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The Idea of Wilderness

*From Prehistory to
the Age of Ecology*

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS

New Haven and London

to nature, have again come to the fore. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 examine a trio of wilderness thinkers, beginning with Henry David Thoreau, whose way was collectively prepared by the previous two centuries of intellectual ferment. As a group, these thinkers—Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold—questioned the divide between civilization and wilderness established by Modernism. These developments begin with Thoreau, for he clearly had a significant influence on those who came after. Thoreau is best understood as a wilderness philosopher whose subject was the continuities and discontinuities between culture and nature. Almost universally misunderstood as a transcendentalist in the Emersonian tradition, Thoreau explicitly rejected the mechanistic rationalism that enslaved Emerson's view of nature. So understood, Thoreau is a thinker whose kindred spirits were simultaneously arcadian, Romantic, and philosophical; more important, he extended the critique of Modernism in a fashion that remains relevant. Thoreau thus bridges between all that went before and that which is yet to come in the age of ecology.

CHAPTER FIVE

Deshlaker

Henry David Thoreau Philosopher of the Wilderness

Though there is a general progress in his overall development, there is no single Thoreauvian stance vis-à-vis nature . . . The movements of his imaginative life show a continual series of struggles (most of them met with delight) because he was aware of nature's infinite variability and he wanted to face every fluctuation with the mode which it required of him. Each voice that he heard from nature demanded a slight shift in his own voice.

—Frederick Garber, *Thoreau's Redemptive Imagination*

HENRY DAVID THOREAU cuts a most unusual figure in the fabric of American life, for he died largely unknown and unrecognized by his peers, perceived as a satellite orbiting an Emersonian center of gravity.¹ Today Thoreau's reputation has largely eclipsed Emerson's. The older transcendentalist is viewed more as a popularizer of European ideas than as a progenitor of a unique philosophy. Although Emersonian transcendentalism is moribund, Thoreau's ideas yet animate reflection on the human condition and are recognized as crucial to the birth of a distinctively American idea of wilderness. He was in the vanguard of the nineteenth-century criticism of Modernism, in some ways an American analogue to Schopenhauer, Marx, and Nietzsche.² More important, Thoreau had the brilliance to recognize, before Darwin published his theory of evolution, an organic connection between *Homo sapiens* and nature—a natural world from which the species had come and to which it was bound. This evolutionary insight puts Thoreau on the leading edge of a postmodern view of the relation between humankind and nature.

There is little doubt why Thoreau has been reappraised: his life and writings exemplify an attempt to grapple with the pivotal questions of human existence: Who or what is humankind? nature? and how are they

related? What is the good life? the good economy? the good government? the good society? And, finally, what are knowledge, beauty, justice, and truth? Central to Thoreau's thought is his idea of wilderness and the natural life. The most recent readings of Thoreau, such as Jerome and Diane Rothenberg's and Frederick Turner's, find him to be a thinker who discovers the essential and creative affinity between wild nature and Homo sapiens, questions the presumed ontological dichotomy between the primitive and civilized, and affirms the grounding of the social in the presocial.³ As Neil Evernden argues, human beings are culture-dwelling animals, and we cannot avoid creating categories "any more than we can avoid the social construction of reality. The inclination to tell the story of 'how the world is' seems basic to being human. . . . We can only hope that when the story turns out to be too far removed from actual experience to be reliable, we still have the skill to return to the world beneath the categories and re-establish connection with it."⁴ Such a skill is the essence of Thoreau's great genius. Virtually no article of faith, ideology, or institution—be this sacred or profane, this worldly or otherworldly—escapes his scrutiny.

Transcendental Inclinations

Those determined to interpret Thoreau from a transcendental perspective often begin with Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Nature," pointing out parallels between this work and Thoreau's.⁵ Undeniably, Thoreau read the essay during his collegiate days at Harvard, and he responded enthusiastically to its message. "Nature" espouses maxims for action that Thoreau actualized. Clearly he, among all the Concord circle, was the most actively engaged in encountering nature firsthand. Setting out from his transcendental inclinations, Thoreau developed through ceaseless reflective effort a remarkable philosophical position revolving around the ideas of self, society, and wilderness and the interrelations among them. Thus, although he followed Emerson's practical maxim in "Nature," he did not reach the same conclusions. His mentor's key contribution was helping Thoreau to establish a belief that nature can be known through the immediate activity of inquiring consciousness (or, alternatively, an absolute separation between consciousness and nature does not exist). This transcendental axiom, or first principle, was the heart of the Emersonian philosophical legacy. But comparison of Emerson's "Nature" and other relevant writings, such as "The Over-soul," with Thoreau's mature work underscores the differences in their use of the imagination. Unlike Em-

son, Thoreau uses transcendentalism as a departure point, that is, as justifying the intuitive apprehension and active questioning of nature.

For Emerson consciousness is nothing more than a vehicle to carry him toward a pre-existing conclusion. "Nature" is not a philosophical inquiry but a literary exercise designed to rest a pre-established belief in God on rational, rather than scriptural, footing. The conceptual focal point is the human soul and God, not nature or the wilderness. For Emerson a wilderness odyssey is an occasion for the individual mind first to discover a reflection of itself (nature as a system of laws, concepts, and commodities) and then to confirm God's existence. So viewed, Emerson's "Nature" merely goes over the ground covered by the physico-theologists, like them discovering purpose and final cause in nature, the difference being that his argument is leavened by transcendental philosophy rather than proto-ecology. He discovers the design of nature not through its inner unity and order but rather through the workings of the transcendental consciousness. The organic world, full of sights and sounds and smells, was through his philosophical spectacles mere appearance, a visible promontory obscuring something more real than the phenomenal face of nature—namely, mind itself, and ultimately God, who unifies all seeming diversity into the One. Emerson believes that human beings can recapture a prelapsarian condition, transcending the dichotomies that separate them from nature and God. "We do not understand the notes of birds. The fox and the deer run away from us; the bear and tiger rend us." Yet through personal encounter with nature a human being might rediscover the truth of the Bible.

Know then, that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. . . . As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions. A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit. So fast will disagreeable appearances, swine, spiders, snakes, pests, mad-houses, prisons, enemies, vanish; they are temporary and shall be no more seen. . . . *The kingdom of man over nature*, which cometh not with observation,—a dominion such as now is beyond his dream of God,—he shall enter without more wonder than the blind man feels who is gradually restored to perfect sight.⁶

This passage, the conclusion of "Nature," unmistakably reveals Emerson's orientation toward the natural world. The position is conventionally anthropocentric and androcentric, enframined by a Baconian-Cartesian perspective: nature is mere putty in human hands, bestowed by God upon his most favored creation, *man*. Sentient Man is master of all that lies

before him, the phenomenon perfect for whom the world was made. How comforting such an "argument" must have been to the Boston Brahmins and to Emerson, with a supreme being restored to the cosmological throne through "Transcendental Reason," rescued from the clutches of blind faith resting on Scripture and the revealed word—a God reached not through the Bible but through recitation of a transcendental litany. Although "Nature" does not commit the *petitio principii*, a fallacy inherent in all biblically based arguments for God's existence, the argument is tortured, to say the least, and inconsistent with Kant and the German idealism from which New England transcendentalism sprang.⁷

Emerson and the other transcendentalists unquestionably left their mark on Thoreau, but transcendentalism is a poor framework for understanding Thoreau's idea of wilderness. As with all first-rate minds, his cannot be reduced to the ideas of his progenitors. Thoreau asks questions and finds interrelations between the human species and nature about which Emerson never dreamed. If Thoreau's idea of wilderness can be understood from a transcendental perspective, then he is a mere Emersonian epigone, and "Nature" rather than *Walden* contains the seminal American idea of wilderness. But if Thoreau's idea of wilderness goes beyond transcendentalism, then any view of his work that reduces it to transcendentalism commits the genetic fallacy. Clearly, Thoreau had transcendental inclinations; yet Emerson and the other transcendentalists did not realize the revolutionary potential of European idealism. Thoreau, not Emerson, is the American heir to Kant's critical philosophy. Unlike Kant, who reduces wild nature to Cartesian-Newtonian nature in the first critique, however, Thoreau encounters wild nature without an established repertoire of categories, attitudes, and responses. In the final analysis, the Thoreauvian idea of wilderness has more in common with the Kant of the third than the first critique (see above, chapter 4), and with Schopenhauer's idea of the world as will, for the Kantian aesthetic opened the door to a genuinely original relation to the wilderness.

*Thoreau's Wilderness Explorations:
The Evolution of an Idea*

Thoreau's idea of wilderness is rooted in a lifetime of primary experiences or firsthand meetings with nature. Not only did he live in the wilderness alongside Walden Pond for more than two years, but he ranged widely and frequently over New England and journeyed on occasion to Canada and Minnesota. Thoreau climbed mountains, explored the vast,

densely forested regions of Maine, and floated rivers. And he walked—day-hiked, in the popular idiom—almost every day of his life. These journeys were the existential substratum for his intellectual investigations, the folding back of consciousness on his immediate experiences. Thoreau was no rhapsodic Romantic or Lake Poet singing hymns of praise to nature's beauty. His excursions, as he called them, were not mere physical journeys but contemplative odysseys through which he gradually overcame the alienation of the person, both as living body and as sentient being rooted in culture, from nature. *Walden* is customarily viewed as Thoreau's masterpiece; yet a new perspective on the Thoreauvian corpus is that the *Journal*, traditionally viewed as a daily record and ultimately a source book for Thoreau's more formal works, takes precedence over all his other work.⁸ However, if we are to have any chance of understanding the radical, even revolutionary implications of his idea of wilderness, and in reconciling the multitudinous "definitive" scholarly studies, then we must retrace the route he took. No reader of the Thoreauvian corpus can fail to notice the evolution of his thought, even perhaps in a single work, given his penchant for folding time into his writings.

