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NEILL MATHESON

Thoreau's Inner Animal

In our culture, the decisive political conflict, which governs every other conflict, is that between the animality and the humanity of man.

Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*

IN A WELL-KNOWN 1856 LETTER, THOREAU WROTE TO this friend H.G.O. Blake about Walt Whitman, whom he had met for the first time the previous month. Thoreau reports that he has just read the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which “has done me more good than any reading for a long time” (*Correspondence* 444). Yet his enthusiastic praise for this “exhilarating” new poetry is qualified from the start by reservations about the explicitness of what he calls its “sensuality.” He complains, “It is as if the beasts spoke. I think that men have not been ashamed of themselves without reason. No doubt, there have always been dens where such deeds were unblushingly recited, and it is no merit to compete with their inhabitants” (444–45). Thoreau figures overt erotic expression as animal speech, suggesting that his anxious concern with sexuality is caught up in the question of the distinction between the human and the animal, often understood to hinge on the possession of language. What seems troubling about Whitman’s poetry is imagined as boundary-crossing, animals exhibiting a human-like capacity for speech, or humans speaking as animals would if they possessed language, openly discussing beastly matters.¹ Shame also signals the transgression of this boundary between human and animal, the impropriety that Thoreau attributes to Whitman’s poetry. Men have reason to be ashamed of their sexuality (and perhaps would feel no shame without the faculty of reason); shame appears here to be a uniquely human emotion. Only in “dens” inhabited presumably by ani-

malized humans can “such deeds” be recounted without shame. Shame distinguishes us from animals, but it also reveals that we are not fully separate, since what elicits shame is the manifestation of the animal in us. If, in Thoreau’s conceit, animals acquire human powers of speech in Whitman’s erotic poetry, men seem to abdicate their humanity by losing their ability to blush.

Thoreau’s letter to Blake is remarkable for its ambivalence and inconsistency, its rapid shifts from strong assertion to seemingly contradictory opinion.² Whitman’s distasteful penchant for uninhibited erotic expression (“disagreeable to say the least”) is also an admirable openness and honesty (on the topic of sexuality, “he has spoken more truth than any American or modern that I know” [*Correspondence* 445]). His explicitly sensual poetry “may turn out to be less sensual than it appeared” (444–45). These uncertainties extend to Thoreau’s impression of Whitman himself: in another letter to Blake written a few weeks earlier, Thoreau acknowledges that “I am still somewhat in a quandary about him,—feel that he is essentially strange to me, at any rate” (441).³ Thoreau seems unable to make up his mind about Whitman or his poetry. This irresolution certainly is provoked by the central place of sexuality in Whitman’s poetic project, but it is figured here in terms of the uncertain difference between humans and animals, especially the troubling presence of animality within the human. Whitman’s extraordinary yet unsettling poetry is a site where the distinction between human and animal is blurred or threatened. Thoreau’s response to this disagreeable intermixing is to wish for an incorruptible purity: “I do not so much wish that those parts were not written, as that men & women were so pure that they could read them without harm, that is, without understanding them” (445). Thoreau envisions purity here as an innocence free of knowledge, as if the inability to understand is the only certain prophylaxis against Whitman’s eroticism. Thoreau often imagines human purity as a renunciation of the animal, the bestial, but in the letter to Blake he suggests that such purity may be inhuman, an impossible ideal.

The concern with human animality implicit in Thoreau’s response to Whitman echoes his much more expansive and explicit engagement with these issues a few years earlier in *Walden*. The chapter “Higher Laws” in particular explores the contested boundary between human and animal with even greater ambivalence. In calling attention to Thoreau’s mixed feelings and conflicting impulses, my aim is not simply to

provide evidence of his inability to resolve these issues. I contend that the relation between sexuality and animality is a troubling but productive snarl for Thoreau, an important provocation for thinking about the human as animal, and ultimately the human relation to nonhuman nature. Thoreau is notable among antebellum American writers for approaching the distinction between human and animal as a fundamental problem worth sustained attention, and for recognizing that deeply rooted cultural assumptions about human uniqueness would need to be questioned in the process—even if he was not always successful in doing so. Certainly his thinking about animals sometimes takes for granted that the human is a distinct, privileged category. Yet Thoreau's writing repeatedly interrogates this relation, reconsidering it from various angles, at times decentering the human significantly. Early in "Higher Laws," for example, Thoreau calls for a compassion that would reject species distinctions: "No humane being, past the thoughtless age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature, which holds its life by the same tenure that he does. The hare in its extremity cries like a child. I warn you, mothers, that my sympathies do not always make the usual *phil-anthropic* distinctions" (212). His italics emphasizing that philanthropy is by definition anthropocentric, Thoreau suggests that a truly humane being would perceive a common identity with other living (and dying) creatures. The hare's cry sounds like a child's not for incidental reasons but because it expresses fundamentally the same feelings of fear and pain that a human would experience in similar circumstances. In this view, to be humane (and thus to be fully human) involves acknowledging the shared capacity for suffering across species boundaries, and therefore rejecting distinctions that have traditionally constituted the human as separate from other animals.⁴ Thoreau urges a kind of bio-compassion, sympathy or fellow feeling based on a conception of life not limited to the human, in response to what Michel Foucault calls "the naked question of survival" (137).⁵ Nonhuman animals face the same question of biological existence, holding their lives by the same tenure we do—it is this awareness that makes sympathetic identification possible. The remainder of "Higher Laws" turns away rather dramatically from this extraordinary injunction (which was an especially late addition to the text of *Walden*),⁶ but its presence is still significant, anticipating Thoreau's attempts to think of the animal as neighbor in subsequent chapters.

