
Walden
and
Civil Disobedience

Henry David Thoreau

*With an Introduction and Notes by
Jonathan Levin*

George Stade
Consulting Editorial Director



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From the Pages of Walden and “Civil Disobedience”

As if you could kill time without injuring eternity. (from *Walden*, page 11)

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. (from *Walden*, page 11)

It is never too late to give up our prejudices. (from *Walden*, page 11)

Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hinderances to the elevation of mankind. (from *Walden*, pages 15—16)

My purpose in going to Walden Pond was not to live cheaply nor to live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles; to be hindered from accomplishing which for want of a little common sense, a little enterprise and business talent, appeared not so sad as foolish. (from *Walden*, page 19)

Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes. (from *Walden*, page 21)

Men have become the tools of their tools. (from *Walden*, page 33)

I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up. (from *Walden*, page 69)

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. (from *Walden*, page 74)

Every path but your own is the path of fate. Keep on your own track, then. (from *Walden*, page 95)

I was seized and put into jail, because, as I have elsewhere related, I did not pay a tax to, or recognize the authority of, the state which buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle at the door of its senate-house. I had gone down to the woods for other purposes. But, wherever a man goes, men will

pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they can, constrain him to belong to the desperate odd-fellow society. It is true, I might have resisted forcibly with more or less effect, might have run "amok" against society; but I preferred that society should run "amok" against me, it being the desperate party. (from *Walden*, page 137)

The universe is wider than our views of it. (from *Walden*, page 250)

In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them. (from *Walden*, page 253)

Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. (from *Walden*, page 258)

Law never made men a whit more just. (from "Civil Disobedience," page 266)

Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in government? Is it not possible to take a step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man? (from "Civil Disobedience," page 286)

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Henry David Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau was born on July 12, 1817, in Concord, Massachusetts, the third of four children. His family lived on a modest, sometimes meager, income; his father, John, worked by turns as a farmer, schoolteacher, grocer, and pencil-maker; his mother, Cynthia, was a teacher and would take in boarders when money was scarce. Young Henry's gifts manifested themselves early. He wrote his first piece, "The Seasons," at age ten, and memorized portions of Shakespeare, the Bible, and Samuel Johnson while studying at the Center School and Concord Academy. In addition to his academic pursuits, Henry rambled through the countryside on exploratory walks and attended lectures at the Concord Lyceum, where as an adult he would fascinate audiences with his discourses on life at Walden Pond.

Thoreau began his studies at Harvard College in 1833. His years at Harvard were stimulating, but solitary; he immersed himself in a traditional humanities curriculum of multiple languages, anatomy, history, and geography. Upon graduation in 1837, he began teaching in Concord at the Center School, the public school he'd attended as a boy, but left his post after being told to administer corporal punishment to a student. During these years following college Thoreau published his first essay and poem, began lecturing at the Concord Lyceum, and attended Transcendentalist discussions at the home of his mentor, the renowned essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson. At Emerson's urging, Thoreau started a journal—a project that would become his lifelong passion and culminate in more than two million words.

A boat trip with his brother, John, in 1839 set the foundation for his well-known work *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Sadly, unforeseen tragedy separated the tightly knit brothers in 1842 when John died of lockjaw caused by a razor cut. The following year, Thoreau joined Emerson in editing the Transcendental periodical *The Dial*, a publication to which Thoreau would become a prolific contributor. He also pulled up stakes for a time, accepting a position to tutor Emerson's children in Staten Island, New York. Half a year later, Thoreau returned to his family's house in Concord, deeply affected by the abolitionists he had met in Manhattan. He dedicated much of his time to lectures and essays advocating abolition and became involved in sheltering runaway slaves on the journey north.

In 1846 Thoreau was briefly imprisoned for refusing to pay a poll tax to the village of Concord, in protest against the government's support of slavery, as well as its war of expansion with Mexico. His experience in the Concord jail led to the writing of what would later be titled "Civil Disobedience." Unappreciated in Thoreau's lifetime, "Civil Disobedience" is now considered one of the country's seminal political works. During this period, Thoreau built his cabin on Walden Pond and lived there for a little more than two years. In this small home on Emerson's property, he began writing his most enduring work, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, and finished the manuscript for *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. When *Walden* was published in 1854, sales were brisk and its reception favorable, although Thoreau's work as a whole remained somewhat obscure during his lifetime.

As the years passed, Thoreau's commitment to the antislavery movement strengthened, as did his popularity as a lecturer and essayist. Even in the declining health of his later years, he remained a man of conviction and action, writing on many subjects and participating in various political causes until shortly before his death from tuberculosis. George Eliot's review of *Walden* singles out qualities that

attract readers to this day: “a deep poetic sensibility” and “a refined as well as a hardy mind:” Henry David Thoreau died on May 6, 1862, in Concord.

The World of Henry David Thoreau, Walden, and "Civil Disobedience"

1817 Henry David (christened David Henry) Thoreau is born on July 12, in Concord, Massachusetts, to John and Cynthia Thoreau; he is the third of four children.

1818 Henry's family moves to nearby Chelmsford; his father opens a grocery store, which does not prove profitable.

1819 Walt Whitman is born on May 31.

1821 Financial straits force Henry's family to move again, this time to Boston, where his father takes a job as a schoolteacher.

