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REVIEW ESSAY

# Thoreau in the 21st Century

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## Abstract

Laura Dassow Walls's superb biography of Henry David Thoreau is the most important study of this author thus far in the twenty-first century. Beautifully written, and packed with rich detail and subtle interpretation, Walls's book teaches us much that is new about Thoreau and, furthermore, prompts us to think more deeply about and reassess this complex person and challenging writer—a writer whose range and mass of published and unpublished work, produced during his all too brief life (he died at age 44), is astounding. Thoreau is an inspiring radical voice for personal change and social reform, yet he is, at the same time, extremely self-centered and highly skeptical about the capacity of readers and audiences to bring about the transformations that he advocates.


**Keywords** Thoreau · Emerson · Walden · Civil disobedience · Concord · M. Gandhi · M. L. King · Transcendentalism · John Brown

Laura Dassow Walls. *Henry David Thoreau: A Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. 640 pages. $35.00. ISBN: 978–0226344690.

It is commonly said that Thoreau (the accent is on the first syllable) is more relevant than ever, but I am not sure that's true. In her brilliant new biography, Laura Dassow Walls asks the question, "Can his faith live on after nature, as least nature as he knew it, has ended?" (xvi). Acknowledging how gravely we are damaging the planet, Walls nonetheless replies: "I think it can and will," a forthright claim given authority by her unmatched familiarity with Thoreau's life and work. But the injunction that Walls then gives us is to me weak: "All humans need to do is to learn to work with instead of against the vital currents of life" (xvii). Thoreau would approve of this. But translating this thought into policy, action, social and political transformation—this is the hard, despair-inducing part, when high hopes and aspirations collide with obdurate reality.

In a world blitzed by social media and endangered by climate change, is Thoreau a figure who equips us for the present and future? Or, do we respond to him with a sense of nostalgia, as an endearing object of study but finally as an historical curiosity, the relic of a bygone pre-industrial era?

There is a major academic industry devoted to Thoreau, and many readers around the world do affirm that they find inspiration in his example and books, especially in his reverential scrutiny of nature and celebration of individual freedom. But the curious thing about Thoreau is that he is never writing for readers—he only seems to be; he is writing always to and for himself. It is mysterious that readers have heeded the call for reform from a writer who is exceedingly self-absorbed. Thoreau is not interested in conversing with his readers. It's not a dialogue. He is launching words at them. For him, what is primary is how he is feeling as he declares how right he is and how wrong you are.

In the "Solitude" chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau says: "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude" (135). Thoreau refers to readers, but the reader he is thinking about is himself—again, how his critiques, complaints, and portentous maxims resonate to and for him. Thoreau's tone and stance are direct, confrontational. His dominant mode is assertion, not persuasion. Often, I feel not that he is speaking to me as a fellow human being, but, rather, that I am a target at whom he is aiming his principles.

The body of writing that Thoreau produced during his 44-year life is astounding. But most of it was published in

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periodicals or in volumes prepared by others after his death in 1862. Only two of Thoreau's books were published in his lifetime, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) and *Walden* (1854). The second is the best known, highly acclaimed, familiar to many. "In the United States," *Walden* "remains the central canonical text in that ongoing project to define and reinforce the American character known as 'American literature'" (Fender, xxii).

Polls and surveys have shown that *Walden* is the most widely assigned American literature text in colleges and universities, ahead of books by Fitzgerald, Franklin, Morrison, and Twain. It has been a major influence on American essayists and natural science writers, including E. B. White, Loren Eiseley, Annie Dillard, John McPhee, Aldo Leopold, Edward Hoagland, and Wendell Berry (see Dillman, 21). Countless testimonials exist—I do not discount this fact– to the rejuvenating effect of *Walden* on the hearts and minds of readers. Thoreau, they report, taught them to perceive nature with new eyes: this text is for them a pathway to enlightenment, a form of sacred scripture.

It would be interesting, however, to know how many of these readers have traveled the full distance from first page to last. *Walden* is a tough book to get through, and even Thoreau's most devoted admirers have groused about it. Says one of them: "It often bores me when I'm near it, and enchants me all the rest of the time" (Shwartz, 63). Another appreciative reader, the critic and Amherst professor Theodore Baird, concludes: "He is an impossible egotist…. Thoreau speaks as the exception to every rule, the judge of all the rest of the universe, droning on and on, monotonously didactic, deliberately obscure, about friendship and chastity and the soul and things like that, all the while playing with words, seeing similarities in differences, differences in similarities, punning and turning out paradoxes" (96). In *The Senses of* Walden, a significant study of Thoreau as philosopher, Stanley Cavell concedes: "It cannot, I think, be denied that *Walden* sometimes seems an enormously long and boring book" (20).

