

William Arthur Delaney

## THOREAU'S MENAGERIE

I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle-dove, and  
am still on their trail.

Henry David Thoreau

When I first read the above sentence in *Walden* at the age of nineteen, I understood it immediately. It wasn't until some forty years later, while reading *The Variorum Walden*,<sup>1</sup> that I came to realize there had ever been a controversy about the meaning of Thoreau's so-called "metaphor."

The fanciful and unsubstantiated interpretations quoted in the endnotes of *The Variorum Walden* astonished me. Even Thoreau's great friend Ralph Waldo Emerson muddied the waters with his own off-the-wall interpretation that the hound was a book Thoreau had published and that "the bay horse might be such command of property as he desired, and the turtle dove might be the wife of his dream."<sup>2</sup>

Emerson at least did not try to construe the hound and the horse as symbols for human beings, as others have done. Some have maintained that the dove was Thoreau's first love, Ellen Sewall, that the hound (or perhaps the horse) was her younger brother Edmund, and that Thoreau's brother John was either the horse or the hound, whichever was left.<sup>3</sup>

It is undoubtedly the “turtle-dove” part of Thoreau’s statement that puts people on the wrong track, since this cooing creature has been a symbol for a loved one for centuries. But to call a friend a hound and a brother a horse does not sound like Thoreau—or any other poet in his right mind.

Thoreau himself was strangely and very suspiciously evasive when asked what he meant. When “Uncle Ed” Watson queried him, he replied, “Well, Sir, I suppose we have all our losses.” “That’s a pretty way to answer a fellow,” replied Uncle Ed.<sup>4</sup> And to B. B. Wiley’s direct question regarding the meaning of the symbols, Thoreau replied with a veritable smokescreen of words:

How shall we account for our pursuits, if they are original? We get the language with which to describe our various lives out of a common mint. If others have their losses which they are busy repairing, so have I mine, and their hound and horse may *perhaps* be symbols of some of them. But also I have lost, or am in danger of losing, a far finer and more ethereal treasure which commonly no loss, of which they are conscious, will symbolize. This I answer hastily and with some hesitation, according as I now understand my words.<sup>5</sup>

Since Thoreau’s time, even more fanciful interpretations have been offered than those suggested by his contemporaries.<sup>6</sup> John Burroughs says that all three animals represent a “fine effluence” which Thoreau “was always reaching after, and often grasping or inhaling.”<sup>7</sup> Mark Van Doren assumes the “parable” to be “a mythical record of disappointments.”<sup>8</sup> Edith

Peairs attempts to prove that the source of the hound-horse-dove symbols was Voltaire's tale *Zadig*.<sup>9</sup>

Henry Seidel Canby has his own literary solution. He writes:

In the symbolic language of the Persian poets which he [Thoreau] so often read, he is clearly describing a search for no lost maid or boy, but for that sense of spiritual reality behind nature which again and again in his Journal he deplores as something felt in youth, but never quite regained.<sup>10</sup>

Samuel Arthur Jones has a religious interpretation:

To this man Thoreau every created thing was a divine message from its Maker and his. Oh, if he could but catch the meaning of the message or of the messenger. . . . Alas for us all! they had lost them, even as we have: for what is the hound but the divine scent that finds the trail: what the bay horse but sagacity and strength to carry us in pursuit; and what the turtle-dove but innocence to secure us the Divine protection? And we have lost them all.<sup>11</sup>

Kenneth G. Johnston in an article in the *Thoreau Journal Quarterly* probably offers the most imaginative interpretation of all. He writes:

The meaning of the hound-horse-dove passage, I believe, lies in the stars, specifically in the constellations Canis Major, the Greater Dog; Pegasus, the Flying Horse; and Pleiades, the Seven Doves.<sup>12</sup>

Thoreau scholars Walter Harding and Carl Bode call this hound-horse-dove passage “one of the most intriguing problems of Thoreau scholarship” and predict that it “will probably never be solved to everyone’s satisfaction.”<sup>13</sup>

I have no doubt that it will never be solved to everyone's satisfaction, just as I have no doubt that the solution I am about to propose is the correct one and will be rejected by some people only because it is too simple. In his famous short story "The Purloined Letter," Thoreau's great contemporary Edgar Allan Poe has his amateur detective C. Auguste Dupin say to Monsieur G\_\_\_, the Prefect of the Parisian police, "Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault," and Poe begins this story with a quotation from Seneca: "*Nil sapientiae odiosius acumine nimio*" ("Nothing is more inimical to wisdom than too much subtlety").<sup>14</sup>

