R. W. Emerson
from
B. D. T.

WALDEN MARGINALIA

OR

THE CONTENTS
OF A DOZEN SHANTIES

By AMELIA R. DUDD

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OR,

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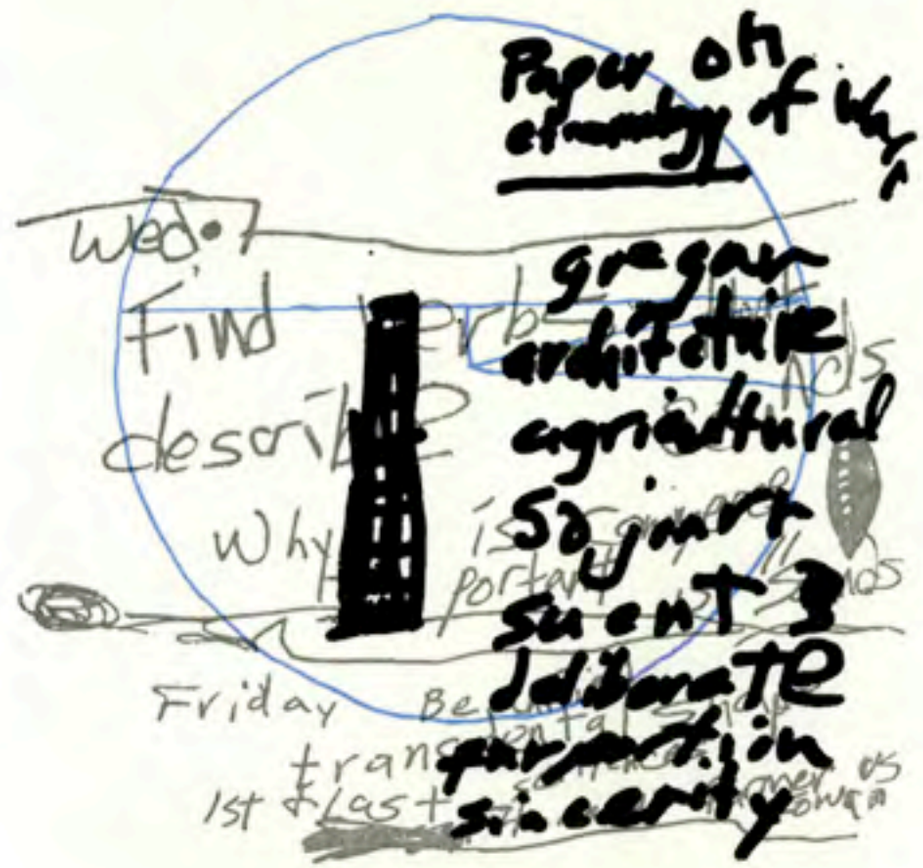


By AMELIA R. BIRD

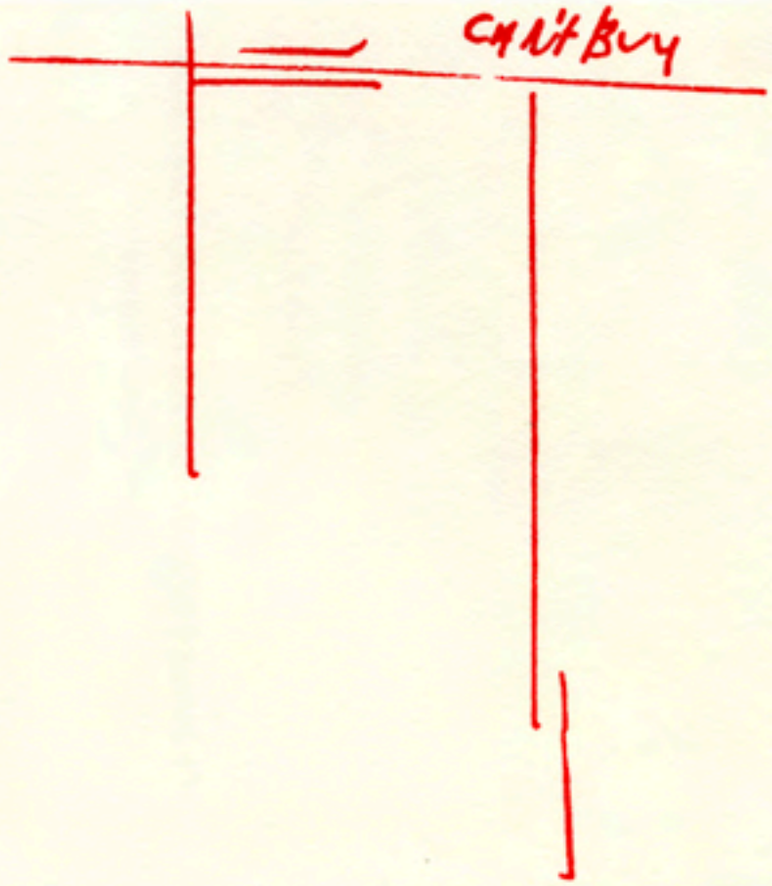
"The book exists for us, perchance, which will explain our miracles and reveal new ones. The at present unutterable things we may find somewhere uttered."

