The very greatest masterpieces, when one is fresh from them, are apt to seem neglected. At such a time one knows, without stint, how unspeakably better they are than anything that can be said about them. An essential portion of the teaching of Walden is a full account of its all but inevitable neglect.

I assume that however else one understands Thoreau's topics and projects it is as a writer that he is finally to be known. But the easier that has become to accept, the more difficult it becomes to understand why his words about writing in Walden are not (so far as I know) systematically used in making out what kind of book he had undertaken to write, and achieved. It may be that the presence of his mysterious journals has too often attracted his serious critics to canvass there for the interpretation of Walden's mysteries. My opening
hypothesis is that this book is perfectly complete, that it means in every word it says, and that it is fully sensible of its mysteries and fully open about them.

Let us begin to read in an obvious place, taking our first bearings, and setting some standards, by looking at his explicit directions in the early chapter entitled "Reading." "The heroic books, even if printed in the character of our mother tongue, will always be in a language dead to degenerate times; and we must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valor and generosity we have" (III, 3).* This may sound like a pious sentiment, one of those sentences that old-fashioned critics or book clubs like to cite to express their high-mindedness. But it is the first step in entertaining Thoreau's intentions and ambitions to understand that he is there describing the pages he has himself readied for our hands. This may not be obvious at first, because the very extremity of his praise for what he calls "classics" and for "reading, in a high sense," together with his devotion to the "ancients," seems to imply that the making of such a book, a heroic book, in the America he depicts and in "this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial nineteenth century" (XVIII, 14), is not a feasible enterprise. But it is axiomatic in Walden that its author praises nothing that he has not experienced and calls nothing impossible that he has not tried. More specifically, what is read in a high sense is "what we have to stand on tiptoe to read and devote our most alert and wakeful hours to" (III, 7); and again, "There are probably words addressed to our condition exactly, which, if we could really hear and understand, would be more salutary than the morning or the spring to our lives" (III, 11). Given the appearance of morning and spring in this book, what words could be more salutary than these? But then, given such words in the book as, "Morning is when I am awake and there is dawn in me" (II, 14), we recognize that morning may not be caused by sunrise, and may not happen at all. To discover how to earn and spend our most wakeful hours—whatever we are doing—is the task of Walden as a whole; it follows that its task, for us who are reading, is epitomized in discovering what reading in a high sense is and, in particular, if Walden is a heroic book, what reading Walden is. For the writer of Walden, its task is epitomized in discovering what writing is and, in particular, what writing Walden is.

It is hard to keep in mind that the hero of this book is its writer. I do not mean that it is about Henry David Thoreau, a writer, who lies buried in Concord, Massachusetts—though that is true enough. I mean that the "I" of the book declares himself to be a writer. This is hard to keep in mind because we seem to be shown this hero doing everything under the sun but, except very infrequently, writing. It takes a while to recognize that each of his actions is the act of a writer, that every word in which he identifies himself or describes his work and his world is the identification and description of what he understands his literary enterprise to require. If this seems to reduce the stature of what he calls his experiment, that is perhaps because we have a reduced view of what such an enterprise may be.

* To make my references to Walden independent of any particular edition, I shall give citations by chapter and paragraph, roman numerals for the former, arabic for the latter. References to "Civil Disobedience" are also according to paragraph, preceded by "CD."
The obvious meaning of the phrase "heroic book," supported by the mention of Homer and Virgil (III, 6), is "a book about a hero," an epic. The writer is aligning himself with the major tradition of English poetry, whose most ambitious progeny, at least since Milton, had been haunted by the call for a modern epic, for a heroic book which was at once a renewed instruction of the nation in its ideals, and a standing proof of its resources of poetry. For the first generation of Romantics, the parent generation to Thoreau's, the immediate epic event whose power their literary epic would have to absorb, was the French Revolution—the whole hope of it in their adolescence, and the scattered hopes in their maturity. The writer of _Walden_ alludes to the three revolutions most resonant for his time. Of the Puritan revolution he says that it was "almost the last significant scrap of news" from England (II, 19). Why almost? We don't really need a key for this, but Thoreau provides one in an essay on Carlyle which he wrote while living at Walden: "What... has been English news for so long a season? What... of late years, has been England to us—to us who read books, we mean? Unless we remembered it as the scene where the age of Wordsworth was spending itself, and a few younger muses were trying their wings... Carlyle alone, since the death of Coleridge, has kept the promise of England." As against the usual views about Thoreau's hatred of society and his fancied private declaration of independence from it, it is worth hearing him from the outset publicly accept a nation's promise, identify the significant news of a nation with the state of its promise, and place the keeping of that promise in the hands of a few writers.