“Higher Laws” has often been paired with the chapter that immediately follows it in *Walden*, “Brute Neighbors.” Earlier versions of these chapters were titled “Animal Food” and “Animals” respectively, suggesting that they were intended to complement each other by exploring different domains of animality. William Rossi asserts that their “deliberate pairing” seems “more rhetorical than confessional”: “In constructing the pair of chapters around the Janus-faced question of the animal, Thoreau faced first his own and his humanist culture’s instinctive repugnance, then turned to meet his actual animal neighbors on their own ground” (85, 86). By juxtaposing these chapters, Thoreau implies a connection between two quite different notions of the animal: human animality, the idea or metaphor of something animal-like in human nature; and nonhuman animals as he encounters them at Walden Pond. Thoreau explores the human-animal distinction as it takes shape in these two arenas: within the human, where he understands it primarily as an opposition or division, a struggle between “higher” and “lower” natures; and in the external environment, where he imagines the possibility of new sympathies or affinities between humans and nonhuman animals. In terms of salient tropes, these chapters move from the animal as parasite to the animal as neighbor, and from repulsion and abjection to interspecies fellow feeling. It seems that Thoreau must first negotiate the troubling idea of human animality before arriving at a sense of the potential interconnections between humans and other living creatures sharing the same world. I will explore the implicit turn from “Higher Laws” to “Brute Neighbors,” though my concern is less with the formal organization of *Walden*, than with how these (and other) chapters stage Thoreau’s meditation on human-animal relations. I argue that Thoreau’s embracing of an ethos of neighbor love or respect in relation to nonhuman animals cannot be extricated from his much more anxious negotiation of the split between human and animal within us. In fact, his very inability to resolve the problem of human animality seems to enable his progressive thinking about animal neighbors.

Thoreau’s negotiation of human animality in “Higher Laws” takes place primarily within the contexts of diet and sexuality. His overt interest in dietary reform, vegetarianism, and bodily health in this chapter partially masks a more guarded concern with sexual desire, chastity, and sexual indulgence. Yet what underlies both of these sets of issues is a sustained meditation on human animality; both diet and

sexuality are equally understood here in terms of the more fundamental problem of the animal within the human. The chapter begins with the fantasy of devouring and internalizing animal wildness; providing one of the book's memorably strange images, Thoreau recounts, "I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented" (210). To consume the wild animal is to internalize its wildness, becoming animal-like oneself. This eucharistic fantasy of incorporation turns into a vision of feral abandon: "I found myself ranging the woods, like a half-starved hound, with a strange abandonment, seeking some kind of venison which I might devour, and no morsel could have been too savage for me" (210). The chapter "Higher Laws" thus begins with the symbolic drama of eating the wild animal body, the savage morsel, establishing the presence of the animal within the human.

What follows is a declaration of principles: "I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good" (210). Thoreau affirms both a "higher" human life and an animal life of the body, refusing to privilege one "instinct" above the other.⁷ But many readers have felt that the rest of the chapter belies this claim for equal valuation, as indeed the language of "higher" and "primitive" already implies. In an influential early critical account, Frederick Garber points out that Thoreau's assertion of "equal reverence" is "not rejected or even referred to again after the introductory pages"—the avowal of "the wild" is "displaced," merely "shunted aside" rather than "superseded," in favor of human spirit (120). For this reason, according to Garber, "Higher Laws' is markedly schizophrenic." Betraying intense ambivalence, it resorts to a "disjunctive maneuver" to avoid confronting its own contradictions (121). More recently, Lawrence Buell calls the chapter "a confusing performance" (392), and refers to Thoreau's "almost schizophrenic attempt to resolve the problem of 'spiritual' versus 'animal' natures" (152).⁸ Thoreau scholarship suggests that "Higher Laws" is a site of profound turmoil and irresolution, where reason itself is at risk. More than Thoreau's personal ambivalence, the chapter attests to a deeper cultural incoherence surrounding the definition of the human in relation to the animal, and particularly the idea of

human animality. Its “confusing” rhetorical performance is symptomatic of the unresolved cultural contradictions that it aims to articulate. By aligning “higher” and “lower” human natures with the division between human and animal, Thoreau makes their reconciliation problematic even as he asserts it. “Higher Laws” follows an entire Western tradition by defining the human in opposition to the animal, but it also demonstrates that the former category is already contaminated by the presence of the latter—the human is at once not-animal and both human *and* animal. In this light, the purity Thoreau calls for may be not only an impossible ideal, but the displacement of a fundamental contradiction concerning animality.

“Higher Laws” indexes a range of contemporary social reform discourses, including vegetarianism and dietary reform, Temperance, and sexual hygiene and male purity. Thoreau circles around these ideas for reforming the impure self, and particularly the male body, reconsidering them from various angles. Though the chapter’s progress is anything but linear or monolithic, its general movement is toward ideas of purity, abstinence, self-denial. If asceticism is an especially deeply felt inclination in *Walden*, essential to the book’s “erotic economy,” as Michael Warner has argued, “Higher Laws” surely represents the most stringent expression of such impulses.⁹ Thoreau confesses that “like many of my contemporaries, I had rarely for many years used animal food, or tea, or coffee, &c.; not so much because of any ill effects which I had traced to them, as because they were not agreeable to my imagination. The repugnance to animal food is not the effect of experience, but is an instinct” (*Walden* 214). Such abstinence is valued in terms of self-culture, the fostering of higher forms of specifically human consciousness: “I believe that every man who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food” (214–15). To embrace a higher human nature means to give up the animal, to renounce the flesh, one’s own flesh and the flesh one eats—conversely, to eat animal food threatens to make one more animal-like. In contrast to the earlier image of devouring the woodchuck’s wildness, here the idea of incorporating the animal through eating is extremely negatively valued. Thoreau likens the eating of animals to cannibalism: “Whatever my own practice may be, I have no doubt that it is a part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the

savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilized" (216). In this brief narrative of development, vegetarianism is the next step in human progress after renouncing cannibalism, as if once we give up eating other humans we should begin to question eating our animal neighbors, fellow creatures only somewhat less closely related to us. Decrying that "man is a carnivorous animal," Thoreau implies that subsisting by "preying on other animals" represents an inhuman cruelty, "a miserable way,—as any one who will go to snaring rabbits, or slaughtering lambs, may learn" (215–16).

However, more than the cruelty of killing and eating animals, Thoreau emphasizes the impurity of animal food in the context of self-culture and self-reform in "Higher Laws." The principal problem with animal food is its "uncleanness" and "filth": "there is something essentially unclean about this diet and all flesh" (214). The language of uncleanness, with its hint of Leviticus, suggests notions of symbolic purity and pollution. Thoreau's discussion of vegetarianism is connected to a more general concern about the flesh, "all flesh," and its susceptibility to pollution in a variety of forms. Bodily appetites merge in Thoreau's reckoning: "all sensuality is one, though it takes many forms; all purity is one. It is the same whether a man eat, or drink, or cohabit, or sleep sensually. They are but one appetite, and we only need to see a person do any one of these things to know how great a sensualist he is" (220). What holds these different manifestations of sensuality and inebriety together is that they all represent the animal within. If "chastity is the flowering of man" (219–20), and "our purity inspires and our impurity casts us down" (220), it is because purity in each context is understood as the eradication of the inner animal: "He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established. Perhaps there is none but has cause for shame on account of the inferior and brutish nature to which he is allied. I fear that we are such gods or demigods only as fauns and satyrs, the divine allied to beasts, the creatures of appetite, and that, to some extent, our very life is our disgrace" (220). Thoreau construes our mixed nature as cause for shame, recalling the embarrassing revelation of human animality that he associates with Whitman's poetry. His argument in this chapter drives towards the elimination of the animal within the human, but this animality continually shifts from one modality to another: "When the reptile is attacked at one mouth of his burrow, he shows himself