"I did not read books that first summer; I hoed beans."

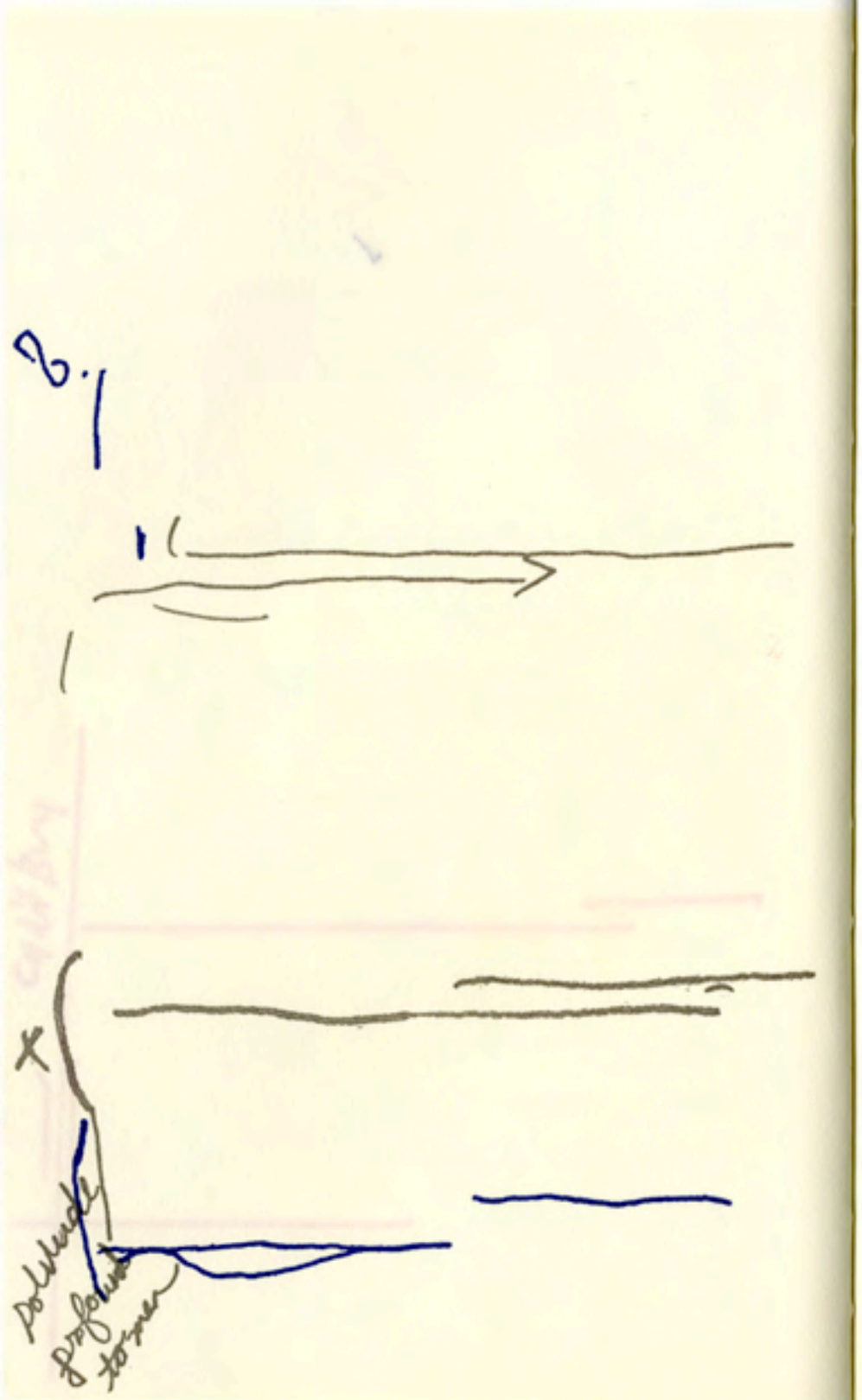
—*Henry David Thoreau*

I.

In 1894, a critic recommended *Walden* if not for its actual contents then for its "suggestive capacity." And thus we can think of it as a kind of container.

