From A Week to Walden

Exigencies and Opportunities, 1849–1850

Following the publication of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers in May 1849, Thoreau's life began a quiet transformation. Partly as a result of the reception of the book, but partly owing also to the development of new interests and a newfound stability in the routines of his life, his literary habits—his reading, especially—changed and began to settle into patterns that would remain more or less constant for the rest of his life. The failure of A Week to generate much critical or popular appreciation and the financial setback that its poor sales caused were both disappointing to Thoreau, but they were offset by other and compensating developments among his literary interests that made the next decade a busy and productive one—albeit the issue of the significance and value of his projects after Walden was published in 1854 is still capable of provoking lively critical debate.

Nevertheless, there is a kind of quiet drama to be inferred from the record of his reading and writing during these years, for his studies of natural history, early American history, and the American Indian did progress far enough to suggest, at least in the essays that he managed to finish or culled from these projects late in life, the directions in which his thought was proceeding. His natural history work may be gauged from such late essays as “Wild Apples” and “The Succession of Forest Trees” (extracted from a longer manuscript on the dispersal of seeds); his ideas about American history from “Provincetown” in Cape Cod; and his engagement with the American Indian from the contrast between his reading on the subject and his firsthand experience with Joe Polis in Maine in 1857, narrated in “The Allegash and East Branch” in the posthumously published The Maine Woods. Before taking up the developments in his reading that helped to shape these late works and that mark his mature intellectual interests, however, it may be useful to consider first the new patterns of stability that began to cohere in his life around 1850 from a concatenation of circumstances as varied as the commercial failure of A Week and his partial estrangement from Emerson, the establishment of the Concord Town Library, and his resumption of regular reading notes and detailed, dated Journal entries.

The failure of A Week to sell well had at least three significant repercussions for Thoreau. First, since he had agreed to guarantee the costs of production, and since it was soon apparent that royalties from sales would not cover these costs, he incurred a debt of almost $500. He had to rely on other employment, especially surveying and pencil making, to meet his ordinary expenses and to pay off his publisher (“falsely so called,” he observed mordantly). It was not until near the end of 1853, four and a half years after the book appeared, that he managed to discharge this obligation (JL 5.5111). The extremely slow sales of the book (just over two hundred copies in four years) also dimmed Thoreau’s chances of earning at least a nominal living from his pen and of following A Week with Walden, which he was confident by 1849 was nearly ready for publication. He had to confront more directly than before the stark reality that, after nearly a decade of writing for various magazines, lecturing, and publishing a book, he was unlikely to be even moderately remunerated for his work. Like virtually all other serious American writers of his generation, he had to find some alternative arrangement for making a living if he wished to continue to write, and he also had to find some alternative forms of expression for his writing while his literary career reoriented itself to cultural and economic realities. This is not to say that Thoreau abandoned the idea of lecturing or of writing for paying publications. Quite the contrary: There were occasional periods of brisk activity in lecturing, and he was, in Emerson’s words, in “a tremble of great expectation” when Walden appeared in

1. The most authoritative case for Thoreau’s “decline” is that made by Sherman Paul in The Shores of America, who says that during the 1850s “the sources of [Thoreau’s] life began to dry up” and that “nature had become barren, and the method which Thoreau now adopted in order to find her meaning ... did not bear any significant crop of inspiration” (pp. 272, 274). This view, the culmination of a strain in Thoreau criticism that goes back to Emerson’s funeral address, has been challenged recently by the work of scholars more sympathetic to Thoreau’s aims as a naturalist and writer. See S. Price, Thoreau and the American Indians, p. 101; William L. Howarth, The Book of Concord (New York: Viking Press, 1981), pp. 190–208; and John Hildebidle, Thoreau: A Naturalist’s Liberty (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 69–96.

