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Henry David Thoreau: The Maine Woods

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Introduction

HENRY DAVID THOREAU was so emotionally attached to his home in Concord that he found it almost impossible to leave. In fact after 1837 he did so only for short periods—thirteen days on the Concord and Merrimack rivers, some visits to Cape Cod, three trips to the Maine woods, several months in Staten Island and in Minnesota. He was never alone on these excursions; always went with a friend or relative. He was one of the earliest climbers to the heights of Mount Katahdin, but that was a bold exception and he probably did not achieve the highest peak. The canoe trip of 325 miles he writes about in “The Allegash and East Branch” in *The Maine Woods* was his most ambitious trip—and a hard one—but the book shows that for all Thoreau’s enthusiasm for the wilderness he was sometimes lost and confused in the deep woods. The experience convinced him that he would never be able to live there on his own.

The Maine woods were wilderness, but Thoreau emphasizes their proximity: they are only a matter of hours from easily accessible Bangor. Walden Pond was a pleasant walk to his family home, where he lived for almost his entire life. During his famous experiment in his cabin at Walden, moralizing about his solitude, he did not mention that he brought his mother his dirty laundry and went on enjoying her apple pies. His friend William Ellery Channing wrote that, after his graduation from Harvard at the age of twenty, when his mother broached the subject of his leaving home, Thoreau became weepy—and didn’t leave.

Though his literary mentor, Emerson, went to England in search of inspiration, and other contemporaries traveled widely on the globe—Hawthorne to

England, Washington Irving to Spain, Melville to the Pacific—Thoreau was not impressed. The reports of such peregrinations roused him to be defiant and sometimes condescending. He was self-consciously a contrarian. He cultivated his eccentricity and talked it up in his writing, but his personality was a great deal stranger than he knew and perhaps beyond cultivation.

His characteristic response to his world-traveling friends was (as he confided to his journal), “Methinks, I should be content to sit at the backdoor in Concord, under the poplar tree, henceforth forever.” Is Thoreau in this saying any more than Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* in her last sighing insight: “If I ever look for my heart’s desire again I’ll never look farther than my own back yard”? Perhaps not, but Thoreau’s deflations are often paradoxes. Anyway, why leave Concord when, as he wrote in a poem,

Our village shows a rural Venice,
Its broad lagoons where yonder fen is;
As lovely as the Bay of Naples
Yon placid cove amid the maples;
And in my neighbor’s field of corn
I recognize the Golden Horn.

This is Thoreau’s usual attitudinizing, the lovable but maddening stay-at-home stubbornness of an American village explainer who has never seen Venice, Naples, or Turkey and doesn’t intend to. Its special pleading seems suspect, and you have to question his insistence on staying put and seldom mentioning foreign parts except to belittle them. The inherent provincialism of the attitude that so caught Henry James’s critical eye lies at the heart of Thoreau’s desire to chronicle the wildness in Maine. He wanted to find it spooky and saturated with the past and wild enough to report that it had never been seen by a white man before—a claim he makes on his first trip in just those words.

Thoreau was assertively American, in a manner of conspicuous nonconformity inspired by Emerson. Thoreau's passion was for being local, and that included being a traveler in America—to show how to care about the country, what tone to use, what subjects to address. By the way, in adopting and refining these postures, he became our first and subtlest environmentalist. In Maine his subjects were, as he listed them in a letter, “the Moose, the Pine Tree & the Indian.” The last words he spoke on his deathbed were “Moose . . . Indian.”

Thoreau's three Maine trips from 1846 to 1857 overlap the publication of Melville's greatest works. We have no proof that Thoreau read *Moby-Dick*, but we have ample evidence that he read *Typee*, which appeared at the time of his first visit to Maine, and which he discussed in a discarded early version of “Ktaadn.” Somewhat combative in comparing wildernesses, Thoreau argued that he experienced deeper wilderness in Maine than Melville had as a castaway in the high volcanic archipelago of the remote Marquesas, among the lovely maiden Fayaway and the anthropophagous islanders. It seems a stretch, but there it is.

