end of the Journal, some 24 years and two million words later, the once intruding self is calmly subordinated to the landscape it observes. With the self-assured ease he has gained by years of attentive practice, Thoreau deduces the direction of the rain from the traces it leaves on the ground:

After a violent easterly storm in the night, which clears up at noon (November 3, 1861), I notice that the surface of the railroad causeway, composed of gravel, is singularly marked, as if stratified like some slate rocks, on their edges, so that I can tell within a small fraction of a degree from what quarter the rain came.

These lines, as it were of stratification, are perfectly parallel, and straight as a ruler, diagonally across the flat surface of the causeway for its whole length ...

All this is perfectly distinct to an observant eye, and yet could easily pass unnoticed by most. Thus each wind is self-registering. (*Journal XIV*, p.346)

By the time he stops keeping his Journal, Thoreau has long since found himself in the seemingly selfless identity of the 'observant eye' (which is not so selfless and neutral that it is not set apart from other less perceptive identities).¹ For the last decade at least, he has been living by the light of clear deduction and luminous detail, primarily (but never exclusively) intent on external nature.²

Thoreau's routine of observation and Journal writing becomes firmly established at the beginning of the 1850s, when he begins to pay detailed and near enough daily attention to the variations of the Concord landscape. In 1852, which he thought of as his 'year of observation',³ the entries grow longer and more frequent. Botanical and ornithological observations abound, often in the form of latinate lists of natural phenomena; a myriad of natural facts occupy the space where the self-consciously

¹ The last sentence of the Journal ('Thus each wind is self-registering') makes even this 'observant eye' seem redundant; tellingly enough, Thoreau ends his long diary on the notion of a perfectly self-sufficient nature to which man is irrelevant.

² Singling out a shift of this kind, from self-centredness to 'objectivity' (as if such a thing were possible), is obviously a simplification of the real situation. Thoreau's approach changed only gradually and its transformation was neither simple nor complete. No matter how objective the bulk of Thoreau's Journal entries become in the 1850s, more subjective comments can always be found and he never stops yearning for personally resonant observations. In May 1853 for example, he is still far more thrilled by the thought of allegorically significant incidents than by factual knowledge, as the following remark suggests: 'Quite in harmony with my subjective philosophy. This, for instance: that, when I thought I knew the flowers so well, the beautiful purple azalea or pinxter-flower should be shown me by the hunter who found it. Such facts are lifted quite above the level of the actual. They are all just such events as my imagination prepares me for' (*Journal V*, p.203).

³ See the Journal entry on July 2, 1852, in which he also emphasises the importance of a spontaneous mode of observation. He seeks to reclaim scientific study of nature as an inspired poetic process: 'Nature is reported not by him who goes forth consciously as an observer—but in the fullness of life—to such a one she rushes to make her report— To the full heart she is all but a figure of speech. This is my year of observation, & I fancy that my friends are also more devoted to outward observation than ever before—as if it were an epidemic' (*Journal 5*, p.174).

aspiring self once reigned supreme. But what happens to Thoreau's youthfully restless, yearning, self-improving self in this process? And what about his high-minded and ever-burning aspiration? Has it perhaps outlived its course, already in his mid-thirties? How does his immersion in natural facts affect his optimism, rooted as it is in an impatient desire to change both his life and himself? A life of observation was a viable answer to Thoreau's rather unfocused longing for 'improvement', as it brought measurable rewards in terms of increasing skill and a growing body of knowledge. Observe with enough dedication and the secrets of the natural world will be explained to you, his new mode of life seemed to promise. This might not make him a better person, but he had never cared much about that in any traditional sense. His new habits were designed to make him feel that he was getting somewhere. Each day spent studying the landscape would advance his work, adding layers of knowledge and data to his growing Journal record of nature's ways. The painstaking routine Thoreau adopted in the 1850s thus provided a way of channelling his optimism into purposeful activity, which could be relied upon to ensure steady progress. No such gains could however occur without corresponding losses – he soon realised that his life might become *too* purposeful, too intent on the gathering of facts, leaving little room for spontaneity and imagination.

As Lawrence Buell has pointed out, Thoreau had to change fundamentally to be able to look at nature in a more objective way:

In order to attend as closely to nature as he did late in life, Thoreau had to overcome not only the limits of his classical education and his early Transcendentalist idealism, but also of an intense preoccupation with himself, his moods, his identity, his vocation, his relation to other people. This narcissism he surmounted by defining as an essential part of his individuality the intensity of his interest in and caring for physical nature itself.⁴

⁴ Lawrence Buell, 'Thoreau and the natural environment', in Joel Myerson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.172.

Taking Buell's suggestion one step further, perhaps Thoreau not only defined himself through his passionate interest in nature, but remained involved with himself in the midst of his attention to external things, nature functioning as an extension of the self. A deep strain of subjectivity certainly continues to inform Thoreau's work throughout the 1850s. In August 1851, he comments on the necessity of introspection, apparently reluctant to let go of his former 'narcissism': 'The poet must be continually watching the moods of his mind as the astronomer watches the aspects of the heavens. What might we not expect from a long life faithfully spent in this wise – the humblest observer would see some stars shoot' (*Journal 3*, p.377).⁵ Just over a week later, on August 28, he writes in a similar vein: 'The poet is a man who lives at last by watching his moods. An old poet comes at last to watch his moods as narrowly as a cat does a mouse' (*Journal 4*, p.16). The stance Thoreau outlines here, by way of a striking comparison,⁶ amounts to a fusion of introspection and scientific observation; a careful watching of oneself for poetic purposes. This approach serves as a fitting emblem of the transitional early 1850s, when Thoreau was torn between youthful self-absorption and a growing thirst for other kinds of knowledge. A life of observation appears to guarantee rewards, but he remains hesitant about its value. In the midst of his emerging enthusiasm for natural facts, he seems to be aware that the fulfilment he seeks can not be found exclusively in nature, and that it is neither easily cultivated nor readily pinned down. But to be able to sustain his optimism in his mid-thirties, he nevertheless needed to develop a mode of living that could be relied

⁵ Thoreau is notably discussing poets rather than natural scientists here. His approach to his work might be changing, but he still thinks of it in terms of art rather than science.

⁶ The poet in Thoreau's image not only *lives* by watching his moods, but watches them with the ravenous purpose of a cat watching a mouse, intent on his prey.

upon to give him a sense of purpose and fuel (if not quite satisfy) his hopes from day to day.

Thoreau was often concerned about the way he was changing during this period, analysing the 'symptoms' of his current state at great length in the Journal. He was particularly worried about what he experienced as a dulling of the imagination, either as a natural part of the process of ageing or because of the over-rational approach he was adopting.⁷ In August 1851, he comments anxiously (but artfully, rhyming 'heaven's cope' with 'microscope') on what the intensive study of nature might be doing to him:

I fear that the character of my knowledge is from year to year becoming more distinct & scientific— That in exchange for views as wide as heaven's cope I am being narrowed down to the field of the microscope— I see details not wholes nor the shadow of the whole. I count some parts, & say 'I know'. (*Journal 3*, p.380)

Thoreau feared that if he embraced the tracing and naming of parts he was turning to, he would run the risk of leaving meaningful connection behind. The adoption of scientific methods might make him see a great deal but comprehend very little.⁸ The very details he loved, the pattern of veins on a scarlet oak leaf or the colour of a bull frog's iris, could become obstacles to true vision if they are merely gathered in lists, dead-end data preventing real (that is, imaginative or Transcendental) perception. Given nature's bewildering vastness, where would such scrupulous attention lead you? Do you count

⁷ Walter Harding plausibly suggests that Thoreau's adoption of natural science on a large scale in 1852 might have been triggered by his encounter with Louis Agassiz, or by the intellectual climate of the times: 'Perhaps it was the result of his recent contacts with Louis Agassiz, perhaps it was because of the generally increasing scientific interest of the time, at any rate Thoreau found himself approaching nature more and more scientifically. He began to keep longer and longer lists of specimens he found and records of the budding of trees, the blossoming of flowers, and the arrival of birds' (Harding, p.290).

⁸ Disconnection of this kind is an inevitable part of natural history writing, based as it is on the observation of individual phenomena which, in the first instance, must be clearly perceived. Large parts of Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne* (of which Thoreau owned a copy, although he was probably not familiar with it until at a later stage of his life; the first Journal reference to White occurs on March 29, 1853), consists, like Thoreau's 1850s Journal, of apparently random observations that jump from topic to topic. See for example White's Letters 39-41 to Pennant in this work.

some parts and say you know? Even attention impelled by love might only lead to confused uncertainty, a result that would be far from the optimism-inducing sparks of inspiration Thoreau primarily craved. As a result, he is often troubled by the relation between the demands of art and natural science at this time. While writing a meticulous (but also lyrical) description of the beauty of the formation of dew drops on pondweed leaves and of fog over the river in July 1852, he reflects that 'Every poet has trembled on the verge of science' (*Journal 5*, p.233). This most ambiguous trembling, which is not just every poet's but also Thoreau's own, suggests both a sense of awe and redundancy in the face of scientific methods, and a thrill at the recognition of the inherently poetic nature of this approach.⁹

Even though Thoreau gradually settles into his habits of observation, he remains worried about the effects of studying the landscape so intently. He dwells on the subject in 1853, just as he had the previous year:

Man cannot afford to be a naturalist, to look at Nature directly, but only with the side of his eye. He must look through and beyond her. To look at her is fatal as to look at the head of Medusa. It turns the man of science to stone. I feel that I am dissipated by so many observations. I should be the magnet in the midst of all this dust and filings. I knock the back of my hand against a rock, and as I smooth back the skin, I find myself prepared to study lichens there. I look upon man but as a fungus. I have almost a slight, dry headache as a result of all this observing. (*Journal V*, p.45)

As Thoreau acknowledges, attention to nature might even become an obsessive disease, disordering the observer in proportion to its rational ordering of nature. No dry headaches would beset the Transcendental observer who looked 'through and beyond' nature, selecting only the most compelling details for further attention. But this lingering doubt

⁹ Back in 1840, long before Thoreau adopted a more objective stance, he commented on how rare the ability to see clearly is (here in terms of comprehending universal laws rather than observing individual details): 'The eye that can appreciate the naked and absolute beauty of a scientific truth, is far rarer than that which discerns moral beauty. Men demand that the truth be clothed in the warm colors of life—and wear a flesh and blood dress. They do not love the absolute truth, but the partial' (*Journal 1*, p.197).

does not stop Thoreau from carrying on with his observation as usual. The following day he takes as much pleasure as ever in scrutinising the landscape, although his comments are highly tinted by the imagination. When he describes some piles of freshly cut white pine wood by the road side, he soon 'transcends' the factual observations he starts off with in an extravagant image of 'tears shed for the loss of a forest':

I like the smell of it, all ready for the borers, and the rich light-yellow color of the freshly split wood and the purple color of the sap at the ends of the quarters, from which distill perfectly clear and crystalline tears, colorless and brilliant as diamonds, tears shed for the loss of a forest in which is a world of light and purity, its life oozing out. These beautiful accidents that attend on man's works! Fit pendants to the ears of the Queen of Heaven! (*Journal V*, p.48)

The fanciful comparison with which Thoreau concludes the passage could hardly be further removed from objectivity; his imagination is clearly still alive and well.

Doubts about the compatibility of scientific and 'poetic' seeing do however keep haunting him throughout the 1850s,¹⁰ regardless of the fact that he became more and more adept at combining the two. Every year he pushed closer to a kind of art that depended on the interaction between them, working towards the successful integration he achieves in late texts such as 'The Dispersion of Seeds'.¹¹ This ultimate compatibility does perhaps seem clearer with hindsight, and from an ecological perspective, than it did to Thoreau himself. Following the publication of 'The Dispersion of Seeds', recent criticism has paid a great deal of attention to Thoreau's achievements in the natural sciences.¹² Recent

¹⁰ In 'Autumnal Tints', which he wrote in 1858 and 1859, the distinction is as central as ever: 'I have found that it required a different intention of the eye, in the same locality, to see different plants, even when they were closely allied, as *Juncaceæ* and *Gramineæ*: when I was looking for the former, I did not see the latter in the midst of them. How much more, then, it requires different intentions of the eye and of the mind to attend to different departments of knowledge! How differently the poet and the naturalist look at objects!' (*Ex*, p.352).

¹¹ See Chapter 6 and 7 for a further discussion of this subject.

¹² See for example Michael Berger's article 'The Saunterer's Vision: Henry Thoreau's Epiphany of Forest Dynamics in *The Dispersion of Seeds*' (*The Concord Saunterer*, New Series, Vol. 4 [Fall 1996]), and Laura Dassow Walls's book *Seeing New Worlds*.

commentators, such as Frank N. Egerton and Laura Dassow Walls in their article 'Rethinking Thoreau and the History of American Ecology', also tend to stress the benefits of the interaction between art and science in Thoreau's work, a choice of emphasis that does not fully explain his lingering anxiety about the adoption of scientific methods.¹³

When Thoreau first established his nature-tracking routine in the early 1850s, one of the main problems was that it jarred with his craving for spontaneity and leisure. The systematic study of nature too easily became discipline rather than pleasure, drying up his love as he imagined himself to be indulging it. Attention to the landscape could come to seem like a chore rather than a delight. Thoreau tried to counteract this deadening effect by relaxing his ambition a little, which he did for example by looking more playfully at nature (as he puts it in the 1853 Journal passage quoted above, with the side of the eye). In September 1852, after a spring and summer of unusually painstaking observation, he yearns for some such ability to apprehend without looking:

I must walk more with free senses— It is as bad to *study* stars & clouds as flowers & stones— I must let my senses wander as my thoughts—my eyes see without looking. Carlyle said that how to observe was to look—but I say that it is rather to see—& the more you look the less you will observe— I have the habit of looking to such excess that my senses get no rest—but suffer from a constant strain ... What I need is not to look at all—but a true sauntering of the eye.
(*Journal 5*, pp.343-44)

A 'true sauntering of the eye', relaxed and intuitive seeing, is perhaps more difficult to achieve for a professional observer, which Thoreau is rapidly becoming. Such seeing has to be learned, or re-learned; reclaimed from the wreckage of youth turning into maturity, spontaneity into deliberate practice. Thoreau longs to be able to maintain a balance

¹³ The conclusions they draw make Thoreau's two-fold approach seem more deliberate and well integrated than it is likely to have been: 'Having discovered how he could make science relevant to his own concerns, salvaging and protecting the damaged forests and fields of Concord, Thoreau realized that he need not make a choice between poetry and science. He could use science to nourish his poetic soul and also to protect the natural environment which he loved' (*The Concord Saunterer*, New Series, Volume 5 [Fall 1997], p.15).

between deliberate fact-seeking and a calmly receptive frame of mind, approaches that should ideally merge in 'absolute' involvement with nature. At the end of his 'first' full year of observation, he comments with characteristic exaggeration about how one has to 'camp down' next to the objects one observes to be able to appreciate them properly. Nothing less than 'infinite' leisure is required, a usage that implies a relaxed approach as well as a long stretch of time: 'How much—What infinite leisure it requires—as of a lifetime, to appreciate a single phenomenon! You must camp down beside it as for life—having reached your land of promise & give yourself wholly to it' (*Journal 5*, p.412).

As the above passage suggests, Thoreau, despite his reservations, is generally very excited about his involvement with the landscape at the beginning of the 1850s. He gives himself wholly to his observations and derives sustenance from the details that during bad times seem like mere dissipation. However, he also tries to 'reclaim' intuitive seeing without it interfering too much with his new-found objectivity. He does this by emphasising the transcendent nature of the phenomena he studies and his own role as 'poetic observer' (*Journal 5*, p.112). Natural details should be invigorating gems of truth, eternalised in writing: 'Facts collected by a poet are set down at last as winged seeds of truth—samarae—tinged with his expectation. O may my words be verdurous & sempiternal as the hills. Facts fall from the poetic observer as ripe seeds' (p.112). This comment appears in the midst of an 1852 entry that consists of a list of flowers seen, which is exactly the kind of material that most urgently needs justification and literary purpose.¹⁴

To be truly meaningful to Thoreau, natural phenomena must still be transformed in some

¹⁴ This is one brief example of the kind of material I have in mind, taken from the same June 1852 entry: 'The panicked cornel (under which Gray puts Big's white C.) with pure white flowers— This & the V. dentatum now out—show handsome corymbs (and the V nudum) in copses, both in sun & shade against and amid the green leaves of other shrubs or trees. Grape in bloom—agreeable perfume to many—to me not so' (*Journal 5*, p.112).

way; not only recorded but also *altered* in writing, touched by the hand of the poet.¹⁵ Pure observation does not satisfy him in the long run, steeped as he is in Transcendental beliefs. No matter how scientific his observations become, he finds it hard to let go of the notion that the highest use of nature is to express the self. To be of lasting interest, facts should be collected as seeds of truth, 'tinged' with both the experience and the expectation of the observer. Comments to this effect often appear in otherwise factual entries. In May 1853, Thoreau describes how nature becomes a meaningful language, suffused with stories, when he himself is 'rich in experience':

If I am overflowing with life, am rich in experience for which I lack expression, then nature will be my language full of poetry,— all nature will *fable*, and every natural phenomenon be a myth. The man of science, who is not seeking for expression but for a fact to be expressed merely, studies nature as a dead language. I pray for such inward experience as will make nature significant. (*Journal V*, p.135)

Thoreau is stubbornly longing for the kind of 'inward' state in which nature seems significant. Although he is constantly bouncing his emotions off nature in the 1850s, his aim is still to experience life intensely and find expression for his feelings. As Norman Foerster puts it, 'Was not the thing he sought, after all, not out there in nature, in the pine groves and upland grasses, but within his own mind and heart? Steadily conscious as he is of his love of the outward, in his profounder hours Thoreau remembers happily the supremacy of the inward'.¹⁶

Writing in spring 1854, Thoreau even claims that it is impossible to say anything interesting without being subjective: 'There is no such thing as pure *objective* observation. Your observation, to be interesting, *i. e.* to be significant, must be *subjective*' (*Journal VI*, pp.236-37). Total objectivity is neither possible nor desirable. When Thoreau's primary

¹⁵ Note the shift in the above passage from preoccupation with plain *facts* to the thought of his own *writing* ('O may my words be verdurous...').

¹⁶ Norman Foerster, 'The Humanism of Thoreau', in *The Recognition of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Wendell Glick (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p.217.

concerns change in the early 1850s, a strong subjective impulse remains prominent in his work. His writing would be very different indeed without this strain and, as he reflects in 1854, far less valuable: 'All that a man has to say or do that can possibly concern mankind, is in some shape or other to tell the story of his love, – to sing; and, if he is fortunate and keeps alive, he will be forever in love' (*Journal VI*, p.237). His work, which often reads as an act of rebellion against fixity, is large enough to combine contradictory ambitions. It encompasses opposites, but not without tension. In the conclusion to *Thoreau: A Naturalist's Liberty*, John Hildebidle incisively sums up Thoreau's dualistic approach: 'The world's conjunction is *or* – be a scientist or writer. Thoreau's is, repeatedly, *and* – he will, he insists, be a scholar *and* Adam, be a mystic, a Transcendentalist *and* a natural philosopher to boot.'¹⁷ Thoreau does not abandon his attempt to make sense of the world, he just changes his approach.¹⁸ The natural details he records in the *Journal* are still subjectively chosen, selected consciously or unconsciously because of their relevance to him:

Is it not as language that all natural objects affect the poet? He sees a flower or other object, and it is beautiful or affecting to him because it is a symbol of his thought, and what he indistinctly feels or perceives is matured in some other

¹⁷ John Hildebidle, *Thoreau: A Naturalist's Liberty* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1983), p.152. Hildebidle is discussing Thoreau's well-known description of his 'more than' scientific stance (March 5, 1853). Thoreau's statement was triggered by a query from the Association for the Advancement of Science about which branch of science he devoted himself to. The passage continues: 'How absurd that though I probably stand as near to nature as any of them, and am by constitution as good an observer as most—yet a true account of my relation to nature should excite their ridicule only' (*Journal 5*, p.470). In his 1850s writing, 'Thoreau proceeds *both* naturalistically and Transcendentally' (to quote Hildebidle's comment on *Walden*, p.115). Even when Thoreau's work is at its most scientific, as in the one essay which has been accepted as a contribution to science, 'The Succession of Forest Trees' (1860), his intentions remain partly literary. He is for example turning seeds into evocative symbols (for a further discussion of this subject, see Chapter 7).

¹⁸ John Hildebidle also points out that the discipline of natural science provides its own style and format, through which experience can be understood: 'The style of the natural historian provides a vehicle whereby the complexities of the moment can be organized and expressed' (*Thoreau: A Naturalist's Liberty*, p.118).

organization. The objects I behold correspond to my mood. (*Journal V*, p.359; August 7, 1853).

Not all natural objects will inspire in this way; not every listed flower will be experienced deeply enough to serve as a symbol of thought. But every phenomenon that finds its way into the Journal will have caught his attention on some level, and the sheer effort he puts into selecting from nature's abundance suggests a love more dedicated and intense than that of the occasional observer. Even his most scientific quests, such as the attempt he makes at the beginning of 1846 'To find the bottom of Walden Pond—and what inlet & outlet it might have' (*Journal 2*, p.228), have poetic overtones. The care he takes when he measures the depth of the pond in various places in search of its exact proportions suggests a longing for more than just factual answers (although they too are preserved, recorded on the plan that is included in 'The Pond in Winter' chapter in *Walden* [see **Figure 1**]). Such labours are carried out on the borderline between art and science, and can be considered from either perspective. The 1850s writing which is the record of this love sometimes suffers in the ways Thoreau feared, from disjunctiveness, repetitiveness and faltering imagination, but the 'hidden' story of devotion behind this material is more suggestive than what meets the eye.

Despite his deep involvement with nature, Thoreau often felt at a loss about the direction his life was taking in the early 1850s. His insecurity is expressed both in direct comments about the potential dryness of his approach and in more subtle ways, such as through a deep current of nostalgia for a youth he feels to be passing. During this period, he dwells on signs of ageing and often laments the loss of his former sensitivity, as here in July 1851:

I think that no experience which I have today comes up to or is comparable with the experiences of my boyhood— ... In youth before I lost any of my senses—I can remember that I was all alive—and inhabited my body with inexpressible satisfaction, both its weariness & its refreshment were sweet to me. This earth was the most glorious musical instrument, and I was audience to its strains. To

have such sweet impressions made on us—such extacies [sic] begotten of the breezes. I can remember how I was astonished. I said to myself—I said to others—There comes into my mind or soul an indescribable infinite all absorbing divine heavenly pleasure, a sense of elevation & expansion. (*Journal 3*, pp.305-6)

A sense of decline and disappointment permeates the Journal entries of this period. It coexists in a fruitful way with the forward-looking explosion of effort and energy Thoreau simultaneously invests in the observation of nature, an explosion that pushes the Journal in a new, more objective, direction. The sudden surge of nostalgia in the early 1850s Journal is an aberration in Thoreau's work; he does not normally think of present experiences as pale imitations of idealised past events.¹⁹

How much—how perhaps all that is best in our experience in middle life may be resolved into the memory of our youth! I remember how I expanded. If the Genius visits me now I am not quite taken off my feet—but I remember how this experience is like but less than that I had long since. (*Journal 5*, p.438)

In this mood, life seems like mere repetition, faint and much 'less than' it once was. Thoreau, contradictory as ever, wavers between a desire to arrest the process of change and an inclination to accept it (a wavering similar to that found in his early comments on heroism, which are torn between insistence on perfection and acceptance of defeat). Sometimes he thinks that he quite simply needs to wind back his inner clock a little by making a deliberate effort to rouse himself: 'As we grow older—is it not ominous that we have more to write about evening—less about morning. We must associate more with the early hours' (*Journal 4*, p.364). Age is far from fixed – it is a matter of attitude and perception as well as years. When Thoreau failed to step back to an earlier frame of mind in this way, he often embraced his perceived decline and sought compensatory rewards; his optimism ensured that he would never be at a loss for long. His nostalgia during this

¹⁹ See also Thoreau's comment on the beauty of rose-buds, which he considers superior to the beauty of full-grown flowers, in June 1852. He dwells on the roses' 'promise of perfect & dazzling beauty when their buds are just beginning to expand—beauty which they can hardly contain—as in most youths commonly surpasses the fulfillment of their expanded flowers. The color shows fairest & brightest in the bud' (*Journal 5*, p.145).

period has much in common with Wordsworth's preoccupation with the (redeemable and perhaps ultimately purposeful) loss of childhood sensibilities,²⁰ although Thoreau's 'golden age' occurred later in life; he harked back to his early youth rather than his boyhood years.

Thoreau does not just lament the process of ageing during this period; like Wordsworth, he often looks at its bright side and takes its benefits to heart. Life may seem like a sustained lesson in resignation, but the way it forces us to alter our perspectives can be for the better: 'The youth gets together his materials to build a bridge to the moon or perchance a palace or temple on the earth—& at length the middle-aged man concludes to build a wood-shed with them' (*Journal 5*, p.223). A note of optimism is implicit in this apparent commonplace on the subject of disillusion. Thoreau's wood-shed is not just a bathetic sign of disappointment, but also a realistic starting point; his literal 'shed' at Walden Pond once served as a locus for the renewal of his life. His consideration of his own inner change during this period is thus both optimistic and comically resigned. As in the above example, he is staking out a path that leads through and beyond disappointment. He may be courting resignation, or at least an acceptance of his altered state, but resignation does not imply hopelessness in Thoreau's work; it is always a strategy for attainment. Alongside his wistful glances back during this period, he remains fundamentally affirmative.

In the continuation of the above passage, Thoreau describes how men, given inner strength and favourable conditions, can have two 'growths' in a lifetime, like trees in a season:

So is it with man—most have a spring growth only & never get over this first check to their youthful hopes—but plants of hardier constitution—or perchance planted in a more genial soil—speedily recover themselves—& though they bear

²⁰ In particular in 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', 'Tintern Abbey' and *The Prelude*.

the scar or knot in remembrance of their disappointment—they push forward again and have a vigorous fall growth—which is equivalent to a new spring. (*Journal 5*, p.223)

What he outlines here, by means of a carefully chosen natural metaphor, is a hopeful agenda for recovery from the onset of inner and outer change. Thoreau's close attention to nature clearly informs his writing here; his observation of the fall growth of plants supports his understanding of human resilience in a seamless way.²¹ Man, or indeed Thoreau himself, might not always be able to live with such unclouded hope and intensity as he once did ('I was daily intoxicated and yet no man could call me intemperate' [*Journal 3*, p.306]), but he should still be able to live with force and anticipation, to 'push forward again and have a vigorous fall growth'. Thoreau was pushing forward in new directions in both his life and writing around this time, a process that was at least partly initiated by the physical and mental changes he felt himself to be undergoing. Continuing to live with zest and curiosity must be possible even in mid-life, in a world that is ever-varied and ever-new with wonder: 'Why should we not still continue to live with the intensity & rapidity of infants. Is not the world—are not the heavens as unfathomed as ever? Have we exhausted any joy—any sentiment?' (*Journal 3*, p.194). Thoreau is stubbornly determined to let optimism rather than pessimism rule. He intends to override the gradual dulling of his senses, and he tries to achieve this at least partly through settling into a discipline of observation and, more vitally still, Journal writing.

From the early 1850s onwards, Thoreau often uses his writing as a way of reminding himself of his purpose and approaching a heightened state of existence. On the surface, he may be trying to capture the ever-varying facets of nature, but he also writes as a way of gearing himself up for a life of intensity. His sensibility seems to have lost some

²¹ See Chapter 7 for a further discussion of Thoreau's natural metaphors for human hardiness (such as hickories and other resilient trees).

of its former edge, so even more effort is required (he complains in 1854, 'This great expanse of deep-blue water, deeper than the sky, why does it not blue my soul as of yore? It is hard to soften me now' [*Journal VI*, p.165]). In his daily stints with the Journal, Thoreau tries to 'soften' himself into feeling, grasping for glimmers of insight in the recollection of the day's experiences. Moments of deep emotion are as readily called up by the act of writing as by direct engagement with nature, as when he gets carried away by his (writerly) vision of red maples: 'O! If I could be intoxicated on air and water! on hope and memory! And always See the maples standing red in the midst of the waters on the meadow' (*Journal 3*, p.120). Even this heady dream has its origin in the perception of natural beauty; the red maples Thoreau eulogises are initially objectively described ('The red maples on the river, standing far in the water when the banks are overflown and touched by the earliest frosts, are memorable features in the scenery of the stream at this season' [*Journal 3*, p.120]). The past and the future are neatly fused in his wish to be intoxicated 'on hope and memory', merging in the desire for strong present feeling. Intensity will fade unless he reminds himself to hold onto it, but if it is called up (and set down) in a Journal, perhaps it will linger a little and remain as a source of inspiration, ready to be re-experienced. Why else would he have bothered filling notebook after notebook with the beauty that came his way, or, as is sometimes the case, the absence of it? Thoreau's attempts to capture the landscape do however often result in intensity that is filtered through reflection; his actual experiences are somehow distanced by the very act of putting them into words.

Only some of the events Thoreau recorded could be imbued with intensity or symbolic meaning, but his more straightforward observations still perpetuated his optimism as they gave him a lot of pleasure. The natural world charmed him, and seemed

more rich and compelling the better he found his way around it. Joseph Wood Krutch has suggested that Thoreau's happiness stemmed from the simple delight he took in sensation and in the surrounding landscape: 'In his own mind it was certainly the continuous sense of being alive in a continuously beautiful and wonderful world of phenomena which, even more than any thoughts or conclusions concerning that world, made living a precious boon'.²² Krutch simplifies the situation a great deal, overlooking Thoreau's ceaseless quest for meaning and the fundamental importance of Journal-keeping in his life.

Conscious interpretation was perhaps not strictly necessary to keep Thoreau happy, but in his writing, he seldom stopped trying to make sense of what he saw. Energised by his love of nature, he would spend most of the 1850s in search of the meaning of the visible and tangible. He did not always glimpse truths or find any use for the data he listed, but his attention to outward things kept him happy on a basic level; his general contentment seems to increase in proportion to the length of his Journal inventories of the landscape. In August 1852, he comments on the pleasures of attending to the outward. The passage opens in a mystical mode, asking for deeper meaning, but he abandons this frame of mind as he finds an answer in the sheer wonder of being able to experience the world:

What are these rivers and hills—these hieroglyphics which my eyes behold? There is something invigorating in this air which I am peculiarly sensible is a real wind blowing from over the surface of a planet— I look out of my eyes, I come to my window, & I feel & breathe the fresh air. It is a fact equally glorious with the most inward experience. Why have we ever slandered the outward? The perception of surfaces will always have the effect of miracle to a sane sense.
(*Journal 5*, p.309)

As well as beauty in ample measure, the external world provides welcome relief from the self. Thoreau's life-changing revelation around this time was nothing more complicated

²² Joseph Wood Krutch, *Henry David Thoreau* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1949), p.146.

than that the 'perception of surfaces' could be deeply satisfying and form the basis of his art, even if it would never preclude the need for further interpretation.

Thoreau accordingly made his love of natural phenomena central to his daily routine in the early 1850s. He felt an unusually strong need to choose between man and nature at this point. Affinity with one often seemed to preclude affinity with the other, as in the following entry, and his deepest sympathies are with nature:

If I am too cold for human friendship—I trust I shall not soon be too cold for natural influences. It appears to be a law that you cannot have a deep sympathy with both man & nature. Those qualities which bring you near to the one estrange you from the other. (*Journal 4*, p.435; April 11, 1852)

This sense of opposition was at least partly caused by his estrangement from Emerson, which came to a crisis after the publication of *Week* in 1849 and coloured the early 1850s. During this period, the two continually misunderstood each other. Thoreau responded by turning to nature, although his withdrawal from company was often more rhetorical than actual. While stressing his estrangement from mankind in his writing, in his daily life he continued to interact with people in much the same way as usual; his life was far less absolute than his Journal statements. Two months after Thoreau wrote the above passage, he revealingly makes the opposite claim. He now proposes that his appreciation of nature is crucially dependent on successful human relations: 'A lover of nature is preeminently a lover of man. If I have no friend—what is nature to me? She ceases to be morally significant.' (*Journal 5*, p.164; June 30, 1852). There can however be little doubt that the natural world was his main source of happiness; what he primarily laments here is the way *nature* loses its meaning when he becomes too lonely.

Thoreau often flees from the complications of human contact to an indulgence of his instinct for solitude, though not always without regret. In an entry on this subject from

July 1852, he starts out by commenting on his craving for solitude, reflects on the essential isolation of man, and ends up on a note of inner conflict:

By my intimacy with nature I find myself withdrawn from man. My interest in the sun & the moon—in the morning & the evening compels me to solitude ...

In your higher moods what man is there to meet? You are of necessity isolated. The mind that perceives clearly any natural beauty is in that instant withdrawn from human society. My desire for society is infinitely increased—my fitness for any actual society is diminished. (*Journal 5*, pp.250-51)

As so often, Thoreau is pulled in two directions and struggles to make sense of his situation. Perhaps it is this very division which makes him so inclined to think in absolute terms. He wants all or nothing; just nature or just man, and finds it hard to deal with the fact that life of necessity involves both. His optimism stumbles on the threshold between two separate worlds, and is more easily restored by solitude than by company. Just as characteristically, the voice used in the passage moves from the first to the second person (and back again), linguistically aligning Thoreau's experience with that of others. This movement is prominent throughout the *Journal*. Thoreau repeatedly switches between different persons – between descriptions of his own state and generalisations about mankind – a technique that indicates a strong impulse both to draw conclusions and to include other people in his experiences.

Apart from his (partial) break with Emerson, Thoreau was not notably more isolated in the early 1850s than at other periods. He had other friends and acquaintances. Ellery Channing for example often accompanied him on his walks in Concord and on longer excursions, such as his trip to Canada in September 1850.²³ But these years were still relatively uneventful. His literary career was at a temporary standstill. *Week* had failed to impress the critics or the reading public, he gave few lectures, and was giving up hope about his ability to ever support himself as a writer, although he worked on several

²³ He later published an account of this journey as 'A Yankee in Canada' (*Ex*, pp.1-125).

manuscripts and was constantly writing. He travelled a bit (twice to Cape Cod), became involved in the Underground Railroad, and took up surveying, but the general emptiness of these years provided him with ample opportunity to devote himself to nature and to Journal keeping. In his entries, he frequently broods on the relation between man and nature. In an extended rhetorical comparison written in January 1853, he contemplates the incompatibility of lives led close to nature and among men, professing his allegiance to the former. He condemns the 'masculine' world of human institutions, preferring instead the joyful 'feminine' world of nature, which he continually describes as 'she'. The use of gender terms makes the split he experiences between the two worlds explicit and striking, though his usage, which often recurs in his work, is open to further interpretation:

I love nature partly *because* she is not man, but a retreat from him. None of his institutions control or pervade her. There a different kind of right prevails. In her midst I can be glad with an entire gladness. If this world were all man, I could not stretch myself— I should lose all hope. He is constraint; she is freedom to me. He makes me wish for another world— She makes me content with this. None of the joys she supplies is subject to his rules & definitions. What he touches he taints... (*Journal 5*, p.422)

This comparison concludes as it begins, in complete, and effectively put, polarity: 'There are two worlds—the post-office & nature. I know them both. I continually forget mankind & their institutions as I do a bank—' (p.442). The rapid succession of short phrases adds emphasis to Thoreau's point, as does his choice of human institutions to pitch against the freedom and joy of nature.

Thoreau's dedication to nature grows so strong in the early 1850s that he seeks to observe every facet of the landscape as it changes with the seasons. Sufficient time, or as he puts it in *Walden*, 'leisure and opportunity to see the spring come in' (p.302), is essential if this close attention is to work in a fruitful and creative way. Thoreau is often anxious about missing the events of the seasons, fending off other distractions as best he

can. On May 19, 1852, he reflects on how far he has succeeded in this during the present spring: 'Up to about the 14th of May I watched the progress of the season very closely—though not so carefully the earliest birds—but since that date both from poor health & multiplicity of objects I have note[d] little but what fell under my observation' (*Journal* 5, p.67). In September 1854, he sums up the benefits of having the time and freedom to observe in a statement that could serve as a credo for his 1850s mode of life:

Thinking this afternoon of the prospect of my writing lectures and going abroad to read them the next winter, I realized how incomparably great the advantages of obscurity and poverty which I have enjoyed so long (and may still perhaps enjoy). I thought with what more than princely, with what poetical, leisure I had spent my years hitherto, without care or engagement, fancy-free. I have given myself up to nature; I have lived so many springs and summers and autumns and winters as if I had nothing else to do but *live* them, and imbibe whatever nutriment they had for me; I have spent a couple of years, for instance, with the flowers chiefly, having none other so binding engagement as to observe when they opened ... Ah, how I have thriven on solitude and poverty! I cannot overstate this advantage ... If I go abroad lecturing, how shall I ever recover the lost winter? (*Journal VII*, p.46)

Ironically enough, Thoreau does give up the next few months to writing and lecturing, thus missing the arrival of winter.²⁴ On December 8, 1854 he comments on this loss:

'Winter has come unnoticed by me, I have been so busy writing. This is the life most lead in respect to Nature. How different from my habitual one! It is hasty, coarse, and trivial, as if you were a spindle in a factory. The other is leisurely, fine, and glorious, like a flower' (*Journal VII*, p.80). Thoreau's engagement to nature is perhaps above all an engagement to himself. It is fuelled by the determination to realise his potential and make his existence different to that of, in his own well-chosen image, a human spindle.

A strain of subjectivity remains notable throughout the seemingly objective *Journal* of the 1850s and 1860s. It is apparent for example in Thoreau's continued

²⁴ During November and December 1854, he was working intensively in particular on his lectures 'Life without Principle' and 'Moose Hunting'. Thoreau gave the latter of these in Philadelphia on November 20 and in Concord on December 5 (it was later incorporated into *The Maine Woods*).

concern with how life should best be lived, and through the introduction of images that transcend the factual, as in the passage cited above. The wildest excesses of self are however tempered by Thoreau's ever-increasing objectivity and precision. The Journal becomes more 'transparent', like a window opening on nature, or more 'reflective', like a mirror whose reflections will not distort, but explicit concern with self is seldom absent for long. Thoreau himself remains visible somewhere within the frame, if only in a corner. The self is only really pushed out when his interest in the landscape comes to dominate, as it does in some parts of the 1850s Journal and some of the late natural history essays (such as 'Wild Apples' and 'The Succession of Forest Trees'). John Hildebidle argues that Thoreau, as a main character, is much less prominent in the late essays than he is in *Walden* and in his earlier works. He seeks to prove this point by counting the appearances of 'I' on the first few pages of the works in question, claiming that the central consciousness has shifted to 'you' or 'we', and that this shift is entirely beneficial: 'In these essays his halo is less terribly visible, and both his humanity and his science are all the more evident and more appealing'.²⁵ But for all its obvious advantages, this change of approach, which first becomes apparent at the beginning of the 1850s, is neither straightforward nor absolute.

The thematic and stylistic continuities between Thoreau's early and late work are at least as striking as the discontinuities; his topics and turns of phrase do not vary much. Signs of his later love of detail can for example already be found in the early 1840s. In 'A Natural History of Massachusetts', Thoreau prophetically wrote: 'Let us not underrate the value of a fact; it will one day flower in a truth' (*Ex*, p.160). He was describing his own future approach, a method that is neither wholly subjective nor entirely objective, but

²⁵ *Thoreau: A Naturalist's Liberty*, pp.88-89.

embraces both philosophic idealism and scientific observation. Only the ongoing interaction of these apparently contradictory stances could satisfy him in the long run. How else could the details of the landscape become 'winged seeds of truth', pregnant with meaning? The emphasis he placed on each mode did however gradually change. Thoreau devoted himself to facts, but he did so with the ultimate intention of comprehending them as fully as possible and going beyond them. Regarded in this way, his 1850s objectivity does not seem very objective at all, but is rather a way of extending the reach of the self into the material world. Thoreau values his factual and scientific discoveries for what they might be as well as for what they are. He is thrilled on the borders of uncharted depths, and only there. The sudden influx of natural detail in the early 1850s Journal can be seen as another facet of his restless searching, in which each fact is recorded as a (faint but unfading) memento of the actuality and promise of beauty. Close attention to the landscape becomes Thoreau's primary way of preparing for further experiences, a mode of optimism that speaks clearly of his ambition to track down nature's evanescent essence. For, as he puts it in 'Autumnal Tints', in a curiously brutal image of shooting into the sky for the 'game' of beauty, proper appreciation requires a lot of practice:²⁶

²⁶ In Chapter 5 of *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), Laura Dassow Walls provides a neat explanation of Thoreau's 1850s approach – the principle of the 'intentionality of the eye' (some previous knowledge is essential if we are to know what we are looking for, or as she puts it, 'our knowledge constructs its supporting facts' [*Seeing New Worlds*, p.202]). The better Thoreau knew nature, the better he would be able to perceive it. As he himself suggests in the passage from 'Autumnal Tints', the ability to anticipate nature's events through detailed knowledge of them would enable him to see the landscape more clearly. Laura Dassow Walls suggests that carefully cultivated anticipation almost automatically widens the range of our perceptions, and that it might even 'call forth something new': 'This limitation [of what we perceive], then, can be cultivated into a strength, if one educates oneself in the art of "anticipation", or "expectation." One can call forth something new, as when by sheer force of expectation he [Thoreau] became the first to locate a rare or unknown plant' (*Seeing New Worlds*, p.172).

Why, it takes a sharp-shooter to bring down even such trivial game as snipes and wood-cocks; he must take very particular aim, and know what he is aiming at. He would stand a very small chance, if he fired at random into the sky, being told that snipes were flying there. And so it is with him that shoots at beauty; though he wait till the sky falls, he will not bag any, if he does not already know its seasons and haunts, and the color of its wing, – if he has not dreamed of it, so that he can *anticipate* it. (*Ex*, p.353)

Back in the early 1850s, Thoreau embarked on the considerable task of getting to know nature's 'seasons and haunts' through close observation. This endeavour was fuelled by the optimistic conviction that beauty would be forthcoming to the prepared observer. Just dreaming of beauty no longer seemed sufficiently rewarding, so Thoreau turned to the natural world to ensure the perpetuation of his hopes: he set out to pin down beauty with the precision of a skilled sharp-shooter.

CHAPTER THREE

Anticipation and Attentiveness

At the end of winter there is a season in which we are daily expecting spring, and finally a day when it arrives. (*Journal V*, p.13)

May 10th 52

This monday the streets are full of cattle being driven up country cows & calves—and colts. The rain is making the grass grow apace— It appears to stand upright—its blades and you can almost see it grow. For some reason I now remember the autumn—the succory & the golden-rod. We remember autumn to best advantage in the spring—the finest aroma of it reaches us then.

(*Journal 5*, p.49)

Thoreau's increasingly specific interest in natural detail during the 1850s goes hand in hand with an impassioned and rapidly expanding interest in every aspect of the seasons; their promise, arrival, peak and maturity as well as their weather-ruled daily variations. Although much of this Journal material amounts to little more than straightforward recording of seasonal phenomena in line with naturalist tradition, a significant part of Thoreau's observations has a far deeper resonance. I am thinking in particular of his habit of anticipating each season long in advance, or indeed of looking back to seasons past, memory and anticipation blending in the dream of the ideal other. With a highly emotional kind of restlessness, triggered by the sights and sounds of particular phenomena in nature, Thoreau is ever-ready to stray in thought from the season at hand. Perhaps the essence of a season is best caught in its absence; why else would 'We remember autumn to best advantage in the spring', as he put it in May 1852? A gleam from the dark side of the year is often far more inspiring than any present season, however bright, and such gleams keep fuelling Thoreau's hopes in the first half of the 1850s. While discussing

Thoreau's life in 1852 in *The Shores of America*, Sherman Paul notes his tendency to anticipate a season long before it happens (any season, that is, not just spring): 'Just as Thoreau had looked with increasing eagerness for the signs of spring in winter, so now, by July, he was looking for the signs of autumn in summer' (Paul, p.288). H. Daniel Peck also draws attention to this habit in his discussion of Thoreau's observation of 'first facts' of the seasons and his 'restructuring' of the calendar year in Chapter 4 of *Thoreau's Morning Work*^(Peck, pp. 90-114) but neither Paul nor Peck investigates in detail the rich implications of Thoreau's seasonal anticipation. Such an investigation is vital for an understanding of the mid-1850s Journal and it has much to reveal about the volatile and complex nature of Thoreau's optimism in general. By tracing the life of nature as it unfolds in the space between the present and the future, Thoreau simultaneously locates his own life in the fertile ground between contentment and discontent, or indeed between acceptance and hope, feeding, I think, off both.

Before looking at some specific examples of Thoreau's anticipation of seasons, we need to take account of his general tendency (sharply accentuated in the early 1850s) to balance the value of the present moment against that of what surrounds it, in space and time. Thoreau's inclination to anticipate, to lift himself slightly from the here and now, is in some ways at odds with his declared longing to live in the present. This longing is forcefully expressed in *Walden*, which was approaching its final form during this period and is strewn with statements about the importance of realising the beauty of the world at hand:

Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality which surrounds us. (*Walden*, pp.96-97)

There is little sign of Thoreau's impatience with the present in this passage (except perhaps in his longing for it to be lived at a near unobtainable peak of intensity), and *Walden* is rich in comments of this kind; comments that locate the available moment as the very apex of dreams.¹ In 'Spring', Thoreau emphasises the value of the present in a similar way, using imagery of the seasons to bring home his point: 'We should be blessed if we lived in the present always, and took advantage of every accident that befell us, like the grass which confesses the influence of the slightest dew that falls on it ... We loiter in winter while it is already spring' (*Walden*, p.314). Although Thoreau's affirmation of the present finds eloquent expression in *Walden* in passages such as these, they still amount to rhetorical statements of aim and intent rather than records of his actual experiences. For such a record we have to look to the Journal, a much more immediate text (it is less drafted and processed, and was not subject to the pressures of publication). When the Journal emerged as Thoreau's main vehicle of expression, it granted him the space to describe the cycle of the seasons and his own evolving life at his leisure. In this, it was well suited to his 1850s ambitions, and indeed enabled them in a crucial way. In the all-embracing Journal, celebration of the present takes concrete form in the description of intensely experienced moments.² These instances of rare beauty are all the more striking because they are surrounded by material of a plainer kind. In these moments, Thoreau

¹ Emerson, too, writes eloquently about the importance of living in the present, as here in 'Self-Reliance': 'The roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence ... Its nature is satisfied and it satisfies nature in all moments alike. But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time' (*EFS*, p.67).