Of the events which keep burning on the Continent, the writer of _Walden_ is apparently dismissive: "If one may judge who rarely looks into the newspapers, nothing new does ever happen in foreign parts, a French revolution not excepted" (II, 19). Marx, at about the same time, puts the point a little differently in his _Eighteenth Brumaire_, suggesting that it is only if you think like a newspaper that you will take the events of 1848 (or 1830) as front-page history; they belong on the theater page, or in the obituaries. But in _Walden_ 's way of speaking, its remark also means that the French Revolution was not new. For example, the revolution we had here at home happened first, the one that began "two miles south" of where the writer is now sitting, on "our only field known to fame, Concord Battle Ground" (II, 10). For an American poet, placed in that historical locale, the American Revolution is more apt to constitute the absorbing epic event. Only it has two drawbacks: first, it is overshadowed by the epic event of America itself; second, America's revolution never happened. The colonists fought a war against England all right, and they won it. But it was not a war of independence that was won, because we are not free; nor was even secession the outcome, because we have not departed from the conditions England lives under, either in our literature or in our political and economic lives.

I understand the writer of _Walden_ to be saying at least these things, in his way, when he announces for the second time the beginning of his "experiment": "When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence Day, or the Fourth of July,
1845, my house was not finished for winter" (II, 8). Good and learned readers, since at least Parrington, will have such a passage behind them when they describe Thoreau as having written a "transcendental declaration of independence." But why does the writer say "by accident"? Merely to mock America's idea of what independence comes to, and at the same time ruefully admit that he is, after all, one of us? But he has been insisting on these things from the beginning. From what is he supposed to have declared his independence? Clearly not from society as such; the book is riddled with the doings of society. From society's beliefs and values, then? In a sense — at least independence from the way society practices those beliefs and values. But that was what America was for; it is what the original colonists had in mind.

Earlier, as an introduction to the first time we see the hero at his experiment, about to describe the building of his house, he quotes at some length from two accounts, one contemporary and one nearly contemporary, of the first shelters the colonists made for themselves to get them through the first winter in the world which for them was new (I, 57). We know the specific day in the specific year on which all the ancestors of New England took up their abode in the woods. That moment of origin is the national event reenacted in the events of Walden, in order this time to do it right, or to prove that it is impossible; to discover and settle this land, or the question of this land, once for all. This is one reason that taking up the abode on the Fourth of July is an accident.

Any American writer, any American, is apt to respond to that event in one way or another; to the knowledge that America exists only in its discovery and its discovery was always an accident; and to the obsession with freedom, and with building new structures and forming new human beings with new minds to inhabit them; and to the presentiment that this unparalleled opportunity has been lost forever. The distinction of Walden's writer on this point (shared, I suppose, by the singer of Leaves of Grass and by the survivor in Moby Dick) lies in the constancy of this mood upon him, his incarnation, one may call it, of this mood at once of absolute hope and yet of absolute defeat, his own and his nation's. His prose must admit this pressure and at every moment resolutely withstand it. It must live, if it can, pressed between history and heaven:

In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line. (I, 23)

This open acknowledgment of his mysticism, or rather of the path to it, is also a dedication of his prose to that path. This is what "and notch it on my stick too" means — that he is writing it down, that his writing and his living manifest each other. The editor of The Variorum Walden, Walter Harding, is surely right to refer here to Robinson Crusoe's method of telling time; but that reference alone does not account for the methods of Walden's writer, for what he would mean by telling time, in particular for what he means in claiming to notch not merely the passing of time but his improvement of it. It is when the writer has just gone over the succession of farms he had bought in imagination, and
comes to his abode in the woods, that he says, "The present was my next experiment of this kind, which I purpose to describe more at length" (II, 7). Of course he means that the building of his habitation (which is to say, the writing of his book) is his present experiment. He also means what his words say: that the present is his experiment, the discovery of the present, the meeting of two eternities. ("God himself culminates in the present moment" [II, 21].) The most extended moment of the book which puts together the ideas of art and of the presentness which admits eternity, is the closing parable about the artist from Kouroo, the surface of which relates those ideas to the notching of a stick.

To say that the writer reenacts the Great Migration and the inhabitation of this continent by its first settlers is not to suggest that we are to read him for literal alignments between the history of the events in his woods and in theirs. That would miss the significance of both, because the literal events of the Puritan colonization were from the beginning overshadowed by their meaning: it was itself a transcendental act, an attempt to live the idea; you could call it a transcendental declaration of freedom. (In his "Plea for Captain John Brown," Thoreau praised this man once as a Puritan and once as a Transcendentalist.) This means that the writer's claims to privacy, secrecy, and isolation are as problematic, in the achievement and in the depiction of them, as any other of his claims. The more deeply he searches for independence from the Puritans, the more deeply, in every step and every word, he identifies with them—not only in their wild hopes, but in their wild denunciations of their betrayals of those hopes, in what has come to be called their jeremiads. (This is a stand-

ing difficulty for America's critics, as for Christianity's; Americans and Christians are prepared to say worse things about their own behavior than an outsider can readily imagine.) His identification extends even to the further meaning of the migration: to perform an experiment, a public demonstration of a truth; to become an example to those from whom they departed; to build, as they said to themselves, "a city on a hill."

This is one way I understand the writer's placing himself "one mile from any neighbor." It was just far enough to be seen clearly. However closely Thoreau's own "literary withdrawal" resembles those of the Romantics, in its need for solitude and for nature, the withdrawal he depicts in Walden creates a version of what the Puritan Congregationalists called a member of the church's congregation: a visible saint. On this ground, the audience for the writer's words and acts is the community at large, congregated. His problem, initially and finally, is not to learn what to say to them; that could not be clearer. The problem is to establish his right to declare it.

