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The Early Literary Career

Transcendental Apprenticeship, 1837–1844

DURING THE YEARS after his graduation from college, Thoreau grappled with the problem of vocation and felt his way tentatively toward a life in letters. Getting a living was never really a practical problem for him, for he could always (and indeed often did) work at the family pencil and graphite business, which gradually improved despite the economic hard times of the late thirties and early forties. The greater challenge than poverty was success, for he might easily have become prosperous by applying himself consistently rather than intermittently to this work. But the traditional professions open to college graduates—law, the church, business, medicine—failed to interest him, and there was very little of a saleable or even publishable nature he was prepared to write at age twenty-one: His proclivities and training equipped him to be a fair classical scholar and reader of English poetry but little else. And Thoreau was probably too independent, too tinged with Transcendental ideas, and too provincial to make any headway in the literary circles of Boston or New York, as his brief sojourn in the latter city a few years later would demonstrate.

He turned, naturally enough, to the remaining profession traditionally followed by Harvard graduates and practiced by all three of his siblings: teaching school. He first taught briefly in the Concord public school, choosing to resign after a few weeks rather than ferule the students, and then, with his brother John, conducted the Concord Academy from 1838 to 1841. The demanding work of keeping a school was a retarding influence on Thoreau's own reading and writing, and it was not until John's health forced the brothers to close the school in 1841 that Thoreau's reading and literary activity began to gather momentum again. Meanwhile, the founding of *The Dial* in 1840 and his growing intimacy with Emerson gave him an outlet and some direction and stimulus to his rather vague literary ambitions.

Opportunities for study were more limited in Concord at this time

than they would later be. The town had no public library yet, only the Concord Social Library of fewer than a thousand volumes. The Fitchburg Railroad, linking Concord to Boston, would not be built for several years, so travel to libraries in the metropolis—later a regular practice for Thoreau—was inconvenient. He depended for the most part on his own and his family's small collection of books, the slender resources of the Social Library, and especially and most importantly on the library of his new friend Emerson. With characteristic generosity, Emerson gave the young schoolteacher access to his books, undoubtedly the finest collection of literature, philosophy, history, and religion in Concord, and even borrowed books for him from the library of the Boston Athenaeum.¹ Under these conditions, Thoreau seems for a time not to have kept up the habit that he had developed in college of making extracts from and careful records of his reading, and it is only from the surviving pages of his early Journal that we can glean any indication of what he was reading at this time.

Generally, this post-college reading tended to extend and develop interests that he had begun to cultivate at Harvard. Foremost among these interests during the fall of 1837 was Goethe, whose *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* he had read in Carlyle's translation the previous summer during his last term in college, prompted in all probability by Longfellow's enthusiastic lectures on modern German literature. Thoreau now read Goethe in the original, borrowing volumes from Emerson, who owned a fifty-five-volume German edition and who was himself reading and translating Goethe at this time.² Thoreau read *Torquato Tasso*, *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, and *Die Italiänische Reise* that fall, probably in part to keep up and improve his German as well as to acquaint himself with Goethe. His commentary on Goethe in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* faults him for too exclusively regarding life from the artist's vantage point, but Thoreau seems to have been impressed by the fidelity and sensitivity of Goethe's descriptions of his travels in the *Italiänische Reise*, praise that may mark an influence on his own interest in travel writing that was to develop in a few years (PJ 1.6–30; WE, 325–330). It is also possible that Goethe's ideas about the metamorphosis of plants caught Thoreau's

1. See Harding, *Emerson's Library*, and Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Ralph Waldo Emerson's Reading* (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1962). The latter lists Emerson's borrowings from the Boston Athenaeum as well as from other libraries, and Thoreau can frequently be found to be reading a book after Emerson withdrew it. See, for example, Thoreau's reading of the *Laws of Menu* (n. 5, below).

2. Harding, *Emerson's Library*, p. 118; on October 27, for example, Emerson comments on *Torquato Tasso* (JMN 5.415), and Thoreau quotes from the same work on October 26 (PJ 1.6–7).

attention at this time. The *Italiänische Reise* describes Goethe's search for the "protoplant" (*Urpflanze*), an underlying form that would explain the principles of vegetation, and records his excitement upon intuiting that this underlying form was in actuality the leaf.³ In his Journal for December 1837—at the same time that he is reading *Die Italiänische Reise*—Thoreau speculates in a Goethean fashion on the fundamental law governing ice crystallization and vegetation:

It struck me that these ghost leaves [of hoarfrost] and the green ones whose forms they assume, were the creatures of the same law. It could not be in obedience to two several laws, that the vegetable juices swelled gradually into the perfect leaf on the one hand, and the crystalline particles trooped to their standard in the same admirable order on the other. (PJ 1.15-16)

Several years would pass before Thoreau would turn his attention seriously to the underlying laws of natural phenomena, but he was acquainted this early, through Goethe, with some of the general ideas of German *Naturphilosophie*.

Much of his other reading from 1837 to 1839 also suggests at least in part an effort to continue and to build upon his training in languages. He read and translated occasionally in the Journal passages from the *Iliad*, Virgil's *Eclogues*, Plutarch's *Morals*, Greek verses purportedly by Anacreon, and Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* and *Seven Against Thebes*. His classical training offered him a sort of bridge to writing for publication, too, for his first printed essay would be on the Latin satirist Aulus Persius Flaccus in the inaugural issue of *The Dial* (July 1840), and he would complete translations of Aeschylus and Pindar for the magazine during ensuing years. Not only were the classics a lifelong interest, but translating them was a literary activity that harmonized with his occupation, since he was responsible for the Greek and Latin curriculum of the Concord Academy. His interest in the English literature of earlier periods, on the other hand, is only sporadically noticeable, in quotations from Sharon Turner's *History of the Anglo-Saxons* and occasional allusions to Milton and earlier English poets (PJ 1.1-100).

Early in 1840, however, Thoreau's reading—at least the record of it that he left—and his literary activity began to increase, largely as a result, one suspects, of his growing intimacy with Emerson and the inauguration of *The Dial*. The two most prominent emphases of his reading at this time were a renewed interest in the history of philoso-

3. Goethe's *Travels in Italy: Together with His Second Residence in Rome and Fragments of Italy* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1885), pp. 387-390.

phy and the beginning of what would become an intense interest in Oriental thought. Both of these interests reflect the Transcendentalists' eclectic preferences, and both would ultimately be related to the character and contents of *The Dial* and Thoreau's involvement with it as contributor and editor.

The philosophical or quasi-philosophical works that he read between the spring and fall of 1840 included Ralph Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe*, Gérando's *Histoire Comparée des Systèmes de Philosophie*, and Fénelon's *Abrégé de la Vie des Plus Illustres Philosophes de l'Antiquité* (PJ 1.121–180). All these works reinforced, to a young man tinctured with Transcendentalism, the philosophical idealism and eclecticism that Thoreau had been exposed to in college. Individually and in sum, they offer no sustained or systematic analysis of any school of philosophy, but rather stress the timeless thoughts and wisdom of philosophers of various ages. Gérando's work was an extension of that of Cousin and Jouffroy, which Thoreau had read in college, and although Cudworth's tome intended to demonstrate, in the words of its subtitle, how "the reason and philosophy of atheism [could be] confuted" by a close examination of philosophy, Thoreau doubtless read it as Emerson did, not for its Christian apologia but as "a magazine of quotations, of extraordinary ethical sentences, the shining summits of ancient philosophy."⁴

All three of these works were in Emerson's library, and Thoreau's reading of them at this time suggests that his friendship with the older man had ripened to the stage of sharing not only literary but also philosophical and ethical concerns. Unlike Emerson, however, Thoreau seldom extended his reading of philosophy to original texts (although Emerson himself was by no means a carefully systematic reader of philosophy). Thoreau tended to know philosophy through secondary sources such as these, and his interest in the discipline always tended toward a sort of "practical teleology": Although he was, like the other Transcendentalists, by instinct and training a philosophical idealist, he was especially concerned with how actually to live life according to the dictates of the higher law. He had little appetite for philosophical systems or argument as such, and, as Ellery Channing aptly remarked in his memoir of Thoreau, "metaphysics was his aversion." As he was later to put it in *Walden*, "To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically" (WA, 14–15).