As the biographer and scholar Walter Harding has noted, many of Thoreau's paragraphs in *Walden* occupy most or all of a page, and many of his sentences are very long too. He also uses rare and unusual words (e.g., integument, umbrageous, deliquium, aliment, fluviatile, periplus), copious literary allusions, and abundant rhetorical figures and devices (Thoreau, *Variorum*, 16–18). Open to a page at random, and you might find yourself thrilled and fortified. But from there, if you keep reading, moving forward into the thick, dense text, you are likely to find your attention starting to wander. *Walden* hence for many is a great book, but it is as much or more the invigorating idea for a book, one that readers cherish yet find laborious, if not impossible, as a sustained reading experience.

Thoreau emphasized that his intention was to wake up his neighbors. This is different from seeking to understand them. Thoreau's readers are an abstraction to him, not flesh and blood. It is impossible to imagine him as a novelist: he does not have the empathy, the curiosity about how and why other people think as they do that a good novelist requires. Thoreau is a bracing satirist, a consummate cynic, a gifted and proficient isolate, hermit-like even in the midst of his family, circle of friends, and neighbors.

This feature of Thoreau's literary personality is there from the beginning, and it became more pronounced—the annoyance, the exasperation–as his career unfolded. In, for example, a letter to his friend H. G. O. Blake, March 27, 1848, Thoreau remarks: "If you would convince a man that he does wrong, do right. But do not care to convince him. Men will believe what they see. Let them see" (*Familiar Letters*, 163). Thoreau held that the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation, and he certainly is intent on unsettling his readers; he hankers to shake them up, jostle and jar them out of their (to him) maddening complacency. But at the same time, Thoreau betrays—or, perhaps, proclaims–that this enterprise, this zealously prosecuted campaign for mind-conversion, is futile. Readers are too hard-headed: it is impossible to knock sense into them.

In a way, then, Thoreau's project is an ironic one: he does not believe that his writing will have much (if any) impact. To counter his own doubts, we could point to the essay "Civil Disobedience," a text testifying that Thoreau's impact has been formidable indeed. But my guess is that this essay's influence would have surprised him. The thrust of the essay is not communal, cooperative, or collaborative. It is one man taking a stand. What matters to him is the condition of his own conscience. What you and I do—this is our own affair, and Thoreau is not concerned with whether we, as opposed to him, think the right way and do the right thing or not.

Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King valued "Civil Disobedience," and the essay has a moral drive and prophetic fire that braced and toughened these men for their radical activities. But group protests, large-scale ongoing demonstrations, many people banding together in wholehearted commitment to demanding change and sacrificing their personal desires for the whole, for the greater good: this is what Gandhi and King espoused and did. Thoreau focuses on his own conscience, his freedom, his needs and choices. It is hard to picture him marching with King from town to town in the 1950s and 1960s segregated South.

In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers,* Thoreau says: "I have never known advice to be of use but in trivial and transient matters" (300). "It is impossible for me to be interested in what interests men generally," records Thoreau in his *Journal*, April 24, 1852. "Their pursuits & interests seem to me frivolous. When I am most myself and see the clearest men are least to be seen" (III: 461). "I have lived some thirty years on this planet," he writes in *Walden*, "and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me anything to the purpose" (9).

In a *Journal* entry, December 27, 1858, Thoreau says: "I doubt whether one can give or receive any very pertinent

advice…. They, methinks, are poor stuff and creatures of a miserable fate who can be advised and persuaded in very important steps" (XI: 379). Two years later, February 13, 1860, again in his *Journal*, he says: "Always you have to contend with the stupidity of men. It is like a stiff soil, a hard-pan. If you go deeper than usual, you are sure to meet with a pan made harder even by the superficial cultivation. The stupid you have always with you" (XIII: 145).