I have come to trust Walden and to trust its accuracy to its intentions when it says: "If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career" (II, 22). I cannot say that this writing always and everywhere brings me to this conclusion. But it often does, often enough so that when it does not I am not quick to determine whether it is failing me, or I it. My subject is nothing apart from sensing the specific weight of these words as they sink; and that means
knowing the specific identities of the writer through his metamorphoses, and defining the audiences in me which those identities address, and so create; and hence understanding who I am that I should be called upon in these ways, and who this writer is that he takes his presumption of intimacy and station upon himself. For someone who cannot yield to Thoreau’s words, or does not find them to warrant this power to divide him through, my subject will seem empty, even grotesque. Emerson did not quite share this enthusiasm, and yet he knew as well as anyone has known how good a writer Thoreau was, as he proved in his speech at Thoreau’s funeral by the sentences he chose to read from the unpublished manuscripts. But in the large of it, the writing made him, as he said to his journals, “nervous and wretched” to read. I find this response also to be accurate and essential to the reading of Walden—just not final. (The writer of Walden knows how trying his trials can be: “I sometimes try my acquaintances by such tests” [1, 35].)

How far off a final reading is, is something I hope I have already suggested. Every major term I have used or will use in describing Walden is a term that is itself in play within the book, part of its subject—e.g., migration, settling, distance, neighborhood, improvement, departure, news, obscurity, clearing, writing, reading, etc. And the next terms we will need in order to explain the first ones will in turn be found subjected to examination in Thoreau’s experiment. The book’s power of dialectic, of self-comment and self-placement, in the portion and in the whole of it, is as instilled as in Marx or Kierkegaard or Nietzsche, with an equally vertiginous spiraling of idea, irony, wrath, and revulsion.

Once in it, there seems no end; as soon as you have one word to cling to, it fractions or expands into others. This is one reason that he says, “There are more secrets in my trade than in most men’s . . . inseparable from its very nature” (1, 23). But we do not yet know much else about that trade.

We started thinking along one line about what the writer of Walden calls “heroic books”; and while I take him there to be claiming an epic ambition, the terms in which he might project such an enterprise could not be those of Milton or Blake or Wordsworth. His talent for making a poem could not withstand such terms, and the nation as a whole to which he must speak had yet to acquire it. (He knows from the beginning, for example, that his book will not come in twelve or twenty-four parts.) In Thoreau’s adolescence, the call for the creation of an American literature was still at a height: it was to be the final proof of the nation’s maturity, proof that its errand among nations had been accomplished, that its specialness had permitted and in turn been proved by an original intelligence. In these circumstances, an epic ambition would be the ambition to compose the nation’s first epic, so it must represent the bringing of language to the nation, words of its own in which to receive instruction, to assess its faithfulness to its ideal. The call for a new literature came, compounding difficulties, at an inconvenient moment in English literature generally, when it was all a writer like Carlyle could do to keep alive his faith in it. John Stuart Mill, three years younger than Emerson, says in his autobiography that a Romantic poem had helped him recover from the critical depression that preceded his maturity; but once he was recovered, it was Bentham’s vision, not
Coleridge’s, say, that elicited the devotions of a model intellectual. Matthew Arnold, five years younger than Thoreau, spent a life accommodating to his nation’s loss of poetry.

According to the assumption that the chapter on reading is meant as a description of the book before us, the one the writer in it went into the woods to write, it is explicitly said to be a scripture, and the language it is written in is what its writer calls the “father tongue.”

Those who have not learned to read the ancient classics in the language in which they were written must have a very imperfect knowledge of the history of the human race; for it is remarkable that no transcript of them has ever been made into any modern tongue, unless our civilization itself may be regarded as such a transcript. Homer has never yet been printed in English, nor Aeschylus, nor Virgil even, works as refined, as solidly done, and as beautiful almost as the morning itself; for later writers, say what we will of their genius, have rarely, if ever, equaled the elaborate beauty and finish and the lifelong and heroic literary labors of the ancients... That age will be rich indeed when those relics which we call Classics, and the still older and more than classic but even less known Scriptures of the nations, shall have still further accumulated, when the Vatican shall be filled with Vedas and Zendavestas and Bibles, with Homers and Dantes and Shakespeares, and all the centuries to come shall have successively deposited their trophies in the forum of the world. By such a pile we may hope to scale heaven at last. (III, 6)

The hardest thing to understand or believe about this is that the word “scripture” is fully meant. This writer is writing a sacred text. This commits him, from a religious point of view, to the claim that its words are revealed, received, and not merely mused. It commits him, from a literary point of view, to a form that comprehends creation, fall, judgment, and redemption; within it, he will have discretion over how much poetry to include, and the extent of the moral code he prescribes; and there is room in it for an indefinite amount of history and for a small epic or two. From a critical point of view, he must be readable on various, distinct levels. Walden acknowledges this in a characteristic way: “‘They pretend,’ as I hear, ‘that the verses of Kabir have four different senses; illusion, spirit, intellect, and the exoteric doctrine of the Vedas;’ but in this part of the world it is considered a ground for complaint if a man’s writings admit of more than one interpretation” (XVIII, 7). (This is characteristic in its orientalizing of the mundane. There is just one text in the culture for which he writes that is known to require interpretation on four distinct levels.)