² See Chapter 4 for a more detailed consideration of such moments.

feels quietly attuned to nature and acutely aware of his own existence, if still not quite beyond restlessness.

One such moment (among many) occurs in Thoreau's account of an evening on the river in June 1852. There is nothing particularly grand or unusual about this evening's experience, and his intention with the entry seems to be quite simply to preserve an impression of it, caught by the angular strokes of a rather random set of sentences. The sustained use of the present tense creates a (more or less trustworthy) sense of immediacy:

It is candlelight, the fishes leap— The meadows sparkle with the coppery light of fire-flies. The evening star multiplied by undulating water is like bright sparks of fire continually ascending. The reflections of the trees are grandly indistinct. There is a low mist slightly enlarging the river—through which the arches of the stone bridge are just visible—as a vision. The mist is singularly bounded—collected here—while there is none there—close up to the bridge on one side & none on the other— depending apparently on currents of air. A dew in the air it is—which in time will wet you through. See stars reflected in the bottom of our boat it being $\frac{1}{4}$ full of water.

There is a low crescent of Northern light.— & shooting stars from time to time— (we go only from Channings to the ash above the RR.) I paddle with a bough the Nile boatman's oar—which is rightly pliant & you do not labor much. Some dogs bay. A sultry night. (*Journal 5*, pp.101-2)

There is a curious tension between impulses towards objectivity and imaginative transformation in this apparently unified passage. The initial matter-of-fact statements are swept aside by the extravagant image of the continually ascending sparks of the evening star and the mistily sublime river impressions which follow ('as a vision'), only to be reintroduced by the highly rational comments about the exact cause of the location of the mist (and indeed of stars being reflected in the bottom of the boat, 'it being $\frac{1}{4}$ full of water'). If the objective voice used here denotes enlightened interest in the moment and thus a willingness to accept it as it is, the concurrent creative transformation of it indicates a degree of dissatisfaction; an urge to make the present seem different and more splendid.³

³ It could however be argued that Thoreau's most desired and ideal present is precisely that which is capable of sparking off such imaginative transformations.

A look at one of Thoreau's more ecstatic moments of communion with nature reveals an even greater tension of this kind. In an extended Journal passage from August 1854, Thoreau describes a sunset evening spent on a hillside. It is only the second day of the month but the season is already ripe with anticipations of the fall. The oncoming autumn is prefigured in particular by a new sense of thoughtfulness:

As I go up the hill, surrounded by its shadow, while the sun is setting, I am soothed by the delicious stillness of the evening, save that on the hills the wind blows. I was surprised by the sound of my own voice. It is an atmosphere burdensome with thought. For the first time for a month, at least, I am reminded that thought is possible. The din of trivialness is silenced. I float over or through the deeps of silence. It is the first silence I have heard for a month. My life had been a River Platte, tinkling over its sands but useless for all great navigation, but now it suddenly became a fathomless ocean. It shelved off to unimagined depths.

I sit on rock on the hilltop, warm with the heat of the departed sun, in my thin summer clothes. Here are the seeds of some berries in the droppings of some bird on the rock. The sun has been set fifteen minutes, and a long cloudy finger, stretched along the northern horizon, is held over the point where it disappeared ... After a little while the western sky is suddenly suffused with a pure white light, against which the hickories further east on the hill show black with beautiful distinctness. Day does not furnish so interesting a ground. (*Journal VI*, pp.417-18)

In this passage, Thoreau balances a longing for transcendence against a firm grounding in the present moment⁴ ('I sit on rock on the hilltop...') and some relatively objective observations of his surroundings ('Here are the seeds of some berries in the droppings of some bird on the rock').⁵ The evening is still save for the blowing wind but Thoreau's mind is far from still, busy liberating itself from the constraints of the earth ('I float over or through the deeps of silence') and likening its new-found life to an ocean of fathomless depths. There is a long way from the seeds of berries in a bird's droppings to the depth of

⁴ Thoreau's grounding in the present is further stressed by the subsequent description of him writing there and then on the hillside: 'I was compelled to stand and write where a soft, faint light from the western sky came in between two willows' (*Journal VI*, p.419).

⁵ Despite the precision of this observation, it is still curiously vague. Questions a naturalist would ask, such as 'which bird?' and 'which berries?', are left unanswered.

the ocean, but Thoreau is adept at swinging from here to elsewhere without losing sight of his aim (which partly resides in this elasticity of mind, an ability to embrace *both* here and elsewhere with equal force). The post-sunset light that seems like obvious material for an other-worldly passage is here bent back to earth. Thoreau simply comments on the way it makes the hickories 'show black with beautiful distinctness', suppressing the temptation for Transcendental excess.⁶ Even in a moment of deep awareness of the present, Thoreau's attention thus continually oscillates between his actual surroundings and imagined realms. The more intense sense of life he experiences has at least as much to do with the prospects in his heart and beyond the horizon as with the more immediate view, the lingering 'heat of the departed sun' there and then on his body; it is all of this and much more that together constitute the moment. The life in the present Thoreau so insistently calls for in *Walden* dissolves into multiplicity in the very attempt to describe it in the Journal, revealing its inconsistency (such as the tension between empirical observation and imaginative play). However, the sense of release Thoreau describes in this passage is crucially dependent on its time and place; the experience of the sunset on the hillside. Thoreau might roam in thought, but the roots of his thoughts this August evening reach deep into the ground of this particular hill outside Concord.

If Thoreau's Journal descriptions of moments of deep involvement with the present are often affected by a creative restlessness that transports him far from the current time and place, his statements of explicit impatience with the present season provide a way of articulating this discontent. The seasonal material in the Journal often suggests longing for something other than the present, its firm emphasis on anticipation

⁶ In the continuation of the passage, Thoreau states his preference for the night ('Day does not furnish so interesting a ground'), a 'season' he was exploring in the early 1850s. See the beginning of Chapter 4 for a further discussion of this subject.

sharply at odds with the dream of being satisfied with the current moment. In the middle of a hot and dry July 1854, in which 'Plants are curled and withered' and 'leaves dry, ripe like the berries', Thoreau complains that 'The season is trivial as noon' (*Journal VI*, p.392), implying in unambiguous terms (and in this case with good reason) that he is longing for release. Thoreau often finds summer, a season of relative stasis, especially difficult to be satisfied with, looking for signs of fall at least from the start of July.

During the summer of 1852 he begins to formulate a theory to explain his weariness with this time of the year, writing at the beginning of August about the way the year grows old after a certain point, which he locates midway through the summer when our attention tends to shift to the following season: 'Methinks we do ourselves at any rate some what tire of the season—& observe less attentively and with less interest the opening of new flowers—and the song of the birds— It is the signs of the fall that affect us most. It is hard to live in the summer content with it' (*Journal 5*, p.282). Familiarity can quite naturally dampen interest, but Thoreau's problem with contentment does not depend only on the appearance of the present season. It stems at least partly from the fact that the thrill of imagining an absent season is often much greater than that of appreciating the present one, as indeed the thought of the ideal so easily overshadows the actual. Thoreau implies as much both in the above passage and when he is intrigued by the subtle ways in which the excitement of memory works while studying the evidence of spring in April 1854:

In the brook there is the least possible springing yet. A little yellow lily in the ditch and sweet flag *starting* in the brook. I was sitting on the rail over the brook, when I heard something which reminded me of the song of the robin in rainy days in past springs. Why is it that not the note itself, but something which reminds me of it, should affect me most? – the ideal instead of the actual.
(*Journal VI*, p.182)

This suggestive note revitalises the alluring space between the experienced and the expected, preparing him for further life by making him more receptive to the past.

In early January 1853, midwinter of the year, the examination of a crowfoot bud leads to an impassioned (and even religiously reverential) entry that catches the excitement of anticipation as such, and over and beyond that, of anticipation as hope. No contentment could equal the fairness and resonance of the promise this flower holds, still tightly folded up among its unexpanded leaves:

The leaves of the crowfoot also are quite green & carry me forward to spring. I dig one up with a stick, and pulling it to pieces I find deep in the centre of the plant just beneath the ground—surrounded by all the tender leaves that are to precede it—the blossom bud about half as big as the head of a pin—perfectly white (?)— I open one next day & it is *yellow* There it patiently sits—or slumbers how full of faith—informed of a spring which the world has never seen—the promise & prophesy of it shaped some-what like some eastern temples in which a bud shaped dome o'er tops the whole—it affected me this tender dome like bud, within the bosom of the earth—like a temple upon the earth—resounding with the worship of votaries— Methought I saw the priests in yellow robes within it.

The crowfoot buds—And how many beside!—lie unexpanded just beneath the surface. May I lead my life the following year as innocently as they— May it be as fair and smell as sweet. I anticipate nature. Destined to become a fair yellow flower above the surface to delight the eyes of children & its maker. (*Journal 5*, pp.438-39)

The step from objective examination to promise-laden play is here short indeed. A tiny bud such as this naturally leads the thoughts to spring, but Thoreau reinvigorates this well-worn symbol by his carefully worked out comparison of it to an Eastern temple, complete with yellow-robed votaries. The inspirational effect of the experience is effectively captured by the shift from relatively passive anticipation in the first paragraph (where the speaker is mainly acted upon) to active desire to anticipate in the second paragraph, a shift that is signalled above all by the sudden introduction of modal auxiliaries ('*May I lead my life...*'). The rhapsodic energy this bud-centred dream induces gives an idea of the power the smallest triggers of anticipation have over Thoreau. They are readily capable of renovating his mind and making it blossom in an instant, thrilled into life by the suggestion of a future.

In this context, the actual arrival of spring is almost irrelevant, more likely to cool the heat of promise than bring about its realisation. As Thoreau states after a lengthy passage concerned with the events of spring (which takes the usual form of noting the opening of flowers) in May 1854:

We soon get through with Nature. She excites an expectation which she cannot satisfy. The merest child which has rambled into a copsewood dreams of a wilderness so wild and strange and inexhaustible as Nature can never show him ... That forest on whose skirts the red-bird flits is not of earth. I expected a fauna more infinite and various, birds of more dazzling colors and more celestial song. How many springs shall I continue to see the common sucker (*Catostomus Bostoniensis*) floating dead on our river! (*Journal VI*, pp.293-94)

Tracing the arrival of spring here goes hand in hand with a sense of the unlikelihood that spring-induced hopes will find satisfaction. The image of the dead suckers, the inclusion of their Latin name locating them firmly as part of the 'ordinary', empirically knowable world, effectively reinforces the contrast between Thoreau's surroundings and the splendid landscape of his dreams. In light of the fact that he so successfully made it his mission to know and appreciate the world around him, his disenchantment with his environment is perhaps unexpectedly severe, even directly contradicting his general sense of nature's inexhaustibility. The sentiment is however by no means unusual in the *Journal*; Thoreau's love of the near and close was suffused with doubt and impatience. With one eye on the ground and the other bound for the stars, he was well and truly divided; while admiring his surroundings, at least part of his heart ached for a beauty no earthly prospects could muster.

Thoreau's dreamy otherworldliness is often activated by the same triggers that lead him to think of other seasons. All kinds of sensory impression affect him but few more powerfully than sounds; music, bird song, the sound of crickets and of his much loved telegraph harp.⁷ These readily induce a sense of infinity or transcendence, directing him

⁷ Thoreau's fascination with the associations induced by sensory impressions anticipates Proust's.

away from the actual with unparalleled force. In August 1852 for example, the sound of distant piano music completely transforms his surroundings, a transformation figured (parodically or not) by the use of chivalric imagery:

A thrumming of piano strings beyond the gardens & through the elms—at length the melody steals into my being— ... This is no longer the dull earth on which I stood— It is possible to live a grander life here—already the steed is stamping—the knights are prancing— Already our thoughts bid a proud farewell to the so-called actual life & its humble glories— (*Journal 5*, p.272)

In a rapturous longer passage on sounds in general in December 1853, Thoreau describes how they remind him of his immortality and even liberate him from his body and its surroundings: 'I get the value of the earth's extent and the sky's depth ... I leave my body in a trance and accompany the zephyr and the fragrance' (*Journal VI*, p.40). At other times he considers such release from the actual in temporal terms, as a liberation from the present season and perhaps even from time itself. In May 1853 and 1854, the sound of crickets transports him rapidly through the seasons to come, towards infinity. On May 15, 1853, he writes:

With this elixir I see clear through the summer now to autumn, and any summer work seems frivolous ... At one leap I go from the just opened buttercup to the life-everlasting. This singer has antedated autumn. His strain is superior (inferior?) to seasons. It annihilates time and space; the summer is for time-servers. (*Journal V*, p.158)

This is anticipation of seasons at its most ecstatically extreme, its vertiginous associations summed up by the description of the shift 'from the just opened buttercup to the life-everlasting'; a shift straight out of time. Thoreau's thoughts on the crickets in May 1854 are uncannily similar, picking up the thread where he left it the previous year by stressing the timelessness of their sound. The song of a cricket now 'suggests a wisdom

Each and every encounter might transport him to other times of the year and the present is only as rich as the associations it holds, a springboard to dreams. Walking open and receptive through the landscape, Thoreau is walking in the past and future too, seasons mingling in his mind on the slightest suggestion. Gathering what is distant into the present moment in this way, he truly lives in a hybrid present that is suffused with hope.

mature, never late, being above all temporal considerations, which possesses the coolness and maturity of autumn amidst the aspiration of spring and the heats of summer' (*Journal VI*, p.290); Thoreau's responses remain consistent. This consistency is central to his anticipation of seasons, which is subject to a good deal of repetition and orderly thinking. It is also vitally dependent on the gradual accumulation of knowledge Thoreau was engaged in in the 1850s – he had to know nature intimately to be able to appreciate subtle signs of the future, and indeed to inhabit the evolving year in any true sense.

His entries on the seasons directly reflect the need for this deep knowledge, frequently comparing this year's observations with those of former years. There would indeed be no anticipation without memory as we can only know what we are seeking through our knowledge of the past, previous experience serving as the mold for future expectation.⁸ Thoreau's anticipations of seasons are movements simultaneously back and forward in thought, sometimes explicitly so, as in this comment on the catnep in May 1852: 'There is something in its fragrance as soothing as balm to a sick man. It *advances me* even to the autumn and beyond it. How full of *reminiscence* is any fragrance–' (*Journal 5*, p.39; my emphasis). Advanced by a reminiscence, Thoreau shuttles between the known and the unknown, his premonition of autumn sparked somewhere in the interval between them. Many of his anticipation entries testify to this duality, often rather subtly through the inclusion of words such as 'reminds' or 'reminiscence' in a forward-looking context (for example, 'The sight of the masses of yellow hastate leaves and flower-buds of the yellow lily, already four or six inches long, at the bottom of the

⁸ As H. Daniel Peck succinctly puts it in *Thoreau's Morning Work*, 'The necessary context for observing the "first" appearance of a seasonal phenomenon is the natural cycle; any "first" in nature is recognizable only because it has happened before'; 'Reporting the appearance of these "first birds" [the first birds in spring 1860] to his Journal is an act of confirmation as much as an act of origination; the beginning, in Thoreau, always pivots between memory and anticipation' (Peck, p.98).

river, *reminds* me that nature is prepared for an infinity of springs yet' [*Journal VII*, p.71; my emphasis]).⁹ Some entries even make the distinction between past and future seem irrelevant, as when Thoreau contemplates pitcher-plant leaves in March 'whose fragrance when bruised' carries him 'back or forward to an incredible season' (*Journal VI*, p.149). Neither the destination nor the way there really matters here.

The most notable thing about Thoreau's anticipation of seasons is perhaps his sheer devotion to the practice in the mid-1850s; the fact that he is so likely to be moved during these years by intimations of the absent. He is continually energised by these small encounters, as with buds in autumn which lead his mind to spring even more powerfully than when they are actually expected. In autumn 1853, Thoreau frequently notices such unusually early budding. As soon as the last leaves have fallen, renewal is ready and waiting: 'Now leaves are off, or chiefly off, I begin to notice the buds of various form and color and more or less conspicuous, prepared for another season,— partly, too, perhaps, for food for birds' (*Journal V*, p.455; October 26). A few days later even leafing is seen to occur, a phenomenon he describes as both extraordinary and familiar; it anticipates nature in a wonderful but also regular way, exactly as he knows it did last year: 'While getting the azaleas, I notice the shad-bush conspicuously leafing out. Those long, narrow, pointed buds, prepared for next spring, have anticipated their time. I noticed something similar when surveying the Hunt wood-lot last winter. Remember in this connection that at one period last spring this bud appeared the most forward' (*Journal V*, pp.471-72). When searching for evidence of still distant renewal, Thoreau tends to be both sober and

⁹ The word 'reminds', however, here suggests remembrance of the past only as a submerged secondary meaning. In this context, it even seems to point more emphatically to the future than to the past.

expectant in this way, equally involved with the minutiae of the present and the rapid flow of the seasons, the promise to come.

Some of the associations that transport him to far-off seasons are more subtle than buds and leafing, which are almost synonymous with spring. Summer can be lodged in a sudden scent, encountered on the off-chance in the frozen depths of February: 'When I break off a twig of green-barked sassafras as I am going through the woods now—& smell it, I am startled to find it fragrant as in summer— It is an importation of all the species of oriental summers into our New England winter. Very foreign to the snow & the oak leaves' (*Journal 4*, p.339). Similarly, the palest touch of colour seen against a background of snow can trigger a sudden flash of summer, all the more potent because of its rareness, as in January 1854: 'Nature is now gone into her winter palace. The trunks of the pines, greened with lichens, are now more distinct by contrast. Even the pale yellowish green of lichens speaks to us at this season, reminding us of summer' (*Journal VI*, p.63). Perhaps summer, or indeed any season, is always present somewhere inside us, burning with a small light and ready to burst into full flame at the slightest hint as in the above example. Thoreau suggests as much in January 1855 when he comments on the overpowering force the recollection of summer can have in winter: 'Perhaps what most moves us in winter is some reminiscence of far-off summer. How we leap by the side of the open brooks! What beauty in the running brooks! What life! What society! The cold is merely superficial; it is summer still at the core, far, far within' (*Journal VII*, p.112). Stirred by memory and anticipation, the inner season readily eclipses and even overthrows the outer season; thinking of summer, Thoreau suddenly *is* in summer even if it is January outside. The season he experiences is thus to some extent a subjective matter, which is open to

manipulation at will.¹⁰

A glance at the most common kind of seasonal anticipation in the Journal, anticipation of the following season, reveals how early Thoreau begins to look ahead and how consistent this practice is, applied to all four seasons alike. In 1854, a year keenly devoted to the study of the seasons and about three years into Thoreau's dedicated mapping of seasonal progress, he already starts to think about spring in January, three months before it is due. The first spring anticipation occurs on the thirteenth when a persistent thaw brings associations of a warmer season: 'Still warm and thawing, springlike; no freezing in the night, though high winds ... Even the telegraph harp seems to sound as with a vernal sound, heralding a new year' (*Journal VI*, p.65). The first anticipation of summer, which rapidly deepens into a summer memory, is recorded on April 6, again well before the season is close:

This susurrus [of honey bees] carries me forward some months toward summer. I was reminded *before* of those still warm summer noons when the breams' nests are left dry, and the fishes retreat from the shallows into the cooler depths, and the cows stand up to their bellies in the river. The reminiscence came over me like a summer's dream. (*Journal VI*, p.186)

In a similar way, Thoreau glances at autumn when summer has barely started. On May 26, the rapid growth of the rye leads his thoughts to seasonal cycles in general and autumn in particular: 'It makes the revolution of the seasons seem a rapid whirl. How quickly and densely it clothes the earth! Thus early it suggests the harvest and fall' (*Journal VI*, p.303). Before the beginning of June, Thoreau's anticipation has thus already become focused on autumn, off on a path of foretelling which is ever-bound for the future. Thus, when

¹⁰ An evocative passage on the way in which we carry absent seasons within us can be found already in 'A Winter Walk', which appeared in the October 1843 issue of *The Dial*: 'in the coldest day, and on the bleakest hill, the traveler cherishes a warmer fire within the folds of his cloak than is kindled on any hearth. A healthy man, indeed, is the complement of the seasons, and in winter, summer is in his heart. There is the south. Thither have all birds and insects migrated, and around the warm springs in his breast are gathered the robin and the lark' (*Ex*, pp.205-6).

autumn actually arrives at the beginning of September, his thoughts gradually shift to winter. On the twelfth, the cold weather both energises him and makes him think of providing for the following season, inducing a subtle anticipation of winter:

This is a *cold* evening with a white twilight, and threatens frost, the first in *these respects* decidedly autumnal evening. It makes us think of wood for the winter. For a week or so the evenings have been sensibly longer, and I am beginning to throw off my summer idleness. This twilight is succeeded by a brighter starlight than heretofore. (*Journal VII*, p.34)

Coming full circle, the first spring anticipation in 1855 occurs with due regularity in early January. Just like the previous year, the promise of spring is triggered by a certain warmth in the air: 'The delicious soft, spring-suggesting air, –how it fills my veins with life! Life becomes again credible to me. A certain dormant life awakes in me, and I begin to love nature again. Here is my Italy, my heaven, my New England' (*Journal VII*, pp.104-5). This list could be continued throughout the year and indeed the years before and after. Judging by the abundant evidence of anticipation in the *Journal* around this time, Thoreau barely pauses to take in the imminent quarter of the year (which he of course also does, in its multiplicity of detail) before shifting his attention to the next.

It is of course perfectly common practice to look for signs of the next season, at least in winter and spring. This habit may be evidence of little other than relaxed attention to present phenomena and an interest in the renewal of the year, just as the signs singled out may be more closely related to the (transitional) present than to any seasons to come. However, Thoreau's habit of looking forward can also be regarded as a testimony to his optimism. It speaks of a life that reaches out for the future and is lived continually on the borders of promise, simultaneously associated with and dissociated from the present. The paradox is of course that Thoreau's seemingly linear and progressive anticipation is also cyclical, leading him round and round with the year as well as onward. He can look ahead ever so much and still be sure of an eventual return to

his starting point, carried by the consoling repetitiveness of the natural year. Progress and stasis combine in Thoreau's anticipation of seasons; when looking ahead, he appears to be courting the new, but the novelty he is seeking is of a safe and predictable kind – the return of the familiar. In historical terms, cyclical thinking could even be described as anti-optimistic, as it by its very nature precludes the chance of progress in any real sense.¹¹ Thoreau did however base some of his most optimistic works, notably *Walden*, on cyclical structures, and does not seem to be concerned about the paradox inherent in this practice.¹² The circular pattern of *Walden* is made to serve a progressive purpose, leading us step by step to a high-point of promise that is described in terms of novelty rather than repetition: spring. Even 'Walking', which at a first glance appears to court the future in its celebration of the westward course, is also partly circular, at times looking 'back' to the East (with which Europe, history and the promised Holy Land are all associated). Perhaps Thoreau did not feel that there was a contradiction between longing for progress, and a love of seasonal routines and cyclical structures. Fuelled by hope, his anticipation overrides the inherent threat of stasis, just as he, in 'Walking', opens up the inevitably circular pattern of his daily walks by his way of thinking about them: 'The outline which bounds my walks would be, not a circle, but a parabola, or rather like those cometary

¹¹ When Alfred, Lord Tennyson welcomes progress and change near the end of 'Locksley Hall' (1842), he contrasts this to what he perceives as the stasis of China, which is notably described as cyclical: 'Forward, forward let us range. / Let the great world spin forever down the ringing grooves of change. / Thro' the shadow of the globe we sweep into the younger day: / Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay' (Lord Tennyson, Alfred, *The Poems of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Volume 1, 1830-1856* [London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1914], p.197).

¹² In *Thoreau's Morning Work*, H. Daniel Peck argues that Thoreau only became fully aware of the implications of the natural cycle in the early 1850s, when he began to develop a more circular understanding of time. Peck describes this as the key imaginative breakthrough in his life (see pp.46-48).

orbits which have been thought to be non-returning curves, in this case opening westward, in which my house occupies the place of the sun' (*Ex*, p.266).

Thoreau's habit of looking forward grew rapidly in the early 1850s, leading him to repeat his cycles of observation from year to year, until the practice gradually faded out in the second half of the 1850s. All seasons are eagerly expected in the *Journal* of this period but spring and autumn in particular, and most of all spring, which Thoreau invariably predicts and records in exhaustive detail, perhaps preferring it in a commonplace way.¹³ As he puts it in a statement that his autumn life readily contradicts, 'We observe attentively the first beautiful days in the spring, but not so much in the autumn' (*Journal V*, pp.382-83).¹⁴ In late winter we are certainly more naturally inclined to look ahead; it is a time that is especially conducive to anticipation, as suggested in the first passage cited at the head of this chapter ('At the end of winter there is a season in which we are daily expecting spring, and finally a day when it arrives' [*Journal V*, p.13]). In the early and mid-1850s, Thoreau often refers to such a season of near-inevitable anticipation as soon as the new year is under way; sometime in January or February. True to his fascination with the future during this period, his thoughts eagerly rush ahead of the year to spring.

Thoreau's insistent spring anticipation is often matched by a recurring sense of belatedness and decline from about July onwards; a tinge of despondency arrives with the

¹³ Thoreau's *Journal* entries tend to swell in bulk each spring. In both 1853 and 1854 for example, his May entries put together are almost twice as long as his January ones (in the 1906 edition, twenty-three pages compared with thirteen in 1853, and twenty-two pages compared with twelve in 1854).

¹⁴ Thoreau is even capable of grading the seasons according to preference ('How precious a fine day early in the spring—less so in the fall, less still in the summer & winter' [*Journal 5*, p.393]), although the validity of such a statement is contradicted by the loving attention he bestows on all seasons alike.

notion of fall. As he puts it in 1854, elaborating his theory of two halves of the year:¹⁵

'The fall, in fact, begins with the first heats of July ... It is one long acclivity from winter to midsummer and another long declivity from midsummer to winter' (*Journal VI*, p.421).

Or with a rather more ominous emphasis, in July 1852: 'Do not all flowers that blossom after mid. July remind us of the fall? After midsummer we have a belated feeling as if we had all been idlers—& are forward to see in each sight—& hear in each sound some presage of the fall.— just as in mid. age man anticipates the end of life' (*Journal 5*, p.266). But there is an excitement inherent in the anticipation of autumnal lateness too, an excitement different in kind from that of expectation in spring. When the sound of crickets brings a reminder of autumn in July, Thoreau's reaction is one of exhilaration and sharpened senses: 'How apt we are to be reminded of lateness, even before the year is half spent! Such little objects check the diffuse tide of our thoughts and bring it to a head, which thrills us' (*Journal V*, p.336).¹⁶ This alertness, sparked into life by the suggestion of

¹⁵ See also the suggestion of a two-part year in Thoreau's description of the 'foreglow' and the 'afterglow' of the year in the entry for March 18, 1853, both of which are curiously marked by anticipation: 'The sun is now declining, with a warm and bright light on all things, a light which answers to the late afterglow of the year, when, in the fall, wrapping his cloak closer about him, the traveller goes home at night to prepare for winter. This is the foreglow of the year, when the walker goes home at eve to dream of summer. To-day first I smelled the earth' (*Journal V*, p.27). H. Daniel Peck alludes to this theory in his discussion of Thoreau's challenge to traditional calendar divisions: 'To decide that, "in fact," autumn begins in July and that summer begins in May is to appropriate the role of calendar-maker to oneself by appealing to immediate observation, and thus to challenge the traditional calendar's lines of demarkation. This challenge, of course, is part of a larger claim for the efficacy of individual perception' (Peck, p.93).

¹⁶ In the 1840s poem 'The Fall of the Leaf', the premonition of autumn is similarly both thrilling ('fresh', 'golden') and sad ('pensive', 'prematurely wise'). This combination is particularly notable in two stanzas that appear in a late draft from c. 1847 (MS now in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library), but not in the finished version. After the published poem's fourth stanza ('Sometimes a late autumnal thought / Has crossed my mind in green July, / And to its early freshness brought / Late ripened fruits and an autumnal sky'), the MS continues: 'A dry but golden thought which gleamed / Athwart the greenness of my mind, / And prematurely wise it seemed / Too ripe mid summer's youthful bowers to find. // So I have seen one yellow leaf / Amid the glossy leaves of June, / Which pensive hung, though not with grief, / Like some fair flower, it had changed

seasonal difference, is however tinged, if ever so subtly, by the melancholy associated with anticipating a season of decline.

Considered from the perspective of autumn, the signs of oncoming seasons may thus be read as markers of the brevity of the year and life drawing to its close rather than as signs of hope and progress. Each act of anticipation points towards death as well as further life, rushing a process that is short enough as it is. 'The year is full of warnings of its shortness, as is life', Thoreau writes in August 1853, feeling the weight of impending darkness while considering the meaning of the sense of lateness that has come over him: 'The sound of so many insects and the sight of so many flowers affect us so,—the creak of the cricket and the sight of the prunella and autumnal dandelion. They say, "For the night cometh in which no man may work"' (*Journal V*, p.379). The following year, Thoreau locates the sadness inherent in the turning of the year more precisely than in transience in general; it is in the sudden realisation that spring-stirred promise might not find satisfaction this year either. As early as June 17, the hopes of the year seem to be fading: 'The season of hope and promise is past; already the season of small fruits has arrived ... We are a little saddened, because we begin to see the interval between our hopes and their fulfilment' (*Journal VI*, p.363). At the end of July, Thoreau reiterates this sentiment, emphasising his sense of discrepancy between hope and attainment: 'Methinks the season culminated about the middle of this month,— that the year was of indefinite promise before, but that, after the first intense heats, we postponed the fulfillment of many of our hopes for this year' (*Journal VI*, p.413). It is perhaps only by renewing the dream of renewal, which Thoreau does by dreaming of another spring soaked in promise, that the

too soon'.

dense shades that have become associated with forward-looking can be cleared away, making anticipation again seem attractive.

To Thoreau, the arrival of spring or any season remains a beautiful mystery no matter how much he studies it, ever-new and elusive in its capacity to surprise and demand attention. Its seemingly obvious signs, such as newly opened flowers, can be noted over and over again in the *Journal*; Thoreau's record of them speaks clearly of a mind that does not weary of its self-appointed task. 'What is the earliest sign of spring,' Thoreau would ask in March 1853, a couple of years into his devotion to such matters and still naively unsure. He suggests a wide range of answers: 'The motion of worms & insects?— the flow of sap in trees & the swelling of buds—? Do not the insects awake with the flow of the sap? Blue birds &c prob do not come till insects come out. Or are there earlier signs in the water—the Tortoises frogs &c' (*Journal 5*, pp.472-73). Not that there necessarily is a right answer; indeed, the point of an entry such as this may be to draw attention to the wonderful multiplicity of spring. Thoreau's increasingly exhaustive lists of seasonal phenomena, gatherings of facts that are simultaneously rich in their precision and limited by it, function in a similar way. In autumn 1853 he meticulously notes the current state of trees and plants, turning the current moment into a rough approximation of the season:

Oct. 24. Early on Nawshawtuct.

Black willows bare. Golden willow with yellow leaves. Larch yellow. Most alders by river bare except at top. Waxwork shows red. Celtis almost bare, with greenish-yellow leaves at top. Some hickories bare, some with rich golden-brown leaves. Locusts half bare, with greenish yellow leaves. Catnip fresh and green and in bloom. Barberries green, reddish, or scarlet. (*Journal V*, p.450)

The inventory method of distilling the essence of a season creates its own kind of poetry, which exists on the borderline of natural science. As Laura Dassow Walls has recently argued in an attempt to still the long-running debate about Thoreau's alleged loss of

imagination in his later years, poetry and science in the nineteenth century were not the polar opposites they are today but tools that could be used in the same quest for truth.¹⁷ By the last decade of his life, Thoreau knew more clearly than ever before what he was seeking and how he intended to go about finding it, a certainty that should reassure us that he had not lost his way, even if his lists might frustrate us. His path led through natural science, and the Journal evidence of his painstaking attempts to realise his vision through careful study of the landscape is nothing less than moving, revealing a life given over to a higher purpose.

Thoreau's record of the arrival of spring in 1854 is particularly detailed, ranging from comments on its early signs to lengthy lists of budding and leafing in May (tracing a gradual shift from abstract expectation to solid reality). His starting point back in February is a pure premonition of spring, a sentiment without concrete grounding but rich in indefinite promise: 'For several weeks the fall has seemed far behind, spring comparatively near. Yet I cannot say that there is any positive sign of spring yet; only we feel that we are sloping toward it. The sky has sometimes a warmth in its colors more like summer' (*Journal VI*, p.130). In March, the actual signs of spring start amassing: melting snow, greenness in the grass, warm rain, bird song ('Heard the first bluebird,— something like *pe-a-wor*,— and then other slight warblings, as if farther off' [*Journal VI*, p.156]). The subtle hopes induced by these random hints pale somewhat when Thoreau begins to gather the evidence of spring in bulk in April and May. He follows the leafing process exactly, noting dates of first appearance, a collection of data that gradually culminates in

¹⁷ She suggests that Thoreau continued to engage with both poetry and science in a complex and creative way in his quest to make sense of nature: 'In nineteenth-century terms, Thoreau rejected neither poetry nor science, nor did he simply "reconcile" them, collapsing them together. In the "consilience" of Emersonian transcendental wholes with Humboldtian empirical science, he sacrificed neither but attempted to create a way of knowing which combined them both into something new' (*Seeing New Worlds*, p.11).

over four pages of lists of the order of trees coming into leaf (see *Journal VI*, pp.297-302; May 24). Inventories of this kind were certainly not unique to Thoreau, reaching back to the eighteenth-century tradition of nature writing and even to some extent to classical literature.¹⁸ Thoreau was well aware of this; he was familiar with the nature works of English writers such as Gilbert White and William Howitt, who both make use of seasonal tables (see for example the lists of birds in Letters 1 and 2 to Barrington in White's *The Natural History of Selborne*).¹⁹ White's *A Naturalist's Calendar*, which was extracted by Daines Barrington from White's yearbooks and *The Natural History of Selborne* and published in 1795, amounts to a pure list of dates of budding and leafing as well as of plants disappearing, following the structure of the year from January to December.²⁰ These dates are based on an average of the available information, directly foreshadowing Thoreau's calculation of averages for his 1860s Kalendar charts. The volume also contains lists such as 'Trees, Order of Losing Their Leaf' and a 'Summary of the Weather' month by month between 1768 and 1792; material of no small affinity with Thoreau's late calendrical interests (the list of trees, for example, finds its elaborated counterpart in 'Autumnal Tints').

¹⁸ John Evelyn's *Kalendarium Hortense* (1664) was one of the first directly calendrical work to appear, followed by works by naturalists such as Gilbert White. Thoreau was also reading the classical agriculturalists Cato, Varro and Columella intensively at the beginning of 1854, copying extensive extracts into the Journal (see his entries for January and February 1854 in *Journal VI*, approximately pp.50-120). These writers were at least to some extent concerned with the seasons, mainly in terms of the farming year.

¹⁹ Thoreau refers to or quotes from White and Howitt several times in the Journal. The first of these entries, a quotation from White on the raven, occurs in March 1853 (*Journal V*, p.65). He had however already reviewed William Howitt's *The Book of the Seasons* in March 1836 (see *EEM*, pp.26-36).

²⁰ White's *The Natural History of Selborne* was originally undertaken as an attempt to write a 'natural history of the year', an idea he gradually abandoned.

White's *Garden Kalendar* follows a more traditional diary structure, recording in a straightforward way his actions in the garden and other seasonal events between 1751 and 1771. Although a few of these entries could be mistaken for extracts from Thoreau's Journal, any kind of looking forward or concern with anticipation is absent here; what White is writing is a precise record of the seasons as they affect his garden, without much aid of (or indeed any need for) transforming imagination. His diary exudes neutral contentment. Its entries, such as the following from September 9, 1765, speaks of a life lived practically in the present, as one side of Thoreau would have loved to be able to live:

Beautiful autumnal weather: most of the corn housed. Gathered my only nect: it was not ripe; but the earwigs had gnawed it so that it could not come to any thing. Gathered my first peach: its flesh was thick, tender, white, & juicy; & parted from the stone. It was a good fruit; but not so high flavoured as some I have met with.²¹

In *The Book of the Seasons*, William Howitt includes tables of natural phenomena in his entries on each month as part of an attempt to sum up their characteristics.²² Thoreau reviewed the book in 1836 and would thus have encountered a statistical approach to nature here, if nowhere else, at a very early stage. More emphatically by far than White or Thoreau, Howitt is concerned with averages, ordering the months into the perfectly regular seasons of a prototype year, with three predictable months in each.²³ As he

²¹ Gilbert White, *Garden Kalendar 1751-1771*, facsimile of the manuscript in the British Library, introduction and notes by John Clegg (London: Scolar Press, 1975).

²² The following self-explanatory tables are inserted in the monthly entries, listing current phenomena: 'Calendar of the Flower-Garden', 'Select Calendar of British Insects', 'Migrations of Birds (Departures and Arrivals)' and 'Select Calendar of British Botany'.

²³ In the entry on March for example, Howitt playfully exaggerates the contrast between the months: 'Artificial as the division of the months may be deemed by some, it is so much founded in nature, that no sooner comes in a new one than we generally have a new species of weather, and that instantaneously ... In comes January,— and let the weather be what it might before, immediately sets in severe cold and frost: in February, wet—wet—wet, which, the moment March enters, ceases—and lo! instead— even on the very first of the month, there is a dry, chill air, with breaks of sunshine stealing here and there over the landscape'. See *The Book of the Seasons, or The Calendar of Nature* (London:

explains his intentions at the opening of the January chapter: 'I speak now as I intend to speak, *generally*. I describe the season not as it may be in this or another year, but as it is in the average'.²⁴ Only when Thoreau finally starts assembling his Kalendar does he come anywhere near to sharing this ambition (and then he employs it in a far more rigorous way than Howitt did). In the early and mid-1850s, Thoreau's intentions are altogether more modest; he is contented with noting the details without drawing out statistical conclusions.

Howitt's English average seasons are not necessarily applicable to the climate of New England. Thoreau acknowledges this difference when he takes issue, in a Journal entry from February 1854, with Howitt's way of ordering the year: 'Howitt describes the harvest moon in August. Did I not put it in September?' (*Journal VI*, p.112).²⁵ The

Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831), pp.61-62.

²⁴ *The Book of the Seasons*, p.3.

²⁵ Thoreau goes on to work out for himself which months should properly belong to winter: 'Is not January alone pure winter? December belongs to the fall; it is a wintry November: February, to the spring; it is a snowy March' (*Journal VI*, p.112). Ending up with only one winter month, he leaves Howitt's regular seasons a long way behind. The arbitrariness of our seasonal divisions also becomes clear by a comparison to other ways of demarcating the year. Thoreau was very interested in the way the American Indians considered each month as a season in itself and named them after their characteristics, as numerous entries on this subject in his Indian Notebooks indicate. In Chapter 7 of *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell draws attention to Thoreau's questioning of the normal 'fourfold typology of seasons' (in comparison to predecessors such as James Thomson): 'What distinguishes Thomson's representation of the seasons from those of his romantic successors [such as Thoreau] is his sense of the fixity of the seasonal round ... "Inveterate tinkerer" though he was, Thomson never questioned, as later naturalists came to do, whether properly speaking a fourfold typology of seasons made best sense, whether each month or perhaps even each day might more properly be called a season in itself. "There is a bit of every season in each season," [Annie] Dillard writes...' See *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), pp.227-28. Buell concludes this discussion by emphasising how important it is that art concerned with the seasons should stretch our understanding of them: 'a further measure of the higher skill we call genius is the ability to do at least as much strategic violence to the expected boundaries as any particular iteration of the seasons is bound to do' (p.232).

difference is largely one of delay; the greater severity of the New England winter (despite its more southerly latitude) makes the wait for spring both longer and more conducive to longing, just as the greater difference between the seasons makes each more precious and distinct.²⁶ The Concord climate is thus a climate of anticipation, as Thoreau is well aware. In January 1852 he describes the beauty of the sharply defined New England year: 'In few countries do they enjoy so fine a contrast of summer & winter—we really have four seasons. each incredible to the other. Winter cannot be mistaken for summer here. Though I see the boat turned up on the shore & half buried under snow—as I walk over the invisible river—summer is far away' (*Journal 4*, p.291). In Concord, the prolonged barrenness of winter makes anticipation possible and vital, an important fact to bear in mind to make sense of the emotional force Thoreau invests in expecting and enjoying the seasons. Every new season, even winter and fall, amounts to a 'wonderful resurrection', altering the whole tone of the world by bringing back conditions different enough to have been forgotten since last time. Some of the signs he encounters in the landscape do however blur these clear seasonal distinctions. The boat in the above quotation is primarily evocative of summer, but its winter coverage shifts its function so that it becomes an emblem of winter. Its double connotations lead Thoreau into the emotional hinterland between a present and an absent season, combining the two in complex union.

Thoreau's main way of keeping absent seasons alive and near is by carefully recording them in the *Journal*, as he does with increasing dedication. As he reads back over the entries made at other times of the year, the seasons they describe often seem

²⁶ As Lawrence Buell has pointed out, America embraces so many different climates that its seasons are hard to pin down ('A vast continental expanse subject to much more dramatic vicissitudes of weather, America was distressingly hard to generalize under any one set of seasonal rubrics' [*The Environmental Imagination*, p.230]).

more vivid than they originally did; revisited from a distance, all times of the year shine with the lustre of otherness. As Thoreau puts it in October 1853:

It is surprising how any reminiscence of a different season of the year affects us. When I meet with any such in my Journal, it affects me as poetry, and I appreciate that other season and that other phenomenon more than at the time. The world so seen is all one spring, and full of beauty. You need only to make a faithful record of an average summer day's experience and summer mood, and read it in the winter, and it will carry you back to more than that summer day alone could show. Only the rarest flower, the purest melody, of the season thus comes down to us. (*Journal V*, p.454)

Looking for the excitement of other seasons among his own past Journal entries is perhaps no different from seeking the signs of absent seasons in nature; the thrill at an apt encounter is of a similar kind. Thoreau's imagination thrives on difference wherever it finds it, gilding the absent whether he encounters it in writing or in the landscape. The extreme reflexivity of this act of seasonal memory is striking, pointing subtly but firmly towards the creation of a self-sufficient universe. Just gather enough material and you can live and relive the year through it, dissolving the need for nature itself, as Thoreau eventually starts to do when assembling charts from Journal material. Long before that, he emphasised the importance of making a record that preserves the year in this way: 'In a Journal it is important in a few words to describe the weather, or character of the day, as it affects our feelings. That which was so important at the time cannot be unimportant to remember' (*Journal VII*, p.171). Thoreau must have sensed that these records would become invaluable for his Kalendar project; that the Journal's final function would be as a storehouse of primary material for his further work.

In the 1860s, when he is summing up the seasons, Thoreau is actively reliving them in the process of writing. This reliving can also be done more directly (although this too is ultimately recorded in writing), as when he thinks back to his life of a few months earlier, perhaps, as in the following passage, remembering what it then was like to

anticipate nature. On June 21, 1854, he recalls how he sought the seeds of the present full-blown summer in the spring that once was:

When I see the dense, shady masses of weeds about water— already an unexplorable maze, —I am struck with the contrast between this and the spring, [when] I wandered about in search of the first faint greenness along the borders of the brooks. Then an inch or two of green was something remarkable and obvious afar ... It is hard to realize that the seeds of all this growth were buried in that bare, frozen earth. (*Journal VI*, pp.372-73)

The intertwining of memory and anticipation is complex and intense here.

Contemplating change, Thoreau looks back to a moment of looking ahead in a heady game with time, crossing it not only once but twice.²⁷

Thoreau also engages with change by noting the disappearance of seasons in the same way he once recorded their arrival. As H. Daniel Peck has put it: 'Everything I am writing about beginnings in the Journal can also be applied to endings. Although Thoreau noted them less frequently, he was as interested in a season's final manifestations as he was in those marking its initiation, and recorded them as carefully'.²⁸ By the middle of July he begins to list flowers that have gone out of blossom (see for example July 25, 1852) and, inversely, to note the lingering signs of summer: 'Barn swallows still ... *July 31* [1853]. Blue-curls. Wood thrush still sings' (*Journal VI*, p.414). The repetition of 'still' in these entries gives a sense of impending lateness; Thoreau is holding on to the season for once, gathering the remnants of summer instead of looking ahead to autumn. When studying seasonal change in early autumn, he thinks in similar terms of absence. A brief observation such as 'the locust sounds rare now' (*Journal VII*, p.45) soberly marks the need to adjust to September loss, and the losses of autumn are manifold: 'Took my last bath the 24th. Probably shall not bathe again this year. It was chilling cold' (*Journal VII*,

²⁷ For another instance of looking back to an earlier forward-looking self, see Thoreau's entry for July 18, 1854 ('Where I looked for early spring flowers I do not look for midsummer ones. Such places are now parched and withering' [*Journal VI*, p.402]).

p.58). Perhaps fall invites description of the present through absences and endings of this kind; just add them up and possibly find the sum of the season. Thoreau is particularly susceptible to autumnal change in 1854, commenting as early as the second of September on how 'It will not be warm again probably' (*Journal VII*, p.6). A year that started out with the enumeration of promise, the literal counting of blessings, soon enough invites him to trace departures in this way. A haunting list of losses, in some ways more striking than his famous lost turtle-dove, bay horse and hound in *Walden*, could be distilled from Thoreau's autumn entries this year (although it would soon enough be superseded by further lists of winter and spring phenomena, together testifying to only a temporary eclipse of the year).

Seasons, like weather, are easily forgotten, obscured by the new without leaving much of an imprint unless one deliberately takes note of them, perhaps by recording their arrival and departure, as Thoreau realised. The year is continually forgotten and ever-new, although its novel impressions are still resonant with the past, unlocking our deep familiarity with annual cycles: 'Each new year is a surprise to us. We find that we had virtually forgotten the note of each bird, and when we hear it again it is remembered like a dream, reminding us of a previous state of existence' (*Journal X*, p.304). Without these resonant reminders, true forgetting threatens. This is the burden of Thoreau's rather over-emphatic words, which temporarily ignore both his good memory and his Journal record: 'It is impossible to remember a week ago— A river of lethe flows with many windings the year through—separating one season from another' (*Journal 5*, p.47). Thoreau frequently draws dividing lines through the year in this manner, sectioning it off into parts of little apparent connection, which are nevertheless easily overridden by anticipation or memory. This insistence on a gulf between the present and the past can be

read as evidence of Thoreau's stubborn forward-looking in the early 1850s, part of an optimistic onward thrust that keenly embraces the future (albeit in the cyclical form of the progression of the year). At the turning of the year 1853-1854, he describes the partially successful process of shaking summer and autumn from the mind: 'The thoughts and associations of summer and autumn are now as completely departed from our minds as the leaves are blown from the trees. Some withered deciduous ones are left to rustle, and our cold immortal evergreens. Some lichenous thoughts still adhere to us' (*Journal VI*, p.37; December 29, 1853). Once the symbolic line of the new year has been crossed, Thoreau effectively 'closes' the past, ridding himself of its last few lingering leaves: 'It is now fairly winter. We have passed the line, have put the autumn behind us, have forgotten what these withered herbs that rise above the snow here and there are, what flowers they ever bore' (*Journal VI*, p.48; January 3, 1854). Thoreau seems to have successfully launched himself into the new season and forgotten the past, busy advancing confidently in the direction of his dreams. However, his understanding of the seasons is altogether too complex to be tied down by such facile divisions for long. Soon enough, he will remember and dream of the flowers those withered herbs once bore. The consoling thing about anticipating seasons is that they are sure to come round; fulfilment is predictable and in some ways guaranteed. The dream of annual renewal is an 'easy' dream that cannot lead far astray. New seasons will arrive and the seasonal losses of former years will be restored when the landscape, in due course, replicates its vanished appearance.