In late 1856, as Walls points out, Thoreau, along with Amos Bronson Alcott, visited Walt Whitman in Brooklyn. Whitman recalled: "Thoreau's great fault was disdain—disdain for men (for Tom, Dick, and Harry): inability to appreciate the average life—even the exceptional life: it seemed to me a want of imagination. He couldn't put his life into any other life—realize why one man was so and another man was not so: was impatient with other people on the street and so forth" (Traubel, 212–213). Julian Hawthorne, the novelist's son and a writer and journalist in his own right, made a similar observation: "Personally, he was odd, in all senses of the term. He was bilious in constitution and in temper, with a disposition somewhat prone to suspicion and jealousy, and defiant, rather than truly independent, in spirit…. The art of pleasing was not innate in him, and he was too proud to cultivate it. Rather than have it appear that society could do without him, he resolved to make haste and banish society" (*Literature*, 148).

Personal relationships, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers and their children, co-workers in jobs and businesses, people struggling with the real, urgent responsibilities of making their livings: all of this is absent from Thoreau's work, so conspicuously absent that sometimes it seems to me that his rapt absorption in nature functions to deflect him from dimensions of human experience that he does not understand or know how to talk about.

The case, or the problem, of Thoreau has become all the more intriguing recently, triggered by many books, essays, and articles in newspapers and magazines keyed to the 200th anniversary, in 2017, of his birth. What is noteworthy to me about this work is that Thoreau's life has come to seem to many scholars and readers to be more compelling, more stimulating, than his writing.

To say this, is one way to honor Walls's achievement in her magnificent biography. It is an impressive piece of scholarly work, beautifully written, a very accomplished demonstration of the art of biography. Walls possesses a deep expertise about Thoreau's life and writing, and is intimately knowledgeable about the multiple contexts relevant to reading and studying him—social history, geography, science, literature, Native American history, and much more.

The town of Concord; Thoreau's ancestors and family members; his education at Concord Academy and Harvard; his friendships with Emerson, William Ellery Channing, Alcott, Hawthorne; his experiences as a school teacher and surveyor; his connection to the anti-slavery movement; his development as a writer—all of this, and more, Walls shapes and structures in a richly detailed narrative. The essential books on Thoreau published in the twentieth-century were Walter Harding's *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (1965; $2^{nd}$ ed., 1982) and Robert D. Richardson Jr.'s *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (1986). The essential book of the twenty-first century is the biography that Walls has written.

As Walls adroitly shows, Thoreau's life, while marked by dramatic periods and incidents, was largely uneventful and circumscribed. He was born on his maternal grandmother's farm, on Virginia Road, in Concord, Massachusetts, a town proud of its seminal role in the American revolution, on July 12, 1817, the third child of John and Cynthia (Dunbar) Thoreau. On October 12th, he was christened David Henry Thoreau, named after an uncle who had died in Concord in July. Not until the mid-1830s did he identify himself (we are not sure why) as Henry David Thoreau. In Concord, population about two thousand, John Thoreau enjoyed success as a manufacturer of pencils, setting up his small factory in an ell of the family home.[1]

John's wife Cynthia was known for her firm opinions, sharp personality, and blunt tone. Active in the anti-slavery cause well before it gained wide support, she was a member of the Concord Women's Anti-Slavery Society (formed in 1837) that was aligned with the radical Boston abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Several aunts, also staunch foes of slavery, lived with the Thoreaus, and Mrs. Thoreau took in boarders to supplement the family's income.

Thoreau attended public grammar school in Concord and then in 1828 along with his brother John, Concord Academy, a private secondary school founded in 1822. Thoreau entered Harvard College in September 1833. Between terms in 1835–1836, he taught school in Canton, Massachusetts, and in January–February 1836, he boarded with the Unitarian minister Orestes Brownson (1803–1876), a trenchant social critic and author. At Harvard, Thoreau did moderately well, ranking nineteenth (roughly in the middle) in the class that graduated in 1837.

In the spring term of his senior year, Thoreau avidly read Ralph Waldo Emerson's book *Nature* (1836). Equally important was Emerson's Phi Beta Kappa Society address "The American Scholar," August 31, 1837, delivered in the First Parish Church in Cambridge to the students in Thoreau's Harvard class. The scholar, Emerson explains, is "*Man Thinking*. In the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking" (*Essays and Lectures*, 54).