4. JMN 9.265.

The ancient philosophers provided a heroic ideal, in much the same way that Homer did. The accounts of their lives in Fénelon's work, for example, stressed their simplicity of life, renunciation of wealth, and devotion to truth and learning. Like history, philosophy was always tending to become metamorphosed into biography for the Transcendentalists, as they searched the past for examples of human greatness and potential. Thoreau's notion of the ideal relation between philosophy and life is perhaps best represented by the Stoics—again, as much through the example of their lives as through their doctrines—but except for such snippets as he was exposed to in college (in Cicero's *De Officiis*, for example) and in this post-college period of reading in the history of philosophy where he comments approvingly on Zeno (PJ 1.26–27), he seems to have had relatively little formal or systematic knowledge of this school of philosophers.

Thoreau's reading of Oriental scriptures and philosophy also began at about this time and had a similarly ethical and practical cast. Emerson probably played a role in stimulating this interest, too: He had read and been impressed by the *Institutes of Hindu Law* (or *Laws of Menu*, as they were generally known), and near the end of July 1840 he again withdrew the book from the library of the Boston Athenaeum and lent it to Thoreau, who in August began referring to it in his Journal and making longer extracts from it.⁵ Emerson also owned or acquired other orientalia that Thoreau read at this time, including *The Hēētōpādēs of Vēēshnōō-Sārmā*, *The Gūlistān* of Sa'dī, and Ockley's *History of the Saracens*. On his own, Thoreau read Murray's history of British India.⁶ These titles represent only a smattering of topics on Near and Far Eastern cultures and thought, of course, and Thoreau would do little systematic reading in this field until a few years later. Still, it was another interest that he cultivated with Emerson, and one that would soon have tangible results in the pages of *The Dial*.

Otherwise, Thoreau continued to read widely and eclectically in 1840: essays by Bacon and Sir Thomas Browne, Gibbon's *Memoirs*, Virgil's *Georgics*, the *Odes* of Horace, Plutarch's *Morals*, and, most singular and significant in this otherwise mostly literary and classical list, Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (PJ 1.107–213 passim). Lyell's landmark study was the first work of contemporary hard science Thoreau left evidence of reading, and its importance was not only for uniformitarian geology but also for the biological sciences, estab-

5. Cameron, *Emerson's Reading*, p. 25; PJ 1.173; his longer extracts are in his "Miscellaneous Extracts" commonplace book (NNPM, MA 594).

6. Harding, *Emerson's Library*, pp. 301, 236; Cameron, *Emerson's Reading*, p. 25; PJ 1.177.

lishing with what appeared to be incontrovertible proof the great age of the earth—an age to be measured at least in millions rather than the biblical thousands of years—and thus preparing the way for the idea of the gradual change of species through evolution. Whether or not Thoreau sensed the significance of Lyell's conclusions at this time, he began tentatively with this work to lay a foundation for himself in contemporary natural science.

The turn toward a somewhat more focused and intensive reading in particular fields increased in 1841, made possible and prompted in part by two related events that gave Thoreau a great deal more time to pursue his literary studies. On the first of April the Thoreau brothers closed their school, and on the fourteenth of the same month Henry took up residence with the Emersons in the capacity of general handyman.⁷ The demands on his time now were fairly light, he had free access to Emerson's library, and not surprisingly he began once more to keep fairly extensive records of his reading. He also turned his energies toward a large-scale reading and literary project, while continuing to think of himself as an aspiring poet and reading selectively in philosophy and Oriental thought.

Already, in December 1840, he had begun to keep a dated list of his reading, and in the same month he began a new commonplace book—the first he had kept since college—in which to make extracts from his reading.⁸ The reading itself was still largely eclectic and miscellaneous—ranging from history and biography to natural history, philosophy, and travel literature—but a pattern of increasing interest in contemporary literary issues begins also to be evident. The most obvious signpost of this development is a marked interest in Coleridge's prose writings. A year or so earlier Thoreau had looked into the *Table Talk*, but now between January and April 1841 he read *Aids to Reflection*, *The Statesman's Manual*, and *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*.⁹ *Aids to Reflection* was especially significant for its careful exposition of the difference between Understanding and Reason, perhaps the key epistemological concept of the Romantic age. The edition that Thoreau is most likely to have read, the one edited by James Marsh in 1829, was

7. Harding, *Days*, pp. 87–88, 127–128.

8. The dated reading list was kept from December 5, 1840, to June 3, 1841. It is in the collection of the Huntington Library (HM 13201) and has been transcribed and printed by Kenneth Walter Cameron, "Ungathered Thoreau Reading Lists," pp. 368–371. Thoreau's new commonplace book was also probably begun in December 1840 and was kept until 1848 or 1849; it is currently in the Library of Congress and has been reprinted in a facsimile edition by Kenneth Walter Cameron as *Thoreau's Literary Notebook in the Library of Congress* (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1964).

9. PJ 1.97, 220, 230; Cameron, "Ungathered Thoreau Reading Lists," p. 368.

one of the most important and influential documents of American Transcendentalism, containing a long preliminary essay by the editor that calls particular attention to this distinction. In addition to providing himself with this background in the chief English exponent of the German philosophical thought that ultimately provided the underpinning of Transcendentalism, Thoreau also dipped into George Ripley's contemporary anthology, *Foreign Standard Literature*, and read Tocqueville's recently published *Democracy in America*. He even displayed what may have been a touch of pride in being especially *au courant*, noting in his reading list that in March and April he read Emerson's *Essays* (First Series) and Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* in proof sheets before publication.¹⁰

By early 1841, then, Thoreau's grounding in or at least exposure to the major tributaries of Transcendentalism was fairly thorough. Chiefly under Emerson's guidance he had read selections from the idealistic tradition of ancient philosophy, Oriental scriptures, modern eclectic philosophy, Anglicized articulations of German Transcendental thought, and contemporary essayists like Carlyle and Emerson himself. Thoreau had begun this course of reading on his own in college and was primed for it, so to speak, through his acquaintance with Orestes Brownson in 1836. Nevertheless, Emerson's own habits of voluminous and eclectic reading, his impressive library, and his kindness in sharing his books and his thoughts with Thoreau made a powerful impression on the younger man's training and cast of mind.

Beginning in the second half of 1841, however, Thoreau's major reading project took him away from this contemporary focus and back to an interest that he had begun to cultivate at Harvard in the English poetry of earlier periods, especially the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries. Emerson played a major role in this project, too, but the enterprise seems to have had its origin in Thoreau's desire to turn the freedom of his situation at Emerson's house to some literary account. From the fall of 1841 until shortly after his return to Concord from New York at the end of 1843, he read, copied extensively, and made notes and commentaries on English poetry and verse drama, and the surviving evidence suggests that he envisioned a major literary project of some kind—a book, probably, or a series of articles or lectures—on the subject.¹¹

The project had its origins that fall when Emerson lent Thoreau one

10. Cameron, "Ungathered Thoreau Reading Lists," p. 368.

11. The account of this project that follows in the text is based on Sattelmeyer, "Thoreau's Projected Work on the English Poets," pp. 239-257, where more extensive documentation may be found.

of his commonplace books containing selections from English poetry (which Emerson used many years later in compiling his own anthology of English verse, *Parnassus*), and Thoreau copied about twenty pages of these quite brief selections into one of his own commonplace books. Later that fall the project grew to a more ambitious scale, for Emerson advanced Thoreau fifteen dollars "in account of his book," as the lender noted, in order for him to go to Cambridge for two weeks, survey the Harvard Library holdings in English poetry, and copy out more extracts. Thoreau obtained a special library privilege by telling President Quincy that he was "engaged in a work . . . for which the aid of [the] Library is requisite," and prevailed upon his friend Charles Stearns Wheeler and another person named Bartlett to check out additional books for him. He bought new blank books, made extensive bibliographical listings of poets and editions, and copied out more than two hundred pages of extracts. He continued the work of transcription and commentary after his return to Concord in December and January, but then only sporadically during 1842. His brother's death in January left him quite ill and despondent for several months, and later in the year he was busy with other literary projects: "Natural History of Massachusetts" and "A Walk to Wachusett."