Thoreau's Journal record of seasonal progress in the early 1850s abounds in evidence of the arbitrariness of the boundaries between different times of the year. His occasional urge to divide the year into distinctive parts thus seems rather rash and sudden, part of a desire to construct a narrative of smooth, cyclical progression embracing both

spring and fall which nature itself emphatically defies. Looking around at the apparently unified landscape, seasonal development is everywhere at different stages, an infinity of variations held loosely together under the name of each season. It might for example be another season entirely down by the river: 'The pontederia leaves are sere and brown along the river— The fall is further advanced in the water as the spring was earlier there. I should say that the vegetation of the river was a month further advanced in its decay than of the land generally' (*Journal 5*, p.346). Signs of earlier seasons might linger in the landscape, in extreme cases for a whole year like the winter-made cracks in the ground Thoreau notices throughout 1854. He frequently comments on these reminders of otherness, if only in passing, as here in September: 'I see no swallows now at Clamshell. They have probably migrated. Still see the cracks in the ground, and no doubt shall till snow comes' (*Journal VII*, p.18). Marks of continuity, these cracks break through the dividing lines Thoreau seeks to introduce into his conception of the year. He also takes note of other reminders of absent seasons around this time, in particular Indian springs and summers, which by their very nature testify to the way seasons refuse to stay put. Periods of warmth beyond expectation, they stir up hopes out of season and set Thoreau off on the familiar track of anticipation. He describes the Indian spring in mid-March 1853 with a degree of disillusionment, as a 'first false promise which merely excites our expectations to disappoint them, followed by a short return of winter' (*Journal V*, p.22). His comments on the Indian summer the previous December were rather more hopeful, reaching both back and forward to fullness: 'The year looks back toward summer—& a summer smile is reflected in her face ... At this season I observe the form of the buds which are prepared for spring—the large bright yellowish & reddish buds of the Swamp pink' (*Journal 5*, p.400). The act of envisioning what has been and will come again is

here capable of renovating the year, or at least the inner season, with some help from unexpected external warmth.

At once vitally related to nature and separate from it, Thoreau can either exercise his liberty, perhaps by anticipating nature, or give himself over to the season by soaking in the here and now as deeply as possible. During the winter of 1852, he often contemplates his relationship with nature, wondering for example about the way life continues to flow in man while the rest of nature withers in annual decay, sure sign of man being somehow unrelated and out of step (see *Journal 4*, pp.252-53). A short while earlier that January, he dwelt on the need to be better attuned to nature's pace: 'Let me not live as if time was short. Catch the pace of the seasons—have leisure to attend to every phenomenon of nature—and to entertain every thought that comes to you. Let your life be a leisurely progress through the realms of nature' (*Journal 4*, p.244). Only by catching 'the pace of the seasons' in some true sense can we come anywhere near to living in the present, Thoreau realises, trying hard to attune his restless mind to nature's unfolding events and thus gain a degree of steadiness and inner peace. Living *in* season is, after all, nature's own prerogative: 'Everything is done in season and there is no time to spare— The bird gets its brood hatched in season & is off. I looked into the nest where I saw a vireo feeding its young a few days ago—but it is empty—it is fledged & flown' (*Journal 5*, p.313). Such attunement to the time at hand is also necessary for Thoreau's creative purposes, his 1850s writing depending directly on his observation of the seasons. As nature is so rich and of such infinite variety, if he could only move in a bit closer and find the words to match it, his writing would surely show a corresponding richness: 'Every new flower that opens, no doubt, expresses a new mood of the human mind. Have I any dark or ripe orange-yellow thoughts to correspond? The *flavor* of my thoughts begins to correspond'

(*Journal V*, p.184).²⁹ Thoreau's imagination thrives on the idea of responding to the present in some intimate way, and beyond that, of being contented with this creative interaction with the landscape. As winter approaches, surely the most hopeful thing we can do is to learn to appreciate it. "Let us sing winter." What else can we sing, and our voices be in harmony with the season?" (*Journal VI*, p.86), Thoreau writes, quoting 'a crazy man' of his acquaintance who suddenly ascended the pulpit, prayer book in hand, and thus addressed the church. Perhaps the ultimate goal of Thoreau's restless mind is quite simply to find the place in every season where it can rest a little, a place so beautiful that it is actually worth lingering in, even if a good deal of that beauty is his mind's projection. As Thoreau says in *Walden*, 'every season seems best to us in its turn' (p.313), a sentiment that is increasingly reiterated in the Journal, as here in December 1856: 'I love the winter, with its imprisonment and its cold, for it compels the prisoner to try new fields and resources ... I love best to have each thing in its season only, and enjoy doing without it at all other times' (*Journal IX*, p.160).

Perhaps as a way of acknowledging the importance of living in the present, Thoreau occasionally resists the impulse to anticipate nature. On December 31, 1851, the sudden touch of spring in the air instead turns his thoughts back to winter: 'It reminds me this thick spring like weather, that I have not enough valued and attended to the pure clarity & brilliancy of the winter skies— ... Shall I ever in summer evenings see so celestial a reach of blue sky contrasting with amber as I have seen a few days since' (*Journal 4*,

²⁹ See also the entry for September 8, 1854 in which Thoreau describes such a moment of correspondence: 'Many green-briar leaves are very agreeably thickly spotted now with reddish brown, or fine green on a yellow or green ground, producing a wildly variegated leaf. I have seen nothing more rich ... Now, while I am gathering grapes, I see them. It excites me to a sort of autumnal madness. They are leaves for Satyrus and Faunus to make their garlands of. My thoughts break out like them, spotted all over, yellow and green and brown' (*Journal VII*, p.27).

pp.229-30). Resistance to seasonal anticipation also occurs in more submerged ways, as when Thoreau deliberately does not comment on the coming season even though his observations clearly point in its direction. In June 1854, for example, the connotation of autumn inherent in ripening berries is not spelt out: 'I see one or two early blueberries prematurely turning. The *Amelanchier Botryapium* berries are already reddened two thirds over' (*Journal VI*, p.351). Maybe this is his way of recognising that these turning berries belong to summer too, or indeed above all, and that their plain existence in the present will do. The most striking aspect of a season *can* be its fullness; the revelation of an essence not to be improved upon.³⁰ In June 1853, the remarkable thing about the still new summer is the fact that it is in its prime, a fact that would seem more and more significant to Thoreau as the 1850s advanced: 'As I look over the fields thus reddened in extensive patches, now deeper, now passing into green, and think of the season now in its prime and heyday, it looks as if it were the blood mantling in the cheek of the youthful year,— the rosy cheek of its health, its rude June health' (*Journal V*, p.219). Struck by the appearance of the reddened fields, Thoreau is for once looking neither back nor forward, but straight *at* them.³¹ At least a few times in every season he is similarly entranced by their peak and perfection. In September 1852, he comments lyrically on the intensity of autumn as

³⁰ Significantly, Thoreau becomes more and more interested in the prime of seasons towards the end of his life. The late *Journal* abounds in brief notations about plants reaching their peak, shifting its emphasis from anticipation of the future to an endeavour to pin down the present which directly reflects Thoreau's increasing contentment and inner peace. See also Richard Lebeaux's account of Thoreau at the end of the 1850s in *Thoreau's Seasons*, which stresses his gradual arrival at maturity (or 'ripening') in these later years. Lebeaux sees a direct relation between Thoreau's interest in the maturity of seasons and his own (Eriksonian) life stage: 'Just before he learned of Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry [in 1859], Thoreau had been focusing, as he had the previous two years in particular, on nature's ripening and its correspondence to his own' See *Thoreau's Seasons* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), p.327.

³¹ However, his imagination is at work as ever, comparing the reddened fields to the rosy cheeks of the year. Perhaps the present needs this creative refigurement, an image able to contain and explain it, to make sense to us.

revealed by the appearance of 'great bidens in the sun in brooks', which he describes as 'The golden glow of autumn concentrated—more golden than the sun' (*Journal 5*, pp.342-43). Thoreau is picking out a detail that speaks amply and clearly of the beauty of the whole, and which, just like the turning berries or the reddened fields, is sufficient in itself.

Seeing and describing such season-bound beauty, perhaps Thoreau comes as close to living in the present as he ever will during this period, letting its essence flow effortlessly into his blood. At the end of 1854, which would prove to be Thoreau's last year of devoted anticipation, he arrives for a while at such a stance of appreciation.³² Towards the end of December he suddenly finds himself in what he calls 'the finest days of the year' (*Journal VII*, p.89; December 21); a few perfect winter days he gladly allows himself to be entranced by. On December 31 he seems to be wholly at peace, concluding a year racked by foretelling and longing in a mood of reverential acceptance, contented with the prospect before him:

Dec. 31. P.M. – On river to Fair Haven Pond.

A beautiful, clear, not very cold day. The shadows on the snow are indigo-blue. The pines look very dark ... I see mice and rabbit and fox tracks on the meadow. Once a partridge rises from the alders and skims across the river at its widest part just before me; a fine sight ... How glorious the perfect stillness and peace of the winter landscape! (*Journal VII*, p.98)

Thoreau's optimism does not reside only in his defiant forward-looking; there is even deeper promise to be found in single instances of being such as this winter walk on the last afternoon of the year. It is perhaps in these moments of stillness that Thoreau can

³² See Chapter 6 for a discussion of Thoreau's relation to the seasons in the second half of the 1850s, when anticipation fades from prominence. His gradual abandonment of seasonal anticipation after 1854 may partly have been caused by the fact that he was struck down with a strange illness in the spring of 1855. This disease weakened him and drained his spirits, and it left him temporarily unable to attend to nature to the extent he was used to. It took him most of 1855 to recover (all, that is, but his habit of looking forward, which he never fully recovered). See Harding, p.357 onwards, for a discussion of Thoreau's illness.

begin to *realise* the words of *Walden*, 'This is, and no mistake' (p.98). For sometimes, at least for a moment, before the seeking mind starts seeking again, it must indeed be possible to feel with conviction that this *is* summer (or autumn, or winter, or spring), and no mistake; this is where I belong, and the season and I are one.

CHAPTER FOUR

Moments of Intensity

When you think that your walk is profitless and a failure, and you can hardly persuade yourself not to return, it is on the point of being a success, for then you are in that subdued and knocking mood to which Nature never fails to open.

(*Journal XIII*, p.111; January 27, 1860)

From the tentative beginnings of Thoreau's work to its settled maturity in the late Journal, his conception of perfect happiness changes very little. Attainment amounts to the experience of intensity; moments in which thoughts cohere or imagination is sparked off, so that the world appears richer and more divine than usual. In his anticipation of seasons, Thoreau is on the track of this potent but ethereal kind of beauty, thrilled by reminders of the absent. Such anticipation is however only one of the forms his quest for intensity takes. Over the years, he explores various ways of reaching beyond the surface of the world. His steadfast faith that nature *will* 'open' and deliver, or more precisely that *he* himself will open up to nature, is both the product of his optimism and a validation of it, as such experiences serve as a guarantee of life being worth living. Thoreau was almost always searching for a heightened sense of life. When he reached this state, his hopes were both perpetuated and temporarily fulfilled; this, for an instant, was as good as life got. As he puts it in May 1857, 'We want no completeness but intensity of life' (*Journal IX*, p.378). His optimism is based on a refusal to accept the possibility of failure in this endeavour for any length of time, a refusal that makes him pursue his ideals with dogged determination. During some particularly driven periods, the quest for intensity surfaces as the primary object of his life. One of the most notable of these is the summer

of 1851, when he walks during the night in search of new perspectives and more thrilling emotions to record in the Journal (finding material for his writing being an important part of his aim). Thoreau's Journal descriptions of intensity during these walks can be seen as a blueprint for such experiences throughout his life, for regardless of the fact that his general outlook changed, the nature of these moments remains similar and they are induced by recurring circumstances.

On June 14, 1851, Thoreau describes his longing to be outdoors when the rest of the world sleeps:

Not much before 10 o'clock does the moonlight night begin. When man is asleep & day fairly forgotten—then is the beauty of moon light seen over lonely pastures—where cattle are silently feeding. Then let me walk in a diversified country—of hill and dale with heavy woods one side—& copses & scattered trees & bushes enough—to give me shadows— (*Journal 3*, p.268)

The image Thoreau evokes, of an arcadian landscape where cattle silently feed, is unusually imprecise for the work of this period and steeped in pastoral clichés ('lonely pastures', 'hill and dale'), but the entry still speaks of his desire to experience the landscape under altered circumstances.¹ Calling not only for moonlight but for the shadows this light throws, Thoreau yearns for a landscape that is suffused with dramatic potential, 'diversified' enough to affect his emotions. In the days just before this entry, he

¹ In his deliberate pursuit of night-time thrills, Thoreau followed in the tradition of the English Romantic poets. Coleridge made particularly extensive use of moonlit night-time settings. In 'Christabel' for example, such a setting contributes to the sense of otherworldliness that is evoked throughout Part I. As the poem proceeds, Coleridge often dwells on the nature of this light, devoting several stanzas to it, as he does in 'The Ancient Mariner', where the moon, in competition with the sun, sheds its light on all parts but the last one. For a more personal account of Coleridge's fascination with the night, see the first stanza of 'France: an Ode', in which he describes the inspirational effect of night-time walks in the woods in a fairly melodramatic way ('Where, like a man beloved of God, / Through glooms, which never woodman trod, / How oft, pursuing fancies holy, / My moonlight way o'er flowering weeds I wound, / Inspired, beyond the guess of folly, / By each rude shape and wild unconquerable sound!' [Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.244]).

had been out walking almost every night (June 11, 12, 14), a habit he began in mid-May and to which he would devote large parts of the summer and early autumn. But why did Thoreau turn to such a deliberate pursuit of intensity at this particular time? Why did he choose to *live* the Romantic fascination with the night? One answer lies in the fact that the beginning of the 1850s was a troubled, transitional period, when he felt that his sensitivity and imagination were failing him.² Walking through the less familiar night-time landscape helped to reinvigorate his sensibilities, but this was still no foolproof cure. In the midst of a moonlight entry dated June 11, his thoughts suddenly turn to the (now remote) sense of immortality he used to feel: 'Ah that life that I have known! How hard it is to remember what is most memorable! We remember how we itched, not how our hearts beat. I can sometimes recall to mind the quality the immortality of my youthful life—but in memory is the only relation to it' (*Journal 3*, pp.251-52). Thoreau laments not only his faltering sensibilities, but also the sheer difficulty of remembering 'how our hearts beat'; of holding on to experiences of intensity or recapturing their wonder at a later stage. Such moments overcome him with great force, but before long, only faint traces remain, lingering reminders of the possibility of attainment.

Thoreau's experience of a loss of sensibility is partly disproved by his frequent moments of intensity during this period and in the following years, but complaints along the above lines nevertheless abound in the early 1850s *Journal*. He is convinced that his creative abilities have deteriorated and is eager to find a remedy. For a writer in acute, if somewhat unnecessary, doubt of his powers, the cool splendour of moonlight over the Concord landscape is a solution near at hand. Moonlight activates his 'stagnant' imagination by revealing the different facets of the landscape.³ In 'Night and Moonlight',

² See Chapter 2 for a further discussion of this period.

³ When Emerson describes the 'delicious awakenings of the highest powers' in Part

the 1854 lecture Thoreau culled from his 1851 material which was posthumously (and rather clumsily) edited by Sophia Thoreau and Ellery Channing, he emphasises the novelty of nature's appearance at night:

On all sides novelties present themselves. Instead of the sun there are the moon and stars, instead of the wood-thrush there is the whip-poor-will,—instead of butterflies in the meadows, fire-flies, winged sparks of fire! who would have believed it? ... So man has fire in his eyes, or blood, or brain. (*Ex*, p.401)

The night is capable of lighting fires in the 'blood, or brain' of man precisely because it is less familiar territory (and yet so close at hand). Difference thrills, and its excitement comes across even in this fairly unsuccessful essay. It pushes Thoreau a bit closer to the 'deep' experience he craves.

In his entries on these heady June nights, Thoreau on several occasions links moonlight with the light of morning. Since morning is for him, as for Emerson, an image of awakening and utmost possibility (notably in *Walden*), the moonlight gains a kind of glory by association.⁴ This is sometimes taken to extremes, as on June 13, when he describes the twilight 'contest' between day and night and a complete reversal of their function and value takes place:

As I entered the deep cut I was affected by beholding the first faint reflection of genuine & unmixed moonlight on the eastern sand bank while the horizon yet red with day was tinging the western side— What an interval—between those two lights! The light of the moon in what age of the world does that fall upon the earth? The moon light—was as the earliest & dewy morning light & the daylight tinge reminded me much more of the night. (*Journal 3*, p.260)

VI of *Nature* ('Idealism'), a state in which surfaces become transparent or invisible and 'causes' and 'spirits' can be seen through them, he identifies a change of viewpoint as one of the starting points for this transcendent experience (*NAL*, p.47). Thoreau uses moonlight to achieve just such a change of perspective the summer of 1851.

⁴ Both Emerson and Thoreau tend to relate morning to earlier, more 'heroic', ages and use the word to describe the most alert and creative states of mind (see for example the ending of *Walden*, or Emerson's essay 'Nature' which contains comments such as the following: 'The tempered light of the woods is like a perpetual morning, and is stimulating and heroic' [*ESS*, p.170]).

By comparing moonlight to 'the earliest & dewy morning light', Thoreau firmly associates it with optimism; it is a light so promising that it is capable of lighting up new realms of possibility. In a passage near the end of 'Night and Moonlight', he furthermore idealises it as 'as bright as our most illuminated moments are' (*Ex*, p.408). If moonlight is really as bright as intensity itself, it should be able to transport him far.

In more practical terms, Thoreau is keen to explore how night-time perception differs from day-time experience; this, after all, is the concrete starting point for intensity. He enthusiastically notes how his senses become sharper during the night. The decreased reliance on sight makes the other senses more open to impressions, but even sight can become more acute (or at least attuned to different things): 'The moonlight reveals the beauty of trees. By day it is so light & in this climate so cold commonly that we do not perceive their shade. We do not know when we are beneath them' (*Journal 3*, p.219). Revelations of this kind, which are induced by the altered perspective, make him reflect that objects and places, such as the sand bank in the Deep Cut, must be seen in moonlight too if we are to 'get a complete notion of them' (*Journal 3*, p.249). More frequently however, night improves the other senses, in particular hearing. The very silence of the landscape makes distant sounds distinct:

I hear from this upland from which I see Wachusett by day—a wagon crossing one of the bridges— I have no doubt that in some places to-night I could hear every carriage which crossed a bridge over the river within the limits of concord—for in such an hour & atmosphere the sense of hearing is wonderfully assisted & asserts a new dignity— (*Journal 3*, p.250)

Thoreau is often attentive to the sounds of the nocturnal landscape, dwelling in particular on the penetrating power of bird song and overheard music. Walking at night is an education in alertness ('You feel yourself your body your legs more at night—for there is less beside to be distinctly known—' [*Journal 3*, p.266]), which not only reveals new potential in the world around him, but also increases his awareness of himself.

Thoreau exploits the possibilities of this receptive state to the full. He loves to describe the way the landscape affects him during his walks; often not just one sense, as in the above instances, but one after another in a rich profusion of impressions. This occurs for example in his account of a night-time walk in July 1851:

The larger rocks are perceptibly warm. I pluck the blossom of the milk-weed in the twilight & find how sweet it smells. The white blossom of the Jersey tea dot the hill side—with the yarrow everywhere. Some woods are black as clouds—if we knew not they were green by day, they would appear blacker still.

When we sit we hear the mosquitoes hum. (*Journal 3*, p.299)

A touch impression is here followed by accounts of smell, sight and hearing, a heady mix of sensations that suggests how alert Thoreau became during these summer nights. His openness to impressions is significant, as these 'slight' sensations often provide the starting point for the intensity he craves. His moonlight entries frequently move from one sense to another in this manner. On September 9, the progression is even more clear-cut, shifting from hearing to sight, to smell and finally to touch: 'I hear a wagon cross on[e] of the bridges leading into the town. I see the moon-light at this hour on a different side of objects. I smell the ripe apples many rods off beyond the bridge. A sultry night—a thin coat is enough' (*Journal 4*, p.64). Thoreau is, even by his high standards, extremely receptive during these nights, and some impressions affect him forcefully. During one of his June walks, a slight shift in temperature seems like a great blow of heat: 'When I had climbed the sand bank on the left—I felt the warmer current or stratum of air on my cheek like a blast from a furnace' (*Journal 3*, pp.260-61). Later on in the entry, Thoreau laments the fact that 'We do not commonly live our life out & full—we do not fill all our pores with our blood— we do not inspire & expire fully', a complaint that culminates in a plea for the proper use of our senses: 'why do we not let on the flood—raise the gates—& set all our wheels in motion— He that hath ears to hear let him hear. Employ your senses' (p.261). Judging by Thoreau's receptiveness to experience during his walks this summer, when the

floodgates were most certainly raised, this plea is somewhat superfluous, although it serves as a reminder of his objectives.⁵

Around this time, Thoreau constantly sought to shake into action his inner life, and ultimately his writing, by courting physical impressions and sensuous receptivity; he was willing to let the landscape thrill him. He would lie exposed on bare hillsides at night, drawing resolve and strength from the rocks themselves. In the first 1851 moonlight walk that is recorded in the *Journal* (May 16, 1851),⁶ he stretches himself out on the cliffs for the simple reason of keeping warm: 'Heard the whipporwill this evening. A splendid full moon tonight. Walked from 6½ to 10 pm. Lay on a rock near a meadow which had absorbed and retained much heat, so that I would warm my back on it, it being a cold night' (*Journal 3*, p.219). Before long, he uses this grounded position as a stepping stone to intense experience. In August, rocks provide a concrete starting point for sky-bound thought:

The air is warmer than the rocks now. It is perfectly warm & I am tempted to stay out all night & observe each phenomenon of the night until day dawns. But if I should do so, I should not wonder if the town were raised to hunt me up ...

I could lie out here on this pinnacle rock all night without cold— ...

To lie here on your back with nothing between your eye & the stars—nothing but space—they your nearest neighbors on that side—be they strange or be they tame—be they other worlds or merely ornaments to this— Who could ever go to sleep under these circumstances. (*Journal 3*, p.361)⁷

The influence of the warm air, the firm rocks and the star-lit skies excite both his body and mind, filling him with wonder at the prospects before him. His physical surroundings

⁵ Thoreau is always eager to remind himself of how life should be lived; his first step towards realising his dreams tend to be to describe them in the *Journal*.

⁶ He had occasionally walked at night the previous summer, but this particular excursion renewed his interest.

⁷ It is worth comparing this spontaneous entry, sprung from the moment at hand, with the more polished version in the (far less successful) lecture 'Night and Moonlight': 'You lie on your back on a rock in a pasture on the top of some bare hill at midnight, and speculate on the height of the starry canopy. The stars are the jewels of the night, and perchance surpass anything which day has to show' (*Ex*, p.403).

have such a powerful impact on his mood that he feels 'nearer to the origin of things' (*Journal 3*, p.251), an inspiring sensation that ultimately provides ample material for a day's Journal entry. Under the spell of such tangible influences, the world expands into a realm of greater possibility than usual, a place in which optimism is rewarded and writing flows freely.

During one of his night-time walks in June 1851, the experience of walking through the landscape is similarly strange and wonderful; his progress feels like a moonlit metaphysical journey into the unknown: 'The woodland paths are never seen to such advantage as in a moonlight night so embowered—still opening before you almost against expectation as you walk—you are so completely in the woods & yet your feet meet no obstacles. It is as if it were not a path but an open winding passage through the bushes which your feet find' (*Journal 3*, p.251). Ordinary consciousness gives way as he cannot quite see where he is going, walking 'automatically' through a tantalising 'open winding passage' in the embowering woods, an experience he describes in generalising terms, using the pronoun 'you'. On his way home this night, he feels cut off from the world around him. His temporary barrenness as he approaches Concord amounts to that 'subdued and knocking mood to which nature Nature never fails to open':

When you get into the road though far from the town & feel the sand under your feet—it is as if you had reached your own gravel-walk—you no longer hear the whipporwill nor regard your shadow—for here you expect a fellow traveller— You catch yourself walking merely The road leads your steps & thoughts alike to the town— You see only the path & your thoughts wander from the objects which are presented to your senses— You are no longer in place. (*Journal 3*, p.253)

As his thoughts turn inward, he is transported away from the actual world in a way that could either be dulling or liberating. The blank introversion of this mood may not seem creative, but, judging by the episode that follows, it serves as a preparation for strong feeling. In what could either be the first notes Thoreau made about this walk or a later

draft, an 'Unidentified essay [Fragment]' now in the Houghton Library, he continues the above account by describing a sudden moment of revelation:⁸

I see only the path and my thoughts wander from the objects which are presented to my senses. I am no longer in place. It is conformity walking in the way of men. –If I had got over this wall I should have been in faery land.

I would except that in one place I suddenly saw the magical moon with her attendant stars reflected from a puddle in the road, and for a moment the earth dissolved under my feet.⁹

The experience of transcendence, which is triggered by a sudden spark of brightness in the dark landscape, is extremely pure and very clearly described. Through the congruence of space and time (being on the road at this precise moment) and the conjunction of high and low (the moon seen in the puddle in the road), Thoreau catches a glimpse of perfect happiness. Circumstances combine to provide an experience that is suggestive enough to perpetuate his optimism.

It is curious that Thoreau omits the climax of his walk in the Journal account, but an explanation is soon provided. A couple of days later, he reveals that he forgot to add the event to his entry, and goes on to describe it with an additional imaginative twist:

And I forgot to say that after I reach the road by Potters barns—or further by potters Brook—I saw the moon sudden reflected full from a pool— A puddle from which you may see the moon reflected—& the earth dissolved under your feet.

The magical moon with attendant stars suddenly looking up with mild lustre from a window in the dark earth. (*Journal 3*, p.260)

Thoreau here elaborates on the experience by adding the image of 'a window in the dark earth'; as he revives the moment in thought, the luminosity of the earth creates a corresponding luminosity of imagination. Such creativity is often the ultimate result of

⁸ In the Journal version, Thoreau's account of this walk terminates abruptly at the point where the passage I quote ends; a discussion of Darwin's *Voyage of a Naturalist Round the World*, as Thoreau calls it, follows.

⁹ 'Unidentified essay [Fragment]', Houghton Library at Harvard College, Boston (Ms Am 278.5.20 [4]), p.1. In the manuscript fragment, Thoreau writes in the first person, whereas in the Journal version he uses the (less immediate) second person, a change that tells us a great deal about his experimentation with different possibilities when revising his work.

his moments of intensity, and he values them at least partly for this reason. These experiences tend to result in even longer passages of flowing imagery, each image a testimony to the fact that he has been 'transported' and that the material has been put to good use. When Emerson describes the symbolic use of language in *Nature*, he has a similar process in mind. He suggests that the moment a writer becomes inflamed with passion so that his discourse rises, it clothes itself in images.¹⁰ To Thoreau, the intensity induced by the glimmering moon on the surface of Walden Pond in June 1851 triggers just such a 'rise of discourse': 'to myriad eyes suitably placed, the whole surface of the pond would be seen to shimmer, or rather it would be seen as the waves turned up their mirrors to be covered with those bright flames like reflections of the moon's disk like a myriad candles every where issuing from the waves-' (*Journal 3*, p.263). In his vision of candles rising from the waves, Thoreau leaves the plain lake far behind, although he retains a scientifically reasoning tone in other parts of the passage, where he speculates about the cause of this optical phenomenon.¹¹

In daytime too, his thoughts in enthralled moments often depart from the surface of the earth in search of more fulfilling imaginary vistas. This occurs for example when he looks out over a fog-bound Concord valley in September the same year:

And all the farms & houses of Concord are at bottom [sic] of that sea. So I forget them and my thought sails triumphantly over them. As I looked down where the village of Concord lay buried in fog-I thought of nothing but the surface of a lake-a summer-sea over which to sail ... I only wished to get off to one of the low isles I saw in midst of the (It may have been the top of Holbrooks elm) and spend the whole summer day there. (*Journal 4*, p.67)

The foggy Concord prospect reinvigorates his imagination; through its beauty and difference, it opens up new dreams. The top of an elm becomes an island in mist, a place

¹⁰ Emerson, *Nature* in *NAL*, pp.30-31.

¹¹ He wonders for example if this phosphorescent light could be caused by fireflies before he discovers its source, the moon.

where a summer day's life can readily be imagined. In 'Beauty', which appeared in *The Conduct of Life* in 1860, Emerson proposes that the world must affect our imagination before it can be seen as 'beautiful', a belief Thoreau shares.¹² In his moments of intensity, the world suddenly appears more beautiful than at other times, not necessarily because of its appearance but because it speaks to his imagination. After the passage quoted above, Thoreau goes on to describe daybreak in an even more impassioned way: 'And next the redness became a sort of yellowish or fawn colored light & the sun now set fire to the edges of the broken cloud which had hung over the horizon –& they glowed like burning turf' (*Journal 4*, p.67). As in the previously discussed passage on moonlight reflected in a puddle, Thoreau's imagery here brings together high and low; the clouds are said to glow 'like burning turf'. His imagination thrives on the conjunction of opposites – in order to describe experiences of extreme beauty, he often mingles the earthy and the transcendent.

Thoreau's efforts are however just as likely to be rewarded by the achievement of a state of thoughtful serenity during these night-time walks, a mood in which thoughts cohere in a less fanciful way. Such a mood is sometimes induced by the stillness and obscurity of the night, which evoke a corresponding stillness in him: 'All these leaves so still none whispering no birds in motion – how can I be else than still & thoughtful?' (*Journal 3*, p.356). The twilight landscape is particularly conducive to thoughtfulness. Thoreau frequently both broods on this process and demonstrates its workings, as during a late evening walk in July 1851:

The tree tops are seen against the amber west– Methinks I see the outlines of one spruce among them–distinguishable afar. My thoughts expand & flourish most on this barren hill where in the twilight I see the moss spreading in rings & prevailing over the short thin grass carpeting the earth–adding a few inches of green to its circle annually while it dies within. (*Journal 3*, p.299)

¹² See for example the following statement (in which Emerson uses terms Thoreau would be unlikely to employ): 'Things are pretty, graceful, rich, elegant, handsome, but, until they speak to the imagination, not yet beautiful' (*CL*, pp.302-303).

The passage moves from a direct statement about the expansion of thoughts to an example of how this might work in practice (the sight of moss spreading makes him think more deeply about its life cycle). As he sat writing at night later on that summer, he noted how the moonlight, which shone on the sheet of paper before him, encouraged thought by making him more aware of his own existence:

As the twilight deepens and the moonlight is more & more bright—I begin to distinguish myself who I am & where—as my walls contract I become more collected & composed & sensible of my own existence—as when a lamp is brought into a dark apartment & I see who the company are. With the coolness & the mild silvery light I recover some sanity—my thoughts are more distinct moderated & tempered— Reflection is more possible while the day goes by.
(*Journal 3*, pp.353-54)

Such moments might lack the excitement of more sudden moments of transport, but they have compensating rewards, fostering clear-headedness rather than intoxication. In this, they serve equally well to further his optimism. Thoreau frequently returns to the notion that 'moonlight is peculiarly favorable to reflection' (*Journal 4*, p.86). He even tries to prove this by reference to sources such as Abraham Rees's *Cyclopaedia*, where he discovers a passage on the moon's influence on earth (which he appropriates for his own purposes by stressing the profound effect it has also on people).¹³ As so often, he is at least as self-consciously interested in the 'theory' of what is happening to him as in the experience itself. He is pushing himself to interpret his feelings, perhaps for the simple reason that this will enable him to control them better.

¹³ See for example the following comment on his reading of this work in September 1851, an eloquent account of the influence of moonlight on people: 'Even the astronomer admits that "the notion of the moon's influence on terrestrial things was confirmed by her manifest effect upon the ocean" but is not the poet who walks by night conscious of a tide in his thought which is to be referred to lunar influence—in which the ocean within him overflows its shores & bathes the dry land. Has he not his spring tides & his neap-tides—the former sometimes combining with the winds of heaven to produce those memorable high-tides of the calender which leave their marks for ages?' (*Journal 4*, pp.87-88).

Each moment of intensity Thoreau experiences amounts to a temporary fulfilment of his hopes. Whenever strong feelings are crystallised out of the daily welter of sensations, his optimism is boosted and carries him further along the road to satisfaction. Although these moments are pleasing in their own right, he also wants them to further his writing; he is always looking for experiences he can put to literary use. This rather self-conscious purpose is never far out of sight, and it is especially prominent during the summer nights of 1851, when he is deliberately searching for 'useful' experience. He is often writing outdoors, a practice that increases his opportunity for recording the gleams of beauty that come his way and adds immediacy to many of the moonlight entries.¹⁴ Comments that draw attention to this fact, like the following August entry, abound: 'But now that I have put this dark wood (Hubbards's) between me and the west—I see the moon light plainly on my paper— I am even startled by it— One star too, is it Venus?, I see in the west' (*Journal 3*, p.359). Or again in September: 'The fog in the lowlands on the Corner road—is never still— It now advances & envelopes me as I stand to write these words—then clears away—with ever noiseless step' (*Journal 4*, p.64). The following summer, Thoreau contemplates the nature of night-time writing in greater detail. He is even more determined to put it to good use; he wants his entries to be so deeply involved with the night that they reflect the source from which they draw their inspiration: 'I have not put darkness duskyneess [sic] enough into my night & moonlight walks—every sentence should contain some twilight or night— At least the light in it should be the yellow or creamy light of the moon or the fine beams of stars & not the white light of day' (*Journal 5*, p.149).

¹⁴ Throughout the 1850s, Thoreau often makes notes outdoors, which he writes up in the *Journal* when he gets home, usually the same evening or the following morning (but occasionally, a few days later).

Another year on, in June 1853, he describes his (occasionally continued) night-time writing in lyrical terms, concluding that it is more instinctive than its daytime equivalent:

The light is but a luminousness. My pencil seems to move through a creamy, mystic medium. The moonlight is rich and somewhat opaque, like cream, but the daylight is thin and blue, like skimmed milk. I am less conscious than in the presence of the sun; my instincts have more influence. (*Journal V*, p.278)

Thoreau is so involved in the act of writing that intensity is heightened by the very progress of the pencil, a writer's ideal state of independently flowing thought. This inspired state does not come easily, even at night. He frequently stays out a large part of the night without much reward, observing the passage of the night until it dissolves into dawn. Just as in daytime, the absence of ideas makes him treat the slightest observations as noteworthy ('After I have got into the road I have no thought to record—all the way home— The walk is comparatively barren. The leafy elm sprays seem to droop more by night!?' [*Journal 3*, p.264]). He seizes on the drooping elm sprays almost in desperation, but there may also be a degree of relief in this state of barren objectivity, as it grants him a moment's rest from his compulsive search for sensation.

Greater peace arrives with the last few walks of the season, in early October 1851. Some of these amount to catalogues of absence. The landscape is not uninspiring, but different in kind; it is 'a deserted country', in which even the quality of moonlight has changed: 'Moon $\frac{3}{4}$ full. The nights now are very still for there is hardly any noise of birds or of insects. The whippoorwill is not heard—nor the mosquito—only the occasional lisp of some sparrow. The moon gives not a creamy but white cold light—through which you can see far distinctly' (*Journal 4*, p.121). The fact that Thoreau notes and laments the passing of the phenomena that made the summer nights so compelling suggests how rewarding the season had been; he had, after all, discovered a way of inducing intensity

that worked more often than not. In autumn, some qualities of this living landscape are lost. A sense of loss is however just as likely to arise out of his own frame of mind and at other times of the year. If his level of responsiveness was low, as it sometimes was even during the most alluring summer nights, enticing external impressions were to no avail.

In June 1852, the receptivity he thrived on the previous summer is no longer forthcoming:

Methinks I am less thoughtful than I was last year at this time— The flute I now hear from the Depot Field does not find such caverns to echo & resound in in my mind— no such answering depths. Our minds should echo at least as many times as a mammoth cave to every musical sound. It should awaken reflection in us. (*Journal 5*, p.146)

When even overheard music, which normally transports him to ecstasy, seems meaningless, his state is barren indeed.

In particularly despondent moods, which could be defined by the lack of transcendent experiences, Thoreau comes close to sharing Emerson's pessimism about the promise of nature. In the essay 'Nature', Emerson stresses that nature does not repay the expectations we invest in it: 'there is throughout nature something mocking, something that leads us on and on, but arrives nowhere; keeps no faith with us. All promise outruns the performance' (*ESS*, pp.189-90). Even if the promise of nature ultimately does not deliver, Thoreau is at least intimately involved with the landscape, while Emerson feels utterly alienated:

Quite analogous to the deceits in life, there is, as might be expected, a similar effect on the eye from the face of external nature. There is in woods and waters a certain enticement and flattery, together with a failure to yield a present satisfaction. This disappointment is felt in every landscape ... the poet finds himself not near enough to his object. The pine-tree, the river, the bank of flowers before him, does not seem to be nature. Nature is still elsewhere. (*ESS*, p.192)

Except in times of doubt, Thoreau is convinced of the very opposite; that nature is near and *can* be reached, if he could only experience it with sufficient intensity. Emerson denies the possibility of exactly the kind of 'present satisfaction' Thoreau so persistently

sought (and believed he could find) in the landscape. Emerson may share Thoreau's understanding of the opportunity nature provides ('to the intelligent, nature converts itself into a vast promise, and will not be rashly explained. Her secret is untold' [ESS, pp.193-94]), but unlike Thoreau, whose optimism is fuelled by his conviction of this 'vast promise', he does not quite believe in its realisation.

Emerson's despondency has more in common with Thoreau's approach to the landscape in his early youth, which it helped to inspire, than his later attitude. In the late 1830s and early 1840s, Thoreau is at times almost as sceptical as Emerson about the possibility of a satisfactory experience of nature, which seldom occurs without a grand imaginative departure from reality. In a brief entry headed 'Consciousness' (August 1838), Thoreau describes a curiously solipsistic experience of transcendence. Unlike later moments of this kind, this state is not triggered by any external impression but by the *shutting off* of his senses, sight and hearing in particular. The moment culminates in a Whitmanesque experience of possessing a vast and timeless self:

If with closed ears and eyes I consult consciousness for a moment—immediately are all walls and barriers dissipated—earth rolls from under me, and I float, by the impetus derived from the earth and the system—a subjective—heavily laden thought, in the midst of an unknown & infinite sea, or else heave and swell like a vast ocean of thought—without rock or headland ... I am from the beginning—knowing no end, no aim. No sun illumines me,—for I dissolve all lesser lights in my own intenser and steadier light— I am a restful kernel in the magazine of the universe. (*Journal 1*, pp.50-51)

This moment is completely self-involved, although the sense of unity he experiences makes the notion of self seem irrelevant. By withdrawing into itself, his mind is released into an abstract realm beyond the reach of selfhood. Similar descriptions of sudden solipsistic 'revelations' also can be found in some of Thoreau's early poetry. In 'The Inward Morning', he emphasises that illumination can not be found 'abroad', but stems

exclusively from within:¹⁵

Packed in my mind lie all the clothes
Which outward nature wears,
And in its fashion's hourly change
It all things else repairs.

In vain I look for change abroad,
And can no difference find,
Till some new ray of peace uncalled
Illumes my inmost mind.
(CP, p.74)

It is notably a 'ray of peace' that is the agent of transformation here. In the previously quoted 1838 Journal passage, Thoreau places similar emphasis on peace, describing himself as a 'restful kernel'. In both instances, greater stillness results from the experience of transcendence, a sense of being calmed and more at ease with the world in the very act of withdrawing from it.¹⁶

Many of Thoreau's early poems and Journal entries on experiences of transcendence, like his entries on bravery and heroism, work around a similar dichotomy between the splendid ideal and the dull actual. In 'Music', he writes in a Wordsworthian way about a loss of sensibility that amounts not just to a loss of openness to impressions, but also of tantalising unearthly visions:

¹⁵ This poem appeared in *Week* in 1849 but was written earlier.

¹⁶ James McIntosh suggests that Thoreau feels closer to the landscape the very moment it affects his imagination; he is not necessarily turning away from nature even in his most rapturous visions. As he puts it in his analysis of Thoreau's effort to 'discover an appropriate distance from which to survey and use' nature in *Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist*, 'often Thoreau is trying to get part way out of his own isolated mind and closer to nature, to exist in a border area between that mind and nature. He often conceives of the mental faculty of imagination not as separating him from nature but as relating him to it' (pp.20-21). This is certainly the effect of many of his more creative experiences of intensity in later life, which are sparked by the interaction between his mind and the landscape, and thrives on this very interaction.

Ah, I have wandered many ways and lost
 The boyant step,¹⁷ the whole responsive life
 That stood with joy to hear what seemed then
 Its echo, its own harmony borne back
 Upon its ear. This tells of better space,
 Far far beyond the hills the woods the clouds
 That bound my low and plodding valley life,
 Far from my sin, remote from my distrust,
 When first my healthy morning life perchance
 Trod lightly as on clouds...
 (CP, p.223)¹⁸

Listening to the 'echoes' of his own responsiveness, to nature brought into line with his yearning and speaking with his voice, Thoreau hears a conventional tale of paradisaical simplicity. His abandonment of such extreme unworldly cravings is not too regrettable; moments of rapture and intensity continue to be forthcoming, and his writing improves markedly when his ecstasy is more directly related to the 'lesser space' of the Concord landscape. In many of his early poems however, dichotomy prevails. In 'Inspiration', Thoreau describes, with some accomplishment and in an uncharacteristically religious way, moments when his senses acquire a new acuteness, as if by divine inspiration:

But now there comes unsought, unseen,
 Some clear, divine electuary,
 And I who had but sensual been,
 Grow sensible, and as God is, am wary.

I hearing get who had but ears,
 And sight, who had but eyes before,
 I moments live who lived but years,
 And truth discern who knew but learning's lore.

¹⁷ Thoreau's intriguing modification of 'buoyant' to 'boyant' is entirely appropriate in the light of the subject matter of the poem; the boyhood he recalls is given substance by the act of dropping a vowel.

¹⁸ An allusion to Wordsworth's 'There Was a Boy' is surely implicit here. Like Wordsworth's boy, the speaker in Thoreau's poem is answered by a landscape that echoes his own voice. Wordsworth's episode is however less self-involved, as the boy's calls mingle with the owls' response, and the whole external landscape is said to enter into his mind. Such an event has no equivalent in Thoreau's poem. It is also worth relating Thoreau's experiences of intensity to Wordsworth's 'spots of time' and Keats's moments of imaginative transport; Thoreau had significant Romantic predecessors in his quest.

I hear beyond the range of sound,
 I see beyond the range of sight,
 New earths and skies and seas around,
 And in my day the sun doth pale his light.
 (CP, pp.230-31)

The contrast between disenchantment and illumination could not be clearer; it is summed up by the shift from 'sensual' to 'sensible'. The influx of meaning that occurs with inspiration (and notably *through* the senses) even makes the sun 'pale his light'; the speaker's 'day' of inspiration is described as greater than daylight. By celebrating a life of moments rather than years, a life that is continually grasped and greeted with fresh senses, Thoreau also hints at the transience of all such states (as they will not last, they have to be continually evoked and rediscovered). Norman Foerster has suggested that Thoreau seeks to go beyond the Romantic celebration of random wonder by aiming at a state of continual inspiration, an ambition which would be the logical conclusion of his optimism.¹⁹ Seeking out moments of intensity is the first step to the fulfilment of this dream.

Thoreau's descriptions of intensity gradually leave behind the extreme dualism that is apparent in his early work. His more mature approach, which uses nature as a springboard to moments of transport (and does not necessarily abandon it), appears already in some early passages, like the following April 1839 entry, entitled 'Drifting':

Drifting in a sultry day on the sluggish waters of the pond, I almost cease to live—and begin to be. A boat-man stretched on the deck of his craft, and dallying with the noon, would be as apt an emblem of eternity for me, as the serpent with the tail in his mouth. I am never so prone to lose my identity. I am dissolved in the haze. (*Journal 1*, pp.69-70)

¹⁹ Foerster emphasises that momentary glimpses are not enough, as Thoreau longs for 'perpetual ecstasy': 'Thoreau's answer, which is also Emerson's, would push farther: I, too, find life in the fleeting moments, he replies, yet not in the protean garb of the flux that entices you and confuses your vision, but in the adamant reality that lies beneath ... If I could but sound these depths always I should find "eternity in each moment". Such a conception meant perpetual ecstasy, perpetual awe and not wonder, and Thoreau aimed at no less' (Norman Foerster, *Nature in American Literature: Studies in the Modern View of Nature* [New York: Russell & Russell, 1958], p.99).

An experience of intensity is induced by physical idleness; selfhood is dissolved in the haze on the sluggish waters. The passage makes a far more spontaneous impression than the formal poems he was writing around this time, despite the somewhat forced image used. This familiar persona, the Thoreau who cultivated drift and self-abandonment and found eternity in idle stillness, also appears in a brief poem of this period, 'The Thaw', entered in the Journal on January 11, 1839. This time, he longs for intensity in the form of union with the earth itself: 'Fain would I stretch me by the highway side, / To thaw and trickle with the melting snow, / That mingled soul and body with the tide, / I too may through the pores of nature flow' (*Journal 1*, p.66). Although such a moment never occurs, idle abandon is described as a direct route to unity with the landscape; ecstasy can be achieved by the very thought of mingling with its melting waters. Some twelve years later, Thoreau writes about merging in a similarly impassioned way. His comment takes hold where 'The Thaw' leaves off, dreaming of utter union:

I hear the sound of Heywood's brook falling into Fair Haven Pond—inexpressibly refreshing to my senses—it seems to flow through my very bones.— I hear it with insatiable thirst— It allays some sandy heat in me— ... The sound of this gurgling water—running thus by night as by day—falls on all my dashes—fills all my buckets—overflows my float boards—turns all the machinery of my nature makes me a flume—a sluice way to the springs of nature— (*Journal 3*, p.301)

In such instances, the distinction between inner and outer worlds is completely forgotten, and its undoing is both the cause of ecstasy and the point of the experience.

