Introduction: On Affirmative Reading, or The Lesson of the Chickadees

STRANGE THINGS happen in Thoreau: sand starts moving like water, and stones vibrate with life; extinct species return; pine trees cry; fish become trees; men grow grass out of their brains; men, not gods, walk on water; like animals and with them, they also walk on four legs; they talk to fish and birds; birds migrate back to life after they have been seen dead; humans migrate into birds; birds migrate into other birds; humans migrate into other humans; two persons come to inhabit one body; two bodies come to be inhabited by one person. How are we to understand such strangeness? We can't treat it as fiction for, strictly speaking, Thoreau is not a fiction writer. The generic characteristics of all of his writings—*A Week* is a memoir, *Walden* is autobiography, the *Journal* is a record of perceptions and thoughts, while the natural history essays are structured according to the logic of scientific writing of the day—require that we treat their content not as fiction but as truth, and their utterances not figuratively but declaratively, as testimonies. Yet, his declarations are sometimes so eccentric, they so radically blur the distinction between what is possible and what is not, between miraculous and natural, that one must raise the question of whether to take them seriously. Does Thoreau really mean what he says when he asserts the possibility of what reason would call fantastic, such as, for instance, when he suggests that persons can shift their shape or, even more strangely,

when he claims that life overcomes death, thus inverting the laws of causality and, as Colin Dayan puts it regarding Poe, implying that he does not inhabit a "privileged position in relation to the supposedly 'dead' or unthinking matter surrounding [him]"?[1]

Thoreau attached clippings to the back cover of one of his late commonplace books. Here is a sampling:

Boston Journal, September 27, 1858 (excerpts); *Donati's comet seen in Cincinnati*

On the evening of the 25th of September, the appearance of the comet, in the great refractor of the Cincinnati Observatory, was especially interesting. . . . The most wonderful physical feature presented was a portion of a nearly circular, nebulous ring, . . . the bright nucleus being in the centre, while the imperfect ring swept more than half way round the luminous centre. . . . No one can gaze on this gigantic object, in all its misty splendor, without a deep impression that the eye is resting on a mass of nebulous matter, precisely such as the nebular theory of La Place supposes to have been the primordial condition of our sun and all its attendant planets, and from which chaotic condition this beautiful system of revolving worlds has been evoked by the action of a single law. . . .

O. M. Mitchell.
Cincinnati Observatory, Sept. 27, 1858

Boston Journal, March 2, 1860, *A TOAD STORY*

A gentleman who witnessed the sight informs us that, about ten days ago, along one of the main roads near Forge village, in Westford, he observed the most marvelous collection of toads he ever witnessed or heard of. In the road for as many as a hundred rods the ground was so covered with them that one could not put his hand down without putting it upon a toad. An estimate was made, and it was determined that there were at least as many as twelve toads to the square foot! The sides of the road and fields were not examined, but for the distance we have named there were toads innumerable. Another fact not a little singular is that they were all apparently the same size—being about half an inch high, or in length, and in color and appearance seemed to be precisely alike, and all were sprightly and seemed as if very much at home. The question is where did they come from? There was a smart shower the night before they were discovered, but is it possible that they rained down? And if so, where did the clouds come in possession of such a multitude of juvenile toads? The fields around may have been as thickly populated, for aught we know to the contrary, as the road; and if so, who can explain their presence?

Reported in newspapers as events observed by reliable witnesses, these examples of the miraculous—vibrant and nebulous matter observed in the moment of creating new life, toads raining down from populated clouds—assume the status of the factual. More generally, the articles demonstrate that to an antebellum American the divide between fantastic and real was less distinct that it is to us postmoderns, which imposes the requirement that the faithful historian of ideas respect this blur. More specifically, to Thoreau, who collected them systematically, these reports were perhaps proof of his lifelong belief that far from being something surreal, which could at best function as a metaphor of something real, the fictional or even irrational is part and parcel of the real. In fact, that was a guiding conviction in *Walden*, whose opening famously declares that hardly any fiction can match the strangeness of ordinary reality:

I have travelled a good deal in Concord; and every where, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways. What I have heard of Brahmins sitting exposed to four fires and looking in the face of the sun; or hanging suspended, with their heads downward, over flames; or looking at the heavens over their shoulders . . . ; or dwelling, chained for life, at the foot of a tree; or measuring with their bodies, like caterpillars, the

> breadth of vast empires; or standing on one leg on the tops of pillars,—even these forms of conscious penance are hardly more incredible and astonishing than the scenes which I daily witness. (Wa, 4)

Nothing more incredible, then, than the lives of ordinary folks, whom Thoreau sees performing acts more fabulous than Brahmins involved in incredible corporeal and incorporeal transformations. But if the fantastic is so embedded in the common as to constitute it, how is it that we, so many ordinary people, can't see what Thoreau sees? What have we done to alter the real into what is coherent, explicable, and knowable, expelling the wondrous into an elsewhere that is only imagined?

On numerous occasions—to which I return in the sections that follow—Thoreau suggested that this filtering out of the fantastic from the real is generated by the dogmatic and critical epistemologies of the West, expounded on from Plato to Leibniz and Kant. Those epistemologies were predicated on the idealistic understanding of truth as noncontradictory. And since the incredible couldn't be deposited in the real in a noncontradictory manner—both because it is in itself often contradictory and because it would render reality simultaneously credible and incredible and consequently cancel the conceptual divides that generate noncontradictory, truthful thinking about the real—our thought is disciplined by mainstream epistemologies that produce a kind of magical transubstantiation: thinking is made to dematerialize what is really incredible into what is only imagined to be so. However, as Thoreau will suggest, the image formed through this dematerialization will not function as a representation of the material and real, but instead—and herein lies the perversity of the imagination and its ideations—as the merely metaphorical representations of the illicit and irrational longings of our mind. Thus, to reference only a few examples of this operation that are crucial for understanding Thoreau's thought, metamorphosis will be understood not as a representation of real, corporeal transformations, but as a metaphor of the mind's desire to change what is; the

idea of a hybrid will refer not to something real that is generated by interspecies splicing, but to a metaphor of the mind's desire to experience its own otherness; the possibility of vitalized and agitated matter—which Thoreau will engage in a serious way—will be understood not as proposing a realistic ontology but as a metaphor for the mind's dream of immortality. The real is thus not only dematerialized into its own ideal representation; more radically, it is altered into a metaphor of what it is not, of the spiritual. An ideation of massive proportions is thus generated whereby everything becomes topsy-turvy, as matter is transubstantiated into an only more-or-less realistic representation of the mind's doings, an idea that de facto blocks access to embodied reality.