at another. If you would be chaste, you must be temperate. What is chastity? How shall a man know if he is chaste? He shall not know it" (220). If this self-reform project seems endless, it is also haunted by the suspicion that the human is by nature a hybrid category, like those myth-creatures, fauns and satyrs, a monstrous, chimerical crossing of divine spirit and lustful animal flesh. One might also find the hint of a more specifically queer or sodomitical meaning in the metaphor of the sensual reptile and the orifice-like mouth of his burrow: driven away from "one mouth," he appears at another. Humans are animals in being "creatures of appetite": the animal is both what we desire, and what we become through our desire.

One important source for Thoreau's interest in vegetarianism as a response to human animality is the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry's third-century treatise "On Abstinence from Animal Foods," which Thoreau read in the early 1840s (Sattelmeyer 253). According to the historian Stephen Nissenbaum, Porphyry's vegetarianism "stemmed from a belief that human life was poised precariously between two poles, the divine and the bestial, and that people's spiritual destiny depended on which of these two poles they most closely approached in their daily lives. By this philosophy, it was brutalizing to kill and eat living creatures, and those who did so were thereby placing their spirituality in jeopardy. The eating of vegetable foods, on the other hand, reinforced the higher and more rational element in human nature" (39–40). Thoreau's thinking in "Higher Laws" implies a similarly uneasy balance between spiritual and bestial, in which higher human nature depends on renouncing the animal. In this view, one abstains from eating animals in order to avoid becoming like them, literally brutalized by one's own participation in the killing of other creatures—not primarily because of compassion for their suffering. But this Neoplatonic philosophy is intermixed with other, more contemporary ideas in *Walden*.

The theories of the health reformer Sylvester Graham are a particularly rich intertext for Thoreau's exploration of human animality in "Higher Laws." Graham, promoter of dietary reforms and anti-masturbation agitator, was an important figure in the male purity movement. His *Lecture to Young Men on Chastity*, first published in 1834, was highly successful, reprinted in many subsequent editions. Graham recommended a vegetarian diet as part of his comprehensive regimen for controlling sexual desire, and more generally for preserving human health against

the modern threat of overstimulation and debility. Graham was perhaps the best-known antebellum American advocate of vegetarianism, to the extent that a vegetarian diet was often referred to as a "Graham diet."¹⁰ More importantly, though, dietary excess and sexual indulgence were profoundly related for Graham, interconnected on both psychological and physiological levels. Graham advocates avoiding food that he considers stimulating: because all forms of physiological excitement in the end are closely related, stimulating food promotes sexual excitement. For this reason, "self-pollution" is Graham's preferred euphemism for masturbation, rather than, for example, "the solitary vice"; as with Thoreau's "uncleanness," a word which Graham also uses frequently, "self-pollution" suggests that masturbation is one of a variety of ways in which the human body can become impure. Graham insists therefore that absolutely "no animal food" can be allowed for patients already suffering from the consequences of such "venereal errors" (72). Similarly, one important step in preventing the "extensive and excessive self-pollution" prevalent at "public schools and colleges" is avoiding "improper diet": that is, Graham specifies, "the free use of flesh, with more or less of stimulating seasonings and condiments," will "unduly stimulate and irritate the nervous system, heat the blood, and early develop a preternatural sensibility and prurience of the genital organs" (75). In "Higher Laws," Thoreau echoes this mistrust of condiments: "put an extra condiment into your dish, and it will poison you. It is not worth the while to live by rich cookery. Most men would feel shame if caught preparing with their own hands precisely such a dinner, whether of animal or vegetable food, as is every day prepared for them by others" (*Walden* 215). Cooking such food for oneself, "with [one's] own hands," begins to sound oddly like masturbation here—it would be shameful to be caught in the act. The "free use of flesh," Graham's suggestive, reiterated phrase, similarly (if perhaps unwittingly) implies that eating animal food and indulging in autoerotic pleasure are related transgressions. The response for Graham is extreme self-control, in obedience not only to an exacting dietary and hygienic program, but also to what he calls "chastity of mind" (39).

However, if Graham dreams of male purity secured through a perfect regimen of self-control, renouncing the pleasures of the flesh, the pleasures of the animal, this project is bound to be incomplete, because the animal is incorporated into his system in contradictory ways. Graham

nominally acknowledges that humans are a higher order of life because of their rational and moral faculties, but in practice he has much more faith in the regulatory efficacy of animal instinct: “as the lower orders of animals have no rational and moral powers to govern the exercise of their sexual appetite, so have they—in a pure state of nature—no artificial means of destroying the government of the law of instinct, which simply incites them to fulfil the purposes of their organization” (14). Human reason can easily overthrow or corrupt the good government of instinct:

It is by abusing his organs, and depraving his instinctive appetites, through the devices of his rational powers, that the body of man, has become a living volcano of unclean propensities and passions. By all that reason, therefore, renders man capable of elevating himself above the brute creation, by so much the deeper does he sink himself in degeneracy, below the brutes, when he devotes his reason to the depravity of his nature. (14–15)

Though “man” must renounce the “free use” of animal flesh, this regimen of abstinence and self-denial is necessary because he has deviated from the instinctive, benevolent self-government of nonhuman animals. In fact, for Graham, humans are animals, distinguished from other animals by the peculiar misery that arises from excess and remorse: “it is a deeply humiliating consideration, that, of all the animals which inhabit this beautiful sphere, where every thing, in uncontaminated nature, is so benevolently fitted for enjoyment,—proud, rational man, is the only one who has degraded his nature, and, by his voluntary depravity, rendered this life a pilgrimage of pain, and the world one vast lazarus-house for his species” (15). Man is the unhappy animal who has corrupted (his) nature, violating “the laws of life” (15), “the laws of his constitution” (14). The implicit aim of Graham’s *Lecture* is to return young men to a better life as chaste, healthy animals.¹¹ Graham’s persistent use of the language of government and law suggests that this reform is conceived as a (bio-)political intervention. He would restore a more wholesome political economy in the human body, based on its constitutional laws. Or as Stephen Nissenbaum suggestively puts it, Graham sought to locate an alternative to the damaging world of the nineteenth-century

marketplace in the “individual human body”: “The physical organism itself was his proposed utopian retreat, his Walden Pond” (129). Yet this bodily utopia is not imagined as an escape from the political, but as the return to better government, obeyed instinctively.