Thoreau and Emerson, who was fourteen years older, met sometime in the late summer or early fall of 1837 and soon became fast friends. In his *Journal*, February 11, 1838, Emerson wrote: "I delight much in my young friend, who

[1] Some of the paragraphs that follow I have adapted and revised from my Introduction to *The Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

seems to have as free & erect a mind as any I have ever met" (180). Emerson was for Thoreau a teacher, an intellectual and spiritual adviser, and perhaps something of a father and an older brother as well.

Walls states that "Thoreau's creativity was realized not alone but in partnership, as Emerson fanned his creativity into genius" (87). In late April 1841, Thoreau became a member of the Emerson household as a handyman, gardener, and caretaker of and tutor to the Emerson children. It was here, for two years, that Thoreau "consolidated his sense of himself as above all a writer—not a dilettante who published occasionally, but a true and focused professional patterned after Emerson's own model, which Thoreau now witnessed daily" (122).

Thoreau was a relentless reader. He treasured the Greek and Roman classics (Homer and Virgil in particular); English poetry from Chaucer, Donne, Herbert, and Milton to Coleridge and Wordsworth; seventeenth-century prose writers (e.g., Thomas Browne); treatises on religion and philosophy; the sacred writings of the Hindus; colonial and local histories and books and pamphlets on the North American Indian tribes; and books about exploration and travel; and natural history studies and guidebooks.

After graduating from Harvard, Thoreau briefly taught public school in Concord, resigning after just two weeks on the job. He helped out in his father's pencil-making business, and then tried unsuccessfully to find a position as a schoolteacher in Maine. In June 1838, he opened a small private school in the Thoreau home, but shortly thereafter he took over Concord Academy, where his brother John joined him as a fellow-teacher in 1839.

Thoreau never married; neither did his brother nor his two sisters, all of whom lived in the family home. "There are strong indications that Thoreau was homo-erotically inclined," says Walter Harding, but he adds that "no evidence has been found that he was actively homosexual" ("Thoreau," 600). "In his acute, unspeakable awareness of difference from those around him," Walls says fervently, Thoreau "crafted a self of fluid but carefully guarded sensuality and intense, thwarted romantic energies, and he poured those energies, with ever-increasing passion, into his devotional life as an artist and prophet" (241).

The year 1839 was also notable for a two-week trip that Henry and John took together, August 31 to September 13, travelling along the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, an experience that Thoreau made the basis for his first book, published a decade later (see Thorson). Thoreau later travelled to Cape Cod in Massachusetts, Maine, New York City, Minnesota, Quebec, and elsewhere, but mostly he lived and worked in Concord, "enlarging the town in his imagination until it became a microcosm holding within its borders the phenomena of the world" (R. Adams and Canby, 491).

In April 1841, because of his brother's lingering illness from the effects of tuberculosis, Thoreau closed Concord Academy, and, at the end of the month he accepted Emerson's offer of room and board at the Emerson home.

The Thoreau and Emerson families were stricken by tragedy in January 1842. On January 1, John Thoreau cut himself while shaving; the wound became infected; lockjaw set in; and he died on the afternoon of the 12th in his brother's arms. On January 24, five-year-old Waldo Emerson came down with scarlet fever, and his death on the 27th grievously pained the Emersons and Thoreau, who knew the boy well.

Emerson and Thoreau also worked together on the Transcendentalists' periodical, *The Dial*, which began publication in July 1840, with Margaret Fuller serving as general editor. During 1842–43, Thoreau assisted Emerson when Emerson replaced Fuller, and he edited the April 1843 issue himself. *The Dial* came to an end in April 1844 but it had been a good outlet for Thoreau, publishing his poems, essays, and translations.

In the first week of May 1843, Thoreau moved to Staten Island, New York, to tutor the eldest son, age seven, of Emerson's brother William. In December, he returned to Concord, and, in March 1845, he began building a cabin near Walden Pond.

Named after a town, "Saffron Walden," forty miles from London, Walden Pond is, in Thoreau's words, "a clear and deep green well, half a mile long and a mile and three quarters in circumference, and contains about sixty-one and a half acres; a perennial spring in the midst of pine and oak woods, without any visible inlet or outlet except by the clouds and evaporation" (*Walden*, 175). Thoreau's site was about a mile and a half south of town, on land that Emerson had purchased in September 1844.