A passage from *Walden* additionally suggests that this transubstantiation (into a metaphor of our spiritual inclinations) of the material world that Thoreau calls "nature," exposes us to what he senses to be the greatest danger of all, the danger of forgetting the literal, the suchness of things: "But while we are confined to books, though the most select and classic . . . we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard. Much is published, but little printed" (Wa, 111). Just as for the idea of matter as not a representation of anything corporeal but of the mind's operations, so all our words, Thoreau here suggests, react not to things but merely to other words. What is published now speaks to what was published before, the language we speak at present answers to classic languages; words are not representations of things, as Aristotle believed, but of words. Language is self-referential, its metaphors nothing but reservoirs of images deposited in them by the history of language, not things. In suggesting that all language is only "indirect speech" that converses with itself about reality in a complete absence of reality (or, as he phrases it, that words are not shaped by a direct "imprint" of things and literal events onto them), Thoreau gestured toward the discovery that, as Paul Patton puts it in another context, "it is not the representation of a nonlinguistic reality that is the primary function of language but repetition and therefore transmission of something already said."[2] As Thoreau

specifies in *Walden*, that distance from the real turns all language into mere chatter:

> It would seem as if the very language of our parlors would lose all its nerve and degenerate into *palaver* wholly, our lives pass at such remoteness from its symbols, and its metaphors and tropes are necessarily so far fetched, through slides and dumb-waiters, as it were; in other words, the parlor is so far from the kitchen and workshop. The dinner even is only the parable of a dinner, commonly. As if only the savage dwelt near enough to Nature and Truth to borrow a trope from them. (Wa, 244–245)

Living in a parlor distanced from things we believe that we are talking about—distanced from the kitchen and the workshop where life is in the making, where it is busy changing—we end up living among "far fetched" metaphors. Our epistemologies have filtered the wondrous out of the real to reach a truth that has in fact relocated us in an imaginary real. Paradoxically, we have ended up living in a fantasized real from which the fantastic has been expelled. Our lives are highly ideated and "meaned up" ("the dinner even is only the parable of a dinner, commonly"), while ideated objects pass us by without affecting us. Thoreau's central discovery can thus be summed up in the insight that, as Cavell puts it, "an object named does not exist for us in a name."[3]

Thoreau's claim that human language means forgetting the very "language which all things . . . speak without metaphor" points to a major premise that will guide his investigations. It signals that for him—similar to what Walter Benjamin will later propose—in addition to the language of man, there is also "language as such," the language of things and other, nonhuman, beings. Everything is generative of language, then. As Benjamin explicitly puts it, echoing almost verbatim Thoreau: "There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents. This use of the word 'language' is in no way metaphorical."[4] Just as Benjamin suggests that not only animals or plants speak but also things such as desks and lamps—as he puts it, "the language of

lamp" expresses the "mental being of the lamp"[5]—so Thoreau proposes that nothing is abandoned to silent numbness, for there are meanings that things exchange among themselves. Things and beings bypass the human obsession with ideation and metaphorization to generate meaning by affecting other beings, or, as Thoreau has it, by imprinting themselves on other beings, thus literally or materially altering them, leaving their trace in them for them to "read."

Thoreau's recovered nonideational language of humans participates in this semiosis not by sacrificing the specificity of its word-making capability, but by requiring words to alter substantially. They have to find their way back to things: emerging out of imprints—a novel phenomenon generated by encounters with beings and things—they themselves have to become "events"; they have to be the repository of unprecedented meanings that can further act "literally," as "things," by generating alterations (imprints) in other beings and things. This semiosis of imprints evades the dualisms of mind and matter, literal and metaphorical. For when Thoreau says that nonideational language—in which "dinner even is only the parable of a dinner, commonly"—will have to be exchanged for another, in which words will be derived from bodies directly ("borrowing a trope from nature"), he is precisely gesturing toward a nondualistic ontology in which the difference between words and things, ideas and bodies, is not considered insurmountable. Instead, all those different phenomena will be understood to relate to one another on the same ontological plane, affecting one another in the same being. He therefore gestures toward the understanding of the sign that Peirce will later articulate, as something that can, but doesn't have to be linguistic, allowing linguistic and nonlinguistic signs to alter one another. If we can borrow a sign from a pine tree or a toad it is precisely because for Thoreau a sign is generated by any dynamic in which, as Peirce has it, "something . . . stands to somebody, for something in some respect or capacity." However, as Eduardo Kohn adds, "somebody . . . is not necessarily human and it need not involve symbolic reference or the awareness often associated with representation."[6] A "somebody" or a "self" is rather any locus of animation or motion in the embodied world that, in affecting another such "somebody," forces it to react to it, and thus to interpret it as a sign.

In fact, Thoreau will go further than gesturing toward the nondualistic ontology and the new language it generates. In a remarkable discussion of the reform of senses at the closing of *A Week*—to which I return, attempting to do justice to its complexity, in my discussion of his epistemology in the third part of the book—he will explicitly declare that his efforts are invested in reversing the ideational direction of our language: "Are we to be put off and amused in this life, as it were with a mere allegory? Is not Nature, rightly read, that of which she is commonly taken to be the symbol merely?" (*W*, 382). Instead of reading the natural—not just its beauty but its capacity to change, recover, or endure—as a metaphor of what in the spiritual is not yet accessible to the mind, Thoreau understands our mind and its thinking practices as mere metaphors of the extraordinary capacity for change in the material, a capacity that we have difficulty in understanding precisely because of our penchant for metaphorization: "We are still being born, and have as yet but a dim vision of sea and land, sun, moon and stars" (*W*, 385). If for Thoreau, as for Spinoza, we don't yet know what a body can do, what corporeality is, and what it is capable of, it is precisely because we don't have access to it, having obscured it with categories and representations as so many metaphors of the material. Thoreau thus wants to "read the Nature right" by despiritualizing it, that is, by passing through the curtain of metaphors to reach the material itself, and he tries to do that through a process I call "literalization," consisting of the twofold gesture I have discussed thus far: turning the word into some sort of thing, capable of affecting bodies; and bringing words closer to objects, recovering the presence of objects in names. In his terms, he wants to move the parlor into the kitchen, where words are still "cooking," still being concocted from fresh ingredients.