If nonhuman animals are models for this well-regulated life of instinct, the animal is also an essential part of human physiology for Graham. He borrowed much of his physiological theory from the late eighteenth-century French medical theorist Xavier Bichat, including the fundamental distinction between two classes of physiological functions, which Graham, after Bichat, calls “animal life” and “organic life.” Organic or vegetative life essentially involves internal, primarily unconscious physiological processes, such as digestion, respiration, and the circulation of blood. Animal life pertains to “the organs of sensation, perception, intellection, volition,” and to “the muscles of voluntary motion” (Graham 15). Organic life is wholly internal, whereas animal (or “relational”) life is oriented toward the external world. As Bichat puts it, a creature lives “within itself only” in its organic life; in its animal life it lives “*out of itself*” as an “inhabitant of the world” (3). Both “lives” are involved in reproduction, but the “power” to engage in sexual activity, and thus to indulge in sexual excess, is a function of animal life. However, animal life is also responsible for higher thought, for the ability to adapt to an environment, and for relations with others, among its many domains of activity. Bichat makes clear that it is through its animal life that a creature possesses “the power of communicating by voice, its desires and its fears, its pleasures or its pains” (3)—even the power of speech is a function of animal life. In contrast to Thoreau’s association of animality with a “lower,” sensual side of human nature, what Bichat and Graham call animal life includes what has often been thought to be most human about us. Nevertheless, as in Thoreau this model suggests that the human is itself divided, split between two essential forms of life, and that (at least) one of these forms of life is animal.

In *The Open: Man and Animal*, Giorgio Agamben emphasizes this internal division within the human in Bichat’s physiological theory. Agamben contends that the distinction between organic or vegetative life and animal life has had great “strategic importance” not only in the history of medicine, but also in the history of the modern state (15). The modern transformation of politics into biopolitics described by Foucault, in which the state increasingly became concerned with

managing the life of the population, relied on “a progressive generalization and redefinition of the concept of vegetative life (now coinciding with the biological heritage of the nation)” (Agamben 15). For Agamben, the notion of organic or vegetative life is closely related to what he calls “bare life,” life “detached from any brain activity and, so to speak, from any subject” (15)—the life that is in question for example in the medical determination of whether a body is clinically dead.¹² Thoreau’s avowal of compassion based on the recognition that a non-human animal “holds its life by the same tenure” as humans do arguably invokes a roughly parallel notion: a life in common across species difference, defined by its exposure to the existential question of death or survival, laid bare in states of extremity (“The hare in its extremity cries like a child”). In their quite different ways, Thoreau and Graham both conceive of a vulnerable life, subject to violence, cruelty, or corruption, shared by human and nonhuman creatures, which would be the site of new biopolitical interventions, reforms, and regimens.¹³

For Agamben, the split between two forms of life in Bichat’s thinking is an expression of the fundamental division between human and animal “within man”:

The division of life into vegetal and relational, organic and animal, animal and human, therefore passes first of all as a mobile border within living man, and without this intimate caesura the very decision of what is human and what is not would probably not be possible. It is possible to oppose man to other living things, and at the same time to organize the complex—and not always edifying—economy of relations between men and animals, only because something like an animal life has been separated within man, only because his distance and proximity to the animal have been measured and recognized first of all in the closest and most intimate place. (15–16)

Agamben contends that Western culture has traditionally thought of the human as the “articulation” or “conjunction” of body and soul, “of a living thing and a *logos*, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element” (16). Instead, he proposes, we should recognize that the human is a site of incongruity or disjunction of these opposed categories, the result of the never fully accomplished

cultural work of differentiating and excluding the animal within “man.” Human nature itself is the perpetually renegotiated, pluriform boundary between human and animal.¹⁴ Agamben asserts that this boundary emerges “first of all” within the human, before it can be deployed in distinguishing humans from other living creatures. That is, humans can be opposed to (other) animals only after the human is first established as a privileged category, through the negation of what is determined to be nonhuman or animal-like within us. Because the hierarchical distinction between the human and “something like an animal life” has already been established within us, it is available to organize what Agamben calls the “not always edifying . . . economy of relations between men and animals” (such as the industrialized production of animals for food). By implication, the subordination and exploitation of nonhuman animals is legitimated by their identification with abject elements of human nature—animals represent instinct, appetite, sex, aggression, eating and excretion, flesh or meat. Yet perhaps more important than the question of priority, of which comes first, is Agamben’s reiterated insistence on the nearness and intimacy of this division: the border that separates us from the animal exists within us.

Agamben’s critical project interrogates a Western tradition of thinking about human nature and animal life that Thoreau is also deeply concerned with in *Walden*. The claim that the division between human and animal has been most intensely and damagingly contested within the human may help to explain the pivotal place of “Higher Laws” within *Walden* (before “Brute Neighbors,” which turns to the relations between humans and actual nonhuman animals), and the inconsistency or incoherence of the chapter’s argument. Thoreau’s focus on human animality, whether in relation to vegetarianism or sexual purity, engages with a profoundly unresolved cultural problem. The chapter’s abrupt shifts between seemingly incompatible assertions call attention to contradictory ways of thinking about human relations with animals. Thoreau values fishing and hunting because they bring about closer “acquaintance” with nature and wildness (“I like sometimes to take rank hold on life and spend my day more as the animals do” [*Walden* 210]), but finds increasingly that he can no longer fish “without falling a little in self-respect” (213), because of a growing distaste for the killing of animals. Less a fisherman with every passing year, he is at present “no fisherman at all,” but imagines becoming one again “in earnest” (214).

At times these inconsistencies seem playful, almost parodic. The chapter moves toward a strong endorsement of vegetarianism, even at the cost of “bodily weakness” (216), but Thoreau interrupts this argument for dietary reform to declare that “for my part, I was never unusually squeamish; I could sometimes eat a fried rat with a good relish, if it were necessary” (217). Yet elsewhere he projects a great deal of squeamishness, characterizing the eating of animal food, and even food in general, in increasingly abject terms, expressing disgust at “this slimy beastly life, eating and drinking” (218). The pleasures of eating threaten to make us beastly, revealing individual eaters and entire populations to be at the lowest stages of development: “The gross feeder is a man in the larva state; and there are whole nations in that condition, nations without fancy or imagination, whose vast abdomens betray them” (215).

