

HENRY DAVID THOREAU'S WALDEN

by Cornelius Browne



In 1845, Henry David Thoreau began building a small cabin in the woods near the banks of Walden Pond, just outside Concord, Massachusetts. He took up residence there on 4 July, and he remained until September 1847. While Thoreau's claim in *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854)—“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”—is justly famous, he went to the woods not only “to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life,” but also to write. The first project on his mind was *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), a narrative of a boat trip Thoreau had taken with his brother John in 1839. To the pond he brought with him a stack of books and his voluminous, posthumously published *Journal*.

THE BOOK

While *Walden* contains many scenes of vivid immediacy and deftly explores an individual's intimate connection to the nonhuman world, it is important to keep in mind that this book is a highly crafted document that underwent no less than seven revisions over a period of eight years. So linked with the account of Thoreau's sensual and intellectual interface with the physical and social worlds around him is a record of his artistic development into one of the most important writers and thinkers in the American tradition. *Walden* is often cited as one of the seminal books in the lineage of American environmental writing, and it performs a still-essential chunk of cultural work. Thoreau, in *Walden*, insists that not only human beings, animals, trees, and ponds exist in an ecological complex, but that cultural artifacts such as texts and railroad cuts also participate in our perception of ecological relationships and are, therefore, overlooked parts of any particular ecology. Our relationships with not only the human but also the nonhuman world—and the expression of those relationships in language—are interlocked. *Walden* explores both, and therein lies its continuing relevance and its power to elicit fascination

from generations of critics, scholars, students, and readers from all walks of life.

Walden is an act of re-creation on many levels. It condenses Thoreau's two-year experience at Walden Pond into one year, and the eighteen essays, or chapters, that make up the book are loosely structured by the seasonal cycle, beginning and ending in the spring. The penultimate chapter, “Spring,” is the emotional apex of the book, coinciding with that time of year when the world renews itself. Thoreau drafted much of the first half of *Walden* while at the pond. He revised again in 1848 and 1849 and the final revisions, including most of the material onward from chapter 9, “The Ponds,” were drafted between 1852 and 1854. Much of the content is drawn from his *Journal*, reworked and reexperienced through meticulous revision.

During the early stages of composition, Thoreau was lecturing in Concord to help subsidize his experiment at the lake. The earliest chapters of *Walden* have their origins in these lectures, partly because when Thoreau spoke, the townspeople proved more interested in why he was living alone at the pond and how he lived there than in anything else he happened to say. To most of them, his experiment in living was incomprehensible. Why would one forsake town life and commercial enterprise to live in a shack in the woods? Even Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of Thoreau's most influential friends and mentors, complained in his funeral eulogy for Thoreau that

Had his genius been only contemplative, he had been fitted to his life, but with his energy and practical ability he seemed born for great enterprise and for command: and I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry party.

Not even Emerson could fully understand what Thoreau was trying to do at the pond and in *Walden*; he could not foresee the profound mark Thoreau's work—and primarily *Walden*—would leave on American thought and culture.

TENSIONS AND MEDIATIONS

The lasting power of the book derives from Thoreau's persistent plumbing of both the relationship between the individual and the American *socia* and the deeply conflicted relationship between America's culture and its physical environment. The articulation of these tensions in *Walden* continues to resonate in the American imagination. In the opening chapter, "Economy," Thoreau authorizes himself to speak from the position of an extreme individualist. He writes: "In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body else whom I knew as well." From the outset of *Walden*, Thoreau insists upon a radical individuality that at first glance seems incongruous with the concern that *Walden* as a whole holds out for both society and the environment in which it is embedded. There are, of course, parallel—and productive—tensions in this book: tension not only between the individual and society, but also between the desire to articulate nature and the inability of language to do so, and especially between Thoreau's philosophical idealism, which privileges the human mind, and his profound respect for the tangible reality of the physical world. Though these tensions are never resolved, they incite deep contemplation, often through rich metaphoric figures that attempt a rapprochement between the ideal and the physical, as in this transformation of the simple act of fishing from a boat on the pond at night:

It was very queer, especially in dark nights, when your thoughts had wandered to vast and cosmogonical themes in other spheres, to feel this faint jerk, which came to interrupt your dreams and link you to Nature again. It seemed as if I might next cast my line upward into the air, as well as downward into this element which was scarcely more dense. Thus I caught two fishes as it were with one hook.