His second intensive period of work on the English poetry project took place during his sojourn on Staten Island in 1843 while he was tutoring William Emerson's son and trying to write for and (more improbably) get paid by New York magazines. He was largely unsuccessful in this effort, but the experience gave him an opportunity to cultivate libraries and librarians once again. "I read a good deal and am pretty well known in the libraries of New York," he wrote to his family in October, referring to the New York Society Library and the Mercantile Library (COR, 141). The charging records of these libraries do not survive to record all his borrowings, but we know that he discovered Ossian and Francis Quarles, both important to his English poetry project and did other reading in seventeenth-century poetry. His Staten Island Journal is rich in commentary on these poets that suggests critical headnotes or summaries that might precede selections in an anthology.

The precise nature of his collection of English poetry cannot be determined, however, since Thoreau never actually completed the project. It can be said that during this period he read and studied earlier English literature most intensely, and, as the range of his allusion in later works suggests, he read both widely and deeply in major and minor poets and dramatists from the Middle Ages to the end of the seventeenth century. It was this period in his life that he describes in *Walden*, for example, when he speaks of attempting to read through

Chalmers's twenty-one-volume anthology of English poetry "without skipping" (and falling asleep, perhaps forgivably, over Davenant's "Gondibert") (WA, 259). Given the sort of project that he seems to have contemplated, his reading was necessarily far more systematic and intensive in this field than in other of his interests early in his career, and would be matched in scope later in his life only by his study of American Indians, early American history and exploration, and natural history. It would be impractical, in fact, even to attempt to list his reading in English poetry, for the task would involve reproducing the tables of contents not only of Chalmers's massive anthology but also of numerous other collections, editions, and anthologies. (In the Bibliographical Catalogue the editions and anthologies he is known to have read are listed, but only those poets and poems that he quotes directly either in his manuscript notebooks or in his published works are cited.)

Of particular interest to him in this project, however, in addition to such standard authors as Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare (whose works he did not need to copy, since there was no scarcity of accessible editions), Jonson, and Milton, were earlier and often less polished works sometimes peripheral to the main development of English verse: Lydgate, such early Scottish poets as Gawin Douglas, Francis Quarles, and the Robin Hood ballads, for example. He also admired James McPherson's Ossian poems, a group of mostly "recreated" ancient Gaelic sagas, and the more scholarly collection of Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*.

What led him to these works, one suspects, was the Transcendental conviction that the most powerful poetic utterance would tend to be located in the rude and primitive beginnings of a poetic tradition. Thoreau generally assented to the theory of art and language sketched by Emerson in *Nature* which affirms that "as you go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry; or, all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols."¹² The earliest poets, then, are presumably closest to this magical moment of correspondence between nature and spirit, and, like children, come down to us trailing the clouds of this former glory. Similarly, folk poetry and ballads are also capable of this power. The practical upshot of this theory would lead to a preference for the precursors over the culminators of a poetic tradition, and certainly it led Thoreau to esteem at least in principle (he complained privately to the Journal about

12. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1, *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, introductions and notes by Robert E. Spiller, text established by Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 19.

reading "many weary pages of antiquated Scotch") the pre-Chaucerians, early Scottish poets, folk ballads, and the knotty and crabbed verse of Quarles and some other seventeenth-century poets (PJ 1.343). As he expressed the idea himself in a lecture, "Homer. Ossian. Chaucer," delivered to the Concord Lyceum in November 1843 at the end of his work on early poetry, "We cannot escape the impression, that the Muse has stooped a little in her flight when we come to the literature of civilized eras" (EEM, 162).

In a sort of corollary interest to the English poets project during this same time, Thoreau was fascinated with Sir Walter Raleigh. Raleigh was one of the Elizabethan poets whom he most admired, to be sure, and there are numerous extracts from Raleigh's work among his collections of copied verse. But his interest in Raleigh transcended his interest in the poetry, for Raleigh was above all an example of the heroic personality to which Thoreau was so attracted as a young man. Praising him as a soldier, scholar, discoverer, politician, poet, and historian, and even doing his best to sympathize with Raleigh's endeavors as a courtier, Thoreau found in him an embodiment of the sort of well-rounded and robust heroism that he had praised abstractly in his early essay "The Service." He read Raleigh's works (including the *History of the World*) and his biographers, delivered a lecture on him before the Concord Lyceum on February 8, 1843, and revised the lecture (probably shortly thereafter) for an essay that was not published during his life but appears now in the collection of his early and miscellaneous essays (EEM, 178-218).

After concentrating on his English poets project from late 1841 to early 1842, and again in 1843 while he had access to good libraries in New York, Thoreau gradually lost interest in the work. Not coincidentally, perhaps, he stopped thinking of verse as his own primary mode of literary expression at about the same time. And despite his deep and abiding interest in English poetry, he seems from the first to have had a certain amount of ambivalence about collecting and editing poetry as a literary enterprise. In Cambridge in November 1841, at the very beginning of his work, armed with blank notebooks and supported by Emerson's loan, he confided to the Journal that while "running over the catalogue, and collating and selecting" he felt "oppressed by an inevitable sadness" at the gulf between the spirit of poetry he imagined and the "dry and dusty volumes" he was poring over (PJ 1.337-338). For whatever reasons (and they may be as simple as a slackening of interest or as complicated as an unconscious resentment of Emerson's efforts to guide his career), Thoreau gradually gave up work on the project and turned toward both the reading and writing of prose instead.

If Emerson had not been successful in helping Thoreau to make a collection of English poetry in 1841, he was shortly to have better luck in steering his young friend's reading in directions that would help him begin to define his interests as a writer. Early in 1842 Emerson took over the editorship of *The Dial* from a tired and discouraged Margaret Fuller, and he was willing (though reluctantly) to do so perhaps not only because he cared for the success of the journal but also because he could rely on Thoreau for editorial assistance and regular contributions; in fact, Emerson soon referred to Henry as "private secretary to the President of the Dial."¹³ The immediate effect of this change on Thoreau was twofold. First, Emerson relied on him for help in making up the "Ethnical Scriptures" department of the magazine, a regular feature that printed excerpts from the religious and ethical writings of other cultures and ages in each issue. Consequently, Thoreau began to extend and amplify his reading of Oriental scriptures and philosophy, and a series of transcripts in his Journal from the *Institutes of Hindu Law* was probably made with a view toward the selections from this work printed in the January 1843 issue of *The Dial* (PJ 1.407-425; EEM, 380-382). Later "Ethnical Scriptures" columns for 1843 and early 1844—"The Sayings of Confucius," "Chinese Four Books" (Confucius and Mencius), and selections from Hermes Trismegistus and the *Gūlistān* of Sa'dī—are of uncertain origin, though Thoreau probably played at least some part in their selection and later demonstrated a knowledge of most of the works selected.¹⁴

The other and divergent path that his reading took at Emerson's urging was toward natural history. In April 1842, shortly after assuming the editorial reins, Emerson asked Thoreau to prepare a review of a recently published four-volume survey of the flora and fauna of Massachusetts.¹⁵ The result was his first natural history essay, "Natural History of Massachusetts," in the July 1842 issue. Although the essay is in part culled from sketches of natural history in the early Journal, it had apparently not occurred to Thoreau to turn his amateur interest in nature to literary account until Emerson commissioned this review. The essay itself is largely a collection of miscellaneous vignettes of local natural history that bears only the slimmest of relations to the volumes purportedly being reviewed (Thoreau was not professionally qualified

13. *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk, 6 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 3.47.