In “Higher Laws,” Thoreau imagines a human purity understood in terms of the casting out of the animal. This animality is repeatedly troped as a form of parasite, as if it were a grotesquely literal animal that inhabits us. The problem with eating is perhaps less the choice of food than “the appetite with which it is eaten,” that is, “when that which is eaten is not a viand to sustain our animal, or inspire our spiritual life, but food for the worms that possess us” (218). Recalling Graham’s worry about the external threat to animal and organic life from dietary excess, here animal health and higher spiritual life are both jeopardized by our sensual appetite, figured in terms of a foreign animal presence, an alien colony inside us. Thoreau would like to expel the animal within, but suspects it is impossible: “We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled; like the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies” (219). He adds, “I fear that it may enjoy a certain health of its own; that we may be well, yet not pure.” In this formulation, it is impossible to reverence both our higher human nature and our animal life—they have an inverse relation, thriving at each other’s expense. The animal within is a parasite, repellent, degrading, and polluting, an invasion from outside, yet its health and life cannot be distinguished from our own.¹⁵

Thoreau’s sense of the impossibility of expelling the animal parasite here parallels an extraordinary passage in the 1851 Journal, in which he imagines having swallowed a water snake years ago, which lives in his stomach. Or he has swallowed unidentified “ova”: “who knows what

will be hatched within me" (369–70). At first this metaphor seems to convey an aspirational fantasy of a future in which the separation between nature and the human will vanish: not "man" reborn in nature, but "all nature reborn in him," so that he must be prepared "to suckle monsters." Yet at just this point the image becomes more ambivalent, as if in response to its transgressive gendering—the man who swallows ova and gives birth to monsters. As the passage continues, the hopeful image of "seeds of thought . . . expanding in me" is replaced by an injunction to extract the parasite within:

I have got rid of the snake in my stomach. I drank at stagnant waters once. That accounts for it. I caught him by the throat & drew him out & had a well day after all. Is there not such a thing as getting rid of the snake which you swallowed when young? When thoughtless you stooped & drank at stagnant waters—which has worried you in your waking hours & in your sleep ever since & appropriated the life that was yours. Will he not ascend into your mouth at the sound of running water_ Then catch him boldly by the head & draw him out though you may think his tail be curled about your vitals. (370)

The parasite, this foreign animal life, appropriates our human life, worming its way even into our thoughts and dreams. The metaphor of the snake that was swallowed, which is now curled inside, recalls the reptile at the mouth of its burrow in "Higher Laws," suggesting an ambiguous erotic subtext; these emphatically male creatures trouble the body's borders, which are rendered more uncertain here by the shift in pronouns from "I" to "you." Thoreau's insistence that he has caught this creature by the head and drawn him out is belied by the suspicion that "his tail" cannot be extricated from our "vitals." The passage calls for a bold act of self-purification, but the animal may be too deeply rooted. Thoreau's spectacular trope of the animal within as parasite implies that our life must be separated from sensual animal life, but that this internal struggle will always be ahead of us.

The chapter's expression of profound ambivalence towards the animal parasite recalls Walter Benjamin's well-known reflection on animals and disgust, in his early essay "One-Way Street": "In an aversion to animals, the predominant feeling is fear of being recognized by

them through contact. The horror that stirs deep in man is an obscure awareness that something living within him is so akin to the animal that it might be recognized. All disgust is originally disgust at touching" (448). The animal's touch repels because it brings a disturbing awareness of something animal-like lurking within us, implying our kinship with animals. Benjamin suggests that although the feeling of disgust can be "mastered," man "may not deny his bestial relationship with the creature" (448). What takes place in *Walden*, though, resembles the inverse of the scenario unfolded by Benjamin. The fascinated disgust at the animal that inhabits us seems to enable a positive recognition of kinship with nonhuman animals, even a desire for contact.

The turmoil and ambivalence of "Higher Laws" suggests that Thoreau cannot heal the rift associated with human animality. The chapter's elegant final gesture towards closure seems instead to signal a kind of melancholic resignation. Thoreau conjures up the figure of John Farmer, who imagines a "glorious existence" beyond "this mean moiling life," but cannot see how to "migrate thither": "All that he could think of was to practise some new austerity, to let his mind descend into his body and redeem it, and treat himself with ever increasing respect" (222). The body is still impure, and the only answer is another reform, a new regime of austerity, attempting again to redeem the human from its animal life. Yet Thoreau's very willingness to entertain contradictions, to leave these matters in a state of disorder, seems to allow for a rethinking of his relation to the nonhuman world in the chapters that follow "Higher Laws." His inability to resolve the problem of animality within the human may indeed be necessary for the extensive cross-species identifications that shape his progressive environmental vision of the human relation to nonhuman nature. Recognition of the animal neighbor depends on an awareness of human animality, an alterity within the human that makes possible the perception of affinity or kinship with nonhuman animals. Eric Santner suggests that "neighbor love" demands a willingness to be open to the neighbor's "creaturely life" (xiii), its proximity as "a subject at odds with itself, split by thoughts, desires, fantasies, and pleasures it can never fully claim as its own and that in some sense both do and do not belong to it" (xii).¹⁶ For Thoreau, respect for the animal neighbor seems to follow from a recognition of our own creaturely life, our sense of disorientation or self-estrangement at the foreign animal presence within us. In this view, we are able to

acknowledge and be responsive to nonhuman animal otherness only after we recognize that as a result of our own divided nature, we are already other to ourselves.

Thoreau famously declares on the title page of *Walden* that the book aims “to wake my neighbors up,” and he repeatedly invokes the trope of the neighbor throughout the text. The implications of conceiving of nonhuman animals as neighbors can be made clearer by returning to the 1849 essay “Resistance to Civil Government” (better known as “Civil Disobedience”), in which the idea of the neighbor is addressed more substantially and provocatively. In “Resistance,” Thoreau opposes relations between neighbors to the vertical relation of the individual political subject to the state, which is understood primarily in terms of compulsion and resistance. He affirms that he is “as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject” (84). An ethic of neighborliness emerges in Thoreau’s reflections on meeting the state “face to face” every year “in the person of its tax-gatherer” (74):

My civil neighbor, the tax-gatherer, is the very man I have to deal with,—for it is, after all, with men and not with parchment that I quarrel,—and he has voluntarily chosen to be an agent of the government. How shall he ever know well what he is and does as an officer of the government, or as a man, until he is obliged to consider whether he shall treat me, his neighbor, for whom he has respect, as a neighbor and well-disposed man, or as a maniac and disturber of the peace, and see if he can get over this obstruction to his neighborliness without a ruder and more impetuous thought or speech corresponding with his action? (75).