Ways in which these commitments are to be realized in Walden are made specific in the meaning of “father tongue.”

Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written. It is not enough even to be able to speak the language of that nation by which they are written, for there is a memorable interval between the spoken and the written language, the language heard and the language read. The one is commonly transitory, a sound, a tongue, a dialect merely, almost brutish, and we learn it unconsciously, like the brutes, of our mothers. The other is the maturity and experience of that; if that is our mother tongue, this is our father tongue, a reserved and select expression, too significant to be heard by the ear, which we must be born again in order to speak. (III, 3)
Were it not for certain current fantasies according to which human beings in our time have such things to say to one another that they must invent something beyond the words we know in order to convey them, it would be unnecessary to emphasize that “father tongue” is not a new lexicon or syntax at our disposal, but precisely a rededication to the inescapable and utterly specific syllables upon which we are already disposed. Every word the writer uses will be written so as to acknowledge its own maturity, so as to let it speak for itself; and in a way that holds out its experience to us, allows us to experience it, and allows it to tell us all it knows. “There are probably words addressed to our condition exactly, which, if we could really hear and understand, would be more salutary than the morning. . . .” There are words with our names on them—that is to say, every word in our nomenclature—but their existence is only probable to us, because we are not in a position to bring them home. In loyalty both to the rules of interpreting scripture and to the mother tongue, which is part of our condition, the writer’s words must on the first level make literal or historical sense, present the brutest of fact. It is that condition from which, if we are to hear significantly, “we must be born again.” A son of man is born of woman; but rebirth, according to our Bible, is the business of the father. So Walden’s puns and paradoxes, its fracturing of idiom and twisting of quotation, its drones of fact and flights of impersonation—all are to keep faith at once with the mother and the father, to unite them, and to have the word born in us.

Canonical forms of rebirth are circumcision and baptism. True circumcision is of the heart. It has never been very clear how that is to happen; but of course one ought not to expect otherwise: understanding such circumcision requires that you have undergone it; it is a secret inseparable from its very nature. Perhaps it will happen by a line of words so matured and experienced that you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a scimitar, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart. Christ is to come with a sword, and in Revelation the sword is in his mouth, i.e., the word is words. Of baptism, two moments are called for. The water of Walden Pond is unique, but so is every other body of water, or drop, or place; and as universal. John could have used that water in the wilderness as well as any other. The baptism of water is only a promise of another which is to come, of the spirit, by the word of words. This is immersion not in the water but in the book of Walden.

There is a more direct sense in which scripture is written in the father language: it is the language of the father, the word of God; most particularly it is spoken, or expressed, by prophets.

Then the word of the Lord came unto me, saying,
Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations. Then said I, Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child.

But the Lord said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I send thee, and whatsoever I command thee, thou shalt speak. . . . Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth. (Jeremiah 1:4–9)

It is Ezekiel who anticipates most specifically the condition of prophecy in Walden:
And he said unto me, Son of man, go, get thee unto the house of Israel, and speak with my words unto them. For thou art not sent to a people of a strange speech and of an hard language, but to the house of Israel; Not to many people of a strange speech and of an hard language, whose words thou canst not understand. Surely, had I sent thee to them, they would have hearkened unto thee. But the house of Israel will not hearken unto thee; for they will not hearken unto me: for all the house of Israel are impudent and hardhearted. (Ezekiel 3:4-7)

The world of Ezekiel shares other particular features with the world of Walden: its writer received his inspiration “by waters”; it is written in captivity (what constitutes our captivity in Walden has yet to be outlined); it ends with elaborate specifications for the building of a house.

Milton, in The Reason of Church Government, trusted himself to identify with the vocation of Jeremiah and of the author of Revelation in justifying his right and his requirement to write as he did, “to claim . . . with good men and saints” his “right of lamenting”; and he further attested to his sincerity by announcing that in undertaking this task he was postponing the use of his particular talent, to compose the nation’s epic: “. . . to fix all the industry and art I could unite to the adorning of my native tongue; not to make verbal curiosities the end . . . but to be an interpreter and relater of the best and sagest things among mine own citizens throughout this island in the mother dialect. [“For what are the classics but the noblest recorded thoughts of man?” (111, 3)]. That what the greatest and choicest wits of Athens, Rome, or modern Italy, and those Hebrews of old did for their country, I in my proportion, with this

over and above of being a Christian, might do for mine.”

Do we really believe, even when it comes from John Milton, in the seriousness of such an identification and ambition? Or do we believe it, or tolerate it, just because it comes from Milton, who twenty-five years later made good with Paradise Lost on some highest promise or other? And if we cannot believe it, is that a skepticism about religion or about literature? And if we may believe it about Milton, would we find it credible that any later writer, and an American to boot, could justly, or sanely, so aspire? Blake’s placing of himself on this ground is (though with apparently increasing exceptions) not credited. And by the time Wordsworth finds the seer in the child, the idea of the poet-prophet can conveniently seem to us the sheerest of Romantic conceits.