The height of early Thoreau is a "Natural History of Massachusetts" (1842), "A Walk to Wachusett" (1843), and "A Winter Walk" (1843).⁹ Of the three, "A Walk to Wachusett" is the most conventionally transcendental. As with Emerson's "Nature," where an encounter with nature is only a means to ground a pre-existent conclusion, "Wachusett" seems to be less about Thoreau's philosophical explorations (search for meaning) while climbing the mountain of that name than an imposition of a conventional interpretation on the experience. The first sentence sets the tone for the piece and shows the mark of Emerson's belief (that universals always underlie contemporaneous experience. From a transcendental perspective, the classic and therefore timeless insights of a Virgil or a Homer are the true meaning of wilderness encounters. "Summer and winter our eyes had rested on the dim outline of the mountains on our horizon, to which distance and indistinctness lent a grandeur not their own, so that they served equally to interpret all the allusions of poets and travelers; whether with Homer, on a spring morning, we sat down on the many-peaked Olympus, or with Virgil and his compeers roamed the Etrurian and Thessalian hills, or with Humboldt measured the more modern Andes and Teneriffe."¹⁰

This less than flowing beginning is followed by a long and stiff poem.¹¹ Unlike the later nature writing, the reader here continues only as a labor of love. Thoreau struggles to suffuse "Wachusett" with classical sensibilities. The essay lacks spontaneity and intensity; the prose is stilted as he strains

to achieve an empyrean view connecting the immediacy of the present moment with universal truth. Rather than using intuition and reflection to uncover meaning organically rooted in the encounter with nature, Thoreau tries to discover the significance of this present mountain excursion by subsuming it under classical and therefore timeless categories. Only after his engagement with Mount Katahdin (the highest peak in Maine) could he reconcile the natural and cultural in a complementary fashion. On the summit of Wachusett, Thoreau is incapable of finding meaning except through classical categories that frame the significance of his experience.

Near the end of the essay, reflecting an almost letter-perfect rendition of Emerson's "Nature," Thoreau reaches the conclusion of an orthodox transcendentalist, echoing the traditions of physico-theology and the argument from design, by finding evidence of divine plan in the mountainscape. "We could at length realize the place mountains occupy on the land, and how they come into *the general scheme of the universe*. When first we climb their summits and observe their lesser irregularities, we do not give credit to *the comprehensive intelligence* which shaped them; but when afterward we behold their outlines in the horizon, we confess that *the hand* which moulded their opposite slopes, making one to balance the other, worked round a deep centre, and was privy to *the plan of the universe*."¹² Here, then, is Emerson's idea of nature, capital "N" Nature over which human-kind ruled, strutting its stuff for the transcendental consciousness.

THE "Natural History of Massachusetts" and "A Winter Walk" are more felicitous pieces, in some ways almost vintage Thoreau. Some critics believe "Natural History" to be the first piece in the Thoreauvian nature writing genre. Both essays show the modern reader a Thoreau reveling in the presence of wild things, plants and animals, as well as his emerging talent for close observation of particulars—minutiae that an orthodox transcendentalist would recognize only as exemplifying universals. Thoreau had not yet accumulated that wealth of nature lore that he later drew on, and "Natural History" relies heavily on information from books—an observation confirmed by the uneven discussions of the various plant and animal species, some long and detailed, others no more than a few sentences. In this essay, however, Thoreau diverges from a narrow path, espousing ideas that were heresies to mainline New England transcendentalists. "In society you will not find health," he writes, "but in nature. . . . Society is always diseased, and the best is the most so." He also indicates that no merely conventional appreciation of nature is adequate; the parlors and polite conversation of Concord are wearing thin.

"We fancy that this din of religion, literature, and philosophy, which is heard in pulpits, lyceums, and parlors, vibrates through the universe, and is as catholic a sound as the creaking of the earth's axle; but if a man sleep soundly, he will forget it all between sunset and dawn."¹³ Expressing such ideas publicly would not in any social circle, and particularly one as geographically centralized as that of the New England transcendentalists, win friends and influence people.¹⁴

"Natural History" confirms Thoreau's critical bent, for conventional wisdom of any kind is suspect, mere opinion to be tested by immediate experience and later reflection.¹⁵ Emerson's teaching, for example the belief that a person might find in Nature proof positive of God's existence and the underlying order of things, is questioned. Thoreau's iconoclasm even leads him to criticize the scientific method, a platform that to Emerson and other transcendentalists reveals the eternal laws of nature, helping to confirm the existence of an Over-soul. Thoreau knew intuitively that if one gives a boy a new hammer, he will want to hammer everything he sees. The Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm epitomizes such an instrument, and in "Natural History" Thoreau rejects it.

The true man of science will know nature better by his finer organization; he will smell, taste, see, hear, feel, better than other men. His will be a deeper and finer experience. We do not learn by inference and deduction and the application of mathematics to philosophy, but by direct intercourse and sympathy. It is with science as with ethics, —*we cannot know truth by contrivance and method; the Baconian is as false as any other*, and with all the helps of machinery and the arts, the most scientific will still be the healthiest and friendliest man, and possess a more perfect Indian wisdom.¹⁶

Thoreau is not advocating scientific book burning but is seeking a kind of cognitive balance, an "Indian wisdom" that restores organic qualities to a world of scientific quantities and reintegrates human consciousness with the cognizable world. The seeker of Indian wisdom is clearly not a classicist imposing timeless Virgilian and Homeric categories on nature. Rather the search is for presocial meaning through primary experience in the wilderness, through encounter with a nonhuman other outside the domain of conventional wisdom. Thoreau here clearly questions the boundaries between wilderness and civilization that are absolutes to Emerson and his fellow transcendentalists. Thoreau's goal—however imprecisely formulated in "Natural History"—is to rekindle a primitive (savage, Paleolithic, archaic, or Indian) awareness of the Magna Mater. "Natural History"

makes clear the Thoreauvian notion that meaning can be found through an immediate (nonmediated) encounter with wild nature. This is the legacy of idealism and Romanticism unrealized in Emerson's "Nature."

The Thoreauvian exploration of the natural history of Massachusetts cannot be defined, then, in terms of either scientific or transcendental category. To escape the parlor's din he recommends a natural antidote: sleep, unconsciousness, a letting go of the categorically focused concentration on Nature. And in the morning, a fresh beginning, a walk into wild nature sans the categories of culture. Nature is alive with the sights and sounds that science excludes, and these secondary qualities Thoreau finds central to understanding nature-as-an-organism with which he is bound as distinct from nature-as-matter-in-mechanical-motion over which he stands as thinking subject. "Natural History" also sharpens our understanding of Thoreau's perspectives on nature as modified by human action. Massachusetts had been colonized two hundred years earlier, and those colonists confronted a true wilderness that they were determined to civilize. A long history of bloody encounters with the "Indians" and the depredations of hunters and trappers finally led to the "taming" of both wild people and the animals. "Natural History"—published six months before "Wachusett"—reveals a different perspective than that of literary pastoralism. Clearly, even at the beginning of his career when he was most influenced by Emerson, Thoreau was aware of humankind's adverse impact on nature. "The bear, wolf, lynx, wildcat, deer, beaver, and marten have disappeared; the otter is rarely if ever seen here at present; and the mink is less common than formerly."¹⁷

"A Winter Walk" begins with sentimental descriptions of waking and rising on a winter morning. Thoreau wishes to emphasize natural rhythms, the slow pace increasing as waking gives way to walking. Within a few pages Thoreau strikes a pace—close to the quality of description reached in *Walden*—that shows him as the very "true man of science" addressed in "Natural History." Sauntering through the winter landscape, free of the parlor's din, he establishes an intuitive bond with nature. Many of the ideas present in "Natural History" are again examined, rooted now in the winter wilds. "Meanwhile we step hastily along through the powdery snow, warmed by an inward heat, enjoying an Indian summer still, in the increased glow of thought and feeling. Probably if our lives were more conformed to nature, we should not need to defend ourselves against her heats and colds, but find her our constant nurse and friend, as do plants and quadrupeds." Yet Thoreau still attaches Emersonian interpretations

to this insight, observing that "what stays out [in winter] must be part of the original frame of the universe, and of such valor as God himself."¹⁸

"A Winter Walk," while echoing "Natural History," foreshadows themes developed in both *Walden* and "Walking," Thoreau's greatest essay on the idea of wilderness. He observes that "a healthy man, indeed, is the complement of the seasons, and in winter, summer is in his heart"—a structural theme in *Walden*. He also discovers in an abandoned woodsman's hut a model for his cabin at Walden Pond. And he finds in wilderness ramblings the inspiration so central to the message of "Walking." "The chickadee and nuthatch are more inspiring society than statesmen and philosophers . . . In this lonely glen, with its brook draining the slopes, its creased ice and crystals of all hues, where the spruces and hemlocks stand up on either side, and the rush and sere wild oats in the rivulet itself, our lives are more serene and worthy to contemplate." Rather than marching unconsciously to the dictates of society, a person-in-the-wilderness is more natural, in tune with organic fundamentals, and thus not a philosopher or scientist but a person of Indian wisdom. Similarly, the fisher "does not make the scenery less wild, more than the jays and muskrats, but stands there as a part of it . . . He belongs to the natural family of man, and is planted deeper in nature and has more root than the inhabitants of towns."¹⁹

"Natural History" and "A Winter Walk" reveal a Thoreau in process, exploring the wilderness for meaning, and slowly progressing toward mastery of his medium of expression. An abstract quality, although muted, remains in these essays, which sometimes fall back on transcendental universals rather than develop original conclusions drawn from intuition. But we see Thoreau's imagination beginning to stretch the categories—both transcendental and classical—of experience, as he explores new methods of knowing. The Thoreauvian art form is yet imperfect, but the use of natural metaphors (for example, a healthy man has summer in his heart; the fisher has roots in nature) has ensued. Thoreau has not yet reconciled the natural and the cultural, but he has set out on a singular path.²⁰

A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers was written during Thoreau's sojourn at Walden Pond, and his intent to draft the book may have influenced his decision to make such a retreat.²¹ *A Week* exemplifies his lifelong habits of working and reworking his literary efforts and of incorporating materials accumulated over years into a single work. The book includes fragments from his journal of 1837 (his elliptical record of

the voyage), a poem he wrote in 1839, pieces of essays he published in *The Dial* in the early 1840s, and the essay "Friendship," written in 1848. *A Week*, as might be anticipated for a first book, lacks the craftsmanship of *Walden* (Joseph Wood Krutch calls the work "scattered and unfocused") and again shows the lingering influence of Emersonian transcendentalism. As in "Wachusett," abstruse passages interrupt the narrative flow.²² Nevertheless, the book reveals advances in Thoreau's idea of wilderness: he set out on the river in search of something like the eternal mythical present or point of origin (original face) of the Paleolithic mind.