14. See EEM, 382, 383, 385-386, 390, for evidence of Thoreau's participation; but compare Joel Myerson, *The New England Transcendentalists and the "Dial"* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1980), pp. 307-308, who attributes the selections primarily to Emerson.

15. Emerson, *Letters*, 3.47.

to review them in a rigorous way, anyway), but from this modest beginning grew one of the major interests—indeed almost the preoccupation—of his maturity. In 1842 and 1843, however, Thoreau was still uncertain about the direction that his literary career (if he was in fact to have one) would take. He was reading English poetry, trying out various kinds of prose compositions and lectures on literary and miscellaneous topics, and helping unofficially to edit *The Dial*. It would not be until the late 1840s that he would actually begin to record his observations of nature and to study natural history systematically.

Another disappointment to professional ambitions was his brief attempt to write for the New York literary market from May to November of 1843. Living on the edge of New York City, as one might expect, had the effect of making him long ardently for the woods and rivers of Concord, and indeed his best writing that summer was "A Winter Walk," an essay describing in careful detail the sensory and imaginative pleasures of a day's ramble in the environs of his home town. The chief impact of his reading may also have been to make plain to him what he was not suited for. He did his last concerted reading in English poetry in New York, and he also reviewed a utopian Fourierist tract by J. A. Etzler, *The Paradise Within the Reach of All Men*, for the *Democratic Review*. His critique of this fantasy, which promised a sort of new mechanical Eden through labor-saving devices, found Thoreau challenging the communitarian basis of most reform movements of the 1840s and anticipating in a way his reform community of one at Walden two years later:

Alas! this is the crying sin of the age, this want of faith in the prevalence of a man. Nothing can be affected but by one man. He who wants help wants everything. . . . We must first succeed alone, that we may enjoy our success together. . . . In this matter of reforming the world, we have little faith in corporations; not thus was it first formed. (RP, 42)

His New York experiment ended in late November 1843, when Thoreau returned home for Thanksgiving and apparently decided that there was no point in returning to continue what had been fruitless efforts to earn a living by his pen. Back in Concord for good, but now without any obvious literary prospects, he was again without access to good libraries. Even the faithful *Dial*, which had at least printed his early work, was about to cease publication (the April 1844 number was the last). He would not keep (or at least would not preserve) a regular Journal or record of his reading for the next eighteen months, and he was probably busier with his hands than with his head for a time, working long hours for the pencil business and helping his father

build a new family house. The record of his reading does not resume until he declared his personal independence day and moved into his cabin at Walden Pond on July 4, 1845.

Walden and Beyond, 1845–1849

FOR the next several years, Thoreau's life was peripatetic: In 1844, having recently returned from New York, he helped his family build and move into a new house on the outskirts of town; in 1845 he built and then lived for two years in his cabin at Walden Pond; in 1847 and 1848 he lived at the Emersons' again while Waldo was in Europe on an extended lecture tour; and in the summer of 1848 he moved back to the family home for good, though the next year there would be still another house to renovate before the Thoreaus settled permanently in 1850 in their Main Street residence in Concord.¹⁶ These were the busiest and quantitatively the most productive years of Thoreau's literary career, too, for between 1844 and 1849 he wrote and published *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, worked through two or three drafts of *Walden*, and thought of it as virtually ready to print by the time *A Week* appeared. He also wrote and published long articles on his first wilderness excursion to Maine, on the writings of Thomas Carlyle, and "Resistance to Civil Government," the essay on the duties of the individual to himself and the state that would become widely influential in the twentieth century as "Civil Disobedience."

Compared both to his apprentice years and to his later career, however, the period from 1844 to 1849 furnishes relatively little in the way of evidence of Thoreau's reading habits. Part of the scarcity of the record is actually a consequence of the accelerated pace of his literary activities during this time. Not only did writing and the various manual tasks that he was performing—building and remodeling houses and working in the pencil factory—consume much of the time and energy that he might normally have devoted to reading, but this ambitious program of literary projects also quite literally consumed much of the Journal in which Thoreau customarily left allusions to his reading. No Journal survives for nearly all of 1844 and the first half of 1845, and likewise nearly all of 1847 and the first half of 1848 are virtual blanks in the record. The Journal was probably kept only irregularly from 1844 to 1849, and such volumes as have survived are fragmentary, as Thoreau characteristically removed leaves from them for insertion in drafts of literary works in progress.¹⁷ The surviving por-

16. Harding, *Days*, pp. 177–178, 221, 263.

17. PJ 2, "Historical Introduction," pp. 445–447.

tions of the Journal and the literary works themselves, however, do provide sufficient information to sketch at least inferentially the developments in his intellectual and literary interests that his reading patterns mark.

By his own testimony, Thoreau did less reading than usual during the summer of 1845 at Walden: "I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans" (WA, 111). His only reading, he says, consisted of an occasional passage from the *Iliad*, which he kept open on his desk, and "one or two shallow books of travel" (p. 100). Although he may have thought these travel books shallow (at least for the rhetorical purposes of "Reading" in *Walden*), his reading of them was probably not entirely for purposes of escape or entertainment. He was about to begin writing a kind of travel book himself, by which he hoped to achieve some popular success as a writer. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, to which he would devote most of his time during that first year, provides a convenient summary of the various tributaries of his reading at the time, since the book itself is a compendium of his early works and interests. But before these various interests that manifest themselves in *A Week* are considered, one other literary project with some significance for developments in Thoreau's career needs to be examined.

During the fall and winter of 1845–1846 Thoreau prepared a lecture on Thomas Carlyle that he delivered in Concord on February 6, 1846. He had known Carlyle's work since his college years, when he read *Sartor Resartus* and the translation of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. During the early 1840s he kept in touch with Carlyle's work almost inevitably, since Emerson was so actively engaged in promoting and publishing his Scottish friend's work in America: On at least one occasion, for example, Emerson presented Thoreau with a copy of Carlyle's most recent book. But in 1845 Thoreau read and reread Carlyle intensively for his lecture and for a subsequent essay published in *Graham's Magazine* in 1847, concentrating on Carlyle's historical works *The French Revolution* and his recent edition of *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*.¹⁸

Carlyle represented to Thoreau, as he remarks in the essay, "the hero, as literary man," and like many of his contemporaries he owed a good deal to Carlyle for making accessible and popularizing German thought and literature in the English-speaking world (EEM, 243). Nor was he above capitalizing on Carlyle's most popular pieces; the pas-

18. See Chapter 1 for evidence of his earlier reading of Carlyle, and PJ 2.187–226 *passim* for his reading of Carlyle in 1845–46.

sages on dress in "Economy" in *Walden*, for example, are clearly indebted to Carlyle's exposition of the philosophy of clothes in *Sartor Resartus*. But the chief influence of Carlyle was at a little lower layer, at the level of Thoreau's development of his mature voice and prose style.