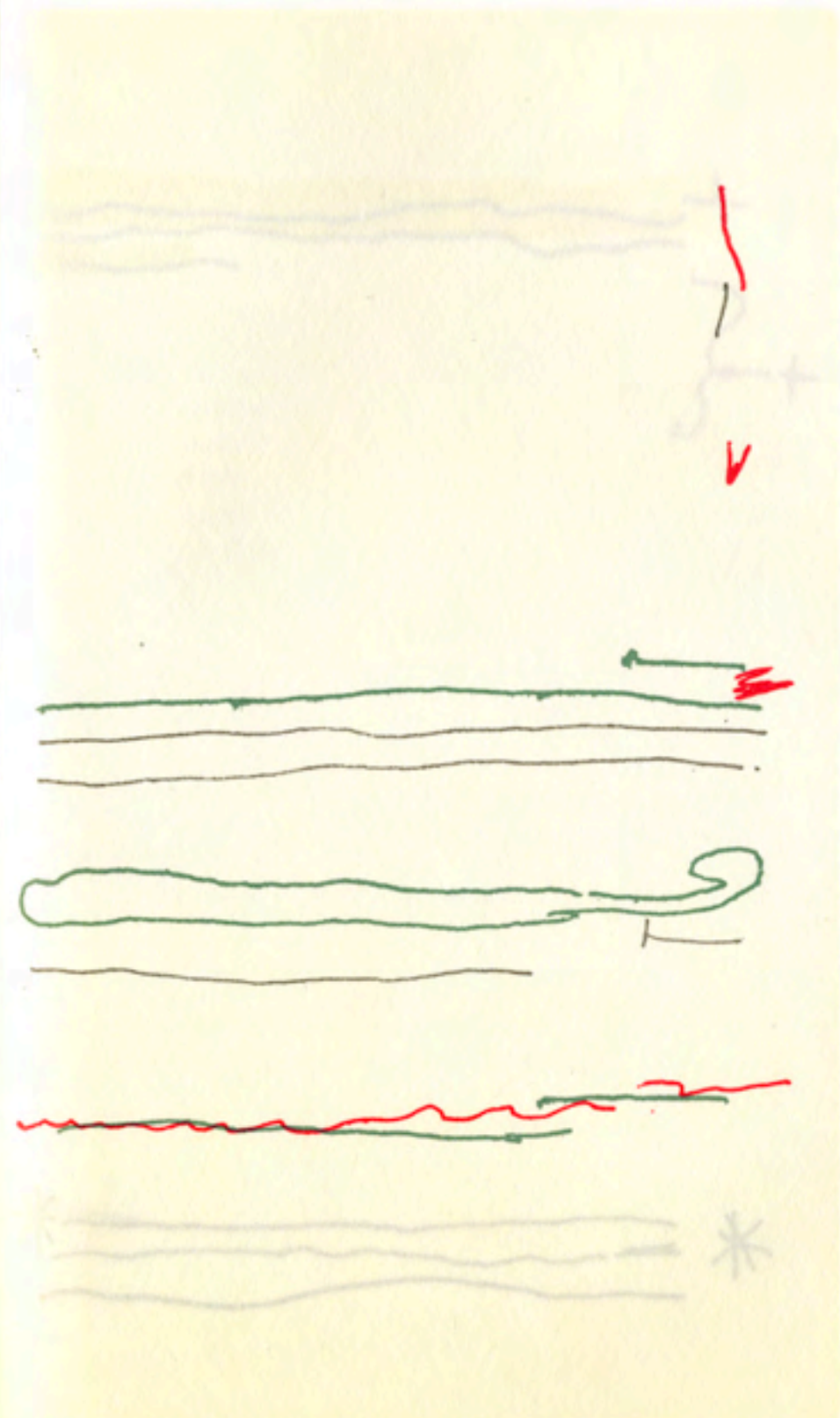

CALL BUY

In or out of the woods, *Walden* has never been an easy read. The text is densely metaphoric, aphoristic, and pedantic. Also, it's full of holes. Thoreau sets up an argument in one chapter and contradicts it in the next, saying he'd rather eat a fried rat with relish.



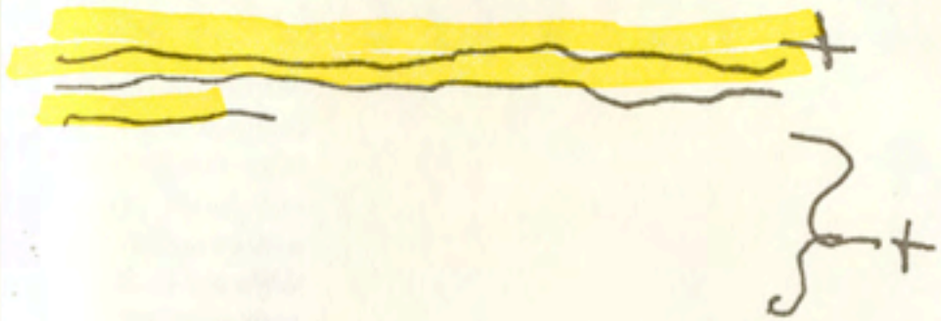
In the chapter "The Ponds" Thoreau describes an old Indian path around the water's edge as seen from a distance in winter as a "clear undulating white line." But seen close-up with too much foliage surrounding it, that same path was indistinguishable.

Thoreau is always stumbling across paths in the woods and following them. When he leaves the pond, he concludes that holy wanderers of the future will find the paths he made and, in their insensible following, keep them clear and defined.



And so it is with *Walden*. We come to it on our own or we are led to it in class, and we expect it to go somewhere tangible, for if anyone can teach us how to live right it must be Thoreau, the great American trailblazer.

Sure, Thoreau may have been a bit of a fraud and a mama's boy and a pyromaniac, but he was unabashed about first-person narration, he is the reason we have round pencils with various intensities of graphite, and he urges us, "books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written."