Among other things, Thoreau's trips to the Maine woods were a deliberate search, like that of his contemporary George Catlin, to understand the Indian as an American ideal. Thoreau was an early and unbigoted chronicler of native Americans and as great a portraitist of them in words as Catlin was on canvas. But Catlin was traveling in the Far West, and Thoreau never saw the finery and feathers or the dignity of Catlin's subjects. Speaking of an Indian in one of the more lyrical and mystical passages, at the end of “Ktaadn,” he concludes, “He glides up the Millinocket and is lost to my sight, as a more distant and misty cloud is seen flitting by behind a nearer, and is lost

in space. So he goes about his destiny, the red face of man.”

Against Thoreau’s longest trips away from home, two futile months of illness in Minnesota and six homesick months in Staten Island, we must consider the accomplishments of the heroic travelers of his time—Sir Richard Burton in Arabia and Africa, Sir John Franklin in the Arctic, Sir Joseph Hooker in Tibet, Henry Walter Bates on the Amazon, Darwin in the Galapagos, Alfred Russel Wallace in the Far East. I mention these travelers because Thoreau, who read widely in travel narratives—this literary genre was one of his greatest enthusiasms—read the books of most of these men. He was fascinated by Burton in Arab disguise in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and as a writer and thinker was profoundly influenced by Darwin’s *Voyage of the Beagle* and *Origin of Species*.

Thoreau’s denigrating witticism, “It is not worth the while to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar,” is well known, yet he was widely read in books of African travel. Arctic travel books were another passion and may have taught him how to write about the freezing and thawing of Walden Pond. He also read Lewis and Clark (the account of their expedition was first published in 1814) and was keenly, almost competitively, aware that in his lifetime America was still being ambitiously explored. At roughly the period Thoreau was hiking and paddling in the Maine woods, John Fremont and Kit Carson were exploring in the Rocky Mountains.

In his reading and in his own travel, Thoreau—obsessed with unspoiled America and in search of primeval forest—was insistent that Maine was wilder than more distant parts of America. The logging metropolis of Bangor he describes in a lovely image as “like a star on the edge of night, still hewing at the

forests of which it is built." And as for wilderness, he says that "some hours only of travel" north of Bangor "will carry the curious to the verge of a primitive forest, more interesting, perhaps, on all accounts, than they would reach by going a thousand miles westward." A thousand miles westward would have landed him in Columbus, Ohio.

Thoreau traveled for information and experience, but he also traveled in search of metaphors and, most of all, to carry back with him an itinerary to serve as a narrative structure. He first practiced this method of writing in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, a book inspired by his brother John's death two and a half years after their trip together on those waterways. *A Week* abounds with wisdom and insight, aperçus, poems (his own and others'), and such extensive asides that they amounted to essays. The conceit of the book was that it was a week of floating down rivers. It is anything but that, and is hardly a travel book in any conventional sense. Each day is a lengthy chapter of philosophy and natural history, with plenty of breezy denunciations of Christianity and mocks against organized religion (this obsessive secularism killed the book's chances with readers at the time). One of his best essays (on friendship) is a later insertion. *A Week* is replete with such insertions, and *Walden* went through seven different handwritten drafts.

With such an appetite for revision, narrative plumping, second thoughts, tidying up, and rewriting, it is little wonder that Thoreau published only two books in his lifetime—though he had plans for a number of others. *The Maine Woods* was to be one of them, *Cape Cod* another, and he spoke of a book about Indians. It is important to point out that, for all its insights, *The Maine Woods* published posthumously is a set of three

narratives in various states of completion; not a unified book, but rather a three-decker sandwich of woodland excursions. As a record of impressions, a work in progress, it is all the more interesting. "Ktaadn" is a polished and youthful piece, "Chesuncook" finished and mature, and "The Allegash and East Branch" somewhat provisional though containing a wealth of information.

The whole book is rife with repetitions, contradictions, and loosely organized matter. A trivial example: the name Sunkhaze is used early in "Ktaadn." It is a small stream near Oldtown. "We crossed the Sunkhaze, a summery Indian name." But almost three hundred pages later Sunkhaze is defined by Joe Polis with his characteristic (and hardly summery) allusiveness, "Suppose you are going down Penobscot, just like me, and you see a canoe come out of bank and go along before you, but you no see 'em stream. That is *Sunkhaze*."