I had often stood on the banks of the Concord, watching the lapse of the current, an emblem of all progress, following the same law with the system, with time, and all that is made; the weeds at the bottom gently bending down the stream, shaken by the watery wind, still planted where their seeds had sunk, but ere long to die and go down likewise; the shining pebbles, not yet anxious to better their condition, the chips and weeds, and occasional logs and stems of trees, that floated past, fulfilling their fate, were objects of singular interest to me, and at last I resolved to launch myself on its bosom, and float whither it would bear me.²³

A Week begins with a passage that provides a vantage point on Thoreau's sorting out of the interrelations between the cultural and natural and on his increasingly adept use of language to uncover these meanings. In fact, *A Week* returns again and again to fundamental questions of language and expression, of contrasts between "white man's poetry" and Indian muses.

The Musketaquid, or Grass-ground River, though probably as old as the Nile or Euphrates, did not begin to have a place in civilized history, until the fame of its grassy meadows and its fish attracted settlers out of England in 1635, when it received the other but kindred name of CONCORD from the first plantation on its banks, which appears to have been commenced in a spirit of peace and harmony. It will be Grass-ground River as long as grass grows and water runs here; it will be Concord River only while men lead peaceable lives on its banks. To an extinct race it was grass-ground, where they hunted and fished, and it is still perennial grass-ground to Concord farmers, who own the Great Meadows and get the hay from year to year.²⁴

This passage manifests a deepening appreciation of the philosophical complexities inherent in language and sound. Thoreau views "Musketa-

quid" as the true name of the river, as a name rooted in a natural and therefore primary rather than merely cultural and thus contingent history. Something in the Indian name captures his imagination as it flows from the tongue. "If we could listen but for an instant to the chaunt of the Indian muse, we should understand why he will not exchange his savageness for civilization."²⁵ "Concord," although kindred, is a merely conventional name, an imposition of a recent social order upon natural fact. By emphasizing the name of the grass-ground river as "Musketaquid," Thoreau attempts to disclose a presence concealed by conventional designation, a presocial, primal, and therefore genuine meaning.²⁶ Further, as grass-ground river the river endures beyond the reign of civilization. Thoreau here achieves a hermeneutical insight into the linguisticity and historicity of the human predicament. *Language speaks*, as Heidegger says, language is the house of Being.²⁷ (Thoreau is intuitively aware of this encompassing linguistic reality; what eludes his attention is the further realization that all language, as a human phenomenon, takes on conventional meaning and that the passage of time ultimately carries away any and all phenomena, including the grass-ground river and its Indian name.)

Throughout *A Week* Thoreau weaves archaic languages—as in selections from Virgil—through quotation into the text. Unlike "Wachusett," where the citations seem mere ornamentations, the material is integrated into the philosophical exploration, essential to the realization of nature's priority over culture. Ancient and dead languages now held a fascination for Thoreau, particularly when they recognized living nature; that element bonded him with archaic sensibilities and thus with a time before the enfolding of meaning within the merely present. "These are such sentences as were written while grass grew and water ran." Thoreau seeks to write sentences like those written when the grass first grew and the water ran fresh, unsullied by humankind. Though unusual, these are perfectly healthy sentences that "are, perhaps, not the nicest, but the surest and roundest."²⁸

A Week, then, reveals the germs of Thoreau's quest for mastery of his medium, his goal to communicate through the written word the very pulse of human encounter—naked experience, without transcendental universals or other armament—with wild nature. A true seeker of wisdom must, Ortega y Gasset observes, lay down the merely traditional and orthodox and seek the wild beast of truth in the jungle where it lives.²⁹ Geoffrey O'Brien suggests that "Thoreau dreaded the sterility of purely denotative language." As a result he struggled to maintain contact with the natural world that remained vital, outside the printed page. "The 'perfectly healthy sentence' that he wants to write is not a dissection of reality

but a spontaneous manifestation of it, a human utterance equivalent to 'the crowing of cocks, the baying of dogs, and the hum of insects at noon, . . . evidence of nature's health or *sound* state.'"³⁰ The structuring of *A Week* around two natural metaphors—the days and the river—is part of Thoreau's endeavor to ground consciousness in nature. A day is a natural cycle beginning with a dawn that finally gives way to night, as Sirius and the constellations replace Sol. Similarly, the river is a natural metaphor for a sentient life, a never-ending flow through time, freed from the confines of convention.

Thoreau digresses in *A Week* to recount his exploration of Mount Greylock in July 1844. Approaching the mountain along a "romantic and retired valley," he crosses a stream whose "constant murmuring would quiet the passions of mankind forever."³¹ Here he encounters a last outpost of civilization, a man named Rice—crude and gruff, an aboriginal man unsuited to Concord yet at home in the mountains. "He was, indeed, as rude as a fabled satyr. But I suffered him to pass for what he was, for why should I quarrel with nature? and was even pleased at the discovery of such a singular natural phenomenon. I dealt with him as if to me all manners were indifferent, and he had a sweet wild way with him. I would not question nature, and I would rather have him as he was, than as I would have him. For I had come up here not for sympathy, or kindness, or society, but for novelty and adventure, and to see what nature had produced here."³² The contrast between a man like Rice and the members of the Concord circle must have been overwhelming. Rice is not a gentleman but a natural-man, living in close consort with nature, as Thoreau would soon do at Walden Pond. Obviously, there is a rationale for including this incident in *A Week* on more than one score. While living at Walden Pond, Thoreau likely drafted the episode because Rice, too, rejected social convention for a wild life.

Thoreau's idea of wilderness and his unique way of seeing is not complete in *A Week*, nor is his quest to write "perfectly healthy sentences" fulfilled. When pressed for conclusions, he often falls back into comfortable cubbyholes of thought. Yet his close observation of Rice and attention to Indian words reveal an increasing awareness of organic, presocial layers of meaning: he is abandoning the methods of transcendentalism for those of philosophical anthropology.³³ As readers like Jerome Rothenberg and Fred Turner suggest, Thoreau was ideally placed in time, since during the nineteenth century the idea that archaic societies might serve as models for European society came into currency. *A Week* reveals in part an anthropological inquiry just underway, an idea of wilderness in process. Thoreau

has abandoned the Emersonian position outlined in "Nature," which assumes as givens the categories (economic, religious, political, scientific) of Modernism and searches for alternatives. So viewed, the Walden experiment represents Thoreau's self-conscious step across the boundary between wilderness and civilization. He is trying to recreate "the economic condition of the savage, in search of the place where we took our false turning. . . . [At Walden] Thoreau is being historically, as well as personally, reflexive; just as he is seeking the foundations of his own experience, he is seeking the foundations of the experience of his culture."³⁴

AT THIS JUNCTURE our path becomes less defined, as contemporaneously and posthumously published works, and material from the *Journal*, begin to intertwine. Even determining a strict chronology is difficult, given Thoreau's penchant for continual revision. Yet there is justification for considering the posthumously published *Maine Woods* (1864), edited by his sister Sophia and his lifelong friend Ellery Channing, as the next step in the unfolding of Thoreau's idea of wilderness. The book is an amalgamation of three essays based on three trips to Maine (1846, 1853, 1857). Yet *Maine Woods* is essential because of the excursion to Ktaadn.³⁵ "Ktaadn" is an Indian word meaning highest land, substituted by Thoreau for the Anglicized "Katahdin." The journey to Ktaadn's summit was an existential encounter that dealt a death blow to the Emersonian notion that the world existed for humankind. Thoreau began his trip to Ktaadn—which is, at precisely one mile above sea level, the highest and most precipitous mountain in Maine—on August 31, 1846 (thus interrupting his stay at Walden), but he had had the plan in mind for some time.³⁶ There is no reason to think that he even remotely conceived of what awaited him, for he left Walden a somewhat unorthodox transcendentalist with romantic tendencies. He returned with an understanding of the fundamental untenability of the Emersonian stance toward wild nature, having learned that there was no easy equation between consciousness (*psyche*) and nature, between the cultural and natural, between humankind and the wilderness. To this point in life, including his experiences at Walden Pond, Thoreau's intercourse with wild nature had been pleasant, if occasionally uncomfortable, but never threatening. The Ktaadn excursion tested him, physically and psychologically, in a new and radical way.

Maine Woods reveals a Thoreau in high spirits as the journey begins, but as his party works deeper into the wilderness his outlook subtly shifts. He begins to sense evil within nature—a position in some ways not unlike a conventional Judeo-Christian orientation. Thoreau, seeker of Indian

wisdom, a man who had admired Rice for his rough and uncivilized ways, is suddenly taken aback by the true wilderness. The contrast is obvious. Walden Pond, though once removed from Concord, is on the edge of civilization, where even in his criticism of conventional wisdom Thoreau remains within a safe world with known boundaries. The Maine woods, once removed from Walden, is *terra incognita* with life-endangering circumstances—a true psychological and physical divide.

The text brilliantly shows his awareness of the crossing, as he becomes increasingly attentive to the evidences of civilization, seeking to maintain a psychic balance between the civil and the natural. He comments favorably on the signs of human existence: the scarring of the forest by loggers, a ring-bolt drilled into rock, even a brick someone had left behind. He characterizes trout caught for supper as “the fairest flowers, the product of primitive rivers,” “these bright fluviate flowers, seen of Indians only, made beautiful, the Lord only knows why, to swim there!” thus reassuring himself that nature is not evil. That night Thoreau dreams of the beautiful trout, but the doubts—the psychic foreboding—emerge again. Questioning the dream’s veracity, Thoreau rises before dawn to “test its truth”: “There stood Ktaadn with distinct and cloudless outline in the moonlight; and the rippling of the rapids was the only sound to break the stillness. Standing on the shore, I once more cast my line into the stream, and found the dream to be real and the fable true. The speckled trout and silvery roach, like flying-fish, sped swiftly through the moonlight air, describing bright arcs on the dark side of Ktaadn, until moonlight, now fading into daylight, brought satiety to my mind, and the minds of my companions who had joined me.”³⁷ To all appearances, Thoreau is striving to maintain an Emersonian view of the wilderness even on the verge of his climb.