Thoreau is literature's most famous walker. He was a naturalist and wanted to see everything. Also he was a notorious loner and liked to get away from people. Both by temperamental preference and out of scientific curiosity, he kept off the beaten paths. Emerson writes of him:

He knew the country like a fox or a bird, and passed through it as freely by paths of his own. . . . Thus, he could not bear to hear the sound of his own steps, the grit of gravel; and therefore never willingly walked in the road, but in the grass, on mountains and in woods.<sup>15</sup>

Now this means that much of the time Thoreau would have been trespassing on private land. Anyone who has done this kind of cross-country walking near an urban area, as I did under the influence of Wordsworth, Keats, and Thoreau in my impressionable youth, will have had the experience of

running into property owners and assorted busybodies who seem to pop up out of the ground like gophers. Commonly they will ask such questions as, “Are you lost?”, “Are you looking for something?”, or “Can I help you?”; but what they really want to know is who you are and what you think you’re doing there.

It is natural for people to suppose that a stranger means trouble. Some will suspect you are an agent for a real estate developer, or a geologist who has some secret knowledge about mineral deposits, or that you know where a treasure was buried by Captain Kidd. Others will think you are a horse thief, a cattle rustler, an escaped convict, a foreign spy, or a government representative who is trying to figure out a way to raise property taxes. Some individuals who do not actually own the land may be hoping to acquire it when an elderly widow dies and are afraid you might be thinking of buying it out from under their sharp noses. But one thing you can be sure of:

*Nobody will believe you are simply communing with nature.*

So the solution to the famous hound-horse-dove problem, or metaphor, or parable is very simple. Thoreau was lying.

What! Thoreau lying?

Please don’t get excited. It was only a white lie, not too much different from the lie he might or might not have told his tailoress:

When I ask for a garment of a particular form, my tailoress tells me gravely, "They do not make them so now," not emphasizing the "They" at all, as if she quoted an authority as impersonal as the Fates, and I find it difficult to get made what I want, simply because she cannot believe that I mean what I say, that I am so rash. When I hear this oracular sentence, I am for a moment absorbed in thought, emphasizing to myself each word separately that I may come at the meaning of it, that I may find out by what degree of consanguinity *They* are related to *me*, and what authority they may have in an affair which affects me so nearly; and, finally, I am inclined to answer her with equal mystery, and without any more emphasis on the "they,"—"It is true, they did not make them so recently, but they do now."<sup>16</sup>

If Thoreau had tried to explain what he was doing on private land, or even on public land for that matter, he would have had to quote from his own as yet unpublished *Walden* and tell his interlocutor he was trying to hear what was in the wind, that he was waiting at evening on the hill-tops for the sky to fall, that he was a self-appointed inspector of snow storms and rain storms, that he was watering the red huckleberry, the sand cherry and the nettle tree. There is no telling what people would have thought of him, but he certainly would not have assuaged their suspicions or allayed their fears. They probably would have thought he was nuts.

Thoreau would have found it easy to make them believe he had lost a hound, or a horse, or a dove. Most people he encountered would have assumed he had lost something anyway, or else that he was lost himself. Obviously he would have needed to have "lost" more than one animal. If he was looking up at a tree or even clambering around in the branches, as he so

often did while looking for birds' eggs, he could hardly say he was looking for a horse. One can imagine some gimlet-eyed Yankee squire saying, "You own a horse that climbs trees? Sounds like a valuable animal. No wonder you're going so far out of your way to look for him. Or is it a mare?"

Thoreau's fictitious menagerie would naturally have had to include a horse because that would be the most plausible lie. But if he was trespassing through a fenced field or a fenced orchard, it would be awkward to claim that the horse might have jumped the fence. A horse might jump out of an enclosure but certainly wouldn't jump *into* one.