1823 The Thoreau family returns to Concord, where Henry's father takes over the family pencil-making business. Henry enters the Concord Center School. Continued financial strain forces his mother to take in boarders.

1827 Henry writes his earliest known essay, "The Seasons." John James Audubon's *The Birds of America* is published.

1828 Henry and his brother, John, attend Concord Academy, where they study the classics, geography, science, and history. Noah Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language* is published.

1829 Henry first attends talks at the Concord Lyceum, where he will frequently speak as an adult.

1833 Thoreau enters Harvard University, the only child in his family to attend college; he spends many solitary hours studying the classics, numerous languages, history, and the sciences. The Abolition Act of 1833 outlaws slavery in the British Empire.

1835 During a semester's leave of absence from Harvard to teach school in Canton, Massachusetts, Thoreau lives in the home of the Unitarian minister Orestes Brownson, who instructs him in German.

1837 Thoreau graduates from Harvard. He begins teaching at the Concord Center School, but resigns after being told to administer corporal punishment to a student. He begins attending Transcendentalist meetings at Ralph Waldo Emerson's house. At Emerson's urging he starts a journal, which becomes a lifelong project.

1838 Thoreau travels to Maine in search of a teaching job but soon returns to Concord; he and his brother, John, open a private school at the Concord Academy, which they operate until 1841. They find a devoted pupil in the young Louisa May Alcott. Thoreau gives the first of many speeches at the Concord Lyceum.

Thoreau and John take a two-week trip on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, in a homemade boat; the journey inspires Thoreau's later well-known work *A Week on the*

1839 *Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" is published.

1840 Ralph Waldo Emerson founds the Transcendentalist periodical *The Dial*, which serves as the forum for Thoreau's first published essay and poem. Ellen Sewall rejects the marriage proposals of both Thoreau brothers.

1841 Thoreau moves into Emerson's home, where he works for two years as a groundskeeper and repairman and reads widely from Emerson's library. He comes up with the idea of living in a cabin on nearby Flint's Pond. The first series of Emerson's *Essays* is published.

1842 Thoreau's brother, John, dies from lockjaw. Shortly after John's death, Thoreau meets Nathaniel Hawthorne. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Poems on Slavery* is published.

1843 Thoreau contributes to several publications and coedits *The Dial* with Emerson. He moves for half a year to Staten Island, where he tutors Emerson's children. In New York he meets and associates with abolitionists and reformers.

1844 Upon his return to Concord, Thoreau becomes more active in the abolition movement, writing essays and speaking out against slavery. The second series of Emerson's *Essays* is published. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Poems* is published. Thoreau accidentally sets fire to the Concord Woods.

1845 In a small space on Emerson's property, Thoreau builds his Walden Pond cabin, where he will live for the next two years. At Walden Pond, he writes *A Week on the Merrimack and Concord Rivers* and his first version of *Walden*. Poe's *The Raven and Other Poems* is published.

1846 Thoreau makes another trip to Maine, where he climbs Mount Katahdin. In July he is jailed for refusing to pay a poll tax, in protest against the government's support of slavery and the Mexican War. After a night in jail, he is released when someone (presumably a family member) pays the tax. The experience inspires the work that later will be titled "Civil Disobedience."

1847 Thoreau moves out of the Walden cabin and into Emerson's home. He gives a speech at the Concord Lyceum titled "A History of Myself."

1848 He moves back into his family home. He delivers "The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government" at the Concord Lyceum; the speech, hardly noticed in Thoreau's lifetime, later will be published as the highly influential "Civil Disobedience."

1849 *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* is published to lackluster reviews. "Resistance to Civil Government," the original published title of "Civil Disobedience," appears. Thoreau visits Cape Cod for the first time.

1850 Thoreau travels to Cape Cod and Canada. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is published. The Fugitive Slave Act (part of the Compromise of 1850) is passed, stating that north- erners must return escaped slaves to their owners.

- 1851 ~~Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is published.~~
- 1854 After five years of trying, Thoreau finds a publisher for *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. The book is warmly received by critics, including George Eliot, who praises it in *Westminster Review* (January 1856).
- 1855 Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is published. Thoreau makes another trip to Cape Cod.
- 1856 Thoreau meets Whitman.
- 1857 Thoreau meets the activist and abolitionist John Brown. He travels to Maine and Cape Cod.
- 1859 Thoreau's father dies. On October 16 John Brown makes his doomed raid to liberate slaves at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia); he is caught, tried, and hanged for treason. Thoreau speaks on behalf of Brown before, during, and after his execution. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* is published.
- 1860 In December Thoreau contracts bronchitis that, compounded by tuberculosis, leaves him seriously ill. Abraham Lincoln is elected president.
- 1861 In hopes of improving his health, Thoreau travels to Minnesota, where he meets Native Americans and collects various specimens of plants. He returns home and makes preparations for his death, including the establishment of an estate for his mother and sister. The American Civil War begins.
- 1862 Thoreau continues to write and visit with friends despite his severe illness. He dies in Concord on May 6, and is buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.
- 1863 *Excursions* is published.
- 1864 *The Maine Woods* is published.
- 1865 Thoreau's letters are published in *Letters to various Persons*, edited by Emerson. Cape Cod is published.
- 1866 *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers* is published.
- 1906 His journals are published in a 14-volume edition entitled *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*.
- 1993 *Faith in a Seed*, a collection of Thoreau's writings on natural history, is published.
- 2000 His last discovered manuscript, *Wild Fruits*, also on natural history, is published.