In the early 1850s, when Thoreau was working on drafts of *Walden* and devoted more and more time to Journal keeping, he did not only court intensity by letting himself go. As we have seen, he also actively pursued the thrills of nature. This was the time of intensity-seeking by night as well as day, of moonlight walks and receptive daytime rambles. His active, if somewhat self-conscious, pursuit of beauty tends to pay off; when he goes out deliberately to experience the world (as he does for example on July 4, 1852,

when he gets up at 3 am to see the lilies open and admire the stillness of dawn), he often finds what he seeks. The irrepressible optimism that leads him out in the landscape at all hours is rewarded and perpetuated by his experiences (if not quite satisfied, as the achievement of intensity also leads to hunger for more). Sensuous impressions often encourage him to stray in thought from the present season, but they also trigger deep feelings of other kinds. The taste of fruit or berries inspires his writing, as here in September 1851: 'I feel that the juices of the fruits which I have eaten the melons & apples have ascended to my brain-& are stimulating it. They give me a heady force. Now I can write nervously' (*Journal 4*, p.51). The following summer, he goes as far as to define genius as an abundance of life and health in which 'whatever addresses the senses ... intoxicates with a healthy intoxication'. He then describes one such experience, a moment of transformation through taste, with a measure of wonder:

I am thrilled to think that I owe a perception to the commonly gross sense of taste- that I have been inspired through the palate-that these berries have fed my brain. After I had been eating these simple-wholesome-ambrosial fruits on the high hillside-I found my senses whetted-I was young again. (*Journal 5*, pp.215-16)

The sensation of eating these berries is so powerful that it seems to bring back his youth. Throughout the 1850s, Thoreau experimented with sensuous experience as a way of reaching intensity. Bathing, for example, instantly alters his frame of mind; his swims in the lakes and rivers around Concord generally result in exhilaration. At the end of August 1851, he reflects on this privilege: 'With what sober joy I stand to let the water drip from me & feel my fresh vigor-who have been bathing in the same tub which the musk rat uses- ... How ample & generous was nature - My inheritance is not narrow-' (*Journal 4*, p.24). A couple of summers later, he describes bathing as a step to true belonging, a way of inhabiting the earth:

What a luxury to bathe now! It is gloriously hot,-the first of this weather. I cannot get wet enough. I must let the water soak into me. When you come out, it

is rapidly dried on you or absorbed into your body, and you want to go in again. I begin to inhabit the planet, and see how I may be naturalized at last. (*Journal VI*, pp.382-83)

Altering one's state of mind could not be more simple; just enter the lake and let its waters work on you, or just taste the fruits of the landscape and let their juices affect you.

Thoreau captures the potent effects of bathing by suddenly shifting the scale of his observations from the particular (rejoicing in his own bathing) to the universal (a sense of being 'naturalized' in a greater cosmic context). He also switches from the first to the second person in the middle of the passage (and back again), a technique he frequently uses to widen the range of his reflections.

Sensuous experience of nature is however only the first step to intensity; it does not guarantee that the world is revealed in a new light. As he tellingly puts it in the above passage, 'I *begin* to inhabit the planet' (my emphasis). When he lies out in the fields one chilly August day in 1851, this time in bright daylight, the sobering experience of the cold air sparks a perhaps more productive 'pensiveness', a 'certain fertile sadness', for which he is grateful:

As I could not command a sunny window I went abroad on the morning of the 15th and lay in the sun in the fields in my thin coat though it was rather cool even there. I feel as if this coolness would do me good. If it only makes my life more pensive why should pensiveness be akin to sadness. There is a certain fertile sadness which I would not avoid but rather earnestly seek— It is positively joyful to me— It saves my life from being trivial. My life flows with a deeper current— (*Journal 3*, p.368)

Indeed, the colder and more barren the landscape gets, the more Thoreau braces himself and rejoices, with characteristic insistence on making the most of each situation. In

November 1851, his stubborn defiance of the cold is rewarded by abundant inner life:

Truly a hard day—hard Times these. not a mosquito left Not an insect to hum. Crickets gone into winter quarters— Friends long since gone there —& you left to walk on frozen ground—with your hands in your pockets. Ah but is not this a glorious time for your deep inward fires?— & will not your green hickory & white oak burn clean—in this frosty air? (*Journal 4*, p.181)

The concluding image of burning wood effectively evokes the serenity he describes, an apt extension of the idea of inward fires. Such fruitful states can appear at any time. As Thoreau is well aware, intensity is an oblique and unpredictable matter, which may be triggered by the most unlikely activities. In July 1852, he describes an occupation that proves just as inspirational as walking through a winter landscape: 'The slight distraction of picking berries is favorable to a wild abstracted poetic mood.— to sequestered or transcendental thinking. I return ever more fresh to my mood from such slight interruptions' (*Journal 5*, p.261). His thoughts often start to flow when his mind is half engaged with practical matters. In July 1854, the effects of picking berries are enhanced by the river scene before him, the stillness and subtle lyricism of which enter his prose: 'My thoughts are driven inward, even as clouds and trees are reflected in the still, smooth water. There is an inwardness even in the mosquitoes' hum, while I am picking blueberries in the dank wood' (*Journal VI*, p.395).

As Thoreau's approach to the landscape becomes more objective and statistical in the late 1850s, his quest for intensity abates slightly, although longing for it continues to be important. He may be less actively on the look-out for moments of inspiration, but such moments still fill him with the same rapture when they do appear. During some parts of this late period, he is especially susceptible to intensity (even searching for it as he once did), whereas at other times either no inspiration is forthcoming or he is too preoccupied with other things to be concerned about it. Judging by his entries, most of 1857 is an 'inspired' year. The *Journal* of, in particular, January, late spring and the autumn months is suffused with creativity and longing for a more impassioned mode of existence; in the summer, he went travelling (to Cape Cod in June, and on the 'Allegash' trip through Maine in late July and August). The record of the previous year is less

inspired, as Thoreau himself is keen to point out when this is about to change. In 1858, he is often so involved with his studies of the landscape (of matters such as frog spawn, birds, Mount Monadnock and the colour of autumnal leaves, which he investigates in painstaking detail), that he often forgets about intensity. When heightened moments appear, their triggers are similar to the sources of inspiration in former years. Sounds of various kinds, especially music and bird song, continue to inspire. At the beginning of 1857, in an entry that gradually becomes more impassioned, the music of an overheard guitar makes him reflect on former experiences and feel that life is still stirring inside him:

I hear one thrumming a guitar below stairs. It reminds me of moments that I have lived. What a comment on our life is the least strain of music! It lifts me up above all the dust and mire of the universe. I soar or hover with clean skirts over the field of my life ... The way in which I am affected by this faint thrumming advertises me that there is still some health and immortality in the springs of me. What an elixir is this sound! I, who but lately came and went and lived under *a dish cover*, live now under the heavens. It releases me; it bursts my bonds.
(*Journal IX*, p.217)

Ecstasy, which takes the form of release and breaking of bonds, is as attainable as it ever was. Thoreau is aware of the continuity involved; his experience makes sense at least partly because it can be related to past events. But despite the nostalgic slant of this entry, its emphasis is firmly placed on present and future intensity. In the continuation of the passage, Thoreau describes his yearning for further inspiration in high-minded terms (a realisation of 'the full grandeur of our destiny', which we are only aware of during one-hundredth part of our life [pp.217-18]). His goals are as grand as ever, and his ability to experience intensity is still sensitised by the slightest impressions.

During low-spirited parts of the late 1850s, such moments are still forthcoming, although they tend to be treated in briefer terms and may spark more pessimistic reflections.

In April 1856, overheard music has the same elevating effect, but in the midst of this mood his thoughts turn to the shallowness of ordinary existence:

Was awakened in the night to a strain of music dying away,—passing travellers singing. My being was so expanded and infinitely and divinely related for a brief season that I saw how unexhausted, how almost wholly unimproved, was man's capacity for a divine life. When I remembered what a narrow and finite life I should anon awake to! (*Journal VIII*, p.294)

The reflections induced by moments of 'divine life' in more inspired periods, such as spring 1857, are far more hopeful. When he is affected by the song of a bay-wing heard across the fields, it 'instantly translates' him and 'repairs all the world' for him. He continues this line of thought in an even more idealistic way: 'The spirit of its earth-song, of its serene and true philosophy, was breathed into me, and I saw the world as through a glass, as it lies eternally' (*Journal IX*, p.363). Seeing the world 'through a glass', presumably a telescope or other optical device, suggests a distancing barrier between him and the eternal landscape he sees, but the emphasis is still on the uplifting effect of his vision. This is conveyed for example by the notion of the spirit of the bird's song being 'breathed into' him. The moment culminates in a sustained reflection on different levels of existence, which sums up his experience of inspiration:

I ordinarily plod along a sort of whitewashed prison entry, subject to some indifferent or even grovelling mood. I do not distinctly realize my destiny. I have turned down my light to the merest glimmer and am doing some task which I have set myself ... But suddenly, in some fortunate moment, the voice of eternal wisdom reaches me, even in the strain of the sparrow, and liberates me, whets and clarifies my senses, makes me a competent witness. (*Journal IX*, pp.364-65)

During more inspired parts of the late 1850s, Thoreau, a 'competent witness' to the wonders of nature, is willing to place his trust in such intimations. Carried by his inexhaustible optimism, he will follow the song of the sparrow wherever it might lead. Such moments of liberation from 'ordinary' existence remain central to his whole endeavour, a goal that teases him on with its abundant promise. He may only get 'transient and partial glimpses of the beauty of the world' (*Journal VIII*, p.44), as in

December 1855 when the beauty of brightly coloured birds makes his body 'all sentient' with enchantment, but the pursuit of these glimpses is still worthwhile as their benefits are immense. Thoreau locates the power of the above moment, which he dwells on at some length,²⁰ in the fact that the familiar is transformed by the presence of unfamiliar birds. When his perspective is changed, intensity ensues. Perceived in the right way or from a novel angle, every scene could contain the epitome of beauty. As he puts it with a truly Transcendental sense of boundless possibility, 'From the right point of view, every storm and every drop in it is a rainbow' (*Journal VIII*, pp.44-45).

Although inspiration can be encouraged by the creation of favourable circumstances, which involves a receptive attitude as well as a novel perspective, it remains unpredictable, teasing him with its absence or surprising him with a sudden influx. 'To perceive freshly, with fresh senses, is to be inspired' (*Journal VIII*, p.44), he writes, convinced that the world will open up correspondingly if he is sufficiently open to it.²¹ To a sensitive observer, enchantment is forthcoming through the sights as well as sounds of the landscape. The appearance of the scene before him, in particular when it is enhanced by some additional touch of beauty, readily appeals to his attuned and sentient mind ('Simply to see a distant horizon through a clear air, – the fine outline of a distant hill or a blue mountain-top through some new vista, – this is wealth enough for one afternoon'

²⁰ In his conclusion to this entry, Thoreau celebrates this moment in evocative terms by using imagery of seeds and fruition: 'It is a wonderful fact that I should be affected, and thus deeply and powerfully, more than by aught else in all my experience, – that this fruit should be borne in me, sprung from a seed finer than the spores of fungi, floated from other atmospheres! finer than the dust caught in the sails of vessels a thousand miles from land! Here the invisible seeds settle, and spring, and bear flowers and fruits of immortal beauty' (*Journal VIII*, p.45). For a further discussion of Thoreau's fascination with seeds, see Chapter 7.

²¹ In *Nature in American Literature*, Norman Foerster outlines some of the conditions which may enable Thoreau's experiences of transcendence. These include an attitude of openness, a change of viewpoint and a serene and patient approach (see pp.100-6).

[*Journal XIV*, p.260]). The perception of beauty is increasingly sufficient; beauty does not have to spark unworldly visions to indicate a heightened sense of life (although it often does). Sights such as the 'indescribably beautiful contrast of scarlet and yellow' in a red maple tree seen against the light (in October 1860; *Journal XIV*, p.108), or the sparkle of sunlight on a stream,²² generate intensity; they form vignettes of wonder which thrill him in subtle ways. He sometimes deliberately tries to call up intense perception by trying out different vantage points. In September 1858, he looks at the sunset upside down until it appears to tenfold effect, like a world of pure enchantment.²³ But such experiments are seldom as effective as spontaneous revelations of beauty; they are too contrived. They do however suggest to what lengths Thoreau will go to satisfy his longing for beauty.²⁴ When he is in dire need of inspiration in August 1856, each glimpse of beauty helps to turn the world into a realm of possibility. At the very least, such glimpses transform him a little, so that he becomes more likely to see it as such:

I would fain improve every opportunity to wonder and worship, as a sunflower welcomes the light. The more thrilling, wonderful, divine objects I behold in a day, the more expanded and immortal I become. If a stone appeals to me and elevates me, tells me how many miles I have come, how many remain to travel,—and the more, the better,—reveals the future to me in some measure, it is a matter of private rejoicing. (*Journal IX*, pp.45-46)

As soon as the world speaks to him, intensity is nigh; even something as plain as stones can elevate him to the extent of, in telling terms, revealing a future.

²² See for example the following moment, recorded in the summer of 1859: 'How perfectly new and fresh the world is seen to be, when we behold a myriad sparkles of brilliant white sunlight on a rippled stream! So remote from dust and decay, more bright than the flash of an eye' (*Journal XIII*, p.311).

²³ See *Journal XI*, p.166.

²⁴ For another example, see his entry for October 28, 1857, when Thoreau is struck by 'an incredibly intense and pure white light' falling on the breasts of two ducks on the pond and the trees by its shores. The more he describes this arresting moment, which he dwells on at length and seeks to comprehend in rational terms, the more dissipated the experience becomes (see pp.132-34 of *Journal X*).

While nature inspires intensity in many different ways, man most certainly does not; Thoreau's 'moments' hardly ever occur in company. Solitude, in particular when walking, is his most reliable way of rejuvenating himself, to which *Walden*, 'Walking' and the bulk of the *Journal* testify. The landscape invigorates him whether it is 'empty' or 'full', and it can easily change the course of his feelings. In January 1857, he repeatedly speaks of his longing to turn away from men, rediscover serenity in nature and devote himself to the infinite again;²⁵ he hopes to restore his sunken spirits by suffusing himself in the winter landscape. On January 7, he goes for a circular walk to Walden Pond ('down railroad and return over Cliffs'), and writes at length about its inspirational effects:

There is nothing so sanative, so poetic, as a walk in the woods and fields even now, when I meet none abroad for pleasure. Nothing so inspires me and excites such serene and profitable thought. The objects are elevating. In the street and in society I am almost invariably cheap and dissipated, my life is unspeakably mean ... But alone in distant woods or fields, in unpretending sprout-lands and pastures tracked by rabbits, even in a bleak and, to most, cheerless day, like this, when a villager would be thinking of his inn, I come to myself, I once more feel myself grandly related, and that cold and solitude are friends of mine. (*Journal IX*, p.208)

The entry carries on in this way and concludes with his often quoted account of a recurring dream he used to have as a child, Rough and Smooth or Insanity and Sanity.²⁶ Smooth is what he finds in nature, an inspiriting, invigorating wholeness that comforts and cheers him, unlike the company of men. Nature's healing effects can work as instantaneously as a moment of intensity (and most probably last longer), as in the following entry from June 1857: 'I go along the settled road, where the houses are

²⁵ See for example *Journal IX*, p.205.

²⁶ In this dream, 'All existence, all satisfaction and dissatisfaction, all event was symbolized in this way. Now I seemed to be lying and tossing, perchance, on a horrible, a fatal rough surface, which must soon, indeed, put an end to my existence, though even in the dream I knew it to be a symbol merely of my misery; and then again, suddenly, I was lying on a delicious smooth surface, as of a summer sea, as of gossamer or down or softest plush, and life was such a luxury to live. My waking experience *always* has been and is such an alternate Rough and Smooth' (*Journal IX*, pp.210-11).

interspersed with woods, in an unaccountably desponding mood, but when I come out upon a bare and solitary heath I am *at once* exhilarated' (*Journal IX*, pp.431-32; my emphasis). Such solitude is a prerequisite for intensity, providing both space and fuel for his imagination.

However, neither walking nor solitude are foolproof ways of reaching intensity; nothing might happen, and even if it does, the experience might not go very far. Even in particularly inspired periods, such as the autumn of 1857 when Thoreau's Journal entries are energised by the unusual brightness of the turning leaves, his moments of fulfilment remain to some extent incomplete. This is a season of happily flowing life, but he still dreams of further intensity (as previously suggested, such moments sometimes open up a void rather than fill it, catching him in a self-perpetuating – but exciting – circle of desire). In September, the recollection of the phosphorescent wood he saw in Maine makes him reflect on the insatiability of our yearning. The frustration implicit in the passage sets the tone for the entries that follow: 'Consider what actual phenomena await us. To say nothing of life, which may be rare and difficult to detect, and death, which is startling enough, we cannot begin to conceive of anything so surprising and thrilling but that something more surprising may be actually presented to us' (*Journal X*, pp.53-54). Thoreau's optimism often takes the form, as here, of hoping for something new and different. The notion that infinite excitement lies ahead validates his hopefulness, even if the excitement ultimately proves to be out of reach. The thought of future exhilaration is inspiring enough to provide him with hope, perhaps precisely because it leaves space for the imagination.

The following month, Thoreau comments more directly on the elusiveness of inspired thought. He compares it alternately to a restless flock of sparrows and a soaring eagle, two images that imply its evanescence:

Those sparrows, too, are thoughts I have. They come and go; they flit by quickly on their migrations ... The whole copse will be alive with my rambling thoughts, bewildering me by their very multitude, but they will all be gone directly without leaving me a feather. My loftiest thought is somewhat like an eagle that suddenly comes into the field of view, suggesting great things and thrilling the beholder, as if it were bound hitherward with a message for me; but it comes no nearer, but circles and soars away, growing dimmer, disappointing me, till it is lost behind a cliff or a cloud. (*Journal X*, pp.128-29)

Even at a time when Thoreau takes perception to its limits, moments of intensity all too easily circle and soar away, like the eagle in the above passage (an evanescence which, perhaps paradoxically, nourishes his optimism). One of the few poems he wrote in later life is composed this autumn (it is entered in the *Journal* on October 29, 1857). Its first few lines summarise, rather hauntingly, his current fear that intimations of beauty are more dream-like than real and rapidly dissolve: 'Forever in my dream and in my morning thought, / Eastward a mount ascends; / But when in the sunbeam its hard outline is sought, / It all dissolves and ends' (*Journal X*, p.144). The poem continues in this way; its imagery flows a little less smoothly but the unworldly sentiment remains the same.²⁷ In this particular instance however, there is perhaps more to provoke disappointment than optimism.

Thoreau's attention to the Concord landscape in the late 1850s does not just lead away from the actual. At its perhaps most satisfactory, it results in serenity and contentment. In the entry that contains 'Forever in my dream', Thoreau, with characteristic inconsistency, describes a model of happiness that takes the opposite

²⁷ Consider for example the images of pilgrimage in the continuation of the poem: 'The woods that way are gates; the pastures too slope up / To an unearthly ground / But when I ask my mates, to take the staff and cup, / It can no more be found' (*Journal X*, p.144).

approach. He now describes simple, earth-bound activities such as building fences and gathering fuel as 'true paths to perception and enjoyment ... the true way to crack the nut of happiness' (*Journal X*, p.146). The airy idealism of the poem, in which happiness can only be glimpsed in dissolving visions, could not be more remote from the robust common sense of the subsequent parts of the entry. Most of his sight-inspired experiences of intensity this autumn occupy a middle ground between these two standpoints; the gap between the actual and the vision it inspires tends to be less extreme. Transcendent visions, if they appear at all, follow as logical conclusions to the objects in view, as when Thoreau becomes excited about the sight of a single red maple tree because it 'leads our thoughts away from the dusty road into those brave solitudes which it inhabits' (*Journal X*, p.43). He both beholds the tree as it appears before him and leaves it behind, shuttling between the actual and the imagined with interesting results. In the more successful passages, inspired conclusions arise out of meticulously concrete observations, as when Thoreau finds a message of encouragement in the finely-wrought beauty of a snowflake in January 1858:

Very little evidence of God or man did I see just then, and life not as rich and inviting an enterprise as it should be, when my attention was caught by a snowflake on my coat-sleeve. It was one of those perfect, crystalline, star-shaped ones, six-rayed, like a flat wheel with six spokes, only the spokes were perfect little pine trees in shape, arranged around a central spangle. This little object, which, with many of its fellows, rested unmelting on my coat, so perfect and beautiful, reminded me that Nature had not lost her pristine vigor yet, and why should man lose heart? (*Journal X*, p.239)

The actual and the ideal meet in this snow-flake, a visitation of wonder. In this fine ecstasy of perception, Thoreau is both exact and creative (he discerns pine trees in the spokes of the flake and goes on to describe snow in even more playful, animated terms).²⁸

²⁸ As in the following image of falling snow, which is particularly fanciful: 'These little wheels came down like the wrecks of chariots from a battle waged in the sky' (*Journal X*, p.239).

Above all, he is satisfied with the subtle inspiration he gets from looking closely at this object; he does not dream of other worlds and ^{is} sufficiently encouraged not to lose heart with this one.

When Thoreau approaches the landscape around him with 'infinite expectation and faith', with an attitude that demands a response, the most well-worn views gain a new lease of life. One of the most inspired passages of 1858 celebrates the repetition and familiarity of November evenings. The prospect before him appears almost frighteningly unchanged from last year. It is perfectly predictable but, in the midst of this sameness, novel against the odds:

The almshouse and Frederick were still as last November. I was no nearer, methinks, nor further off from my friends. Yet I sat the [sic] bench with perfect contentment, unwilling to exchange the familiar vision that was to be unrolled for any treasure or heaven that could be imagined ... It was as if I was promised the greatest novelty the world has ever seen or shall see, though the utmost possible novelty would be the difference between me and myself a year ago ...

And yet there is no more tempting novelty than this new November. No going to Europe or another world is to be named with it. Give me the old familiar walk, post-office and all, with this ever new self, with this infinite expectation and faith, which does not know when it is beaten. (*Journal XI*, p.274)

The only change is within him, but this is event enough because it amounts to an influx of hope and, characteristically, expectation 'which does not know when it is beaten'. The variation is slight and intangible but sufficient, enough to make the familiar season a 'new November'. In this visionary moment of 'anti-vision', Thoreau celebrates the ordinary to such an extent that he refuses to leave it behind; he even includes the post office (which he normally scorns) in his 'list of acceptance'. Just like the previous year, he thrives on barren winter landscapes, taking pleasure in the simplicity they exude and the corresponding mood of stark satisfaction they foster in him. In November 1860, a day of pale sunlight and 'cool but clear, crystalline' air induces intensity that is closely dependent on the landscape before him:

I rejoice in the bare, bleak, hard, and barren-looking surface of the tawny pastures, the firm outline of the hills, so convenient to walk over, and the air so bracing and wholesome ...

You enjoy not only the bracing coolness, but all the heat and sunlight that there is, reflected back to you from the earth. The sandy road itself, lit by the November sun, is beautiful. (*Journal XIV*, pp.258-59)

By the early 1860s, Thoreau has become very adept at deriving nourishment from seemingly slight experiences. The most commonplace sights, such as a sunlit sandy road, become apparitions of beauty (at least when recalled in writing). He no longer needs to pursue the implications of its winding course, but delights in the available vista of the known road before him. Minimal experiences often inspire extreme satisfaction; Thoreau frequently professes his love of the slight and small as a strategy of optimism. In such moments of appreciation, the boundaries between himself and the surrounding world disappear, as when he once sat in the doorway of his Walden house (thrilled, appreciative, contented) and time just slipped by.²⁹

Thoreau's main approach to realising his optimism is to cultivate his ability to experience each moment deeply. The more easily he can do this, the more continually rich and rewarding the world appears. While discussing the exaggeration and extravagance of Thoreau's writing, James McIntosh describes how keen he is to take each moment on board: 'Necessary to Thoreau's practice of exaggeration is his willingness to give himself up to the impression of the moment, on which he focuses only temporarily, and to allow each differing moment its own importance'.³⁰ This, on the surface so modest a creative ambition, might be harder to accomplish than it would seem, requiring, among

²⁹ See the beginning of 'Sounds' in *Walden*, p.111 ('Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night').

³⁰ *Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist*, p.41.

other things, an ability to let go of one's self. While discussing Gerard's and other naturalists' ways of ordering nature in October 1860, Thoreau finds apt expression for his own approach to life. He emphasises that each object, like each moment, should have an equal opportunity for appreciation:

In the true natural order the order or system is not insisted on. Each is first, and each last. That which presents itself to us this moment occupies the whole of the present and rests on the very topmost point of the sphere, under the zenith. The species and individuals of all the natural kingdoms ask our attention and admiration in a round robin. (*Journal XIV*, p.119)

His characteristically ambitious aim is nothing less than to be able to discern the full wonder of each natural phenomenon, so that it would occupy, for an instance, 'the whole of the present'. In a life that moves from fullness to fullness in this way, there would indeed be little room for dejection.

Thoreau's ideal of perpetual attention to the present is however far from simple, beset for example by a strong desire to transcend or transform it. In December 1859, he wonders at the way we idealise the remote. He confesses to his own indulgence in this practice, and describes how poets (and writers such as himself) see present things as if they were somehow other or greater than they seem:

How is it that what is actually present and transpiring is commonly perceived by the common sense and understanding only, is bare and bald, without halo or the blue enamel of intervening air? But let it be past or to come, and it is at once idealized ... The imagination requires a long range. 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. (*Journal XIII*, p.17)

As described here, the present is only radiant in proportion to the effect it has on us, coming into its own when we see it 'as if' it is also something else. This shift of perspective is particularly relevant to the process of writing. What Thoreau feels to be significant *is* significant, and likely to result in communicable intensity: 'All that interests the reader is the depth and intensity of the life excited ... That is, man is all in all, Nature nothing, but as she draws him out and reflects him' (*Journal IX*, p.121). When we are

drawn out and lose our mute unresponsiveness, as Thoreau so frequently was, nature opens; every leaf or shore or quietly illuminated sandy road is transformed into a potential agent of promise.

Thoreau's experience of the landscape constantly shifts between a sense of immense potential and utter barrenness. A scene that appears inexhaustible in a moment of wonder seems exhausted the next, but this oscillation only spurs him on. He is keen to reinduce the intensity that he knows from experience lies ready and waiting just round the corner, or more probably, behind the next tree trunk. In January 1857, he thinks, for an instant, that he has gained everything there is to be had out of the winter scene before him: 'I have listened to the whispering of the dry leaves so long that whatever meaning it has for my ears, I think that I must have heard it' (*Journal IX*, p.211). These dry leaves will soon speak to him again, but most probably of different things and in a different way. There is no doubt that Thoreau's experiences of intensity repeat themselves but this does not stop him from craving them; his ecstasy, like most of his life, took place on well-trodden ground.

For Thoreau, perhaps no intensity compares with the intensity of familiarity, which expands the slight into unexpected proportions and reassures through the sheer likelihood that the experience will recur. On May 24, 1857, he likens men to torn fragments that can change in wonderful ways, celebrates intensity in general,³¹ and records, as so many times before, the first cricket of the season:

As for completeness and roundness, to be sure, we are each like one of the laciniae of a lichen, a torn fragment, but not the less cheerfully we expand in a moist day and assume unexpected colors. We want no completeness but intensity of life. Hear the first cricket as I go through a warm hollow, bringing round the summer with his everlasting strain. (*Journal IX*, p.378)

³¹ In a phrase I also quote in the first paragraph of this chapter ('We want no completeness...').

He must have described this event at least six times (every year of this decade), but it has still the power to thrill him. Some of its impact, at least, lies in his intimacy with it. Thoreau knows this sound, he knows the reflections it is likely to induce, and he knows that a summer and autumn of (who knows what) opportunity will follow. He might let the cricket's song lead him away from the actual, or he might chose to stay still and attend to the 'now' it is also irrevocably part of. That is, he may live in or slightly beside the present, and preferably, as he rather self-consciously does, in both at once. The dreamily inspired path to intensity may be the most spectacular, but Thoreau also habitually pursues other approaches, which bring satisfactions of a more concrete kind. Through his naturalist's involvement with the landscape around Concord, he fulfils many of his more practical hopes, and perhaps even his optimism, in a tangible way. While his unworldly moments of intensity sometimes just exacerbate his yearning, close contact with animals and plants works in the opposite way: it helps to appease it. Such concrete involvement, which is the subject of the next chapter, takes him away from himself for a while and removes every trace of self-consciousness. In this, it brings him deeper and more naturally 'into the present' than his driven quest for intensity.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Wider Community

The first thing that is likely to strike a reader of Thoreau's works is his stubborn love of solitude and, in particular, solitude in nature. One does not even have to reach the end of the first sentence of *Walden* before one is confronted with this fact: 'When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived *alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor...*' (my emphasis). As one reads on, Thoreau promises to justify his choice of dwelling, a justification that includes answering the question of whether he felt lonely. Solitude is thus immediately singled out as a crucial aspect of his Walden experience, and it is just as central to his general experience of life. Critics have been quick to pick up on this leaning: almost every commentator has something to say about it, whether positive or negative. At times criticism of Thoreau makes him out to be a sort of Gulliver, who thinks his fellow human beings are Yahoos. Thoreau did choose nature above human company, preferring the pleasures of the landscape whenever he could, but he was far from such misanthropy. He was sociable enough: he was devoted to his family, brought companions on many of his walks and took an interest in at least some of the goings-on in the neighbourhood. He was however also very vulnerable and sensitive to human interaction, as the steady flow of despairing Journal comments on friendship makes clear. People easily disappointed him (most probably by failing to correspond to his vision of them), while nature almost infallibly restored him and built him up. Thoreau turned to nature for the basic psychological reason that it furthered his optimism, while his contact

with people, more often than not, broke it down. In nature, he could lose himself, not just in moments of transcendence but also in close involvement with its settled features, ever-changing vegetation and wild inhabitants. He was generally perfectly at ease when admiring some natural detail that had caught his attention or following the tracks of animals through the woods. In such moments, which added to his resources of hope, nature provided all the community he could wish for.

When Thoreau was writing, just before Darwin's ideas gained currency, nature did not necessarily seem caught up in a savage struggle for existence, but was often thought of as an altogether more gentle place, to which man could readily entrust himself.¹ Thoreau was aware of the brutality of some aspects of nature,² but he was seldom troubled by this and generally experienced the landscape as a safe, benevolent and well-ordered place. In his view, which Roderick Nash has described in *The Rights of Nature* as 'holism' or 'theological ecology', each natural detail is shaped to perfection and linked to all others in absolute harmony, a reflection of some greater, God-like force. This belief helps to legitimize Thoreau's preference for nature. The natural world seems more intimately related to the divine than the human world, and the two are anyway part of the same whole. Mankind is not hierarchically elevated above nature, so the fact that

¹ Thoreau's approach to nature was, unlike Darwin's, rooted in what Donald Worster (in *Nature's Economy*) calls 'Arcadian' ecology. This way of relating to the landscape is based on the appreciation of the fine interrelatedness of all things, including human life, for its own sake. Darwin, on the other hand, worked (according to Worster) in the rival tradition of 'Imperial' ecology, studying nature's connections as a way of taming and controlling the natural world.

² Perhaps most memorably, he is taken aback by his confrontation with 'pure Nature ... vast, and drear, and inhuman ... something savage and awful, though beautiful' on the top of Ktaadn (*MW*, p.70). The experience inspires both a catalogue of absence ('Here was no man's garden ... It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea...') and a famous moment of existential disorientation and angst. Thoreau did however not shy away from signs of violence and death in his immediate surroundings, often studying such scenes with unemotional detachment.

communion with the landscape often meant more to Thoreau than human interaction did not cause him any regret on moral grounds. Roderick Nash has summed up Thoreau's sense of all-encompassing natural society as follows:

Thoreau's organicism or holism, reinforced by both science and religion, led him to refer to nature and its creatures as his society, transcending the usual human connotation of that term ... He regarded sunfish, plants, skunks, and even stars as fellows and neighbors—members, in other words, of his community.³

Fellowship was at hand wherever Thoreau turned. His love of the natural world pointed the way to a widening of the very notion of community, which came to include each and every life-form around him.⁴ This sense of a larger community proved to be extremely liberating, setting him free to follow his instincts in the pursuit of happiness. Thoreau appreciated nature so deeply that he was hard put to find fault with it; it seemed to be created to perfection and for the benefit of each of its constituent parts. In January 1857, he 'corrects' a man who is troubled by unhappiness by pointing out that this sentiment is alien to the surrounding landscape:

'Why!' said I, speaking to his condition, 'the stones are happy, Concord River is happy, and I am happy too. When I took up a fragment of a walnut-shell this morning, I saw by its very grain and composition, its form and color, etc., that it was made for happiness. The most brutish and inanimate objects that are made suggest an everlasting and thorough satisfaction; they are the homes of content. Wood, earth, mould, etc., exist for joy... (*Journal IX*, pp.206-207)

To Thoreau, nature appears to be in harmony and brimful with contentment. In this, it is quite unlike man, and not only the man in the above example. The closer Thoreau could get to it, the more likely he would be to be able to share in its lack of despondency.

Intimacy with nature worked as a near-certain guarantee of happiness; it could be relied upon to satisfy many of his most recurrent longings (such as his desires for inspiration,

³ Roderick Frazier Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p.37.

⁴ This all-encompassing, holistic view was of course not new; it has precedents for example in ancient culture in the teachings of Pythagoras, c. 500 B.C., which stress the interrelatedness of all things and rail against the killing of animals for food (see Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Bk. XV).

↳ pp. 337-41; p. 376

beauty, and peace). Nature hardly ever let him down. For someone who wanted to live as fully and with as much optimism as Thoreau did, refiguring his understanding of community to include nature rather than man, who was shifted from his central position, was a sensible choice.

Thoreau's highly developed ability to find his satisfactions in nature, the most congenial community at hand, does not however mean that he was self-sufficient. Even though he liberated himself from many social ties, he was still part of a strong web of human connections, and people often had a powerful effect on him. He did not let many people close for the simple reason that he found emotional involvement too painful, as in his friendship with Emerson, but he could not escape far from Concord's social framework. He assumed a place in this fixed social order, although his situation was located on its literal and metaphorical fringes (certainly no further away than, as in *Walden*, a mile from the heart of the village). Critics and biographers have however often taken Thoreau's solitary stance at its face value and found it hard to accept. In Thoreau's times, as in the present day, disinclination for human company is likely to induce suspicion – something must surely be wrong. Romantic nature worship had started to make love of the non-human world acceptable, as it certainly was among the Transcendentalists, but attention to nature was not as widespread as it is today. Perhaps it was only really digestible in so far as it ultimately led, like appreciation of nature in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, back to the love of man (which Thoreau's appreciation notably did not). Having (partially) stepped out into the landscape, Thoreau refused to take this second step back, for he had found his spiritual home. He would remain attached to the human community he was born into but it was nature he loved most, and many critics have felt that this preference, at the very least, requires an explanation.

During Thoreau's lifetime, James Russell Lowell attacked his stance several times, as indeed Emerson also did both in public and private.⁵ He regarded Thoreau's criticism of mankind and proclamation of solitude as 'intellectual selfishness'.⁶ Lowell saw only the push towards loneliness in Thoreau; he missed the less prominent reverse side. In his view, Thoreau 'was not merely solitary, he would be isolated, and succeeded at last in almost persuading himself that he was autochthonous' (p.99). Lowell furthermore ascribes Thoreau's confrontational stance to what he regards as his unhealthy mind:

It is a morbid self-consciousness that pronounces the world of men empty and worthless before trying it, the instinctive evasion of one who is sensible of some innate weakness, and retorts the accusation of it before any has made it but himself. To a healthy mind, the world is a constant challenge of opportunity. Mr. Thoreau had not a healthy mind, or he would not have been so fond of prescribing. His whole life was the search for the doctor. (p.101)

It was nature rather than the human world that was Thoreau's 'constant challenge of opportunity' (and it was capable of healing him too). Confronted by something as alien to his own sociable ways as Thoreau's often aggressive difference, Lowell responds by pronouncing him ill. The very idea of turning away from man seemed so unnatural that it must be the result of 'some innate weakness', a fundamental unfitness for the far worthier aim of human society.

Similar accusations have been made time after time in the history of Thoreau criticism. In 1882, R.L. Stevenson called him a 'skulker' and attacked his desire for self-improvement, which he regarded as something lean and narrow: an unhealthy man's way of grasping for health. According to Stevenson, Thoreau's all-important 'engagement to himself' precludes true engagement with others and makes him use people for selfish

⁵ Emerson's doubts about Thoreau also make their presence felt in the funeral oration he delivered, which is remarkably critical for the genre.

⁶ 'Thoreau', in *The Earlier Essays of James Russell Lowell*, ed. E.G. Hoffsten (New York: Macmillan Company, 1916), p.99. This scathing (but occasionally perceptive) essay, which appeared in the *North American Review* for October 1865, was occasioned by Thoreau's *Letters to Various Persons*.

purposes. He would enter into friendships with the afterthought of learning something from them:

Thoreau is dry, priggish, and selfish. It is profit he is after in these intimacies; moral profit, certainly, but still profit for himself. If you will be the sort of friend I want, he remarks naively, 'my education cannot dispense with your society.' His education! as though a friend were a dictionary.⁷

In a later Preface to *Familiar Studies of Men and Books*, Stevenson withdrew some of his sharpest criticisms. He had learnt that Thoreau was not as anti-social as he had thought, but had been engaged with worthy humanitarian issues and 'was once fairly and manfully in love'.⁸ A few signs of sociability made his solitary ways more palatable, and sufficed to redeem them. In our century, Perry Miller's attack on Thoreau, which accompanies the text of the lost Journal volume for 1840-1841, is perhaps the sharpest and most extreme. As part of his catalogue of abuse, he describes the Journal as a 'clinical study' of the relation between Thoreau's literary libido and his 'biological or psychic neurosis'.⁹ He goes on to make his point in more detailed terms:

It would be trite to say that the *Journal* is in any sense a 'sublimation' of inhibited loves, or a 'compensation' for a ghastly sense of inferiority, or a neurotic defense against a fear of humiliation. (All of which, in so far as literature can be, it is.)¹⁰

Miller took to its limits the notion that Thoreau was weak and neurotic. He based this interpretation on the assumption that a life of close involvement with others is everyone's goal, or should be. What pleasures other than compensatory ones could he possibly find in nature or in writing? Surely he would have preferred human company, if he had been

⁷ 'Henry David Thoreau: His Character and Opinions', in *The Essays of R.L. Stevenson*, Selected by Malcolm Elwin (London: Macdonald & Co, 1950) pp.215-16. Originally in *Familiar Studies of Men and Books*, 1882.

⁸ R.L. Stevenson, 'Preface by Way of Criticism', *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1925), p.xvi. The English Thoreau scholar A.H. Japp, who wrote the second biography of Thoreau (*Thoreau: His Life and Aims*, 1877) under the pseudonym H.A. Page, enlightened him on the above issue. He set out to redress the already prevalent view that Thoreau was a morbid and solitary egotist.

⁹ Perry Miller, *Consciousness in Concord: The Text of Thoreau's Hitherto 'Lost Journal' (1840-1841)* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), p.93.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.94.

capable of sustaining it? Failing that, he was forced to find other outlets for his feelings, and ended up with a vast record of inadequacy and denial: the Journal. Later still, Richard Bridgman took this view to heart. He shaped his book-length study of *Dark Thoreau* around what he saw as Thoreau's failings, focusing on (and exaggerating) his 'morbidity', pessimism, weakness, and the intellectual incoherence of his work. In Bridgman's reading, solitariness was not his main vice but the fertile growth medium for his 'dark' and negative temperament.¹¹

Even those who defend Thoreau against accusations of 'unnaturalness' generally do so within the framework of the same human-centred value system. In *Thoreau in the Human Community* (1980), Mary Elkins Moller set out to reclaim the companionable Thoreau and show that human relations had a profound impact on his life, whether they were successfully realised or not. Among more abstract topics,¹² she discusses his friendships (each in turn) and family relations, and finds them governed by a pattern of attraction and repulsion. Moller places Thoreau in his human context without simplifying the situation or his feelings, which were as contradictory in this area as in most others. However, her main ambition is to 'rescue' Thoreau from his cold and solitary reputation by describing his emotional life and need for personal relationships as central, which it is perfectly possible to do. In his sensible and balanced book-length study of Thoreau's personality (a matter elusive enough to trigger studies of this kind), Edward Wagenknecht takes a similar approach. Like Moller, he makes Thoreau's preference for solitude seem less extreme by emphasising his involvement with his community. Another possible (and

¹¹ Many other critics have been ill at ease with Thoreau's solitary stance, including Mark Van Doren, Leon Edel and Raymond Gozzi, who wrote a Freudian study of his life. The current of distrust runs deep and right up to the present day; my examples are just a chosen few.

¹² Such as his ideal of friendship and his humanism, philanthropy, and sexuality (which was abstract indeed in its near non-existence).

perhaps more radical) way of defending Thoreau is to point out that his 'solitude' was not necessarily forced upon him but was instead a positive choice, as Harding and Meyer do in *The New Thoreau Handbook*. Far from warping him, it was beneficial and enabling, and not as mere compensation. They deny that he was 'hopelessly cold and sour':

He had an anti-social streak in him, but it was not informed by misanthropy – although he was an exacting critic of what he took to be meaningless activities and social mores ... Instead, Thoreau's preference for solitude and disavowal of society was consciously based on the positive desire for self-renewal.¹³

In Harding and Meyer's level-headed account, Thoreau's rhetorical and actual distancing from society is primarily a life-affirming step on the road to fulfilment:

That Thoreau was a critic of society and a gadfly who satirized its follies is undeniable – and also a large part of his significance to us even today – but his nay-saying is sometimes not recognized as a prelude to his yea-saying. Ultimately, his response to life was extraordinarily positive.¹⁴

Perhaps Thoreau's solitary defiance of custom was indeed a way of creating space for his optimism. This approach certainly directed him towards the aspects of existence he found most worthwhile and, in its strong-headed individualism, it was very much of its time and place.

Thoreau was far from being the only young New Englander who turned his back on society, intent on appreciating the 'true' relations of things. Solitude was important both to the Transcendentalists' quest for higher truth and their rebellion against prevalent social mores. When Emerson summed up the mood of the movement in his 1842 lecture 'The Transcendentalist', he devoted a substantial part of his speech to describing the essential loneliness of its members (among which he would have included Thoreau):

They are lonely; the spirit of their writing and conversation is lonely; they repel influences; they shun general society; they incline to shut themselves in their chamber in the house, to live in the country rather than in the town, and to find their tasks and amusements in solitude. (*NAL*, p.342)

¹³ Walter Harding and Michael Meyer (ed.), *The New Thoreau Handbook* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1980), p.142.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.150.

Thoreau's inclination was shared by at least some like-minded others. Emerson stresses that the Transcendentalists chose solitude for positive reasons, out of both temperament and principle, and describes them as joyous and affectionate, with 'a great wish to be loved' (*NAL*, p.343). He thus (perhaps inadvertently, perhaps deliberately) pin-points the dilemma that haunts the young Thoreau: the simultaneous longing for intimacy and repulsion from it. Emerson was sufficiently close to him to have some understanding of his emotional constitution. His description of the Transcendentalists' struggle with the idea of friendship certainly suggests as much: 'They feel that they are never so fit for friendship as when they have quitted mankind and taken themselves to friend' (*NAL*, p.347). Thoreau makes similar statements about himself, such as his frequent confessions of his preference for friendship in the abstract ('I leave my friends early— I go away to cherish my idea of friendship' [*Journal 5*, p.310]).¹⁵ In solitude, his dream of perfect friendship grows extravagant and loses all realistic proportion. As long as he does not try to put it into practice, it effectively feeds his optimism. When he does, it just as effectively fuels his (occasional) despair.

Thoreau's high ideals in matters of friendship are manifested in his writing from its earliest phases; they suffuse the *Journal* of the 1830s and 1840s and the 'Wednesday' chapter of *Week* (which is largely based on earlier *Journal* entries). He longs for absolute understanding, harmony, purity and trust; an association so fine that it dissolves the boundaries of the self (which he normally guards carefully). He never really lets go of these hopes. Even as his outlook becomes more realistic, sobered by disappointments (in particular in his crucial friendship with Emerson) and plain common sense, he still

¹⁵ For another example, see the following November 1850 statement: 'I love my friends very much but I find that it is of no use to go to see them— I hate them commonly when I am near them. They belie them selves & deny me continually' (*Journal 3*, p.141).

occasionally harks back to the dream of perfect elevation and mutuality. His earliest Journal comments are however more purely marked by hope, lacking the note of distance and bitterness that characterises many of the later entries, in particular those in which he sets forth his preference for nature. The early comments are so high-minded and highly strung that one wonders if Thoreau really believed what he said. His understanding of human relations is only loosely related to reality. It is set up, as it were, to fall. True friendship means union so perfect that it allows no discordance:

Friends are those twain who feel their interests to be one— Each knows that the other might as well have said what he said[.] All beauty—all music—all delight springs from apparent dualism—but real unity. I see his nature groping yonder so like mine— Does there go one whom I know then I go there.

The field where friends have met is consecrated forever— (*Journal 1*, p.383; March 20, 1842)

Thoreau's early comments on friendship are written in the same vein as his entries on self-improvement: in both these sets of entries, he courts perfection and will be content with nothing less. When these two ambitions meet, the result can be very intense and personal, lifting his writing out of the trough of abstraction. In February 1841, he is touchingly conscious of his own failings while dreaming of realised love: 'If my world is not sufficient without thee, my friend, I will wait till it is and then call thee— You shall come to a palace not to an almshouse' (*Journal 1*, p.273). The entry becomes even more lyrical as it proceeds; it is steeped in unspoken love ('My prickles or smoothness are as much a quality of your hand as of myself— I cannot tell you what I am more than a ray of the summer's sun— What I am—I am —and say not' [p.273]). Thoreau's generally dry reflections on friendship become intriguing when they, as here, stem from urgently felt need. In such moments, friendship seems to be interchangeable with love, and he is wrestling with it in his heart rather than just in his head.