Any text can be studied for the marginalia it inspires, but I am drawn to *Walden* because it both begs to be annotated—to be mastered and the proof of understanding be marked on the pages—and defies such piddling, denies easy comprehension, and tells the reader that she needs to find a different way to track.

Or at least that's what I glean from my notes.

II.

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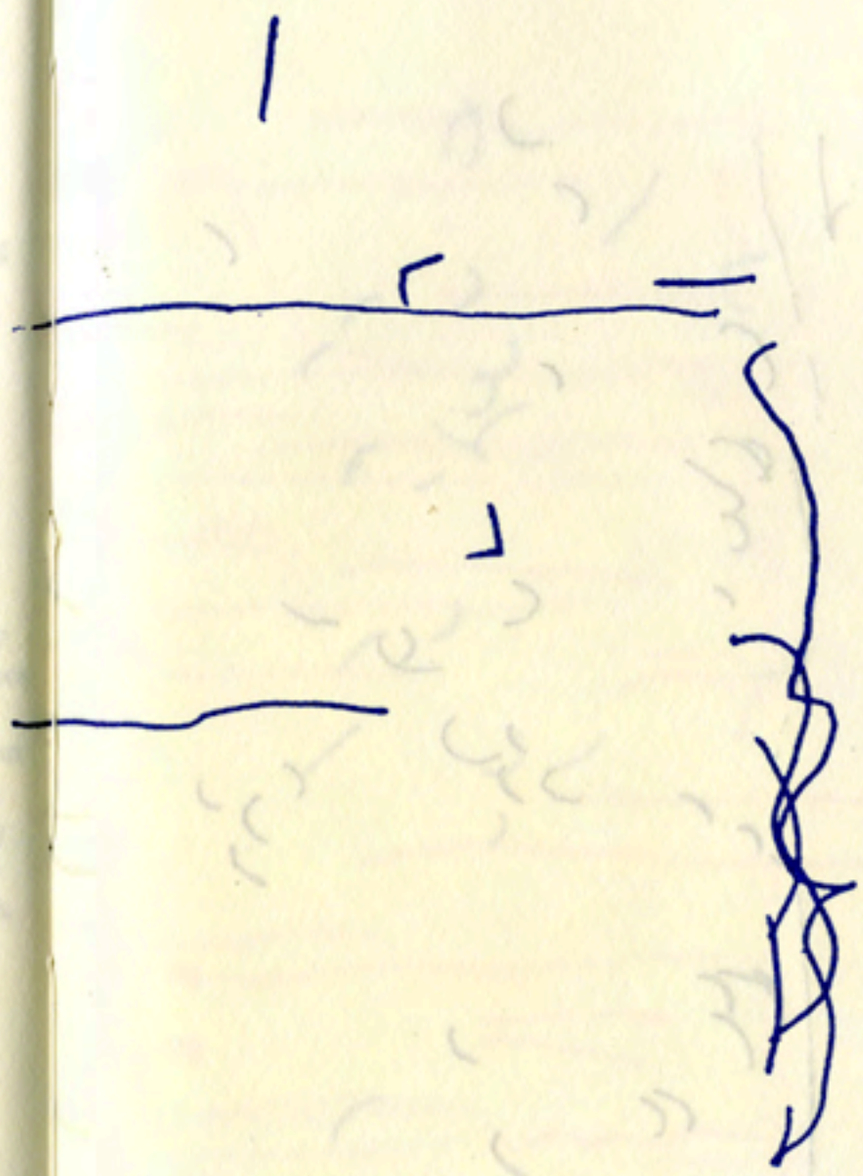