Walden is concerned throughout with the torsion of fishing for two things at once: a rooting of experience in a well-known physical place and the grounding of thought in the relationships between the experiencing subject and the physical environment.

The foremost symbol of this experiential and philosophical fishing is the lake itself; Walden Pond is an interface: "Lying between the earth and the heavens, it partakes of the color of both." Standing on the frozen surface of the pond, Thoreau notices that "Heaven is under

our feet as well as over our heads." As human beings, our primary way of perceiving relationships is visual, and in *Walden* the physical world is allowed to gaze back at us as the pond becomes an eye: "A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is the earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature." Although Thoreau rarely abdicates the subject position, he gives serious consideration to the earth as possessed of its own ability to see and even speak—the pond functions as both intermediary and interlocutor. As the pond ice opens in the spring, Thoreau listens attentively: "The pond does not thunder every evening, and I cannot tell surely when to expect its thundering; but though I may perceive no difference in the weather, it does. Who would have suspected so large and cold and thick-skinned a thing to be so sensitive?" The pond is alive, it has a skin, it is sensitive, and it communicates. Thoreau next aligns the lake with a technological artifact: "The largest pond is as sensitive to atmospheric changes as the globule of mercury in its tube." Interestingly, although Thoreau allows the technological into his discussion, the nonhuman sphere exists on a larger scale than the human: the pond is "the largest" and the mercury in the thermometer is a mere "globule."

TEXT, TOOLS, ECOLOGIES

However, certain technologies become magnified at key places in *Walden*—especially the technology of writing. Writing comes to be seen as participating in an ecology that links the physical environment, the writer, the reader, the past, and the future. Walden Pond, *Walden*, and the twenty-first-century libraries all over the world that shelve the book can be understood to participate in a certain ecology. Take Thoreau's classic description of the melting sandbank at the end of the "Spring" chapter. First of all, Thoreau acknowledges that the effect and frequency of the phenomenon he observes are heightened by human manipulation of the land: "The number of exposed banks of the right material must have been greatly multiplied since railroads were invented." Both human culture and the sandy soil profile of the land surrounding Concord enhance the spectacle of the sandbank, but the most productive interface in this passage is not the boundary between the human railroad and the environment through which it cuts, but the one that exists between Thoreau's imagination and the material of the sandbank.

Thoreau gives us the composition of flowing materials that "overlap and interlace"—a mixture of sand and clay—and names it a "hybrid product," a gathering

together of separate things. In that it is part mineral, part vegetable; it responds to a mutual influence, obeying “half way the law of currents and halfway that of vegetation.” Thoreau introduces here a more complex conceptual interface. With a reasonable amount of effort, we have little trouble perceiving a transitional zone between a forest and a field or a forest and a railroad cut. Thoreau, however, takes the idea a step further. He insists upon an interpenetration of mineral and vegetable that begins to defeat our received categories. He calls our basic morphologies into question. Thoreau brings his imagination to bear on the flowing sand and clay, and he is reminded of lichens and “of coral, of leopard’s paws or bird’s feet, of brains or lungs or bowels, and excrements of all kinds.” The movement shifts from simple life forms to more complex animals, and then, surprisingly, his focus narrows to the internal organs of beasts, then to excrement in this strange meditation. It is a shift from external to internal and then to the internal made external by animal excretion. We forget we are looking at a sandbank. All manner of boundaries are rendered permeable—animal, vegetable, mineral, internal, and external—and the flowing sand becomes a conglomerate of life, down to the viscera that sustain life, and life’s more disagreeable processes. Thoreau stands awed and tells us that “I feel as if I were nearer to the vitals of the globe, for this sandy overflow is something such a foliaceous mass as the vitals of the animal body. You find thus in the very sands an anticipation of the vegetable leaf. No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly.”