The sub-title of the book that Thoreau later wrote about his experiences is "Life in the Woods," and we tend to associate him with forests near a pond and paths between tall trees. But the woods where Thoreau resided were one of the few forest areas remaining in the Concord environs. As Richard Higgins has noted in his informative book *Thoreau and the Language of Trees*, "Thoreau's lifetime overlapped with the apex of deforestation in New England. By 1850, save for wetlands in accessible woods, or land not fit to farm, Concord was largely shorn of its trees" (6; see also Brooks, Foster; Schofield and Baron). Thoreau thus was fortunate in being able to find and settle on a woodland.

Thoreau bought a hut from an Irishman, which he took apart and then reassembled, fifteen feet long, ten feet wide, situated to allow the morning sun to shine into his doorway. He moved into his cabin, his very small "house" (a word he uses 100 times) on the Fourth of July–a fitting date for his declaration of independence, though he says it was simply "by accident" (84).

Thoreau took with him only one book—the *Iliad* (Dann, 40). The cabin contained three chairs, a table, a desk, a small mirror, and a few other items, and it was not until the fall that Thoreau constructed the fireplace and chimney. In May and June, before moving in, he cleared two and a half acres of land

and planted beans, corn, and potatoes, so that these crops would be growing when he arrived.

The dwelling that Thoreau built was simple and sturdy because he wanted it that way: it was the right choice for the nature of the new life he had in mind. "My greatest skill," he noted in his *Journal*, "has been to want but little" (July 19, 1851; II: 219).

Thoreau was attentive to the woods and the pond, but he was aware as well of the incursion into the landscape made by the railroad. For him, it was a sign of the technological transformation of America, and in *Walden* he describes the construction of the track from Boston to Fitchburg along the pond's western shore. The power of the locomotive impressed him, but he hated its effects on the land and its role in promoting commerce and undermining personal freedom.

It is the quest for this freedom, for wisdom, for quiet reflection and self-understanding, that Thoreau recounts in *Walden* as he tells of the days he spent by the pond in 1845–47. But while Thoreau resided at Walden, he was more than anything else hard at work on his writing. Thoreau did not intend to spend the rest of his life at Walden. What he desired, was making sure he found ample private time for his literary work.

Thoreau was obsessed by core questions: "What to be? What to do? How to make a living and at the same time live?" (Sullivan, 58). But he was seeking less to live out the answers to these questions than to concentrate on writing about them. The critic Geoffrey O'Brien has said: "In contrast to the unsought and painful isolation of Poe or Melville, Thoreau's solitude was wrested with considerable difficulty from a life overflowing with human relationships. For nearly a decade before the move to Walden Pond he had been at the center of the most intense intellectual environment in America, and it seems to have been from the very intensity of that endless give-and-take that he needed to distance himself, if only symbolically."

Aided by *Journal* volumes he brought along, Thoreau turned first to writing a manuscript about the river trip that he and John Thoreau had taken in 1839. This became *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, published a decade later, with the invocation "be thou my Muse, my Brother." He also composed an acute essay on Thomas Carlyle; it was the basis for a lecture he presented at the Concord Lyceum on February 4, 1846, and it appeared in two parts in the March and April 1847 issues of *Graham's Magazine*, which had a circulation of 50,000. Thoreau also wrote 100 pages on his experiences in the Maine woods, which he turned into a series of articles, July through November 1848, for the *Union Magazine of Literature and Art*.

Thoreau was underway on two lectures about his Walden experiment almost as soon as he began it, probably in response to questions from friends and neighbors. By early 1847, Thoreau was making excellent progress on his *Walden* manuscript; he drew from it for a lecture, February 10, 1847, again at the Concord Lyceum, titled "The History of Myself." In September 1847, the first draft of the *Walden* manuscript was finished.

As Walls explains in detail, Thoreau at Walden was in the midst of a number of writing projects. At one juncture, he was working simultaneously on the first draft of *Walden*, the second draft of *A Week*, and the draft of his trip to Maine (S. Adams and Ross, *Mythologies*, 2). He wrote regularly in his *Journal* as well.

Thoreau resided at Walden for twenty-six months, but his life was not a solitary one. He had many visitors. He also took frequent breaks and walked into town. Often, he took his meals back home with family members or with the Emersons; he even dropped off his laundry for his mother and sisters to take care of. As Walls explains, Thoreau was not so much alone as he was more prominently visible than he had ever been. "Walden Pond was hardly wilderness," but was in fact "a familiar part of Concord's daily life," and by choosing to build a cabin there, Thoreau "became a spectacle," the creator of "an iconic work of performance art" (192–194).