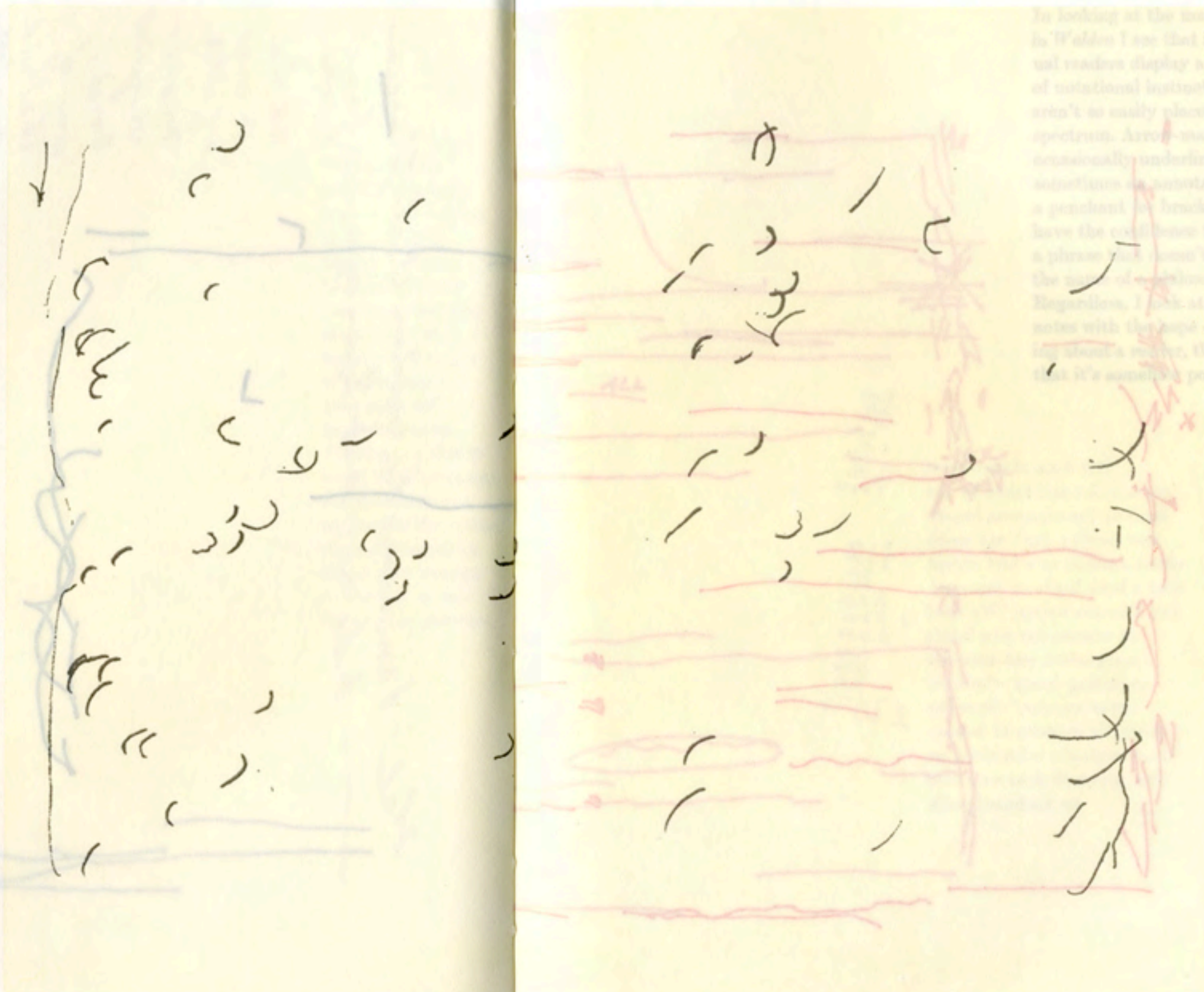
Writing in the margins of a book is similar to writing in a diary. The notes may be intended for only your eyes, but you can't help but imagine a stranger or the stranger of your older self re-reading them. Writing in a library book, then, surpasses self-consciousness and enters the realm of performance, an act akin to wearing a large hat or talking to your parents.