During the second half of 1845, while he was working on the Carlyle lecture, Thoreau was beginning to compose passages in the Journal, based on his life at the pond, of personal belief and social criticism that would form the kernel of "Economy" and "Where I Lived and What I Lived For" in *Walden*. Though he did not begin to write *Walden* itself until somewhat later, a large proportion of the material in the first draft can be found in the fragmentary Journal of 1845–1846.¹⁹ Many of these passages appear to be a response to and an imitation of the features of Carlyle's style that Thoreau found significant and praiseworthy, especially the adoption of a distinctive persona to unify and enliven diverse material, and the deliberate cultivation of a rhetoric of exaggeration. The vigor and force of Carlyle's style, achieved through his characteristic exaggeration and various mannerisms of emphasis, seemed remarkable to Thoreau, whose praise has about it a sense of self-discovery: "One wonders how so much, after all, was expressed in the old way, so much here depends upon the emphasis, tone, pronunciation, style, and spirit of the reading. No writer uses so profusely all the aids to intelligibility which the printer's art affords. You wonder how others had contrived to write so many pages without emphatic or italicised words, they are so expressive, so natural, so indispensable here, as if none had ever used the demonstrative pronouns demonstratively before" (EEM, 229). But these mannerisms and the strategy of deliberate exaggeration made Carlyle something more than the Tom Wolfe of Thoreau's generation, for there was a basis of moral and epistemological truth in the style, as Thoreau—using the trick himself—makes clear in defending it: "Exaggeration! was ever any virtue attributed to man without exaggeration: was ever any vice, without infinite exaggeration? . . . To a small man every greater is an exaggeration. He who cannot exaggerate is not qualified to utter truth. . . . Moreover, you must speak loud to those who are hard of hearing, and so you acquire a habit of shouting to those who are not" (EEM, 264–265).

One need only compare familiar passages from the early pages of *Walden* dating from this same time to glimpse Thoreau putting this theory and these devices into practice: "Talk of divinity in man! Look at the teamster on the highway, wending to market by day or night;

19. PJ 2, "Historical Introduction," p. 456.

does any divinity stir within him? His highest duty is to fodder and water his horses! What is his destiny to him compared with the shipping interests? Does not he drive for Squire Make-a-stir? How godlike, how immortal is he? See how he cowers and sneaks, how vaguely all the day he fears, not being immortal nor divine, but the slave and prisoner of his own opinion of himself, a fame won by his own deeds" (WA, 7). Thoreau was aware of the danger of falling under the influence of a style so distinctive and recognizable (having written "Carlyleish" in the margin next to a passage in his Journal as early as 1838), and he found fault with Carlyle for ultimately "indicat[ing] a depth . . . which he neglects to fathom" (PJ 1.34; EEM, 257). Still, the rhetorical verve and the distinctive—almost aggressive—insistence upon the first personness of the narrator in *Walden* may owe a great deal to Thoreau's immersion in Carlyle when the book was in its embryonic stage. Certainly Carlyle helped Thoreau to liberate his style from the decorum and polite diction that characterize his early work and reflect his training in eighteenth-century rhetorical principles at Harvard.

Thoreau's main literary activity during his first year at the pond, however, was the writing of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. He had begun collecting material for the book a few years earlier (perhaps as early as 1840), and he would continue to work on it until late 1848 or very early 1849, but by July of 1846 it was complete enough for him to read portions of the manuscript to Emerson, who described it as though it were a finished book: "In a short time," he told Charles King Newcomb, "if Wiley & Putnam smile, you shall have Henry Thoreau's 'excursion on Concord & Merrimack rivers,' a seven days' voyage in as many chapters, pastoral as Isaak Walton, spicy as flagroot, broad & deep as Menu."²⁰

A Week was Thoreau's first book, and (typical of first books) it expressed many ambitions and acknowledged many obligations. It was a travel narrative; a tribute—almost a pastoral elegy—to his brother John, the unnamed companion on the voyage; an anthology of Thoreau's own early writings; and an attempt to achieve the sort of synthesis of books, nature, and action that constituted the formative influences on the American Scholar as Emerson had described him to Thoreau's graduating class in 1837. It was also, following naturally from these impulses, a compendium of his reading to date, for the scholar's duty, according to Emerson again, was to be expressed "by

20. Emerson, *Letters*, 3.338; See WE, "Historical Introduction," pp. 433–500, for an account of the book's genesis.

preserving and communicating heroic sentiments, noble biographies, melodious verse, and the conclusions of history.”²¹

Many of the areas of Thoreau’s reading most prominently represented in *A Week* are those already well defined and developed in his early years—classical literature, English poetry, and Oriental thought—about which little need be said. The wealth of quotation from the English poets in the book represents a carryover from the earlier and more ambitious project on the same subject, and he began in *A Week* to develop his thinking on the Oriental scriptures into a sustained exposition of their virtues that included a fairly sharp critique of Christianity as commonly practiced. In particular, Thoreau added the *Bhāgvāt-Geētā* to his store of Oriental reading in 1846, and wrote enthusiastically about it in his book, praising its “pure intellectuality” and observing sardonically that it “deserves to be read with reverence even by Yankees” (WE, 135–143).

One relatively new interest evident in *A Week* is history, especially the local and regional history of New England. Once Thoreau returned to Concord from his brief venture to New York at the end of 1843, he seems gradually to have become sensible of the richness of his native region, in much the same way that Faulkner, three-quarters of a century later, would discover the inexhaustible potential of his small corner of Mississippi after a series of early experiments and disappointments. Both *A Week* and *Walden* are suffused with a sense of New England history that enhances by contrast or complement the significance of present events and the undertakings of the protagonists. Thoreau’s retelling of the Hannah Duston captivity narrative in *A Week*, for example, suggests a tragic dimension to the New England experience not often apparent in the book, and his description of early New England Indian and settlers’ dwellings in *Walden* serves to sharpen his attack on the luxuries to which his contemporaries were wedded (WE, 320–323; WA, 29–30, 38–39).

The precise beginning of Thoreau’s careful reading of American history cannot be dated with certainty, but it seems to have had its inception while he was living at Walden and to be roughly contemporaneous with his early work on both *A Week* and *Walden*. Allusions to New England history in his writings and the Journal are sparse before this time, but *A Week*, completed in the beginning of 1849, contained quotations from and fairly detailed references to some dozen or so histor-

²¹. *Nature, Addresses and Lectures*, p. 62. The definitive study of the composition and genesis of *A Week* is Linck C. Johnson, *Thoreau’s Complex Weave: The Writing of “A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers” with a Text of the First Draft* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986).

ical works ranging from town histories of Concord, Dunstable, and Haverhill to such classic firsthand accounts of early settlement as Edward Johnson's *Wonder-Working Providence*, Nathaniel Morton's *New-England's Memorial*, John Smith's "Description of New England," and the histories of John Winthrop and Thomas Hutchinson.²² Thoreau did not reestablish his library privileges at Harvard until late 1849, and thereafter his charging records and manuscript notebooks furnish a quite comprehensive record of his reading in this area. Nevertheless, relying still on the Social Library's small collection and his own and his friends' books, Thoreau began to develop an interest in American history that would in the future carry him back to the age of exploration and discovery in North America and forward to a critical analysis of the historians of his own day.

Transcendental theory both hampered and encouraged this endeavor, conveying a conflicting message to the would-be historian about the value of his labor that is reflected in *A Week* by a certain ambivalence toward the subject. On the abstract and general level, history was suspect because it suggested a concentration on the past that Americans ought not to have. One of Emerson's signal achievements, after all, had been to assure his readers and listeners that to be born without an extensive history or rich traditions was actually a blessing and not a liability, a healthy condition of life in the New World that would be celebrated in Whitman's "Song of the Open Road," for instance. The well-known complaint that begins *Nature*—"Our age is retrospective"—was only true imaginatively (one could hardly imagine an age less "retrospective" than the Jacksonian) for a generation that wished to set itself above the mere writing of history. To discover the universal in the present moment was the Transcendentalists' aim, and Thoreau pays tribute to this ambition in *Walden* when he speaks of Time as "but the stream I go a-fishing in. . . . Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains" (p. 98). Or when he says of history in *A Week* that "critical acumen is exerted in vain to uncover the past; the past cannot be *presented*; we cannot know what we are not. But one veil hangs over past, present, and future, and it is the province of the historian to find out, not what was, but what is" (p. 155).