This face to face encounter presents an opportunity not only for the individual citizen to refuse to submit to the state’s authority, but also for the state’s agent to acknowledge his neighbor in his singularity as an individual, rather than treating him as a non-compliant subject (whether lunatic or criminal). The ethic of neighborliness that Thoreau calls for here implies respect for others based on a recognition of their difference and singularity, their independence as well as their nearness to us. Only by acknowledging his neighbor as an independent individual can the tax-collector begin to understand himself as “a man” and not merely “an officer of the government.” Our relation to the neighbor

as an independent equal takes place at a remove from the state and its power to compel submission, beyond its laws, which are displaced by the ethical demands of neighborliness. Thoreau urges his neighbor the tax-collector to look past his refusal to pay the poll-tax, and to recognize him as a responsible member of the community (who contributes to its welfare as a schoolteacher, for example, “doing my part to educate my fellow-countrymen” [84]). The essay ends with Thoreau’s vision of a “really free and enlightened State,” the measure of which is that it “can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor,” even to allow “a few . . . to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow-men” (89–90).

I argue that in *Walden* a similar ethic of respect for the neighbor is implicit in Thoreau’s thinking about nonhuman animals, particularly in the chapters that follow “Higher Laws.” Thoreau describes his experiment at Walden Pond as a departure from a compromised political world, become untenable in a state “which buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle at the door of its senate-house”; he comments wryly, “I had gone down to the woods for other purposes” (171). Yet he also rejects the traditional economy of human-animal relations, particularly the use of the labor of domesticated animals, primarily because of its detrimental effect on human freedom: “men are not so much the keepers of herds as herds are the keepers of men, the former are so much the freer” (56). If the state treats slaves “like cattle,” keeping cattle can turn men into slaves. Reliance on animal labor threatens to invert the master-servant binary that is supposed to govern the relation between humans and domesticated animals: “When men begin to do, not merely unnecessary or artistic, but luxurious and idle work, with [animals] assistance, it is inevitable that a few do all the exchange work with the oxen, or, in other words, become the slaves of the strongest. Man thus not only works for the animal within him, but, for a symbol of this, he works for the animal without him” (57). This discussion early in *Walden* seems of a piece with Thoreau’s ideas about animality in “Higher Laws”: both animal labor and animal food bring us into too intimate a relation with (our) lower natures, threatening to imbrute us, to make us impure. For this reason, “no nation of philosophers . . . would commit so great a blunder as to use the labor of animals” (56). Yet the passage also signals Thoreau’s aversion to the relations of dominance and servility

that are for him inherent in the keeping of livestock. The new economies Thoreau envisions at Walden Pond would exclude such forms of inequality and exploitation. In this space removed from the state and its "dirty institutions" (171), Thoreau aims to establish new forms of relations with others, nonhuman as well as human. He would approach animals as neighbors rather than merely commodities valued as food or for labor.

In an oft-quoted passage in "Brute Neighbors," a page or two after the inconclusive end of "Higher Laws," Thoreau asks, "Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world? Why has man just these species of animals for his neighbors; as if nothing but a mouse could have filled this crevice?" (225). The ecological vision implied by these questions leads to a consideration of Thoreau's animal neighbors at Walden Pond, a mix of notes on natural history and reflections on cross-species interaction that is continued in later chapters, such as "Winter Animals." Thoreau seems to suggest that species difference in general might be conceived of as a relation between neighbors, in which nonhuman animals are understood as living beings adjacent to the human. Yet the focus in these later portions of *Walden* is more characteristically on the particularizing description of individual animals as he encounters them, in contrast to the more generalized animality that figures in "Higher Laws."¹⁷ Thoreau explores the possibility of interspecies neighborliness based on proximity and mutually negotiated spaces, as in the case of the mice which "haunted" his house, becoming "familiar" enough to climb up his leg (225), the moles which "nested" in his cellar (253), or the wasps which "bedded" with him, yet "never molested me seriously" (240). In other moments, he offers glimpses of nonhuman subjectivity, an animal intelligence that looks back and responds to human attempts to construe or confront it.¹⁸

His description of an encounter with a loon, which takes up the last few pages of "Brute Neighbors," presents such an image of an animal subjectivity that addresses us. The bird's "unearthly howl," "his looning," is "perhaps the wildest sound that is ever heard here, making the woods ring far and wide. I concluded that he laughed in derision of my efforts, confident of his own resources" (236). Thoreau imagines a knowing animal capable of mocking human attempts to contain or control it. The passage dramatizes the respect for difference and singularity that he associates with an ethic of the neighbor. It maps their inter-

relationship in terms of movements across the space of the pond: Thoreau repeatedly attempts to row close to the loon, but it easily eludes him, unerringly finding open water “at the greatest distance from the boat” (234), in the “widest part of the pond” from which it “could not be driven” (235). He is interested here in an animal that cannot be readily grasped or converted to human use, that escapes beyond the limits he sets for it.¹⁹ The encounter that he describes is improvisatory, “a pretty game” (235) not governed by conventional rules or customs, requiring both human and animal to negotiate their relation to each other. Such negotiation demands recognition of the other as a singular individual, whose intentions and actions cannot be known in advance, whose thoughts can only be guessed (“while he was thinking one thing in his brain, I was endeavoring to divine his thought in mine” [235]). In keeping with this emphasis on singularity, Thoreau refers to “the loon” (never “the animal”) throughout this long passage, but much more frequently simply uses the pronoun “he,” so that the stark distinction between human and animal is minimized in what begins to seem an interaction between individuals beyond classifications. If the passage begins with Thoreau’s desire to dominate the encounter, it ends with an acknowledgment of the loon’s freedom and autonomy: “so I left him disappearing far away on the tumultuous surface” (236). *Walden* represents the animal neighbor as independent and separate, but also near to us, inhabiting the same environment, allowing us to perceive shared interests and desires in spite of our differences, as Thoreau suspects that the pond’s ducks may “love its water for the same reason that I do” (237).