Using Journal material, it would be perfectly possible to construct a picture of a Thoreau who was acutely sensitive to the effect of others and as privately passionate as any lover (even though there is no record of consummated love, and scant evidence even of passing attractions). He occasionally suggested (foreshadowing or preempting his critics) that he attached himself to nature at least partly in the place of human affections: 'When our companions fails[sic] us we transfer our love instantaneously to a worthy object. As the sunlight which falls on the walls and fences, when those are removed falls instantaneously on the mountains & spires in the horizon' (*Journal 3*, p.58). In the Journal entry dated 'After April 19, 1850' from which the above passage is taken, the ravages of time (or indeed Thoreau's own cuttings) combine with his sudden admission of vulnerability to convey raw emotion. The manuscript, which deals with friendship, has been torn in several places, but nowhere as evocatively as after the following confession:

Actually I have no friend I am very distant from all actual persons—and yet my experience of friendship is so real and engrossing that I sometimes find myself speaking aloud to the friend I

{Portion of page missing}
 {Portion of page missing}
 (*Journal 3*, p.58)¹⁶

It may be the work of chance that we are left wondering about the friend Thoreau so vividly imagines, but the alienation he describes is nevertheless affecting. The ripped manuscript passage mimics his abandonment, leaving the speaking subject stranded without even the echo of an answer. There are enough passages of this kind to suggest, as Mary Elkins Moller has, that he was not cold but emotional even in matters of the heart

¹⁶ For another example, see the preceding passage. The missing sections add emphasis to the impermanence described: 'There are few to whom Friendship is a sufficiently sacred relation ... I cherish so many fancies about it and so religiously that I never get to speech on the subject— I have been grieved at the readiness with which {Three-fourths page missing} the persons change but {MS torn} same— persons are the {MS torn} friendship wears' (*Journal 3*, pp.57-58).

and, furthermore, that he was in urgent need of an outlet for his feelings.¹⁷ For whatever reason (be it a matter of temperament, high standards, sexual orientation, uncondusive circumstances or something else entirely), he seldom found his deepest satisfactions with other people, but nature and writing were always consolingly close at hand. When people failed him, his trust would, like the sunlight in the earlier example, automatically fall on the landscape (and not necessarily on the mountains on the distant horizon), which hardly ever let him down.

Thoreau was never very good at reconciling the idea and actuality of friendship. The early Journal is full of soul-searching entries on the subject, which were often occasioned by his turbulent relationship with Emerson. His youthful idealism faded in many areas, but his basic assumption about the ideal beauty of friendship did not change in any substantial way, no matter how many knocks it received or how seldom he managed to realise it. A longing for perfect relations between friends recurs throughout the Journal, although he does not dwell on it as often in the 1850s, and he more often commented on the futility of his hopes than expected their fulfilment in later years. Thoreau only wrote about his (idealised or 'real') relations when matters came to a crisis, so it is easy to take his soul-searching as the norm. Untroubled relations were far more common and these are hardly mentioned in the Journal, glimpsed only in passing references to time spent with Ellery Channing and exchanges with his Concord neighbours. He seldom worries about such interactions, which, in their unacknowledged way, help to sustain him on a day-to-day level. As long as a friendship does not become

¹⁷ Her reading goes against Horace Hosmer's view that Thoreau 'did not have the "love-idea" in him; i.e. he did not appear to feel the *sex*-attraction' (quoted in Bridgman's *Dark Thoreau*, p.271). According to Moller, he not only had such feelings but they were central and governed his behaviour, although in an unconventional, sublimated way.

too important, he enjoys it as much as anyone, but if it does, he sooner or later finds this difficult and unsettling.

Thoreau's entries on 'higher' relations between people are troubled and idealistic throughout the Journal. Their consistency is intriguing as his general outlook changes a great deal. In dark moments, he is as likely to think in terms of absolute separation between himself and others, and between man and nature, in the late 1850s as he was in early youth. The section on friendship in *Week* is as it were written all over again in the late Journal; a sequel could easily be pieced together from available material. In March 1856, he describes his sense of an unbridgeable gap between himself and his friends, whose paths are so radically diverging from his that they seem to be on the other side of a mountain (see *Journal VIII*, p.231). The following winter, such feelings come to a head when a friendship suddenly ends.¹⁸ He is undeniably hurt by this, and responds by searching for grand justice and compensatory rewards along Emersonian lines. On February 8, he compares his suffering to that of the gods, a thought he relishes in the midst of his pain:

And now another friendship is ended. I do not know what has made my friend doubt me, but I know that in love there is no mistake, and that every estrangement is well founded. But my destiny is not narrowed, but if possible the broader for it. The heavens withdraw and arch themselves higher. I am sensible not only of a moral, but even a grand physical pain, such as gods may feel, about my head and breast, a certain ache and fullness. (*Journal IX*, p.249)

True to his optimism, Thoreau is capable of turning most situations to his advantage.

Two weeks later, he is just as 'grandly' troubled ('Morning, noon, and night, I suffer a physical pain, an aching of the breast which unfits me for my tasks. It is perhaps most intense at evening. With respect to Friendship I feel like a wreck that is drifting before the

¹⁸ Thoreau hardly ever identifies his friend(s) in these entries. Although the passages were often inspired by particular relationships, his use of a generic term gives them a universal ring, as does his habit of using the upper case for Friend and Friendship.

gale...' [pp.276-77]).¹⁹ While accusing his friend of dishonesty and distance, he also speaks of how he wishes him the best, even if that means separation: 'If my coming hinders him in the least conceivable degree, I will exert myself to the utmost to stay away' (p.277). In its self-sacrificing idealism, this comment resembles some of the earliest entries Thoreau made about friendship. In February 1841 for example, he remarked on the importance of granting friends space: 'Friends will be much apart— they will respect more each others privacy than their communion— for therein is the fulfillment of our high aims and the conclusion of our arguments ... The hours he [Thoreau's friend] devotes to me were snatched from higher society' (*Journal 1*, p.271). More than fifteen years later and in the midst of severe disappointment, Thoreau's conception of how friends should treat each other is as idealistic as it ever was. Now as then, he is often haunted by the discrepancy between expectations and actuality, as here in November 1858:

How long we will follow an illusion! On meeting that one whom I call my friend, I find that I had imagined something that was not there. I am sure to depart sadder than I came. Nothing makes me so dejected as to have met my friends, for they make me doubt if it is possible to have any friends. I feel what a fool I am. (*Journal XI*, pp.281-82)

When it comes to friendship, Thoreau never feels that his deepest hopes are fulfilled (and they were perhaps, as he suspected, unfulfillable). His optimism falls flat in this area, hardening into cynicism or even pessimism when reality proves too much, but this does not stop him from reviving and cherishing his dream. Failing that, there were always less

¹⁹ Canby alludes to this entry in a fairly sympathetic and balanced discussion of what he sees as Thoreau's deepening loneliness (and compensation in nature) during the 1850s: 'In the long descent into loneliness, which lasted from 1851 to 1857, he found his satisfactions increasingly in nature, in part, certainly, because the human love which meant so much to him was decaying. As a friend and lover he felt like a wreck drifting before the gale; but outdoors, in his new obsession with nature, he was happy. He found compensation there because love of nature was better suited to his intense temperament than any love of man or woman possible for him – at least in Puritan Concord' (Henry Seidel Canby, *Thoreau* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1939], p.353).

complicated kinds of human interaction²⁰ and, more importantly still, nature, with which he was more likely to experience a sense of community: 'I am not so ready to perceive the illusion that is in Nature. I certainly come nearer, to say the least, to an actual and joyful intercourse with her. Every day I have more or less communion with her, *as I think* ... I feel like a welcome guest' (p.282). A strong sense of doubt is however prominent in this seemingly affirmative passage; Thoreau is only a guest in nature's welcoming community, he is still on his way 'to an actual and joyful intercourse' with the landscape, and he is troubled by the lingering suspicion that it might all be an illusion. His communion with nature was far from smooth and easy, as the frequent Journal comments on his successes or failures of appreciation make clear.

Thoreau's thoughts are almost constantly preoccupied with nature. In the Journal as a whole, friendship plays a minor, even a negligible, role. A look at the index of Torrey and Allen's edition of the Journal readily proves this point. Thoreau does not spend much of his time fretting about the precise nature of his friendships, but is busy exploring the landscape. There are for example more than 150 entries about squirrels (gray, red, striped or chipmunk, and in general), over 100 on ducks (black, buffle-headed, dusky, eider, wood, domestic, wild, and unidentified), and even the muskrat scores far more comments than Emerson (about 100 compared with a mere 40 direct references). His mother and father come far down the list with around ten entries each, while there are thousands of references to trees and flowers of various kinds. His interests are so

²⁰ Despite some statements to the contrary, Thoreau is generally interested in the people around him. The less conventional they are the better; he gets on particularly well with his numerous friends on the fringes of Concord society. He is also open and receptive to strangers, both at home and on his travels. He is even intensely curious about some of these, notably Joe Polis on the third trip to the Maine Woods ('The Allegash and East Branch'). Acquaintances of this kind tend to please him in a straightforward way, and help to prevent misanthropy.

predominantly on the side of nature that it would be misleading to speculate too much about other concerns or disappointments. The fact is that nature thrilled him, and he spent most of his life in pursuit of the excitements it offered. He came closest to living a life of sustained optimism when he was contemplating the landscape in a simple, down-to-earth way. His devotion to nature was far from cold or impartial; even the slightest notation he made was on some level motivated by his over-arching love. Nature could be trusted to inspire intensity, and in the intervals between these heightened moments, it seldom failed to cheer him. It certainly provided a more reliable (if still not trouble-free) sense of community than human interaction and, in this, it fuelled his optimism.

Most of the time, Thoreau was quietly delighted with the landscape around him. Occasionally, he would get carried away and his response would become more passionate. In such moments, a tree would no longer be a tree but the answer to dreams, its shape as thrilling as that of any human lover. Thoreau famously fell in love with a shrub oak:

Rigid as iron, clean as the atmosphere, hardy as virtue, innocent and sweet as a maiden is the shrub oak. In proportion as I know and love it, I am natural and sound as a partridge. I felt a positive yearning toward one bush this afternoon. There was a match found for me at last. I fell in love with a shrub oak. (*Journal IX*, p.146; December 1, 1856)

Thoreau's comment is both playful and serious; he was aware of the potential absurdity of his statement. But his thoughts keep returning to the shrub oak throughout the month. Love, of however unusual a kind, is the logical conclusion of the strong and beneficial effect these trees had on him ('A farmer once asked me what shrub oak leaves were made for, not knowing any use they served. But I can tell him that they do me good' [*Journal IX*, p.184]). Even withered shrub oak leaves, which Thoreau finds 'exceedingly beautiful' and goes on to describe in loving detail,²¹ have the power to please him:

²¹ See **Figure 2** for Thoreau's accompanying drawing of autumnal shrub oak leaves. He contemplates their outlines with a lover's admiring attention: 'Now that the crowd and bustle of summer is passed, I have leisure to admire them. Their figures never weary my

When I returned from the South the other day, I was greeted by withered shrub oak leaves which I had not seen there. It was the most homely and agreeable object that met me. I found that I had no such friend as the shrub oak hereabouts. (p.184)

Such sudden preferences aside, Thoreau was similarly drawn to many other features of the landscape. He felt a strong attraction towards the wild and unspoilt areas in his neighbourhood, loving its primitive stones 'as a maiden' (*Journal IX*, p.45). He was equally drawn towards swamps and bogs, and full of affection for individual natural phenomena, such as 'the rich brown fruit of the panicled andromeda' (*Journal IX*, p.161). Thoreau's passion for inanimate nature goes far beyond mere appreciation; even its most unlikely features stir up strong emotions. Thoreau may stop short of embracing his shrub oak, but its example inspired him more deeply than many of his human friends. He found satisfaction in the (mute, unresponsive, and utterly safe) nearness of his chosen tree, and his love needed little encouragement beyond the sight of its hardy beauty.

The early 1850s Journal is particularly rich in evidence of Thoreau's powerful love of the natural world. He often describes nature with the delicacy and passion of a lover, as when he explains his longing to submerge himself completely, to 'lose' and 'bury' himself, in its (virginal) wildness during a trip on the Sudbury River in 1852:

I would like to go into perfectly new & wild country where the meadows are rich in decaying & rustling vegetation—present a wilder luxuriance— I wish to lose myself amid reeds & sedges & wild grasses that have not been touched ... I wish to bury myself amid reeds— (*Journal 5*, p.323).

He dreams of aligning himself with the landscape, merging in utter harmony with the untouched reeds. Describing the effect spring has on him, he goes as far as to, in writing at least, close the gap between the earth and his own body: 'The softness of the air

eye. Look at the few broad scallops in their sides. When was that pattern first cut? With what a free stroke the curve was struck! With how little, yet just enough, variety in their forms! Look at the fine bristles which arm each pointed lobe, as perfect now as when the wild bee hummed about them, or the chewink scratched beneath them' (*Journal IX*, pp.185-86).

mollifies our own dry and congealed substance ... We are affected like the earth, and yield to the elemental tenderness; winter breaks up within us; the frost is coming out of me, and I am heaved like the road' (*Journal V*, p.34). The identification between himself and the landscape is complete in this image; *he* is 'heaved like the road', thawing in perfect unison with nature.

Thoreau frequently portrays nature as invigorating and healing.²² The mere sight of some of its features can make him well: 'It did me good this afternoon to see the large soft looking roots of alders occupying a small brook in a narrow shady swamp' (*Journal 5*, p.265). Living well in nature means far more than just exploring and listing its contents; it involves abandoning yourself to it and letting yourself be touched by it: 'Open all your pores and bathe in all the tides of Nature, in all her streams and oceans, at all seasons' and 'Grow green with spring, yellow and ripe with autumn' (*Journal V*, p.394). To Thoreau in this confident mood, opening yourself up to nature cannot conceivably lead you astray, 'For all Nature is doing her best each moment to make us well. She exists for no other end. Do not resist her' (*Journal V*, p.395). As soon as the landscape lies spread out before him, its vigour and peace become readily transferable qualities. Nature's calm is contagious, providing relief from the strains of the human world: 'I have come to this hill to see the sun go down, to recover sanity and put myself again in relation with Nature. I would fain drink a draft of Nature's serenity' (*Journal VI*, p.329). The health nature inspires is both physical and mental; a brief walk in the landscape often, as here, affected Thoreau so deeply that he felt that he was regaining his sanity.

²² Thoreau had already evocatively described nature's healing powers in 'A Natural History of Massachusetts' (1842): 'In society you will not find health, but in nature. Unless our feet at least stood in the midst of nature, all our faces would be pale and livid ... To him who contemplates a trait of natural beauty no harm nor disappointment can come. The doctrines of despair, of spiritual or political tyranny or servitude, were never taught by such as shared the serenity of nature' (*Ex*, p.129).

Close involvement with nature certainly contributed to Thoreau's self-sufficiency. He could be alone yet thoroughly supported and comforted in the landscape, each leaf in seeming sympathy with his being. 'Everything beautiful impresses us as sufficient to itself', he wrote at the end of an entry in which he longs for (seemingly unavailable) peace of mind (*Journal V*, p.453). In his writing, he frequently introduces natural images of self-sufficiency, some of which find their way into *Walden*. One such image is Walden Pond itself, receiving its 'wonderful depth and purity' from its hermit isolation, its laudable lack of inlet or outlet.²³ Another, rather more oblique, image is the description of the delight he takes in being, at last, alone in nature and hearing the echo of his own voice ('this leisure this sportiveness—this generosity in nature—sympathizing with the better part of me—somebody I could talk with—one degree at least better than talking with one's self [*Journal 5*, p.466]). The echo strikes him as preferable both to his own and to other human voices. It exerts a compelling influence: 'I did wish rather to linger there & call all day to the air & hear my words repeated—but a vulgar necessity dragged me along round the bounds of the farm—to hear only the stale answers of my chain man shouted back to me' (p.466). The echo he hears amounts to self intensified by nature, or indeed self communing with itself by the way of nature. The episode certainly provides an apt image of Thoreau's relation to nature; like the echo, he was both enough in himself and sustained by the landscape.

As Thoreau's life was supported by the natural community he found most congenial, human interaction was often beside the point. Contact with animals, however, was not. Like engagement with nature, it was likely to fuel his optimism, while other people all too often left it in ruins. After a lengthy passage on the nature's healing

²³ See the Journal entry for December 5, 1852 (*Journal 5*, pp.404-6).

qualities (which he sets against his boredom with men), Thoreau describes his attraction towards his 'brute neighbours' as follows:

I love and celebrate nature, even in detail, merely because I love the scenery of these interviews and translations. I love to remember every creature that was at this *club* ... I do not consider the other animals brutes in the common sense. I am attracted toward them undoubtedly because I never heard any nonsense from them. I have not convicted them of folly, or vanity, or pomposity, or stupidity, in dealing with me ... This society is what I live, what I survey, for. I subscribe generously to *this* – all that I have and am. (*Journal IX*, pp.209-10)²⁴

Communion with animals was a viable alternative to human company, which he here portrays in familiar derogatory terms: as lacking any kind of grace. Animal society was free from such drawbacks and Thoreau is always ready to trust his instincts; he will seek out the kind of company that suits him best. This society was made possible by what Nash calls his 'expanded community consciousness'; the fact that he valued the non-human world as highly as the human.²⁵ Animals often made a deep impression on him. He felt genuinely close to them and spent many of his happiest moments in pursuit or observation of them. In *The Flowering of New England*, Van Wyck Brooks draws a memorable picture of Thoreau's interaction with the animals around him:

As for his friends, he had some who were wilder than Melvin, the breams, who nibbled from his fingers, while he stroked them gently and lifted them out of the river, the muskrat that emerged from the hole in the ice. The muskrat looked at Henry, and Henry looked at the muskrat, wondering what the muskrat thought of him, – safe, low, moderate thoughts, of course. Muskrats never got on stilts, like some of the Transcendentalists. Once he conversed with a woodchuck, three feet away, over a fence. They sat for half an hour, looking into each other's eyes, until they felt mesmeric influences at work over them both.²⁶

²⁴ In 'Song of Myself', 32, Whitman writes in a very similar vein about the impulse to associate with animals, who seem to lack the folly of man: 'I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain'd, / I stand and look at them long and long. // They do not sweat and whine about their condition, / They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins, / ... / Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things...' (*Leaves of Grass*, p.54). Thoreau's comment could have been partly inspired by Whitman's passage, which he would have known (he had written about Whitman's work in the *Journal* a few weeks before, and the two had recently met).

²⁵ *The Rights of Nature*, p.37.

²⁶ Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England, 1815-65* (E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc, 1936), p.298.

Van Wyck Brooks calls attention to several central features of Thoreau's engagement with animals: the fascinated gentleness of his attention, his inclination to look into the eyes of the animals he meets, and the 'safety' of the practice ('Muskrats never got on stilts...').

The incident he has in mind appears in the Journal on April 16, 1852 and extends over several pages. Thoreau describes how he chased after the woodchuck, got him to stop and observed him at leisure, played with him with a stick, looked at him until he felt mesmerised, 'talkd [sic] to him quasi forest lingo–baby-talk', chewed checkerberry leaves to give him, examined his paws, stomach and tail and eventually laid his hand on him, which proved too much for the wild animal (*Journal 4*, pp.453-55). Thoreau is utterly absorbed in his attention to the woodchuck, losing himself not only in its gaze but in the encounter as such. In moments of this kind, the communion with the animal before him becomes all; self, time, human kind and all his usual cares are forgotten. While the woodchuck taunts him with his display of tameness, Thoreau's cravings for solitude and company are both satisfied. He is alone, and not. He is shivering on the boundaries of another being while far from what most people would consider society. Feeling his influence on the woodchuck, whom he is sure he could have tamed, he is rewarded by a more positive and thrilling response than the one he tends to get from people. Better still, the experience satisfies him; he is not necessarily longing for its renewal or yearning to take it further. Such encounters with wild animals were thoroughly and fundamentally pleasing. Even a brief meeting with a rabbit in the doorway of his Walden house went straight to his heart:

Jean Lapin sat at my door today 3 paces from me at first trembling with fear–yet unwilling to move–a poor wee thing lean & bony–with ragged ears–and sharp nose–scant tail & slender paws ... Its large eye looked at first young–and diseased– almost dropsical unhealthy. But it bound free the venison straitening its body and its limbs–into graceful length.

and soon put the forest between me & itself. (*Journal 2*, pp.225-26)

Thoreau does not have time to do much more than grasp the rabbit's appearance, but this makes such a strong impression on him that he recalls it in tender prose. In their muteness, animals spoke to him more directly than the most eloquent human beings ever could. In communion with a trembling rabbit (and animals of all kinds), he found the kind of engaging and trouble-free association he sought.

In the mid-1850s, as during the Walden period, animal encounters feature prominently in the Journal. Thoreau was living so close to nature that he came into contact with wildlife almost every day, and many of these meetings proved to be memorable. In July 1856 for example, he finds himself face to face with a gray screech owl who is peering straight and very intensely at him. When it flies, he follows it to its equally captivating young brood. The following month, he watches a turtle hatch, and is similarly sensitive to the new-born animal's gaze: 'Though those eyes never saw the light before, he watches me very warily, even at a distance' (*Journal IX*, p.31). The next moment, he notices that a squirrel is observing him. The landscape is brimful with life, and many animals are as curious about Thoreau as he is about them. In these instances, the answer to Thoreau's yearning for company and communication seems strikingly simple; he needs little more than a squirrel, turtle or woodchuck who will return his attention. Such incidents pleased him immensely. They both grounded him, in the sense that they brought him in touch with his surroundings, and helped to solidify his optimism. Relating to animals, he felt perfectly at ease and like an integral part of nature; he was assuming his place in the 'extended community' that he was so pioneeringly aware of.²⁷

²⁷ In Chapter 2 of *The Rights of Nature*, 'Ideological Origins of American Environmentalism', Nash points out that very few mid-nineteenth century Americans cared about nature in the 'holistic' sense that Thoreau did. Nature was a little more than a subordinated and seemingly inexhaustible commodity to be used by man. Thoreau's fine appreciation of the interrelatedness of man and nature was ground-breaking at the time.

Thoreau's interaction with animals seldom sparked impassioned or reflective Journal entries. His mini-narratives about his encounters in the woods stay close to facts, which are reported in a plain and straightforward way. It could be argued that his meetings directed both him and his writing towards the actual and thus served as antidotes to his moments of intensity, which resulted in more flowery and expansive writing. Apart from the pleasure these encounters brought, they also fostered inner peace and simplicity of taste. It is no accident that the mid-1850s Journal is full of such incidents, for around this time, Thoreau was becoming more preoccupied with tangible matters and less likely to roam back and forth in thought.²⁸

Thoreau was occasionally drawn towards people, but when he followed his deepest instincts, the choice between man and nature was not difficult. The society he preferred was other than human: the arching sky, some slender trees, a narrow glen or the gleaming surface of a river. Even though he emphasises, with characteristic exaggeration, that he is 'naturally no hermit' and loves 'society as much as most' at the beginning of the 'Visitors' chapter of *Walden*, he was far more at ease in woods and fields than with people. In the ever-affirmative *Walden*, solitude and company, in their many senses, are celebrated alike, but despite Thoreau's attempt to let confidence rule, his hesitation about embracing either of these approaches can still be felt. The picture of the sociable Thoreau is undermined by a multitude of comments to the contrary, and his statements of absolute self-sufficiency in nature seem hesitant and partial when subjected to scrutiny. In 'Solitude', he describes how he sought to diminish the risk of dejection by living near nature, an approach that frequently inspired a sense of cosmic relatedness ('Why should I feel lonely? is not our planet in the Milky Way?' [*Walden*, p.133]). This happy state can

²⁸ See the beginning of Chapter 6 for a discussion of Thoreau's changing outlook.

however only be achieved temporarily and by sustained effort. Success remains dependent on many things, including possession of one's senses ('There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature *and has his senses still*') and the continued availability of nature: '*While* I enjoy the friendship of the seasons I trust that nothing can make life a burden to me' (p.131; my emphasis). A degree of vulnerability thus informs Thoreau's self-sufficient persona even at its most affirmative, for he is only enough unto himself as long as he feels part of a greater whole. Nature sustained him, but, for both internal and external reasons, this sustenance could not be guaranteed.²⁹ Thoreau's solitude was only viable because it was supported by such close involvement with the natural world that it was not solitude at all, but community in the deepest sense. And, as he points out in *Walden*, this involvement has its foundations in his own being: 'Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?' (*Walden*, p.138).

²⁹ Access to the landscape would become even more uncertain and precarious for subsequent generations of nature-lovers. Choosing nature above man, Thoreau set an example that inspired others (and in particular the ecological movement) in ways he would hardly have been able to imagine. As nature recedes in the face of continual threat, his propositions have become increasingly noticed and appreciated. Thoreau chose solitude, of sorts, but in the end he was not the least bit alone in his choice. With *Walden*, he even helped to establish a new literary genre, the 'solitary sojourn' form of nature writing, which has come to include classics such as Henry Beston's *The Outermost House* (1928) and Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974).

CHAPTER SIX

Inhabiting the Present

Jan. 2. [1859] P.M. – To Cliffs and Walden

Going up the hill through Stow's young oak woodland, I listen to the sharp, dry rustle of the withered oak leaves. This is the voice of the wood now. It would be comparatively still and more dreary here in other respects, if it were not for these leaves that hold on. It sounds like the roar of the sea, and is enlivening and inspiriting like that ... It is the sound of the surf, the rut of an unseen ocean, billows of air breaking on the forest like water on itself or on sand and rocks.

(Journal XI, p.384)

Apart from the widely accepted shift to a more scientific stance around 1850, one further shift can be discerned in the late Journal. This shift is more gradual and tentative than the earlier change, which, with its influx of natural data, transformed the whole tone of the Journal. It amounts not so much to a new approach but to a refinement of methods and an increasing satisfaction with his involvement with nature; at the end of the 1850s, Thoreau is less restless with what he sees and more calmly able to 'inhabit' the present than at the beginning of the decade. The signs of this shift are fairly subtle, embedded for example in the aspects of the landscape he chooses to focus on. Most notably, anticipation of seasons disappears almost completely from the Journal around 1855, and in its last few years, a preoccupation with the moment when plants reach their prime takes its place. He is more adept than ever before at noting and appreciating the fullness of each moment in nature, without necessarily transforming it or straying from it in thought (though he does that too). His involvement with the present appearance of the landscape also finds expression in more lyrical comments, such as the passage quoted at the head of this chapter.

Listening to 'the voice of the wood now', in January 1859, Thoreau hears the sound of the

sea in the rustle of withered oak leaves; the very barrenness of winter is invigorating and evocative, beyond the need for signs of spring.¹ Of course, such moments of appreciation can be found, in some measure, at all stages of Thoreau's life, just as restlessness afflicts him even in this more attuned and contented phase. Nevertheless the balance has shifted in this period: a change of tone is perceptible, reflecting his changing preoccupations and ever-growing love of the external world.

In the late 1850s, Thoreau's sound, and steadily increasing, knowledge of the landscape enables him to inhabit each moment with new confidence. Perhaps he knows the seasons so well by this stage that he no longer needs to push at their boundaries, assured by the certainty that others, which he can observe with equal satisfaction, will follow. Sherman Paul has suggested that Thoreau's abandonment of anticipation may have been due to the fact that his studies had become more habitual; it was not as essential to look forward in order to recognise what was happening in nature as it once had been.² Some late Journal statements serve as eloquent correctives to his earlier love of anticipation. In spring 1859 for example, he emphasises that every phenomenon is bound to its season, and that it is wise and necessary to make the most of the current moment:

¹ A subtle reference to the following season is however embedded in the passage, as one of the words Thoreau uses, 'rut', is associated with the sexual activity of animals in spring. In America, the word is mainly used (as Thoreau primarily uses it here) to describe the roaring of the sea (see the *Oxford English Dictionary*). The connotation of spring could have been unintentional.

² See Paul's discussion of Thoreau's changing attitude in the last chapter of *The Shores of America*, and in particular statements such as the following: 'Originally he had noted the phenomena of the changing year in order to anticipate their reappearance and prompt his ecstasy; now [sic] ("See and hear chewinks,— all their strains; the same date with last year...")— now this had become more routine' (Paul, p.395; quotation from *Journal VII*, p.334). Perhaps this is the case, although that does not necessarily mean that his excitement about the recognition of nature has grown weaker as Paul implies; it may just have found different sources and outlets.

Take time by the forelock. Now or never! You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment. Fools stand on their island opportunities and look toward another land. There is no other land; there is no life but this, or the like of this. (*Journal XII*, p.159)³

In these late years, Thoreau's way of launching himself on every wave and seizing his 'island opportunity' is to devote himself fully to the landscape or task at hand. He is often so involved in what he is doing that he does not need to look elsewhere for fuel for his optimism; the here and now becomes all, and is more than sufficient.

The detailed knowledge of the cycle of the seasons Thoreau has accumulated plays an important part in his fine devotion to the present in later life. He is familiar with most of the phenomena he is likely to encounter, but still longs to know more. Contemplating the relation between knowledge and perception in his frequently quoted statement about the way we track ourselves through life (January 1860), he calls attention to the closed nature of perception but also hints, more optimistically, at its potential expansion:

We hear and apprehend only what we already half know ... Every man thus *tracks himself* through life, in all his hearing and reading and observation and travelling. His observations make a chain. The phenomenon or fact that cannot in any wise be linked with the rest which he has observed, he does not observe. By and by we may be ready to receive what we cannot receive now. (*Journal XIII*, p.77)

Thoreau's desire to widen his field of attention, to become 'ready to receive' what he cannot yet receive, is a hopeful ambition, which aims to expand the world by expanding his mind. Such an expansion can, as Laura Dassow Walls has suggested by the notion of the 'intentionality of the eye', be encouraged by the deliberate cultivation of knowledge.⁴ The accumulation of information gradually widens the range of objects seen (a widening that can of course also occur through spontaneous inner change and growth). Even when

³ Similar reminders can however be found with due regularity throughout Thoreau's work. This stance is not new at the time; it is a prominent feature of, in particular, *Walden*.

⁴ See Chapter 2, footnote 26, for a further consideration of Laura Dassow Walls's ideas.

he stopped anticipating as much as he once did, Thoreau was fascinated by what and how he perceived when he was looking at nature. The seemingly straightforward process of learning to recognise each facet of the landscape is thus, more or less consciously, part of a larger epistemological project, an exploration of how we know, and what we can know about, the natural world.

Such grand ambitions aside, the thorough knowledge gained by years of devoted exploration (or 'tracking') promises continued receptivity to the seasons. As Thoreau suggests with characteristic exaggeration (and with his Kalendar project at the back of his mind), it is an enabling knowledge that cannot be gained in haste: 'It takes us many years to find out that Nature repeats herself annually. But how perfectly regular and calculable all her phenomena must appear to a mind that has observed her for a thousand years!' (*Journal XIII*, p.279). Having spent a decade studying how nature repeats itself, Thoreau has learned a little about such repetition, and knows how to confront the landscape in a way that will match this regularity; without impatience and with the serenity of a perspective that is long in human terms. One of his late statements about writing, made on the day his father died (February 3, 1859), is equally applicable to his approach to understanding nature.⁵ He states, in absolute terms, that it takes the writer a long time to create a theme for himself, let alone find a way of expressing it: 'It is only when many observations of different periods have been brought together that he begins to grasp his subject and can make one pertinent and just observation' (*Journal XI*, p.439). The refusal to admit any other possibilities ('It is *only* when...') is intriguing, indicating a desire to justify the collection of facts in which he is engaged. His understanding of how incisive

⁵ This division is perhaps in any case superfluous; Thoreau's writing and study of nature are inseparable during this period, as his observations find their way into the Journal and are carried out largely to perpetuate his writing.

observations are made is perhaps more relevant to his own approach than to that of most other writers. Armed with observations accumulated over the years in the Journal, Thoreau is, by his own judgement at least, more ready than ever before to grasp and describe the landscape before him.

Even when Thoreau stops anticipating the seasons as insistently as he once did, a degree of forward-looking, or 'intentionality of the eye', is still central to his recognition of nature. The very act of knowing and pre-empting the seasons, if ever so slightly, enables us to appreciate them properly, and indeed to apprehend them at all:

A man must attend to Nature closely for many years to know when, as well as where, to look for his objects, since he must always anticipate her a little. Young men have not learned the phases of Nature ... I would know when in the year to expect certain thoughts and moods, as the sportsman knows when to look for plover. (*Journal XII*, p.347)⁶

The kind of anticipation Thoreau has in mind here is however that of a natural scientist; it is far from the dreamily intense expectation of future seasons he used to indulge in. 'A little' is the keyword here; the gap between the present and the expected is constantly shrinking as the Journal proceeds. Thoreau is dreaming of tomorrow rather than eternity, as he did in early youth, preparing for that which is imminent. His anticipation of fall in late August 1859 is almost indistinguishable from a heralding of the new season on its appearance. He starts by describing the sudden transformation of the landscape caused by the 'first fall rain' in careful detail, and goes on to locate this stage within a cycle of regeneration (another significant event of the season, the first frost the previous week, is described as 'the beginning of winter, the first summons to summer', with emphasis on the threat it poses to the already re-emerging grass [*Journal XII*, pp.294-95]).⁷ The following

⁶ Cf. Thoreau's statement about the role of anticipation in the appreciation of beauty (*Ex*, p.353; quoted at the end of Chapter 2).

⁷ Thoreau playfully goes on to describe the onset of frost in terms of assault by an 'aboriginal enemy': 'That first frost on the 17th was the first stroke of winter aiming at the scalp of summer. Like a stealthy and insidious aboriginal enemy, it made its assault just

year, anticipation of autumn occurs just as close upon the season's arrival, arising out of amassed evidence of the next stage of the annual cycle. On August 22, 1860, he writes:

The already, *methinks*, yellowing willows and button-bushes, the half-shorn meadows, the higher water on their edges, with wool-grass standing over it, with the notes of flitting bobolinks and redwings of *this year*, in rustling flocks, all tell of the fall. (*Journal XIV*, p.55)

Even anticipations as slight and commonplace as these are rare in the late Journal, apart from a brief period in the winter of 1859-1860, an unusually intense and dreamy time when Thoreau was as prone as ever to more extravagant foretelling of seasons.⁸ After the raid on Harper's Ferry in October 1859, Thoreau was agitated by the John Brown case. William Dean Howells, who visited him at the beginning of 1860, found him abstracted and preoccupied with Brown's example.⁹ When Thoreau contemplates the progress of the seasons at other times during the last few years of his life, as when he remarks on thawing at the beginning of 1859 and 1861, his mind does not leap to spring as it would automatically have done in former years.¹⁰ Nor does it move ahead to autumn when prompted in late summer 1860.¹¹ This change indicates an increasing contentment in the present; he finds the scenes before him sufficiently rewarding to be beyond the need for constant foretelling, and if he looks ahead at all, it is to the near and close.

When Thoreau stops anticipating nature as insistently as he used to, he becomes more conscious of the implications of his former practice, including its somewhat illusory nature. While describing how the hum of bees brings a first intimation of summer in April 1859, he not only notes this phenomenon but also contemplates the way the

before daylight in some deep and far-away hollow and then silently withdrew' (*Journal XII*, p.295).

⁸ See for example *Journal XIII* on pp.3, 81 and 84.

⁹ See Walter Harding (ed.), *Thoreau: Man of Concord* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p.129.

¹⁰ See Thoreau's entries for February 14, 1859 (*Journal XI*, p.448) and January 16, 1861 (*Journal XIV*, p.314).

¹¹ See *Journal XIII*, p.418.

experience only lasts as long as the sound itself. It calls up a mood (or indeed a season)

he can step into or out of at will:

Go ten feet that way, to where the northwest wind comes round the hill, and you hear only the dead mechanical sound of the blast and your thoughts recur to winter, but stand as much this way in the sun and in the lee of this bush, and your charmed ears may hear this faint susurrus weaving the web of summer. (*Journal XII*, p.148)

The 'dead mechanical sound of the blast' is linguistically inert, whereas synaesthesia (the bees' 'susurrus weaving the web of summer') brings the passage to life. Thoreau is so adept at anticipating by now that he plays around with the very idea, both in language and practice. In March the same year, he expresses his doubts about the common custom of antedating spring (which he was more 'guilty' of than most) in equally powerful figurative language:

We may not even see the bare ground, and hardly the water, and yet we sit down and warm our spirits annually with this distant prospect of spring. As if a man were to warm his hands by stretching them toward the rising sun and rubbing them. (*Journal XII*, pp.4-5)

Thoreau's image suggests a detached awareness of the pitfalls of anticipation, hinting at its potential absurdity though ~~not without~~ ^{with a} warmth and glow of empathy. Thoreau himself had after all spent years rubbing his cold hands before the rising sun, the faintest beam from its unyielding surface sufficient to rekindle his stubborn longing for spring. He has left that anticipating self behind by now, but not without suspecting that nature itself was prompting his practice, and that it was in deepest harmony with it. When he hears a nuthatch 'giving vent to the spring within it' a few days later, Thoreau draws on his accumulated knowledge of seasonal process to set man's spring anticipation in context. He reflects on this as a mood that links man to nature, and that is prompted by its stirring life:

If I am not mistaken, it is what I have heard in former springs or winters long ago, fabulously early in the season, when we men had but just begun to anticipate the spring,— for it would seem that we, in our anticipations and

sympathies, include in succession the moods and expressions of all creatures.
(*Journal XII*, p.14)

The result of his thinking may be nothing more complicated than that anticipation unites all of nature in spring, but the more conscious he becomes of such simple truths, the more likely he is to be able to step back a little from his own habits.

There is another reason why Thoreau might think more intensively about the present than the future – namely the intimation that his own life was drawing to a close. Even straying from the present in thought (by looking back or ahead) would detract from an impulse to make the most of each season. The beauty of each particular day calls for attention; as he keeps reminding himself, no facet of the year is too dull or ordinary to be rewarding. In March 1859, he thinks back to the coldest day of the previous winter, a 'luxury of severe cold' which was so extraordinary that it became the general topic of conversation ('It was plain that one object which the cold was given us for was our amusement, a passing excitement'). While enjoying this as much as anyone, Thoreau goes on to reflect that less spectacular days are just as worthy of appreciation, thus guarding against too simple a joy: 'only we should know that each day is peculiar and has its kindred excitements' (*Journal XII*, p.66). Other statements to this effect follow, emphasising the value of each moment. The sight of late March sunlight on a russet landscape makes him soak in the satisfactions of spring, remodelling a quotation from Christ's sermon on the mount to express the thought that 'Enough for the season is the beauty thereof' (*Journal XII*, p.76).¹² At the end of the month, the transient beauty of the vernal lakes reminds him that there are other seasons to attend to, a thought which

¹² Thoreau's version of this passage from Matthew, 6:34 notably substitutes beauty for evil, an amendment that says a great deal about his outlook. In the Authorised Version of the Bible, the passage runs as follows: 'Take therefore no thought for the morrow; for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.'

pre-empts any sense of loss by confronting it with abundance ('Nature has so many shows for us she cannot afford to give much time to this'; and 'Nature's year is a surprise to us and adapted to our appetite and spirit. She has arranged such an order of feasts as never tires' [*Journal XII*, p.96]). By contemplating the beauty of each successive 'show' nature puts on,¹³ Thoreau gradually becomes more able to let the seasons flow on without too much restlessness and regret. He is reassured above all by the conviction that each moment is both an event in itself and a stepping stone to other, equally significant and rewarding, events.¹⁴

Besides the decreasing emphasis on anticipation, the clearest indication of Thoreau's more intensive inhabiting of each season is his growing interest in their prime. Never before has he so keenly noted when flowers reach their peak, or, their autumnal equivalent, when fruits are ripe. Each such notation is a memento of maturity and perfection preserved in Journal shorthand, the very process of remarking on it pushing him closer to the season at hand. For what better way could there be of grasping the present than observing when plants have arrived at their apex, that point of brief stasis in the midst of transient nature? A point where you can stop and imagine an unaltering world which bends its richness towards you, urging you to feast your eyes on its shows.

¹³ Thoreau places the perceiving self firmly at the centre of nature, whose very purpose seems to be to please man.

¹⁴ Discussing plants coming into bloom in *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), Aldo Leopold comments on the impossibility of noting (or indeed ignoring) all these 'first facts': 'During every week from April to September there are, on the average, ten wild plants coming into first bloom. In June as many as a dozen species may burst their buds on a single day. No man can heed all of these anniversaries; no man can ignore all of them ... Tell me of what plant-birthday a man takes notice, and I shall tell you a good deal about his vocation, his hobbies, his hay fever, and the general level of his ecological education' (pp.47-48). In the first half of the 1850s, Thoreau was anxious to observe as many of these 'anniversaries' as he possibly could. As he learned more about nature's average dates, he relaxed a little in this ambition. Each event would, after all, return and, in the meantime, be succeeded by many others.

The essence of a season may be contained in this vibrant prime, as with the *Bidens chrysanthemoides* in September, which 'apparently in its prime by the river, now almost dazzles you with its great sunny disk ... The yellow lily's is a cool yellow in comparison, but in this is seen the concentrated heat of autumn' (*Journal XII*, p.323). This particular comment is made after a couple of weeks of dedicated 'prime spotting'. In early September 1859, the *Journal* abounds in entries such as 'the feverwort berries are apparently nearly in their prime', 'The liatris is, perhaps, a little past prime' and 'the clusters of the *Viburnum Lentago* berries, now in their prime, are exceedingly and peculiarly handsome' (*Journal XII*, p.317 and p.319). Thoreau's practice of remarking on plants just before or after their moment of prime heightens the sense of the fragility of this condition. By circling around this peak point, dwelling on its arrival and passing, he calls attention to a landscape that is urgently caught up in the process of dying and becoming, each facet a fugitive step on a scale of fullness. 'Prime' is also an apt marker of the current stage of the year to experts like Thoreau, who are able to interpret its signs ('This is truly June when you begin to see brakes [dark green] fully expanded in the wood-paths' [*Journal XIII*, p.337]). Just observe enough of these arrivals and a whole new era will be ushered in, to linger a moment before it passes: 'All plants leafed, say the middle of June, and summer commenced. River begins then to wear its summer aspect' (p.372). By remarking on ripeness and prime in this way, Thoreau calls attention to latent, and deeply evocative, dimensions of the landscape around him, as well as subtly urging himself not to miss any such shows of fullness.

Sensing that seasons can be defined and understood through moments when plants reach their peak, Thoreau gathers long lists of such phenomena. On August 30, 1859, he compiles a table of prevailing flowers, 'considering both conspicuousness and numbers'

(*Journal XII*, p.305), thus creating a blueprint of nature's current abundance (see **Figure 3**). In August the following year, he focuses on maturity by listing berries in prime (as well as those still green) on Mount Monadnock (see *Journal XIV*, p.32). Such lists are not new in the Journal, but only recently have they been so intent on maturity and ripeness. In the first half of the 1850s, he did not necessarily follow the process through, often stopping short at noticing when plants and flowers were out. In his later work, Thoreau takes his new-found interest in prime further by examining different stages of ripeness. In June 1860 for example, he explores the fine details of growth, observing slight variations of size and shade, in particular in the case of leafing. Being asked when the leaves would be fully expanded ('I answered that there were leaves on many if not on most trees already fully expanded, but that there were not many on a tree, the shoots having grown only some three inches' [*Journal XIII*, p.329]) makes him brood on this question for several days. This process of reflection culminates in a detailed entry in which he sums up the current stage of leafing from memory. The passage is remarkably (and even lovingly) observant, calling attention to nature's abundance by exposing some of the constituent parts of the landscape. Despite being recalled from memory, Thoreau's descriptions are extremely precise:

As I now remember, there is the whitish shoot of the white pine; the reddish brown of the pitch pine, giving a new tinge to its tops; the bead-work of the hemlock; the now just conspicuous bursting lighter glaucous-green buds of the black spruce in cold swamps; ... the thick darker green of alders; the downyish of buttonwood *still small*; the soon developed and darkened and fluttering early aspens and Gilead; the still silvery *Populus grandidentata*... (*Journal XIII*, pp.335-36)

The full expansion of these leaves is still some way off; it is recorded in the Journal in the middle of July.¹⁵ The early June landscape Thoreau describes is however richly varied

¹⁵ See the entry for July 15, 1860 in *Journal XIII*, p.402: 'It seemed to me yesterday that the foliage had attained its maximum of darkness, and as I ascended the hill at eve the hickories looked even autumnal'. About a week later, he draws the following conclusion:

and suffused with a sense of temporality. Its past and future is frequently evoked by the remarks at hand (such as the actively 'bursting' spruce buds, urging their way into life, or the 'still small' buttonwood, promising much more).

Throughout the late Journal, Thoreau continues to be preoccupied with the theory as well as the practice of 'true' seeing. He prides himself on his finely tuned ability to pay attention to details, sometimes to the point of alienating his audience. Lecturing on 'Autumnal Tints' at Worcester in February 1859, the only criticism he received was that he had underestimated what the audience had seen of the autumn colours, upon which he (rather superciliously) reflected: 'But after reading it I am more than ever convinced that they have not seen much of them,— that there are very few persons who do see much of nature' (*Journal XI*, p.457). By his own standards, he may have been right, but how was he to know what others see? His own idea of what is worthy of attention had changed a great deal since he first started recording nature. As so often, his comment speaks of a need to justify his own efforts (devoting so much time to observing autumn, surely he must do it a bit better than everyone else). When he is asked a couple of months later if he is still in search of the beautiful, his answer is an emphatic yes (see *Journal XII*, p.160), only the beauty he seeks is now firmly located in the fine details of nature, such as the expansion of leaves or autumn's turning shades; details often so fine that only a trained eye would notice them.

The facts Thoreau records are however still not enough in themselves; just as in the early 1850s, they have to be meaningful too.¹⁶ This is brought out for example by his

'The leaves generally do not get to be perfect till the middle of July, when they are of a dark, hard, glossy green, e.g. the swamp white oak' (p.412).