The ascent soon disabused him of any vestiges of a romantic view of nature. Breaking camp, Thoreau moved to head the party, being the “oldest mountain climber.” Reaching a south-running ridge extending from the main peak (the proposed route of ascent), he was rewarded with his best view yet, one unlike any he had seen before. “Ktaadn presented a different aspect from any mountain I have seen, there being a greater proportion of naked rock, rising abruptly from the forest; and we looked up at this blue barrier as if it were some fragment of a wall which anciently bounded the earth in that direction.” From this point the party almost immediately lost sight of the peak, being “buried in the woods.”³⁸ By four o’clock the group had not reached the summit, and all except Thoreau returned to camp. He continued alone, climbing alongside a precipitous

waterfall into the clouds, until he came to a raging river, approximately thirty feet wide, where he paused to survey the country below.

The wildness of the country was again affecting his perception. “I began to work my way, scarcely less arduous than Satan’s anciently through Chaos, up the nearest, though not the highest peak,” through the “most treacherous and porous country I ever traveled,” where “rocks, gray, silent rocks, were the flocks and herds that pastured, chewing a rocky cud at sunset. They looked at me with hard gray eyes, without a bleat or a low.” Nature was losing its human countenance, turning from familiar friend to potentially hostile stranger: this was no Emersonian excursion. Thoreau returned to camp, perhaps glad to be back in human company. After a fitful night’s sleep, with the wind whipping embers from the fire around the camp, and the party unsettled by the howl of the wind and flapping tent fabric, Thoreau awoke and again contemplated the mountain. The experiences of the previous afternoon were beginning to crystallize into more definite impressions.

The mountain seemed a vast aggregation of loose rocks, as if some time it had rained rocks, and they lay as they fell on the mountain sides, nowhere fairly at rest, but leaning on each other, all rocking-stones, with cavities between, but scarcely any soil or smoother shelf. They were the raw materials of a planet dropped from an unseen quarry, which the vast chemistry of nature would anon work up, or work down, into the smiling and verdant plains and valleys of earth. This was an undone extremity of the globe; as in lignite, we see coal in the process of formation.³⁹

The wilderness was becoming before his eyes a world of evolving matter-in-motion upon which the impersonal chemistry of nature worked. Beautiful trout were no longer inscribing bright arcs on the side of Ktaadn: the mountain was but raw materials of a planet dropped from some unseen quarry. As an Emersonian transcendentalist armed with conventional categories and comfortable conclusions, Thoreau had died on Ktaadn’s ridge, and he verged on achieving a primordial, if threatening, relation to the universe.

Impatient to begin the climb, and perhaps eager to test his courage, Thoreau left camp alone. As he climbed he was engulfed by “the hostile ranks of clouds It was, in fact, a cloud-factory,—these were the cloud-works, and the wind turned them off done from the cool, bare rocks.” All the Homeric odes and poetry of Virgil, the transcendental prin-

ciples of Emerson, and even the romanticizing of nature's beauty were suddenly meaningless. Thoreau was disoriented, struggling not only against the mountainside and the clouds to find his way but also for understanding.

Æschylus had no doubt visited such scenery as this. It was vast, Titanic, and such as man never inhabits. Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends. He is more lone than you can imagine. There is less of substantial thought and fair understanding in him than in the plains [or the parlors of Concord, or even Walden Pond] where men inhabit. His reason is dispersed and shadowy, more thin and subtile, like the air. Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty.⁴⁰

Thoreau's education atop Ktaadn was not yet finished, but the principles of Emerson's "Nature" had already been bracketed. As the clouds thickened, he abandoned the ascent and returned to camp. The significance of the journey now struck home with sudden impact.

Perhaps I most fully realized that this was primeval, untamed and forever untameable *Nature*, or whatever else men call it, while coming down And yet we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast and drear and inhuman Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Nights. Here was no man's garden, but the unhandseled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor waste-land [that is, eludes all conventional categorization]. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made forever and ever,—to be the dwelling of man, we say, [a notion Thoreau is clearly questioning]—so Nature made it, and many may use it if he can. Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific,—not his Mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on, or be buried in,—no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there,—the home, this, of Necessity and Fate. There was clearly felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. It was a place for heathenism and superstitious rites,—to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we. . . . Perchance where *our* wild pines stand, and leaves lie on their forest floor, in Concord, there were once reap-

ers, and husbandmen planted grain; but here not even the surface had been scarred by man, but it was a specimen of what God saw fit to make this world. What is it to be admitted to a museum, to see a myriad of particular things, compared with being shown some star's surface, some hard matter in its home! I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one,—*that* my body might,—but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense*! *Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?*⁴¹

This is surely one of the two most remarkable pages of prose ever penned by Thoreau.⁴² If we believe that his constant quest is to elucidate the relations between human consciousness and nature, then Ktaadn defines one endpoint: brute facticity, the material world, even his own material body within which his consciousness existed, could be alien. Ktaadn rekindles for Thoreau a primal or Paleolithic coming-to-consciousness of humankind's naked rootedness in and absolute dependence upon nature. If *Walden* and "Walking" later refine his definitions of the positive side of the wilderness, then Ktaadn deals with its negative promontory. Yet Ktaadn represents more: the encounter was crucial to the evolution of Thoreau's idea of wilderness. Positively viewed, (1) the position developed in "Ktaadn" is antithetical to Emerson's philosophy, the final step in Thoreau's development from transcendentalism to a genuine relation to the universe. His writings hereafter carry the mark of his singular experiences, of his unique vantage point on the wilderness, and of his genius. More important, (2) the encounter with Ktaadn sharpens Thoreau's understanding of interrelations between humankind and nature. "Talk of mysteries! . . . Think of our life in nature. . . *Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?*" Thoreau's allusion to being shown a star's surface is closer to cosmological truth than he knew (see below, chapter 10). By the time he returned to Walden Pond he was enroute to developing—independently of Darwin and Wallace specifically, and the paleontological and geological advances in Europe more generally—a profound evolutionary perspective on nature. By the time *Walden* was published Thoreau had worked this problem through.

Thoreau returned to the Maine woods twice more. Although the Ktaadn excursion liberated him from transcendentalism, both "Chesuncook" and

"The Allegash and East Branch" (included as part of *Maine Woods*) clarify the distinctions between Emerson and Thoreau. Foreshadowing John Muir's observations, and clearly deviating from the Emersonian commodities view of nature, Thoreau begins "Ktaadn" by observing how even the vast Maine forest had been scarred by logging. So much timber had been harvested and floated downstream to the sea that ships were sometimes becalmed, hemmed in by vast rafts of floating logs. Thoreau notes that there is something nearly tragic in cutting a living tree, for it becomes "lumber merely." "Think how stood the white-pine tree on the shore of the Chesuncook, its branches soughing with the four winds, and every individual needle trembling in the sunlight,—think how it stands with it now,—sold, perchance to the New England Friction-Match Company! . . . The mission of men there seems to be, like so many busy demons, to drive the forest all out of the country, from every solitary beaver-swamp, and mountain-side, as soon as possible."⁴³ Thoreau is asserting, as he argues more systematically in both *Walden* and "Life without Principle," that economic categories blind human beings, destroying not only living entities, which are reduced to use value only, but also the human soul. There can be no easy equation between Thoreauvian and Emersonian views of natural entities. For Thoreau they exist in and for themselves, whereas for Emerson they are ultimately commodities, provided by a benevolent God for his most perfect creation.⁴⁴

Thoreau extends his critique of the economic appropriation of the forest (and wild nature generally) in the later essays. In "Chesuncook," the second part of the book, we see his increasing hermeneutical sophistication. In a passage that reverberates with echoes of the Paleolithic mind, Thoreau recognizes the wilderness as composed of natural entities living self-sufficiently and contrasts this view with the masses of people who are oblivious because of the imprisoning effects of customary categories. He writes that "the pine is no more lumber [despite our human designation of it as 'lumber'] than man is, and to be made into boards and houses is no more its true and highest use than the truest use of a man is to be cut down and made into manure. . . . Every creature is better alive than dead, men and moose and pine-trees, and he who understands it aright will rather preserve its life than destroy it."⁴⁵

Neither a clearer nor an earlier statement of the preservationist's credo can be found. Thoreau denies the unquestioned validity of conventional categories, which ostensibly define the forest, animals, and all wild nature. The true meaning of the wilderness, he insists, is rooted in the spirit of living nature and in the relation of human consciousness to that world.

not in human categorization or use or both. Further, he recognizes that if humans are to understand the wildness that lies across the divide, then conventional wisdom (Modernism) must be bracketed. By expressing his intuitions, Thoreau is revealing a presence concealed by language, simultaneously exeging himself and his relations to wild nature. This is the hermeneutical circle. Thoreau's writing here threatens a quantum leap into a new wilderness mythology beyond the realm of convention—exposing through his art form a world that all might see.

AFTER KTAADN, THOREAU returned to Walden Pond and finished drafting *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.⁴⁶ September 6, 1847, marked his final departure from Walden Pond—the classic experiment in the woods lasted two days beyond twenty-six months. Soon after, he began to draft the *Walden* manuscript, a process that extended over several years through seven major drafts. Although *Walden* was originally intended for publication in 1849, the dismal sale of *A Week* set Thoreau's plans back, undoubtedly to the benefit of posterity.⁴⁷ The book was finally published in 1854. *Walden* gives the appearance of orthodox transcendentalism, but the book itself belies that interpretation. Thoreau clearly rises above Emersonian transcendentalism and reintegrates human consciousness with wild nature by erasing the fence that conventionally separates wilderness and civilization. *Walden* also transcends the paradox of Ktaadn, where the material world stood opposed to human consciousness. For Thoreau, Ktaadn reveals the excesses of transcendentalism; *Walden* (the working in the bean field, the palpable reality of the seasons, the melting of the sandbank, and the reflection upon these experiences) allows him to advance from that encounter to a unique wilderness philosophy. *Walden* reveals the human ego as nature grown self-conscious, a theme Thoreau developed further in "Walking."⁴⁸ It also unequivocally expresses a grasp of the essential triadic integration of matter, life, and consciousness.