I feel compelled to point out to an unsuspecting first-time reader of this book that each narrative begins in the most pedestrian, almost off-putting way, with a date of departure and a recitation of unadorned bits of information, with all the plodding factuality of a traveling salesman's route report. Each section begins in the same way, but soon after, in each case, when he has left the settlements behind and is in the woods, Thoreau hits his stride. He is an inexhaustible observer ("A spy in the camp" he describes himself in his note taking). Anyone who reads Thoreau must inevitably regret that he did not at some point leave the American continent and travel abroad, for he was in the whole of literature one of the most sensitive and scrupulous noticers of nature and man.

In "Ktaadn" he defines the essence of wilderness. "It is difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by

man," he begins modestly. Then comes his hammer stroke:

Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden, but the unhandselled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor waste-land. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made forever and ever.

It is a wonderful passage. You may wonder what Thoreau was doing in his cabin at the shore of Walden Pond for two years. One of the things he was doing was writing sentences like those, for he took his first Maine trip when resident at Walden and worked it up into an article there, which he used as a basis for public lectures. He was twenty-nine years old and at his most lyrical, most prone to the dazzling set piece and to the minute observation that he had learned from reading Darwin.

He went to Maine again seven years later. He was still the poet, still lyrical but with a writing style of satisfying particularity. Consider the passage in "Chesuncook" where his Indian guide Joe Aitteon shoots and wounds a moose. The moose flees and Aitteon follows. Thoreau is closely watching:

He proceeded rapidly up the bank and through the woods, with a peculiar, elastic, noiseless and stealthy tread, looking to right and left on the ground, and stepping in the faint tracks of the wounded moose, now and then pointing in silence to a single drop of blood on the handsome shining leaves of the *Clintonia borealis*, which on every side covered the ground, or to a dry fern stem freshly broken, all the while chewing some leaf or else the spruce gum.

In another passage in "Chesuncook," justly famous for its beauty and its accuracy, Thoreau describes a tree falling some distance off in the forest:

Once, when Joe had *called* again, and we were listening for moose, we heard come faintly echoing or creeping from far through the moss-clad aisles, a dull dry rushing sound, with a solid core to it, yet as if half smothered under the grasp of the luxuriant and fungus-like forest, like the shutting of a door in some distant entry of the damp and shaggy wilderness. If we had not been there no mortal had heard it. When we asked Joe in a whisper what it was, he answered, "Tree fall."

Thoreau took his last Maine woods trip in 1857. He was forty then and you can see by his prose style that he is a different sort of traveler: humbler, affronted by the changes he sees in the eleven years since his first visit, no longer a quoter of Milton, or a praiser of lumberjacks, or a hyperbolic observer of the mystical Indian. He is now a denouncer of the logging industry and a clear-sighted diarist. Indians fascinated Thoreau and this third trip in Maine offered him his best opportunity to study them. Through his guide, Joe Polis, Thoreau was able to record firsthand the life and habits of a Penobscot Indian, who still retained something of his people's traditions.

He had searched for Indians on his first trip but did not find any companions. The Indians in "Ktaadn" were living in "shabby, forlorn, and cheerless" houses, and the single woman he saw was "shabby." One man he met was a "stalwart, but dull and greasy-looking fellow." The Indians were "woebegone," they were drunks, and worst of all they were Christians. Seeing a well-built Catholic church in Oldtown, Thoreau (the young, the quipping, the contrary, the hyperbolic traveler) remarked, "I even thought that a row of wigwams, with a dance of pow-wows, and a prisoner tortured at the stake, would be more respectable than this."

The Indians in “Ktaadn” are glimpsed from a distance and summed up with typical Thoreauvian briskness and presumption. No Indian accompanies him in “Ktaadn.” Louis Neptune, the contracted guide, lets him down. With Joe Aitteon in “Chesuncook” Thoreau scruples to look deeper and finds someone unexpected. Joe Aitteon is “a son of the Governor” (the tribal governor). He is twenty-four years old, “good looking,” “short and stout,” with narrow “turned up” eyes and sturdily dressed. After these mundane details Thoreau offers us this: “When afterward he had occasion to take off his shoes and stockings, I was struck by the smallness of his feet.” We at once see Joe Aitteon as perhaps delicate and slightly more interesting.