Thoreau also spent a night in jail, the result of his arrest in July 1846 for failing to pay his poll tax, a tax that Thoreau argued meant giving support to the Mexican war. He refused to pay his tax, and thought no more about it. But then one day in late July, on a trip into Concord to have a shoe repaired, Thoreau was stopped by the town constable Sam Staples, who told him that he needed to pay the tax, several years of which were due.

When Thoreau balked, Staples offered to loan him the money. When Thoreau said *no* to that too, the constable led him to jail, and he was placed in a cell. Someone, probably Thoreau's Aunt Maria, paid the tax as soon as the family learned what had happened. Thoreau should have been released, but Staples by then was at home and did not want to go back to the jail. Thoreau had to wait until the next day to regain his freedom.

Thoreau departed from Walden in early September 1847—Emerson's wife Lidian asked him to stay with her and the children while Emerson travelled abroad on a lecture tour. For the next ten months, he was once again a member of the Emerson household and he composed and revised lectures and texts. On January 26, 1848, he spoke at the Concord Lyceum on "the relation of the individual to the State," which with the title "Resistance to Civil Government" was published in 1849 in the volume *Aesthetic Papers*, edited by Elizabeth Peabody, an educator, reformer, and Hawthorne's sister-in-law. This was yet another piece that Thoreau had drafted at Walden. When it was reprinted after Thoreau's death, it was given the title "Civil Disobedience."

Thoreau revised the manuscript of *A Week* extensively and started on a second draft of *Walden*. He continued with his *Journal*, and began taking notes on the cultures and traditions

of the American Indians that by 1861 totaled 3000 pages of quotations and comments; there are eleven "Indian" notebooks, totaling nearly half a million words.

*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* was published in May 1849, by James Munroe and Company of Boston, but at Thoreau's own expense. The reviews were disappointing, and the book sold poorly. It was "a commercial disaster, one of the worst-selling books by an eventually-canonized author in American literary history" (Scharnhorst, *Case Study*, 8). Most of the 1000 copies printed went unsold, with the result that Thoreau accrued a debt to the publisher of 290 dollars that took him many months to pay. The unsold copies were returned to Thoreau four years later; "I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes," he wrote in his *Journal*, October 27, 1853, "over seven hundred of which I wrote myself" (V: 459).

From 1850 forward, Thoreau's most reliable source of income came not from books or lectures, but from surveying. Thoreau, says Walls, "took pride in his high standards, his resourcefulness, his ability to hack through swamps and briars in all weather, and his precise and accurate drawings, always finished with a flourish" (287). He was devoted to science and engineering; he was a persistent, painstaking observer of his immediate environment. Thoreau supplemented and enriched this on-the-ground inquiry with a contemplative perusal of many books on travel and exploration (he read 200+ travel narratives), geography, and geology that took him to the farthest reaches of the globe, indeed of the cosmos (see Christie).

The most important literary event of the 1850s for Thoreau was *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. Thoreau had finished a draft of the book while he was living at Walden, and a note included in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* indicated that *Walden* would be published "soon." But the poor sales of *A Week* made the publisher unwilling to proceed with the second book. If *A Week* had been successful, *Walden* would have been shorter, less developed, not as polished.

Thoreau worked on *Walden* from 1846 to 1849, with an intense period from the middle of 1848 through 1849 when he produced most of the pages that went into the first seven chapters. At some point, he inserted at the top of the first page of the first version: "Walden or Life in / the Woods by Henry Thoreau / Addressed to my Townsmen."

He mostly set the manuscript aside from late 1849 to late 1851/early 1852, though he did weave into it passages from Hindu and Chinese texts. In the first months of 1852 and thereafter, Thoreau added the material that became chapters eight through eighteen. This is when he included such famous passages as the description of the owl, the battle of the ants, the fishermen on the ice, and the thawing of the sand banks and the melting of the pond. This was a book that Thoreau pieced together, assembled and built up over the span of the first draft and six revisions during seven years of work. It was published by Ticknor and Fields in Boston in August 1854; 2000 copies, with Thoreau to receive a royalty of 15% on the 1 dollar per copy price.