The writer of Walden is not counting on being believed; on the contrary, he converts the problem or condition of belief into a dominant subject of his experiment. As I was suggesting, his very familiarity with the fact that he will not be hearkened to, and his interpretation of it, are immediate identifications with Jeremiah and Ezekiel. His difference from them on this point, religiously speaking, is that the time of prophecy is past; the law has been fulfilled. So for both unbelievers and believers it is a stumbling block that a man should show himself subject to further prophecy. Yet this is New England, whose case rests upon the covenant. It ought to remain accessible to specific identifications with the prophets of the covenant.

The writer of Walden establishes his claim upon the prophetic writings of our Scripture by taking upon his
work four of their most general features: (1) their wild mood-swings between lamentation and hope (because the position from which they are written is an absolute knowledge of faithlessness and failure, together with the absolute knowledge that this is not necessary, not from God, but self-imposed; and because God's prophets are auditors of the wild mood-swings of God himself); (2) the periodic confusions of their authors' identities with God's—stuck with the words in their mouths and not always able to remember how they got there; (3) their mandate to create wretchedness and nervousness (because they are "to judge the bloody city" and "show her all her abominations" [Ezekiel 22:2]); (4) their immense repetitiveness. It cannot, I think, be denied that Walden sometimes seems an enormously long and boring book. (Again, its writer knows this; again it is part of his subject. "An old-fashioned man would have lost his senses or died of ennui before this" [IV, 22]. He is speaking of the lack of domestic sounds to comfort one in the woods, and he is also speaking of his book. In particular, he is acknowledging that it is not a novel, with its domestic sounds.) I understand this response to Walden to be a boredom not of emptiness but of prolonged urgency. Whether you take this as high praise of a high literary discovery, or as an excuse of literary lapse, will obviously depend on how high you place the book's value.

Chapter VII, called "The Bean Field," contains the writer's most open versions of his scriptural procedures or, as he puts it later, his revisions of mythology (XIV, 22), because he says there explicitly that he is growing his beans not to eat but solely in order to get their message, so to speak: "I was determined to know beans... perchance, as some must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day" (VII, 10, 11). He acknowledges that he is himself the parable-maker whom his work in the field will serve one day by composing an explicit parable in which his weeding of the field becomes the actions of Achilles before Troy:

A long war, not with cranes, but with weeds, those Trojans who had sun and rain and dews on their side. Daily the beans saw me come to their rescue armed with a hoe, and thin the ranks of their enemies, filling up the trenches with weedy dead. Many a lusty crest-waving Hector, that towered a whole foot above his crowding comrades, fell before my weapon and rolled in the dust. (VII, 10)

It is an uncommonly obvious moment; it gives no further significance either to his or to Achilles' behavior. It has nothing of the force and resonance he can bring to fable or to the mock-heroic when he wants to—e.g., in the comparison of his townsmen with Hercules (I, 3), in the battle of the ants (XII, 12–13), or in the new myth of the locomotive (IV, 8–10). What the writer is mocking in the obviousness of this parable is parable-making itself, those moralizings over nature that had become during the past century a literary pastime, and with which his writing would be confused. With good reason: whatever else Walden is, it certainly depends on the tradition of topographical poetry—nothing can outdo its obsession with the seasons of a real place. The writer acknowledges this, too, in allowing the mockery—it is filially gentle—to point at himself and, hence, at Transcendentalism generally. This comes out...
pointedly in the following paragraph, when, after quoting Sir John Evelyn’s “philosophical discourse of earth” and another piece of scientific-pious prose about “lay fields which enjoy their sabbath,” he breaks off abruptly with, “I harvested twelve bushels of beans” (vii, 11).

Less obviously, hoeing serves the writer as a trope—in particular, a metaphor—for writing. In the sentences preceding his little parable of the hoer-hero, the writer has linked these two labors of the hand: “it will bear some iteration in the account, for there was no little iteration in the labor—” (vii, 10). So the first value of the metaphorical equation of writing and hoeing is that his writing must bear up under repetitiveness. He takes the metaphor further: “making...invidious distinctions with [my] hoe, leveling whole ranks of one species, and sedulously cultivating another.” That is, the writer’s power of definition, of dividing, will be death to some, to others birth.

As elsewhere in Walden, an explicit fable from a foreign classic signals that another parable is under foot. The over-arching parable of the chapter on “The Bean Field” is one that describes the writer-hoer most literally, one which itself takes harrowing to be (a metaphor of) the effect of words:

See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant. (Jeremiah 1:10)

Here is the parable-maker he is serving this day, whether hoeing or writing. The tropes and expressions for the sake of which he works in his field had already been employed; to perform “for the sake of them” is to perform because of them, in order that it shall be fulfilled as it is written. So of course he can only be serving “perchance.” It is only through chance that he has been singled out for this service; the ordination is not his to confer, though it is his to establish. And only perchance will his service have its effect; there is a good chance that it will not.

