Reimagining Thoreau is a major reconsideration of Thoreau’s career from his graduation from Harvard in 1837 to his death in 1862. Combining biographical and manuscript evidence with a fresh reading of nearly all of Thoreau’s texts, Robert Milder focuses on the drama of psychosocial adjustment occurring within and beneath the written work. Rooted in the microcosm of ante-bellum Concord but also in the private urgencies of his nature, Thoreau’s writings, in Milder’s view, are rhetorical efforts to mediate his troubled relations with his fellow townsment and to inscribe and thereby realize an ideal self. At the center of Reimagining Thoreau is the first detailed interpretation of Walden as a temporally layered text that changed as Thoreau himself changed during the years of composition and whose shifts and discontinuities suggest a subtler, more conflicted story than the myth of triumph Thoreau deliberately shaped.

Milder also looks beyond Walden to counter the traditional view of Thoreau’s “decline.” His discussion of the late natural-history essays is not only one of the fullest we have; it completes Milder’s reconfiguration of Thoreau’s career, which is neither a parabola whose vertex is Walden nor a continuous line, but a rising arc with periodic disruptions and recommencements, constant only in its impulse toward ascent.
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Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture

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Reimagining Thoreau

ROBERT MILDEN

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<td>EW</td>
<td>Emerson, <em>Complete Works</em> (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911)</td>
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<td>JMN</td>
<td><em>The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson</em>, ed. William H. Gilman et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960–)</td>
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Preface

Perhaps the best introduction to this book would be a brief account of how it came to be written. It began as part of a more inclusive study of Emerson and the American Renaissance that originated in my sense of a deep structural kinship among three of the major canonical texts of the period—Moby-Dick, Walden, and the 1855 and 1856 editions of Leaves of Grass—and between these midcentury writings and Emerson’s 1837 oration “The American Scholar.” By “structural kinship” I had in mind something more than affinities of content or form rooted in the contemporary zeitgeist or traceable in conventional ways to the literary and philosophical influence of Emerson. Despite enormous differences of genre, occasion, sensibility, and idea, the works seemed to share a common rhetorical architecture that could not be explained through the usual vocabularies of criticism and that seemed to point beyond the initiative of particular authors to a source in collective experience.

My subject, as I grew to understand it, centered on the complex relationship among individual and group consciousness, social processes, and literary form. Nothing I had read equipped me to undertake such a project or offered itself as a usable model. While New Historical theory and practice have gone far toward dissolving the traditional distinction between literary foreground and historical background, they have done so in large part by reducing the author to an inconsequential cipher amid the play of discourses and ideologies. More suggestive was the work of theorists or on or beyond the edges of literary criticism—Erik H. Erikson, Lucien Goldmann, Raymond Williams, sociologist Alvin W. Gouldner, and Clifford Geertz, all of whom were concerned with the mental structures individuals and groups generated to mediate their relation with the world. In their different idioms, moreover, all these writers seemed to circle around a remark by Kenneth Burke: “Critical and imaginative works are answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose. They are not merely answers, they are strategic answers, stylized answers,” that “size up the situations, name their structure and outstanding ingredients, and name them in a way that contains an attitude towards them.” Approaching the American Renaissance
through Burke’s notion of literature as symbolic action, I came to see the writings of the 1850s as “stylized answers” to a vocational problem defined by Emerson for an entire literary generation. The process I wanted to illustrate was how the writers of the American Renaissance – pronounced individuals yet members, too, of a literary class that sought to rescue itself from the margins of national life – reshaped their world according to the imperatives of personal and collective need and expressed themselves in literary works as congruent in their underlying narrative and rhetorical form as they were incongruent in most outward respects.