My concern in this essay has been with the relation between the book’s troubled discussion of human animality and its turn towards the nonhuman world. Thoreau seems implicitly to acknowledge that the internal divisions within the human represent a central, inescapable biopolitical problem, necessary to address in order to fully consider our relation to nonhuman animal neighbors, and perhaps to human neighbors as well, with their own mystifying creaturely life. The woodchopper Alek Therien, Thoreau’s frequent human visitor, in whom “the animal man chiefly was developed” (146), would only be the most obvious instance of such a neighbor. Thoreau complains that Therien’s “thinking was . . . immersed in his animal life” (150), but on closer view the woodchopper appears more singular, unaccountable: “To a stranger he appeared to know nothing of things in general; yet I sometimes saw

in him a man whom I had not seen before, and I did not know whether he was as wise as Shakspeare or as simply ignorant as a child" (148). *Walden* demonstrates that there are two very different kinds of animal, whose lives cannot be so easily separated after all: the animal life that is internal to the human, and the nonhuman animal that one could encounter as neighbor. The human itself is split by its relation to the animal, revealed to be an inadequate category—defined by its opposition to the animal, but already inhabited by what it would exclude. Yet these unresolved contradictions seem to allow for the discovery of new affinities between humans and other living creatures, the recognition that we share a vulnerable life beyond or beneath species distinctions. *Walden* intimates that it is just this recognition that might enable one to begin to live next to the animal as neighbor.

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NOTES

I am grateful to Scott Juengel for his characteristically insightful reading of this essay, and to *Arizona Quarterly's* anonymous reviewer for productive comments and questions.

1. Indeed beasts do speak in Whitman's poetry, suggesting that animality is more than just a figure for the erotic here. Animal speech is quite prominent in "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" (later "Song of Myself"), one of two poems in the 1856 *Leaves of Grass* that Thoreau mentions as especially memorable in his letter to Blake. Most famously, Whitman's speaker describes his own poetic voice as a "barbaric yawp," after the cry of a hawk, which "swoops by and accuses me"—Whitman affirms beastly speech as a model for his own unconventional poetry (Whitman lines 1321, 1323). But the poem also contains a more subtle and expansive meditation on the language of nonhuman animals, in what would become section 32 of "Song of Myself."

2. Thoreau of course shared Emerson's disdain for foolish consistencies, often embracing paradox and mutability. No doubt his admiration for "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" extended to Whitman's famous lines about contradiction: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then . . . I contradict myself" (1314–15). Nevertheless, the topic of Whitman, "sensuality," and human animality seems to engender an unusual degree of indecisiveness and ambivalence.

3. Thoreau's quandary concerning Whitman seems focused on the poet's ambiguous class identity, especially as it is manifested in his appearance: "though peculiar and rough in his exterior, his skin (all over (?) red, he is essentially a gentleman. I am still somewhat in a quandary about him,—feel that he is essentially strange to me, at any rate; but I am surprised by the sight of him. He is very broad, but, as I have said, not fine" (441). Whitman's essential strangeness extends to his

very body and “nature,” his broadness and coarseness (“a remarkably strong though coarse nature”), the intriguing possibility that his skin might be red even beneath his clothes. Thoreau has difficulty making sense of Whitman, as if confronting a new specimen which presents a problem for classification. If the description almost makes Whitman himself seem like a strange beast, Thoreau remarks in the second letter that the poet “occasionally suggests something a little more than human” (445).

4. Thoreau comes close here to Jeremy Bentham’s influential argument about animal suffering, which profoundly redirects attempts to establish the difference of animals: “The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?” (qtd. in Wolfe 33).

5. I adapt this phrase from Foucault’s account of biopolitics where it refers to human populations in the context of war in the nuclear age.

6. Much of “Higher Laws” was written at a relatively late stage, during Thoreau’s substantial revision and expansion of *Walden* in the early 1850s. But according to Clapper’s study of the *Walden* manuscripts, the three sentences beginning “No humane being” were interlined into the last manuscript version in 1854 (573). It is tempting to think of this striking assertion of interspecies empathy as something of an afterthought inserted into the margins of Thoreau’s chapter, rethinking his investigation of the human relation to nonhuman animality in *Walden*.

7. In a compelling discussion of Thoreau’s thinking about this topic, Rossi shows that there are sharply divergent concepts of instinct at work in Thoreau’s writing: the more conventional notion of instinct as “a species of intelligence or awareness proper to animal life,” and the Transcendentalist valorizing of instinct as “a privileged mode of intuitive access to a higher human nature: that is to say, to everything ‘the animal’ was not” (77). Thoreau was also aware that instinct was a vexed concept in early nineteenth-century, pre-Darwinian scientific debates about evolution, with significant implications for understanding the place of humans within natural history (77–78).

8. Buell returns to “Higher Laws” repeatedly, as a problem that demands explanation from an environmentalist perspective—particularly Thoreau’s surprising assertion, in the context of a passage on chastity and sensuality, that “Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome” (221). Buell contends that “‘Higher Laws’ is not really so paradoxical as it seems. It may *look* as if Thoreau has forsaken nature in his quest for moral purity, especially when we quote sentences out of context But the point of the chapter is not that we should turn our backs on nature but that we must imagine the ulterior benefits of the original turn to nature in the spirit of economy, both fiscal and ethical” (392). I argue that Thoreau’s very inability to resolve the contradictions of “Higher Laws” leads to his turn to nature.

9. Warner suggestively argues that asceticism for Thoreau is associated with a utopian expression of erotic pleasure: “Through his counter-austerity, an ascetics both inside and outside of capitalism, Thoreau imagines a utopia at once erotic and

economic" (173). The erotic pleasure generated through ascesis is at first glance less apparent through much of "Higher Laws," in contrast to the rest of *Walden*, where self-control and self-care are often intimately related to pleasure. Yet Thoreau's very fascination with the body's "impure" animality, figured in increasingly lurid and grotesque tropes, indicates that pleasure and desire are very much in play here.

10. In his own treatise on *Vegetable Diet*, Alcott claims that "Mr. Graham . . . has probably done more to reduce the subject of vegetable dietetics to a system than any other individual" (223). Yet Alcott—a cousin of Thoreau's friend and neighbor Bronson Alcott—emphasizes what he calls the "moral argument" about cruelty to animals much more strongly than Graham, who is essentially indifferent to this rationale for vegetarianism. It is tempting to think that in Thoreau's articulation of a compassion that does not respect "phil-anthropic distinctions," one might hear the traces of Alcott's expression of similar ideas, for example in his praise for Philadelphia educator (and noted abolitionist) Anthony Benezet, whose "sympathy was so great with everything that was capable of feeling pain" that he became vegetarian. Invited on one occasion to join family in a dinner featuring meat, Benezet reportedly responded, "would you have me eat my neighbors?" (128).