Thoreau needed to have lost an imaginary dog to cope with situations where a horse would not fit the bill. A hound would be the most plausible kind of dog to have lost, since hounds are always getting lost in hunting scenarios or wandering off on impromptu sniffing expeditions of their own. And if the inquisitor materialized at Thoreau's elbow while he was looking at flying birds, or at the passing clouds, or perhaps while he was foraging through some bushes, Thoreau needed a fictitious lost bird to provide his alibi as he surreptitiously stuffed a handful of berries into his coat pocket. A turtle-dove might sound a little more valuable than a mere lost pigeon.

The important point which seems to have been overlooked or ignored by everyone who has tried to decipher Thoreau's hound-horse-dove

statement is that he went around *telling* people he had lost those animals.

Here is the pertinent paragraph in full:

I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle-dove, and am still on their trail. Many are the travelers I have spoken concerning them, describing their tracks and what calls they answered to. I have met one or two who have heard the hound, and the tramp of the horse, and even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud, and they seemed as anxious to recover them as if they had lost them themselves.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, he was not merely telling a lie but embroidering on it. If he meant his statement metaphorically, why would he go around repeating it to strangers? We must assume that in his peregrinations he met many people who asked him where he was going and that he told them he was looking for a lost animal. He did so evidently because he found it easier than explaining that he was trying to live a life of freedom, independence and leisure and spending much of his time studying nature. He also seems to have taken a certain malicious pleasure in pulling people's legs.

Immediately before the paragraph just quoted, Thoreau writes:

. . . there are more secrets in my trade than in most men's, and yet not voluntarily kept, but inseparable from its very nature. I would gladly tell all that I know about it, and never paint "No Admittance" on my gate.<sup>18</sup>

(The reference to signs reading "No Admittance"—or as we would say nowadays "No Trespassing"—is significant.)

Thoreau had probably tried telling the truth and found it was impossible because people either could not understand him or would not believe him. He had to write a whole book to explain his values, and still the majority of his neighbors thought he was a harmless lunatic. Most people are philistines at heart and will believe your explanations of your motives only if the bottom line involves something of monetary value.

Everybody tells these white lies. Here is the opening sentence of James Thurber's short story "The Topaz Cufflinks Mystery":

When the motorcycle cop came roaring up, unexpectedly, out of Never-Never Land (the way motorcycle cops do), the man was on his hands and knees in the long grass beside the road, barking like a dog.

The man nervously explains that he is looking for "Some—some cufflinks, topazes set in gold. . . . They were the color of a fine Mozelle."<sup>19</sup> it turns out that he had made a bet with his wife that a human being's eyes would shine in their car's headlights like a cats if he were down at the same level as a cat.

Is it really possible to imagine Thoreau encountering a stranger and saying, "I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle-dove"? Isn't it far more likely that he told some people he had lost a hound, others a horse, and others a dove, because he had found out "long ago" that this was an effective way to deal with such nuisances? Or is his statement that he told *many*

people had lost these animals, “describing their tracks and what calls they answered to,” somehow to be interpreted as part of the total metaphor?

Let’s face it: as a metaphor it was never much good anyway. It is bad enough to refer to a young woman as a turtle-dove (it sounds like W. C. Fields talking to Mae West); but to refer to a man as a hound or a horse is just outlandish. But as a white lie, it shows originality, humor, and an understanding of human nature, all of which are well-known Thoreauvian traits.

Thoreau was not being poetic: he was telling a convenient falsehood to stop people from bugging him. And I don’t blame him. I wish I had thought of it myself.

#### NOTES

1. Henry David Thoreau, *The Variorum Walden*, annotated and with an introduction by Walter Harding (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962).
2. 271.
3. 270.
4. 270.
5. 270
6. See 270-2 for a summary of these interpretations.

7. 271.
8. 271.
9. 272.
10. 272.
11. 271.
12. Kenneth G. Johnston, "Thoreau's Star-Spangled Losses: The Hound, Bay Horse, and Turtle Dove," *Thoreau Quarterly Journal*, 3 (October 1971): 10-20.
13. Walter Harding and Carl Bode, eds., *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau* (New York, 1958) 479.
14. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Purloined Letter," in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, VI (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1965).
15. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thoreau" *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: AMS Press, 1979), X 469, 481.
16. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers: Harper's Modern Classics, 1963) 30-1.
17. 20.
18. 20.
19. James Thurber, "The Topaz Cufflinks Mystery," in *The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze* (New York & London: Harper & Brothers, 1935).