If it does not work, he will not know why—whether it is his people’s immovability, or God’s, or his own. He keeps saying he doesn’t much like hoeing, or the way he is hoeing; he is as irritated by it as he is by other men’s devotion to nothing else but. And in fact the second half of this chapter feels thin and irritable; a bad mood is in it. The writer’s assertions of hope or of rebuke do not flex upon themselves and soar, but remain mere assertions, moralizings; it has been a bad harvest for him. He manifests nothing like the equanimity in his later knowledge of harvesting: “The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched” (xi, 7). In the first part of “The Bean Field” the sun is lighting him to hoe his beans (vii, 4), and it comes back at the end (“We are wont to forget that the sun looks on our cultivated fields and on the prairies and forests without distinction” [vii, 16]). But at the center of the chapter the light of nature had gone bad: “...I have sometimes had a vague sense all day of some sort of itching and disease in the horizon” (vii, 7). This happens “when there was a military turnout of which I was ignorant”; American militarism’s conception of patriotism infects even the sky; its present manifestation is
the Mexican War. This is not the only time he associates despair with a corrupted idea of patriotism: "I sometimes despair of getting anything quite simple and honest done in this world by the help of men. They would have to be passed through a powerful press first, to squeeze their old notions out of them." (i, 38). But "the great winpress of the wrath of God" (Revelation 14:19) is not perfectly effective. The writer continues: "... and there would be someone in the company with a maggot in his head." In Walden's "Conclusion" the "maggot in their heads" is patriotism (xviii, 2).

The writer's next paragraph is uncharacteristically flat in its irony, totally exempting himself from it. "I felt proud to know that the liberties of Massachusetts and of our fatherland were in such safe keeping; and as I turned to my hoeing again I was filled with an inexpressible confidence, and pursued my labor cheerfully with a calm trust in the future." (vii, 8). His mood of mock vainglory persists, and it produces perhaps the most revolting image in the book: "But sometimes it was a really noble and inspiring strain that reached these woods, and the trumpet that sings of fame, and I felt as if I could spit a Mexican with a good relish" (vii, 9). That is, our bayonets in Mexico are the utensils of cannibals.

He acknowledges this despairing, revolted mood a page or so later when he again picks up the tilling theme from Jeremiah, this time with a didactically explicit acceptance of that identity:

I said to myself, I will not plant beans and corn with so much industry another summer, but such seeds, if the seed is not lost, as sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the like, and see if they will not grow in this soil, even with less toil and manurance, and sustain me, for surely it has not been exhausted for these crops.

Alas! I said this to myself; but now another summer is gone, and another, and another, and I am obliged to say to you, Reader, that the seeds which I planted, if indeed they were seeds of those virtues, were wormeaten or had lost their vitality, and so did not come up. (vii, 15)

It is when Jeremiah is momentarily free of God's voice, and hence of the ordainment to speak to kingdoms and nations, that he says, and hence says to himself:

When I would comfort myself against sorrow, my heart is faint in me. Behold the voice of the cry of the daughter of my people because of them that dwell in a far country: Is not the Lord in Zion? is not her king in her? Why have they provoked me to anger with their graven images, and with strange vanities? The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved. (Jeremiah 8:18-20)

"Alas! I said this to myself": What he said to himself was, Alas! — and alas, that I can say it only to myself.
The writer knows that "he that ploweth should plow in hope" (1 Corinthians 9:10). But he has also known, from the beginning, that he is unable to follow that injunction faithfully: "... the same sun which ripens my beans illumines at once a system of earths like ours. If I had remembered this it would have prevented some mistakes. This was not the light in which I hoed them" (1, 13).

Hoeing is identified not just with the content and effect of words; it is also an emblem of the physical act of writing, as though the sheer fact that a thing is written is as important as what is said. For the writer's hoe, the earth is a page; with it, the tiller "[makes] the
yellow soil express its summer thought in bean leaves and blossoms rather than in wormwood and piper and millet grass, making the earth say beans instead of grass” (vii, 4). This is figured when the artist from Kouroo writes a name in the sand with the point of his stick. The underlying idea of nature as a book is familiar enough; in Bacon, it justifies the scientific study of nature; in Deism, it might be used to ornament a teleological argument for the existence of God. But for an Ezekiel, let us say, these are hardly the issues. In what we call spring, and what the writer of Walden shows to be an Apocalypse, bringing his life in the woods to an end, the vision of blood and excrement is transformed into a vision of the earth and its dependents in a crisis of foliation; these leaves in turn produce a vision of the world as an open book (xvii, 7–9). The idea is literalized when he speaks of “the fine print, the small type, of a meadow mouse” (xiv, 18); or speaks of the snow as re-printing old footprints “in clear white type alto-relievo” (ix, 9).

But heroic books are themselves a part of nature; “the noblest written words are as commonly as far behind or above the fleeting spoken language as the firmament with its stars is behind the clouds. There are the stars, and they who can may read them” (iii, 4). It may seem that the writer is placing his idea of the meaning of nature in a different category altogether from the meaning of words when he turns from the chapter called “Reading” to that called “Sounds” and remarks, “Much is published, but little printed” (iv, 1). We know he means that nature is at every instant openly confiding in us, in its largest arrangements and in its smallest sounds, and that it is mostly lost on our writers.

But the remark also describes the ontological condition of words: the occurrence of a word is the occurrence of an object whose placement always has a point, and whose point always lies before and beyond it. “The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement. Their truth is instantly translated; its literal monument alone remains” (xviii, 6). (Wittgenstein in the Investigations (section 432) records a related perception: “Every sign by itself seems dead.”)

