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Agrarian Purpose and Thoreau's Ecological Knowing

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“Unchronicled Nations”: Agrarian Purpose and Thoreau’s Ecological Knowing

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*T*HOREAU had two sets of purposes in his Walden experiment, one of which might be labeled “agrarian” and the other “ecological.” In the agrarian stance that he had absorbed from a range of sources—Virgil, Cato, Jefferson, the communal reform movements that were emerging thickly in the 1840s—he envisioned both an economic and a domestic alternative to the course of modern industrial life in America, a means by which he could regain control of the daily life that increasingly entangling social expectations had taken from him. In his ecological orientation he hoped to find more securely the vision of cosmic harmony that he had received from Emerson and from Emerson’s own Romantic sources, locating and knowing “by experience” the sublimity of life that seemed so doubtful to many of his contemporaries.

Thoreau’s deepest hope, one that permeates the texts from the Walden years, is that these purposes would not be found to be contradictory. Yet he recognized the prevalent divergence between an agrarian use of the world and an ecological knowledge of it. At Walden he hoped to stem that divergence; the book’s emphases on directness and factuality were strategies to hold use and knowledge in a unified solu-

tion. "If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact," he declared, with as much hope as certainty, "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."¹ This odd but compelling image of knowledge and death, the envisioning of a crucifixion before factuality, captures his conviction that the Walden experiment is a game of high stakes, a life-or-death proposition, and that its deepest object is the difficult reconciliation of contradictory impulses, the glimmer from different surfaces that the right stance will allow one to attain. "Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature," he urged (p. 97), and much of the work of *Walden* is to present us with realized images of how this might be done. The depiction of Thoreau's daily work and activities, which constitute much of the book's texture, are the textual equivalents of this orientation to facticity in which Thoreau dramatizes his own pursuit of a redeeming reality. Among the more notable of these moments is his description of field work in "The Bean-Field," in which the farmer's necessary labor is used to illustrate the possible convergence of agrarian practice and ecological knowledge. It stands as one of the loci of energy in *Walden* into which much intellectual effort is poured, and out of which much new energy is finally generated.



Even though Thoreau was a farmer in only a limited sense at Walden, his stay there can be understood in many senses as an agrarian experiment, as several influential critics have noted. Sherman Paul referred to *Walden* as in part "a modern epic of farming," noting "The Bean-Field" chapter as "an example of Thoreau's idea of organic social reform, of the reform that returned to the economy of nature rather than to economy," one that also entailed "self-reform." Leo Marx analyzed it as a "report of an experiment in transcendental pastoralism," weighing the extent to which

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 98 (further references to this work appear in the text).

Thoreau both affirmed and circumscribed the pastoral impulse.² Thoreau was not alone among his contemporaries in sensing the socially redemptive possibilities of the agrarian life. As Robert D. Richardson, Jr., noted, Thoreau established his residence at the pond in the same year that the National Reform Association was founded, an organization led by Horace Greeley that was devoted to the preservation of public lands for the mission of the small farmer. Broadly Jeffersonian in its aims, with a fundamental commitment both to the economic and ethical advantages of the small farm, the organization can be said to embody institutionally a cultural ethos of which *Walden* is an important expression.³

Thoreau's account of his plans makes it clear that he conceived his retreat partly as a trial at farming. "Wishing to earn ten or twelve dollars by some honest and agreeable method," he explained, he cultivated some two-and-a-half acres "chiefly with beans, but also a small part with potatoes, corn, peas, and turnips" (p. 54). The experimental and potentially impermanent nature of his stay militated against his conceiving it wholly in the rootedly Jeffersonian terms of subsistence farming. His description of what he regarded as his near mistake in negotiating for the purchase of the Hollowell Farm suggests his fear of the entanglements that a permanent commitment to a particular farm might bring: "I even had the refusal of several farms,—the refusal was all I wanted,—but I never got my fingers burned by actual possession" (p. 82). His *Walden* acreage, borrowed from Emerson,

² Paul, *The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1958), pp. 294, 331; and Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), p. 242. For an important refinement of Marx's approach to *Walden* as an example of pastoralism, see James S. Tillman, "The Transcendental Georgic in *Walden*," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 21 (1975), 137–41, who argues that *Walden* is "a Transcendental version of the georgic" (p. 137). Also important to this inquiry is Lawrence Buell's assessment of the ideology of pastoralism in America, which stresses the "duality" of the pastoral impulse as both "counterinstitutional and institutionally sponsored" (see "American Pastoral Ideology Reappraised," *American Literary History*, 1 [1989], 20).