The literalization of language wasn't just one among many interests that Thoreau cherished. It was his central interest; as Barbara Johnson argued, it was what the experiment at Walden Pond was all about. On her understanding, *Walden* is not simply an elaborate metaphor of self-transformation but instead *is* that transformation, simultaneously the act and its description. *Walden* doesn't connote, but denotes:

> What Thoreau has done in moving to Walden Pond is to move *himself*, literally, into the world of his own figurative language. The literal woods, pond, and bean field still assume the same classical rhetorical guises in which they have always appeared, but they are suddenly readable in addition as the nonfigurative ground of a naturalist's account of life in the woods. The ground has shifted.[7]

The ground has shifted into figures, the bodies have moved into words, which is why, as Cavell puts it, "we don't know what *Walden* means unless we know what Walden is."[8]

One need not dwell on sentences insisting on literalization—as when Thoreau claims that nature is "that of which she is commonly taken to be the symbol of"—to realize how correct Johnson and Cavell were in claiming that, for Thoreau, to understand what something means is always to experience what it is. Some instances of that epistemological faith, which frustrates the drive to metaphorize, are famous. For instance, *A Week* is premised on the injunction that to understand life as a journey one must start traveling. Similarly for *Walden:* to understand that living means learning how to dwell, one must turn one's life into building one's dwelling; one can't understand what a house is unless one builds it. But there are many other, less famous examples of the same epistemological credo, asking us to somehow leave the images and concepts of our mind to access literally the life those images and concepts represent or symbolize. One finds such examples everywhere in Thoreau's writings as well as in his practice. They organize his thinking as well as his perception and everyday behavior.

Donald Worster identifies the behaviors generated by Thoreau's literalism—his desire actually to inhabit the perceived—as an "intense empiricism." By that he refers to a series of sometimes painful, rather than enchanted, practices whereby the mind is reduced to perceptions so intense that they lead the perceiver out of his self into the perceived. The perceiver's passages from a thought or perception into its object are identified by Worster as "becomings," that is, real or literal transformations, and he offers a series of examples

to explicate the concept. Sometimes Thoreau becomes a muskrat: "[He] must allow himself to be engulfed to his very ears in the odors and textures of sensible reality. He must become, like the muskrat, a limpid eyeball peering out of the sedges of a flooded meadow."[9] On another occasion this "muskrat" turns into the earth's crust and becomes "terrene": "I felt as if I could eat the very crust of the earth; I never felt so terrene." If the "I" feeling terrene still points to a distance between perceiver and perceived, that distance is annulled on yet another occasion cited by Worster, when Thoreau performs literal behaviors that cause him to become a fox, a pine tree, or a frog: "Nineteenth-century Concord was home to many unusual individuals. But only one local citizen was likely to be seen snorting and galloping with glee after a fox on a snowy hillside. Or sitting in the top of a pine tree, swaying with the wind, or crawling about on his hands and knees endeavoring to communicate with a reluctant wood-frog."[10] Strange if not downright naive, such behavior nevertheless constitutes Thoreau's painstaking efforts to reach the real literally. His wager is that he will start experiencing differently thanks precisely to his (even if always only wished for) emancipation from abstractions embedded in our categories and tropes. He hopes that once his senses are entrusted to an unknown—conceptually unmediated—reality, they will allow him finally to experience how entities, whether corporeal or mental, are not fixed, as our traditional epistemologies would have it, but rather change, and so cancel the generic divides not only among beings (such as when Thoreau becomes a pine tree or a muskrat) but also, as I suggest in what follows, among the living and the dead.

Because Thoreau is so obsessed with testing the limits of the metaphorical, I address what literalization means to him throughout the book and from a series of different points of view. For now—and to clarify the method I have adopted in addressing Thoreau's work—the following general remarks concerning what counts as an act of literalization will suffice.

Literalization features the a-conceptual. The escape from "built-up" connotations that Thoreau envisions for a reformed language is a process that involves "stripping bare" our thought and language (our

"walls must be stripped, and our lives must be stripped" (Wa, 38), producing an utterance or word so tied to its object that it only denotes. Literalization weakens the connotations we have deposited in the word to "mean up" our lives, but which are in fact, as Cavell points out in discussing literalization in Beckett, "curses under which the world is held," for they precisely distance us from the world. Literalization weakens connotations by unfixing clichés, making us acutely aware that we drown in empty meanings, that "our language [has] worked too little, because it worked too much."[11] Additionally, in trying to cancel metaphors, literalization also seeks to cancel concepts, because concepts are metaphors par excellence. As Paul Patton puts it, a "concept exists only when there is a distinction between what falls under the concept and what does not."[12] But such a distinction is always imaginary, always metaphorical only, not just because "no two particular objects or occurrences are identical"[13] and therefore can't be presumed to have the same essence that the concept confers on them, but also because singular occurrences always vary in the passage from class to class, from concept to concept, generating a process that can be called a "zone of connection."[14] If all concepts are metaphors, then, it is because they are the outcome of fictionalization. A concept emerges as a result of the cancellation of the real difference among singular cases under its jurisdiction, of their being merged into an imagined identity, which, by the same token, is a cancellation of real connections, transgressions, and mobility in a contrived stability. In undoing concepts, literalization seeks to achieve two things. First, to recover the particular, as when Thoreau insists that "pickerel" is a meaningless word, obscuring the fact that the "steel-colored pickerel" must be differentiated from a "bright golden kind," a "bright-golden kind with greenish reflections," and a "golden-colored" one (Wa, 184). The compound "bright-steel-golden with greenish-bluish-yellowish reflections" signifies less than, like a sensation, it affects. This particularization of words, turning them into hyphenated compounds on the verge of becoming a percept or a thing that merges into the singular it reflects, can be understood as a desire to reach the literality of what Thoreau calls the "this," so that we find ourselves where "this is and no mistake" (Wa, 98). The recovery of the "this" tells us that literalization really