“I narrowly watched his motions, and listened attentively to his observations, for we had employed an Indian mainly that I might have an opportunity to study his ways.” What Thoreau sees is that Aitteon has a peculiar gait, that he is a great tracker, that he whistles “O Susanna” and says “Yes, Sir-ee” and “By George!” and that he is illiterate (“though he was a Governor’s son”) and knows little about the history of his people. Thoreau reveals his own naïveté as a traveler among indigenous peoples in being disconcerted by Joe Aitteon’s apparently slender grasp of distances. In the rough terrain of folk societies, miles are meaningless; actual travel time is what counts. This is the chief distinction between the person with a map (Thoreau) and the person with profound experience of the region (Aitteon), for Aitteon could tell “at what time we should arrive, but not how far it was.”

Thoreau notes that Joe Aitteon had difficulty conveying an abstract idea when translating place names from Abenaki into English, but Aitteon’s fluency in his mother tongue impresses Thoreau. It is this language, such compelling evidence of a civilization that had

existed on the continent long “before Columbus was born,” that one night gave Thoreau the feeling that he “stood, or rather lay, as near to the primitive man of America, that night, as any of its discoverers ever did.” That Crusoe moment, Thoreau believed, was one of his triumphs as a traveler in the Maine woods.

It is apparent that Joe Aitteon was not the Indian archetype Thoreau was looking for. Aitteon was too familiar with the white world. His “O Susanna” and his catchphrases grated on Thoreau’s finely tuned ear. On Thoreau’s third visit he found the man he sought. True, Joe Polis was a Christian, and so he refused to work on Sunday; he had a sweet tooth, and he had been to Washington, D.C., and New York City. He had met (and been rebuffed by) no less a personage than Daniel Webster. But he is more knowledgeable than Aitteon, he has considerable skills as a woodsman, he is a master of the wilderness topography, he knows the names of plants and trees and landscape features—and this information he shares with Thoreau. Indian-fashion, he uses his teeth, “often where we should have used a hand.” Joe Polis is wellborn, “one of the aristocracy.” He is shrewd, enigmatic, given to gnomic utterances. Asked by Thoreau how he finds his way home through the trackless forest, Polis just laughs, “O, I can’t tell *you*. . . . Great difference between me and white man.” On a later occasion, discussing the mending of a canoe with pitch, Polis confides “that there were some things which a man did not tell even his wife.”

One of the most heartfelt descriptions of Joe Polis is Thoreau’s recording the Indian’s memory of almost starving to death on a trip through the woods in winter as a boy of ten. This harrowing story, simply related, occurs toward the end of “The Allegash.” The Indian is admirable for his toughness, but what impresses Thoreau most about Joe Polis is his self-possession and

the simplicity of his life. In his style of dressing and traveling he is the Thoreauvian ideal:

He wore a cotton shirt, originally white, a greenish flannel one over it, but no waistcoat, flannel drawers, and strong linen or duck pants, which had also been white, blue woollen stockings, cowhide boots, and a Kossuth hat. He carried no change of clothing, but putting on a stout, thick jacket, which he laid aside in the canoe, and seizing a full-sized axe, his gun and ammunition, and a blanket, which would do for a sail or knapsack, if wanted, and strapping on his belt, which contained a large sheath-knife, he walked off at once, ready to be gone all summer.

In the portrait of Joe Polis the man seems as eternal as the trees and the rocks. "I have much to learn of the Indian, nothing of the missionary," Thoreau writes, pondering Joe Polis. Thoreau's method as he relates it to Joe Polis is, "I told him that in this voyage I would tell him all I knew, and he should tell me all he knew." Thoreau's experiences in the Maine woods have a humbling effect on him, turning him from an explainer into a student. Earlier, in "Chesuncook," seeing an Indian making canoes, he writes, "I made a faithful study of canoe-building, and I thought that I should like to serve an apprenticeship at that trade for one season, going into the woods for bark with my 'boss,' making the canoe there, and returning in it at last."