³ See Richardson, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986), pp. 149–50. Richardson includes agrarian reform among three "public contexts" for the *Walden* experiment, also including the rise of the utopian communal experiments and the Mexican War with the associated building of the slavery crisis.

and richer in scenery than in humus, suited his needs more closely, even if it failed some fundamental agrarian tests. "One farmer said that it was 'good for nothing but to raise cheeping squirrels on,' " Thoreau remembered, but he made its marginality into his own advantage: "I put no manure on this land, not being the owner, but merely a squatter, and not expecting to cultivate so much again, and I did not quite hoe it all once" (p. 54). For Thoreau, the point was not to repeat the mistakes of most of the farmers he saw around him, whose lives were owned by the requirements of their farms. His Walden acreage, he believed, could answer his needs without becoming an impediment to the spiritual restructuring of his life that he was also undertaking.

Even under these rigidly bounded conditions, Thoreau's farming was an important part of his experiment, and eventually a prominent part of his narrative. Early versions of what came to be *Walden*, delivered first as lectures, included an account of "White Beans and Walden Pond."⁴ The final text of *Walden* is saturated with references to the work of farming and the attitudes of farmers, against which Thoreau is constantly measuring his own work and life. These references disclose an unresolved tension in Thoreau's thinking. On the one hand he sees farming as potentially salvific, an ennobling and empowering form of work that cuts against the grain of the social malaise that characterizes much of modern American society. His act of retiring to the country and *farming* it, and the prominence he gives to his agrarian work in the text, are signs of his fundamental faith in country life as a valid social alternative. Despite his attacks on the farmers' misuse of their resources, Thoreau recognizes the potential of the farm as a means of economic self-sufficiency. This is of particular importance to him because he offers in *Walden* one of our earliest warnings against an incipient consumer culture, depicting agrarian life as a potential insulation from it: "Every New Englander might easily raise all his own breadstuffs in this land of rye and Indian corn, and not depend on distant and fluctuating markets for them" (p. 63).

⁴ See Stephen Adams and Donald Ross, Jr., *Revising Mythologies: The Composition of Thoreau's Major Works* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1988), pp. 54-55.

But in contrast to this view of farming's potential as an alternative to the developing marketplace economic culture, Thoreau also recognized that in practice it was usually a form of enslaving drudgery. In fact, Thoreau's critique in *Walden* of the ordinary patterns of life seems to focus most directly on the farmers, who represented to him the Concord middle class.⁵ Thoreau characterizes them as victims of their own greed and short-sightedness, individuals who have ironically defeated themselves through their misguided striving for betterment: "I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of" (p. 5). The farm is here depicted as a kind of prison, a burden that requires that one's priorities be bent to its demands. "Who made them serfs of the soil?" he asks pointedly, playing against the American self-conception of its democratic culture anchored in the liberty of the freehold farmer: "Why should they eat their sixty acres, when man is condemned to eat only his peck of dirt? Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born?" (p. 5). The analogy between field work and grave digging, between labor and death, is a powerful challenge to the assumptions that had enshrined the work of farming with a moral authority in American culture.

Thoreau chooses the analogy with a full sense of its provocative nature and a clear understanding that he is undermining the social sanction that farming enjoyed in American culture. "But men labor under a mistake," he argues; "the better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost" (p. 5). The metaphor of compost expresses vividly the process by which the farmer is broken down and consumed by the farm he presumably owns. The inverted nature of this relationship between farm and farmer epitomizes Thoreau's general critique of the exaggerated relative importance of material possessions, and it emphasizes the fact that

⁵ For an important discussion of Thoreau's complicated attitude toward farm life, see Leonard Neufeldt's treatment of his relationship with his boyhood friend Joseph Hosmer, a farmer in the Concord area, in " 'We Never Agreed . . . in Hardly Anything': Henry Thoreau and Joseph Hosmer," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 35 (1989), 85-107.

the dynamic of ownership or possession is often inverted in modern life. The laboring man thus "has no time to be any thing but a machine" (p. 6); and this loss of purpose, this absence of any sense of higher endeavor, casts a pall on daily life. "The mass of men," he concludes, "lead lives of quiet desperation" (p. 8).