dreams about exiting the word, even the word that merely denotes, in favor of the percept. What it really wants is to enable the speaker's or viewer's immersion in the flow of ongoing perception. Hence, the second aim of literalization: in canceling categorical divides among the occurrences that concepts generate, literalization also recovers the fluid, the intermediate, and the variable. This explains Thoreau's obsession with transition, his dedication to detecting the connectedness of phenomena, emblematized, most notably, by his central discovery that Walden Pond is not isolated in its circular form but connected to Flint's Pond through many "smaller intermediate ponds" (Wa, 181). If Thoreau's literalizations render inoperative the abstractions that concepts are, it is because they want to recover not just the particular but also the process, the particular in the moment of its becoming otherwise, the particular that has already started differing from itself, a singularity that is already two, a pair that is already four. If, as Roland Barthes's formulaic phrasing has it, "nuance = difference (diaphora),"[15] then in recovering the nuance Thoreau's literalizations want to enable us to finally enter the diaphoric world, the plethora of differences.

Literalization recovers slow time. Because concepts are abstracts (that is, summaries of nuances), they enable thought to move quickly through varieties of phenomena. In rendering it unnecessary to dwell on the particular, they speed up thinking. They are economical, manufactured for those who are busy, exchanging lost nuances for gained time. In contrast, by refusing to conceptualize, literal thought is tied to nuance and dwells on it, following its very rhythm. It allows phenomena to take their own time, while teaching the mind patience.

Literalization is the critique of the literary. In its commitment to what is diaphoric, literalization can be understood as a critique of literary as well as conceptual thinking. For while literature indeed works with nuances—so much so that Barthes defines it as "a codex of nuances"[16] and contrasts it with philosophy, which operates through concepts—it does so only to the extent that it is able to restrict them by means of form. To maintain the very being of the literary, its own generic

specificity, literature must interrupt the flow of the particular. Literary forms thus do for literature what concepts do for philosophy: they classify, segregate, bind, and regulate. In so doing those forms act like concepts, as forces of ideation and generalization, which means finally that they act as metaphors ("metaphor, hence, a generality" is how Barthes phrases it).[17] Thoreau's effort at literalization should therefore be registered as his resistance to the literary, as a subversion of literary forms that is by no means restricted to loosening the connections between paragraphs in *Walden*, for instance, or by constructing hybrid forms (*A Week* is at the least a memoir, a travelogue, and a history book). More radically, it involves working toward a complete dissolution of the form, such as he achieves in the *Journal*, where nuances flow unchecked, proliferating into formlessness. As Barthes again puts it, "nuance—if not kept in check—is Life," not literature, which is precisely where Thoreau wants literalization to take him: to life, to a becoming alive of the word.[18]

Literalization risks insanity. As Thoreau suggests in *Walden*, stripping our lives bare of connotations requires not only that we undo clichés and idioms (to leave "the mud and slush of opinion or prejudice"), but also that we abandon everything we thought we knew about the world, about "our poetry and philosophy and religion" (Wa, 98). It requires us to unfetter the systems and methods of thinking that we have designed to make sense of the world. However, in canceling the categorical and conceptual, as well as the methodical and ordered, literalization risks their opposites, and therein lies its greatest danger. It risks disorder, incoherence, and obscurity, if not insanity. Indeed, as Cavell reminds us, again in the context of literalization in Beckett, the disregard of categorical divides produces an incoherence that brings words so close to things that it even confuses them for things, which is "the mode which some forms of madness assume."[19] That is why, as Cavell puts it in *The Senses of Walden*, the "question of insanity . . . or at any rate, the extremity and precariousness of mood in which [Thoreau] writes is so recurrent in *Walden*."[20] Moreover, that extremity becomes its central theme, embodied throughout the book by the loon, the bird that risks or suffers insanity time and again by allowing itself to become

disoriented, lost in its diving ("he would dive and be completely lost" [Wa, 234]). The loon reemerges on the surface as a crazed "demon," uttering an "unearthly laugh" [Wa, 235]), or metamorphosed into a wolf (howling "probably more like . . . a wolf than . . . bird" [Wa, 236]); indeed, becoming the wolf-bird that Thoreau himself would then strive to become ("While he [the loon] was thinking one thing in his brain, I was endeavoring to divine his thought in mine" [W, 235]). The loon not only merges the questions of insanity and metamorphosis—insanity functions as a type of molting—but also confuses corporeal and incorporeal transformation. And it is here that we finally encounter the most disturbing consequence of literalization and are required to deal with the crucial question of how to address Thoreau's work. For much of what Thoreau is saying can indeed be understood literally: for instance, the injunction "to think about the house requires building it" might change the way we think about dwelling, or change our habits, but not necessarily drive us to madness.

But how are we to treat metamorphosis, a word and experience so central to Thoreau? There is no reading of Thoreau that doesn't emphasize his preoccupation with "self-transformation," self-renewal and change. But if those assessments of his project are by now empty clichés, I would maintain that it is because we don't know what they really mean. Is Thoreau seriously talking about self-transformation? Of the mind or of the body as well? As Cavell puts it, "it is hardly necessary to insist on the concept of moulting, and metamorphosis generally, as central to *Walden;* but as elsewhere, it is hard to believe how thoroughly it is meant."[21] If metamorphosis is not meant in the spiritual sense only, representing a change of heart or mind; if it is not meant metaphorically, referencing corporeal reshaping to signal a change of mind; if, in contrast, it is meant really, literally, or "thoroughly," then we can no longer read it as poetic fancy only, as a mere wish for the impossible. Instead, we must come to terms with the *literal reality* of a change of heart that also generates a change in our bodies.