The book begins with "Economy," almost three times longer than "The Ponds" and perhaps five times longer than any other section. "Economy" subtly offers a critical analysis of the economic forces that rule human lives, and a reflective justification of why Thoreau came to the pond. Explaining that he embraces wild nature to free himself from civilization's grip, he confesses his ultimate goal: to discover life's essentials. The argument flows gently along, and yet the Thoreauvian dialectic cuts a deep channel, questioning both the presuppositions of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and the very idea of knowledge. "Economy" begins by strip-

ping bare the social illusions—the force of custom, of opinion—that govern most human lives. The most famous and often quoted line of *Walden* comes to the point. “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” Underlying these ruined lives is Modernism: the liberal-democratic industrial state that promises so much and delivers so little. “Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. . . . [The laboring man] has no time to be any thing but a machine. How can he remember well his ignorance—which his growth requires—who has so often to use his knowledge? . . . The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling.”⁴⁹

Here Thoreau only hints at the positive function of ignorance—an Indian wisdom achieved through spontaneous encounter with nature—an idea he develops in “Walking.” He does, however, explore the trap that the claim to knowledge, or the belief that something is known absolutely, represents, again validating the distinction between opinion that enslaves the mind and the wisdom that is the goal of inquiry. “The greater part of what my neighbors call good,” Thoreau writes, “I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of any thing, it is very likely to be my good behavior.” His point is that knowledge of truth, justice, and virtue have little or nothing to do with tradition, custom, or popularity even if conventional wisdom rules the world. “The millions are awake enough for physical labor,” he writes, “but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion.” In these insights Thoreau shows a remarkable sense of ideas later developed by twentieth-century sociologists, philosophical anthropologists, and social psychologists.⁵⁰

Having recognized humankind’s social predicament, and the resultant force of mere opinion on thought, he turns to societal institutions and traditions; these, too, he finds wanting. “It would be some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessities of life For the improvements of ages have had but little influence on the essential laws of man’s existence; as our skeletons, probably, are not to be distinguished from those of our ancestors.” Thoreau’s immediate concern is with the effect of economic society on the individual, since he believes that mainstream New England culture represents an untenable answer to an essentially simple problem—living a good life. A necessary though not sufficient condition for such a life, he argues, is simply to maintain one’s “vital heat,” requiring only food and shelter—those essential laws of human existence.

But, anticipating the consumer culture and conspicuous consumption of the twentieth century, Thoreau observes that “most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor.” And later, again with penetrating sociological insight, he writes that “it is the luxurious and dissipated who set the fashions which the herd so diligently follow.”⁵¹ Thoreau thus rejects one of the cardinal presuppositions of Adam Smith—namely, that human well-being can be equated with the consumption of material goods. Although Modernism still rules the world and society has not yet understood Thoreau, his essential insight is irrefragable: beyond the minimum necessary for sustenance, material consumption becomes a parody of itself.

As “Economy” ends, Thoreau hints at the thesis developed in detail in the following section: “to maintain one’s self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely.” The *Walden* experiment thus straddles the physical and the intellectual: Thoreau seeks to simplify the business of maintaining vital heat and, once free of social illusions, to uncover the good life. “Economy” prepares the way for the conclusion offered in “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For.”

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. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear, nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have *somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.”⁵²

This paragraph is pivotal. Thoreau went to *Walden* to discover primal ways of living. By experiencing an organic life he hoped to find an alternative to “the lives of quiet desperation.” So viewed, the *Walden* project is an anthropological inquiry: an attempt to uncover the outlines of archaic

culture, to recapture a Paleolithic consciousness, and to become a man of Indian wisdom. Thoreau intends to "suck out all the marrow of life," a carefully chosen metaphor that underscores the unconventionality of the experiment. There is also a post-Ktaadn flavor to this account, for he suggests at least a possibility that life in the wilderness might be mean. Yet he enters his wilderness laboratory without either classical categories or transcendental principles, specifically rejecting a conventional intellectual's life, as epitomized by Emerson and the other members of the Concord circle. "There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. . . . They make shift to live merely by conformity, practically as their fathers did, and are in no sense the progenitors of a nobler race of men. . . . The [true] philosopher is in advance of his age even in the outward form of his life. He is not fed, sheltered, clothed, warmed, like his contemporaries. How can a man be a philosopher and not maintain his vital heat by better methods than other men?"⁵³

Neither transcendental philosophers nor ordinary laborers pass the Thoreauvian test for living the good life. Philosophers are prisoners of abstract systems of ideas, workers the captives of the factory system.⁵⁴ The good life, Thoreau is confident, involves living in harmony with nature and the essential laws of human existence, and knowledge of these essentials can be found only in the wilderness, away from the entangling vines of civilization. Thoreau vividly contrasts adults, locked in the world of convention, with children, who spontaneously approach the world, open to its teachings. "By closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit every where, which still is built on purely illusory foundations. Children, who play life, discern its true law and relations more clearly than men, who fail to live it worthily, but who think that they are wiser by experience, that is, by failure."⁵⁵ Children at play do not impose adult schemes upon the world but interact imaginatively with their environment through games. A child might look at a forest as a refuge for hide-and-seek, or a place of mystery and adventure, begging for exploration, whereas an adult might look at the same forest in terms of its value as lumber or as an obstacle to pasturing cattle. More crucially, in the adult world time is money, an attitude rooted in the Protestant ethic. In the child's world time is an infinite sequence of moments, each to be appreciated fully in and of itself.

Thoreau concludes that "time is but the stream I go a-fishing in." This statement implicitly contradicts both the conventional idea of scientific time (Newton's absolute time, part of the structure of the universe, and fundamental to the modern worldview that sure and certain knowledge is

possible) and religious time (Christian time, a secular vale of tears to be endured before salvation). Thoreauvian time is organic, a temporal flow to be enjoyed immediately, then savored through later reflection. It is also cyclical, as with the change of the seasons. Given this organic stream of time, Thoreau continues, he wants to do nothing more than

drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things. I do not wish to be any more busy with my hands than is necessary. My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and forepaws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining rod and thin rising vapors I judge; and here I will begin to mine.⁵⁶

The epistemological implications of this passage are complicated yet elementary. The path to knowledge is to engage time—the flow of life—like a child. Perhaps Thoreau should have spelled out his theory of knowledge with more precision; and yet, read in context, the passage summarizes his previous observations concerning knowledge and lays a foundation for later chapters. Like a child, he spends his time fishing, playing in a stream whose current (portending evolutionary process) reveals eternity—nature's way as manifested in an eternal mythical present. The idea of time as a stream, pebbled with stars on the bottom and fish in the sky, is a richly imaginative and powerful metaphor, childish in a way that surely nettled Emerson, yet more profound than anything he had written. Yet, paradox on paradox, Thoreau cannot count even one star and claims not to know the alphabet. Why? Because the path to Indian wisdom is not through mensuration, quantification, differentiation. Thoreau is in the wilderness to fish for the essential laws of existence, for some sense of the cosmic whole. School learning has made him less wise than the day he was born. But Walden presents the opportunity, away from society, to practice contemplative fishing. Common sense, Thoreau realizes, is a cleaver that names, categorizes, and discriminates in a conventional pattern. "My head," Thoreau claims, "is my hands and feet" (yet another trope). So he keeps his hands free from workaday demands, since his best faculties for

knowing are concentrated in his head—that is, his hands and feet. He will therefore engage himself with walking, and he will burrow, because he intuits a “rich vein” of knowledge nearby. The hoeing in the bean field is about to commence.

Having told us Thoreau’s purpose, *Walden* settles into a comfortable pace, recounting his life alongside Walden Pond. He relates that he sometimes read, but not newspapers, rather Homer and Æschylus, the classics—something with roots deeper than the immediate moment, deeper than prevailing opinion. He laments that “most men have learned to read to serve a paltry convenience, as they have learned to cipher in order to keep accounts and not be cheated in trade; but of reading as a noble intellectual exercise they know little or nothing.” Yet even the classics contain a trap, however important the messages or insights therein. Thoreau is no longer the classicist who wrote “Wachusett,” straining to impose Virgil and others upon contemporary experience, for “while we are confined to books, though the most select and classic, and read only particular written languages, which are themselves but dialects and provincial, *we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor*, which alone is copious and standard. . . . What is a course of history, or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen [and heard].”⁵⁷

The differences between this Thoreau, mature in thought and master of his medium, and the early Thoreau are evident: the empyrean quest has been abandoned. Once free of society, wilderness sights, sounds, and events might intuitively register on consciousness, much like a leaf landing on the surface of a pond, gently supported by surface tension of the water, registering its presence in spreading ripples. Sights, sounds, smells, textures—these are the unmediated language of reality, and they, unlike the abstract generalities of Emerson’s “Nature,” become the substance of his prose. Clearly Thoreau has reached an explicit awareness of language as an organic medium of expression, in part a mirror of nature that therefore reflects truths about the human condition. Meaning is to be found in wild nature, and it can be best expressed through natural metaphor and trope. Thoreau’s use of these is part of his genius, and a reason for working in the bean field, since “some must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day.”⁵⁸

Remarkably, Thoreau achieved insight into the imprisoning subtleties and liberating potentialities of language from a mid-nineteenth-century vantage point—there was no rich tradition of hermeneutics to draw upon

—realizing through his own persistent efforts that *humankind is language* and that conventional language enframes the human project.⁵⁹ The consequences of this enframing, left unrecognized, are stifling. Thus Thoreau aims to break free, not through a romantic retreat to some prelapsarian age of innocence but through recovery of words that speak granitic truth. Thoreau’s goal is to ground his language in nature and thereby (to paraphrase Paul Ricoeur) empty language of its conventional meaning while filling it anew—in short, his project is no less than the “hope of a re-creation of language.”⁶⁰ Thoreau’s earlier use of ancient languages and Indian words gives way in *Walden* to his own imaginative re-creation of the elemental, the primordial or presocial dimension of human experience that grounds all language.