Introduction

In the summer of 1845, Henry David Thoreau moved into a small cabin he'd built near the shore of Walden Pond, about a mile and a half south of his native village of Concord, Massachusetts. Although Thoreau's experience over the next two years, two months, and two days could hardly be considered a wilderness adventure, it did nevertheless constitute a significant departure from the norm. Most of his neighbors, at least, thought he was a little bit crazy. As Thoreau suggests in the early chapters of *Walden*, he set out to conduct an experiment: Could he survive, possibly even thrive, by stripping away all superfluous luxuries, living a plain, simple life in radically reduced conditions? Besides building his own shelter and providing the fuel to heat it (that is, chopping his own firewood), he would grow and catch his own food, even provide his own entertainment. It was, as he delighted to point out, an experiment in basic home economics; but in truth, his aim was to investigate the larger moral and spiritual economy of such a life. If, as he notes in the book's first chapter, the "mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," perhaps by leaving it all behind and starting over on the relatively isolated shores of Walden Pond he could restore some of life's seemingly diminished vigor.

Indeed, there is plenty of undiminished vigor on display in these pages. Nathaniel Hawthorne in his journal described Henry as "a young man with much of wild original nature still remaining in him" (Hawthorne, *The Heart of Hawthorne's Journals*, p. 105; see "For Further Reading"), and readers have often since regarded him—along with Walt Whitman—as something like the wild man of nineteenth-century American literature. Few readers ever forget the start of Walden's "Higher Laws" chapter: "As I came home through the woods with my string of fish, trailing my pole, it being now quite dark, I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for the wildness which he represented" (p. 166). In many respects, Thoreau went to Walden in search of the raw, hoping that an infusion of "savage delight" would cure him and (by the example he would provide) his neighbors of what he regarded as over-civilization, which he linked to timidity and uncritical faith in the authority of others. Throughout *Walden*, and indeed throughout the greater part of his writing, the impulse to simplify conditions and cast off the debilitating and dispiriting obligations of a respectable life is bound up with this pursuit of uninhibited, unadulterated wildness. His admiration for wildness in nature was unbounded. "Life consists with wildness," he comments in the popular talk now known to readers as "Walking." "The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him" (Thoreau, *Collected Essays and Poems*, p. 240). "Hope and the future for me," he adds, "are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps" (Thoreau, p. 241).

Of course, Thoreau was hardly an actual wild man, a point he acknowledges in another talk, "Wild Apples," when he notes that "*our* wild apple is wild only like myself, perchance, who belong not to the aboriginal race here, but have strayed into the woods from the cultivated stock" (Thoreau, p. 452). As this comment suggests, Thoreau recognized that he came to the woods as a highly developed product of civilized society. So too his approach to the Walden environs should be regarded not as a kind of wilderness adventure—Walden was hardly a wilderness, then as now—but rather as an effort to locate and give voice to the wildness that subsists with and within the cultivated and domesticated. Late in *Walden*, offering an analogy from nature for the kind of extravagance he emulates in his

writing, he notes that the migrating buffalo seeking “new pastures in another latitude, is not extravagant like the cow which kicks over the pail, leaps the cow-yard fence, and runs after her calf, milking time” (p. 254). It is telling, in ways that few readers have fully understood, that Thoreau should actually prefer this cow to the seemingly wilder buffalo. What appeals to him about the cow is that its wild instinct has survived domestication: The wildness Thoreau pursues is not found in complete isolation from civilized and domesticating influences but rather survives in a deep, sometimes unacknowledged, layer of being underlying those influences. The experiment at Walden Pond was an attempt to recover such wildness, as it survived on the margins of Concord village life and beneath the smooth and refined surface of even the most modern, educated, and enlightened men and women.

Thoreau went to Walden not only to hoe beans, fish in the region’s several ponds, and wander the countryside in pursuit of raw, physical sensation, but also, it turned out, to read and write. Though these would seem to be rather civilized activities, he imagined pursuing them for their wildness as well. Extravagance is Thoreau’s figure for this wildness in *Walden*: “I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be *extra-vagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced” (p. 253). Thoreau invokes the word’s etymology in order to restore some of its original wildness to it. The background to this ambition is in Emerson, who famously claimed in his essay “The Poet” that all language is “fossil poetry,” by which he meant that words retain, in their etymological roots, traces of their early history and use, reminders of the physical pictures or actions that they originally brought to mind. Emerson argued in his first published work, *Nature*, that “the corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language,” and that “wise men pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things” (Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, p. 223). The poet restores language to its primitive vigor, and so restores men and women to something like a prelapsarian state of unified physical and mental, worldly and spiritual well-being. What’s more, the poet, Emerson says in his essay of the same title, “knows that he speaks adequately, then, only when he speaks somewhat wildly, or, ‘with the flower of the mind’” (p. 459).