My readings are fashioned by the decision to take Thoreau's utterances—even when they seem most fanciful—as serious, nontrivial, and literal. In terms of Cavell's remarks from "Knowing and

Acknowledging" regarding how a non-skeptic is to treat the paradoxes of the skeptic, and appropriating them for the purpose of articulating a methodology of reading a literary text, in what follows I have approached Thoreau's work from the vantage of what, for want of a better word, I call "affirmative reading."[22] And while I will not deny that I find Thoreau's strange ideas deeply seductive, that doesn't mean that I have to believe in what he said, nor does my affirmative reading mean that I have to offer support or further evidence for his words as if I were defending their truthfulness. Instead, my reading obeys the following sets of presumptions.

Thoreau means every word he says, in the exact way that he says them; he means it literally. This is not to say that he didn't realize that he is doomed to language that is distant from things; that he didn't realize that swift transportation of things into words—which he calls for when he asks us to borrow directly from nature—is incredible; or that he wasn't always painfully aware that he is failing in his effort to bring tropes back to bodies. The promise of recalling actual bodies when we call their name was never actually fulfilled. If I then say that I treat Thoreau's words as if such a promise were fulfilled, it is because his desire to move words in the vicinity of things—to make them literal or to even turn them into what they mean—remains for him a regulative epistemological wish. Even if it is always failing, it is thus nonetheless always consequential in fashioning even his most ordinary acts and perceptions.

Because literalism must always—at least partially—fail, readings that take Thoreau's words as if he didn't mean them literally remain indispensable. We have gained fabulous insights into Thoreau's thinking through commentaries that propose, for instance: that his discussion of fish in *A Week* in fact refers to relationships among humans, or even among the thoughts in the mind of a single human; that his obsession with birds is really an obsession with what is ethereal and spiritual; that a little green bittern mentioned in *A Week* stands for platonic archetypes; that in talking about autumnal leaves, he has in mind the advanced modernity of the nineteenth century, or even projecting ideas concerning late capitalism; that his preoccupation with nocturnal walks registers his romantic devotion

to what is dark and dim or, alternatively, his devotion to the woman to whom he proposed marriage earlier in his life; or, that when he talks about an apple tree he is pointing to Yankee resilience.

While acknowledging the complexity of such readings, I am interested instead in investigating what kind of Thoreau is revealed if one takes him to be saying exactly what he writes. What kind of philosophy appears if, when he says "fish" we take it to mean fish, or when he talks about matter (sand, mud, dust, stones) we take him to mean matter; or when he talks about the healing capacities of moonlight he means that moonlight literally heals bodies; or when, in a famous passage, he says that it was no longer he who "hoed beans" he indeed believes he wasn't hoeing the beans any longer; or when, as on so many occasions, he talks about corporeal metamorphoses, we understand him to mean that the bodies really metamorphose? To claim that Thoreau can't intend real metamorphosis when he says "metamorphosis," as he must know that corporeal transformations aren't really possible and so must be speaking metaphorically; to claim, additionally, that the desire to avoid metaphor must be relegated to the domain of epistemological phantasmagoria, as it amounts to an impossible desire to generate meaning without words, all of which are instances of tropes—such claims would, it seems to me, represent nothing less than a form of abuse, comparable to the way the nonskeptic abuses the skeptic by telling him, for instance, that he can't seriously doubt the existence of his own body since he obviously sees himself walking.[23]

Consequently, I tried to treat all of Thoreau's utterances as if they were meant literally, instead of choosing which ones might and which ones might not be so intended. For if we suppose that Thoreau meant only some of his words literally and others metaphorically (he really means that we must build a house in order to think it, but doesn't really mean that there is such a thing as corporeal transformation), we are immediately confronted with the necessity, and impossibility, of deciding the literal or nonliteral status of each statement. That would generate only arbitrary and ad hoc readings. Consequently, when encountering strange or even fantastic propositions in Thoreau, I refrained from normalizing them as allegories. Instead, I tried

to respect and follow their strangeness by treating them as philosophical propositions that formulate a different ontology.

Thoreau knows at least as much as his reader. Following this rule I assumed that to tell Thoreau that he often writes strange things would not come as a surprise to him at all. In other words, I was convinced that he, like me, knew that the merging of persons, for instance, or calling the dead back to life are not quite credible events. Following the same rule I similarly assumed that Thoreau knew his statements to be often contradictory, for he revises his books carefully yet lets the contradictions remain. My belief that Thoreau was aware of the strangeness and contradictions of his statements also absolved me of the supercilious task of disclosing or denouncing them as contradictory or voicing my own disagreement with their strangeness. Instead of expressing my frustrations, my affirmative reading tries to bracket my beliefs (even if I realize that the task is impossible, it nevertheless regulates my readings here) to come nearer to the strangeness and difference produced by reading Thoreau, just as Thoreau so often did when faced with what he found incredible. That is an attitude akin to what Jonathan Lear terms that of a "bird-philosopher," by which he means a thinker or reader who listens instead of judging, somebody who is, as he specifies, wise only in the manner of a chickadee, for "the wisdom of a chickadee consists" of "learning to listen," "sharpening ears by constant use."[24] In Thoreau too, chickadees are extraordinary beings ready to listen to and follow what is different. In fact, in the later Thoreau, chickadees became an emblem of an exceptional capacity for self-transformation enacted through an effort to hear the beings that populate a non-chickadee world, as when a chickadee listens to a twitter that, as if to "attract a [twitter] companion" releases a "distinct gnah," whose meaning should be incomprehensible to a nontwittering creature, such as a chickadee, since its refrain, according to Thoreau's transliteration, is "tche de de de" (Jn, 12, 87). And yet, after patiently listening to this strangeness, the chickadee was observed to understand the call and "unfailingly followed," perhaps not quite becoming a twitter but nevertheless accompanying the twitter into its twitter world, forming

an anomalous twitter-chickadee couple (Jn, 11, 391). Adopting the way of a chickadee, neither supporting nor disproving Thoreau's thinking—finally released from having to evaluate the "rightness" of an author's position—I have tried to follow him, not necessarily to accept but to "learn the particular ground" that his thinking occupies; that is, I tried to learn what his ideas could possibly mean, which, as Cavell reminds us, is "not the same as providing an evidence for them" but is instead the "matter of making them evident. And my philosophical interest in making them evident is the same as my interest in making evident the beliefs of another man, or another philosophy."[25] It is an interest not in reconciling difference into unity but in cherishing it, allowing it to stay.