Thoreau’s journal gives evidence of his “hermeneutical” reflections, and the entry for May 10, 1853, combines his hermeneutical insights with his critique of conventional science and his quest to become a person of Indian wisdom—the true science.

He is the richest who has most use for nature as raw material of tropes and symbols with which to describe his life. If these gates of golden willows affect me, they correspond to the beauty and promise of some experience on which I am entering. If I am overflowing with life, am rich in experience for which I lack expression, then nature will be my language full of poetry,—all nature will *fable*, and every natural phenomenon be a myth. The man of science, who is not seeking for expression but for a fact to be expressed merely, studies nature as a dead language. I pray for such inward experience as will make nature significant.⁶¹

These are remarkable statements. “I pray for such inward experience as will make nature significant.” Such visions would animate a new natural mythology, recapturing a sense of meaning (presence) that scientific language and philosophical abstraction stripped from the world.⁶² By going into the wilderness, Thoreau empties his mind of conventional wisdom and prepares to receive life through primary experience: epiphanies which reveal an eternal mythical present, dimensions of being hidden from ordinary consciousness. And “all nature will *fable*, and every natural phenomenon will be a myth.” If we view *Walden* through this lens, then it represents a new wilderness mythology, an alternative to all that “Nature” and the Cartesian-Newtonian concept of nature represent, a world beyond nineteenth-century conventionality. Wild nature will fable (from *fabulari*, to talk), that is, speak through a person if that person will but let natural

phenomena have voice, and such a speaking will be as if literally true, alive, and organic. The facts of science, imprisoned within conventional language (including mathematics), are inert human inventions, at best useful fictions. So, too, is Emersonian transcendentalism, and the idea that nature has been created by a transcendent God for *man*.

"Solitude" complements this line of analysis, for freed from convention, including the classics, Thoreau becomes a sensitive register of what surrounds and sustains him. "This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself." Through life in solitude by the pond, Thoreau achieves an organic yet conscious unity with wild nature. "What do we want most to dwell near to? Not to many men surely, the depot, the post-office, the bar-room, the meeting-house, the school-house, the grocery, Beacon Hill, or the Five Points, where men most congregate, but to *the perennial source of our life*, whence in all our experience we have found that to issue, as the willow stands near the water and sends out its roots in that direction." Thoreau has transcended Judeo-Christian presuppositions about time, the scientific idea of nature, Cartesian dualism, and the Baconian dream: wilderness is neither an alien enemy to be conquered nor a resource to be exploited but "the perennial source of life." Here Thoreau verges on a Paleolithic awareness of living life within nature: all nature is alive, filled with kindred spirits, and he is at home in it (see above, chapter 1). "Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and the humanest was not a person nor a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again." Thoreau's attitude or outlook is, anthropologically considered, archaic. "While I enjoy the friendship of the seasons I trust that nothing can make life a burden to me." "Solitude" also foreshadows the evolutionary insights developed near the conclusion of *Walden*. "Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?"⁶³

"The Bean-Field" is a crucial experiment for Thoreau and a virtuoso demonstration of reflective thought and anthropological insight expressed through natural metaphor. In philosophical terms, the chapter is a dialectical movement as the actual experience of working in the field shapes and reshapes understanding. Thoreau marries human intentionality to wild nature through his hands and feet. He finds an intrinsic pleasure in selfless work, where hoe and hand, muscle and soil, seed and sun become

one. The beans "attached me to the earth." Any gardener can understand Thoreau's pleasure. Beyond the virtue of work itself, Thoreau discovers affinities between his self and the organic materials with which he worked, rising above a commonsense categorization of weeds and critters. His initial understanding is conventional. "My enemies are worms, cool days, and most of all woodchucks." By the end of his labors Thoreau discovers that from a mythic viewpoint—one that escapes human centeredness and includes larger, natural cycles of existence—the "beans have results which are not harvested by me. Do they not grow for woodchucks partly? . . . How, then, can our harvest fail? Shall I not rejoice also at the abundance of the weeds whose seeds are the granary of the birds?" Rain is part of a larger cycle that lies outside the ordinary purview of human experience, even that of a farmer. "If it should continue so long as to cause the seeds to rot in the ground and destroy the potatoes in the low lands, it would still be good for the grass on the uplands, and, being good for the grass, it would be good for me."⁶⁴

While hoeing in the bean field, Thoreau stumbles on a metaphor for rooting culture in wild nature—an idea developed fully in "Walking." "When my hoe tinkled against the stones, that music echoed to the woods and the sky, and was an accompaniment to my labor which yielded an instant and immeasurable crop. It was no longer beans that I hoed, nor I that hoed beans." The insights gained in the bean field are methodologically distinct from the results of either scientist or transcendental philosopher. Thoreau is a seeker of Indian wisdom, a proto-anthropologist digging for organic truth. The arrowheads in the soil he tills become a metaphor for the interpenetration of the natural with the cultural and sentient—all woven into a moment of time. Thoreau extends the analogy a few lines later, as hawks circle overhead, "alternately soaring and descending, approaching and leaving one another, as if they were the embodiment of my own thoughts." He brings the metaphor full circle by comparing the seeds he plants in the bean field to "sincerity, truth, simplicity"—human virtues, which themselves can become "wormeaten" or lose vitality.⁶⁵ Just as with beans, virtues must be planted from seeds and cultivated, and only vital stock yields an abundant harvest. Most human beings neglect the lessons of the bean field and are therefore oblivious to life's essentials: virtue, like beans, must be seeded from good strains and nurtured.

Reverberations from "Economy" now come stage center in the "Bean-field," for not only are human beings more concerned about their crops than virtue, their motivation is mercantile. The prototypical modern person is *Homo oeconomicus*, and the sole value of farming the land is profit.

Such activities do not bring the human spirit closer to the soil and larger organic process but render nature of use value only—a boundary (common to Adam Smith and Karl Marx) Thoreau is determined to transgress, or at least question.

Ancient poetry and mythology suggest, at least, that husbandry was once a sacred art; but it is pursued with irreverent haste and heedlessness by us, our object being to have large farms and large crops merely. We have no festival, nor procession, nor ceremony, not excepting our Cattle-shows and so called Thanksgiving, by which the farmer expresses a sense of the sacredness of his calling, or is reminded of its sacred origin. . . . By avarice and selfishness, and a grovelling habit, from which none of us is free, of regarding the soil as property, or the means of acquiring property chiefly, the landscape is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives. He knows Nature but as a robber.⁶⁶

By tilling in the bean field Thoreau hears the faintly lingering melodies of the Earth Mother, realizing that the worship of Mammon and Judeo-Christianity together desacralizes nature. Accordingly, he seeks to reinvest wild nature with sacrality: to create a new wilderness mythology through an organic language that combines words of granitic truth in perfectly natural sentences. He underscores his notion of wild nature's sacredness in a later chapter, wryly extending his critique of Christianity with favorable allusions to pagans and polytheists. "Sometimes I rambled to pine groves, standing like temples, or like fleets at sea, full-rigged, with wavy boughs, and rippling with light, so soft and green and shady that the Druids would have forsaken their oaks to worship in them; or to the cedar wood beyond Flints' Pond, where the trees, covered with hoary blue berries, spiring higher and higher, are fit to stand before Valhalla."⁶⁷

We come now to "Higher Laws," the title perhaps a thrust at the abstract sterility of transcendentalism. The chapter begins with a compelling passage that, ringing with reverberations of the encounter on Ktaadn, reveals a consciousness now capable of embracing nature through recognition of its visible promontory *within* human nature itself.

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. Once or

twice, however, while I lived at the pond, I found myself ranging the woods like a half-starved hound, with a strange abandonment, seeking some kind of venison which I might devour, and no morsel could have been too savage for me. . . . I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good. . . . I like sometimes to take rank hold on life and spend my day more as the animals do.⁶⁸

To eat a woodchuck raw is to behave as a savage, even perhaps as an animal living unconsciously and spontaneously, and instinctively following primordial patterns. In the woods there is no polite conversation over glasses of wine and veal served on fine china in a Concord dining room, no discussion of nature as a system of laws or manifestation of God, but a Schopenhauerian realization of the vital center—nature as will—of organic life. Thoreau immediately moderates his position by claiming to love the good as well as the wild. Yet most human beings, he correctly observes, love only the good and are oblivious to the wild: the line between the primitive and civilized is drawn absolutely. Yet he loves the wilderness and wants to experience its wildness completely. The problem, as he had learned on Ktaadn, is to embrace its existence *within* himself without threatening his identity as a distinctively human being: Thoreau is the most civilized of men, and he knew it. Although he stops short of adopting the woodchuck as a totemic symbol, he again verges on recovery of the Paleolithic mind.

"Spring" is the crux of Thoreau's idea of wilderness. No doubt archaic people first associated spring with nature's rejuvenation after winter's austerity. In any case, Thoreau's choice of spring as the season for summing up his philosophy was deliberate. He uses a melting sandbank as a natural metaphor to illustrate "the principle of all the operations of Nature." The sandbank fascinated him as it melted and, freed from winter's grip, began slowly to shift. As the sand flowed, Thoreau recognized in its metamorphosis the very process of cosmic creation.

When the frost comes out in the spring, and even in a thawing day in the winter, the sand begins to flow down the slopes like lava, sometimes bursting out through the snow and overflowing it where no sand was to be seen before. Innumerable little streams overlap and interlace one with another, exhibiting a sort of hybrid product, which obeys half way the law of currents, and half way that of vegetation. As it flows it takes the forms of sappy leaves or vines, making heaps

of pulpy sprays a foot or more in depth, and resembling, as you look down on them, the lacinated lobed and imbricated thalluses of some lichens; or you are reminded of coral, of leopards' paws or birds' feet, of brains or lungs or bowels, and excrements of all kinds.⁶⁹

These observations are richly imaginative; Charles Darwin almost simultaneously was making his epic cruise to South America and, ultimately, the Galapagos. But Darwin's imaginative leap, given the abundance of organic forms with which he worked, is perhaps not so great as Thoreau's, for Thoreau derives his principle of the mutability of natural form from inorganic material.⁷⁰ And, going far beyond Darwin, he extends his description of evolutionary process from elemental matter through life to cosmological principle.