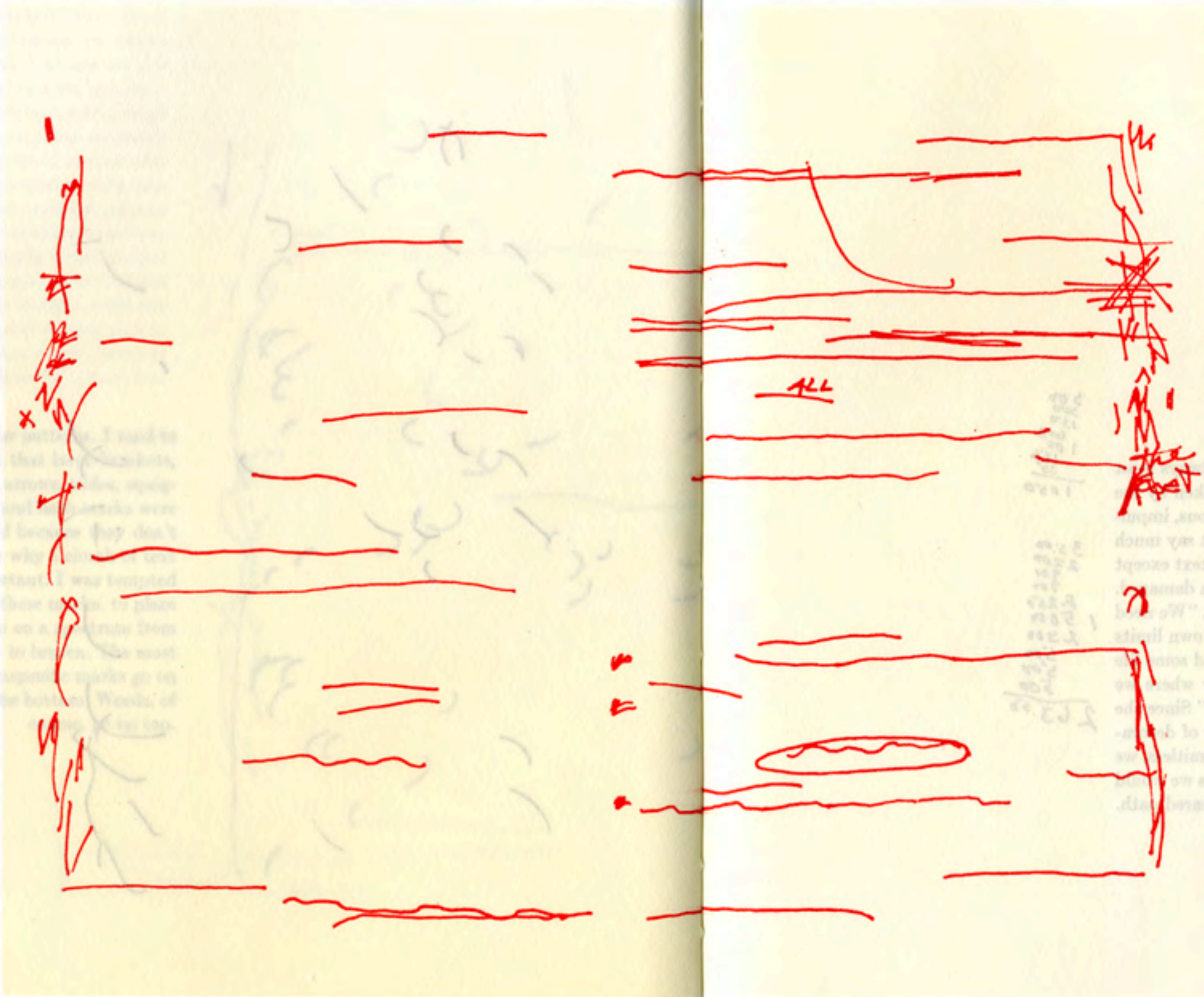
Hale — I am sorry that I have the wonders that Thoreau did not feel grandeur in his books as he is one of the most original and one of the kind minded men ever lived. This acquaintance with nature was likely Thoreau —