To make Thoreau's thought evident I follow it as far as it leads. To follow Thoreau's thinking to its first cause or extreme consequences, rather than interrupting him every once in a while to critique him, doesn't mean that I am at the mercy of what I disagree with, since in the affirmative reading I imagine, to use Cavell's phrasing once again, the "critic and his opposition [don't] have to come to *agree* about certain propositions which until now they had disagreed about."[26] Instead, following Thoreau to his extreme consequences means reaching his final complication, experiencing the impasse he creates and, through the experience of this final boundary of what can be thought, formulating a new problem (instead of answering an existing question). Questions are formulated on the basis of already existing solutions (whether Thoreau's thought answers the criteria of truthful thinking, whether it has recourse to illicit forces of the fantastic, whether his call for literalization is a fantasy, or whether his books are well written—these are all questions one can raise and answer only because one already knows that truthful thinking must be conceptual, hence metaphorical, noncontradictory, and nonoccult, and because one already has a set of aesthetic standards outlining what a "good book" is). In contrast, as Gilles Deleuze, another advocate of affirmative thinking puts it, "the art of constructing a problem," the "invention of the problem-position" occurs "before finding a solution."[27] Problems are formed in an extreme precariousness of thinking, when it is unprotected by questions and faces the un-thought, what threatens to devastate it, what puts it at risk or has it confront an abyss. The Thoreau I encountered is a thinker who manages to avoid such protective questions; always ready to risk exposing thought to the awe of its own cancellation, he formulates unprecedented problems. I have tried, as humbly as possible, to follow his thinking to the very core of the problems it creates, where its precariousness threatens it with dissolution.

Following Thoreau's ideas is a task that is additionally complicated by the ritualistic if not obsessive nature of his thinking, which makes him seem to work through the same problem of transformation time and again. Respectful of nuance, he always formulates the problem of change from a slightly different vantage, which, especially in the *Journal*, often gives an impression of repetitiveness. This "slightness of difference," a difference that verges on repetition, confronts the critic with the difficult question of how radically to summarize his insights: does it suffice simply to suggest that transformation overwhelms his thinking, or should the critic, rather, follow the "slightness of difference," to see what it generates? Faithful to my effort to respect the general orientation of Thoreau's work, I try to solve this quandary by obeying his slow pace, letting Thoreau teach me how to respect his nuances, and realizing that he is anyway not a thinker for the impatient ones. As a result, in different sections of the book I return to seemingly similar problems but in order to draw, as Thoreau does, different conclusions from them.

While my Thoreau is influenced by the great ecological readings of Lawrence Buell above all, but also of Jane Bennett and Laura Dassow Walls, Thoreau is nevertheless less an ecologist than a thinker obsessed with the problem of life in a properly ontological sense. By this I mean not only that everything in his world—from stones to humans—is alive, but also that in his philosophy life is afforded the status of a force that precedes and generates all individuations and into which individual forms dissolve. Consequently, death is considered a process of deformation but not of cessation. Differently put, in Thoreau's world death does not have the power to interrupt life but instead functions as the force of its transformation, enabling us to experience finitude while ushering us into what

remains animated. My book thus tells the story of how this central claim—which I have termed "vitalism" and whose meaning I develop in the Introduction to Part II of the book—came to be and how it fashions and complicates Thoreau's epistemology, science, poetics, and politics.

Because each part of the book is contextualized by its own introduction, here I offer only a very general outline of the whole. I argue that vitalism emerged as a central issue for Thoreau in the wake of his brother's death. The intense grief that remained following John's departure prompted him to ask sometimes disconcerting questions about what, and even whether, death was, leading him ultimately toward a stunning theory of grief as well as a novel epistemology and the outlines of a science of life. The first part of the book thus explores the theory of grieving that Thoreau formulated in response to John's death. That theory was based on a form of "unforgetting," which, by changing how we understand personhood, evolved into a philosophical proposition concerning life and an ethics of the treatment of living beings. In analyzing Thoreau's response to his own grief, I suggest that the ideas he will begin to formulate from 1842 on, relating to "perpetual grief," are explicitly predicated on the archaic Greek practice of perpetual mourning *(álaston pénthos)*. I suggest that Thoreau's perpetual grief—the ban on forgetting the loss—is closer to an ontological operation of restoration of the loss than the modern psychological commitment to protecting the interest of the mourner. Because his theory of grief is formulated under the influence of Greek sources—Hesiod's cosmology, Homer's epics, Greek tragedy, and Pindar's poetry—and because, following those sources it sometimes offers fantastic propositions and entertains ideas of magical transformations, I have titled the first part of the book a "mythology" of mourning.

As Thoreau's mourning leads him to question the existence of death and as this question leads him in turn deeper into an engagement with contemporary sciences of life, Thoreau comes to realize that many of the versions of vitalism he had been investigating through Greek sources—from Thales to Aristotle and Lucretius—had been revived and given scientific status. The second part of my book thus charts Thoreau's investigation of and contribution to the pre-

Darwinian sciences of life, at the same time reconstructing how he was influenced by the rarely discussed theories of life formulated by a group of scientists working in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts, and related to Harvard University, whom I came to call the "Harvard vitalists." That influence was profound, and the work of Bigelow, Felton, Guyot, Holmes, Nuttall, Tuckerman, Ware, and Waterhouse led, I argue, to Thoreau's formulating a vitalistic philosophy that would lead in later years to a more complex homeopathic proposal regarding the physiology and pathology of living beings. I investigate Thoreau's obsessive interest in vegetal tumors—galls and other abnormal plant outgrowths—as well as his lifelong preoccupation with vegetal decay, to propose that his research into life forms that generate through self-multiplication leads him to a larger philosophical claim about what constitutes life.