Influenced by Emerson, as well as by the work of such contemporary linguists as Richard Trendelenburg and Charles Krauss, Thoreau would press this point to its limits, using language as an instrument to recover some of the same wildness he sought in swamps and abandoned fields. Only such language that is extravagant to the root, has the power to awaken and reinvigorate a somnolent population: “I desire to speak somewhere without bounds; like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moment, for I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression” (p. 254). Exaggeration takes many forms in *Walden*, from the depiction in “Brute Neighbors” of a warlike encounter of red and black ants rendered in mock-epic style to the description in “Spring” of the melting railroad embankment, replete with dozens of etymological word-plays that aim to show that “the earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit,—not a fossil earth, but a living earth” (pp. 240—241). In the very inventiveness of his prose, and especially in his effort to use words in ways that recapture forgotten aspects of their original meanings, Thoreau’s prose style thus aims to restore the attentive reader to what Emerson, in his introduction to *Nature*, calls an “original relation to the universe.”

There is, of course, considerable irony in Thoreau’s posture of radical independence and original expression. James Russell Lowell, one of the leading literary authorities of the mid- to late-nineteenth

century, rightly pointed out that Thoreau's "notion of an absolute originality ... is an absurdity" and that a man "cannot escape in thought, any more than he can in language, from the past and the present" (Lowell, *Literary Essays*, vol. 1, pp. 372—373). As Lowell memorably reminded his readers, Thoreau "squatted on another man's land; he borrows an axe; his boards, his nails, his bricks, his mortar, his books, his lamp, his fish-hooks, his plough, his hoe, all turn state's evidence against him as an accomplice in the sin of that artificial civilization which rendered it possible that such a person as Henry D. Thoreau should exist at all" (Lowell, vol. 1, p. 380). All of this is true enough, and Thoreau would have readily acknowledged as much. For all his occasional posturing, he knew rather well the extent of his dependence on others. If he forgot, those who attended his lectures and read his published work reminded him often enough: "In its narrative, this book is unique," wrote one reviewer of *Walden*, "in its philosophy quite Emersonian." "It is the latest effervescence of the peculiar school, the head of which stands Ralph Waldo Emerson," wrote another. Newspaper reviews of Thoreau's lectures in and around New England are unrelenting in their description of Thoreau as a kind of minor Emerson. As ever, Lowell himself cut to the quick, damning Thoreau with faint praise: "Among the pistillate plants kindled to fruitage by the Emersonian pollen, Thoreau is thus far the most remarkable" (Lowell, vol. 1, p. 285).

It was indeed Emerson who encouraged Thoreau to begin a journal; Emerson who inspired Thoreau with his early lectures and addresses; Emerson who invited Thoreau into the family home after his experiment as a schoolteacher failed; Emerson who allowed Thoreau the temporary use of his property on Walden Pond. Thoreau had the great good fortune to meet and come under Emerson's influence just as Emerson came into his own intellectually and artistically. Still, as extraordinary as this almost daily contact must have been, it could not have been easy for the young and ambitious Thoreau. Emerson was a phenomenon, and Thoreau knew him just as he began to achieve that reputation. Only twelve years older than Thoreau, Emerson had made a splash in his early to mid-thirties with the 1833 publication of *Nature* and the delivery of a series of electrifying and often controversial lectures, including "The American Scholar," delivered to Thoreau's graduating class at Harvard in 1837, and the Divinity School "Address," also delivered at Harvard in 1838. Since the mid-1830s Emerson had been conducting popular Lyceum lecture series—a kind of early adult education system—on such topics as "English Literature," "Philosophy of History," "Human Life," and "The Present Age." Emerson published his first volume of collected essays in 1841, and a second volume followed in 1844. Thoreau moved into the Emerson household just as the first volume was being published; he moved in again, just a month after leaving the cabin at Walden Pond, when Emerson left to make his tour of England and France in 1847.

By then, while Emerson's career was in full swing, Thoreau was adjusting to his own literary disappointments. He had written a great deal while living at Walden: In addition to his regular journal, he completed two drafts of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and a preliminary draft of *Walden* itself. He was having no luck, however, securing a publisher for *A Week*, an account of a two-week river expedition he undertook in the summer of 1839 in a homemade boat with his older brother John. Discovering little prospect of seeing the book into print, and already well advanced on what would become *Walden*, Thoreau finally agreed to pay the cost of publication from royalties received from the book's sales. Published in 1849, *A Week* received mixed reviews and sold poorly, leaving Thoreau the then considerable debt of some \$300, which it took him four and a half years to repay. After he took possession of 706 unsold copies of the original 1,000-volume print run, he quipped, "I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself."

Thoreau was nearly thirty-two years old when his first book was published; he was thirty-six when he took possession of its unsold stock. He had by then been at work on *Walden* for eight years; indeed he was by 1853 at work on the fifth of eight drafts of the ever-expanding *Walden* manuscript. He was a steady worker but had other responsibilities besides writing. Responding to a ten-year anniversary questionnaire from his Harvard class in 1847, he declared, “I am a Schoolmaster—a private Tutor, a Surveyor—a Gardener, a Farmer—a Painter, I mean a House Painter, a Carpenter, a Mason, a Day Laborer, a Pencil-Maker, a Glass-paper Maker, a Writer, and sometimes a Poetaster” (Thoreau, pp. 650—651). Thoreau was indeed, at different times, all of these things. The family business was pencil-making, and Henry periodically threw himself into it with gusto, developing new techniques for improving the quality of the graphite that allowed the business, eventually, to shift from pencil-making to a more lucrative process for producing graphite to sell to other pencil manufacturers. Throughout the 1850s, he also relied increasingly on his skill as a surveyor to pay his—and his family’s —bills, including the notorious \$300 debt for the publication costs of *A Week*. His arrangement for staying as the Emersons’ long-term houseguest included working at a number of odd jobs around the house and property. And on top of all of this activity, there was, of course, always the writing.