[When I see the flowing sand] I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me,—had come to where he was still at work, sporting on this bank, and with excess of energy strewing his fresh designs about. 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. The atoms have already learned this law, and are pregnant by it.⁷¹

As with Darwin, Thoreau does not describe the actual workings of genetics. Yet clearly he has grasped the principle of evolution of complex from simple forms—in this case living vegetative matter from inorganic materials. Earlier anticipations of evolutionary process, as on Ktaadn's ridge, are now brought to completion. The cosmos is alive and in flux, virtually a living continuum in which the higher is an elaborated or articulated arrangement of the lower. This is a bold step toward resolving the paradox of Ktaadn, and Thoreau accomplishes it in part by metaphorically extending the melting sandbank to the human body.

When the sun withdraws the sand ceases to flow, but in the morning the streams will start once more and branch and branch again into a myriad of others. You here see perchance how blood vessels are formed. . . . In the silicious matter which the water deposits is perhaps the bony system, and in the still finer soil and organic matter the fleshy fibre or cellular tissue. *What is a man but a mass of thawing clay?* The ball of the human finger is but a drop congealed. The fingers and toes

flow to their extent from the thawing mass of the body. . . . Is not the hand a spreading *palm* leaf with its lobes and veins? . . . The nose is a manifest congealed drop or stalactite. The chin is still a larger drop, the confluent dripping of the face.⁷²

The fundamental weakness of metaphor and analogy, of course, is disanalogy. "This" can never be exactly like "that" in all regards without undercutting the essentially inductive logic of analogy. If an *x* is identical in all regards with a *y*, then logically they are both *x*, an empty identity rather than analogy. A Thoreauvian dissertation on fetal development, for example, is sure to fail, since he seeks meaningful comparisons grounded in immediate experience rather than scientific explanations based on theory. Thoreau knew this, clearly acknowledging the fanciful nature—viewed from a physiological perspective—of his fable. Indeed, he is playing with words, as the many puns reveal; there is no literal assertion that any particular person is a mass of thawing clay. Thoreau's point is that evolution is pervasive, and not only within the inorganic realm. The organic evolves from the inorganic, and evolution continues within the organic realm, a process including the human animal, however unclear the sequencing.

What Champollion will decipher this hieroglyphic for us [Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published in 1859, some five years after *Walden*], that we may turn over a new leaf at last? This phenomenon is more exhilarating to me than the luxuriance and fertility of vineyards. True, it is somewhat excrementitious in its character, and there is no end to heaps of liver lights and bowels, as if the globe were turned wrong side outward; this suggests at least that Nature has some bowels [a Thoreauvian arrow aimed at the heart of Emerson's "Nature"], and there again is mother of humanity. . . . [The melting sandbank] convinces me that Earth is still in her swaddling clothes, and stretches forth baby fingers on every side. Fresh curls spring from the baldest brow. There is nothing inorganic. These foliaceous heaps lie along the bank like the slag of a furnace, showing that Nature is "in full blast" within. The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, . . . but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit,—not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic. . . . You may melt your metals and cast them into the most beautiful moulds you can; they will never excite me like the forms which this molten earth flows out into. *And not only it, but the institutions upon it, are plastic like clay in the hands of the potter.*⁷³

The implications are profound. Thoreau's discovery of fundamental evolutionary principles is the mark of genius. Not until the later nineteenth century, with Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, was America to produce thinkers who so clearly understood Heraclitean metaphysics and cosmology. And Peirce and James, of course, are post-Darwinian figures: Thoreau is on the cutting edge of evolutionary thought.⁷⁴

Walden did not offer Thoreau opportunity to pursue his evolutionary insights, and thus we come to "Walking," his great evolutionary essay, best read as applying and extending the insights gained at Walden Pond to culture and knowledge. Some consider "Walking," along with "Life without Principle," the best overview of Thoreau's philosophy. "Walking" is undoubtedly the finest short statement of his idea of wilderness. "I wish to speak a word for Nature," Thoreau begins, "for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil,—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society." This is necessary, he believes, because most human beings are alienated from nature. "Here is this vast, savage, howling mother of ours, Nature, lying all around, with such beauty, and such affection for her children, as the leopard; and yet we are so early weaned from her breast to society, to that culture which is exclusively an interaction of man on man,—a sort of breeding in and in, which produces at most a merely English nobility, a civilization destined to have a speedy limit."⁷⁵ Therein lies the role of walking. By removing the individual from the social cocoon such excursions enable immediate and potentially liberating encounters with wild nature.

Walking is no mere exercise, Thoreau cautions, "nothing in it akin to taking exercise . . . but is itself the enterprise and adventure of the day. If you would get exercise, go in search of the springs of life." Further, walkers must prepare themselves for the adventure, essentially by clearing the mind, forgetting the conventional wisdom, the din of parlors, thoughts of work. "What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods?" So prepared, the walker need merely follow nature's "subtle magnetism . . . which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright." Human beings are like the needle of a compass, and nature would direct them westward. "It is hard for me to believe that I shall find fair landscapes or sufficient wildness and freedom behind the eastern horizon." Thoreau's metaphor is easily misunderstood; wilderness, for example, lies east of Los Angeles and north of San Francisco. But the West for Thoreau is the wild, as contrasted to the settlements along the eastern seaboard. Boston and New York, which he had known as either student or erstwhile

American scholar. The East symbolizes tradition, a cultural shell encasing and restraining life, and the West represents creativity and freedom, the palpable essence of life. "We go eastward to realize history and study the works of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race; we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure."⁷⁶

Beyond freedom for the individual, and its increase through walking, the essay extends Thoreau's evolutionary insights to culture itself. "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that *in Wildness is the preservation of the World.*"⁷⁷ *Walden* focuses on the evolution of the organic from the inorganic; "Walking" applies the same evolutionary principle to culture. Society, being a collectivity of individuals, is endangered when wilderness is destroyed, thereby stultifying its potential to revivify culture. Thoreau believes that the essence of freedom resides not in culture but in nature, and the closer human beings live to nature, the more likely they are to realize their freedom. Moreover, and crucially, society more often hinders than aids the actualization of freedom—the ephemeral and contingent (a monetary economy), the artificial (conventional morality), and the trivial (money), supplanting the permanent and necessary (nature's economy), the natural (joy), and the essential (higher laws).

Walking is a path to freedom, an organic activity that redirects humankind's attention to the natural, organic, and essential. Thoreau's insight is astute, however imperfect the idea of "wildness" might be in conveying the essential notion that *cultural forms*, just as inorganic and organic ones, *must evolve in response to changing circumstance*. His essential insight is that the same evolutionary process that underpins life also nourishes the individual and that the creative (novel) individual is in turn necessary to sustain cultural evolution.

My spirits infallibly rise in proportion to outward dreariness. Give me the ocean, the desert, or the wilderness! . . . When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp. I enter a swamp as a sacred place, a *sanctum sanctorum*. There is the strength, the marrow, of Nature. The wildwood covers the virgin mould, and the same soil is good for men and for trees. . . . In such a soil grew Homer and Confucius and the rest, and out of such a wilderness comes the Reformer eating locusts and wild honey.

Here is Emerson's American Scholar, transformed from a ministerial or professorial role into a seeker of Indian wisdom. Evolution moves the cos-

mos, and when its renewing potentials are thwarted, both the individual and culture are endangered. "The civilized nations—Greece, Rome, England—have been sustained by the primitive forests which anciently rotted where they stand. They survive as long as the soil is not exhausted. Alas for human culture! little is to be expected of a nation, when the vegetable mould is exhausted, and it is compelled to make manure of the bones of its fathers."⁷⁸

"Walking" also advances Thoreau's project of developing an evolutionary epistemology, or naturalistic theory of knowledge true to the precepts of a seeker of Indian wisdom rather than those of a scientist or philosopher. He reinforces the idea that the value of wilderness experience is its unconventionality, since the meaning of a wilderness excursion can neither be defined in conventional terms nor have its meaning appropriated by the market. Furthermore, insight into the essentials of existence is irreducible to any kind of Emersonian transcendentalism or scientific law. Every walker can achieve an authentic, inherently creative relationship, with nature. "Beautiful knowledge," surely a deliberate juxtaposition of terms, is the outcome. "We have heard of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. It is said that knowledge is power, and the like. Methinks there is equal need of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Ignorance, what we will call Beautiful Knowledge, a knowledge useful in a higher sense: for what is most of our boasted so-called knowledge but a conceit that we know something, which robs us of the advantage of our actual ignorance? What we call knowledge is often our positive ignorance; ignorance our negative knowledge."⁷⁹

How such notions must have rankled the hardworking Yankees of Concord and confirmed their opinion of Thoreau as a slacker, more interested in bird-watching and dreaming than in contributing to the cultural enterprise. These ideas were also stinging barbs directed at the heart of transcendentalism. Little wonder that Emerson ultimately dismissed him as little more than Captain of a Huckleberry Party, for Thoreau challenges all that customarily passes for knowledge.⁸⁰ And with brilliant insight "Walking" proposes what is in effect a bracketing of both scientific and philosophic method—an *epoche* as relentless, if not as incisive, as that of twentieth-century phenomenology.

My desire for knowledge is intermittent, but my desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant.
The highest we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with

Intelligence. I do not know that this higher knowledge amounts to anything more definite than a novel and grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we called Knowledge before,—a discovery that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy. It is the light up of the mist by the sun. Man cannot *know* in any higher sense than this.⁸¹

Nonsense, thought the good citizens of Concord, and Emerson as well. The typical New Englander could understand the practical people who came to gather ice from Walden during winter or to catch fish during summer; but to sit contemplating the water as if it were the eye of the earth was something else again. "Sympathy with Intelligence"? The utility of theoretical science, let alone such a philosophical flight of fantasy, was difficult enough for most to grasp. Yet the almost automatic tendency to reject this idea as mere romanticism rather than intuitive insight must be questioned. Thoreau brilliantly weds the implications of evolution with epistemology itself: *knowledge itself evolves, and intuition is fundamental to the process.*⁸² Again, we must emphasize that Thoreau is a thinker far ahead of his time in realizing that humankind is enframed by language and history. Walking—that is, wilderness excursions taken without preconception—was one way to rediscover the mythic point of origin.