¹⁶ It is intriguing to note that Thoreau's longing to transcend text-book botanical knowledge is as strong as ever, even though he has found a way of making such knowledge serve an expressive purpose. In October 1859, he is troubled by the same problem as at the beginning of the decade: 'If you would make acquaintance with the ferns

continued anxiety about the point of his observations, and by passages such as the following condemnation of the idea of studying captured birds of prey in close up:

Some, seeing and admiring the neat figure of the hawk sailing two or three hundred feet above their heads, wish to get nearer and hold it in their hands, perchance, not realizing that they can see it best at this distance, better now, perhaps, than ever they will again. What is an eagle in captivity!— screaming in a courtyard! I am not the wiser respecting eagles for having seen one there.
(*Journal XIII*, pp.194-95)

Celebrating the value of seeing these birds in their proper context, Thoreau is concerned with living beauty rather than static details, the kind of 'petty knowledge' (p.194) that can be gained by looking at dead specimens. Although the bulk of his observations in the late *Journal* could be described as factual, small and slight, his intentions in gathering them are quite the opposite. Each diminutive detail ('elder-berries in prime' or 'asters and goldenrods prevalent') is a building block in a larger quest for comprehension. Thoreau is aware of the difficulty of seeing anything clearly, let alone grasping its essence, and for this reason, he often reminds himself to take note of his surroundings. Such clarity may be a step to 'truth', and Thoreau urges himself to take each step as opportunity offers. After lamenting the fog of subjectivity that impairs our perceptions ('Surrounded by our thoughts or imaginary objects, living in our *ideas*, not one in a million ever sees the objects which are actually around him' [*Journal XIII*, p.137]), he makes a deliberate effort to describe the appearance of the February landscape before him. Although he aims to be as objective as possible, the observing self is still prominent:

you must forget your botany. You must get rid of what is commonly called *knowledge* of them ... In what book is this world and its beauty described? Who has plotted the steps toward the discovery of beauty? You have got to be in a different state from common. Your greatest success will be simply to perceive that such things are, and you will have no communication to make to the Royal Society' (*Journal XII*, p.371). Moments of deep involvement with nature are, as they always were, beyond the need for naming (a point Thoreau brings home with a dig at the Royal Society, which is the very epitome of the rational exchange of knowledge). What Thoreau hopes for here is quite simply to feel 'that such things are', and moreover, that they are beautiful.

Above me is a cloudless blue sky; beneath, the sky-blue, *i.e.* sky-reflecting, ice with patches of snow scattered over it like mackerel clouds. At a distance in several directions I see the tawny earth streaked or spotted with white where the bank or hills and fields appear, or else the green-black evergreen forests, or the brown, or russet, or tawny deciduous woods... (*Journal XIII*, p.137)

Thoreau is practising his ability to take note of his surroundings, longing (if failing) to transcend subjectivity and see the world clearly. If he could only succeed in this, he would surely arrive at a viable starting point for further insight.

The late 1850s Journal is full of entries that serve a similar purpose in a more spontaneous way; passages in which Thoreau approaches the landscape by taking stock of it. Many of these pay particular attention to colours, as when he sums up 'the color of spring hitherto' ('I should say that in dry weather it was fawn-colored, in wet more yellowish or tawny' [*Journal XII*, p.83]). In spring 1859, he comments on the browns of early spring and other tints of this season (see his descriptions of the first sightings of bare earth, clad in withered grass, on March 12 and 16). Fields are no longer just fields but also repositories of colour, the distinctive hue of each species worthy of note. In July 1860, he lists and counts the wild grasses that can be seen, remarking on their tints before commenting at length on the even more richly varied colours of cultivated grasses:

There is the rich glaucous green of young grain now, of various shades, depending on its age and kind; the flashing blades of corn which does not yet hide the bare ground; the yellowing tops of ripening grain; the dense uniform red of red-top, the most striking and high-colored of all (that is, cultivated); the very similar purple of the fowl-meadow... (*Journal XIII*, p.403)

At once scientific and lyrical, Thoreau's meticulous description of these fields provides a good way of coming to terms with them, each vivid facet granted space in the Journal.

With characteristic ambition, he hopes to preserve as exact a description of the scene as he possibly can. His interest in the nature of seeing lies at the heart of these evocative entries, which preserve an impression of nature both objective and uniquely his own.

Thoreau's entries on seasonal progress in the late Journal are distinguished by a new density and compression. Using the keyword system of notation he developed over the years, these entries reflect his ever-growing sense of the complexity of seasonal development, often pointing in several temporal directions at once. The past and the future radiate from the landscape at hand in many of these passages, in particular in entries made in transitional periods such as spring or late summer, as here:

There is much of what I call *Juncus scirpoides* now in its prime in the wetter parts, as also the *Eleocharis palustris*, long done, and *Rhynchospora alba* lately begun. Also buck-bean by itself in very wet places which have lost their crust. Elodea, how long? (*Journal XII*, p.259; July 26, 1859)

Plants which are 'long done' or 'lately begun', the history and future of the landscape, frame those currently in their moment of prime (and subject to the urgent question, 'how long?'). Such descriptions amount to a juxtaposition of past and present, a meeting point of separate life cycles, frozen for a moment (or in the Journal, forever) before the balance changes.

Having refined his methods to such an extent that this evocative mode of description became possible, Thoreau had perhaps taken his quest for a 'true' portrayal of nature as far as it would go. His approach evolved out of botany and natural science, but he adapted his models so that they would serve his own, more literary, purposes. Once established, the format of his entries remains settled, even though the plants in question vary with the turning of the year. The tone of the following sparse description of weeds by the riverside (dated July 31, 1859) is for example similar to that of the previously quoted entry, despite a slight variation of terminology:

What a variety of weeds by the riverside now, in the water of the stagnant portions! Not only lilies of three kinds, but heart-leaf, *Utricularia vulgaris* and *purpurea*, all (at least except two yellow lilies) in prime. Sium in bloom, too, and *Bidens Beckii* just begun, and *Ranunculus Purshii* still. (*Journal XII*, p.267)

Reading of the late Journal soon acquaints you with the full range of Thoreau's season-tracking terminology. Repeated phrases such as 'in prime', 'in bloom' and 'just begun' amount to a resonant (if also curiously stunted) short-hand language, which is later used to full effect in the Kalendar charts.¹⁷

This way of writing, in all its simplicity, is eminently suited to describing nature's multi-layered present. Despite their engagement with the moment at hand, Thoreau's season-tracking entries are characterised by their openness to other times. The next stage of the process is, like the preceding one, never far from view. Prime's arrival or passing is implicit in particular in the reiteration of the ambiguous phrase 'how long?', which can point in either direction (looking either back or forward). At the beginning of June 1859, each and every observation makes him ask this burning question:

[June 3] *Arenaria lateriflora* well out, how long? Common rum cherry out yesterday, how long? *Carex crinita* out a good while

[June 4] *Cornus alternifolia* well out, apparently three or four days. Yellow-eyed grass, how long?

[June 6] Yellow wood-sorrel out. Umbelled thesium, how long? Red avens, how long? *Stellaria longifolia*, at Well Meadow Head, how long? (*Journal XII*, p.199)

Even if the primary sense of the phrase is 'how long since' each flower opened, each 'how long' also contains the opposite meaning ('how long before it withers?'). Read in the latter way, its repetition beats a steady rhythm of passing, which calls attention to the urgency of prime, and also fuels Thoreau's old anxiety about failing to attend to the events of the seasons. When he has no information at hand, he seldom attempts to guess nature's ways by answering his own question. 'How long?' simply stands as a marker of brevity and mortality, a confrontation with transience which (in the midst of such an abundance of statistical material) is left untainted by trivial measurements. The knowledge that prime is

¹⁷ For further comments on this subject, see pp.220-23 below.

brief is in itself quite sufficient, and provides ample material for a day's entry (his entry for August 11, 1860 reads in its entirety: '*Panicum capillare*; how long? *Cyperus strigosus*; how long?' [*Journal XIV*, p.53]). Despite Thoreau's strong sense of nature's resilience and the regenerative force of the seasons, his obsession with these imminent small 'deaths' suggests a slight unease with natural cycles, a wish that prime would cast its rich glow for far longer than possible. His notations circle around a prime that is far from still and radiant in the present; right from its moment of birth, it is rushing head-long to its ending.

Already early on in the year, as here on April 11, 1860, moments of prime are everywhere outliving their peak: '*Aber rubrum* west side Deep Cut, some well out, some killed by frost; probably a day or two at least. Hazels there are all done; were in their prime, methinks, a week ago at least' (*Journal XIII*, p.244). Fullness is brief, subject to sudden set-backs and premature passing. Equally regrettably, much beauty is likely to fade away unnoticed, discovered too late by the seeking observer, like the rhexia in August 1859: 'The rhexia in Ebby Hubbard's field is considerably past prime, and it is its reddish chalices which show most at a distance now. I should have looked ten days ago. It is still handsome' (*Journal XII*, p.301). By constantly glancing ahead to this post-prime period, Thoreau familiarises himself with transience, each falling flower preparing him in some subconscious way for death on a larger scale. More than just a record of nature's ever-unfolding present, his description of the annual cycle in the late *Journal* reveals its details afresh, describing something as familiar as the fading of flowers with such clarity that we sense its import in each individual case. The prime Thoreau hopes to experience shifts faster than he can follow, but each *Journal* entry serves as a brief resting point against decay.

Thoreau's portrayal of the landscape in the late *Journal* calls attention to the vulnerability (or just the natural passing) of each individual species, maintaining a fine balance between holding on (through the act of recording) and letting go (by moving on to other scenes). Even the evergreen ferns will wither a little, come September (see *Journal XII*, pp.359-60); permanence is unthinkable, except in the certainty of change. Moved by this state rather than morbidly lamenting it, Thoreau dwells on the advantages of each stage of the annual cycle. In October (1859), the lingering greenness of leaves is 'so much the more interesting because so many have already fallen and we know that the first severer frost will cut off them too' (*Journal XII*, p.371). True to his optimistic nature, he often focuses on the benefits of this advancing barrenness ('In the summer greenness is cheap; now it is something comparatively rare and is the emblem of life to us' [p.371]). Just as with his time-soaked observations of prime, these lingering leaves highlight the fragility of life, and thus make the moment seem more affecting. This fragility is of course counteracted by the unfailingly vigorous renewal of nature; the certainty of annual repetition. Knowing that each individual prime will reappear, Thoreau can safely let go of each instance of fullness, anticipating its return or even taking comfort in its appearance in the more distant future beyond himself. When he realises, in November 1859, that life has been carrying on as usual while he was preoccupied with the John Brown affair, he observes that he has been inattentive to nature without any sign of his usual regret. When he next becomes aware of the landscape, he simply reflects on nature's longevity and indifference to man: 'It appeared strange to me that the little dipper should be still diving in the river as of yore; and this suggested that this grebe might be diving here when Concord shall be no more' (*Journal XII*, pp.447-48).¹⁸ Confined to his house by terminal

¹⁸ This longevity is however far from unthreatened, as Thoreau is well aware. In particular, he is alarmed by the threat man's alterations (his 'improvements') poses to the

illness the following winter, he writes to his cousin George Thatcher in similarly accepting terms. He describes his own absence as a matter of no great account, just a minor withdrawal from external life: 'However, I may say that I have been unexpectedly well, considering how confined and sedentary my life has been. I have had a good time in the house, and it is really as if nothing had happened; or only I have lost the phenomena of winter'.¹⁹ The sum of nature's myriad life cycles, including man's, is a grand stability, a fact Thoreau learned by paying close attention. The fine acceptance he achieves towards the end of his life is the product of a mind that is not unmoved by change, but deeply engaged with it. It finds expression for example in 'Autumnal Tints', where he describes how vigorously leaves wither and die – nature sets a comforting example.²⁰

Thoreau's relation to the seasons is an apt marker of his state of mind; in very simplified terms, the deeper his involvement with seasonal process, the deeper his general serenity and contentment. The prominence of seasonal structures in his late works (in

landscape. Towards the end of 'Wild Apples', this concern culminates in a lament for the impending loss of native wild apple orchards, a curiously fatalistic plea for conservation: 'The era of the Wild Apple will soon be past. It is a fruit which will probably become extinct in New England. You may still wander through old orchards of native fruit of great extent, which for the most part went to the cider-mill, now all gone to decay ... Since the temperance reform and the general introduction of grafted fruit, no native apple-trees, such as I see everywhere in deserted pastures, and where the woods have grown up around them, are set out. I fear that he who walks over these fields a century hence will not know the pleasures of knocking off wild apples. Ah, poor man, there are many pleasures which he will not know!' ('Wild Apples', *Ex*, pp.394-95). See Chapter 7 for a further discussion of this subject.

¹⁹ Letter to George Thatcher, March 31, 1861, quoted in Raymond R. Borst, *The Thoreau Log: A Documentary Life of Henry David Thoreau, 1817-1862* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1992), pp.584-85. Thoreau did however express similar sentiments already in early youth, in times of illness; see eg. *Journal 1*, p.265.

²⁰ See the section entitled 'Fallen Leaves', which is written in the tradition of an ancient literary genre that reflects the Christian preoccupation with the 'good death': 'It is pleasant to walk over the beds of these fresh, crisp, and rustling leaves. How beautifully they go to their graves! how gently lay themselves down and turn to mould! – painted of a thousand hues, and fit to make the beds of us living. So they troop to their last resting place, light and frisky ... They that soared so loftily, how contentedly they return to dust again, and are laid low ... They teach us how to die' (*Ex*, pp.330-31).

particular the chronological ordering of 'Wild Apples', 'Autumnal Tints', 'Huckleberries', 'Notes on Fruits' and the Kalendar charts) is no accident; it is a logical extension of his Journal keeping and the seasonal format more allegorically employed in *Walden*. The fact that he uses the shape of the natural year to structure his late works is indicative both of an increasing subordination to natural process (nature is pushed to the forefront, taking the place of self), and of the reverse, an expansion of self in the very act of identification with the natural world (nature can speak for him now; there is less need for intervening self). But Thoreau does not just adopt seasonal cycles; he also adapts them to his purposes, redefining the ordinary conception of the year. In the 1850s, he is busy broadening the scope of the term 'season' by, for example, applying it to shorter 'seasons' within the seasons, periods often bounded by the life-span of individual species. In April 1859, he defines a spring period as follows : 'This is the beginning of that season which, methinks, culminates with the buttercup and wild pink and *Viola pedata*. It begins when the first toad is heard' (*Journal XII*, p.162). Such a season, located between seemingly random phenomena, has surely never been conceived before; Thoreau is working out his own demarcation of spring. His redefinition of the term in the late Journal suggests a strong sense of the slipperiness and complexity of the progress of the year (as he puts it, 'we must not be governed by rigid rules, as by the almanac, but let the season rule us' [*Journal XII*, p.159]). Each day may be seen as a season in itself ('Even the grass begins to wave, in the 19th-of-April fashion' [*Journal XII*, p.162]), as may periods that are defined by particular activities or characteristics. In March 1860, he describes 'the season when you sit under a bridge and watch the dimples made by the rain' (*Journal XIII*, p.206), and in June he notes that the season of 'two day's rain' is past (*Journal XIII*, p.353). Thoreau's rewriting of the seasons thus takes a curiously personal turn in the late

Journal. The great turning points of the year are marked by small-scale observations of the most mundane kind, such as the sight of a new flower in bloom ('The 21st I began to notice the *Festuca ovina* in dry pastures, prevailing and so marking a season' [*Journal XIII*, p.377]). Or, more mundanely still, the seasons may be defined by the effect they have on him, like the arrival of summer in June, which is ascertained by his new activities and way of dressing: 'We have had warmer weather for several days, say since 12th. A new season begun, –daily baths, thin coat, etc' (*Journal XIII*, pp.355-56). Potential seasons multiply in a world thus seen, a world in which divisions are based on individual experiences rather than rough generalisations.

In 'Autumnal Tints', Thoreau suggests that we should measure time by means of a tree year. The trees in each village could mark the seasons, 'like the town-clock' (*Ex*, p.339). This would reintroduce simplicity, as well as provide a natural way of denoting the seasons ('Let us have Willows for spring, Elms for summer, Maples and Walnuts and Tupeloes for autumn, Evergreens for winter, and Oaks for all seasons' [*Ex*, p.339]). In its abstraction, the fact that each season would be described by a characteristic natural 'event', Thoreau's tree year has much in common with the American Indians' way of referring to the seasons, a subject he had long been interested in. His 'Indian Notebooks' (eleven volumes of meticulously copied reading notes he began in 1847 and continued throughout the 1850s) contain many extracts on this topic. He is particularly fascinated by their way of naming the months. In Volume IV, which he started in the autumn of 1851, he quotes from Baron de la Houton's discussion of 'the year of the Ontaouas, Ontajamas, Huron, Santeurs, Minois, Oumamis, and some other savages' in *New Voyages to North America*:

Moreover all these lunar months have names which belong to them. They call what we name March, the moon of Worms (aux vers) because these animals are

accustomed to come out of the holes of trees at that time ... That of April the moon of Plants, May the moon of the Swallows –& the like.²¹

And in Volume VI, he extracts the annual calendar of the Dakotas from Henry Roe

Schoolcraft's report on the Indians, discovering a different system of naming which is based on similar associative principles:

January, the severe or hard moon, February, the moon in which racoons run, March the moon of sore eyes, April, the moon that the geese lay, May, the moon of planting, June the moon for strawberries and hoeing corn, July, mid-summer, August, the moon that corn is gathered, September, the moon that they make wild rice, October & November, running of the does, December, the moon when the deer shed their horns.²²

Extracts of this kind abound in the 'Indian Notebooks' and can occasionally be found in the 1850s Journal. They provide an alternative standard for the definition of seasons that Thoreau undoubtedly learned from and was keen to follow. His considerable observational skills, coupled with the example set by the Indians, make his seasonal redefinition possible. This practice became a way of taking charge of an elusive process and inhabiting the year in a more individual way. Thoreau charted his own year with considerable optimism and enthusiasm; because of his faith in subjective experience, he confidently refused to be bound by conventions.

Thoreau's increasingly confident knowledge of the seasons coexists with a growing reverence before them. The progress of the year often makes him stand back in thoughtful awe, as in one of the rare moments of seasonal anticipation in the late Journal. At the end of April 1860, just after the heady John Brown winter, the sudden warmth and the sound of insects bring a premonition of summer. Rather than leaping ahead in thought

²¹ Arthur Christy's typed transcript of Thoreau's 'Indian Notebooks' (Pierpont Morgan Library, New York), Volume IV, p.91.

²² Quotation from Henry Roe Schoolcraft's *Historical and Statistical Information Respecting the History, Condition and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States* in the 'Indian Notebooks', Volume VI, p.144, reprinted in Richard E. Fleck's *The Indians of Thoreau: Selections from the Indian Notebooks* (Albuquerque: Hummingbird Press, 1974), p.46.

as formerly, Thoreau now takes all the more pleasure in this particular experience. He pauses to contemplate it, relishing the interval of repose before the new season starts:

Again I am advertised of the approach of a new season, as yesterday. The air is not only warmer and stiller, but has more of meaning or smothered voice to it, now that the hum of insects begins to be heard ... It is a voiceful and significant stillness, such as precedes a thunder-storm or a hurricane. The boisterous spring winds cease to blow, the waves to dash, the migrating ducks to vex the air so much. You are sensible of a certain repose in nature. (*Journal XIII*, p.263)

Thoreau and the landscape are at one as he appreciates its momentary peace. He is an able interpreter of the occasion, who is attentive to the sounds audible in the stillness around him, noting its 'voicefulness'.²³ Even though he is very aware of the oncoming season, just as he was the previous day, he does not push ahead to explore it in thought. Instead, he 'inhabits' the present; he tries to pin down the essence of the current moment by describing the constituent parts of its 'significant stillness'.

Thoreau's reverential wonder before the seasons, which drove him so deeply into the present, also informs his Kalendar project, the unfinished result of his painstaking sifting of Journal material and tireless calculation of averages. The Kalendar reveals (as if such a revelation was needed) how keenly devoted Thoreau was to the task of comprehending nature. He went to great lengths to get, as he thought, a bit closer to understanding it, and this did not just mean enjoying its beauty. This final effort to comprehend nature was vastly ambitious and far from immediate. He looked at the Concord landscape from a remove, as he was dealing almost exclusively with previously gathered information. The Kalendar charts are rarely studied and still unpublished (perhaps, indeed, unpublishable); they are in urgent need of further exploration. The project is usually dismissed by critics as a dead end or as evidence of his failing powers.

²³ The pertinent word Thoreau uses here, 'voiceful', is now largely defunct. In the nineteenth century, it was quite frequently used in poetry, generally in relation to nature or birds.

This is the case even in more recent criticism, which is surprising as his other late work is receiving its due attention.²⁴ Thoreau's *Kalendar* charts amount to the logical conclusion of his late calendrical interests. They testify to his last-minute burst of creative (if revisionary) activity, and possess a beauty all their own. The largely blank rows of columns (except for those relating to the beginning and end of the 1850s, which tend to be meticulously filled in, and stray entries in the years in between) suggest how ambitious his project was; even with the best of intentions, nature's variety proved so infinitely rich that he never got very far. The unfinished tables provide tangible evidence of this obvious but resonant truth (a truth rather different in kind from the straightforward points he set out to discover about nature's averages). In the *Kalendar*'s art of absence, each column of unfulfilled intention paradoxically serves as evidence of abundance. Although remote from living nature, these inter-textual charts could readily be translated back into the landscape again (Sherman Paul has suggested in passing that Thoreau intended to 'humanize' the facts in his charts by reassociating them with human myths and history, as he does in 'Wild Apples' and other late natural history essays [Paul, p.410]). The averages Thoreau sought to determine by considering ten years' worth of observations would have been an enabling knowledge, that would have allowed him to find his way through nature all the better in the future. For someone who strongly believed in the 'intentionality of the eye', convinced that we see only what we are ready to receive, this kind of knowledge may even be absolutely essential, the very key with which the landscape can be unlocked.

²⁴ As Laura Dassow Walls puts it in her discussion of the relation between Thoreau's compilation of charts and Humboldt's fondness for statistics, 'Thoreau's charts have, predictably, been condemned as symptomatic of a breakdown into pointless activity, even as the fashion of counting and tabulating statistics seems "pointless" to many of Humboldt's commentators' (*Seeing New Worlds*, p.81).

The rigorously scientific approach which culminates in the Kalendar charts is also evident in the Journal of the late 1850s and early 1860s. As Sherman Paul concisely puts it in a passage on the shift from anticipation to close investigation of particular aspects of the landscape:

In the winter 1855-56 he no longer looked for signs of spring but measured the snow, and in each season he studied a particular phenomenon: nests in the winter of 1856, foliage in the autumn of 1857 (when he also went wooding and nutting), swamps in the winter of 1857-58, rivers in the summer of 1859 and the spring of 1860, and forests from 1859 through 1860. (Paul, p.396)

This list could readily be expanded to include many other objects of study (alongside his habitual attention to first appearances, withering and weather), such as the temperature of springs, ponds and brooks in June and July 1860 (*Journal XIII*, p.388 onwards), vegetation on Mount Monadnock in August 1860 (see the beginning of *Journal XIV*) or even a Canada lynx later on in the year (*Journal XIV*, pp.79-85). Apart from such evidence of thoroughness, the very methods of calculation he uses to collate his Kalendar charts are also evident in the Journal. He often he tries to sum up recent phenomena, as in April 1859, when he reviews the weather of the recent past (*Journal XII*, p.131), or in March 1860, when he lists temperatures he measured at the beginning of the month (*Journal XIII*, p.193). This impulse culminates in a curious, apparently fictional, day-by-day account of 'the general phenomena of March' in spring 1860.²⁵ Seeking to outline an archetypal March, Thoreau's long entry (which Torrey and Allen called 'The Story of March') makes curious reading at times, assuming a law-bound landscape along the lines of that described in Howitt's *The Book of the Seasons*. Thoreau's account is more specific; he is generalising about each day rather than each month. His comments

²⁵ Thoreau's day-by-day comments on March were written on the 25th, but they reach ahead into the future to cover the full month as if it had already taken place. They also bear little relation to the actual entries he made earlier in the month; his generalisations are strangely assured inventions.

tell the story of spring as if little variation was possible, 'fixing' its fluid process in statements such as 'By the 2d, ice suddenly softens and skating ends' and 'By the 3d, the snow-banks are softened through to earth' (*Journal XIII*, pp.222-23). Thoreau's summary loses all credibility when he attributes this kind of regularity to the temperature and the weather ('The 11th is a warmer day and fair, with the first considerable bluish haze in the air' [p.225]), although some flexibility is still acknowledged; the occasional 'perhaps' can be found. 'The Story of March' provides a comprehensive version of the events of March, which is strangely naive in its conception and rather unimaginatively executed. Thoreau must have realised that the idea of turning facts into an archetypal narrative of seasonal progression was a step in the wrong direction; he never attempted anything like it again.²⁶

Thoreau's Kalendar approach to nature is even more directly discernible in numerous late Journal entries concerned with averages. By 1860, comparison with former years has become a habitual strategy, perhaps as here enabling him to work out why Walden Pond opened earlier than Fair Haven Pond this year: 'However, it is clear enough why Walden has broken up thus early this year. It does not ordinarily freeze till near the end of December (average of twelve observations, December 25th), while Fair Haven Pond freezes about December 2d' (*Journal XIII*, p.190). His carefully worked out conclusion is that Walden opens early if it freezes late due to a mild winter. But the data he gathers is not always this useful. Sometimes, it displays a bewildering range of variations instead of providing neat answers. The notion of nature's regularity rapidly slips out of reach when he seeks to prove it, as he realises with little sign of dismay. Soon after his attempt to write the story of March, he turns his attention to the irregularities of

²⁶ The main problem is perhaps that his narrative lacks a unifying theme. His more successful late attempts to base his work on seasonal averages, such as 'Autumnal Tints', 'Wild Apples' and 'Huckleberries', are all structured around the central image in their title.

spring: 'The bluebird may be seen February 24, as in '50, '57, and '60, or not till March 24, as in '56,— say twenty-eight days. The yellow-spotted tortoise may be seen February 23, as in '57, or not till March 28, as in '55, —thirty-three days' (*Journal XIII*, p.234). As the late Journal becomes more and more self-referential, using 'first facts' from entries of previous years rather than new observations, it relocates its emphasis to summary and conclusion, an endeavour which proved more difficult and elusive than Thoreau ever could have guessed.

The Kalendar is the culmination of this reflexive impulse, drawing on more than a decade's worth of Journal material. He would list data from his former entries and then incorporate these into larger tables, scoring through the lists in pencil as he dealt with them (see **Figure 4** for an example of one of these lists). The more than 600 lists and tables Thoreau started to assemble for this project²⁷ work retrospectively, recapturing former years to some small extent. When assembling data of flowering, leafing and autumnal fading from the Journal, Thoreau most probably relived the shows of the past, seeing far richer scenes than the brief facts that find their way into his tables give evidence of. The leafing of former years is granted a second life in this project; the trees expand their leaves yet again in his mind and tentatively restore the absent past. Thoreau's labour of compilation and the resulting charts may be condemned as unimaginative and mechanical, but the impulse behind them is reverential and self-effacing, informed by a love so fine that it lets nature speak for itself as far as conceivably possible. That the project proved beyond his powers (and most probably would have done even if his life had not been cut short) only makes it more poignant. In

²⁷ Many of these lists and charts are in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, in the manuscript folder MA 610, entitled 'Nature Notes'. Others can be found in the Berg Collection in New York Public Library and in the Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino.

his last and most ambitious effort to comprehend nature's diversity, Thoreau was confronted with diversity beyond his wildest guesses; a landscape of seemingly endless variations and surprising irregularities. The empty spaces in his charts evoke seasons and events that will never be recaptured; perhaps he had no record of them, or perhaps he just never had the chance to add the data he had gathered [see **Figure 5** for an example of one of Thoreau's charts, 'Leafing of Trees and Shrubs', which, like most of these charts, is only partly filled in]. The facts he did get round to entering, in his minute and nearly illegible handwriting, often read like minimalist free verse wrought from the very fabric of nature; a sparse and strangely lyrical catalogue of life cycles.

One of the most evocative charts is the 'Fall of Leaf' tabulation in the Pierpont Morgan Library (included in MA 610), six large sheets that amount to autumn condensed, a poem of annual loss [see **Figure 6** for the first of these six sheets]. Covering the autumn months in the decade between 1851 and 1861, the sheets are largely empty apart from the column for 1858, a year in which Thoreau had dates of leafing available for most kinds of trees, and random entries in the other columns. Whatever happened with the pitch pine between 1853 and 1856, or the red and scarlet oak trees before 1858? The dates recorded are followed by a few words of utmost simplicity, myriad variations on the theme of bareness and turning leaves. Consider the kind of list one could cull from these charts: 'almost bare', 'bare how long?', 'mostly bare', 'many leaves left', 'fast losing leaves', 'some leaves lingering yet', 'falling', 'rustle under foot', 'yet green', 'at height of change', 'green but shading leaves', 'some flash dark red', 'somewhat withered', 'will hold on'. Thoreau had been using this system of brief notations for some time in the *Journal*; in the *Kalendar*, his usage reaches new heights of economy and purity. The 'Fall of Leaf' charts might not be literature in any normal sense, but they are filled (or not, as it were) with

facts distilled to speak directly to the emotions, assuming a degree of willingness and imagination on the reader's part. If you study them closely you will find that they are not only concerned with loss; small signs of regeneration are hidden in the record of autumn's progress. Thoreau's comment on the S. Aenica in 1860 reads, in its entirety: '?Nov 8 just fallen / grow forth leaves'. In two brief lines, this entry evokes not only renewal but the whole cycle of the year, and it is not the only entry of its kind.

Thoreau's autumn charts also have their spring equivalents, tables of pure renewal concerned with subjects such as the 'Earliest Flowering of April Flowers' [see **Figure 7**] or the 'Leafing of Trees and Shrubs' [**Figure 5**] (the latter charts bring together data gathered between April and June). If you look closely at these spring charts, subtle premonitions of fall can be found, testifying to the complexity of the way the year progresses. Other charts explore 'General Phenomena' for various autumn and spring months; in the Pierpont Morgan collection, there are charts of this kind for April, May, June and November, as well as a lot of preparative notes on October phenomena.²⁸ The lop-sided year of Thoreau's Kalendar focuses on the seasons that mark the beginning and ending of the natural year, and not without reason: he is using his language of essentials to describe the most 'essential' and evocative parts of the annual life cycle. Whether he intended to carry on with the rest of the year or not, the charts we do have were not meant to be the final product; they would have been reconstituted in prose along the lines of the late essays. Regarded in its entirety, his undertaking is ambitious almost beyond the scope of comprehension, demanding much dedication and vast reams of time. As Emerson famously put it in the funeral oration he delivered: 'The scale on which his

²⁸ In the 'Nature Notes' folder in the Pierpont Morgan Library, there are also a few charts entitled 'Recapitulation of Winter Notes', which sum up the phenomena and activities of this season, noting events such as 'River opens' and 'Last skating'.

studies proceeded was so large as to require longevity, and we were the less prepared for his sudden disappearance ... It seems an injury that he should leave in the midst his broken task which none else can finish' (*LBS*, pp.484-85). Had his project ever been completed, the obsessive impulse behind it might have been more off-putting than it now appears. In its unfinished state, it speaks touchingly of the endeavour to determine a few certainties in an ever-changing world. Perhaps most importantly, the painstaking labour of compilation functioned as a (highly successful) strategy of happiness, the last such strategy Thoreau developed. The work on the charts kept him busy and hopeful in his last few years. This turn to intertextuality also enabled him to relive his former excursions and let nature delight him once more, mentally dissolving the walls of the sick-chamber that set him apart from the landscape he loved.

Thoreau's late essays and the 'Notes on Fruits' manuscript, in which his carefully gathered facts are turned back into prose, give a fairly accurate idea of his ultimate intentions with the Kalendar project. They suggest that a certain open-endedness and lightness of touch would have been important in the final work. Weaving disparate material from myth and history into their calendrical structures, these essays use the gradual unfolding of the present as a springboard to further associations; they include concern for both the past and the future in their suggestive wholes.²⁹ The calendar structure is thus used in a creative and all-encompassing way; Thoreau's conception of time is more subtle than his devotion to linear temporal structures suggests. In 'Wild Apples' for example, he concentrates on how the summer leaves its imprint on the skin of

²⁹ This structure is of course not new in Thoreau's work; *Week* is (like *Walden*) structured along temporal lines and mingles myth and history with its setting in the evolving present of the river journey.

the apples, so that they retain an element of warmer days throughout the process of ripening:

It is rare that the summer lets an apple go without streaking or spotting it on some part of its sphere. It will have some red stains, commemorating the mornings and evenings it has witnessed; some dark and rusty blotches, in memory of the clouds and foggy, mildewy days that have passed over it; and a spacious field of green reflecting the general face of Nature... (*Ex*, p.386)³⁰

The former season is incorporated into these wild apples in an image that beautifully blurs the distinction between past and present. As this history-streaked apple suggests, the gradually unfolding chronological order Thoreau employs is only the rough outline of a project with deeper aims, by no means an end in itself. The insistent foregrounding of time in the form of exact dating in these late works is however worthy of comment. In the unfinished 'Notes on Fruits' manuscript, the first 350 pages (out of 600) are chronologically arranged, an organising principle that gives them a semblance of order (after that, large sections of the manuscript consist of crossed out lists and other material Thoreau used in the preparation of its more finished parts).³¹ Aiming to give an account of the whole calendar of fruiting, the manuscript starts tentatively with early ripening fruits, such as wild raspberries (25th of June), and comes into its own in August and September when the fruits of autumn begin to appear. Many species can now be attributed to the same date (fever-wort and barberry are both said to ripen on August 23, and medeola, peas, beans, cranberry, butterworth, sweet gale, pontederia and others all belong to the first of September). However, not all entries are dated, and dating within

³⁰ See also the comment Thoreau made to similar effect a few pages earlier: 'These [wild] apples have hung in the wind and frost and rain till they have absorbed the qualities of the weather or season, and thus are highly *seasoned*, and they *pierce* and *sting* and *permeate* us with their spirit. They must be eaten in *season*, accordingly,— that is, out-of-doors' (*Ex*, pp.382-83).

³¹ This manuscript is now in the Berg Collection in New York Public Library (Berg: 69B). It should soon be more widely available; Bradley Dean is currently preparing it for publication.

the entries (in terms of remarks on the maturing of each species) occurs only infrequently; the structure of the 'Notes on Fruits' manuscript as it stands is more arbitrary than its primary purpose, the determination of averages, would suggest.

The most finished text to emerge from the manuscript, the essay 'Huckleberries' which was extracted and published by Leo Stoller in 1970, gives a good idea of the more coherent but still multi-layered effect Thoreau hoped to achieve. He comments briefly on every life stage of these berries, ranging from the appearance of green fruit about June 19 to evidence of ripened fruit holding on well into December. He also gives a more detailed outline of the history of the huckleberry, which gives him ample hope for the future: 'Plants of this order (*Ericaceae*) are said to be among the earliest ones found in a fossil state, and one would say that they promised to last as long as any on this globe'.³² The range and extent of the source material Thoreau uses in this brief essay is remarkable. He quotes from a wide range of texts to prove that the American Indians have used the berry since 'time immemorial' (*Huckleberries*, p.20), thus emphasising its Americanness and centrality to national tradition.³³ This association is particularly important as he goes on to transform the huckleberry into a metaphor for hope, which is resonant with further meanings. This ubiquitous berry, which, as Thoreau emphasises, is so hardy and common

³² Henry Thoreau, *Huckleberries*, ed. Leo Stoller (The Windhover Press of the University of Iowa, 1970), p.9. This faith in their hardy longevity is however soon contradicted by more anxious statements about their potential extinction: 'The wild fruits of the earth disappear before civilization, or only the husks of them are to be found in large markets' (*Huckleberries*, p.28).

³³ Much of this material is drawn from the 'Indian Notebooks'. Thoreau's refers to a range of works on the Indians, starting with texts by early seventeenth century authors such as Samuel de Champlain (whose account is dated 1615) and working his way towards (then) contemporary reports, such as David Dale Owen's 1852 *Geological Survey of Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota*. On pp.16-19 of *Huckleberries*, he alludes to works by the following authors, in chronological order: Samuel de Champlain, Gabriel Sagard, Le Jeune, Roger Williams, Nathaniel Morton, John Josselyn, La Houtan, Father Raselles, Father Hennepin, John Lawson, John Bartram, Peter Kalm, Heckewelder, Lewis & Clarke and David Dale Owen.

that it thrives in the most barren soil, serves as a reminder of nature's unfailing provision for man:

If you look closely you will find blueberry and huckleberry bushes under your feet, though they may be feeble and barren, throughout all our woods, the most persevering Native Americans ... ready to reclothe the hills when man has laid them bare and feed all kinds of pensioners. What though the woods be cut down; it appears that this emergency was long ago anticipated and provided for by Nature, and the interregnum is not allowed to be a barren one. (*Huckleberries*, pp.13-14)

Thoreau becomes more and more enraptured with the potential of this berry as the essay proceeds, likening the hills in his neighbourhood to a land flowing with milk and honey (in 'Exodus') and the Delectable Mountains in *The Pilgrim's Progress*:³⁴

The very sides of the road are a fruit garden. The earth there teems with blackberries, huckleberries, thimbleberries, fresh and abundant ... I seem to have wandered into a land of greater fertility – some up country Eden. These are the Delectable Hills. It is a land flowing with milk and huckleberries, only they have not yet put the berries into the milk ... I ask myself, What are the virtues of the inhabitants that they are thus blessed? (*Huckleberries*, p.25)

In Thoreau's impassioned vision, the sheer wealth he is surrounded by seems like the embodiment of the original settlers' dream of America as a promised land, teeming with abundance. But these simple riches are threatened along with the landscape itself, as he warns in a plea for preservation towards the end of the essay: 'Let us try to keep the new world new, and while we make a wary use of the city, preserve as far as possible the advantages of living in the country' (*Huckleberries*, p.31). Admonishments of this kind make the current provision of nature seem all the more wonderful, turning America into an 'up country Eden', which enjoys a few still unfallen (but potentially numbered) moments. Thoreau's huckleberry unites many functions; it represents hardiness and abundance on a large scale, as well as calling his own childhood and adulthood joys to

³⁴ After escaping from Giant Despair, Christian and Hopeful come to the Delectable Mountains, which they climb 'to behold the gardens, and orchards, the vineyards, and fountains of water...' and thoroughly refresh themselves (John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Roger Sharrock [London: Penguin Books, 1979], p.157).

mind. In its many associations, it readily transcends the straightforward order of the calendar on which it is based.

Similar emblems evolve in other late essays, which often work by attaching great significance to particular natural phenomena. In 'Wild Apples', the wild apple becomes a symbol of Concord itself, partaking of the resonant meaning of this name, while also being linked to classical mythology ('Apples, these I mean, unspeakably fair,— apples not of Discord, but of Concord! [*Ex*, p.386]).³⁵ In 'Autumnal Tints', the scarlet oak leaf, in its high colours, comes to signify both the most perfect ripeness of the year and an ideal mode of existence (which, like its own outline, combines matter and sky in one balanced whole, so that 'Both our love of repose and our spirit of adventure are addressed' [*Ex*, p.344]).³⁶ In his description of the sky-soaked dance of the scarlet oak leaves, Thoreau finds an image that is both ethereal and based in tangible matter. But even this transcendent leaf is subjected to the realistic chronological structure Thoreau so carefully established in many of his late works. The last of the oak leaves to ripen, the scarlet oak leaf, comes into its prime around October 26, in the very nick of time to rekindle man's hopes: 'Most go in and shut their doors, thinking that bleak and colorless November has already come, when some of the most brilliant and memorable colors are not yet lit' (*Ex*, p.345). Both involved with the seasons and rising beyond them, these late essays take wing on the energy of their central symbols, weaving lasting figures out of seemingly slight material, like leaves. Who could forget the implications of the scarlet oak leaf,

³⁵ Thoreau is alluding to the Judgement of Paris. In the original Greek myth, discord broke out when Aphrodite, Hera and Athena all claimed the golden apple inscribed 'For the fairest' that Eris (Strife) had introduced among them. Paris settled the matter by giving the prize to Aphrodite, a decision that led to the Trojan War.

³⁶ Thoreau goes on to suggest how this double address might work: 'In our most casual glance, perchance, we think that if we succeed in doubling those sharp capes we shall find deep, smooth, and secure havens in the ample bays' (*Ex*, p.344).

having seen the slender and thrilling outline of Thoreau's Journal drawing (November 11, 1858), and taken on board his vision of its essential harmony? [see **Figure 8**].

The huckleberry, wild apple and scarlet oak leaf prepare the way for Thoreau's last and most carefully studied symbol, the seed. An emblem of pure future, the object he concludes his researches on aptly reflects his calmly expectant frame of mind at the time. Thoreau explores the fine details of seeds and seed dispersal with characteristic dedication, but he also celebrates the promise of seeds in the abstract.³⁷ While his other late emblems are firmly associated with autumn, the seed is the essential sign of springtime, holding infinite life within its diminutive self.³⁸ This combination is not altogether remote from the state the increasingly ill Thoreau felt himself to be in, heated into disproportionate hopefulness by the glow of consumption. As he puts it in the last entry for 1859, if you feel young and strong (as he did, without actually being so) then in a sense you are, as you will be full of hope: 'If you are well, then how brave you are! How you hope! You are conversant with joy!' (*Journal XIII*, p.69).³⁹ Autumn is pushed to the forefront in the mid- and late 1850s Journal, celebrated in lists of fruits in prime (see for example *Journal XII*, p.378) or comments on the beauty of the maturity of the year.⁴⁰

³⁷ For Thoreau's investigations of the seed (a subject to which the following chapter is devoted), see in particular 'The Succession of Forest Trees', 'The Dispersion of Seeds' and the Journal of, and around, 1860.

³⁸ The seed is however also associated with autumn, as it is the product of maturity, the 'offspring' of plants and ripened fruits that have outlived their course. Thoreau often gets carried away at the thought of autumnal ripeness in the late Journal, as in this entry from September 1859, in which the sight of ripe, seed-dispersing fields inspires him: 'The *S. nemoralis* spreads its legions over the dry plains now, as soldiers muster in the fall. It is a muster of all its forces, which I review, eclipsing all other similar shows of the year. Fruit of August and September, sprung from the sun-dust' (*Journal XII*, pp.321-22).

³⁹ This comment is rather ironically followed by an outcry against the idea that the Greeks, who were sufficiently 'conversant with joy' to create their mythology, could possibly have been a race of consumptives and dyspeptics (see p.70).

⁴⁰ See the entry for August 2, 1859, which is written in the by now familiar mode of entries that celebrate the arrival of autumn (often as here triggered by late summer premonitions of the new season): 'That fine z-ing of locusts in the grass which I have

This season provides the literal and figurative seeds of the season beyond it, called renewal and hope (forget winter; spring is the logical conclusion of the faith inspired by autumn). Sherman Paul has suggested that the autumnal character of Thoreau's late writing stems from this season's correspondence to his own life stage (a topic Richard Lebeaux considers in greater detail in *Thoreau's Seasons*):⁴¹

Seed. Flower. Fruit. He did not live to write out the entire process, only the faith in the eternity that this process inspired in him ... Perhaps because he felt that his own year was ripening he turned to autumn first, sketching a lecture on the huckleberry and completing another on the autumn foliage. (Paul, p.400)⁴²

From at least the especially fine autumn of 1857 onwards, autumnal ripening receives more comment than ever before in the *Journal*; it holds a special fascination and even redemptive power for him. When the prime of wild apples occurs in November (not long after that of the scarlet oak), it lights up one of the dreariest months of the year with its taste and glow. If it requires maturity to appreciate something as commonplace as these apples, Thoreau certainly possessed it by now, thrilled by their annual appearance in the woods around Concord.

By the last few years of his life, Thoreau had truly learnt to live in season, periods he could comprehend and claim as his own by virtue of having thought long about them. He would stop to appreciate each day or season, allowing its shows to suffuse him. Adept at ascertaining the essential facts of the day at hand, a chosen few of these facts would gradually turn into subtle emblems, like the seed or the huckleberry or the scarlet oak leaf. Anticipation was a mode of the past, largely because of his greater fascination with the

heard for three or four days is, methinks, an August sound and is very inspiring. It is a certain maturity in the year which it suggests. My thoughts are the less crude for it' (*Journal XII*, p.274).

⁴¹ See in particular Chapter 8 ('Ripe for the Fall') of Lebeaux's work.

⁴² See also p.408, where Paul further considers Thoreau's late fondness for autumn: 'Autumn was preferable to spring and summer, for the autumnal man was ripe throughout and bore his fruits – those palatable fruits, whether of music, poetry, love, or character, that would communicate his flavor'.

present in all its variety. Another reason for this shift of emphasis might be that his time was rapidly ebbing out. When asked about the afterlife by Parker Pillsbury, who visited Thoreau shortly before his death, he famously corrected him by replying 'one world at a time',⁴³ thus turning back towards the still available world he loved. Despite his determination to make the most of each day, much beauty had been lost unnoticed; the fine appreciation he craved did not necessarily come easily. Writing about the purple grasses in the opening section of 'Autumnal Tints', he describes how long it took him to recognise the beauty that was evident before him:

Each humble plant, or weed, as we call it, stands there to express some thought or mood of ours; and yet how long it stands in vain! I had walked over those Great Fields so many Augusts, and never yet distinctly recognized these purple companions that I had there. (*Ex*, p.315)

But with the figure of these purple grasses in his eye and a heart prepared to receive them,⁴⁴ this barren situation changed in an unaccountably beautiful way: 'I had brushed against them and trodden on them, forsooth; and now, at last, they, as it were, rose up and blessed me' (*Ex*, p.315). Each season will bless the willing observer like these grasses rose up to bless Thoreau, rewarding his attention with a revelation beyond his deepest hopes. And, as he provocatively puts it, seeking to communicate the full lesson of his experience, the benefits of this keen love may reverberate beyond the narrow boundaries of the self: 'Who can doubt that these grasses, which the farmer says are of no account to him, find some compensation in your appreciation of them?' (*Ex*, p.315).

⁴³ See F.B. Sanborn's account of this encounter in *The Personality of Thoreau* (Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed, 1901), pp.68-69. The passage is also quoted in Harding, p.465.

⁴⁴ In the concluding discussion of preparedness in 'Autumnal Tints', Thoreau formulates this as follows: 'The Scarlet Oak must, in a sense, be in your eye when you go forth. We cannot see anything until we are possessed with the idea of it, take it into our heads,— and then we can hardly see anything else' (*Ex*, p.351).