The first fruit of this project was an essay on Emerson entitled “‘The American Scholar’ as Cultural Event.” A chapter on Thoreau’s early writings and *Walden* was to be the second. The evolution from chapter to book was initially a response to the wealth and character of the available materials – fourteen volumes of journals in the 1906 Torrey-Allen edition (currently being superseded by the Princeton text), which, together with Ronald E. Clapper’s genetic edition of *Walden*, enabled readers to trace the development of author and book through most of a decade. Alongside this living record of how and why *Walden* assumed its particular shape, generalizations about history, ideology, vocation, and literary structure seemed bloodless, formulaic, and often beside the point. To modify Emerson’s remark that “there is no history; only biography” (*JMN* VII, 202), I increasingly felt there was no literary history of the kind I wanted to write except through biography. Comparing Thoreau’s first draft of *Walden* (1846–47) with the published text, one interpreter has argued that “history forcibly enters [the book] in the changes and additions” of the intervening years. So it does, yet “history” involves substantially more than Thoreau’s declining “confidence in the likelihood of civic reform” and the role of his own work in “instigating” it. The history that altered *Walden* is the organic history of its author as a psychosocial being, and until one understood that history with reasonable fullness there seemed little chance of sympathetically understanding any other. The circumstances of the case at hand – what I came to think of as “practical history” – would have to suggest whatever larger claims might be made for the intertextuality of the American Renaissance.

I do not pretend to have come full circle and written the historical book I projected. As I worked with the journals and the genetic text of *Walden*, together with the contemporaneous writings and the juvenilia, Thoreau’s career assumed an interest of its own, and having charted its development up to and within the successive drafts of *Walden*, it was impossible not to pursue it farther, beyond *Walden*, to discover how and where the journey ended. Reputedly, the terrain was not inviting. Despite the 1980s work of Robert D. Richardson, John Hildebidle, William Howarth, and others, the myth of Thoreau’s “decline” is still nearly as entrenched as the myth of Melville’s. Yet both writers went forward to other lives and other achievements – Melville, most impressively in *Clarel*, by endowing his lifelong concerns with a new depth and historical reflectiveness as
well as a new literary form, Thoreau in his late natural history essays by extending his range of interests and themes and coming before the public in a new incarnation. Not least among the aims of this book is to help reconfigure the shape of Thoreau’s career, which is neither a parabola whose vertex is *Walden* nor a continuous line, but a rising arc with periodic disruptions and recommencements, constant only in its impulse toward ascent.

A note on vocabulary and method. For the most part I have tried to avoid pedagogical sermons and to use literary theory pragmatically for limited ends in response to immediate problems. I do, however, acknowledge a bent toward a reconstituted authorial criticism. “What matter who’s speaking?” one asked. Everything, I believe, provided one rejects Foucault’s straw man, “the free subject,” and identifies the speaker as a distinctive consciousness receiving and processing sociohistorical experience and working to adapt itself favorably to the community. Erikson and Goldmann were useful counterweights to Foucault in their emphasis on the power of individuals and groups to remodel their internalized world and forge new mental structures to meet crises of psychosocial adjustment. On a different side, I was encouraged to find (after the fact) that the approach to textual (dis)unity I had taken with *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* has elsewhere received a name. “The empirical critic,” as Frederick C. Crews denominates him or her, “is inclined to accept [the work’s] contradictions without attempting to sublimate them into a higher unity, and then to investigate their origin in an irresolute or conflicted authorial mind. Such a critic demands order not from the text per se but from the congruence between textual and biographical evidence.” Since even the empiricist’s kind of order may be more than a book or a literary career can neatly supply, it seems necessary to add that empiricism is a relative matter, a choice not so much to be “objective” as to submit one’s inescapable subjectivity to a responsibility to facts and an open inquisitiveness toward literary form.

“Reimagining Thoreau,” though applicable to my own project in constructing a version of Thoreau, refers primarily to the enterprise of self-mythologizing in which Thoreau himself was continuously engaged. At the center of this activity was Thoreau’s concern with what I call his “problem of relation.” “I have almost completed thirty nine years and I have not yet adjusted my relation to my fellows on the planet, or to my own work” (*JMN VII*, 458), Emerson remarked in 1842 in words that might equally have been Thoreau’s — indeed, in one form or another were Thoreau’s in journal confessions spanning nearly twenty-five years and in rare confidences to friends like Harrison Blake. While it includes vocation as a chief element, “relation” takes in the several coordinates involved in defining a satisfactory posture toward experience; it begins in personal identity and ends in a justifiable calling in the world, its adaptational thrusts mediated along the way by the self’s connection with other selves, with the local community, with society and humankind at large, and with history, nature, and God.