This theme is declared as the book opens, in its first few sentences: “When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built by myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only.” On a second perusal, this sentence raises more questions than it answers—about where Concord is, and what a pond is, and how far a mile is, and who the neighbor is, and what earning a living is. Now what is “the bulk” of the pages he wrote? We know that Thoreau wrote about half of Walden during the years in which his hut was his abode; but every page the writer writes, wherever he is and whatever writing is, is merely, or ontologically, the bulk of writing: the mass or matter of it, the body or looming of it, its physical presence. Writing is a labor of the hands. We know from the third paragraph of the book that labor which is not the labor of slaves has a finish; and we know, from what is said about hoeing, that labor at its best “[yields] an instant and immeasurable crop” (vii, 6). Writing, at its best, will come to a finish in each mark of meaning, in each portion and sentence and word. That is why in
reading it "we must laboriously seek the meaning of every word and line; conjecturing a larger sense. . . ."

We are apt to take this to mean that writing, in a high sense, writing which is worth heroic reading, is meant to provide occasions for our conjecturing. That is not wrong, but it is likely to be lukewarm, a suggestion that the puns and paradoxes, etc., are tips or goads to us to read with subtlety and activity, and that we are free to conjecture the writer's meaning. But in *Walden*, reading is not merely the other side of writing, its eventual fate; it is another metaphor of writing itself. The writer cannot invent words as "perpetual suggestions and provocations"; the written word is already "the choicest of relics" (III, 3, 5). His calling depends upon his acceptance of this fact about words, his letting them come to him from their own region, and then taking that occasion for inflecting them one way instead of another then and there, or for refraining from them then and there; as one may inflect the earth toward beans instead of grass, or let it alone, as it is before you are there. The words that the writer raises "out of the trivialness of the street" (III, 3) are the very words or phrases or lines used there, by the people there, in whatever lives they have. This writer's raising of them to us, by writing them down, is only literally, or etymologically, a matter of style, scratching them in. Raising them up, to the light, so to speak, is the whole thing he does, not the adornment of it. The manner is nothing in comparison with the act. And the labor of raising them up is itself one of seeking "the meaning of each word and line," of "conjecturing a larger sense . . . out of what wisdom and valor and generosity" the writer has (III, 3). Conjecturing is not for the reader, and hence not for the reader, what we think of as guesswork. It is casting words together and deriving the conclusions of each. This is how his labor of the hands earned his living, whatever it was.

Why is the isolation of the written from the spoken word his understanding of the father tongue? Why is it his realization of the faith of the prophets? That is, how does his understanding of his position—in Concord, Massachusetts, "in the Presidency of Polk, five years before the passage of Webster's Fugitive- Slave Bill" (xii, 14)—take him beyond the knowledge prophets have always had of the ineffectiveness of God's words in their mouths; or take him to a different resolution of his ordainment?

I understand his strategy as an absolute acceptance of Saint Paul's interpretation of Christ's giving "gifts unto men" (Ephesians 4): "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called." According to Paul, the gifts for "the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" are divided—among apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. For the writer of *Walden*, in declaring writing to be such a gift, in such a service, the problem of walking worthy of it is different from, anyway later than, Milton's view of his talent: he must learn not merely what to write, in order that his trust not be buried; he must undertake to write absolutely, to exercise his faith in the very act of marking the word. He puts his hand upon his own mouth.

This fulfillment of his call to prophecy overthrows the mode of the old and the new prophecies of the word—their voicing of it. It directly disobeys the
cardinal motivation of Puritan preaching—that the word be spoken and confessed aloud. The time for such prophesying is absolutely over. We have heard it said, "We shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ... every tongue shall confess to God. So then, every one shall give account of himself to God" (Romans 14:10–12). But Walden shows that we are there; every tongue has confessed what it can; we have heard everything there is to hear. There were prophets, but there is no Zion; knowing that, Jesus fulfilled them, but the kingdom of heaven is not entered into; knowing that, the Founding Fathers brought both testaments to this soil, and there is no America; knowing that, Jonathan Edwards helped bring forth a Great Awakening, and we are not awake. The experiment of man ("We are the subjects of an experiment" [V, 10]) has failed. Not that any of man's dreams may not come to pass. But there is absolutely no more to be said about them. What is left to us is the accounting. Not a recounting, of tales or news; but a document, with each word a warning and a teaching; a deed, with each word an act.

This is what those lists of numbers, calibrated to the half cent, mean in Walden. They of course are parodies of America's methods of evaluation; and they are emblems of what the writer wants from writing, as he keeps insisting in calling his book an account. As everywhere else, he undertakes to make the word good. A true mathematical reckoning of the sort he shows requires that every line be a mark of honesty, that the lines be complete, omitting no expense or income, and that there be no mistake in the computation. Spoken words are calculated to deceive. How are written words different? The mathematical emblem embodies two ways. First, it is part of a language which exists primarily as notation; its point is not the fixing of a spoken language, which had preceded it, but the fixing of steps, which can thereby be remarked. Second, the notation works only when every mark within it means something, in its look and its sequence. Among written works of art, only of poetry had we expected a commitment to total and transparent meaning, every mark bearing its brunt. The literary ambition of Walden is to shoulder the commitment in prose.