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1854. In 1861 and 1862, he quite literally worked on his deathbed, dictating to his sister Sophia after he became too weak to write himself, in order to prepare as many essays as possible for publication. But in 1850 he had to accommodate himself to the truth that no reliable public outlet for his work existed, and as a consequence he turned increasingly to the Journal as a mode of private expression that served simultaneously as a record of his studies and observations and as a potential storehouse for his occasional public performances. This shift in his primary form of composition is vividly suggested by the proportions of his printed Journal in the 1906 edition: whereas two volumes suffice for the thirteen-year period from 1837 to 1849, twelve are required for the next dozen years, from 1850 to 1861. (The earlier Journal had been much longer, of course; much of it was used up or destroyed by Thoreau in the process of drafting his early literary works.) The summer of 1850 marks the beginning of this later phase of the Journal as a voluminous, regularly kept, and dated document that records in great detail Thoreau's studies—especially of natural history—during the rest of his life. Since he frequently noted his response to books he was reading in his Journal, his interests in the fifties are generally somewhat easier to trace than those of earlier decades.

The third consequence of A Week and its reception appears to have been a real rupture in Thoreau's relationship with Emerson. Thoreau's Journal records a deep and disturbed preoccupation with the subject of friendship in 1849, returning again and again to the idea of its failure or end. He goes so far as to associate the crisis and its aftermath with the friend's criticism of A Week: "I had a friend, I wrote a book, I asked my friend's criticism, I never got but praise for what was good in it—my friend became estranged from me and then I got blame for all that was bad, & so I got at last the criticism which I wanted." The critic is never explicitly named, but since Emerson was Thoreau's closest friend, played so dominant a role in his literary apprenticeship, and urged him to publish A Week at his own expense, assuring him he would be unlikely to lose financially by so doing, there can be little doubt that he is behind the often anguished passages on friendship from this period.

Thoreau's sense of injury over this criticism was probably only tangentially related to the change in his relationship with Emerson, however, for the roots of their estrangement lay deeper. It was clear that


Thoreau did not and could not fulfill Emerson's expectations of him, and for his part Thoreau could scarcely continue into his mid-thirties as a disciple of anyone, especially of the apostle of self-reliance. Even before this time he had been privately and publicly satirized for his apparent imitation of the older writer, and he must have been acutely self-conscious of his widely perceived position as Emerson's protégé. Ironically, the book that everywhere testified to Emerson's influence was to be at least the apparent occasion of a breach between the two men that would never entirely be healed, although it would be patched over. Painful as it evidently was, the rift probably helped to propel Thoreau in the direction of what he came to view as his proper studies and lightened the pressures that he must have felt to live up to Emerson's expectations.

Another important change in Thoreau's social and domestic life about this time was in his relations with his family. Thoreau moved back to live with his parents and sisters after Emerson's return from Europe in the summer of 1848, and during the following year he helped to carry out extensive renovations in their new house on Main Street, into which the family settled permanently early in 1850. He had lived at home for only about eighteen months during the previous eight years—in 1844 and the first half of 1845 while he was building his cabin at the pond—but now he settled back with the family for good, taking a hand as usual in the graphite business and working independently as a surveyor. He occupied the attic floor of the new house, a spacious finished area that gave him ample space for his belongings, his instruments, his writing desk and bookshelves, and his growing collections of natural history specimens. The new house was near the river, and since Ellery Channing, his friend and frequent companion, now lived almost across the street in a house whose back yard sloped down to the bank, Thoreau had a convenient place to moor his boat for the river excursions that were almost as regular a habit as his walks. This domestic stability helped to shape Thoreau's literary habits and pursuits in the decade to come. His housing since college had been a series of makeshift and temporary arrangements, and now that his

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The most important of these new routines was the habit of daily walks that he began about this time, a habit that he would practice uninterruptedly all year round in all weathers until the onset of his final siege of tuberculosis. “Within a year,” he wrote to H.G.O. Blake in November 1849, “my walks have extended themselves, and almost every afternoon, (I read, or write, or make pencils, in the forenoon, and by the last means I get a living for my body.) I visit some new hill or pond or wood many miles distant” (COR, 250–251). About the same time, in the Journal, he began to record and index “Places to Walk to,” and gradually his settled practice when not engaged in a large surveying project became to spend the morning at some literary labor—whether working on a lecture or essay or writing up previous days’ Journal entries from field notebooks, afternoons were spent boating, and the evening in reading. After narrating in the Journal a winter day’s outdoor activities in December 1856, for example, Thoreau looked forward to a typical evening: “Now for a merry fire, some old poet’s pages, or else serene philosophy, or even a healthy book of travels, to last far into the night, eked out perhaps with the walnuts which we gathered in November” (JL 9.173).