On the other hand, the literary nationalism that the Transcendentalists also espoused promoted the use of native materials and encouraged the development of American legends, heroes, historical events, and traditions in American literature. More important, "what is" in

22. See William Brennan, "An Index to Quotations in Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*," in *Studies in the American Renaissance: 1980*, ed. Joel Myerson (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), pp. 259-290.

the most universal sense could only be recovered by the sort of detailed study of primary documents that enabled one to pierce the mask of historical difference and recover the timeless facts that characterized human life in whatever era. As there was ultimately no contradiction, as we shall see, between Thoreau's disparagement of travel and his own travel reading and travel writing, there was finally no contradiction between his orthodox skepticism about a reliance on the past and his increasingly antiquarian researches. To read (and eventually in *Cape Cod* to try to write) history transcendentally was the challenge, and the path to this end led him, predictably, toward the original documents, the first reports, the eyewitness accounts that were history as "what is" rather than history as the discipline of writing about or attempting to *present* the past.

In *A Week* much of the attention to the historical past of the region through which the travelers pass focuses naturally enough on the Indian wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. If there had ever been a heroic age in New England it was during this epoch, when men and women endured the hardships of primitive settlements, harsh climate, isolation, and years of bloody struggle with Indian foes. Thoreau quotes from Daniel Gookin's account of the Puritans' attempt to convert the Indians and narrates at some length the familiar stories told in the song "Lovewell's Fight" and the various accounts of the captivity and escape of Hannah Duston (WE, 80-83, 119-122, 320-324). A note of awe and surprise is present in all these accounts. Thoreau wonders that such monumental endeavors and conflicts could have taken place so recently in a landscape where in the present day he finds only peace and burgeoning commerce. He also wonders how it was with the Indians, who left no chroniclers of their story. "There is no journal to tell" of their experiences, he muses in the conclusion to the recension of the Lovewell fight, and it takes little extrapolation to see the awakening of his own intense interest in the history of American Indians at the same time as he became more absorbed in the history of New England. Within a few years this interest, which had been a hobby with him since boyhood, would increase exponentially and eventually lead to the most extensive and scholarly program of reading that he would undertake during the last dozen years of his life.

In his retelling of the story of Hannah Duston, who escaped captivity by tomahawking her captors in their sleep, Thoreau goes beyond historical re-creation (though his narrative is vivid and imaginative) to tell a tale with mythic overtones of how the settlers became estranged from nature in the new land, a fable of an "American Paradise Lost," as Robert F. Sayre has aptly termed the episode in *Thoreau and the*

*American Indians.*²³ Here the historical accounts were not merely sifted and compared to construct an accurate version of the events; rather they were treated as being “instinct with significance,” to use Melville’s phrase for a factual story he hoped to write about, and it became the writer’s task to create a story that would somehow figure forth the deeper significance of the episode.

Thoreau may have gotten his stimulus for this sort of deliberate literary mythmaking from reading Alexander Ross’s *Mystagogus Poeticus, or The Muses Interpreter* about this time (PJ 2.184–186). Ross, a seventeenth-century divine, briefly retold the classical myths and followed each with a series of interpretations leading from the most obvious and “historical” to the most allegorical and sometimes improbable, usually culminating in a reading that would cause the myth to conform to some Christian moral, a practice for which he was ridiculed by later writers. But although Thoreau had known the Greek myths since reading Jacobs’s *Greek Reader* in his early teens at the Concord Academy, he began to look at mythology in a different light after reading Ross, apparently struck for the first time by the capacity of such unadorned tales from the prehistoric past to hold in suspension several layers of significance. His own mythologizing, consisting of outwardly simple, brief, resonant fables using quasi-historical or legendary figures (the artist of Kouroo in *Walden*, for example), may be related to his meditations on Ross. Like his reading of Cudworth’s *True Intellectual System*, his response to Ross seems to have involved discarding the vessel of Christian moralizing and fastening instead upon the implicit suggestiveness of the work for an artist working with historical or legendary materials. He records his rereading of the myths through Ross enthusiastically in the Journal early in 1846, and reworked and expanded the passages for *A Week*, where he concludes:

The hidden significance of these fables, which is sometimes thought to have been detected, the ethics running parallel to the poetry and history, are not so remarkable as the readiness with which they may be made to express a variety of truths. As if they were the skeletons of still older and more universal truths than any whose flesh and blood they are for the time made to wear.
 . . . In the mythus a superhuman intelligence uses the unconscious thoughts and dreams of men as its hieroglyphics to address men unborn. (PJ 2.184–186; WE, 61).²⁴

23. (Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 52.

24. See Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Myth and Literature in the American Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), esp. pp. 92–99, for Thoreau’s use of myth in *A Week*.

Thoreau's renewed interest in mythology inevitably sent him back to the classical writers themselves. The fragmentary Journal for 1847–1848 contains translations of the story of Phaeton and Apollo and the creation of the Cosmos out of Chaos from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (PJ 2.366–369). Robert D. Richardson, Jr., has shown how the climactic thawing-sand-and-clay section of "Spring" in *Walden*, the significance of which phenomenon Thoreau was beginning to realize about this same time, relies heavily on the *Metamorphoses* for its imagery. Moreover, the concept of metamorphosis itself, as Richardson points out, was to Thoreau and his contemporaries analogous to what evolution would be to the second half of the nineteenth century: "a master image of the workings of nature," a paradigm advanced by natural historians (especially Goethe) to account for the various and manifold expressions of life and their relationships to one another.²⁵ Thus Thoreau's interest in mythology, his allusions to Ovid, and his fable of creation and renewal in "Spring" are all part of a conceptual whole, a vision of the various forms of a single power working through both nature and the imagination. Nature, like history, could best be understood by discovering its primitive, naked forms or ur-phenomena, and in *Walden* Thoreau explicitly links the insight into the creative processes of nature that he receives from the thawing sand and clay to the creative power of mythology within a culture: "This is the frost coming out of the ground; this is Spring. It precedes the green and flowery spring, as mythology precedes regular poetry" (WA, 308).

It was about this time, too, that Thoreau read Coleridge's *Hints Toward . . . a More Comprehensive Theory of Life*, a posthumously published treatise arguing for a theory of metamorphosis or evolution and summarizing the laws of nature (polarity and individuation) by which evolutionary change takes place. As I have elsewhere argued, Thoreau's reading of this work in late 1848 may have acted profoundly as a catalyst to his own work as a naturalist, for Coleridge outlined a theory and practice of natural science that were fundamentally in harmony and not in conflict (as Thoreau's earlier exposure to eighteenth-century natural science had been) with the epistemological and aesthetic principles of Romantic thought.²⁶ Even more important,

25. Ibid. p. 137. See also Ronald Gray, *Goethe: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 120, where Goethe's theory of the metamorphosis of plants is summarized. Thoreau is remarkably close to Goethe's declaration that "alles ist Blatt" ("all is leaf") when he proclaims in "Spring" that "the Maker of this earth but patented a leaf" (p. 308).

26. Robert Sattelmeyer and Richard A. Hocks, "Thoreau and Coleridge's *Theory of Life*," in *Studies in the American Renaissance*: 1985 ed. Joel Myerson (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985), pp. 269–284.

perhaps, Coleridge linked his *Theory of Life* to a close and detailed study of natural phenomena and showed how a program of careful observation was integral to an understanding of nature's essential principles and processes. Thoreau took unusually careful notes from the *Theory of Life*, extracting its central arguments (a practice that he did not usually follow when taking notes on natural history books), and it may be that Coleridge's book gave him some of the stimulus that he needed to convert his youthful Transcendentalism and love of nature into a meaningful and satisfying life's work. The *Theory of Life* describes a creative force or power working through nature, a view related to and to an extent developed from the *Naturphilosophie* of Schelling, but also attentive, in its dependence upon the exhibits in John Hunter's museum, to the classification, observation, and cataloguing of specimens themselves. The study of nature in the light of this theoretical orientation becomes not an innocent diversion, nor even a way of appreciating the evidence of creation in some former ages (as the preceding age's natural theologians had it), but, as James Engel has recently phrased it, "a huge arena in which the individual human mind can seek the moving spirit of the world, and in which we learn to imitate the divine creative force."²⁷

At the same time, Thoreau was also reading a more purely philosophical treatise that summarized the tenets of this school of natural philosophers, J. B. Stallo's *General Principles of the Philosophy of Nature*, a work that contained, in addition to Stallo's exposition of the various "Evolutions" (his term for the various changes of form and development observable in nature), chapters detailing the views of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Oken, and Hegel. Stallo pays homage to "Father Goethe," as he calls him, as the progenitor of this school of thought, and distinguishes its principles from those of both the natural theologians and the materialists.