Thoreau's initial counterstance to this bleak picture of farm life as imprisoning drudgery is that of the loafer, and *Walden* contains an amusing series of moments in which Thoreau thumbs his nose at the conventional standards of responsible hard work.⁶ "What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?" he asks ironically (p. 10). His well-known descriptions of his Walden occupations, such as "reporter to a journal, of no very wide circulation," and "self-appointed inspector of snow storms and rain storms" (p. 18), are a calculated mockery of the farmer's work ethic. "I have had an eye to the unfrequented nooks and corners of the farm," he explains slyly (p. 18), his preference for geographical margins being the correlative of his intent to step away from the pull of conventional expectations, especially as they concern work.

Thoreau consciously attempted to protect himself from any rigid daily schedule, and in *Walden* he emphasized a quality of openness and spontaneity, especially in his depiction of his responses to the natural world. His stated preference for a "broad margin" to his life meant that "there were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or hands" (p. 111). Some mornings he did not hoe beans, but "sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery," finding this gift of time and acceptance an important enhancement to his life: "I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been" (p. 111).

But then again, many mornings during that first year he did hoe beans, and his crop of nine bushels and twelve quarts is evidence of at least a moderate degree of diligence. It is with

⁶ Despite these examples, Thoreau's attitude toward the American work ethic was a complicated one. Robert Sattelmeyer has discussed Thoreau's ambivalence about fishing as an activity that was free from the routines of daily work, but that also garnered "cultural disapproval" for its tendency to flaunt the standards of responsible hard work ("The True Industry for Poets": Fishing with Thoreau," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 33 [1987], 191).

at least some pride that he mentions that "when they were growing, I used to hoe from five o'clock in the morning till noon" (p. 161). Loafing did constitute an important counterstatement to the debilitating work ethic of the farmer, but it was not Thoreau's only response. His nonchalance about work explains only one side of his strategy for countering the work ethic, for in another sense he remained deeply committed to it. As Paul noted in discussing Thoreau's reaction to plans for utopian reform, he never relented in his belief that work, both physical and moral, was the necessary means of reform: "The price of virtue still had to be paid in the immemorial way, by the sweat of the brow" (Paul, p. 153). In *Walden* Thoreau aimed not to deny the absolute claims of work, but to reformulate the spirit and awareness in which work is conducted. He hoped to demonstrate that moral self-fashioning required an unremitting spiritual labor, and that the physical labor necessary to sustain our daily lives must also be considered as an integral part of this larger pattern of spiritual work. "To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts," he declared (p. 90), and such change necessarily implied both a new mode of self-conception and a change of perception that would entail a reformulation of the quality of daily labor.



Thoreau's reformulation of labor was enabled by his nurturing of what we might call the ecological orientation of his consciousness. Ecology was not a term available to Thoreau, but it has come to express for our century a direction of thinking in which he was an originating participant.⁷ I use it here to express the dramatically enlarged frame of reference that *Walden* adduces in its depictions of the human observation of, and interaction with, the natural world. This changed mode of interaction with the world is of particular importance in dictating the valuation of labor and other economic activities. While one may at first consider the ecologi-

⁷ On the origins of the term "ecology," and an amusing account of his mistaken effort to attribute it to Thoreau, see Walter Harding, "Thoreau's Text and Murphy's Law," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 33 (1987), 207–8.

cal consciousness as a perceptual or epistemological concept, its deepest implications are ethical, and quite specifically economic. Yet Thoreau often arrives at the ethical and the economic by way of the poetic. "It was no longer beans that I hoed, nor I that hoed beans," he says at one point in describing his morning work (p. 159). This mutual elision of identities is an important sign of Thoreau's broadening of concern and of perception, which breaks through the usual hierarchical relationship between the observing and use-making self and the observed and used object. The cultivation of this capacity of knowing, the foundation of an ecological sensitivity, informs the agrarian aim of *Walden*, representing the larger spiritual and ethical attainment that is Thoreau's dearest hope. A description of the development of this consciousness is in a sense a description of the entire text of *Walden*, since Thoreau's aim was to find the words that would communicate this enlargement of vision to his readers. It is epitomized in the famous discussion in "Spring" of the "sand foliage" on the banks of the deep cut for the railroad tracks, in which the human body, the organic world, and the earth itself are shown to be a single evolving entity.⁸ But it is important to remember how deeply that vision of wholeness is grounded in the minute particulars of Thoreau's observation and the detail of his description. The delicacy and precision of his seeing and knowing at that moment exemplify the state of awareness, or condition of being "awake," that he had hoped to recover at Walden. "Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep," he had explained; "why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been slumbering?" (p. 90).