By the time Thoreau took possession of the unsold copies of *A Week*, Emerson was already a household name, both in the United States and abroad. Indeed, Emerson had gone to lecture in England and France in 1847 on the basis of his established reputation. As if occupying the shadow of that reputation were not enough, Thoreau had to contend as well with the substance of Emerson’s teaching, which was not kind to derivative success. Emerson, after all, was the apostle of self-reliance and as such took a rather dim view of disciples. “Genius is always sufficiently the enemy of genius by its over influence,” Emerson had said in “The American Scholar” (Emerson, p. 58). And, “I had better never see a book, than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system” (p. 57). In the Divinity School “Address,” he had insisted, “Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul. What he announces, I must find true in me, or wholly reject; and on his word, or as his second, be he who he may, I can accept of nothing” (p. 79). Emerson revolutionized American literary culture by infusing into it this spirit of radical independence and originality.

Although this attitude of independence and originality was itself in some measure shaped by British and European Romantic influences, Emerson linked it to Americans’ sense of doing something radically new in the world; he cast self-reliance as an antidote to American cultural belatedness—the sense that for all its political independence and innovation, America remained a cultural backwater dependent on Europe for its cultural standards and models. Emerson turned this condition on its head, declaring in the opening paragraph of “The American Scholar,” “Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close” (Emerson, p. 53). For the first time, a sense of a distinctively American cultural mission took center stage. Americans were urged to cultivate freely their native creative powers, unburdened by the weight of cultural traditions. They would no longer achieve cultural recognition by importing and imitating acknowledged English and continental models, but would discover and promulgate their own unique cultural genius. The hallmark of this genius, according to Emerson, would be Americans’ heightened sense of self-reliance. Striking a note to which a young Henry David Thoreau clearly vibrated from head to toe, Emerson announced in “The American Scholar,” “Not out of those, on whom systems of education

have exhausted their culture, comes the helpful giant to destroy the old or to build the new, but out of unhand-selled savage nature, out of terrible Druids and Berserkirs, come at last Alfred and Shakespeare” (Emerson, p. 62).

Undoubtedly, Emerson overstates the radical independence of individuals, although he does so with an often acutely ironic sense of just how embedded even the most self-reliant individual is in the larger machinery of social and historical networks. He also exaggerates the rawness of the social and cultural environment that nurtures and sustains such native genius. But such characteristic exaggeration nevertheless gave Americans a new sense of cultural vitality and authority. Thoreau's writings, including the work written initially for public presentation on the lecture circuit, exude the spirit of bold and original creation.

Still, as buoyed as Thoreau must have been by his close contact with Emerson and others associated with this new American literature, he must have wondered where he himself fit in the larger scheme. His difficulties seeing *A Week* into print combined with the volume's mixed reviews and 700 remaindered copies stored in his attic; the seeming indifference with which some of his lectures and magazine publications were being received, including parts of what would become *Walden*; the constant need for money; the sense of occupying Emerson's long and much-admired shadow; and over time, the added weight of increasingly strained relations with Emerson all must have contributed to some doubt, on Thoreau's part, that he ever would amount to anything more than an exceptional, well-read jack-of-all-trades. Add to all of this the tragedy of losing his brother to lockjaw in 1842 and other personal disappointments, such as the rejection of his marriage proposal by Ellen Sewall—perhaps the only serious love of his life (with the possible exception of the eminently unmarriageable Lydian Emerson, Emerson's wife).

Everybody who cared about him wondered what would become of so peculiarly gifted a man as Henry Thoreau. Hawthorne commented in his notebooks as early as 1842 that Thoreau “has repudiated all regular modes of getting a living, and seems inclined to lead a sort of Indian life among civilized men—an Indian life, I mean, as respects the absence of any systematic effort for a livelihood” (Hawthorne, p. 106). Apart from the blatant racism of the comment—the all-too-pat opposition between civilization and savagery characteristic of the age—Hawthorne captured what many felt about Thoreau: His singular eccentricities and his almost religious dedication to his afternoon walks in the woods might ultimately get in the way of his making any lasting contribution to the great social and literary movement of the age. A few years later Hawthorne would write, “There is one chance in a thousand that he might write a most excellent and readable book,” though he did allow that such a book, if written, would be “a book of simple observation of nature, somewhat in the vein of White's *History of Selborne*” (Borst, p. 42). Nobody seems to have had great faith in Thoreau's potential. Emerson would write in his journal in 1851, even as Thoreau was writing and rewriting *Walden*: “Thoreau wants a little ambition in his mixture. Fault of this, instead of being the head of American engineers, he is captain of a huckleberry party” (Porte, *Emerson in His Journals*, p. 426). Emerson maintained this objection to the end, incorporating it almost verbatim into his eulogy for Thoreau along with the observation that “pounding beans is good to the end of pounding empires one of the days; but if, at the end of years, it is still only beans!” (Poirier, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 488).