CHAPTER SEVEN

Seeds of Optimism

For his last object of investigation, which he began to explore in a serious way in early 1856 and to which he devoted large parts of 1859 and 1860, Thoreau chose the ultimate emblem of potential: the seed. While his writing on the seasons became ever more literal and focused on the present, his studies of seeds and seed dispersal often made his mind move in the opposite direction. Despite its factual grounding, this body of work is, by virtue both of its subject matter and Thoreau's treatment of it, symbolically charged and engaged with the future. As he began to feel that his own life was drawing to a close, his studies of the landscape brought him ever nearer to the beginning of life. He was concerned with the vitality of nature at its very point of origin, as well as with some of its subsequent incarnations, such as the resilience of certain species.¹ Thoreau's interest in seeds speaks clearly of his optimism and fascination with the future. He learned to interpret the present appearance of the landscape at least partly in order to be able to foretell its shape in years to come, looking ahead to seasons beyond his own 'use' or horizon. Such hopefulness aside, his writing on seeds displays both admiration and scientific thoroughness. He is as keen to comprehend their workings as he is to step back in reverent appreciation of their potential. As he puts it in 'The Succession of Forest Trees', his 1860 summary of his findings on the subject that turned his attention to seeds:

¹ Despite their primary association with vitality and future life, seeds, which are the products of spent organisms, also represent the final stage of nature's life cycle. For my discussion of Thoreau's observations on resilience, see pp.261-63 below.

Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed – a, to me, equally mysterious origin for it. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders. (*Ex*, p.248)²

While emphasising his lack of belief in spontaneous generation, Thoreau embraces the seed as an origin of similar charm and wonder, which is beyond his full comprehension.³

With characteristic doubleness, his faith in seeds is both realistically grounded and potentially transcendent; both, that is, the direct result of his observations and the heightened essence of his longing for vigorous life. If his unfinished project on seed dispersal and the vast number of Journal entries on the subject do not always live up to their promise, the outline of a truly reverent attitude to nature shimmers through their uneven surfaces. The result of Thoreau's final quest may be sketchy, but the heart of his aim is firmly and, more importantly, faithfully, in place, putting its trust in the continued vitality of the landscape.

Long before Thoreau became interested in seeds in any comprehensive way, he came across Asa Gray's account in the *Manual of Botany*, from which he copied extracts in 1851. At this stage, he paid little attention to the seed as such or to its function in the landscape; Gray's dry botany instead served as a trigger for Transcendental speculations. On May 20, he took note of some of Gray's technical descriptions of the parts of the seed and let his thoughts wander, in extravagant ways (the first sentence of the following extract is quoted from Gray):

'The first point of the stem preëxists [sic] in the embryo (i.e. in the rudimentary plantlet contained within the seed): it is here called the radicle.' Such is the

² Bradley Dean's edition of 'The Dispersion of Seeds' and other works, *Faith in a Seed*, takes its title from this statement.

³ Like Darwin, Thoreau argues against spontaneous generation throughout his Journal entries on seeds in the late 1850s and early 1860s. He read *The Origin of Species* at the beginning of 1860, soon upon its publication. His reading both confirmed some of his own observations, making him more confident about his beliefs, and opened his eyes to new ways of thinking.

rudiment of mind—already partially developed—more than a bud but pale—having never been exposed to the light—& slumbering coiled up—packed away in the seed—unfolded (consider the still pale—rudimentary infantine radicle-like thoughts of some students, which who knows what they might expand to if they should ever come to the light & air.—if they do not become rancid & perish in the seed. It is not every seed that will survive a thousand years. (*Journal 3*, p.225)⁴

By drawing an intricate parallel between the expansion of the seed and man's mental development, Thoreau shifts the emphasis from nature to the self, and to self in the sense of (all too easily thwarted) self-improvement. As he continues his comparison of parts of plants and the human mind, paying attention to roots as well as seeds, he is intent on discovering 'a perfect analogy between the life of the human being and that of the vegetable' (*Journal 3*, p.224).⁵ On its appearance in the *Journal*, the seed is instantly transformed into something quite other (and much larger) than itself. Thoreau's instant recognition of the metaphorical potential of the seed is related to his continued search for higher meaning and general zest for self-improvement in the early 1850s. He also uses seeds in this intricately metaphorical way in the 'Economy' chapter of *Walden*. He introduces an image of sprouting to describe man's readiness for higher life once he has obtained the necessities of life: 'The soil, it appears, is suited to the seed, for it has sent its radicle downward, and it may now send its shoot upward also with confidence' (*Walden*, p.15). Although Thoreau soon enough abandons such elaborate conceits in his thinking about seeds, he always remains sensitive to their symbolic implications. When seeds emerge as a main object of interest in the late 1850s, his approach to this material is more

⁴ The passage from Asa Gray is taken from *A Manual of Botany of the Northern United States, from New England to Wisconsin and South to Ohio and Pennsylvania Inclusive...* (Boston and Cambridge: James Munroe and Company; London: John Chapman, 1848).

⁵ Contrived as it this approach may seem, it is not entirely lacking in results. Gray's account of the development of roots inspires a comparison that is evocative, potent, and very fanciful: 'No thought but is connected as strictly as a flower, with the earth— The mind flashes not so far on one side—but its rootlets its spongelets find their way instantly on the other side into a moist darkness' (*Journal 3*, p.227).

factual, but seldom so scientific that he resists the temptation to let his imagination work on it.

Thoreau's interest in seeds had existed for some time in rudimentary form, as his response to Asa Gray and a few earlier entries suggest,⁶ but it is not until the winter of 1855-1856 that he seriously started to engage with the subject. During this unusually cold winter, the pristine surface of the snow-covered landscape directed him towards his new object of research by revealing the presence and movements of seeds.⁷ At the beginning of February, he keeps noticing seeds scattered on the snow and on the snow-covered ice. The role the snow plays in this process is apparent from the entries he makes this winter. On February 3, 1856, he writes:

About five inches of soft snow now on ice. See many seeds of the hemlock on the snow still, and cones which have freshly rolled down the bank. (*Journal VIII*, p.161)

There comes a deep snow in midwinter, covering up the ordinary food of many birds and quadrupeds, but anon the high wind scatters the seeds of pines and hemlocks and birch and alder, etc., far and wide over the surface of the snow for them. (*Journal VIII*, p.163)

The 'blankness' of the winter landscape reveals presences and patterns that were hidden in other seasons. In particular, it makes the motion of the seeds easier to trace. As these

⁶ As early as 1841 for example, Thoreau reflected on the beauty of the part he himself unwittingly played in the process of seed distribution: 'I feel slightly complimented when nature condescends to make use of me without my knowledge—as when I help scatter her seeds in my walk—or carry burs and cockles on my clothes from field to field— I feel as though I had done something for the commonweal, and were entitled to board and lodging.— I take such airs upon me as the boy who holds a horse for the circus company—whom all the spectators envy' (*Journal I*, p.253).

⁷ On January 31, walking over new-fallen snow up the North Branch made him reflect on the transformation this cover of snow has brought to the landscape, a transformation that amounted to a new beginning: 'The old tracks are blotted out, and new and fresher ones are to be discerned. It is a *tabula rasa*. These fresh falls of snow are like turning over a new leaf of Nature's *Album*. At first you detect no track of beast or bird, and Nature looks more than commonly silent and blank. You doubt if anything has been abroad, though the snow fell three days ago, but ere long the track of a squirrel is seen making to or from the base of a tree, or the hole where he dug for acorns, and the shells he dropped on the snow around that stump' (*Journal VIII*, p.155).

observations suggest, Thoreau was already interested both in seeds as such and in their dispersal, which he viewed as part of nature's purposefulness (nothing is going to waste; the seeds are scattered as food in an explicit act of provision). This interest informs simple comments such as 'I see a pitch pine seed, blown thirty rods from J. Hosmer's little grove' [*Journal VIII*, p.159]). A long entry on birch seeds on the river on March 2, which is later used in near-unchanged form in 'The Dispersion of Seeds',⁸ also testifies to his preoccupation with seed distribution. In this passage, the sight of spreading birch seeds inspires grand conclusions. The persistence and long reach of these birch seeds, as revealed by the snow, appeals to his imagination:

As I advanced toward them [the nearest birches on the river bank], the seeds became thicker and thicker, till they quite discolored the snow half a dozen rods distant, while east of the birches there was not one. The birches appear not to have lost a quarter of their seeds yet. As I went home up the river, I saw some of the seeds forty rods off, and *perhaps*, in a more favorable direction, I might have found them much further. It suggested how unwearied Nature is, spreading her seeds ... A great proportion of the seed that was carried to a distance lodged in the hollow over the river, and when the river breaks up will be carried far away, to distant shores and meadows. (*Journal VIII*, p.198)

Allowing his thoughts to wander with the spreading seeds, Thoreau's assured vision reaches a conclusion that transcends the ice-bound present ('It suggested how unwearied Nature is, spreading her seeds'). From the sight of drifting seeds, the step to the thought of nature's perseverance and fertility is characteristically short.

The sight of seeds on snow was however only one of several triggers of Thoreau's expanding interest in these small objects in early 1856. It also emerged out of his long-running ambition to track the progress of the seasons. Although he had been taking notes on flowering and leafing for some time, as the 1850s progressed he became more

⁸ For the later version of this entry, see p.44 of *Faith in a Seed*. Thoreau copied the passage from his *Journal* almost without alteration and qualified it with an additional remark, clearly the result of his subsequent experiments: 'For, as I find by experiment, though the scales soon sink in water, the seeds float for many days'.

and more fascinated by prime and ripeness.⁹ Following this cycle through, he was also keen to pin-point the exact moment when plants shed their seeds. His researches into seeds thus began partly as a natural, perhaps inevitable, offshoot of his devotion to the unfolding seasons. In April 1856 for example, he notes the maturing of the dog's-bane, counting the time until it will scatter its seeds, if picked ('See a dog's-bane with two pods open and partially curved backward on each side, but a third not yet open. This soon opens and scatters its down and seed in my chamber' [*Journal VIII*, p.306]). As the season advances and plants are more generally going to seed, observations along this line become more frequent. During a June expedition to Sconticut Neck, Thoreau notes seeds being shed all around him: 'I found on the rocky and rather desolate extremity of this point the common *Oxalis stricta* on the seashore, abundant, going to seed; apparently carrots (?) naturalized; atriplex not yet out; beach pea, still out and going to seed' (*Journal VIII*, p.389). References to plants going to seed are even more prominent in the Journal of 1859 and 1860, when consideration of seeds make up a substantial part of the entries. In May 1860, observations such as the following occur almost daily. On May 15, 'The *salix humilis* is going to seed as early as the *discolor*', and the following day he notices 'Masses of double samarae unequally disposed along the branches [of a red maple], trembling in the wind' (*Journal XIII*, pp.294-97). Thoreau thus ended up with a new interest as a side effect of his attention to moments of ripeness. This interest literally amounted to a new beginning, as he was focusing on the very origin of the life cycle he had been tracing for so long.¹⁰

⁹ See my account of Thoreau's preoccupation with nature's moments of prime in Chapter 6.

¹⁰ It could however be argued that Thoreau was focusing on the end as well as on the beginning of the life-cycle when studying seeds, even though their primary connotation is that of future life.

Thoreau's surge of interest in seeds has yet another source; the issue of pine and oak succession. This was a common topic of debate in Concord,¹¹ and it soon became the focal point of his work on seeds. The problem was debated at length in George B. Emerson's *Report on the Trees and Shrubs Growing Naturally in the Forests of Massachusetts*, which appeared in 1846 and of which Thoreau owned a copy.¹² His first brief Journal response to George B. Emerson occurs in July 1851 and references can be found throughout the 1850s.¹³ Emerson's survey of Massachusetts trees had been commissioned by the state, and devotes much space to pine and oak succession,¹⁴ the very subject around which 'The Succession of Forest Trees' and large parts of 'The Dispersion of Seeds' revolve. The question of why oaks tend to spring up where pines had previously grown and the other way round was an age-old forest management problem. The very opening section of Emerson's work, in which he presents letters from people who have witnessed this phenomenon on their own lands, suggests how widely noted it was.¹⁵ The

¹¹ Near the beginning of 'The Succession of Forest Trees' for example, Thoreau points out that he has often encountered this issue among his townsmen: 'At those dinner-tables referred to, I have often been asked, as many of you have been, if I could tell how it happened, that when a pine wood was cut down an oak one commonly sprang up, and *vice versa*. To which I have answered, and now answer, that I can tell,— that it is no mystery to me' (*Ex*, p.227).

¹² See Appendix A ('Library of Henry D. Thoreau') in F.B. Sanborn's *The Life of Henry David Thoreau* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), p.513.

¹³ For the first reference, see the entry for July 27, 1851 ('Sunday 27 walked from Cohasset to Duxbury & sailed thence to Clark's Island. Visited the large Tupelo Tree *Nyssa multiflora* in Scituate whose rounded & open top like some umbelliferous plants I could see from Mr Sewal's—the tree which Geo Emerson went 25 miles to see—' [*Journal* 3, p.338]).

¹⁴ See in particular his discussion of the succession of forests near the beginning of the work, but also the subsequent sections on pines and oaks (pp.47-76 and 113-157 respectively).

¹⁵ Mr. E. Swift, for example, reports that 'Many instances have occurred in this town, of pine lands having been cleared of the pine timber, which has been succeeded by a spontaneous growth of oaks'. Mr. S. Freedman's testimony confirms the above experience: 'I have known frequent instances, where a forest of oaks has been entirely cut down, and succeeded by a growth of pine, and *vice versa*' (George B. Emerson, *Report on the Trees and Shrubs Growing Naturally in the Forests of Massachusetts* [Boston: Dutton

problem is so common that Emerson even acknowledges the potential redundancy of further discussion of it: 'I have many similar statements from all parts of the State. Indeed, the Hon. D.P. King, of Danvers, tells me that the fact is so universally admitted, that he is surprised at my asking the question'.¹⁶ The issue was certainly debated in Concord. On April 28, 1856, for example, Thoreau records the following exchange with George Hubbard:

Observing the young pitch pines by the road south of Loring's lot that was so heavily wooded, George Hubbard remarked that if they were cut down oaks would spring up, and sure enough, looking across the road to where Loring's white pines recently stood so densely, the ground was all covered with young oaks. (*Journal VIII*, p.315)

In the light of the fact that Thoreau thrived on observation of the obvious and made it his art to describe what everybody knew, the commonplace nature of his research makes a good deal of sense. If the mystery he set out to solve was familiar and ordinary, to Thoreau, it still seemed steeped in wonder.

The reason why this alternation occurred was however neither obvious nor commonly known at the time. G.B. Emerson's suggestions are vague,¹⁷ and Thoreau had to spend a long time observing patterns of seed dispersal before he felt sure of his conclusions. In search of an answer, he would watch the transportation of oak acorns and pine seeds, noting where and trying to deduce why new groves sprang up. He was on the

and Wentworth, State Printers, 1846], p.29).

¹⁶ Ibid, p.29.

¹⁷ G.B. Emerson believed that these new woods sprung from seeds that had been shed by small trees in the undergrowth, a notion Thoreau's discoveries about seed distribution would challenge. Emerson's explanation of forest succession, which incorporates an observation from Mr. A. Bacon of Natick, runs as follows: 'In order that it [the alternation] should take place, the woods must contain trees of various kinds sufficient to supply the whole surface with seed. When this is the case, a wood of one kind will usually be found full of little trees of other kinds. "Upon clearing off the old growth, the undergrowth, which has been kept from the sun, shoots up with astonishing rapidity." That portion of it which is most unlike the previous growth, finds plentiful nutriment, while the proper food of the previous forest has been exhausted, and the woods naturally change their aspect' (*Report on the Trees and Shrubs*, pp.29-30).

track of his solution already in May 1856, when he made some early attempts to formulate his ideas:

...if you look through a thick pine wood, even the exclusively pitch pine ones, you will detect many little oaks, birches, etc., sprung probably from seed carried into the thicket by squirrels, etc., and blown thither, but which are overshadowed and choked by the pines ... Scarcely enough allowance has been made for the agency of squirrels and birds in dispersing seeds. (*Journal VIII*, p.335)

In his main statement on the subject, 'The Dispersion of Seeds', Thoreau's key discovery is that birds and animals (along with the perhaps more obvious wind) play an important part in the distribution of seeds. The fact that they can carry them over great distances provides a clue to the problem of pine and oak succession. Thoreau describes their labour with a good deal of tenderness (as John Hildebidle points out, 'the squirrel, is very nearly the hero [as man is quite certainly the villain], appearing at least fourteen times and twice occupying as much as ten pages of continuous text').¹⁸ When he sums up his conclusions in 'The Succession of Forest Trees', they sound extremely simple:

It remains, then, only to show how the seed is transported from where it grows to where it is planted. This is done chiefly by the agency of the wind, water, and animals. The lighter seeds, as those of pines and maples, are transported chiefly by wind and water; the heavier, as acorns and nuts, by animals. (*Ex*, p.228).

Thoreau's logical exposition of his material makes his answer seem all the more assured.

Oak acorns are quite simply carried into pine woods by squirrels and birds, while pine seeds are blowⁿ into oak forests, ready to sprout when given a chance.

His confidence about these matters was based on observations he carried out from 1856 onwards. The *Journal* serves as the primary record of this research, and much of the material is later used in 'The Succession of Forest Trees' and 'The Dispersion of Seeds'. The intertextuality of this work is unusually intense. Large sections of the late 1850s *Journal* and the two above works overlap or replicate each other, a fact that accounts for

¹⁸ *Thoreau: A Naturalist's Liberty*, p.71.

the frequent déjà vu experiences when reading this material.¹⁹ Concrete research was the starting point of his work on seeds, and it took the form both of patient observation and deliberate experiments. As well as observing the forests around Concord, Thoreau examined seeds and seedlings, measured the growth of trees and compiled charts of their progress,²⁰ experimented with the release of pollen and seeds from their parent plants and with their dispersion by wind and water. A thorough and professional attitude permeates this labour. 'Truths' are discovered through inference in search of the kind of knowledge that leaves little to chance. The better Thoreau got to know nature, the more sensitive he became to its intricate network of connections. His efforts to read the landscape gradually resulted in a greater understanding of its workings, such as the ability to discern vital (if perhaps obvious) relations like that between the presence of birds and of seeds. 'The Dispersion of Seeds' reveals his emerging confidence in his interpretive ability: it is suffused with observations that unravel nature's connections:

In 1859 the white pine, hemlock, and larch bore abundantly, so that the northern birds which feed on their seeds (redpolls and goldfinches and others) were very numerous, and the following spring I saw the crossbills here for the first time in my life. Indeed, I think that I can tell by the numbers of the above birds in our woods whether there is a good crop of these and of birch seeds. (*FS*, p.40)

Thoreau's ability to draw conclusions about the history of Concord wood lots from the smallest signs is perhaps more impressive (and certainly more unusual) than his fairly commonsensical remarks on relations of this kind.²¹ The most important outcome of all his efforts to understand forest propagation was a fine sense of ecological logic and the interrelatedness of all things.

¹⁹ For example, the second section of 'The Dispersion of Seeds' (*FS*, p.104 onwards) covers much the same ground as 'The Succession of Forest Trees', incorporating long extracts from the earlier essay. There are innumerable other examples, some of which will be pointed out in subsequent footnotes.

²⁰ See the charts of the growth of pitch pines drawn up in November 1860, which are based on his counting of tree rings, in *Journal XIV*, pp.230-37.

²¹ For further comments on Thoreau's interest in nature's past, see pp.257-58 below.

Thoreau was inclined to take this scientific approach to nature to extremes in the late 1850s. He yearned for more specific knowledge about seeds, questioning for example some of the current hazy knowledge about their longevity. Tantalisingly vague accounts could be found in the botanical works of the period, such as George B. Emerson's *Report on the Trees and Shrubs* and Asa Gray's tracts and handbooks. In *Elements of Botany*, Gray claims that seeds can survive for hundreds of years if they are protected from agents that would activate their growth.²² In 'The Succession of Forest Trees', Thoreau questions one of Emerson's statements about the tenacity of life in pine seeds because of its lack of empirical grounding ('Since he does not tell us on what observation his remark is founded, I must doubt its truth' [*Ex*, pp.245-46]).²³ After taking issue with further instances of (even more extravagant) speculation on this subject, Thoreau, in typical self-contradictory fashion, introduces an example of their longevity (as he puts it, 'Yet I am prepared to believe that some seeds, especially small ones, may retain their vitality for centuries under favorable circumstances' [*Ex*, p.247]). He had however some evidence with which to back up his claim: the appearance of rare plants, which suggested the survival of seeds in the soil, on the site where the Hunt House (which dates back to 1703) was demolished in 1859. He was duly impressed by this discovery. The sight of unusual species opened up realms of unexpected longevity and potential, and he used the episode in the essay to reintroduce wonder at the potency of seeds. Thoreau was inclined both to place a great faith in seeds and to try to dispel their (perhaps undispellable) mystery; he wanted to know everything there was to know about them,

²² See Asa Gray's *Elements of Botany* (New York: G.&C. Carvill & Co, 1836), p.247.

²³ For the context of Emerson's statement, see the section on pine seeds in his *Report on the Trees and Shrubs*, p.53 onwards.

while not needing to know much at all.²⁴

Thoreau's meticulous but wonder-struck attitude to the phenomena he studies resembles Darwin's approach to nature in *The Origin of Species*. The very fact that Darwin's science hovers on the borderline of the unknown gives it an additional edge of excitement, which may partly account for his far-reaching reverence before the processes he demystifies. The influence of *The Origin of Species* is particularly notable in 'The Dispersion of Seeds', which took shape after 1860 (a copy of Darwin's work arrived in Concord on January 1, 1860, and Thoreau soon got to read it).²⁵ Many of Darwin's observations of the distribution of plants and the dispersion of seeds over great distances overlap with Thoreau's. His encounter with Darwin's conclusive evidence makes him more eloquent about his own tentative discoveries. In 'The Dispersion of Seeds', he argues against the notion of spontaneous generation, taking issue with Agassiz while elaborating on one of Darwin's central points. He contests the then commonly held belief that the fireweed, *Erechtites hieracifolia*, can spring up without any need for seeds.²⁶ In

²⁴ Although it could be argued that he tends to arrive at this faith *via* accurate knowledge; his factual discoveries provide sufficient opportunities for wonder, as in the case of the Hunt House.

²⁵ For an account of Thoreau's encounter with Darwin's work, see Robert D. Richardson's *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*, p.376. For evidence of Thoreau's interest in Darwin, see his references to Darwin's account of Alphonse De Candolle's remark on winged seeds (*FS*, p.25), to spontaneous generation (*FS*, pp.89-90), and to Darwin's famous counting of the number of species (537 in six months) that emerged from one small mud sample of 6 3/4 ounces (*FS*, p.102).

²⁶ A short extract from this passage gives an idea of Thoreau's demonstrative reasoning against this notion: 'Why then suppose it to be spontaneously generated? I would ask those who still maintain this theory: If the fireweed is spontaneously generated, why is it not so produced in Europe as well as in America? Of course, the Canada thistle is spontaneously generated just as much, yet why was it not generated here until the seed had come from Europe? I have no doubt that the fireweed can be raised from the seed in corresponding places in Europe, if it is not already, and that it will spring up just as mysteriously there as it does here. But if it will grow thus *after* the seed has been carried thither, why should it not before, if the seed is unnecessary to its production?' (*FS*, pp.89-90).

the mid-nineteenth century, the role of seeds was not taken for granted. In 'The Succession of Forest Trees', Thoreau states for example that trees of necessity stem from seeds, a statement that now seems redundant.²⁷ The seed is of central importance to Darwin's discoveries. He used observations of the distribution of both seeds and species to explain the connections between life forms on different continents, thus arriving at his theory of migration and modification. Thoreau took note of Darwin's experiments with seed immersion and flotation, and his conclusions about their omnipresence in mud.²⁸ Some of Darwin's observations could have been Thoreau's own, as they share a sense of the essential rightness of nature's patterns of distribution (as Darwin tenderly put it, 'Nature, like a careful gardener, thus takes her seeds from a bed of a particular nature, and drops them in another equally well fitted for them').²⁹ Darwin moreover acknowledged that much research remained to be done on seed distribution, the very field Thoreau made his own. By commenting on how 'profoundly ignorant we are with respect to the many and curious means of occasional transport, – a subject which has hardly ever been properly experimented on',³⁰ Darwin may well have encouraged Thoreau in research that was already underway.

Darwin's willing admission of his ignorance in some fields leaves room for excitement about the workings of nature. He shares this excitement with 'old' naturalists

²⁷ See *Ex*, p.227 ('No such tree has ever been known to spring from anything else. If any one asserts that it sprang from something else, the burden of proof lies with him').

²⁸ For Darwin's experiments, see pp.354-59 and p.377 of *The Origin of Species*. Darwin's chapters on the geographical distribution of species (in particular the subsection of Chapter 11 entitled 'Means of dispersal, by changes of climate and of the level of the land, and by occasional means') are the parts of his work which, along with Chapter 3 on the struggle for existence (which stresses the ferocity and fecundity of nature), had most impact on Thoreau's writing on seeds, judging both by the subject matter of these sections and his reference to them.

²⁹ *The Origin of Species*, p.378.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.393.

such as John Evelyn and John Gerard, who wrote at a time when even less was known and whom Thoreau keenly praised throughout the 1850s. In the entry for December 16, 1859, he describes how he went to Cambridge to read in Gerard's *Herball*, which he enthuses about as 'greatly superior to the modern more scientific ones' and praises in particular for its sensuous and vivid realism:

His leaves are leaves; his flowers, flowers; his fruit, fruit. They are green and colored and fragrant. It is a man's knowledge added to a child's delight. Modern botanical descriptions approach ever nearer to the dryness of an algebraic formula, as if $x + y$ were = to a love-letter ... How much better to describe your object in fresh English words rather than in these conventional Latinisms! He has really seen, and smelt, and tasted, and reports his sensations. (*Journal XIII*, p.30)³¹

Here, at the end of the decade, he sides with the seventeenth century naturalists as assertively as he did when he first took a stance against the aridity of modern botany in the early 1850s. Thoreau had long been as enthusiastic about another seventeenth century nature writer, John Evelyn. In 1853, he praised his vocabulary and use of language in some fine images of his own, attributing its qualities partly to the period in which Evelyn was writing:

Evelyn and others wrote when the language was in a tender, nascent state and could be moulded to express the shades of meaning; when sesquipedalian^{wc} long since cut and apparently dried and drawn to mill, – not yet to the dictionary lumber-yard, – put forth a fringe of green sprouts here and there along in the angles of their rugged bark, their very bulk insuring some sap remaining; some florid suckers they sustain at least. Which words, split into shingles and laths, will supply poets for ages to come. (*Journal V*, p.43)

³¹ Gerard's description of the wild oak, which he relishes in its every detail, gives an idea of the qualities Thoreau responded to: 'There is a wilde Oke which riseth up oftentimes to a maruellous height, and reacheth very far with his armes and boughes, the body whereof is now and then of a mighty thicknesse, in compasse two or three fathoms; it sendeth forth great spreading armes, diuided into a multitude of boughs. The leaues are smooth, something hard, broad, long, gashed in the edges, greene on the upper side: the Acornes are long, but shorter than those of the tamer Oke; euery one fastened in his owne cup, which is rough without' (*The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes*, Gathered by John Gerarde, Very much Enlarged and Amended by Thomas Johnson [London: Printed by Adam Islip Ioice Norton and Richard Whitakers, Anno 1636], p.1340).

In stark contrast to Evelyn's expressive descriptions, the impersonal language of Gray's *Manual of Botany of the Northern United States*, of which Thoreau owned a copy, crackles with dryness. It is suffused with latinized terms that often complicate rather than clarify the subject, reducing the appreciation of plants to a matter of recognition and classification.³² Thoreau found little to inspire him in this material, although he still used it as a source of information and learned from it. Despite his reservations, he even took note of Gray's specialised terminology, which he used occasionally in his own work.

With characteristic independence, Thoreau contradicts his sources whenever he thinks fit. Sometimes he questions them in a fundamental way, as he tends to do with contemporary botanical works. More frequently, he merely quibbles about minor matters of identification, as here in June 1856: 'Is not Nuttall mistaken when he describes the notes of the Savannah sparrow in March in Georgia as "very long, piping, and elevated" and says that they sometimes have a note like a cricket? Audubon refers to the last note only' (*Journal VIII*, p.388). Inconsistent as ever, Thoreau could be just as pedantic as Gray in his approach to nature, craving exactly the kind of knowledge he reproached modern botanists for seeking. But whereas taxonomy was an end in itself to naturalists such as Jacob Bigelow and Asa Gray, Thoreau still regards this kind of knowledge as little more than a starting point for future literary endeavours. Modern authorities had their use as providers of an enabling body of knowledge, or, in the case of the seventeenth century

³² A brief extract from Gray's description of pine cones should suffice to suggest the technical nature of his prose: 'Fertile catkins terminal, solitary or aggregated, consisting of imbricated carpellary scales, each in the axil of a deciduous bract, bearing a pair of inverted ovules at the base. Fruit a cone formed of the imbricated and woody carpellary scales, which are thickened at the apex (except in White Pines) persistent, spreading when ripe and dry; the two nut-like seeds partly sunk in excavations at the base of the scale, and in separating carrying away a part of its lining in the form of a thin and fragile wing' (Asa Gray, *Manual of the Botany of the Northern United States: Second Edition; Including Virginia, Kentucky, and all East of the Mississippi: Arranged According to the Natural System* [New York: George P. Putnam & Co., 1856], p.421).

naturalists, of an enabling enthusiasm on which he could build. Although they helped to introduce him to the study of seeds, as his Journal references to George B. Emerson and Asa Gray make clear, the responsibility for further creative application of this interest was his own, requiring little inspiration beyond the careful attention to the landscape. Only nature experienced at first hand can call up the sense of beauty and significance he craves. As he was keen to point out, few people in Concord (or anywhere in New England) paid much attention to seeds. His habitual complaint about people's lack of interest in nature soon enough occurred also in this context. In December 1856, not long after he became interested in the subject, he commented on how seldom anyone noticed the wonderful spread and distant reach of winged seeds:

I see where the pretty brown bird-like birch scales and winged seeds have been blown into the numerous hollows of the thin crusted snow. So bountiful a table is spread for the birds. For how many thousand miles this grain is scattered over the earth, under the feet of all walkers, in Boxboro and Cambridge alike! and rarely an eye distinguishes it. (*Journal IX*, p.154)

Comments to similar effect can be found throughout the late Journal and 'The Dispersion of Seeds'.³³ The more specialised Thoreau's interest became, the more justified his complaint; few would share his preoccupation with the finer details of seed dispersal even

³³ In September 1859, Thoreau observes the fall of seeds from white pine cones and laments the rarity of this occupation (which he suggests is because people tend to pay little attention to that which is not 'useful'): 'It is worth a long walk to look from some favorable point over a pine forest whose tops are thus covered with the brown cones just opened, –from which the winged seeds have fallen or are ready to fall. It is really a rich and interesting sight. How little observed are the fruits which we do not use! How few attend to the ripening and dispersion of the pine seed!' (*Journal XII*, pp.333-34). This entry inspired (and partly found its way into) a passage near the beginning of 'The Dispersion of Seeds', which replicates the sentiment in a discussion of the white pine: 'How little observed are the fruits which we do not use! How few attend to the ripening and dispersion of the white-pine seed! In the latter part of September in a fruitful year, the tops of high trees for six or ten feet are quite browned with the cones, hanging with their points downward and just opened. They make a great show even sixty rods off, and it is worth the while to look down from some favorable height over such a forest – to observe such evidence of fertility in this which commonly we do not regard as a fruit-bearing tree' (*FS*, p.34).

if they did appreciate the beauty of the trees themselves. And among the naturalists who might share his interest, fewer still would invest the subject with symbolic significance.

Thoreau's keen appreciation of seeds rapidly transforms them into a topic of greater resonance, which can be used as fuel for his writing. A sense of their power and potential, or of their distant reach, continually activates his imagination. If the mystery of seeds, in the deepest sense, is beyond comprehension, as John Hildebidle has suggested in passing,³⁴ Thoreau's reverential entries are informed by a sense of the impenetrability at their core. However well he got to know their workings, the capacity for life bound up in these small objects was too awe-inspiringly expansive to be grasped and described in neat terms. So much better to marvel at them and try to capture their singularity in impassioned prose, as he increasingly did. In the Journal of 1859 and 1860, he was often impressed by the fertility of the seed-suffused landscape around him. When he sees new groves springing up in January 1860, he traces them back to the soil from which they sprang: 'Nature so fills the soil with seeds that I notice, where travellers have turned off the road and made a new track for several rods, the intermediate narrow space is soon clothed with a little grove which just fills it' (*Journal XIII*, p.79). The previous spring, Thoreau had pursued the thought of continual regrowth to even greater extremes, calling attention to the earth-wide harmony of nature's successive incarnations. Inspired by the sight of seeds on water, he wrote:

Deep lie the seeds of the rhexia now, absorbing wet from the flood, but in a few months this mile-wide lake will have gone to the other side of the globe; and the tender rhexia will lift its head on the drifted hummocks in dense patches, bright and scarlet as a flame, – such succession have we here, – where the wild goose

³⁴ See pp.74-75 of *Thoreau: A Naturalist's Liberty*, where Hildebidle considers the relation between speculation and ascertainable truth about seeds: 'From time to time Thoreau is not able to test out his "suppositions" in the field; and he distinguishes those things he "suspects" from those things he has observed ... It is not that any specific problem is somehow insoluble, although in the largest sense, the wonder of the seed may indeed be just that'.

and countless wild ducks have floated and dived above them. So Nature condenses her matter. She is a thousand thick. So many crops the same surface bears. (*Journal XII*, pp.98-99)

If nature is 'a thousand thick', as Thoreau feels it to be, bearing crop after crop, the potential of the seed is the source of this fertility, which imparts its richness to the evolving landscape. From the sight of seeds the step to an extravagant vision of dispersal and continuity is short indeed.

In 'The Dispersion of Seeds', Thoreau's wonder at the multiplying potential of seeds often finds expression in more precise images. If you contemplate it, as some of his observations make you do, the leap from seed to tree is almost unfathomably strange. One such instance is the concluding comment to a section on the dispersal of white willow seeds: 'Such is the way in which this tree sows its seed, and possibly some of these downy atoms, which strike your cheek without your being conscious of it, may come to be pollards five feet in diameter' (*FS*, p.57). Perceived in this foreshortened way, the miracle inherent in something as commonplace as growth becomes apparent. Later on in the work, Thoreau calls attention to the beauty of the expansive potential of the seed, using references to Pliny (and later on John Evelyn) to back up his sentiment:

From such small beginnings—a mere grain of dust, as it were—do mighty trees take their rise. As Pliny says of the cypress, 'It is a marvellous fact, and one which ought not to be overlooked, that a tree should be produced from sources so minute, while the grains of wheat and of barley are so very much larger, not to mention the bean.' (*FS*, p.66)³⁵

³⁵ Thoreau's quotation from Pliny is taken from his *Natural History*, Bk.27, Ch.14. The passage he subsequently cites from John Evelyn's *Sylva* is also worth noting, steeped as it is in wonder at seeds: 'And what mortal is there so perfect an anatomist, who will undertake to detect the thousandth part or point of so exile a grain, as that insensible rudiment, or rather halituous spirit which brings forth the lofty fir tree and the spreading oak? [Or who is prepared to believe] that trees of so enormous an height and magnitude, as we find some elms, planes, and cypresses, some hard as iron and solid as marble (for such the Indies furnish many), should be swaddled and involved within so small a dimension (if a point may be said to have any) without the least luxation, confusion, or disorder of parts' (*FS*, p.66). See also Matthew's testament in the Bible, where imagery of seeds is frequently used in parables of faith. In 13:31-32, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a grain of mustard seed, 'which a man took, and sowed in his field'. This is 'the

Thoreau's comments conclude with a playful calculation of what size a seed of the earth would have been, had such a thing been, based on the ratio of willow seeds to full-grown willows. In his answer, two and a half miles in diameter (which equals one-tenth of the surface of Concord), he arrives at a spectacular illustration of the potency of seeds.

Thoreau also dwelled on the wonder of the dispersion and reach of seeds throughout this body of work. These reflections emerged directly out of his researches. When he tried to work out the origin of new groves by locating their parent trees, his attention was caught by the energy with which seeds spread through the landscape. He noted with incessant interest how they were dislodged and transported, as when he observed the little bearberry willow disperse its seeds with the wind: 'Its seeds were just bursting away with irrepressible elasticity and buoyancy, and spreading its kind from peak to peak along the White Mountain range' (*FS*, p.59).³⁶ Thoreau found the agency of animals in the dispersion of seeds equally marvellous. He devoted several long sections to this topic in the late Journal and 'The Dispersion of Seeds'.³⁷ In November 1860, he is struck by the disappearance of pitch pine cones from the landscape ('I conclude, therefore, that they must be collected into some hole in a tree or in the earth,— there can hardly be a doubt of this, — and possibly some are buried as nuts are. What stores of them there must

least of all seeds', but it soon grows, like Evelyn's seeds, into 'the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree' where birds lodge. A few chapters later, in 17:20, he again uses the image of a mustard seed to represent faith to the disciples ('If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you').

³⁶ In May 1860, he pursues a similar line of thought, commenting on the distant reach of aspen and willow seeds: 'No wonder that these small trees are so widely dispersed; their abundant fine and light seed, being buoyed up and wafted far through the atmosphere, speedily clothe the burnt tracts of British America. Heavy-seeded trees are slow to spread themselves, but both air and water combine to transport the seeds of these trees' (*Journal XIII*, pp.305-6).

³⁷ See for example his comments on the roles of squirrels, mice, jays and other kinds of birds in the first and second parts of 'The Dispersion of Seeds'.

be collected in some places now!' [*Journal XIV*, p.207]). The charm of seed transportation stems at least partly from the fact that it occurs independent of man, testifying to nature's self-sufficiency. The better Thoreau got at decoding such patterns of distribution, the more impressed he became by the essential harmony and vitality of the landscape.

The spread of seeds by the wind was however the means of dispersal that intrigued him most. He loved to trace their journeys in thought and could sit and watch them for hours, an occupation implied by the following suggestion of a soothing September activity:

If you sit at an open attic window almost anywhere, about the 20th of September, you will see many a milkweed down go sailing by on a level with you, – though commonly it has lost its freight, – notwithstanding that you may not know of any of these plants growing in your neighborhood. (*Journal XIV*, p.77)

Following the path of seeds in this way tended to induce a mood of lyrical reverie. The most magnificent flight of all is that of the thistle-down, which may rise higher than the seeds of most other species (his observations on the August 1860 trip to Mount Monadnock confirm this theory).³⁸ In 'The Dispersion of Seeds', where he devotes five pages to thistle-downs, his comments shift from the literal (basic facts combined with extracts from classical authorities and his own Journal notes) to the fantastic. In the following open-ended passage, he allows the mystery of dispersal to weave its potent spell around him:

Perhaps one whose down is particularly spreading and open rises steadily from your hand, freighted with its seed, till it is several hundred feet high and then passes out of sight eastward. Was not here a hint to balloonists? Astronomers

³⁸ The following instance, recorded in his entry for August 9, provides some evidence for his conjectures: 'I saw what I took to be a thistle-down going low over the summit, and might have caught it, though I saw no thistle on the mountain-top nor any other plant from which this could have come. (I have no doubt that it was a thistle by its appearance and its season.) It had evidently come up from the country below. This shows that it may carry its seeds to higher regions than it inhabits' (*Journal XIV*, p.50). See also *FS*, p.86, where Thoreau retells this incident.

can calculate the orbit of that thistledown called the comet, conveying its nucleus, which may not be so solid as a thistle seed, somewhither; but what astronomer can calculate the orbit of your thistledown and tell where it will be depositing its precious freight at last? It may still be travelling when you are sleeping. (*FS*, p.87)

Like many of Thoreau's more intriguing observations on seeds, the above passage calls attention to the wonder implicit in the phenomenon it describes, expanding a world we thought we knew. His image of the unarrested rise and flight of the thistle-down opens up tantalising imaginative realms, transforming its slight subject into an image of possibility itself.

Thoreau frequently shifts from factual observations to either striking images (as above) or generalising conclusions. This shift can occur on a small scale; within a single sentence. His brief description of the inside of a thistle head follows this pattern, moving from an objective botanical account to elaborate imagery:

It is a hedge of imbricated, thin, and narrow leaflets of a light brown color, and beautifully glossy like silk—a most fit receptacle for the delicate downy parachutes of the seed—like a silk-lined cradle in which a prince is rocked. (*FS*, p.87)

The likening of thistle seeds to parachutes prepares the way for the tender and fanciful comparison that follows. Put together, these two images sketch a miniature world which leaves its factual starting point far behind. This imaginative transformation is Thoreau's way of making sense of his observations and making them personally, if playfully, relevant. He continually yearned for the discovery of such figurative significance. While describing white birch cones in a straightforward way, he suddenly introduces an image he perceives in the outline of their scales:

The scales of all our birch cones are three lobed, like a typical spearhead (or *fléur de luce* [sic]); but those of this species [the white birch] are peculiarly interesting, having the exact form of stately birds with outspread wings, especially of hawks sailing steadily over the fields, and they never fail to remind me of them when I see them under my feet. (*FS*, p.42)

The extent of Thoreau's imaginative play is suggested by the fact that he does not just see the shape of a bird, but the outline of a specific kind of bird in motion ('hawks sailing steadily over the fields'). He introduces his image *and* builds on it, so that scales become 'stately birds' and, finally, sailing hawks. The passage concludes with a return to the original scales; a sudden shift from the fanciful back to the actual. The impression of a shift is further accentuated by the linkage of high and low – when 'over the fields' is answered by 'under my feet', the rhythmic echo emphasises the conjunction between the two. 'The Dispersion of Seeds' is suffused by this kind of imaginative play. In the following description of pitch pine cones, Thoreau's thoughts suddenly take off in a startling direction:

Within this strong, prickly, and pitchy chest are contained about a hundred dark brown seeds in pairs, each pair occupying a separate apartment behind its prickly shield. A very thin membrane or wing about three-fourths of an inch long extends from one end of each seed, which it clasps in its divided extremity like a caged bird holding the seed in its bill and waiting till it shall be released that it may fly away with and plant it. (*FS*, p.25)

The images of birds in the two above extracts allude^{to} the future flight of these seeds. In the latter passage, Thoreau even follows the seed through to the very moment of planting.

The most straightforward way in which Thoreau transcended the factual level of seeds was through general, often very optimistic, claims for their importance. When setting forth his faith in seeds, he tended to lavish significance upon them, elevating them from bare (if potent) matter to an incarnation of possibility itself. The last entry on seeds in the *Journal*, a long reflection on how nature's vitality is held in check, on the naturalisation of plants and on spontaneous generation, culminates in a statement about their crucial function: 'A seed, which is a plant or tree in embryo, which has the principle of growth, of life, in it, is more important in my eyes, and in the economy of Nature, than the diamond of Kohinoor' (*Journal XIV*, p.334). This entry is made on March 22, 1861,

and amounts to one of the last sustained reflections of any kind in the Journal. A month and a half later, Thoreau set out on his trip to Minnesota to try to restore his health, and recorded his impressions in a separate notebook; the following autumn he wrote only very occasionally in the Journal. Coming as it does at the end of a couple of years of intensive engagement with seeds, Thoreau's final comment sums up the high regard in which he held them. His sense of their significance became ever more emphatic as his work progressed. It was also directly related to a concern about the preservation of the landscape. The previous autumn, he had been contemplating the way seeds would become more vital as forests grew sparse in America. His October 1860 entries are steeped in foreboding, highlighting their future importance: 'As time elapses, and the resources from which our forests have been supplied fail, we shall of necessity be more and more convinced of the significance of the seed' (*Journal XIV*, p.132). This tentative anxiety about the destiny of the American landscape provides the literal starting point for 'The Dispersion of Seeds'. In his introductory statement, Thoreau uses this October 1860 entry about his countrymen's growing conviction of the significance of the seed in unchanged form.³⁹ The prominence this sentiment is granted sets the tone for the work that follows. Throughout 'The Dispersion of Seeds', the seed is described as an agent of future provision which holds out a hopeful and reassuring, if simultaneously threatened, sense of possibility.⁴⁰

³⁹ See *FS*, pp.23-24, where Thoreau differentiates between the attitude to seeds in the old world and the new. He claims that they have of necessity long been held in high regard in the less fertile and abundant countries of Europe.

⁴⁰ As John Hildebidle has put it, 'The seed will save us – but only if we learn its significance. Toward the teaching of that significance Thoreau turns his manuscript ["Notes on Seeds"]' (*Thoreau: A Naturalist's Liberty*, p.72). By identifying and communicating the vital function of the seed in the ecology of the landscape, Thoreau holds up a means by which nature may be preserved.

As 'The Dispersion of Seeds' proceeds, Thoreau's faith in seeds becomes more optimistic and assertive. In his passage on milkweed seeds, which enchant him with their ability to rise and fly, he describes them as prophesies of future springs. Beyond that, they promise the continuation of the world itself. Commenting on their distant reach, his imagination takes off in corresponding flight. The spreading seeds are off to perpetuate their race in new places in perfect parallel to the American experience of migration and settlement:

How many myriads go sailing away thus, high over hill and meadow and river, on various tracks until the wind lulls, to plant their race in new localities—who can tell how many miles away? ... I am interested in the fate or success of every such venture which the autumn sends forth. And for this end these silken streamers have been perfecting themselves all summer, snugly packed in this light chest, a perfect adaptation to this end—a prophesy not only of the fall, but of future springs. Who could believe in prophesies of Daniel or of Miller that the world would end this summer, while one milkweed with faith matured its seeds? (*FS*, p.93)⁴¹

In Thoreau's excited reading, the milkweed seeds function as suggestive links to times to come. They open up the prospect of a future. Seeds, after all, are seeds of ensuing life; observed, as here, in their full lightness and persistence, they are directly emblematic of hope. The fact that Thoreau concludes the passage by ascribing some of this faith to a milkweed itself, which innocently prepares for generations to come, makes the entry more touching. He thus establishes a division between an animated landscape, which is confident, vibrant and intent on renewal, and a human lack of faith in natural process,

⁴¹ Thoreau refers to the apocalyptic prophesies of Daniel (of the Bible) and William Miller (a religious leader born in Pittsfield, Massachusetts) in the same breath, an act of levelling that makes the sudden end of the world seem even more unlikely. William Miller was a militant fundamentalist who believed that Christ would soon return to earth. He prophesied the second coming in both 1843 and 1844 (see his 1843 book *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ*) and won half a million followers, who duly prepared themselves for the end. The Adventist church was later formed by 'Millerites'.

which opens the way for prophets of doom: man's belief all too easily ends up in the wrong quarters.