It is those theories of life, as I argue in the third part of this book, that enabled Thoreau to formulate a complex materialist epistemology, redefining not just the dualistic divide between matter and mind, body and memory, but by extension the Western understanding of subjectivity as well. In articulating such an epistemology Thoreau was guided by Eastern philosophical traditions. Thus, charting the epistemological consequences of Thoreau's study of Hinduism—from the *Gita* to Mahayana Hinduism and the *Sānkhya Kárika* school of thought—I investigate how that work helps him articulate, in *A Week* and in *Walden*, an image of new thought, a thinking predicated on radical dispossession and self-impoverishment verging on self-annihilation. But my reconstruction of Thoreau's epistemology of dispossession also makes an ethical claim. For if I am correct in suggesting that Thoreau worked toward weakening the self rather than—as is too often proposed—strengthening it, then certain political and ethical consequences necessarily derive from that. Perhaps nothing is more iconic in the history of American ideas than the image of Thoreau, sitting asocial and highly individualized in his cabin, distanced from a world that he has left to its own devices. His supposed strong version of individualism has typically been understood as emblematic of the brutal capitalism of Jacksonian America; or alternatively, his supposed resolutely isolated individual is taken as representing values that fit well with liberalism, which

effectively weakens leftist efforts to enact collective social change. But if we understand that Thoreau was working not toward individualism but toward its opposite, toward a radical weakening of the self, advocating a precarious self that doesn't conform to any Jacksonian American value, we would be obliged to rethink our understanding of his politics and ethics. Indeed, since the self-cancellation that Thoreau proposes is so radical as to be almost unthinkable in the framework of Western logic and ontology, what kind of ethics could possibly be predicated on it?

To answer that question, in the last part of my book I discuss how Thoreau's understanding of mourning was mobilized as a means of gathering or recollecting community. I thus dwell on his practice of writing obituaries for people he didn't know and who didn't have anybody to bury and mourn them; I write about his habit of frequenting estate sales to recover personal effects of the dead, and I inquire into what kind of ethics or even politics might emerge from his idea that the loss I mourn doesn't have to be mine, that I can take over losses of others as if they were mine, and vice versa, that what I lost can be mourned and recovered by a community of others—whom Thoreau calls "travelers" he meets on the road—others who seek to recover my losses as if they were theirs. And I suggest that far from arresting the mourner in the stupor of grief, such practices of communal mourning in fact enable action and mobilize a community based on an ethics of caring, sharing, and participating.

Although my book is clearly a monograph dedicated to Thoreau's thinking, its reconstruction of the scientific and philosophical concerns of his America, with its religious and political turmoil and ethical quandaries, also makes this work a more general treatise on the antebellum cultural environment. Instead of addressing one topic through the work of many authors, the analysis moves through a range of discursive formations and offers a "feel" of antebellum culture based on the work of one author.

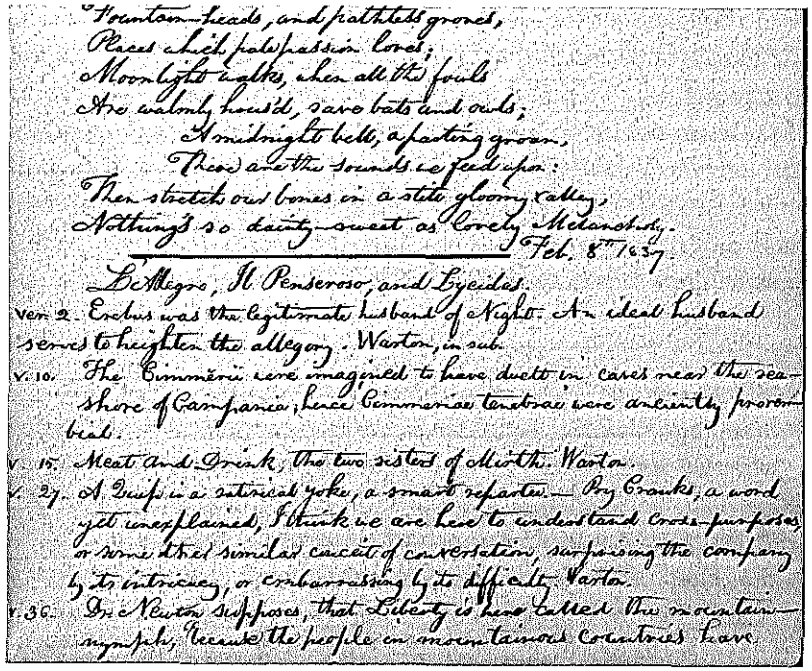
Birds fly throughout this book, because they fly throughout Thoreau's work. They fly through *A Week*, most notably in the discussion regarding the green bittern staring at two brothers as they are "rolling up" the Concord River; they fly through *Walden*, where a

turtle dove embodies a loss taking its leave of Thoreau, and where the loon is summoned to emblematize capacity that all life has for metamorphosis. They also fly through Thoreau's Walden Pond cabin: "I sat in my sunny doorway . . . while the birds . . . flitted noiseless through the house" (Wa, 111). They are everywhere in his *Journal* and his walks, because they are always on his mind as he learns their different languages, caught in a genuine bird-becoming process. In the words of Frederick L. H. Willis, who visited him in his cabin in July 1847:

> [Thoreau] said: "keep very still and I will show you my family." Stepping quickly outside the cabin door, he gave a low curious whistle; immediately a woodchuck came running towards him. . . . With still another note several birds, including two crows, flew towards him, one of the crows nestling upon his shoulder. . . . He fed them all from his hand . . . and then dismissed them by a different whistling, always strange and low and short, each little wild thing departing instantly at hearing its special signal.[28]

If birds assume such a central role in Thoreau, it is because, as I argue, they are for him undying repositories of memory. Some readers have noted that his writing employs birds as metaphors of elegiac recollection, as when he addresses John in "Brother where dost do well?"—a poem probably written in 1842 and sent to Sophia in 1843—asking "what bird wilt thou employ / To bring me word of thee?"[29] In that question, on Sherman Paul's understanding, birds are employed in the same way as nature in "Lycidas," a poem whose parts Thoreau copied in one of his very early commonplace books.