The theoretical and methodological grounding that Thoreau absorbed from these works was complemented and amplified by his acquaintance at this time with the man who would soon become the leading natural scientist of his age, Louis Agassiz. The Swiss scientist, already in possession of a distinguished reputation in Europe, arrived in America in the fall of 1846 and quickly became a celebrity in New England intellectual and scientific circles for his series of lectures called "The Plan of the Creation" during the winter of 1846–1847. Thoreau may have attended these lectures (although no direct evidence of his

27. *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 313. Engel is speaking of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*, but the description is apt for both Coleridge and Thoreau.

having done so exists), for in the spring of 1847 he began collecting specimens of fish and turtles for Agassiz and corresponded with him through his associate, James Elliot Cabot. In 1848 Agassiz would be appointed to a professorship in the fledgling Lawrence Scientific School, from which base he would work tirelessly in the decades ahead to extend, popularize, and professionalize the study of natural science in America. His approach, while it was based on field work, observation, and comparative anatomy, was fundamentally in harmony with Coleridge's *Theory of Life*, for Agassiz too had been influenced by the *Naturphilosophie* of Oken and Schelling during his youth and would never come to accept the materialism of Darwin.²⁸

Shortly after his careful reading of the *Theory of Life* and his becoming acquainted with Agassiz, Thoreau began systematically to train himself as a naturalist and to define his principal work as the study of New England natural history. He would retain to the end of his life a view of natural science essentially identical to that outlined by Cole-ridge, a view fundamentally opposed of course to the growing tide of materialistic and positivistic science of his own day. And, whatever temporary disappointments he would feel and express about the minutiae of scientific observation, the fact is that from 1849 onward he devoted himself happily and energetically to a variety of natural history investigations, especially those having to do with the propagation and dispersal of plants. In 1853, asked by the Association for the Advancement of Science, to which he had been nominated as a member, to describe his specialty in the field, he could proclaim in the Journal with mixed affirmation and exasperation:

Now, though I could state to a select few that department of human inquiry which engages me, and should be rejoiced to do so, I felt that it would be to make myself the laughing-stock of the scientific community to describe or attempt to describe that branch of science which specially interests me, inasmuch as they do not believe in a science which deals with the higher law. . . . The fact is I am a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot. Now I think of it, I should have told them at once I was a transcendentalist. (J 5.4)

As was his habit during other periods of his life, Thoreau continued to read widely in travel literature during the late 1840s. In fact, his reading of travel books is perhaps the most constant feature among his literary interests from his college years until his final illness. The bibli-

28. See the discussion of Agassiz's influence on Thoreau's later natural history writing in Chapter 4, below.

ography of travel works read by Thoreau in John Aldrich Christie's *Thoreau as World Traveler* lists nearly two hundred titles and might well have included many others.²⁹ And, more important, as Christie shows, this reading in travel literature provided Thoreau with a means of giving his own microcosmic focus on Concord and New England a global resonance. It needs to be kept in mind that the bulk of what Thoreau wrote for publication was either travel narrative or a closely related form of essay (which might without denigration be termed "pedestrian") that was based on traveling by foot and that he usually called the excursion. Thus, the relationship of his travel reading to his literary career is even more fundamental and obvious than Christie suggests.

Travel narrative—specifically, the spatial and temporal dimensions of a journey out and back—gave him both a structure and a level of metaphoric correspondence in which he could objectify the essential Transcendental quest for insight through nature and test his principles and assumptions against society and the external world at large. A *Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, *Cape Cod*, *The Maine Woods*, and such essays as "A Winter Walk," "A Walk to Wachusett," "Walking," and "A Yankee in Canada" are all excursions or outright travel narratives that need to be considered in the context of both Thoreau's wide reading in travel literature and the enormous popularity of the genre in the nineteenth century. Even *Walden*, in many ways the antithesis of a travel book and a celebration of staying home, is quite literally as well as hyperbolically about one who "travel[s] a good deal in Concord." The perspective that Thoreau adopts toward his neighbors and countrymen is very much that of a traveler, a stranger in a strange land describing the curious business and domestic practices of the natives.

The mid nineteenth century was a golden age of travel literature, as Europeans and Americans penetrated the last blank spaces on the globe or reentered regions of the world that had been closed to them for centuries: It saw the great western explorations of Lewis and Clark, Pike, and Frémont; the Arctic expeditions of Kane, Parry, and Franklin; the journeys and archaeological expeditions to the Near East of Layard, Lane, and Chateaubriand; travels and scientific surveys in South America, especially the region of the Amazon, by Lieutenant Herndon for the United States government and by the great German naturalist Humboldt; and the expeditions to unlock the mysteries of

29. (New York and London: Columbia University Press and the American Geographic Society, 1965), pp. 313–333. Christie does not cite books about travel in New England or periodical articles, and he did not have access to the fragmentary Journals of the 1840s that record additional travel reading.

the Nile and central Africa by David Livingstone and Richard Burton. Thoreau knew all these and scores more, for his taste in travel literature was remarkably catholic, if not undiscriminating. He read not only works of sober science and acute observation such as Darwin's *Voyage of a Naturalist Round the World* but also government surveys for railroad routes to the Pacific, women's accounts of travel, books on hunting exotic game in Africa, accounts of gold mining in Australia, and even romanticized and fictionalized books for young people such as Mayne Reid's *The Desert Home; or The Adventures of a Lost Family in the Wilderness*, a sort of book with obvious popular cinematic counterparts in our own age. In fact, what Thoreau says sardonically in *Walden* of his contemporaries' appetite for popular fiction—"There are those who, like cormorants and ostriches, can digest all sorts of this, even after the fullest meal of meats and vegetables, for they suffer nothing to be wasted"—might be said with equal aptness of his taste for travel literature (WA, 104).

It was a fondness for which he occasionally upbraided himself, as in his remark about the "one or two shallow books of travel" that he read his first summer at Walden, but on the whole this reading was nourishing, providing him with a virtually limitless fund of geographical knowledge that enriched his writings about the environs of Concord, as well as a framework and a persona—the journey and the traveler—through which he could give body and outwardness to his personal quests. During the mid to late 1840s his reading in travel literature was characteristically varied, in terms of both quality and locale described: Melville's *Typee* (presumably one of the shallow books that he referred to, and one which, it will be remembered, was published as nonfiction), John Charles Frémont's *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains*, Eliot Warburton's *The Crescent and the Cross; or, Romance and Realities of Eastern Travel*, Chateaubriand's *Travels in Greece, Palestine, Egypt, and Barbary*, the Reverend Joseph Wolff's *Narrative of a Mission to Bokhara*, and the Reverend William Ellis's *Polynesian Researches* (also, incidentally, a source for Melville) (PJ 2.168, 315, 349–350; WE, 60, 127).