Thoreau himself liked to believe that “with regard to essentials” he never “had
occasion to change [his] mind" (Corr 491); in truth, the emphases of his thinking, and still more of his self-conception, were nearly always in flux. What did not change was his transcendentalist conviction that he was embarked on a life pilgrimage whose celestial city was fullness of being, to be reached within or beyond secular time. Interpreting this journey as it appears in, shapes, and is reflexively shaped by his writings – and in terms other than Thoreau himself would have chosen to use – is the main object of this book. A vast commentary has gathered on the substance of Thoreau’s beliefs and his artistry in announcing them; my own focus is on the drama of adjustment I see occurring within and beneath his work, generating its rhetorical architecture and charging its expression. Like Stanley Cavell, I would insist that Walden (and nearly all Thoreau’s writing) “means in every word it says,”9 but I would emphasize the preposition “in,” which implies for me an actional significance quite different at times from the literal or poetic content of Thoreau’s words. In their origin and achieved form – the lines of energy that course through them and mold content into argument – Thoreau’s writings are dramatized answers to the social and psychological problem of how to live, answers that assumed new character as Thoreau’s efforts to inscribe (and thereby realize) an ideal self met unexpected resistances in nature, society, and his own being. Thoreau rarely overcame such problems; still less did he allow himself to be stymied by them. His special quality was a resilience that enabled him to mythologize himself anew and reformulate the terms of success. Refusing to admit defeat even to himself, Thoreau made good on his refusal through a resourcefulness of mind and spirit inexhaustible in its life-giving efficacy, if sometimes exasperating in its readiness to shed the burden of intellectual memory. Where Emersonian growth is a bursting of boundaries and a recrystallizing of the self around a new mental “helm” (CW II, 180), Thoreau-vian growth is more typically a redirection of energies, commitments, expectations, and hopes in response to some inner or outer check. Though fond of images of upward metamorphosis (the worm into the butterfly), Thoreau was a Proteus who eluded tragedy, chronic frustration, remorse, and despair through a sidelong change of form which, if not immediately the transmutation he sought, had the salutary effect of reviving his constitutional optimism and giving new creative impetus to his life and work.

I do not expect that my presentation of Thoreau will satisfy all readers. Hagioographers will prefer not to consider the underpinnings of his rhetorical stances, nor will formalists be pleased by my emphasis on disjunctions in his major texts, which changed as he changed and in ways he seems not always to have recognized, much less to have acknowledged. “By ignoring [Thoreau’s] weaknesses,” however, “we do violence to what is strongest in the man,” as Michael West remarked; and by turning an eye from the shifts and discontinuities in his texts, we neglect much of what is most humanly vital in them. Other stories are unfolding in Thoreau’s public and private writings than the narrative of self-celebration he would have us attend to. The story I try to tell is in many
respects a complement to his; it describes the pressures that generated his identic and literary forms, the experiences that strained or fractured them, and the structures that rose and subsequently fell in their stead. The Thoreau who counts most in my reading is the journalizer and writer of 1851–62: the author of the later drafts of *Walden* and of the life and career after *Walden*. The older Thoreau is a deeper, more sympathetic, more truthful figure – a riper one, too, nowhere more than toward the last in what is still commonly regarded as his intellectual and literary winter.

This book could not have been written without the textual scholarship of J. Lyndon Shanley and, especially, Ronald E. Clapper. Intellectual debts are numerous, considerable, and sometimes elusive, but I would particularly like to acknowledge the work of Charles R. Anderson, John Hildebidle, William Howarth, Linck C. Johnson, Richard Lebeaux, Sherman Paul, Stephen Railton, Robert D. Richardson, and Robert Sattelmeyer. Steven Fink’s *Prophet in the Marketplace* appeared after a draft of my manuscript was completed but was a valuable source of information and provocation during the final revision. Teachers routinely credit their students, but the wealth of suggestion offered by my graduate and undergraduate students at Washington University is real and substantial. I am grateful to former Dean Edward N. Wilson and the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Washington University for summer grants that helped fund the project, and to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a research grant for an earlier work that contributed formatively to the present one. Above all, I thank my wife, Gail, and my sons, Jeffrey and Brian, for their understanding and support through the difficult work of what Melville called taking a book off the brain.