His daily walks were not primarily for exercise or recreation but for discipline. He was training himself to become a careful observer and recorder of natural phenomena, jotting on small sheets of paper details which would form the basis of Journal passages that he would later write up in his study, sometimes composing several days’ entries in one stint. It was about this time, 1849–1850—that he began to study systematically botany and natural history in general. He describes, again in a Journal entry from December 1856, how “from year to year we look at Nature with new eyes” and how about a half-dozen years earlier he had begun to bring home plants in a “botany box” constructed inside the crown of his hat and busied himself “looking out the name of each one and remembering it” (JL 9.156–157).

As Thoreau’s outward life and pursuits were becoming more regular and settled, and his literary projects grew more dependent upon reading and research, his access to important sources of books also improved. In September 1849 he petitioned Jared Sparks, president of Harvard College, for permission to withdraw books from the library, claiming—surely for the only time in his life—benefit of clergy. Normally, ordained ministers were the only nonresident alumni permitted to check out books. Thoreau, exercising a characteristic philological ingenuity turning on the fact that “clergy” and “clerk” (in the medie-
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val sense of "scholar") were derived from the same root, argued that he should qualify "because I have chosen letters for my profession, and so am one of the clergy embraced by the spirit at least of her rule" (COR, 266-268). Whether or not Sparks found this line of reasoning compelling, he did grant the request, and thereafter Thoreau used the Harvard library regularly, especially for his researches in early American history and American Indian ethnology. The railroad, which had been completed out to Concord in 1844, made it possible to travel conveniently to Boston and return the same day. Thaddeus W. Harris, the librarian, was also an entomologist of note (he had been Thoreau's natural science instructor at Harvard), and Thoreau frequently improved his visits to the library by talking over scientific matters of mutual interest with Harris.

Other Boston libraries were also important to Thoreau's work. In 1850 he was elected a corresponding member of the Boston Society of Natural History, entitling him to charge books from the society's library, a privilege that proved to be of immense use to him as his study of natural history became more specialized and expert over the years. The New England metropolis's other renowned library was in the Boston Athenaeum, and despite the fact that he was not a member, Thoreau made at least occasional use of its collections. Emerson had earlier introduced him as a guest and sometimes borrowed books for him on his charging privileges. Non-members, especially if they were students or writers, could consult the catalogue and the collections, and Thoreau took advantage of this policy when he was beginning his extensive bibliographical survey of works on the American Indians: One of his manuscript notebooks contains a lengthy list of books on the subject that is headed "At Athenaeum." He also added slowly and carefully to his personal library, buying modestly books on natural history, both ancient and modern, and planning each purchase as if it were a military campaign, for the expenditure represented no inconsiderable portion of his earnings. He paid fifteen dollars, for example, for Loudon's Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum, an eight-volume botanical encyclopedia that was also in the Town Library. According to Ellery Channing's memoir, Thoreau "prized 'Loudon's Arboretum,' of which, after thinking of its purchase and saving up the money for years, he became a master." When he 9. Kenneth Walter Cameron, "Emerson, Thoreau, and the Society of Natural History," American Literature 24 (March 1951): 21-30.
was in Boston he generally visited Burnham's bookstore, where he would occasionally come across books, such as the three-volume edition of Pliny's natural history that he found in 1859. He jotted down the titles of used books (with their prices) to carry back to Concord with him, obviously to meditate their purchase and plan for the outlay. His personal library never grew much in excess of four hundred volumes (not counting the seven-hundred-odd volumes of *A Week* that he included when sardonically recounting the story of the publisher's return of unsold copies), but they were a carefully chosen and compact lot, selected to facilitate his literary and scientific work.

The availability of books in Concord also improved significantly about this time. In 1851 the Concord Town Library, which would become the Concord Free Public Library in 1873 (where many of the books in Thoreau's personal library are housed today), came into being as a public library, absorbing the collection of the old subscription Social Library and thereafter building its collections through regular acquisitions funded by tax revenue. The librarian, Albert Stacy, also owned a stationer's store from which he operated a circulating library of books that could be borrowed for a small rental fee. The circulating library—a target of Thoreau's satire on "easy reading" in *Walden* (wa, 104)—tended to concentrate on popular current literature, especially fiction and travel books, and was the source of much of Thoreau's reading in the latter genre during the 1850s. The Town Library, on the other hand, tended to acquire (in a complementary way that suggests that being town librarian and owning his own circulating library did not constitute a conflict of interest for Stacy) more sober works of nonfiction in fields such as history, religion, and natural and applied science. Its collections were quite important for Thoreau, especially rich in philosophy and religion, and Ellery Channing was an inveterate reader with an extensive collection of literary works. After 1855, Thoreau occasionally borrowed books from Franklin Benjamin Sanborn (later to be an editor and biographer of Thoreau), a young abolitionist schoolteacher boarding at the Thoreau house.