Notes could be divided into categories: marks of ownership (names on flyleaves), unrelated jottings (math figures, phone numbers), classroom notes, acquisition information, book reviews and other outside contexts, opening opinions, book convention imitations (readers' indices, tables of contents), readers' codes (signs of attention, signs of approval or disapproval, invented systems), words and phrases, and finally, full sentences.

I look for patterns. I used to think that large brackets, stars, arrows, tildes, squiggles, and hash marks were timid because they don't indicate why a chunk of text is important. I was tempted to rank these marks, to place them on a spectrum from wimpy to brazen. The most unspecific marks go on the bottom. Words, of course, go on top.

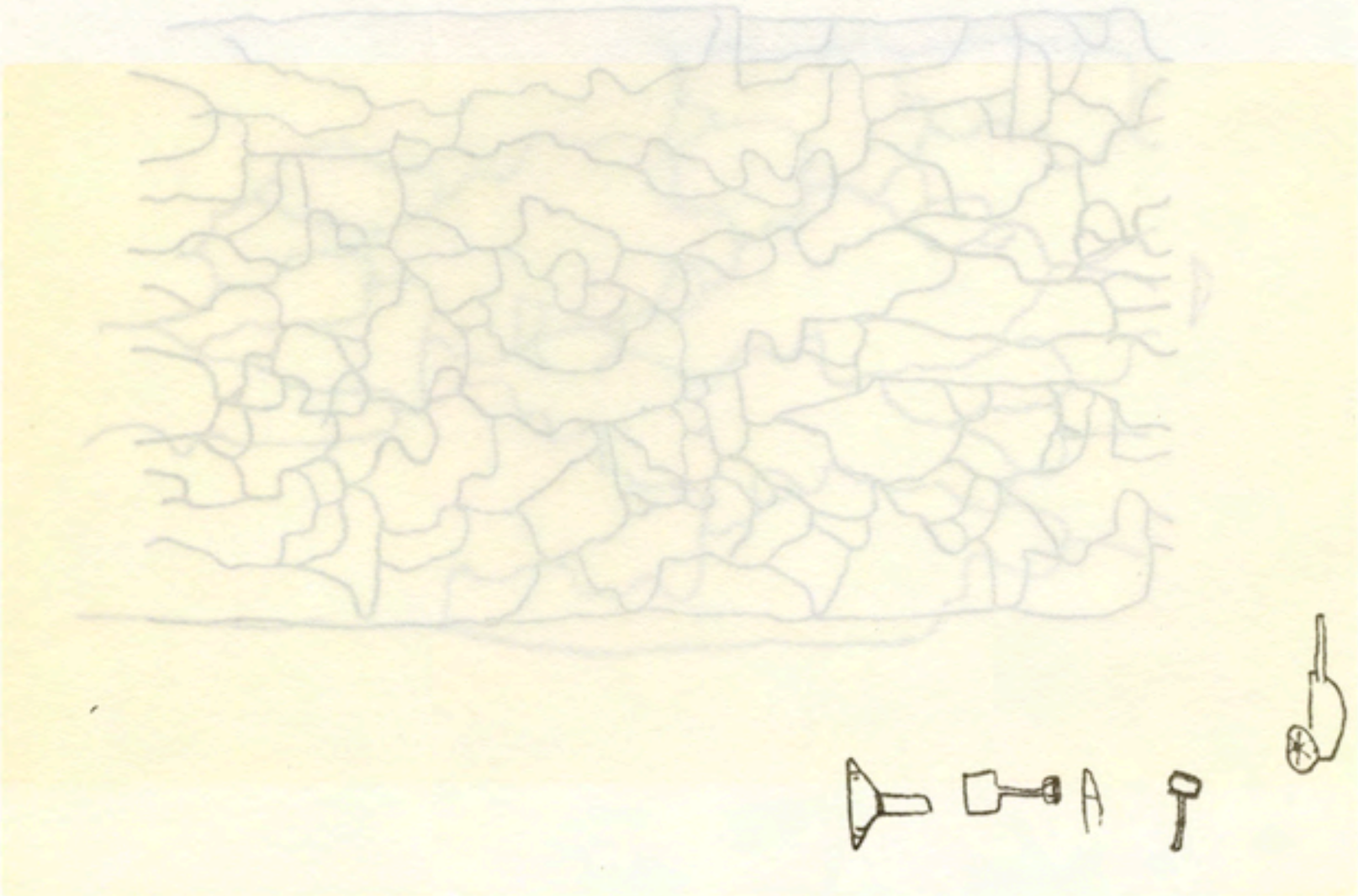




In looking at the marginalia in *Walden* I see that individual readers display a variety of notational instincts and aren't so easily placed on a spectrum. Arrow-makers occasionally underline, and sometimes an annotator with a penchant for brackets will have the confidence to write a phrase that doesn't contain the name of a philosopher. Regardless, I look at margin notes with the hope of learning about a reader, the belief that it's somehow possible.

But I am always most confounded and taken by the outliers. Spontaneous, impulsive doodles don't say much about a reader or a text except that a book has been damaged. But Thoreau writes, "We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander." Since the aesthetic capacity of decorative marginalia is limitless, we can approach it as we would an uncleared path.

III.



When I was nineteen I spent nine days in the woods by myself. I brought along a backpack of environmental literature, Thoreau coming first and being the pillar to which Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Rick Bass, and the rest of the contemporary nature writers would be compared. With my borrowed tent and my father's gun I sat in the woods and read *Walden* and didn't see another person for days and, yes, went a little crazy.

It's all there, in my notes. Rather, it's in their shapes. On many pages I stuck to frilly stars, overworked curly brackets, and stacked lines—patterns that look like the trails beavers weave in the sand on the way into and out of their lodges of sticks.