The equation between seeds and life had a strong hold on Thoreau's imagination. When he observed that a newly dug pond in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery had been rapidly restocked by sprouting seeds (and even by fishes, via a ditch that linked it to a nearby river), he commented: 'Thus, in the midst of death we are in life' (*FS*, pp.100-101).⁴² The cemetery provides a stark backdrop to this image of teeming life; the sheer incongruity of the juxtaposition speaks of nature's resilience and disregard of death. By tracing the vegetation he discovers in the pond back to its source, nature's steady supply of seeds (which have either lain dormant in the mud or been transported there by wind and waters), Thoreau highlights the link between seeds and thriving life. The two are near-synonymous throughout the late Journal and 'The Dispersion of Seeds', the presence of one indicating the possibility (or inevitability) of the other. In the above passage, his thoughts move from the pond to the notion of 'a world that is already planted, but is also still being planted as at first' (*FS*, p.101). In its fertility, the landscape is in a state of continual transition and constantly renewed.

The influence of Darwin's development theory, as set forth in *The Origin of Species*, is particularly notable in 'The Dispersion of Seeds' and the brief Journal of the 1860s. It is apparent for example in the Journal entry for October 18, 1860, which moves from a tentative enquiry into how another pond, 'that little pool at the south end of Beck Stow's', became stocked with plants, through the thought of a world that is constantly

⁴² The original version of Thoreau's account of this pond appears in his Journal entry for October 10, 1860 (*Journal XIV*, pp.109-10). In this entry, which contains the above reflection on life in the midst of death, he describes how swiftly the pond has been stocked since it was completed in 1859 and contemplates, in some detail, the source of the seeds that have repopulated it.

being planted, to the issue of creation and dispersal in the distant geological past. This is followed by a direct reference to Darwin:

Unless you can show me the pool where the lily was created, I shall believe that the oldest fossil lilies which the geologist has detected (if this is found fossil) originated in that locality in a similar manner to these of Beck Stow's. We see thus how the fossil lilies which the geologist has detected are dispersed, as well as these which we carry in our hands to church.

The development theory implies a greater vital force in nature, because it is more flexible and accommodating, and equivalent to a sort of constant *new* creation. (*Journal XIV*, pp.146-47)

Thoreau's reading of *The Origin of Species* confirms his sense of nature's vigour and pushes the relation between seeds and subsequent life to the forefront. The elements of Darwin's landscape, like Thoreau's, have ample power to disperse, diverge and multiply. In his late work, Thoreau seems more clearly aware than ever before of how nature is caught up in incessant process; it is planted and yet being planted, evolving through 'constant *new* creation'. This insight has a direct bearing for example on his comments on forest management in 1860. He stresses the importance of an annual planting of trees and of there being trees in every stage of growth (*Journal XIV*, p.212). He also introduces the somewhat paradoxical suggestion that 'our forest generally is in a transition state to a settled and normal condition' (*Journal XIV*, p.218). Thoreau's vision of a future period when each tree would occupy its optimum position was clearly an elusive dream, normality shifting as inevitably as the forest itself. The Concord wood lots he observed, and indeed loved and celebrated, were, like all natural woods, in a 'disorderly' state of continual transition. But like Darwin, whose observations led him to a fundamental optimism about nature's ways,⁴³ Thoreau never stopped dreaming of a general amelioration.

⁴³ The final section of *The Origin of Species* amounts to a statement of pure optimism. A movement towards perfection is described as the inevitable result of the struggle for existence. For example, Darwin concludes that 'natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being', and that 'all corporeal and mental endowments

Thoreau's Darwin-inspired thinking about seeds thus tended to focus on the fluidity of the landscape (a landscape that at times seems like a direct offshoot of his emblem of constant creation in *Walden*, the flowing mud-banks of the Deep Cut). Although seeds primarily directed his thoughts forward in time in true optimistic fashion, towards the notion of future life, they also made him engage with life as it appears in the present, life in transit. Yet another layer of time emerges, as if by accident, from Thoreau's observations: the past. His discoveries about seed dispersal enabled him to retrace some of the history of the wood lots around Concord, a subject that fascinated him in his last few years.⁴⁴ As he puts it in a Journal statement that, as so often, finds its way into 'The Dispersion of Seeds' (and which, in both versions, culminates in one of his laments of people's lack of interest): 'Our wood-lots, of course, have a history, and we may often recover it for a hundred years back, though we *do* not ... Yet if we attended more to the history of our lots we should manage them more wisely' (*Journal XIV*, pp.125-26).⁴⁵ Thoreau sets an example by working out the history of a few oak woods and pine lots in the neighbourhood (p.126 onwards). He ends up with speculative knowledge along the following lines:

There was even under these dark, dense pines, thirty years old, a pretty thick bed of blueberry and huckleberry bushes next the wall, ten feet wide, the relics of a still denser and higher one that grew there when it was an open field. The former had thus been driven back three times, first by the blueberry hedge, then by the pines of thirty years ago, and lastly by the young pines that sprang from them. (*Journal XIV*, p.130)

will tend to progress towards perfection' (*The Origin of Species*, p.459). He furthermore suggests that this process will continue unbroken in the future, evolving ever higher and better forms of life.

⁴⁴ In *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, Donald Worster has drawn attention to the fact that a historical interest (or even an ambitious intention to write the history of Concord wood lots) evolved out of Thoreau's studies of succession in nature (see his discussion in Chapter 3, p.71 onwards).

⁴⁵ For Thoreau's later use of this statement in 'The Dispersion of Seeds', see *FS*, p.164, where it appears in identical form.

By counting tree rings and observing signs of change in the landscape, he could reach a long way back in time. He went about this task with his usual thoroughness and dedication, writing detailed descriptions of new wood lots around Concord for future reference (*Journal XIV*, pp.160-62), and summarising the history of woods he had studied (see *FS*, pp.33-34). He was also fascinated ^{by} more obvious reminders of the past ('The stumps of trees which were cut in the last century—oaks at least—must not be uncommon in our woods' [*Journal XIV*, p.223]), and by the thought of a landscape that provided a direct link to former ages. One such landscape was the uncut and pathless Inches Woods in Boxboro: 'Seeing this, I can realize how this country appeared when it was discovered. Such were the oak woods which the Indian threaded hereabouts' (*Journal XIV*, p.230). The wood he finds himself in is both identical with and different from the wood of the past. To an imaginative observer, it could provide a point of stability in a changing world.

Thoreau gradually developed a more assured understanding of the evolution of the landscape around Concord. Through the myriad details with which he was confronted, he learned to discern some of the central changes that had taken place. In a few delimited areas at least, his chosen wood lots, he thus found a way of transcending the boundaries of time which enabled him to speak with some certainty about the course nature had taken. If the past could become thus transparent, perhaps the future could too. But apart from a general vague anxiety about impending change, Thoreau was reluctant to make assumptions about times to come. The seed might hold the secrets of future ages enclosed in its small self, but its workings were too capricious to be readily guessed. Some of the history of the landscape could be neatly unravelled, or at least estimated, but its future incarnations were subject to startling changes and nowhere near as easily deduced. The late *Journal* contains many statements about nature's illogic (which still forms an intrinsic

part of its overall logic), such as the reckless waste of seeds in its economy. Thoreau was fascinated by the mortality rate of oak acorns and the amount of seeds that came to nothing. In October 1860, the rapid decay of swamp white oak acorns surprises him to the extent of making him doubt nature's ways:

It is a remarkable fact, and looks like a glaring imperfection in Nature, that the labor of the oaks for the year should be lost to this extent. The softening or freezing of cranberries, the rotting of potatoes, etc., etc., seem trifling in comparison. The pigeons, jays, squirrels, and woodlands are thus impoverished. It is hard to say what great purpose is served by this seeming waste. (*Journal XIV*, p.149)

A few days later, he continues this line of thought in a gently inquisitive way:

There is no such mortality in nobler seeds—seeds of living creatures, as eggs of birds, for instance—as I have noticed in white oak acorns. What if the eggs of any species of bird should be added to this extent, so that it should be hard to find a sound one? (*Journal XIV*, pp.167-68)

The answer might be that extinction would ensue, a situation which was clearly not the case with less 'noble' seeds such as acorns. Most were born to die, but the survival of a select few ensured the continuation of the species.

Thoreau was however aware that the thwarted destiny of most seeds was not just a matter of illogical waste, but a necessary sacrifice that was part of nature's provision for the future. The loss of seeds was furthermore common knowledge. Asa Gray even sets out in figures how, in a state of nature, few seeds actually grow as they were intended, although all have the potential to do so.⁴⁶ When Thoreau comments on the meagre success rate of willow seeds in 'The Dispersion of Seeds', he acknowledges the point and essential rightness of this seeming waste:

But though the seeds of the willow thus annually fill the air with their lint, being wafted to every cranny in the woods and meadows, apparently only one in a million gets to be a shrub or tree. Nevertheless, that suffices; and Nature's purpose is completely answered. (*FS*, p.61)

⁴⁶ See for example *Elements of Botany*, p.247 (a work from 1836), where he sets forth statistics such as the information that 24,000 thistle seeds tend to yield one crop, whereas the poppy requires more than 30,000 seeds for the same purpose.

Thoreau's lucid understanding of the function of nature's apparent over-production was most probably suggested to him by Darwin. In particular in Chapter 3 of *The Origin of Species*, he emphasises that fertility must be checked or it would overwhelm the earth. Darwin here explores the role of destruction in the ecological system in detail. He discusses topics such as the early death of most seeds and seedlings (thwarted for instance by other plants and species)⁴⁷ and the reason for the vast amount of redundant seeds ('But the real importance of a large number of eggs or seeds is to make up for much destruction at some period of life; and this period in the majority of cases is an early one').⁴⁸ He arrives at some striking illustrations of his conclusions, such as the following description of the way in which destruction ensures the continuation of harmony:

Lighten any check, mitigate the destruction ever so little, and the number of the species will almost instantaneously increase to any amount. The face of Nature may be compared to a yielding surface, with ten thousand sharp wedges packed close together and driven inwards by incessant blows, sometimes one wedge being struck, and then another with greater force.⁴⁹

The outcome of this incessant struggle for existence among every known species is a delicate balance. As he puts it, 'battle within battle must ever be recurring with varying success [in nature]; and yet in the long-run the forces are so nicely balanced, that the face of nature remains uniform for long periods of time'.⁵⁰

Darwin's insights into the tensions that hold nature in check are reflected in several ways in Thoreau's work on seeds. They inform both his comments on the ongoing battle between pines and oaks and his sense of a landscape that is under constant threat, threatened among other things by the transforming power of the seed. Nature can readily

⁴⁷ As he put it, 'A plant which annually produces a thousand seeds, of which on an average only one comes to maturity, may be more truly said to struggle with the plants of the same and other kinds which already clothe the ground' (*The Origin of Species*, p.116).

⁴⁸ *The Origin of Species*, p.119. Darwin goes on to stress that the production of a single seed would suffice if it was never destroyed and its germination could be ensured.

⁴⁹ *The Origin of Species*, p.119.

⁵⁰ *The Origin of Species*, p.124.

overthrow its present configuration or break down man's structures. On one occasion, the sight of a small pitch pine seedling in a pasture triggers a sense of impending doom:

It was, as it were, a little green star with many rays, half an inch in diameter, lifted an inch and a half above the ground on a slender stem. What a feeble beginning for so long-lived a tree! By the next year it will be a star of greater magnitude, and in a few years, if not disturbed, these seedlings will alter the face of nature here. How ominous the presence of these moss-like stars to the grass, heralding its doom! Thus, from pasture this portion of the earth's surface becomes forest—because the seeds of the pine, and not of moss and grass alone, fell on it. (*FS*, p.27)

If the succession of woodlands can be described in as lyrical terms as these (in a vision in which seedlings are stars and the threat they represent is described with utmost clarity), so can the destiny of the seeds that never germinate. During the cold winter of 1859-1860, Thoreau marvels at the skill of tree sparrows who shake dry andromeda seeds to the ground and claim these by-passed objects as their sustenance:

These dry persistent seed-vessels hold their crusts of bread until shaken. The snow is the white table-cloth on which they fall. No anchorite with his water and his crust fares more simply. It shakes down a hundred times as much as it wants at each shrub, and shakes the same or another cluster after each successive snow. How bountifully Nature feeds them! ... These shrubs ripen an abundant crop of seeds to supply the wants of these immigrants from the far north which annually come to spend the winter with us. (*Journal XIII*, pp.91-92)

Even 'wasted' seeds serve a purpose in the ecology of nature, as Thoreau's observations this winter and his concurrent reading of Darwin confirm. Death seems omnipresent in the landscape he studies, but its result is, in one way or another, further life.

Alongside his interest in seeds, Thoreau was equally preoccupied with another emblem of hope during this period: evidence of resilience. He was fascinated by the way certain trees, notably hickories, keep springing up again if they are cut down, defying death time after time and to poignant extremes. Evidence of nature's incessant vigour, such resilience also testified to its ability to adapt itself to new circumstances and discover alternative modes of living, a point Thoreau took to heart. In autumn 1860 in particular, he explored the perseverance of hickories and other trees, which could partly be

accounted for by life remaining in their thick and sturdy roots. At the end of September, he measured and examined the roots of young hickory shoots, and in October a similar investigation of roots in cleared wood lots (which Torrey and Allen named 'Vivacious Roots of Trees') makes him speculate about the troubled life stories of grown trees:

When you see an oak fully grown and of fair proportions, you little suspect what difficulties it may have encountered in its early youth, what sores it has overgrown, how for years it was a feeble layer lurking under the leaves and scarcely daring to show its head above them, burnt and cut, and browsed by rabbits. Driven back to earth again twenty times, – as often as it aspires to the heavens. The soil of the forest is crowded with a mass of these old and tough fibres, annually sending up their shoots here and there. The underground part survives and holds its own, though the top meets with countless accidents...
(*Journal XIV*, p.121)

Thoreau's exaggerated account suggests a strong desire to envisage these persevering roots and trees as sources and signs of hope. But even Thoreau's wildest speculations about resilience emerged out of factual first-hand observations. Later this month, he counts tree rings and examines the growth and roots of seedlings in Emerson's wood lot. He learns a great deal about the history of some of these future trees. The following brief extract is taken from one such 'biography' of a (thwarted) oak seedling:

This seedling had died down to the ground six years ago, and then these two slender shoots, such as you commonly see in oak woods, had started. The root was a regular seedling root (fusiform if *straightened*), at least seven eighths of an inch thick, while the largest shoot was only one eighth of an inch thick, though six years old and ten inches high. The root was probably ten years old when the seedling first died down, and is now some sixteen years old. Yet, as I say, the oak is only ten inches high. This shows how it endures and gradually pines and dies. (*Journal XIV*, pp.169-70)

Even if this particular oak suffered in its infancy, its survival is ensured by the thickness of its roots; its future may not be as bleak. As Thoreau puts it with reference to 'one of the largest lilacs at the Nutting wall', 'It evidently dies down many times, and yet lives and sends up fresh shoots from the root' (*Journal XIV*, p.171).

Thoreau's comments on resilience are almost always optimistic, dwelling on the element of success inherent in the overcoming of adversity. Survival is the keynote of

this body of work. Many remarks along the following lines can be found: 'A seedling, it is true, may have died down many times till it is fifteen or twenty years old, and so at last send up a more vigorous shoot than at first' (*Journal XIV*, 252). Each death serves as a preparation for further growth, hardening the plant to renewed efforts as well as testifying to the sheer tenacity of nature's impetus for life. In the lengthy section on the hickory in the second part of 'The Dispersion of Seeds', which gives a lucid account of Thoreau's autumn 1860 activities, this optimistic emphasis is strongly apparent. It contains for example an eloquent and carefully observed account of the way early set-backs may be transcended by future growth:

It is wonderful how much these little hickories have endured and prevailed over. Though I searched the whole of Fair Haven hillside, not only for the smallest but the most perpendicular and soundest, each of the three that I sawed off had died down once *at least*, years ago, though it might not show any scar above ground ... Most of these small ones consist of several stems from one root, and they are often of such fantastic forms and so diseased that they seem to be wholly dead at a little distance. Some which have thus died down and sent up again two or more curving shoots are in the form of rude hooks and the like, and yet evidently many of them make erect, smooth, and sound trees at last – all defects smoothed over and obliterated. (*FS*, p.141)

In Thoreau's landscape, nature may claim some sacrifices but revival is always ready and waiting; 'erect, smooth, and sound' hickory trees will triumph at last. The moral relevance of these observations is, as ever, at the back of his mind. A lesson can be learned from these encounters with resilience. As he proposes, 'It will be very suggestive to a novice just to go and dig up a dozen seedling oaks and hickories and see what they have had to contend with. Theirs is like the early career of genius' (*Journal XIV*, pp.286-87). Slow growing trees have their human parallels; both become stronger for the misfortunes they once suffered:

I am struck by the fact that the more slowly trees grow at first, the sounder they are at the core, and I think the same is true of human beings. We do not wish to see children precocious, making great strides in their early years like sprouts, producing a soft and perishable timber, but better if they expand slowly at first,

as if contending with difficulties, and so are solidified and perfected. (*Journal XIV*, p.217)

However eccentric, Thoreau's conclusion read as unequivocal evidence of his optimism. Just as at the beginning of his writing life, he refuses to lose heart and is always capable of viewing adversity as the first step to thriving perfection.

In some of his last reflections on nature, Thoreau's fascination with resilience led him to another, equally optimistic, way of viewing the landscape. This centred on a sense of nature's longevity; resilience on a broad scale. His observations convinced him that nature was in some ways invulnerable, ready to repair whatever damages were inflicted upon her, including those caused by man. In this, it brings the unbreakable beauty of Walden Pond to mind: 'Sky water ... It is a mirror which no stone can crack, whose quicksilver will never wear off, whose gilding Nature continually repairs; no storms, no dust, can dim its surface ever fresh' (*Walden*, p.188). This sentiment pervades the entry that concludes the *Journal* for 1860, his last full year of record keeping, in providential terms:

What though the woods be cut down, this emergency was long ago foreseen and provided for by Nature, and the interregnum is not allowed to be a barren one. She is full of resources: she not only begins instantly to heal that scar, but she consoles (compensates?) and refreshes us with fruits such as the forest did not produce. To console us she heaps our baskets with berries. (*Journal XIV*, p.301)

If nature does not compensate in this immediately gratifying way, providing berries in the place of trees in an act of provision which, as Thoreau optimistically points out, minimises the damage caused by man, it will compensate in other ways in due course. Part of its strength lies in its length of perspective, a sublime leisure in which to achieve its ends and overcome whatever temporary set-backs it might suffer. In relation to the rapid emergence of white pine lots, Thoreau comments: 'We need not be surprised at these results when we consider how persevering Nature is and how much time she has to

work in. It does not imply any remarkable rapidity or success in her operations' (*FS*, p.36).

Or as he puts it in more general terms in January 1861:

Nature is slow but sure; she works no faster than need be; she is the tortoise that wins the race by her perseverance; she knows that seeds have many other uses than to reproduce their kind. In raising oaks and pines, she works with a leisureliness and security answering to the age and strength of the trees. If every acorn of this year's crop is destroyed, never fear! she has more years to come. (*Journal XIV*, p.312)

This confidence in nature's grand scale and capacity for repair is one part of the outcome of his close attention to resilience. But despite the fact that the security this faith induces radiates from many of his late Journal entries, this is not the only conclusion he draws: his understanding of the situation was more realistic and complex than that.

While believing that nature's vigour and steadiness of purpose ensured its protection in the long run, Thoreau was simultaneously anxious about the threat posed by man. This concern was fairly new and rare at the time; Thoreau's anxiety was pioneering and suggested ways of thinking that would become central in the twentieth century. Such a weakness in nature was inconceivable to earlier generations of Americans, who enjoyed a continent of seemingly boundless resources. The landscape may be teeming with vitality, swiftly able to restore its abundance, like the burnt wood lot Thoreau describes in October 1860 ('So vivacious are the roots and so rapidly does Nature recover herself [*Journal XIV*, p.105]), but it is by no means invulnerable. As he observes, the greatest harmony can be found in 'natural woods', such as the still relatively unspoilt Inches Woods, where man has not interfered. During his walks to these woods in November 1860, Thoreau keeps lamenting man's intrusions. Many of his statements amount to criticism of his folly (which is fairly gentle, compared to his usual diatribes against man):

It is evident that in a wood that has been left alone for the longest period the greatest regularity and harmony in the disposition of the trees will be observed, while in our ordinary woods man has often interfered and favored the growth of other kinds than are best fitted to grow there naturally. To some, which he does not want, he allows no place at all. (*Journal XIV*, p.243)

I have no doubt that, *if entirely let alone*, this which is now an oak wood would have become a white pine wood. (*Journal XIV*, p.247)

Thoreau's anger at the owner of the Concord wood lot who burned down its growth of young oaks to sow winter rye, reveals a more urgent concern about the threat of mismanagement. The episode is recorded in the Journal on October 16, 1860 and later used in the conclusion of 'The Dispersion of Seeds'. His description of the man's rash act, which is partly due to ignorance, culminates in an often quoted proposition for protection:

What a fool! Here nature had got everything ready for this emergency, and kept them ready for many years,—oaks half a dozen years old or more, with fusiform roots full charged and tops already pointing sky-ward, only waiting to be touched off by the sun,—and he thought he knew better, and would get a little rye out of it first, which he could feel at once between his fingers, and so he burned it, and dragged his harrow over it ... So he trifles with nature. I am chagrined for him. That he should call himself an agriculturalist! He needs to have a guardian placed over him. A forest-warden should be appointed by the town. Overseers of poor husbandmen. (*Journal XIV*, p.131)

The fact that Thoreau calls for help by the town authorities to keep 'poor husbandmen' in check, a very uncharacteristic plea, indicates the scale of his anger and, by extension, the extent of his concern. But there is still a hint of irony in this proposition. This is introduced by the complex pun on 'poor', which, as well as describing the lack of skill and the financial state of the husbandmen, also positions them, with a degree of sympathy, as the victims of the appointed forest wardens. Thoreau thus distances himself from his own proposition in the very act of making it, and he does this so subtly that his primary point is not obscured. However vibrantly alive nature is, and however surely the forest will prevail again in due course, it still needs to be treated with respect and good sense. This was rarely the case in his surroundings, as Thoreau's agitated summary of his discoveries about the way the Concord wood lots have been handled indicates:

The history of a wood-lot is often, if not commonly, *here*, a history of cross-purposes, — of steady and consistent endeavor on the part of Nature, of interference and blundering with a glimmering of intelligence at the eleventh hour on the part of the proprietor. The proprietor of wood-lots commonly treats

Nature as an Irishman drives a horse, – by standing before him and beating him in the face all the way across a field. (*Journal XIV*, p.132)

In the above entries, Thoreau takes the opposition between man and nature to dualistic extremes. He ascribes all the consistency to nature while man acts erratically, if 'with a glimmer of intelligence at the eleventh hour'.⁵¹

Thoreau was not alone in his concern about man's encroachment on the landscape. Due to advancing settlement and industrialisation, the American wilderness was more acutely threatened than ever before, not just in the relatively densely populated East but also in the far West. This threat is reflected in the literature of the period. A sense of imminent change and (perhaps inevitable) loss of former natural resources was becoming a prominent topos in American nineteenth-century literature (in particular that written by Easterners about the West, as Roderick Nash has shown).⁵² Nash outlines a progression from works that merely lament the loss of the wilderness to those that call for protection. Both these approaches are apparent in Thoreau's statements on the subject, many of which can be found in the nostalgically slanted essays 'Huckleberries' and 'Wild Apples', as well as in the later sections of the *Journal*. Thoreau would also have encountered similar preservation sentiments in works concerned with his immediate surroundings. George B. Emerson, whose *Report on Trees and Shrubs* Thoreau is known to have read, describes a Massachusetts landscape that has been transformed by thoughtless exploitation. Emerson wants to awaken men 'to a deeper sense of some of the blessings by which they are surrounded, and lead them ... to resolve to preserve the old forests and plant new'.⁵³ In the

⁵¹ Anti-Irish sentiments, as in this comparison, can be found throughout Thoreau's work, but there are also instances of the reverse: appreciative comments about Irish people he actually came into contact with.

⁵² In Chapter 6 of *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 'Preserve the Wilderness!', Nash identifies this topos in the work of for example John James Audubon, Fenimore Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, Washington Irving, and Francis Parkman, as well as Thoreau.

⁵³ *Report on the Trees and Shrubs*, p.2.

introduction to *Report on Trees and Shrubs*, he sets forth his anxiety about the way the landscape has been treated in emphatic, and rather melodramatic, terms. Writing in 1846, he does however regard the threat as largely of the past; at the time, it seemed to be under a degree of control in Massachusetts:

A few generations ago, an almost unbroken forest covered the continent. The smoke from the Indian's wigwam rose only at distant intervals; and to one looking from Wachusett or Mount Washington, the small patches laid open for the cultivation of maize, interrupted not perceptibly the dark green of the woods. Now, these old woods are everywhere falling. The axe has made, and is making, wanton and terrible havoc ... The new settler clears in a year more acres than he can cultivate in ten, and destroys at a single burning many a winter's fuel, which would be better kept in reserve for his grandchildren. This profuse waste is checked, but it has not entirely ceased. It is, however, giving way to better views. Ever since this survey was begun, a wiser economy shows itself. May it be universal.⁵⁴

Thoreau did not take as optimistic a view. Through his close attention to the ecology of the landscape, he was aware of the more subtle and long-term (but no less worrying) damage caused by continual mismanagement of the woods, as well as of the dramatic threat posed by new clearings.

Some time before this, F.A. Michaux had tried to enlighten American farmers about the importance of sensible management of their woods, for economic purposes if no others. He stressed the need to preserve some trees while others could be allowed to die out.⁵⁵ The more inhabited and settled the country, the more conscious it became of such issues. This had previously been the exclusive concern of densely populated Europe, where proper structures of protection had existed for some time.⁵⁶ As Michaux put it in

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.2.

⁵⁵ See p.V of the Introduction to Volume I of *The North American Sylva* (1817).

⁵⁶ Some sections of John Evelyn's *Sylva, or a Discourse of Forest-Trees*, which appeared in 1664, indicates that awareness of the need for protection of natural resources had already existed for several centuries in Europe. Chapter 32 in particular, '*Of the Laws and Statutes for the Preservation, and Improvement of Woods, &c*', provides an outline of the Classical tradition and more recent history of environmental laws, as well as gives suggestions of what should be done. Some of these propositions have a direct bearing on America, like the following: 'Finally, that the exorbitance, and increase of devouring

1817, when the American situation seemed to be quite out of hand:

In Europe the principal forests are in the hands of the different governments, who watch over their preservation with all the solicitude which imperious necessity requires ... In America, on the contrary, neither the federal government, nor the governments of the different States, have, to my knowledge, reserved to themselves any portion of forests. An alarming destruction of the trees proper for civil and naval construction has been the consequence, a destruction which goes on increasing, and which will continue to increase in proportion to the increase in population.⁵⁷

Thoreau is aware of this fundamental difference, as well as of the way America was catching up with Europe in the 'race of destruction', with its subsequent calls for preservation. If natural regeneration can no longer be ensured as the cleared landscape is enfeebled by man's incisions, seeds attain all the greater importance. Thoreau dwells on this aspect of the difference between American and European forest succession, in a series of Journal statements along the following lines:

We are so accustomed to see another forest spring up immediately as a matter of course, whether from the stump or from the seed, when a forest is cut down, never troubling about the succession, that we hardly associate the seed with the tree, and do not anticipate the time when this regular succession will cease and we shall be obliged to plant, as they do in all old countries. The planters of Europe must have a very different, a much correcter, notion of the value of the seed of forest trees than we. (*Journal XIV*, p.70)

Perhaps only the threat of impending loss will open people's eyes to the need for proper caution and care of their surroundings. And perhaps it will also make them realise the beauty of the resources in their proximity, such as the importance of seeds in all their everyday wonder.

Iron-mills were looked into, as to their *distance*, and *number* near the *Seas*, or navigable *Rivers*; And what if some of them were even remov'd into another *World*? 'twere better to purchase all our *Iron* out of *America*, then thus to exhaust our *Woods* at *home*, although (I doubt not) they might be so order'd, as to be rather a means of conserving them. There was a *Statute* made by Queen *Eliz.* to prohibite the converting of *Timber-trees* for *coal*, or other *Fuel* for the use of *Iron-mills*; if the *Tree* were of one foot square, and growing within 14 miles of the *Sea*, or the greater *Rivers*, &c.' (John Evelyn, *Sylva, or a Discourse of Forest Trees and the Propagation of Timber, In His Majesties Dominions* [London: Printed by *John Martys* and *James Allestry*, 1664, pp.109-10).

⁵⁷ F. Andrew Michaux, *The North American Sylva*, Volume I, p.VI.

The better Thoreau came to understand nature's ecology, the more vital wise forest management appeared to him. As he points out in 'The Dispersion of Seeds', it is a practical matter, which demands concrete action to prevent species from disappearing:

The time will soon come, if it has not already, when we shall have to take special pains to secure and encourage the growth of white oaks, as we already must that of chestnuts, for the most part. These oaks will become so scattered that there will not be seed enough to seed the ground rapidly and completely. (*FS*, p.131)

Through his intimate knowledge of the landscape, Thoreau had a clear vision of what needed to be done, both in specific instances and on a broader scale. At the beginning of 1861, he famously suggested that each town should appoint a committee 'to see that the beauty of the town received no detriment' (*Journal XIV*, p.304).⁵⁸ He also defended the vanishing American right to walk freely through the landscape, emphasising the rapidly shrinking difference between America and Europe:

It is true that we as yet take liberties and go across lots, and steal, or 'hook', a good many things, but we naturally take fewer and fewer liberties every year, as we meet with more resistance. In old countries, as England, going across lots is out of the question ... We are tending to the same state of things here, when practically a few will have grounds of their own, but most will have none to walk over but what the few allow them. (*Journal XIV*, pp.305-6)

If such comments on impending change, and pleas for preservation, bespeak a nagging insecurity about the future of the landscape, their element of lament is counteracted by a confident vision of action that could be taken. In his engagement with conservation issues, Thoreau tended, as so often, to be optimistic rather than despairing. He was aggressively eager to alert others to the situation at hand and thus try to change it. Failing that, his optimism was so deeply ingrained that it was seldom defeated. If the encroachment on the landscape could not entirely be averted, he would surely find ways of embracing these new circumstances, as he gradually accommodated the arrival of the

⁵⁸ Thoreau's other well-known preservation plea occurs in October 1859, when he suggests that 'Each town should have a park, or rather a primitive forest, of five hundred or a thousand acres, where a stick should never be cut for fuel, a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation' (*Journal XII*, p.387).

railroad back in the 1840s. However, he would no doubt have been horrified to hear about the latest threats to Walden Woods posed by commercial developments. In the late 1980s, plans were underway for a 147,000-square foot office park at Brister's Hill, 700 yards from Thoreau's cabin site, and 139 condominium units at Bear Garden Hill, half a mile from Walden Pond. Both these proposals were stopped by the Walden Woods Project, which acquired the sites in 1993 and 1991 respectively (along with three others), but the woods are by no means saved; 30% of the area is still privately owned and could become subject to development. Continuing threats are also posed by a landfill near the pond and the nearby highway, Route 2.⁵⁹ An office complex and a block of flats near his pond and heavy traffic through his woods would not have been easy changes to digest, even for the ever-optimistic Thoreau.⁶⁰

Although Thoreau was acutely aware of the threats posed to the landscape around Concord in his day, its wildness disappearing in the face of development, he remained convinced, somewhere deep at heart, of the invulnerable vitality of nature. This faith does not necessarily ring true any more; innumerable landscapes have been laid to waste since Thoreau's times and the ecological balance is more precarious than ever before. To Thoreau however, it seemed that nature could be beaten back ever so many times and still find the resources to return, protected by its own diversity and abundance. His view is still reassuringly optimistic, if a little out of date. Seeds, like landscapes, might go to waste, but other seeds and other landscapes would with certainty appear in their place, harmony reasserting itself throughout the broken lands. This is at least what Thoreau

⁵⁹ See the Walden Woods Project website, <http://www.walden.org/project>

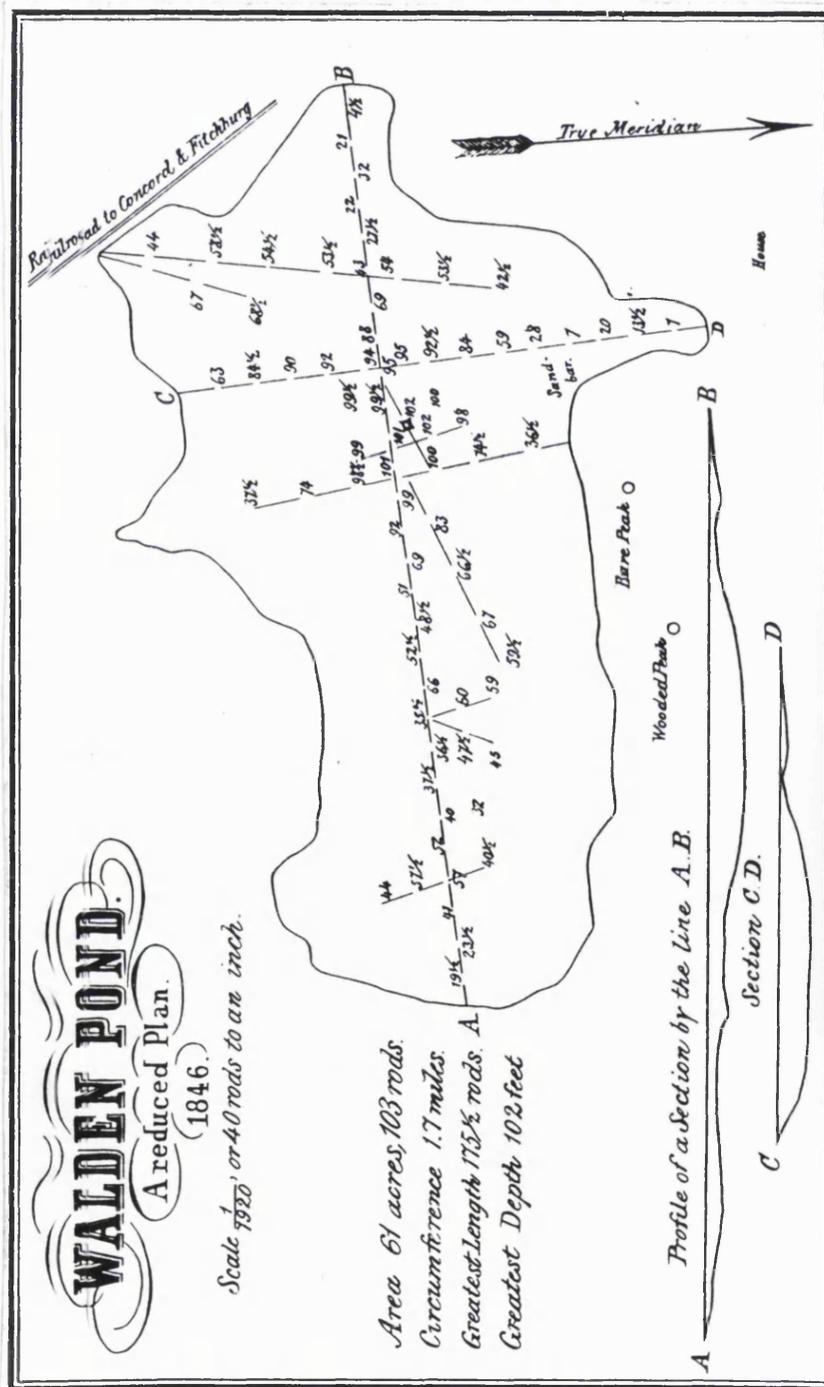
⁶⁰ The Walden area as it appears today is however relatively intact, thanks to the fact that large parts of it are run as a State Reservation by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management, and, more recently, to the Walden Woods Project; Thoreau would not have been too appalled.

wanted to believe, and to support his faith he kept looking for signs of nature's resourcefulness (often, with true intentionality of the eye, finding exactly what he was seeking). As he put it on the discovery of a thriving young pine forest in a pasture where there was not a single tree, and indeed 'not a germinating seed of one', fifteen years earlier: 'I confess that I love to be convinced of this inextinguishable vitality in Nature. I would rather that my body should be buried in a soil thus wide-awake than in a mere inert and dead earth' (*Journal XIV*, p.268). Not only can this vigour readily transcend death (the death of single seeds, entire landscapes or indeed his own body), it also imparts some of its energy to the appreciative beholder. The landscape Thoreau loves is both threatened and secure, and its steadiness and security seem most certain when he contemplates the prospects contained in seeds. By exploring the workings of these objects in both literal and metaphorical terms, Thoreau concludes his vast body of work on an emblem of optimism and continuity that, regardless of man's folly, casts a reassuring glow over its final stages. And if future forests, which one day may stretch unbroken to the far horizon, can be 'swaddled and involved within so small a dimension',⁶¹ in seeds that are produced with annual certainty and lie ready and waiting in the vigorous earth, does he not, at least on some levels, have good reason for hope?

⁶¹ The extract is taken from a quotation from John Evelyn's *Sylva, or a Discourse of Forest Trees* in 'The Dispersion of Seeds' (*FS*, p.66).

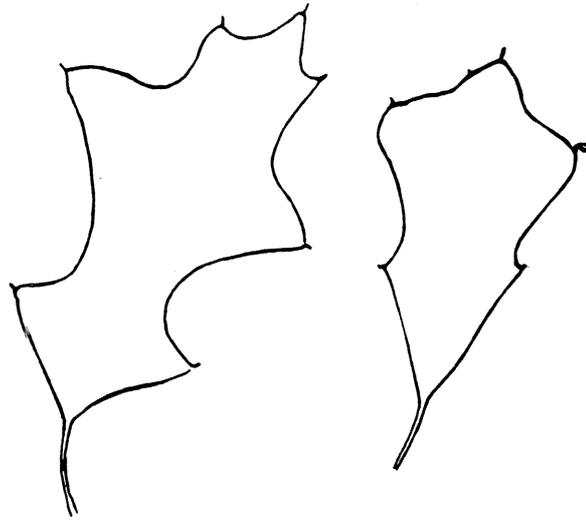
APPENDIX

Figure 1



Thoreau's plan of Walden Pond, from *Walden*, p.286.

Figure 2



Thoreau's Journal drawing of shrub oak leaves, December 17, 1856 (*Journal IX*, p.186).

Figure 3

The prevailing flowers, considering both conspicuousness and numbers, at present time, as I think now:¹ —

Solidagos, especially large three-ribbed, *nemoralis*, tall rough, etc.
Asters, especially *Tradescanti*, *puniceus*, *corymbosus*, *dumosus*,
Diplopappus umbellatus

Tansy

Helianthus, as *Helianthus decapetalus*, *divaricatus*, *annuus*, etc.

Eupatoriums, as *perfoliatum*, *purpureum*

Mikania

Polygonums, as *P. Careyi*, *dumetorum*, front-rank, *Persicaria*,
sagittatum, etc.

Gnaphalium, as *polycephalum* and pearly

Bidens, as *frondosa* and *chrysanthemoides*

Gerardias, as *purpurea* and *pediculata*

Hieraciums, as *Canadense*, *scabra*, and *paniculatum*

Vernonia

Polygala sanguinea, etc.

Liatris

Nabalus albus

Mints, as lycopuses, white mint, pycnanthemums

Hypericums, the small ones of all kinds

Leontodon autumnalis (prevailing, open in forenoon)

Pontederia

Sagittaria variabilis

Desmodiums

Spiranthes cernua

Lespedeza violacea

Cuscuta

Rhexia

Lobelia cardinalis

Cirsium pumilum

Chenopodiums

Scutellaria lateriflora

Impatiens

Apios

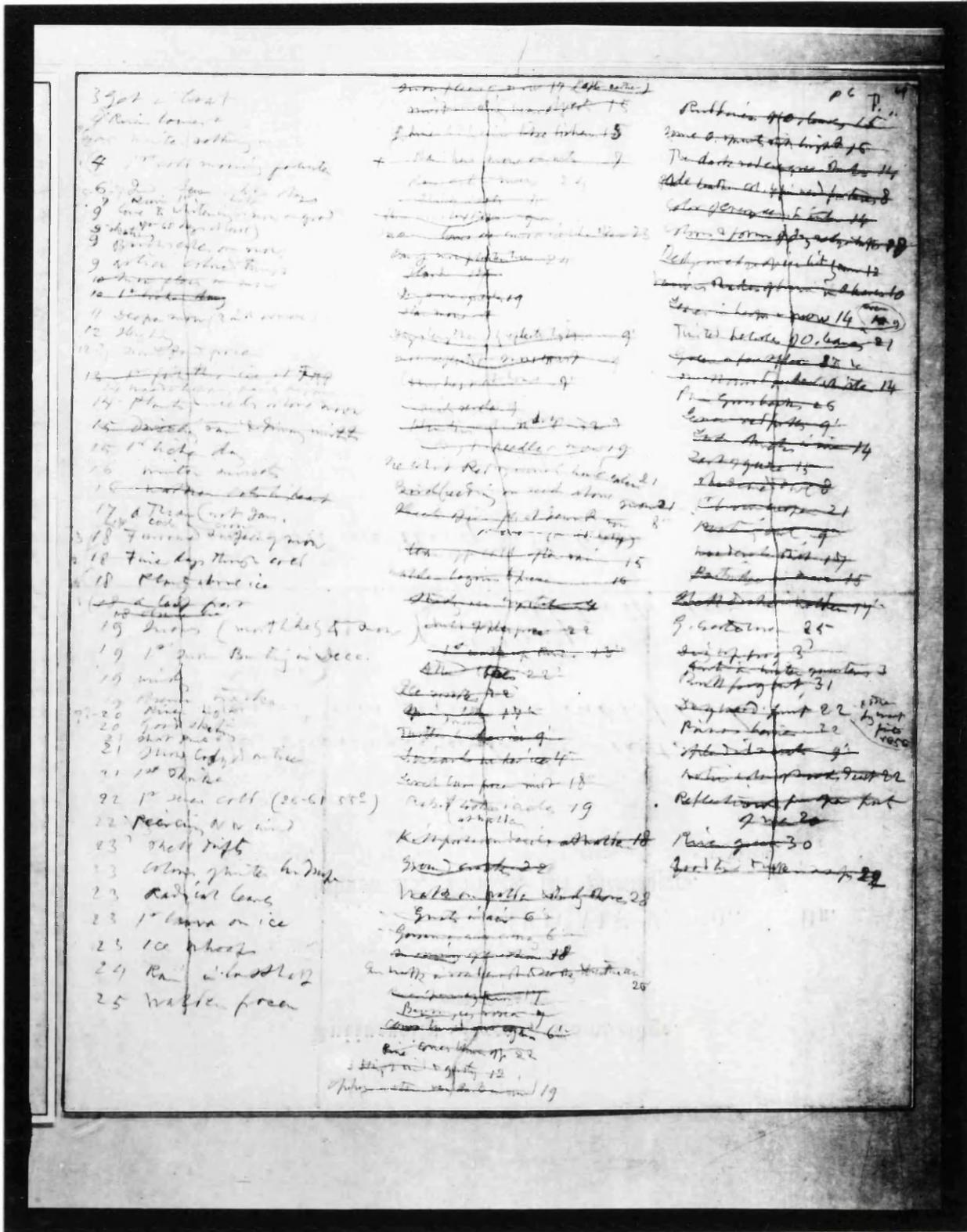
Linaria vulgaris

Gratiola aurea

¹ Imperfect list.

List of prevailing flowers, August 30, 1859 (*Journal XII*, p.305).

Figure 4



Notes Thoreau used when assembling his Kalendar charts, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, 'Miscellaneous Documents', MA 610 ('Nature Notes').

Figure 7

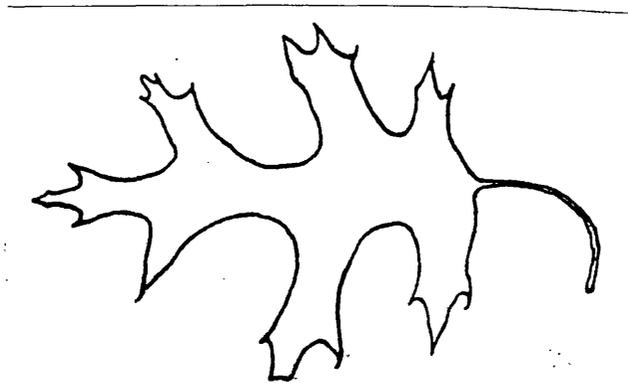
Earliest Flowering of April Flowers (Common - not in the very early)

Species	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60
<i>Alnus incana</i>	11 XX	Mar 22	16 Feb 6	7 XXX	9 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Acc. dasycarpum</i>	9 XX	Mar 23 X	6 XX	7 XXX	9 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Alnus pendula</i>	8 X	Mar 25 X	6 Feb 6	15 XXXX	15 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Alnus pendula</i>	25 XX many	7 XX	6 Feb 6	15 XXXX	15 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Alnus pendula</i>	15	Mar 29 X	10 XX	13 XX	8 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>S. didor</i>	72 XX	Mar 30 XX	9 XX	14 XX	13 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Corylus americana</i>	16	Mar 31 X	8 XXX	13 XXX	11 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Myrica gale</i>	20 Feb 24	2 Feb 6	2 Feb 6	18 XX	25 Feb 6	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Corylus rostrata</i>	27 50 XX	8 XX	8 XXX	11 XX	14 Feb 6	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Saxifraga</i>	28 XX	10 XX	50 XXX	22 XX	18 Feb 6	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Ranunculus foetidus</i>	3 XX	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	May 6 X	25 Feb 6	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Patella (L.)</i>	15 XX	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Urtica americana</i>	25 51	30 XX	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Thalictrum</i>	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Chrysanthemum</i>	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>S. humilis</i>	28 X	11 X	22 XX	23 X	23 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Acc. rubrum</i>			18 X	18 X	18 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Urtica fulva</i>			18 X	18 X	18 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Agrostis canadensis</i>	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Gummi</i>	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Taxus canadensis</i>	29 X	Apr 1 May	23 X	21 X	21 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>P. grandis</i>	Apr 1 May	Apr 1 May	21 X	21 X	21 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Thuja occidentalis</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Antennaria plantaginifolia</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Trinitis stricta</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Alantaria canadensis</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Tormentum officinale</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>S. purpurea</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Menyanthes</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Berberis</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Vicia papilionacea</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Angustifolia</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Cassia</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>S. reticulata</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Vicia blanda</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Arbitus</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>S. Babylonica</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>S. torosa</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>S. alba</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Colutea</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24
<i>Colutea</i>	27 XX	Apr 1 May	29 X	22 X	22 X	Mar 27	11 Feb 24	13 Feb 24	13 Feb 24

REDUCTION 13

'Earliest Flowering of April Flowers' tabulation (the first of two charts), Pierpont Morgan Library, MA 610.

Figure 8



Thoreau's Journal drawing of a scarlet oak leaf, November 11, 1858 (*Journal XI*, p.314)

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