For this reason, some scholars have said that *Walden* should be read not page by page but in columns, corresponding to the draft stages of the manuscript—an experience now made possible for readers on the Internet, *Walden: A Fluid-Text Edition* (Thoreau, *Digital*). The best-known sentence in *Walden*, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (8), first appears in a draft of *A Week*; after being cut from that text, and after much reworking of context, Thoreau placed it in *Walden*. He made additional changes in the page proofs and continued making them even in the published book. As Lawrence Buell has said, we thus "should think of *Walden* both as product and as process," a work that took many years "of accumulated experience and revision to complete" (*Imagination* 118). More than a few readers contend that passages that Thoreau cut altogether—amounting to many thousands of words—are just as rewarding as the final text.

About a month before *Walden*, Thoreau presented an address, "Slavery in Massachusetts," at an anti-slavery meeting on July 4, 1854, in Framingham, Massachusetts. But while Thoreau remained an abolitionist and assisted runaway slaves, he did not enter the public movement with the intensity of a William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, or Frederick Douglass. His instinct was always to return to his "private affairs"; while he hated slavery, he defined himself as a writer and was determined to stay faithful to this vocation.

Thoreau's main tie to anti-slavery during the 1850s was through the militant abolitionist John Brown, who was captured, tried, and executed for leading an assault on October 16, 1859 with twenty followers on the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. In one potent sentence after another in *Journal* entries and in speeches after the raid, Thoreau honored Brown as a moral champion who gave his life for his principles. Above all in "A Plea for Captain John Brown," presented in Concord, October 30, and then again in Boston, November 1, and in Worcester, November 3, Thoreau extolled Brown's greatness as a transcendentalist champion, exerting himself to make his literary resources measure up to the majesty of this heroic figure.

During the 1850s and early 1860s, Thoreau enjoyed visits with old and new friends, including Daniel Ricketson, a Quaker poet and historian from New Bedford, and F. B. Sanborn, an educator, reformer, and abolitionist. Thomas Cholmondeley, an English author and traveler, shipped to Thoreau from England a present of 44 volumes of East Asian and South Asian religious, historical, and philosophical texts, "an entire library" that Thoreau treasured, and, says Walls, that was "probably the best of its kind in America at that moment" (382). Thoreau also took trips to Maine in September 1853 and to Cape Cod in 1855, and to New York and New Jersey in 1856.

There were trips to Cape Cod again and Maine in 1857, the White Mountains of Vermont and New Hampshire in 1858, and Minnesota in 1861. Thoreau savored nature walks, undertook forays in further quest of Native American relics and materials and made scientific studies and collected botanical specimens. Early in 1860, for example, he scrupulously read Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and copied parts of it into a notebook, "making Thoreau," Walls points out, "one of the very first Americans" to read this epoch-making book "from cover to cover" (459).

In December 1860, Thoreau caught a severe cold while conducting a nature experiment near Concord. It turned into bronchitis, and then tuberculosis. His western trip to Minnesota, which lasted two months, was an effort to find a climate with dry, crisp air that might improve his health. But Thoreau's condition grew worse, and he died in Concord on May 6, 1862. The clerk in Concord town hall recorded: "Henry D. Thoreau. 44 years, 9 months, 24 days. Natural Historian."

On May 9, mid-afternoon, Thoreau's body lay in state in the First Parish Church, "covered," Walls tells us, "in wild flowers and forest boughs" (499). With many townspeople and schoolchildren in attendance, Emerson gave a vivid eulogy ("Thoreau"). Friends then carried the coffin to the New Burying Ground Cemetery, where Thoreau was interred between his father and brother. In the early 1870s, the graves of the Thoreau family were moved to what became the "Authors' Ridge" in the nearby Sleepy Hollow Cemetery where Emerson, Channing, the Alcotts, and Hawthorne were buried (R. Adams).

With the aid of his sister Sophia, Thoreau had worked on his manuscripts and papers until the day of his death. A series of his Nature articles, "Walking," "Autumnal Tints," and "Wild Apples," appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1862, and a distilled statement of his beliefs, "Life Without Principle" (the title punned on the economic term "principal"), came out in the same magazine in 1863, followed by other pieces in the 1860s and 1870s.