Hearing Joe Polis divulge the identification of bird-song, Thoreau wishes again to be tutored. "I observed that I should like to go to school to him to learn his language, living on the Indian island the while." Polis taught Thoreau so many Abenaki words that a glossary ("A List of Indian Words") was included in an appendix to most editions of *The Maine Woods*. After Polis shows him the traditional way of making soup from lily roots, Thoreau tries to cook some himself. And at the end of the trip (rather late in the day for this lesson), Polis

teaches Thoreau the Indian method of paddling a canoe.

Throughout *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau disabuses himself of the presumption that the Indians are preservationists. Joe Aitteon readily admits that he cannot survive in the woods as his ancestors (“wild as bears”) did. The woods are not a residence for Indians but rather their hunting ground, Thoreau says; yet he blames them for their opportunism. “What a coarse and imperfect use Indians and hunters make of nature! No wonder that their race is so soon exterminated.” Although this is unreasonable (he said earlier that the Indians had been hunting there for four thousand years), he correctly envisages that indiscriminate logging and hunting will ultimately change the face of the forest forever.

One of the most dramatic episodes in the book is the killing of a moose by Joe Aitteon. Thoreau’s descriptions of moose are inspired and fanciful: “They made me think of great frightened rabbits” and “It reminded me at once of the camelopard” and its “branching and leafy horns—a sort of fucus or lichen in bone.” In all these descriptions there is affection and awe. The killing of a moose is in Thoreau’s view a tragedy (“nature looked sternly upon me on account of the murder of the moose”), but Thoreau grudgingly acknowledges that moose are hunted by Indians out of necessity—for their meat, for their hides, as part of Indian custom and tradition.

In one of the great passages in “Chesuncook” Thoreau writes how the moose and the pine tree are linked in his mind. “A pine cut down, a dead pine, is no more a pine than a dead human carcass is a man.” He speaks of the “petty and accidental uses” of whales and elephants, turned into “buttons and flageolets.” He continues, “Every creature is better alive than

dead, men and moose and pine-trees, and he who understands it aright will rather preserve life than destroy it.”

The Indian is no more a friend of the pine than is the lumberjack; indeed, the only friend of the pine—and the moose, and the wilderness—is the poet. Change nothing, kill nothing, neither moose nor pine, he says in rolling hortatory sentences. This wonderfully humane argument ends with Thoreau extolling what he loves most, the pine tree—“the living spirit of the tree.” He ends with, “It is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still.”

When “Chesuncook” appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the editor, James Russell Lowell, cut that last sentence. The circumstances of this, and Thoreau’s reaction, are telling. Lowell had recently taken over as editor of the magazine. He had no great liking for Thoreau as a person—they had attended Harvard at the same time, but Lowell was something of a socialite and a dandy, and Thoreau was anything but. Lowell asked for a magazine piece. Thoreau submitted “Chesuncook.” The proofs were corrected and sent to Thoreau, who saw the sentence provisionally crossed out. Thoreau wrote “stet” in the margin. When the piece appeared, the sentence was gone. Thoreau suspected, perhaps rightly, that Lowell found it heathenish in its nature worship, excessively hyperbolic, a little too mystical and druidic, unworthy of inclusion in a magazine Lowell intended to be welcome in all households. Whatever, Thoreau said that cutting without his permission was “mean and cowardly.”

It is easy to see that the offending sentence sums up Thoreau’s view of the world. In omitting the sentence Lowell showed his disapproval of this view and thus rejected one of Thoreau’s core beliefs. Thoreau, who

distrusted authority of all sorts, came down hard upon him. His letter is a small masterpiece in defense of authorship. Among other things, he wrote to Lowell:

The editor has, in this case, no more right to omit a sentiment than to insert one, or put words into my mouth. I do not ask anybody to adopt my opinions, but I do expect that when they ask for them to print, they will print them, or obtain my consent to their alteration or omission. I should not read many books if I thought that they had been thus *expurgated*. I feel this treatment to be an insult, though not intended as such, for it is to presume that I can be hired to suppress my opinions.