Still, for all his own and others' doubts, Thoreau was, in fact, busy all along pounding out words. In addition to *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and, eventually, *Walden*, he published good many essays in the years before *Walden* appeared, in both popular magazines and more specialized literary journals. Many of these essays formed the basis of no fewer than five volumes

previously uncollected and unpublished material that appeared within four years of Thoreau's untimely death in 1862: *Excursions* (1863), *The Maine Woods* (1864), *Cape Cod* (1865), *Letters to Various Persons* (1865), and *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers* (1866). He had, as well, composed a journal, which ran more than two million words and fourteen volumes in the last published edition. He compiled some 3,000 manuscript pages in eleven volumes of what he called his "Indian books," a record of his wide-ranging reading on the early history of Native Americans in North America. Nobody is quite sure what he meant to do with this material, but the notebooks constitute a treasure trove of information for anyone seeking to understand Thoreau's imaginative response to Native Americans. In addition, Thoreau completed draft manuscripts of two major contributions to the emerging understanding of New England's natural history, works that have been published only recently as *Faith in a Seed* (1993) and *Wild Fruits* (2000). Today, with almost all of this material readily available (including published excerpts from the "Indian books"), there is little reason to question Thoreau's impressive productivity. But these questions haunted Thoreau and his friends during his lifetime, when so little of this literary and intellectual achievement was available.

Perhaps Emerson's anxieties about Thoreau's productivity have some ulterior explanation, or having less to do with Thoreau's actual accomplishments than with Emerson's sense of how little apparent effect his literary and spiritual revolution was having on the overwhelming dominance of purely material progress in the United States. The engineers were indeed winning the day, and Emerson had, after all, hoped that the American scholar would contribute to that world's moral and spiritual regeneration. Emerson apparently did not fully understand the relationship between Thoreau's daily excursions into the countryside and his lifework. Nor did he grasp the depth of Thoreau's feeling about nature. Emerson had also been interested in natural history, but he never acquired the firsthand knowledge Thoreau acquired in his ramblings around Concord, throughout New England, and on trips as far afield as Canada and, near the end of his life, Minnesota. Though he began as something of an amateur, Thoreau trained himself to be an accomplished, even a semiprofessional naturalist, fully conversant with the most advanced literature of botanists and natural historians—including the emerging theory of evolution—and highly skilled at making, recording, and interpreting field observations. Thoreau may have looked to some like a wide-eyed enthusiast of the woods, but he was in fact something of an early field ecologist, exploring the natural environment with a distinctive combination of scientific inquiry and poetic reflection.

Given the ambivalence of even his closest contemporary friends and supporters, it is not surprising that Thoreau's reputation has had its ups and downs over the years. At first, it was mainly as a naturalist enthusiast that he was admired. Despite the commercial failure of *A Week*, *Walden* was a moderate success when it was first published in 1854, receiving good reviews and selling well if not spectacularly well. *Walden* did not, however, immediately establish Thoreau's place among major American writers. Though much of Thoreau's work made its way into print soon after his death, none of it sold especially well. Excerpts from the journals first appeared in four volumes published in the 1880s and 1890s. These volumes, edited by Thoreau's friend and correspondent Harrison Gray Otis Blake, were organized around seasonal motifs, which served to confirm Thoreau's early reputation as an amateur naturalist. Even Thoreau's ethical project was often considered secondary to his investigations of nature. When the last of these volumes, *Autumn*, appeared in 1892, a reviewer for the *Yale Literary Magazine* commented that "Thoreau's communion with nature divorced himself from the study of mankind, and therefore it is as a naturalist that he had done most for the world, and not as a propounder of ethics" (Scharnhorst, *Henry David Thoreau*, p. 303). A reviewer for the *New York*

Tribune wrote, “Thoreau’s books probably have no great body of readers, but those who care for them at all care for them deeply” (Scharnhorst, p. 301). While Thoreau is regularly mentioned in anthologies and surveys around the turn of the century, and while *Walden* is typically singled out as his major work, there was not yet any clear consensus about Thoreau’s importance or even an adequate grasp of his distinctive accomplishment.

Eventually Thoreau emerged as a major figure in the “flowering of New England” or the “American renaissance,” which in many literary histories written in the first three quarters of the twentieth century became, misleadingly enough, synonymous with American literature itself. Often aligned with Emerson and Whitman and against such “darker” figures as Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe, Thoreau was increasingly admired for the masterful artistry of *Walden*. Central to the classic twentieth-century interpretations of Thoreau’s work is his often intense preoccupation with language and consciousness. Both are central to Emersonian Transcendentalism, emerging out of such famous passages as Emerson’s description of the “transparent eye-ball” in the first chapter of *Nature* and the extended discussion of language in the “Language” chapter of the same work. Language and consciousness were beginning to emerge as central preoccupations of such major twentieth-century writers as James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, and William Faulkner. Many of the best-known nineteenth-century American writers in fact achieved their status as classic writers through interpretations advanced by twentieth-century critics and scholars who were themselves influenced by the chief writers of their own age. Indeed, D. H. Lawrence’s own *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) probably did more to cement the canon of “classic American literature” than any other single publication on the subject. F. O. Matthiessen’s highly influential study *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941)—a more scholarly volume with chapters on Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman—has many echoes of his earlier study of the modernist poet T. S. Eliot. In part because of the influence of critics like Lawrence and Matthiessen, twentieth-century readers often regarded the literature of these classic nineteenth-century American writers as distinctively and even presciently modern. Thoreau’s allusiveness, his penchant for puns—especially those playing on the etymological roots of words—and his constant attention to his own running stream of thought link him in many ways more to a figure like James Joyce than to contemporaries like Harriet Beecher Stowe or Charles Dickens, both of whom died just six and five years, respectively, before Thoreau.