This ambition, directed toward the establishing of American literature, had to overcome two standing literary achievements with speech: Wordsworth's attempted redemption of the human voice and of poetry by one another; and America's peculiar exaltation of the oration and the sermon. The task of literature is to rescue the word from both politics and religion. ("God is only the president of the day, and Webster is his orator" [XVIII, 14].) Even Emerson, in his literature of the sermon, has made a false start. However wonderful, it is not a beginning but an end of something. His voice consoles; it is not of warning, and so not of hope.

I will not insist upon it, but I understand the allusion to Emerson in Walden to acknowledge this relation to him.

There was one other with whom I had "solid seasons," long to be remembered, at his house in the village, and who looked in upon me from time to time; but I had no more for society there. (XIV, 23)

It may be the most unremarkable paragraph of the book; not just because it is one of the shortest, but because it contributes nothing to the account of the visitors the writer received. What is it there for? "I had
no more for society there," beyond saying that no one else visited him, can be taken as saying that he could give no more time or take no more interest in Emerson’s social position, which is all he offered. But this writer knows who Emerson is, his necessity as a presence and as a writer. Why would he take a crack at him? Nor can the paragraph be there merely to make the account complete, for the notching must mark not simply the occurrence of time but the improvement of it. So in this case the act of marking must itself be the improvement. There is an earlier notice of a visitor whose name the writer is “sorry I cannot print... here” (VI, 8). For me, these curiosities come together in Ezekiel’s vision which contains the myth of the writer:

And [God] called to the man clothed with linen, which had the writer’s inkhorn by his side; And the Lord said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.

And to the others he said in mine hearing, Go ye after him through the city, and smite: let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity:... but come not near any man upon whom is the mark... (Ezekiel 9:3–6)

The writer’s nameless marking of Emerson is done in order to preserve him and, simultaneously, to declare that his own writing has the power of life and death in it. America’s best writers have offered one another the shock of recognition but not the faith of friendship, not daily belief. Perhaps this is why, or it is because, their voices seem to destroy one another. So they destroy one another for us. How is a tradition to come out of that?

Study of Walden would perhaps not have become such an obsession with me had it not presented itself as a response to questions with which I was already obsessed: Why has America never expressed itself philosophically? Or has it — in the metaphysical riot of its greatest literature? Has the impulse to philosophical speculation been absorbed, or exhausted, by speculation in territory, as in such thoughts as Manifest Destiny? Or are such questions not really intelligible? They are, at any rate, disturbingly like the questions that were asked about American literature before it established itself. In rereading Walden, twenty years after first reading it, I seemed to find a book of sufficient intellectual scope and consistency to have established or inspired a tradition of thinking. One reason it did not is that American culture has never really believed in its capacity to produce anything of permanent value—except itself. So it forever overpraises and undervalues its achievements.

How is one to write so as to receive the power of life and death? Shelley’s “unacknowledged legislators of the world” still had to be poets; Carlyle saw modern heroes in mere men of letters. For Thoreau these are not answers, but more questions. How is writing to declare its faithfulness to itself, in that power? How is it to rescue language?

My discussion suggests the following direction of answer. Writing—heroic writing, the writing of a nation’s scripture—must assume the conditions of language as such; re-experience, as it were, the fact that there is such a thing as language at all and assume responsibility for it — find a way to acknowledge it— until the nation is capable of serious speech again. Writing must assume responsibility, in particular, for
three of the features of the language it lives upon: (1) that every mark of a language means something in the language, one thing rather than another; that a language is totally, systematically meaningful; (2) that words and their orderings are meant by human beings, that they contain (or conceal) their beliefs, express (or deny) their convictions; and (3) that the saying of something when and as it is said is as significant as the meaning and ordering of the words said.

Until we are capable of serious speech again—i.e., are reborn, are men "[speaking] in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments" (xviii, 6)—our words do not carry our conviction, we cannot fully back them, because either we are careless of our convictions, or think we haven't any, or imagine they are inexpressible. They are merely unutterable. ("The at present unutterable things we may find somewhere uttered" [iii, 11]. Perhaps in the words he is now writing.) The written word, on a page, will have to show that a particular man set it there, inscribed it, chose, and made the mark. Set on its page, "carved out of the breath of life itself" (iii, 5), the word must stand for silence and permanence; that is to say, for conviction. Until we can speak again, our lives and our language betray one another; we can grant to neither of them their full range and autonomy; they mistake their definitions of one another. A written word, as it recurs page after page, changing its company and modifying its occasions, must show its integrity under these pressures—as though the fact that all of its occurrences in the book of pages are simultaneously there, awaiting one another, demonstrates that our words need not haunt us. If we learn how to entrust our meaning to a word, the weight it carries through all its computations will yet prove to be just the weight we will find we wish to give it.

How is a writer to show, or acknowledge, something true of language as such? I have begun in this chapter to answer that question for the writer of Walden—according to my reading of him. So another question has arisen: What will it mean to be the reader of such a writer?