He also finds the earth expressive of language. The inside of a book, of course, also consists of leaves, and Thoreau literally begins to read the earth, connecting mineral, vegetable, and animal worlds with a playful and idiosyncratic sound and typographical symbolism:

The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype. *Internally*, whether in the globe or animal body, it is a moist thick *lobe*, a word especially applicable to the liver and lungs and the *leaves* of fat ($\lambda\epsilon\iota\beta\omega$, *labor*, *lapsus*, to flow or slip downward, a lapsing; $\lambda\omicron\beta\omicron\varsigma$, *globus*, lobe, globe; also lap, flap, and many other words), *externally*, a dry thin *leaf*, even as the *f* and *v* are a pressed and dried *b*. The radicals of lobe are *lb*, the soft mass of the *b* (single lobed, or B, double lobed) with the liquid *l* behind it pressing it forward.

Thoreau is obviously delighted by the sounds of human language. Language becomes the primary focus, and the liquid *l* pushing the lobe is an obvious reenactment of

the flowing sand and clay. He sees into the internal workings of the globe and finds the alphabet. The very basic structure of Western language and expression—the alphabet—finds itself embedded in the bowels of the earth in a powerful expression of how human culture, writing, and world interpenetrate.

This whole passage is remarkable because it posits the earth in clearly textual terms, yet those terms are to a large degree indecipherable, a mixture of alphabets and hieroglyphics awaiting some Champollion (who helped translate ancient Egyptian scripts) to decipher them. In order to emerge from the sandbank, the text demands the geomorphology of the railroad cut, a witnessing subject, and interpreters. Thoreau as witnessing subject in this passage submerges the narrating self as it approaches the “vitals of the globe” and implicitly calls upon the reader to perform Champollion’s labor. In this sense, Thoreau’s primary experience in nature becomes a virtual experience contained in a symbolic text, and once the text is read, the experience contributes to the ongoing aesthetic experience of the reader. Just as the flowing sand became language and thus permeated Thoreau’s experience, the art of *Walden* permeates the reader’s experience, and in this way functions as a negotiated site between the physical world, the text, and experience. It is a giving and receiving across time and space, and it is one of the rare texts that seems in this way to constitute an ecology wherever and whenever the book is pulled from the shelf.

Thoreau makes effective use of other technologies as well. In the middle of winter, Thoreau—who often worked as a surveyor—decided to map Walden Pond and sound its bottom. As should be clear by now, his plumbing the depths of Walden Pond becomes endowed in the retelling with deep metaphorical resonance. Thoreau describes in painstaking detail his measuring of the pond, and he discovers that “what I have observed of the pond is no less true in ethics.” He feels he can “draw lines through the length and breadth of the aggregate of a man’s particular daily behaviors and waves of life into his coves and inlets, and where they intersect will be the height or depth of his character.” However, as Thoreau chops holes in the ice through which to drop his line, water flowing out causes an optical phenomenon that deeply troubles his claims to be able to graph the geometry of human character, especially his own. He sees reflected “a double shadow of myself, one standing on the head of the other, one on the ice, the other on the trees or hillside.” Perhaps Thoreau perceives the basic doubleness of his urge to understand both himself and the nonhuman

world. But perhaps even beyond that, he sees his double shadow as something universal—inhabiting the pond, the shore, and the flora. Any approach to ultimate knowledge, either of our own minds or of the universe, is inevitably reflected, turned on its head, or shadowed. This is the irony of romantic idealism—one seeks the ideal with the sense that what one seeks is ultimately elusive.

Although Thoreau is, at least on some level, clearly aware of this quandary, his awareness does not impede his relentless search for the meaning of his relationships to the social and physical environment. Engaging one of his wild neighbors, Thoreau enters into a game of hide-and-seek with a loon. Interestingly, Thoreau shares certain qualities with the loon. While Thoreau uses a weighted line to find the bottom of Walden Pond, the loon “had time and ability to visit the bottom of the pond in its deepest part.” The loon is one of the most powerful symbols of the wild in *Walden*; its call, or as Thoreau puts it, “his looning,” is “perhaps the wildest sound that is ever heard here, making the woods ring far and wide.” To possess the ability both to plumb the depths and to utter the wildest call in the woods was certainly an element of Thoreau’s desire, and he and the loon, so far, have much in common. However, the commonality between human being and wild creature cannot finally hold up. In his rowboat, Thoreau chases the loon about the pond, and the loon consistently and with little effort eludes him, “looning” back at him: “I concluded that he laughed in derision of my efforts, confident of his own resources.” The chase around the pond in pursuit of the symbol of wild nature is doomed to fail, as is the effort to plumb the symbolic depths of the pond and human character with a weighted line, with human tools.