The experience of being jailed overnight in the summer of 1846, for having refused to pay his poll tax for several years, led Thoreau to crystallize and defend his political views in "Resistance to Civil Government," published in 1849 in Elizabeth Peabody's *Aesthetic Papers*. Typically, the essay was revised from a lecture delivered in 1848, and it would not receive its most famous name, "Civil Disobedience," until the posthumous publication of Thoreau's *A Yankee in Canada, With Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers* in 1866, and this familiar title may well be non-authorial. The sources that influenced this essay, which

has of course become enormously influential itself, are perhaps more obvious and at the same time more elusive than the sources, say, of Thoreau's orientation in natural history. The whole body of what may loosely be termed his political writing, in fact, beginning with his favorable notices of the abolitionists Nathaniel Rogers and Wendell Phillips in 1844 and 1845 and culminating with his impassioned defense of John Brown in 1859, is less susceptible of analysis in terms of specific intellectual debts than most other areas of his thought.

The reasons for this difficulty are, in part at least, obvious. "Politics" is a vague term at best, encompassing in everyday usage everything from one's most deep-seated convictions to the grubbiest and most manipulative aspects of governments on every level from the family to the international community. Nor was Thoreau in any sense a student of politics or political theory as he was of natural history, ethnology, the classics, or English poetry. His political ideas, on the one hand, tended to come from a variety of non-political sources, and his articulation of them, on the other, tended to be prompted by immediate and local issues—his night in jail, the well-publicized cases of the fugitive slaves Thomas Sims in 1851 and Anthony Burns in 1854, the John Brown affair. He made no effort to read political philosophy systematically. This is not to say that Thoreau's political thinking did not evolve, of course; it is rather to suggest that it developed in a sort of organic way out of certain political pressure points of his age—the extension of slavery and the question of individual rights versus civil law in particular—coming into conflict with some of his most fundamental and strongly held convictions about the purposes and conduct of life.

Although he knew Jonathan Dymond's *Essays on the Principles of Morality* from a theme assignment during his junior year, Thoreau's formal study of moral philosophy at Harvard had emphasized the dominant authority in the field, William Paley. If they were not so already, Paley's utilitarian and relativistic views became repugnant to Thoreau during the 1840s because they appeared to authorize the compromises of Northern politicians over slavery. In "Resistance to Civil Government" Thoreau deliberately invokes Paley's relativism in order to refute it and replace it with the familiar Transcendental doctrine of the "higher law," the obligation of the individual to obey the severest dictates of conscience, whatever the strictures of civil law might be.

The philosophical and religious sources of this doctrine are well known, and it requires little effort to see how it would lead to the sort of uncompromising stance toward government that Thoreau adopts in his most famous essay. But Thoreau was also sanctioned in his political radicalism by both his family and his cultural forebears in Massachu-

sets. His mother, sister, and aunts were all active in the Concord anti-slavery society, and abolitionism may be said to have been a part of the very air he breathed. He regularly read such anti-slavery organs as Nathaniel Rogers's *Herald of Freedom* and William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*, participated in abolitionist activities in Concord, and even owned the book *Anti-Slavery Melodies* by Jairus Lincoln. Beginning in 1852, moreover, he subscribed to Horace Greeley's emphatically anti-slavery and pro-temperance *New York Tribune*.

In addition, as Richard Drinnon has pointed out, Thoreau inherited a legacy of political resistance based on conscience: "In his day, the doctrine of a fundamental law still covered Massachusetts like a ground fog."³⁰ The intellectual and religious legacy of the commonwealth, going back to such figures as Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams in the early days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, gave ample precedent for such action as Thoreau took first in resisting the Mexican War and the extension of slavery and then in publicizing his actions and making his own case an occasion for denouncing more widespread evils. The immediate context of the Transcendental movement also furnished authorization and support for his views, as well as examples of individual action based on principle (Alcott too had refused to pay the poll tax). Drinnon credits Emerson's "Politics" as having more direct influence over Thoreau's political views than was exerted by other contemporaries such as Alcott, Channing, or Theodore Parker; and likewise Truman Nelson cites Emerson's "The Transcendentalist" as an important source that served to bridge the gap between the movement's ideals and direct political action.³¹ No doubt Thoreau knew these essays, although he does not allude to them in his writing, and they clearly sanction, as "The American Scholar" had done earlier, the need for action on the part of the reformer, raising the specter at least of non-compliance with authority. Emerson himself, however, was slow to come to see the need for direct action, and criticized Thoreau's night in jail as a gesture that was "mean and skulking, and in bad taste."³²

Ethel Seybold maintained that Sophocles' *Antigone*, a play that Thoreau knew well and that dramatizes an act of what may be termed civil disobedience in its heroine's decision to bury her brother in open defiance of Creon's proscription, was the major inspiration for "Re-

30. "Thoreau's Politics of the Upright Man," in *Thoreau in Our Season*, ed. John H. Hicks (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1962), p. 155.

31. "Thoreau and John Brown," in *Thoreau in Our Season*, pp. 135-136.

32. *The Journals of Bronson Alcott*, ed. Odell Shepard (Boston: Little, Brown, 1938), pp. 183-184.

sistance to Civil Government": "From it must have come his concept of divine law as superior to civil law, of human right as greater than legal right."³³ Drinnon, while agreeing that *Antigone* is an important source, quite correctly observes that "no single work provided Thoreau with his key concept," and makes the more defensible claim that "there was not a major figure in the classical background of anarchism on whom Thoreau did not draw in some way," citing specifically Zeno's Stoicism and Ovid's nostalgia for a time before there was either a state or the need for one.³⁴

Yet it would be difficult to say, in the last analysis, whether Thoreau's civil disobedience was patterned after that of Antigone or anyone else, or whether his acts represent parallel responses from similar principles. After his endorsement of Wendell Phillips and Nathaniel Rogers in the mid 1840s, and his masterful orchestration of argument and rhetoric in "Resistance to Civil Government," Thoreau's political writings during the 1850s became increasingly topical, strident, and negative in the sense that they were predominantly devoted to attacking evil rather than to proposing concrete measures for its eradication. In the newspapers, he followed with a kind of reluctant avidity the escalating crises that eventually led to the Civil War. He also followed the career and writings of Daniel Webster, who became in the course of time the embodiment to Thoreau of what he hated most about politics, the tendency of "statesmen" to compromise principle for expediency. "Slavery in Massachusetts" and his addresses on John Brown illustrate the depth of both his knowledge of political events and his passion about slavery, but they betray no significant new intellectual sources for his own political thought, a subject that still deserves to be accorded more attention by scholars.³⁵

Despite the fact that he apparently neglected to keep the sort of detailed records of his reading from 1844 to 1849 that he kept at other times in his life, it is apparent that Thoreau's intellectual, literary, and professional interests developed and shifted significantly during this period of sustained literary labor. The evidence of shifts and developments during this seminal period in his career is to be seen in profound but subtle changes in his stance toward nature and in his style itself, changes attributable at least in part to his renewed interest in Carlyle

33. Thoreau: *The Quest and the Classics*, p. 17.

34. Drinnon, "Thoreau's Politics," pp. 154-155.

35. See Wendell Glick's "Thoreau and Radical Abolitionism," Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1950; Michael Meyer, "Thoreau and Black Emigration," *American Literature* 53 (November 1981): 380-396; and Johnson, *Thoreau's Complex Weave*, esp. pp. 85-121, for a sample of perspectives on Thoreau's interest in reform and politics.

during the early stages of *Walden* and to adding the *Theory of Life* to his earlier reading of Coleridge's philosophical and ethical writings. His interest in belletristic subjects declined at this time, for no evidence survives to suggest that he continued his project of collecting English verse or maintained an interest in translations of Latin or Greek authors. With the composition of *A Week*, *Walden*, long essays on Carlyle and the Maine woods, and "Resistance to Civil Government," he had begun to find his characteristic forms, subjects, and voice. His reading in the years ahead would lead him to cultivate this ground more intensively and carefully. The history of New England, especially the earliest explorations of the coast, and the history of the American Indians, along with the detailed study of natural history, were newly discovered disciplines that were to prompt and enrich Thoreau's literary projects during the 1850s.