11. In spite of his admiration for Graham, Alcott differs decisively on this point, making clear that for him the aim of dietary reform is not merely to make mankind into "better and more perfect animals" (223), but rather to "elevate" man so that "he may become as truly God-like, or Godly as he now too often is, by his unnatural habits, earthly or beastly" (224). This unstated disagreement suggests the unpredictable ways in which the distinction between human and animal was implicated in dietary reform discourse—even advocates of vegetarianism reveal sharply different assumptions about the relation between humans and animals.

12. Agamben suggests that bare life is exposed in the very lacuna or division between human and animal, a byproduct of sorts of what he calls the "anthropological machine" of Western culture, which produces the human by excluding the animal. The cultural machine for distinguishing human and animal leaves a "space of exception," an empty "zone" in place of the "truly human being" that it aims to produce, revealing "neither an animal life nor a human life, but only a life that is separated and excluded from itself—only a *bare life*" (38).

13. In Graham's terms, this vulnerable life is organic life, the defenseless inner life of the individual body, which health reform would protect from the perils of the modern world—sexual indulgence, poor diet, the debilitating overstimulation of the workplace and the city. In this sense, the medical concept of organic life legitimates biopolitical intervention in the name of health reform, making the endangered health of the individual a matter of concern for the state. I suggest that Thoreau's reference to a life in "extremity" bears some resemblance to organic life (and to Agamben's more expansive and elusive notion of bare life), in the sense of being a kind of minimal or essential life underlying species differences, understood primarily in terms of its vulnerability, its exposure to the possibility of extinction. In a rather different context, one might also think of Thoreau's assertion in "Resis-

tance to Civil Government” that the state never “confronts a man’s sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body” (80). For Thoreau as well, the state intervenes at the level of the body, treating its resistant or non-compliant citizens as “mere flesh and blood and bones, to be locked up” (80), just as it reduces those who serve it to bodies, as if they were either machines (“wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well” [66]) or animals (“they have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs” [66]).

14. This division or border might be expected to exist in nonhuman animals as well, yet for Agamben the “mobile border within living man” seems to define the human as such. “Man” is the result of the differentiation of human from animal, the never-finished work of separating the human from (and elevating the human above) the animal; the human is always marked by its border with an incompletely excluded animality. For Agamben, the human in some sense is this division: “What is man, if he is always the place—and, at the same time, the result—of ceaseless divisions and caesurae?” (16). Because there is no corresponding separation and exclusion of the human within nonhuman animals (we do not for example imagine them as seeking to overcome a part of themselves that is human), they would presumably be untouched by such a border—though Agamben has little to say about them in this context, which is itself perhaps a revealing omission. Thoreau of course writes extensively about nonhuman animals, and for him they seem quite free of the damaging split between higher and lower instincts that troubles human nature in “Higher Laws”; only humans are self-divided in this way, evidently because of their very struggle to rise above the sensual animality within themselves. Even for Graham, if the physiological distinction between organic and animal life pertains just as much to nonhuman animals, these two “lives” function harmoniously in them, regulated by the benign “government” of instinct—it is only in “proud, rational man” that these physiological systems can become divided against each other, in effect at war.

15. It is worth recalling that Kristeva identifies animality as a particularly significant site of abjection: “The abject confronts us . . . with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*” (12–13). In “Higher Laws,” it is characteristically the animal that irrupts into the province of the human.

16. Though Santner is at times interested in the nonhuman, it should be noted that for him “creaturely life” primarily denotes “a specifically human way of finding oneself caught in the midst of antagonisms in and of the political field” (xix). Later, in relation to W.G. Sebald’s depictions of animals “in various states of disorientation,” Santner adds that “what I have been calling creaturely life, then, does indeed mark our resemblance to animals, but precisely to animals who have themselves been thrown off the rails of their nature” (144).

17. Buell contends that Thoreau’s growing interest in the detailed observation of nonhuman nature in these chapters, the bulk of which were added late in the revision of *Walden*, suggests his rough but evident movement “along a path from homocentrism toward biocentrism” (138). However, Rossi, for example, has

expressed more skepticism about the extent to which *Walden* accomplishes such a transition towards a less human-centered understanding of the natural world (84, 88). Thoreau's playful remark that animals "are all beasts of burden, in a sense, made to carry some portion of our thoughts" (225) explicitly acknowledges their availability as vehicles for human meanings, suggesting that even in a nation of philosophers animals may still serve humans by performing tropological labors. In this sense, Thoreau's attempt to rethink his relation to nonhuman animals can be seen as limited by a framework that takes for granted that the human is the central source of meaning and value. Though a full consideration of these issues is beyond the scope of this essay, I suspect that Thoreau's notion of the "brute neighbor" cannot be sorted out easily in terms of the opposition between homocentrism and biocentrism; if the trope of the animal neighbor derives its meaning by analogy to human social life, it is also employed in service of an ethic of respect for otherness and difference, encouraging a fuller recognition of the autonomy of the nonhuman. For that matter, is it finally so evident that the precise scientific observation characteristic of natural history (with its Linnaean aim of naming and classifying all plant and animal species) is less homocentric than the richly figurative literary language often employed by Thoreau in *Walden*?

18. The potential significance of such an acknowledgment of nonhuman subjectivity is suggested by Derrida's claim that throughout the history of philosophical and theoretical discourse on the animal, philosophers "have taken no account of the fact that what they call animal could *look at* them and *address* them" (382). "The experience of the seeing animal, of the animal that looks at them," has been thoroughly erased from these theoretical discourses, "denied" more than "misunderstood" (383).

19. Walls, in an especially provocative reading of this much-discussed passage, suggests that the loon's ability to disappear, putting a stop to this interspecies game, may be more significant than its participation. For Walls, this canny animal disruption of the human effort to organize and dominate the encounter illustrates Thoreau's recurrent interest in "moments of fascinated shock when he finds himself the object of an animal's (or even a plant's) gaze, reminding him that he too is visible, that he is not some undercover agent" (227). Rossi identifies a similar reversal in which Thoreau becomes the object of a nonhuman gaze, in the description of a barred owl late in *Walden*. In this moment, Thoreau "subtly assumes the owl's point-of-view, thus granting this creature a mysterious subjectivity" (88).

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