SIMPLICITY AND COMPLEXITY

However, his failing is by no means a failure. The trajectory of the entire book is not a straight line as seen through the surveyor’s transit. It is a cycling back upon itself—like the seasons—re-creating and reimagining its central problem over and over again. In a sentence the problem—answerable only through infinite questioning—Thoreau poses is, “Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world?” The profundity of this question is often lost on us through our tendency always to simplify the question. Thoreau refuses to simplify thought, and therein lie both his success and the lasting value of *Walden* for us and for the future. *Walden* encourages readers to ask the unanswerable question, to approach it from various angles, to stand it on its head, to

ponder its double reflections and its shadow, to look for it both in ourselves and in our environment. The tools at our disposal are legion. Thoreau wonders, “Who knows but if our instruments were delicate enough we might detect an undulation in the crust of the earth?” Well, our instruments are now delicate enough, yet we are not much closer to knowing why precisely the things around us make a world. For Thoreau and for us, the instrument that demands the most delicate attention is language. It is through language that we may come to know our world, and the rich metaphorical texture of *Walden* comes much nearer an answer than Thoreau’s chains and weights and lines, than our super accelerators and space shuttles. He would have us exercise our language.

Now, to claim that Thoreau refused to simplify difficult philosophical questions poses another problem. As a way of living, Thoreau advocated strongly for a more simple way of life, “for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.” Here again is a short passage that cuts to the center of *Walden*. He achieves mental complexity through physical simplicity. Without the dross of commercial life, Thoreau created a place for himself from which he could observe the world around him and his deepest feelings and thoughts. By eschewing, at least as far as possible, the things of the town, Thoreau installed himself in a physical and mental place where “every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself.” In this way,

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable quality of man to elevate his life by conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of the arts.

In order to affect the quality of the day, people must be awake, and one of the prerequisites for the kind of questioning Thoreau insists upon is a wide-awake and aware citizenry. He felt that Americans were sleeping their lives away, that for all their hustling and bustling toward the goal of getting a better living, they slumbered, unaware that their highest quality was to elevate themselves and their culture in ways transcending material wealth. It should come as no surprise that the morning holds

immense significance in a book whose author claims, alluding to Coleridge and Chaucer, that he does 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.”

Thoreau also discovered neighbors in the woods: “I found myself suddenly neighbor to the birds; not by having imprisoned one, but having caged myself near them.” However, he was deeply concerned with his human neighbors. Of course, Thoreau felt that he could better understand and exercise his concern by living away from Concord and the tumult of everyday life in nineteenth-century America. In so doing he could create a place on the shore of the pond that would grant him access to the mysteries of the physical world and the central philosophical problem of how human culture can best live with, not against, its environment. *Walden's* powerful evocations of the natural world tend to overshadow the fact that Thoreau visited town periodically, and that in small, regular doses, the gossip and chatter of the town “was really as refreshing in its way as the rustle of leaves and the peeping of frogs. As I walked in the woods to see the birds and squirrels, so I walked in the village to see the men and boys; instead of the wind among the pines I heard the carts rattle.” Physical nature and human culture participate in the same ecology, and Thoreau did not seal himself off from his culture. His act itself and the book that resulted are a direct engagement with his culture.

RETREAT AND ENGAGEMENT

Thoreau's alternating retreat and engagement is political action, and the example of his complex relationship with the larger culture is an antidote for the oversimplification of the citizen's role in a democratic culture. Thoreau talks of an Irish immigrant drawn to the dream of America as the land of the golden goose, where butter, bread, and money are plentiful. Although denied these things, he still dreams of potential access to material wealth, to things. Thoreau counters, “But the only true America is that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without these, and where the state does not endeavor to compel you to sustain the slavery and war and other superfluous expenses which directly or indirectly result from the use of such things.” Thoreau's retreat into a life of physical simplicity and mental complexity is an act that has great potential to undermine the structures that he understands as threats to ways of living that exercise the mind and respect the integrity of all life within and around it. Americans'

insatiable appetite for material things, the culture of consumption, does not contribute to a richer life; on the contrary, it contributes to a government that condones slavery and wages a war of aggression on Mexico.