The state of being "awake" is Thoreau's most pointed metaphor for the enlargement of perspective that is fundamental to his ecological stance. Its antithesis, the condition of slumber, implies a world of events and objects from which the mind is cut off in isolation. In this sense, Thoreau's acts of

⁸ The importance of the sand foliage description in "Spring" has long been recognized as a key to understanding Thoreau's vision in *Walden*. Important readings include Paul, pp. 346–49; Richardson, pp. 310–13; and Gordon Boudreau, *The Roots of "Walden" and the Tree of Life* (Nashville: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 105–34.

observation always imply an act of joining, a discovery of some fundamental quality of relatedness. His observation of the sand foliage, for instance, moves him to think in terms of the body: "What is man but a mass of thawing clay? The ball of the human finger is but a drop congealed" (p. 307). Even his fanciful descriptions of the trumping of bullfrogs around the pond—"tr-r-r-oonk, tr-r-r-oonk, tr-r-r-oonk!"—is given a humorously human context, as the bullfrogs are presented as "ancient wine-bibbers and wassailers" (p. 126), passing the cup in increasingly sodden drunkenness. The passage tells us more about Thoreau than it does about bullfrogs, for his fanciful description exemplifies the acutely alert and energetically charged consciousness that he strives to maintain at Walden.

Thoreau's rhetoric of wakefulness is intended to make us aware of the rich network of affinities that constitutes the interlacing of human experience and the natural world. In one vivid metaphorical articulation of this connection, Thoreau referred to his head as "an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore-paws," and declared his intention to "mine and burrow my way through these hills" (p. 98). The search for precious ore, typifying a human preoccupation, is here spoken of in the same phrase with the animal-like act of burrowing in the earth. Both of these operations signify the delving of the mind into nature, a metaphorical surrender and burial whose object is both to know the earth and to be one with it. We may initially consider an image of burial as one of diminishment, but Thoreau's implication is quite the opposite. "I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts" (p. 98), he declares, ending the paragraph on a note of active expectation. His intellect, reformulated to the discipline of being "awake," has joined him to the world, and the array of meanings that such a joining entails are suggested by the multiplying senses of mining, burrowing, and burial for the human entry into nature.



Thoreau's concern with the promise of agrarian life and his parallel concern with an expansive eco-

logical way of knowing come together in his representation of his work in the beanfield, a significant assertion of the possibility of a union between labor and knowledge. It is important to realize that the descriptive paragraph at the center of "The Bean-Field" chapter (pp. 158–60), which is my focus here, begins with a reference to another form of digging in the earth, which as we have seen carries a heavy metaphorical significance in the text. Thoreau refers to his work of drawing "a still fresher soil about the rows with my hoe," an act that brings nutriment not only to his beans but to himself as well. For a nation founded on the taxing, incessant labor of clearing, plowing, planting, cultivating, and harvesting, Americans have had surprisingly few literary representations of field work, a subject that most aspiring writers have regarded as decidedly unpromising territory. Thoreau's refusal to gloss over the effort it takes to get nine bushels of beans from an unfertilized field, frequented by a voracious woodchuck, is therefore important both in its honest factuality and in its depiction of such work as an appropriate literary and ethical subject.

Perhaps most significant to the poetic representation of this work is the discovery that Thoreau makes with his hoe: "I disturbed the ashes of unchronicled nations who in primeval years lived under these heavens, and their small implements of war and hunting were brought to the light of this modern day" (p. 158). Thoreau was well known in his Concord circle for his knowledge of Indian artifacts and Indian culture, and his discovery of such artifacts here is significant. It serves first to remind us of the historical fact of the displacement of the Indian from the land: a descendant of Europeans here cultivates a field that had formerly sustained a community of native Americans. Thoreau's discovery is therefore an initial sign of the gulf between the cultures, but it ultimately serves to suggest the bridge between Thoreau himself and the cultures that have been linked to the land before him. As Thoreau recognizes, the presence of these remnants places his work in a much extended temporal framework, transforming an ordinary, and some might even say irksome, task into a mode of communion within a larger human fam-

ily. In this way the day's customary and routine activities are represented as life-sustaining. They are necessary, as economic acts, for the maintenance of life at the level of commodity, and they also show Thoreau the worker his place in the fabric of human history. His connection with these "unchronicled nations" sacramentally deepens his humanity by returning him to the fundamental work that has sustained the human race.