It is important to recognize the shift that occurred with Thoreau’s appropriation by his later critics into the modernist canon. In effect, Thoreau’s interest in the natural world, which had been the basis for his modest reputation for some fifty or sixty years after his death, was relegated to a secondary position. For Leo Marx, writing in his influential *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), Thoreau’s emphasis on the natural world is actually misleading, since nature only masks the true source of meaning and value for Thoreau: “In *Walden*, Thoreau is clear, as Emerson seldom was, about the location of meaning and value. He is saying that it does not reside in the natural facts or in social institutions or in anything ‘out there,’ but in consciousness. It is a product of imaginative perception of the analogy-perceiving, metaphor-making, mythopoeic power of the human mind” (p. 264). Thoreau, Marx forcefully argues, “restores the pastoral hope to its traditional location. He removes it from history, where it is manifestly unrealizable, and relocates it in literature, which is to say, in his own consciousness, in his craft, in *Walden*” (p. 265).

Throughout *Walden*, and indeed throughout much of Thoreau’s journal and other published writings, the emphasis regularly shifts from whatever is being observed or described to the author’s ve-

powers of observation and description. Thoreau suggests that he hoes beans “as some must work fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day” (p. 129). Thoreau everywhere records the effect of natural phenomena on his sensibility, as if the larger purpose of his project were to describe not Walden and its surroundings but the effects of Walden and its surroundings on his marvelously sensitive and responsive mind. In “Solitude,” he describes his experience of a gentle rain:

I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pin and needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me (p. 106).

The passage highlights the impact of the rain on Thoreau’s own receptive sensibilities, which emerge as the great unifying force of the passage. Thoreau is himself frequently center stage in *Walden* as his sympathetic powers, his extraordinary imaginative resources, and his wonderful inventive verbal prowess vie with the actual Walden environment for the reader’s attention.

Even the larger design of *Walden* underscores Thoreau’s mythopoeic intentions: his effort to situate this world in a deeper, more mythically and even morally resonant reality, to ground the temporal and contingent in the eternal and unchanging. The book’s emphasis on seasonal change—advancing from midsummer through fall, winter, and ultimately spring, a progress underscored in the book’s last few manuscript drafts—reinforces the awakening motif announced in the epigraph. Nature, as Emerson insists in the “Language” chapter of *Nature*, “is the symbol of spirit”: “By degrees we may come to know the primitive sense of the permanent objects of nature, so that the world shall be to us an open book, and every form significant of its hidden life and final cause” (Emerson, pp. 20, 25). Thoreau’s changing seasons correspond to changing psychological and moral conditions, just as descriptive passages often modulate into moral and symbolic reflections. Moreover, Thoreau uses the seasonal motif to challenge his readers to awaken to realities that, for all their omnipresence, remain unacknowledged and even unsuspected. The book’s many references to Hindu and Buddhist sacred texts and traditions, with their frequent emphasis on the illusion that pervades most people’s commonsense perception of their world, further hints at its overarching design. As grounded in *Walden* is in its immediate circumstances and contexts, its mythic and symbolic design often has the effect of minimizing or marginalizing those circumstances and contexts. What’s more, the individual self—the figure of the participant-observer at the heart of so much of Thoreau’s writing—serves as the fulcrum for this mythopoeic experience, since it is to something deep within the individual self that the moral and symbolic realities in question typically correspond, what Coleridge aptly called “the one Life within us and abroad.”

More recent scholarship has shifted its emphasis from the mythopoeic and symbolic to the historical and discursive contexts of Thoreau’s work. This is in keeping with general trends in literary scholarship. What is unusual in the case of Thoreau is that Thoreau himself often—though by no means always—seems to downplay the role of such historical and discursive contexts. Indeed, following Emerson’s lead, he sometimes seems to dismiss history altogether. The irony is that Thoreau was in fact surprisingly well read in social and historical contexts and even quite regularly engaged in his writing with actual social issues and political conflicts. The consciousness at the heart of *Walden* is constantly encountering and reflecting on evidence of the social and historical world around Concord, whether in its repeated attempts to come to terms with the railroad tracks that cut

across one end of the pond or in its consideration of the many abandoned homes encountered along the path to and from Concord (most of them once occupied by Concord's African-American population). Thoreau's emphatic concern with questions of household economy in the book's opening chapter is also increasingly regarded in the context of other prevailing and emerging discourses of economy and domesticity. Ultimately, Thoreau frames *Walden* as a reflection on contemporary social and economic circumstances. Its early chapters represent one of the most important sustained critiques of the material and moral condition of life in the North in the decades before the Civil War. Although many have challenged and continue to challenge the apparent isolation of the reflecting consciousness at the heart of *Walden*, it has become increasingly clear that critics' emphasis on the mythopoeic dimension of Thoreau's project must be balanced with greater attention to the discursive and historical context with which he is also preoccupied throughout his work.