Thoreau takes his commitment to a better America beyond thought and into political action when, “One afternoon, near the end of the first summer, when I went to the village to get a shoe from the cobbler's, 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.” In his essay “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849), he calls for revolution against a government that condones slavery and invaded Mexico. But Thoreau's revolution is not one conducted with arms. His revolt was to withhold his participation in a government he considered unjust by refusing to pay taxes, a nonviolent protest, and he claims:

I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name,—if ten *honest* men only,—aye, if *one* HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, *ceasing to hold slaves*, were actually to withdraw from this copartnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefor, it would be the abolition of slavery in America.

This is Thoreau's idea of passive resistance, embraced by advocates of freedom from Mohandas Gandhi to Martin Luther King Jr.

Thoreau's two-year retreat from society was not then a withdrawal from his culture but a contribution to it. If Thoreau's move to Walden Pond was initiated as a contribution to his culture, and if the structure of society, including its laws, sought to impede such an act, as Thoreau certainly thought it did, then it became time to exercise resistance to that society, which not only enslaved some human beings because of their skin color but also oppressed others because of their nationality. His experiment at the pond was an attempt to recreate and redefine the responsibilities of a citizen in a democracy. That citizen must remain aware, must think, must act, and, most importantly, hold sacred the integrity of individual beings, both white and black, American and Mexican, human and nonhuman. This citizen is the ideal member of a democratic community and the better community that would follow, in whatever manifestation, democracy. Thoreau was forward enough to see that democratic culture would not be the final form into which people organized themselves; it was a step in the evolution of human attempts to live in meaningful relationships with

their social and physical environments. He felt that his government, and his community's unthinking support of it, had begun to impede that evolution.

It is at this juncture that the individual and the *socia* begin to approach each other. Though individuals may periodically be at odds with their culture, individuals of integrity and awareness are the only ones who can fully contribute to an improved collective life. This is not the individualism prevalent in his culture and down to our own, whose central concern is to gather and concentrate material wealth unto particular people. Thoreau, of course, redefines wealth to mean the potential that human beings possess to improve themselves and their culture—to affect the quality of the day—in ways immeasurable by material wealth. *Walden* calls for a wealth of understanding and awareness, a heightened perception of the connections between all things. *Walden* is an exercise in bridging boundaries, and in its "Conclusion," Thoreau shares insights he acquired at the pond:

I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws will be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. 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.

There is a recognizable pattern here of stripping down in order to re-create, and for Thoreau, to move inward was to enable oneself to expand out into the astonishing complexity of the universe. By embracing, if even for only two years, some of the conditions most despised and feared by American culture—solitude, poverty, and weakness—one may be able to dust off the trivial and unearth the key to the universe and one's own dreams.

LOCATION

But Thoreau's wake-up call was not only to think. It was to act. By situating himself in a cabin in the woods, Thoreau—through intense concentration on his physical surroundings—was able to locate himself, and his words speak eloquently to a global, twenty-first-century culture

whose displaced citizens are legion. Thoreau cried, "We know not where we are," and one of the most important lessons *Walden* has to teach is the value of learning where we are, both physically and metaphorically. In bemoaning the state of his culture, Thoreau describes ours: "There is an incessant influx of novelty into the world, and yet we tolerate incredible dulness." We live in a consumer culture in which novelty is the coin of the realm, and we search for instant gratification. In its questioning of this consumerist ethic may lie the greatest piece of cultural work *Walden* can exert. *Walden* is not only the record of Thoreau's two years at the pond. His thought developed over many years of revision, and one can read those thoughts forming, testing, questioning, and maturing in the text. *Walden* is a meticulous re-creation of the experience Thoreau underwent in the woods. Instead of offering clear-cut answers that turn readers into consumers, it presents questions that transform readers into thinkers. *Walden* also demands that we spend time with its complexity, and the book repays manyfold the effort put into its reading. Maybe the most important thing *Walden* might cause us to do is shut off the television for a few nights in a row, join Thoreau at *Walden* by pulling *Walden* off the shelf, and thereby follow Thoreau's model and strive really to understand where we are, how we can affect the day, and why the things around us constitute our world. That in itself could drastically change the culture.

[See also Emerson, Ralph Waldo; *Nature Writing: subentries on Poetry and Prose; and Transcendentalism.*]

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See also the article on Henry David Thoreau immediately preceding.