Walden is of course steeped in allusions to historical texts and events, all of which attempt to universalize its message and ground it in a larger history. But to discover this grounding in common field work, in the hoeing of beans, is perhaps a more dramatic statement of the commonality of the human enterprise. It is, moreover, significant that the "ashes" he disturbs are those of "unchronicled nations": Thoreau's work itself becomes a form of reading and reporting the "chronicle" of their past, the earth serving as a text from which he uncovers meaning, his very labor an enactment of their story.

As Thoreau uncovers this buried narrative of human life, he also reformulates his important earlier trope of the farmer's cultivation of the earth as a form of burial. "Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born?" he had asked, meaning that the farmer's work, and by extension much of the work of modern life, was a form of slow death: "The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost" (p. 5). These buried ashes, the remnants of fire—but also, by implication, the ashes of the men and women who built those fires—force him to see the death of farmers in a new and not entirely tragic light. The "compost" that these ashes represent suggests the process by which successive generations have rejoined themselves to the earth, not only through their deaths but through their lives and works as well. The earlier allusions to the degrading and tragic implications of the farmer's plowing himself into the ground have here become something more ennobling: Thoreau uncovers with his hoe a purpose and dignity that stretches across generations and cultures. And these generations and cultures find a common point of reference in the earth itself.

As the allusion to the Indian ashes suggests, hoeing beans is a particularly suggestive activity for Thoreau, the reverie that often accompanies repetitive physical labor proving in this case to be a rich imaginative resource. Linking Thoreau's thoughtful attitude toward his work in the field with meditative practices anchored in the American Indian religious traditions, Robert F. Sayre has noted that "the beanfield and beans were teachers"; and Stanley Cavell, among others, has shown persuasively that hoeing serves Thoreau as a metaphor for writing and for reading: "For the writer's hoe, the earth is a page."⁹ Thoreau's uncovering of the remnants of Indian cultures with his hoe is an instance of such learning, reading, and writing, a chronicling of the past in which he himself is absorbed into the narrative he uncovers. But it is important to keep in mind that Thoreau's hoe is a tool for cultivation, whatever other metaphoric identities it might attain; his discovery of these remnants ties him to the human narrative in the first instance as a cultivator, the performer of an ancient but never completed labor.

Thoreau therefore makes much of the distinction between labor and leisure as he hoes, finding his work less drudgery than diversion and cultivating not only his beans but his awareness of his surroundings: "When my hoe tinkled against the stones, that music echoed to the woods and the sky, and was an accompaniment to my labor which yielded an instant and immeasurable crop" (p. 159). Work is hereby transformed into a celebratory music making, and he comes to see the "crop" or end product of his work as the process of work itself. The "music of the hoe" reminds him of his "acquaintances who had gone to the city to attend the

⁹ Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indians* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), p. 75; and Cavell, *The Senses of "Walden": An Expanded Edition* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), p. 25. Thoreau's mindfulness of working in the fields previously inhabited by Indians is one example of his belief that the Indian was important to what Philip F. Gura has called his search for "representative men" (see "Thoreau's Maine Woods Indians: More Representative Men," *American Literature*, 49 [1977], 366–84). On the metaphoric quality of Thoreau's work, see Paul, who notes that the work in the beanfield "could easily represent the creative process of the romantic artist" (p. 331); and Frederick Garber, *Thoreau's Redemptive Imagination* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 133–34, who discusses the work with the beans in terms of the artist's attempt to work through his material.

oratorios," who he can now consider "with as much pity as pride" (p. 159), having himself discovered a truer entertainment arising organically from the rhythm of his daily activity.

Midway through his description of his work Thoreau speaks of the "night-hawk" that "circled overhead," a skyward shift of his heretofore earth-focused vision. The hawk falls "with a swoop and a sound as if the heavens were rent, torn at last to very rags and tatters" (p. 159), and the bird's sweeping flight expands the spatial frame within which Thoreau performs his labor. He sees the hawk's soaring and diving as gestures of expansion that balance the digging and delving of his hoe. The heavens remain "a seamless cope" despite the power of the hawk as it rips through the air, for such power, however superficially disruptive it may seem, remains in fundamental harmony with the larger framework of earth and sky. For Thoreau, the hawk is "graceful and slender like ripples caught up from the pond, as leaves are raised by the wind to float in the heavens." This is more than ornamental poetic description, for it indicates the profound likeness of the forms and processes of nature. "Such kindredship is in Nature," Thoreau says (p. 159), reflecting both the hawk's likeness to other natural things and his own sense of kinship with the things around him.