p.188

p.196

p.122

p.339

p.235

p.251

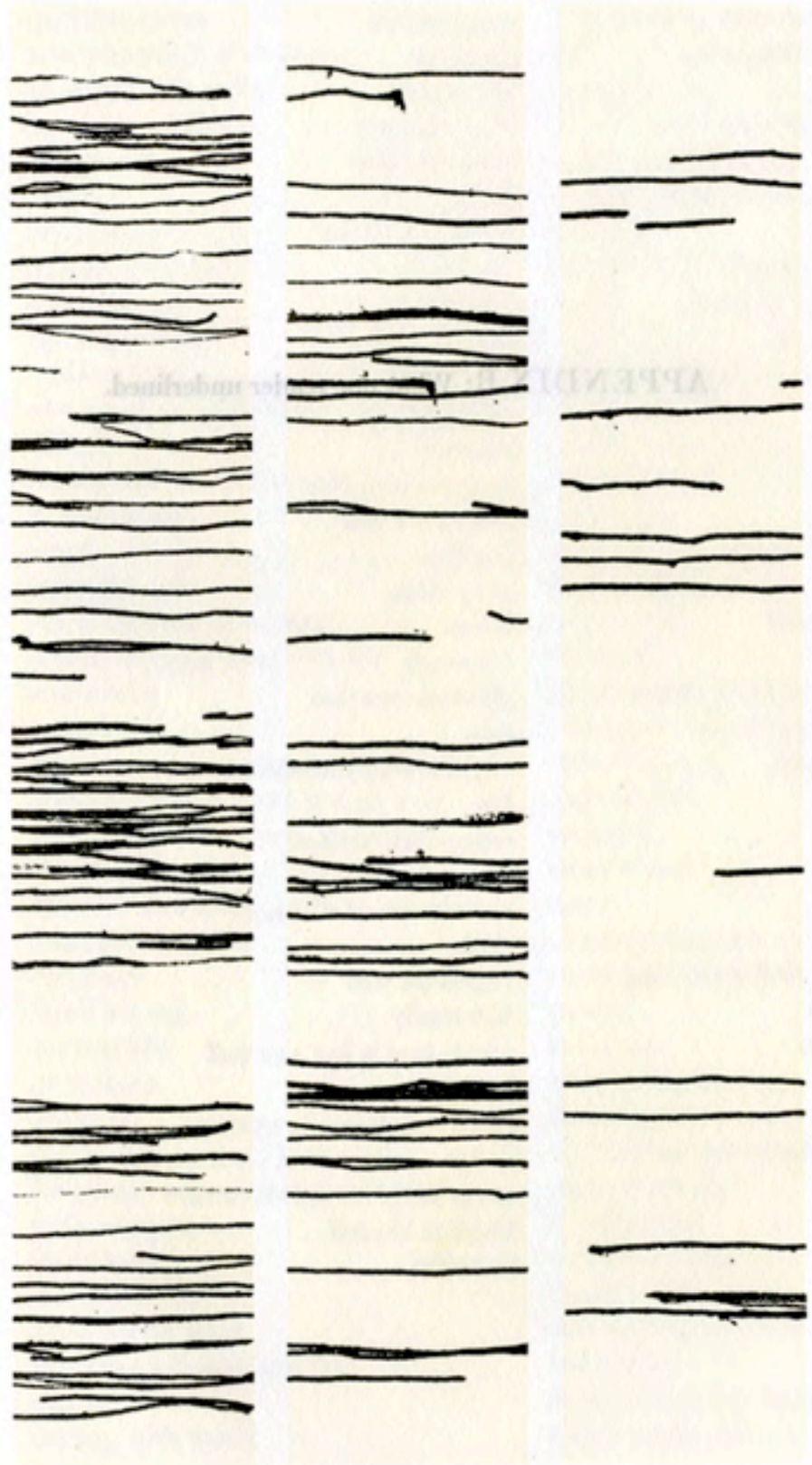
p.339

I was afraid to tamper with Thoreau's text with a highlighter. I was too nervous to underline. I was even reluctant to write words in the margins, for what could I say about a book that had so much sway it had me sitting in the woods expecting revelation before I'd even opened it?

So there in the tent, equipped with a headlamp and a round pencil, I did with my marginalia what I'd been already doing with my attitude. I hugged *Walden*. My reverence cupped the text gently on both sides, an attempt to reach in, to understand, to read as I was told to live—deliberately. But in all my margin scratching I missed Thoreau's ultimately contradictory wisdom: *There is no wisdom. Stop reading. Go outside.*

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: All the underlines—one copy of *Walden* divided into thirds.



APPENDIX B: What one reader underlined.

that these men
into a nutshell of civility
an irresistible voice
necessary of life
savageness
poverty
philosophy
present necessity
but naturally
last importance
a naked thief
who could do with less
"They"
impersonal as the Fates
so commonly
suent
degraded rich
begin without borrowing
broad, flapping American ear
impartially
is vanity
Manus mortariumque bene lavato
Wash your hands and trough well
the contents of a dozen shanties
When a man dies he kicks the dust
There is no odor
imagination
two years
caged myself
conventicle
mountains
the earth
continent
Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!
rigid economy
see it burn
fish in the sky
pebbly with stars
My head is hands and feet
mortal
dealing with truth

It is not all books
alert
contemplation
the oxen that wore them
Warned by the whizzing sound
lost the scent
stampede
the restless world
the pine needles
screech owls
voice of the wood
wood-nymph
did the deeds of darkness
animal, yet with human sobs
dark valley
more fitting and dismal day dawns
Walden nymphs
early to rise
No yard!
Sympathy
serenity is rippled but not ruffled
piece of forest
cigar or pipe
darkness
black kernel
rain
unaccountable friendliness
awakening
Next
too cheap
we were never alone
Morning air!
Hebe
vigor of youth
it was spring
Sufficient distance
the side of his head
new and better customs
chickadees
In him the animal man
called humble who never aspires

could write a remarkably good hand
consciousness or of stupidity
in his animal life
compensated
wise policy
humble himself was he exalted
not reckoned
never to help themselves
greater and greater remoteness
a monopoly of subject
seven miles already planted
arrowheads
half-cultivated
brown thrasher
red mavis
natural
tinkled
the nighthawk circled
my own thoughts
I was determined to know beans
Pythagorean
strolled to the village
Etesian
to launch
tying up the helm
It was very queer
other spheres
The pond was my well ready dug
no storms, no dust
Walden wears best
natives
moral bog hoe
Grow wild according to thy nature
woodchuck
I found in myself
practically
instinctively
humanity
change
mighty hunters at last
few potatoes

imagination
preserve
larva state
less peaceful
never fought
Polk
fiercely spitting
cunningly
surprised
as
as
white breast
learned
It was I and Fire
heathen I was
her lips
very slope
house
Forward
glorious creation
skin
of particular inclination
Ice
completely melted
laciniated
excrements of all kinds
drain
vegetable leaf
Internally
whole tree is but one leaf
bowels
there is nothing inorganic
no stronger proof of immortality
never have enough of nature
Explore thyself
Humility

APPENDIX C: Bibliography of *Waldens*.

The marginalia in this book are presented as single pages and page spreads of notes by multiple readers and as composite images of notes by individual readers in a chapter or an entire volume, and were found in the following copies of *Walden:*

Walden; or Life in the Woods. Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1854 (first edition).

University of Iowa Library
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COLOPHON

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In an edition of 500 copies, this is number

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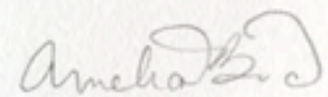

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