After insisting that the sentence be printed in the next issue—it never was—Thoreau went on, “I am not willing to be associated in any way, unnecessarily, with parties who will confess themselves so bigoted & timid as this implies. I could excuse a man who was afraid of an uplifted fist, but if one habitually manifests fear at the utterance of a sincere thought, I must think that his life is a kind of nightmare continued into broad daylight.”

Thoreau had gone to Maine in search of such epiphanies as he described in the pine tree sentence. He had strongly, even erotically identified with trees, not just in his famous declaration, “All nature is my bride,” but in an owlish quip he committed to his journal in 1856: “There was a match found for me at last. I fell in love with a shrub oak.” In slashing the sentence Lowell was denying Thoreau the central thought of his argument, his love for the forest, and I think we should see in Thoreau’s reaction what he values in his book. That is a sentence, and a belief, Thoreau wants us to remember. It sums up the very spirit of the book.

This book’s spirit is youthful. One of Thoreau’s chief characteristics is his boyishness—even his

mother-love, his playful puns, and his staying close to home are aspects of this. So, I believe, are the many instances of simple happiness in his freedom in the Maine woods. And what are those enthusiastic yearnings to acquire Indian skills—learning to how to speak Abenaki, to make a canoe—except wishes to be a young student again? His eager talk of eating off birch-bark plates with forks whittled from alder twigs, sampling cedar tea, and gloating that he is eating his supper using a large log for a table all seem to me examples of Thoreau's taking such ostentatious pleasure in the primitive that he sounds like a gleeful Boy Scout.

"I began to be exhilarated by the sight of the wild fir and the spruce tops," he writes in "Chesuncook." "It was like the sight and odor of cake to a schoolboy." One of the portages in "The Allegash" becomes a frolic, Polis racing him—it is obvious that Thoreau approves when at last out of breath the Indian says, "O, me love to play sometimes." Thoreau went to the Maine woods with serious intentions, and he left us a valuable record of this time and place. But there is also no question but that the woods gave Thoreau the freedom to play and be youthful, for the pine tree and the moose and the Indian loomed over him, as they would a small boy.

His ambivalence is also part of his youthful outlook. When contemplating a solitary hunter, he makes a point of comparing his lot to that of someone living in "the rowdy world in the large cities," where people gather "like vermin." He extols life in the forest, yet he cannot imagine thriving there as the Indians do. The hunter's life is beyond him, and so is the life of "the solitary pioneer or settler . . . drawing his subsistence directly from nature." To the admirer of

Thoreau's resourcefulness one of the revelations of *The Maine Woods*, and it is something of a shock, is Thoreau's honest admission that he cannot live there, that this essentially sociable man needs the society of his own town, that he is happy once again to go home.

But this book is much more than a chance to become better acquainted with the obscure turbulence of Thoreau's inner conflict. The three trips build in their power to evoke a changing landscape. Because of settlers and missionaries and loggers, he saw that the Indian's way of life was changing beyond recognition; that cities were becoming nastier, that the forest was doomed unless we set some of it apart to be conserved, and he specified that the reserves be national parks. He was prescient in condemning the damming of rivers and streams; he foresaw the consequences, all the damage of flooding and loss of habitat. He was not alone in denouncing loggers but his denunciations are memorable: "The wilderness . . . feels 10000 vermin gnawing at the base of her noblest trees." Vermin again. In the same way, instead of prettifying his nights at Walden, he recorded the harsh sound of the first railway locomotives passing within earshot of his cabin. Writing retrospectively in *Walden*, he said, "But since I left those shores the woodchoppers have still further laid them waste. . . . How can you expect the birds to sing when the groves are cut down?"

The Maine Woods is one of the earliest and most detailed accounts of the process of change in the American hinterland. Thoreau showed us how to write about nature; how to know more; how to observe, even how to live. "Our life should be lived as tenderly and daintily as one would pluck a flower." Of course, Thoreau is capable of writing like an angel; but that felicity is not his only or even his greatest value. Because Thoreau was so faithful in recording what he

saw and heard, his writing suggested what the future had in store. In this book he illustrates the powerful lesson of the truthfulness of dogged observation: that when the truth is told, the text is prophetic.

—*Paul Theroux*
January, 2004