*Excursions*, a set of natural history essays, edited by Sophia and Emerson, was published in 1863; *The Maine Woods*, edited by Sophia and William Ellery Channing, in 1864; *Cape Cod*, also edited by Sophia and Channing, in 1865—between 1849 and 1857, Thoreau had walked the length of Cape Cod four times; *Letters to Various Persons*, edited by Emerson, in 1865; and, in 1866, *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers*, edited by Sophia and Channing.

Thoreau also was a poet. His *Collected Poems*, edited by Carl Bode and published in 1943, and then in a new edition in 2010, is 400 pages. Other manuscripts have been published in book form: *Faith in a Seed* (1993) and *Wild Fruits* (2000), both of them transcribed and edited by Bradley P. Dean. The first evolved from a lecture, "The Succession of Forest Trees," which Thoreau presented in September 1860 at the annual meeting of the Middlesex County Agricultural Society; and the second develops ideas and themes that Thoreau laid out in "Wild Apples," a lecture, February 1860, at the Bedford Lyceum.

A revised edition of *A Week*–yet another of Thoreau's projects in 1862–was published in 1868. More importantly, excerpts from the *Journal*, edited by H. G. O. Blake, were published in the 1880s: *Early Spring in Massachusetts*, *Summer*, *Autumn*, and *Winter*. The Boston publisher Houghton Mifflin issued its "Riverside" edition of Thoreau's writings, eleven volumes, in 1894, and in 1906, the "Manuscript" or "Walden" edition, twenty volumes, which included fourteen volumes of the *Journals*. This publication of the *Journal* made Thoreau "the first American person of letters to have his diary published in full" (Buell, "Thoreau Enters," 26).

The *Journal* will never replace *Walden* and "Civil Disobedience" in cultural and literary significance, but it is an amazing compilation of insights, ideas, and observations. For me, it is the place where Thoreau is at his most alert and alive, the most interesting and complex. What a life-long feat of literary labor this was! As he grew older, Thoreau became even more rigorous and compulsive about it. For the final eight years of his life, the *Journal* fills sixteen notebooks, 4000 pages. It is an extraordinary achievement, an act of literary production that very few American authors have rivalled.

The *Journal*, says Walls, was Thoreau's "monumental life's work, an epic journey of over two million words, sustained as long as he could hold a pen" (87). It is his true masterpiece, as Sharon Cameron has argued in her incisive *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journal*. In a paradoxical sense, the private writing in the *Journal* presents Thoreau at his most engaging. There is no reader to get in the way. The obstruction that for Thoreau was the reader is not a concern. It is irrelevant, which curiously opens him to us, makes him fully human, as he is not elsewhere.

Walls maintains that writing was "the central hub of Thoreau's whole being" (190). Yet Thoreau was ambivalent about writing—about its value. He had to do it, but what did it amount to, how much did it matter? One of the most revealing moments in all of Thoreau comes toward the end of "Slavery in Massachusetts": "I walked toward one of our ponds, but what signifies the beauty of nature when men are base?" Walls cites this question and observes, "this crisis realized his deepest fear, and his words expressed his deepest betrayal. They indict not merely his walks to Walden Pond, but his entire career as an artist, including *Walden* itself—the culminating work of his life" (347). Thoreau loves and loathes being in the world. Every moment he spends in nature uplifts and captivates him, and every moment he spends thinking about other people, and their bad habits and values, burdens and oppresses him.

This judgment may seem contrarian, perverse. But I admit to finding Thoreau—not in the *Journal*, but in *Walden* and in most of the political and natural history essays—in a discordant relationship with his audience, and, furthermore, to be too polished and refined in his style. In his organization of language, this lover of nature is highly artificial—which may explain why Hemingway disliked Thoreau's writing, judging it "too literary." Meticulous and dedicated, Thoreau gave care and consideration to every page of his prose. But the result of his labor was that it tended to become mannered, over-written.

Thoreau is such a strange figure, passionately devoted to writing, seeking publication, but frustrated by the fact that being a writer means having readers and thinking about them. Thoreau neither likes nor respects us: we drive him to the brink of despair. He calls on us to remake and renew our lives yet he communicates from the outset that we are intransigent, impervious to change.

Some do change, spurred on by Thoreau—this cannot be denied. But, in general, his view is that we lack the courage not of our own but of his convictions. In sentences crafted to perfection, Thoreau describes how and why we will never do what he thinks we should.

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