The night-hawk is one of what soon becomes a throng of creatures that populate the frame of Thoreau's picture. He observes "a pair of hen-hawks" whose "soaring and descending, approaching and leaving one another" seems to be "the imbodiment of my own thoughts." Those thoughts are not sequentially rational, it is important to note, and their erratic ebb and flow, their lack of predictable pattern, suggests the freedom of reverie that his labor yields. Such surging and turning thoughts are those of a poet or a writer of the imagination, who is capable of reveling in pure energy even at the price of an organized or rationalized form. When the imagination is freed, suggestions and traces of the exotic can come even from the most unlikely sources, as when "from under a rotten stump" he turns up "a sluggish portentous and outlandish spotted salamander, a trace of Egypt and the Nile, yet our contemporary" (p. 159).

The expansive direction of the passage is the reflection of the growing energy of Thoreau's imagination as he pursues his labor, and it suggests the growing web of connections with life in all its forms that becomes apparent to him through his work.¹⁰ This is a crucial moment in *Walden*, a binding together of Thoreau's agrarian with his ecological experiment, a union whose catalyst is the most fundamental and prosaic aspect of agrarian life—the repetitive and physically taxing labor of the hands and back that it requires. Thoreau will redeem the life of the farm not only on the level of theory, in which he calls the motives of the typical farmer into question, but on the level of sweat as well, by illustrating the redemptive possibility of work itself.

It is of course important to remember that Thoreau's work transpires within a framework of reformed economic objectives, free from the interposition of exploitation. He will later discuss his meeting with the Irish immigrant John Field, who "worked 'boggling' for a neighboring farmer, turning up a meadow with a spade or bog hoe at the rate of ten dollars an acre and the use of the land with manure for one year" (p. 204). There is little that is redeeming or imaginatively expansive in Field's situation, as Thoreau frankly recognized. The celebration of labor that we find in "The Bean-Field" is tied closely to the social experimentalism that Thoreau's life at Walden represented. Labor in and of itself may well be unable to overcome oppressive social conditions or relationships that are exploitative. But Thoreau is also intent to show that the work of the hoe is not necessarily drudgery either, and that any form of social change must entail a conception of the necessity and dignity of work, and even of its beauty and intrinsic satisfaction.

The labor that Thoreau performs with his hoe is superficially similar to that of most Concord farmers, but Thoreau

¹⁰ As H. Daniel Peck has noted in *Thoreau's Morning Work: Memory and Perception in "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," the Journal, and "Walden"* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1990), the "urgent work of perception" constitutes Thoreau's most important project in *Walden* and in the Journals (p. 162). In this sense, the work in the beanfield, which opens Thoreau more completely to the life in the field around him, provides the context for that larger perception and stands as an important means to his achievement of his "morning work."

has represented that labor to his readers, and to himself, as a qualitatively different enterprise. His work is not an act of resignation or desperation, and he is not a "serf" to the soil that he works. He has a demanding crop of beans to nurture and cultivate—and he remembers to tell us what he sold them for—but he also has a freedom of mind about his work that originates in the economic freedom his Walden experiment represents. His beans, linked as they are to his plan for his life at the pond, are part of his independent means; his spirit of independence, conversely, allows him to find in his agrarian labor a more expansive vision of his belonging in the natural world. That belonging is rooted in work, the structured expression of his own creaturely necessity to survive and flourish.

In his work in the beanfield Thoreau therefore found the conceptual and experiential link between his hope to live in the world freely and his drive to know the world ecologically. The work rooted him, an expression of his necessary search for sustenance, even as his beans were themselves rooted in a similar search. The gradual process of self-recognition that the work in the beanfield records is augmented by the way his own agrarian work mirrors that of the lost, unchronicled nations he discovers with his hoe, his work coming to provide that missing chronicle through a re-creation of the same experience.

Despite its mordant mockery of most forms of human toil, *Walden* is nevertheless a book that attempts to redeem the concept of work, using the open and thoughtful response to bodily necessity, the foundation of our economic identities, as a means of spiritual redemption. The harmony that Thoreau believes he hears when his hoe hits the stone and debris in the beanfield is the confirming signal that work has transfigured itself into art of the highest kind, that which can "carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look" (p. 90).