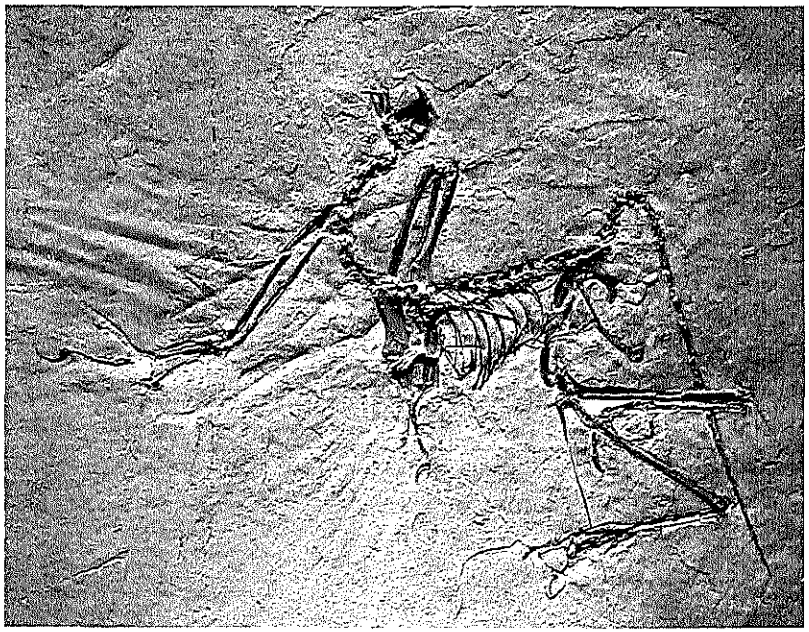
Nature sympathetically records the poet's personal grief yet remains "barren and silent," failing to offer consolation. In Paul's account, birds are irrelevant as birds and assume meaning only as "prisms of [Thoreau's] own subjective idealism."[30] In contrast to Paul I argue that birds in Thoreau can become emblematic sites of recollection only because in a very materialistic manner he always afforded them the status of literal living relics, elevating them to immortal beings in perpetual change and capable of hosting what


"Fountain-heads, and pathless groves,
Places which pale passion loves;
Moonlight walks, when all the fowls
Are warmly housed, save bats and owls;
A midnight bell, a parting groan,
These are the sounds we feed upon:
Then stretch our bones in a still gloomy valley,
Nothing's so dainty-sweet as lovely Melancholy."
Feb. 8th 1637.
L'Allegro, Il Penseroso, and Lycidas.
Ver. 2. Erebus was the legitimate husband of Night. An ideal husband serves to heighten the allegory. Warton, in sub.
v. 10. The Cimmerii were imagined to have dwelt in caves near the sea-shore of Campania, hence Cimmerian tenebrae were anciently proverbial.
v. 15. Meat and Drink, the two sisters of Mirth. Warton.
v. 27. A Quip is a satirical joke, a smart repartee. — Pry Cranks, a word yet unexplained, I think we are here to understand cross-purposes, or some other similar conceit of conversation, surprising the company by its intricacy, or embarrassing by its difficulty. Warton.
v. 36. Dr. Newton supposes, that Liberty is here called The mountain-nymph, because the people in mountainous Countries have

Lycidas, Thoreau's notes; thoughts on books. Autograph notebook signed: Cambridge, Mass., [ca. 1836–1839]. The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. Purchased by Pierpont Morgan with the Wakeman Collection, 1909. MA 594.

has been. That is less strange than it might seem. For during the decades when Thoreau was writing, paleontology—itself a relatively novel science, the word *paléontologie* being coined by Cuvier's student Henry Marie Ducrotay de Blainville only in 1822—still hadn't discovered bird fossils as distinct from the widespread marine and reptile fossils that became the basis for Agassiz's work and his more general theory of the history of life. It was only in 1861 that German paleontologist Herman von Meyer discovered "the first remnant of a bird from pre-Tertiarty times," which he famously named *Archaeopteryx lithographica*.[31]

This discovery immediately generated the discussion that would enable Richard Owen, and later, Thomas Huxley, to speculate about the bird's "reptilian nature" and to suggest that birds flew from one period of earth's life to another, thereby maintaining its continuity



Archaeopteryx bavarica, Paläontologisches Museum, München. Solnhofen limestone (Plattenkalk). Photograph: Luidger, October 2, 2005.

while they themselves slowly underwent actual transformations.[32] Contemporary paleontologists know that the rarity of bird fossils is due to their small and fragile hollow-boned skeletons, which frustrate fossilization. But their absence from the paleontological archives in the 1830s and 1840s was understood by Thoreau as a lack of traces of death, which enabled him to imagine birds as an undying form of life capable of literal metamorphosis; hence his somewhat bizarre juxtaposition in *A Week* of human and avian bones prompted by the sight of reed-birds flying over "some graves of the aborigines" (W, 237). Both are metamorphosing; but while human bones are "mouldering elements preparing for . . . metamorphosis" into the plants they are going to feed, the reed-birds' bones undergo a different metamorphosis, rustling into new birds that render "the . . . race of reed-birds . . . undying" (W, 237). In the philosophical imagination of Thoreau's ornithology birds really are a form of life that

cancels death by self-change, promising the fabulous renewals that Thoreau will extend to the whole of nature.

In the book that follows I summon birds in various ways. Birds fly here from mythology, the Bible, poetry, Greek tragedy, superstition, natural history, geology, and paleontology. Sometimes I invoke them as emblems of grief, at other times as the embodiment of lament. Sometimes they are clues into Thoreau's philosophy of life, at other times they are more specifically considered in the context of his ornithology. Sometimes they are omens of awesome events awaiting us, at other times their refrains voice the song of the dead. But whenever and however they appear, they are always avatars of the infinite life that is also its own—hence total—memory. They are always what Thoreau calls "living relics," embodying the central premise of his philosophy: that life commemorates itself.

Part I

Dyonisia, 467 BC: The Mythology of Mourning