One area where this change is most evident is in scholars' approaches to Thoreau's environmentalism. Where Thoreau's late nineteenth-century reputation as a "poet-naturalist" was displaced by his twentieth-century reputation as a serious and sophisticated, almost cosmopolitan artist, more recent criticism has returned to Thoreau's engagement with natural history, paying particular attention to his command of the various newly emerging scientific disciplines that were then transforming the study of natural history and to his highly accomplished skills as an observer and recorder of natural phenomena. Not long after Leo Marx had insisted that Thoreau's real subject was not Walden Pond and its environs but his own consciousness, environmental historian Roderick Nash insisted in his *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) on Thoreau's important contribution to an emerging and distinctively American wilderness sensibility. For a long time, these reputations occupied separate disciplinary compartments, with literary scholars paying more attention to matters of language and form and environmental historians, environmentalists, and other nature enthusiasts paying more attention to Thoreau's inspirational practice as a naturalist and natural historian. More recently, however, literary scholars, equipped with the tools of an ecological literary criticism, have sought to understand the relationship between Thoreau's literary and environmental projects. While there is still some disagreement about *Walden's* place within Thoreau's evolving project—some see him still struggling in *Walden* to free himself from classically Romantic narrative and figurative strategies—there is widespread agreement that Thoreau must be taken seriously for his study of environmental processes as well as for his concern with what are now called environmental history and ethics. Recent critics have also established Thoreau's influence on later "literary ecologists" including such recent environmental writers as Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, Terry Tempest Williams, and William Least Heat-Moon.

If the question of Thoreau's environmentalism has only recently emerged in its full richness and complexity, Thoreau's engagement with the politics of his day has always been central to readings of his work, even if critics have not always agreed how central this engagement is to his overall project. Indeed, many readers have complained that *Walden's* preoccupation with language and consciousness compromises the forceful social commentary with which Thoreau opens the book. Such readers often regard *Walden* as the ultimate expression of New England elite culture: liberal in sentiment but hopelessly compromised by its entanglement with social institutions promoting the interests of the status quo. By contrast, Thoreau's public lectures often address the social conflicts of the day, and they do so plainly and with straightforward moral urgency. In several of his lectures Thoreau takes on the problem of slavery and, more particularly, the North's failure to respond to the various political maneuvers designed to protect the great compromise between North and South. Others have

emphasized another shift in Thoreau's writing after *Walden*, a shift in focus from the consciousness the participant-observer to the actual social and natural world outside that consciousness. There is undoubtedly much truth to these claims, although criticisms of *Walden* are sometimes overstated in order to highlight shifts in Thoreau's interests and techniques that emerged in his last decade of writing.

Walden and "Civil Disobedience" were first published together in 1948 and have since appeared together, as they do here, in at least ten different editions with countless reprintings. To some extent this is a peculiarity of postwar book culture: Publishers sought to produce inexpensive editions of *Walden*, especially aimed at the high school and college markets, that included what was increasingly regarded as Thoreau's most important work of social and political commentary, "Civil Disobedience." Because "Civil Disobedience" is so short, the two works could and still can easily be combined in this way. Still, for all their obvious differences of design and rhetorical address, the two works form a natural pair, not least because the circumstances that led to Thoreau's writing of "Civil Disobedience" are closely linked to his *Walden* experience. The story behind "Civil Disobedience" is well known even if most of its specific details remain uncertain. Having made the mile-and-a-half walk from his cabin to the village of Concord, Thoreau was detained by the village sheriff for not having paid his poll tax. Some versions of the incident maintain that the sheriff offered to pay the tax for him, but Thoreau, acting on principle, refused. He refused to pay or to have someone else pay the tax because he would not support a government that supported slavery and that sought to extend its influence by waging war with Mexico in order to acquire its northern territories. Thoreau was arrested and jailed. He was released after just one night, his tax having been paid by someone (probably an aunt). One apparently apocryphal story that has circulated ever since has Emerson visiting Thoreau while he is still in jail. When asked by Emerson what he is doing in jail, Thoreau, assuming that principle was on his side of the jailhouse bars, is said to have responded, "What are you doing out there?"

Undoubtedly, Thoreau saw his principled stand in refusing to pay the poll tax as an enactment of the general moral and social attitudes articulated throughout *Walden*. It is true, however, that *Walden* is not shaped in response to any immediate social or political crisis, as are "Civil Disobedience," "Slavery in Massachusetts," "Life without Principle," and, later, the series of talks delivered in support of the radical abolitionist John Brown, for whom Thoreau developed an intense, even worshipful admiration. New England was racked by the slavery crisis in the 1840s and '50s, especially after the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, which required that northerners return escaped slaves to the southern slave owners. Thoreau's responses to these circumstances are sharp and impassioned. First delivered in January and February 1848, only a few months after Thoreau left his cabin at Walden Pond, "Civil Disobedience" precedes the Fugitive Slave Act and is in fact as preoccupied with the Mexican War as it is with slavery; it displays the same sense of moral outrage at his state's and region's complicity with slavery as with an imperial adventure that many worried would expand the reach of slavery and hence the influence of southern slave holders. The essay has proven to be enormously influential, despite being described as "crazy" by the Boston press when it first appeared under its original title, "Resistance to Civil Government." It is remembered today less for its particular response to the crisis posed by the war than for its articulation of the more general logic of civil disobedience: staging nonviolent acts of civil disobedience to protest a government whose policies and actions are deemed by conscience both immoral and illegal. The essay's impact on major twentieth-century advocates of nonviolent resistance, particularly Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., is no doubt in part responsible for its continuing popularity.

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