The nineteenth century is rightly called Darwin's century. But Thoreau's anticipations of things to come are remarkable. "Walking" forcefully advances the premise that no culture achieves perfect form, being only one variation in a never-ending sequence. A culture cannot, Thoreau knew, simply live in the fashion of the past, since the world is dynamic, and the very definition of life is the ability to respond to a changing environment. "Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest."⁸³ Emerson never understood that the societal road into the future is tied to the organic realm and that the path of advance must be in harmony with nature. For Emerson the categories of the Enlightenment and Judeo-Christianity, buttressed by transcendental argument, were adequate for cultural reformation. Progress was to his mind a law of nature. Tied to the city (his pulpit, lectern, or desk), Emerson never experienced a fundamental kinship with the organic realm, its seasons, its landscapes, and its myriad plants and animals. In contrast, by reflecting upon his wealth of experience, by seeking an original relation with the universe, Thoreau confirmed that species *Homo sapiens* is part of the evolutionary flux—material and biological. From our modern vantage point, his notion that in "wildness

lies salvation of the world" is perhaps an imperfect reflection of the evolutionary nature of life. Nonetheless, his insight is essentially accurate: culture evolves or dies.

Walden and "Walking" form the heart of Thoreau's wilderness philosophy, outlining both the critical—his pervasive critique of Modernism and conventional wisdom, be this common sense or New England transcendentalism—and the positive—his evolutionary insight and recognition of the pervasive continuities between the human and the natural—sides of his thought. But we would be remiss not to discuss briefly at least three additional works: "Life without Principle," *Cape Cod*, and the *Journal*.

"Life without Principle" is, in the opinion of Krutch, Thoreau's "most important and the most influential" shorter essay, an "unqualified statement of his defiant individualism and his plea for the individual's right to march to the sound of his own drum."⁸⁴ For all its brilliance, "Life without Principle" does not add much to the idea of wilderness found in other works. The essay contains little of the striking nature writing found elsewhere and is as abstract as anything Thoreau ever wrote. And its themes are not originations but continuations, with many parallels to and isomorphisms with *Walden* and "Walking." The essay is perhaps best understood as a synopsis or gloss of the critique of Modernism found in *Walden*, especially the chapter "Economy," now organized into a format suitable for a listening rather than a reading audience. His point is the familiar one that when humankind rediscovers its primordial grounding in the natural world, then life might be set aright. "Life without Principle" also contains at least a hint of pessimism, recognizing that the opinions that wealth was the highest value and that working for a living was the most important human activity dominated the world. Thoreau writes, "There are those who style themselves statesmen and philosophers who are so blind as to think that progress and civilization depend on precisely this kind of [economic] interchange and activity—the activity of flies about a molasses-hogshead."⁸⁵

Cape Cod was published posthumously in 1864 (edited by Thoreau's sister Sophia and his best friend, Ellery Channing). The book, a collection of ten essays covering his three trips to the cape, lacks the profundity and craftsmanship of *Walden* and the incisive evolutionary insights of "Walking" but deserves more attention than it is accorded. Of the critics, only Paul Theroux has been lavish in praise. Walter Harding calls it Thoreau's sunniest but least profound book.⁸⁶ Yet only *Maine Woods* gives one as

clear a sense of Thoreau's ability to grasp a place, the nuances of life and vegetation, and the interactions between humankind and the environment. *Cape Cod* captures the effect of ocean and beach, wind and tides, on the people who lived there. And, like *Walden*, the encounters with nature, such as observing the rotting bodies of shipwrecked animals washed up on shore, provide grist for contemplation. While beachcombing Thoreau would ponder the waves and tides, and the vast expanse of water, fading off yet ultimately washing onto distant shores, and observe the diverse flora and fauna that comprise the Cape Cod community. "There is naked Nature, inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man, nibbling at the cliffy shore where gulls wheel amid the spray." Thoreau was fascinated by the depths and floor of the ocean, hidden beneath the surface, and characteristically drew parallels between this aspect of the sea and the human mind. And, crucially, he came to see the ocean as the wildest of all wildernesses.

I think that [the sea] . . . was never more wild than now. We do not associate the idea of antiquity with the ocean, nor wonder how it looked a thousand years ago, as we do of the land, for it was equally wild and unfathomable always. . . . The ocean is a wilderness reaching round the globe, wilder than a Bengal jungle, and fuller of monsters, washing the very wharves of our cities and the gardens of our sea-side residences. . . . Ladies who never walk in the woods, sail over the sea. To go to sea! Why, it is to have the experience of Noah,—to realize the deluge. Every vessel is an ark.⁸⁷

No reading of Thoreau's texts could be complete without some mention of the *Journal*. It offers an unequalled record of thought and intuition, of human encounter with wilderness. Not published until 1906, the *Journal* has long been popular with serious amateur and professional natural historians. Thoreau's eye for detail in nature is rivaled only by his eye for humanity; anthropologists find the *Journal* a treasure of information about nineteenth-century ways of life. Meteorologists turn to them to glean a picture of nineteenth-century weather. And botanists recognize Thoreau as the American equivalent of Gilbert White of Selborne; in the later years the *Journal* presents increasingly detailed descriptions of plant and animal species, the seasons and cycles of nature, and the interrelations between them. John Dolan suggests that "the connection between Thoreau's absorption in the rich world of living plants, in particular, the plants of Concord, and his creative growth as an artist and thinker is quite intimate."⁸⁸ Thoreau himself notes, anticipating a biocentric perspective, that "I am

interested in each contemporary plant in my vicinity, and have attained to a certain acquaintance with the larger ones. They are *cohabitants with me of this part of the planet*, and they bear familiar names. Yet how essentially wild they are! as wild, really, as those strange fossil plants whose impressions I see on my coal."⁸⁹ The *Journal* also contains an explicit statement of the ideal of creating national parks. The wilderness traveler

merely has the privilege of crossing somebody's farm by a particular narrow and maybe unpleasant path. The individual [property owner] retains all other rights,—as to trees and fruit, and wash of the road, etc. On the other hand, these should belong to mankind inalienably. The road should be of ample width and adorned with tress expressly for the use of the traveller. There should be broad recesses in it, especially at springs and watering-places, where he can turn out and rest, or camp if he will. I feel commonly as if I were condemned to drive through somebody's cowyard or huckleberry pasture by a narrow lane, and if I make a fire by the roadside to boil my hasty pudding, the farmer comes running over to see if I am not burning up his stuff. You are barked along through the country, from door to door.⁹⁰

Thoreau in Cultural Context

Although Thoreau is widely recognized as the greatest American nature writer and one of the world's best, his works are not mere belles lettres of the nature genre. At his best—as in *Walden*—he achieves that rarest kind of writing, the fusion of form and content. *Walden* perhaps rivals Plato's *Dialogues* in embodying philosophy as an art form. The contrast between Thoreau and Emerson underscores the point. When we compare Emerson's "Nature" and Thoreau's *Walden* the titles themselves speak, "Nature" abstract and general, *Walden* specific and concrete. In "Nature" Emerson writes as a disembodied transcendental spectator who brings with him abstract principles to impose on nature. In *Walden* Thoreau directly engages his subject, becoming its living manifestation. *Walden* exemplifies both the life he lived and the philosophical principles he discovered. He becomes a man of Indian wisdom, a person-in-contact with wild nature, with the Great Mother. His genius is not that he turned his back on civilization—Thoreau is no hermit, no misanthrope—but that he affirms the reality of organic process and the vital importance of understanding that humankind, too, is part of this larger, enframing realm—life within nature. Thoreau is a natural classicist who argues that humankind

in wild nature grown self-conscious and that creativity—that is, evolutionary response to changing cultural circumstances—depends essentially on systematically acting upon this insight: in wildness lies the preservation of the world.

Given Thoreau's now evident genius, the case might be made that he, not Emerson, is the culmination of the mid-nineteenth-century American Renaissance. Thoreau formulates a rich philosophy that scarcely resembles the abstract, sterile theorizing of Emerson. He senses both the insufficiencies of his age and the path beyond; he is acutely conscious of the limitations of the scientific worldview; and his insights into nineteenth-century Yankee society are as penetrating as Marx's on European capitalism and more relevant to American culture. His intuitive grasp of the evolutionary character of the cosmos, and the intertwining of matter, life, and consciousness in the human animal, has been vindicated, first by Darwin and later by ethology, human ecology, cultural anthropology, and cultural geography. Thoreau in many ways anticipates the two great American philosophers of the later nineteenth century, Charles Sanders Peirce and William James. All share a common pragmatic interest in knowledge, an evolutionary viewpoint, and a belief that creativity is essential to survival.

Thoreau's idea of wilderness remains as vital today as when he wrote. In 1861, near the end of his life, Thoreau wrote that most people "do not care for Nature and would sell their share in all her beauty, as long as they may live, for a stated sum—many for a glass of rum. Thank God, men cannot as yet fly, and lay waste the sky as well as the earth! We are safe on that side for the present. It is for the very reason that some do not care for those things that we need to continue to protect all from the vandalism of a few."⁹¹ Thoreau's ideas and example clearly influenced such essential wilderness thinkers as John Muir and Aldo Leopold. Indeed, the Thoreauvian spirit animates the cutting edge of contemporary critiques of Modernism, be it critical economics, ecocentric philosophy, or boldly visionary views of alternative human futures. This fact puts us in a position to understand the reflexive implications of Thoreau's work better than his coevals. The conventional wisdom that Thoreau is of little more than literary interest, and that his philosophy is little more than an application of Emersonian transcendentalism, must be reconsidered. It is no exaggeration to say that today all thought of the wilderness flows in *Walden's* wake.