He also read newspapers, more often and more regularly than the criticism of the popular press in *Walden* might lead one to expect. Probably because of his friendship with Horace Greeley, its publisher, he took a subscription to the weekly edition of the *New York Tribune* in 1852. Greeley was sympathetic to reform generally and to the temperance and abolitionist movements particularly, and was usually supportive of the Transcendentalists (he had provided jobs on his paper to both Margaret Fuller and the feckless Ellery Channing). The Tribune's editorial policy was thus more palatable to Thoreau than that of most newspapers, even though it too had its share of lurid stories of crimes and disasters such as Thoreau alludes to in *Walden*. Greeley

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Interestingly, Thoreau seems to have struck a bargain with Stacy to set up a sort of private subscription library that enabled him to read current booksery and otherwise available. James Spooner, a young man from Plymouth who met Thoreau in the early fifties and wrote fairly extensive accounts of conversations with him, noted on one of these occasions that Thoreau “asked me if we had convenient opportunity for obtaining books. . . . He said that he had made an arrangement with the Concord bookseller to furnish what books he might wish—there were some half dozen others who would read them too & at three or four cts. a piece he would get the price of the book and then sell it afterwards.”

Thoreau continued to borrow books from Emerson too, although he did most of his reading from this source in the early 1840s. He also relied on the libraries of other friends: Bronson Alcott had a collection especially rich in philosophy and religion, and Ellery Channing was an inveterate reader with an extensive collection of literary works. After 1855, Thoreau occasionally borrowed books from Franklin Benjamin Sanborn (later to be an editor and biographer of Thoreau), a young abolitionist schoolteacher boarding at the Thoreau house.

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17. Harding, Days, pp. 332-335. Thoreau noted, for example, in Indian book 12 (MAFMA MA 606) that his source for Henry Youle Hind’s report on a Canadian exploring expedition was Sanborn’s library.
was moreover a sort of unofficial literary agent for Thoreau, and he saw to it that extracts from Walden appeared in his paper and that the book was prominently reviewed, perhaps by Greeley himself.

The Tribune was also issued in daily and semi-weekly editions, and Thoreau occasionally refers to articles in these as well as in the weekly edition that he took. As might be expected, most of his references to and clippings from the paper concern either natural history phenomena or the American Indian. But when an event gripped Thoreau, he read all the newspapers that he could get his hands on. Such was the case in the fall of 1859, when John Brown led his abortive raid on Harper’s Ferry and was subsequently captured and hanged (JL 1:406ff.). At such a time Thoreau was more likely to become enraged by the timidity of editors than to learn much of value about the event. As had been his custom earlier, he read periodical literature regularly, with an eye especially for essays on developments in natural science or ethnology; the latest books were still not always easy to obtain, and the major monthly and quarterly magazines often provided essay reviews that apprised him of new works in these fields. During the 1850s he kept up with new and emerging American periodicals such as Harper's, the Atlantic, and Putnam’s (the last two in which he published), and more intermittently with British magazines, from established journals such as the Westminster Review to more recent ventures such as Charles Dickens’s Household Words.

As a consequence of his more settled habits, his wider and easier access to books, and his shifting literary interests, Thoreau began about this time to keep detailed records of his reading in a series of notebooks designed to facilitate his various literary and scientific projects. He was an almost compulsive notetaker by now (Charmingdescribes him as always reading “with pen in hand”), and he quoted extensively from the books he read. The Journal is one of these repositories of information about his reading, although by no means the principal one. Thoreau tried as a rule to preserve the Journal for his own thoughts and his records of natural history observations, and not to use it for extensive extracts from books. Frequently, however, allusions to and quotations from his reading appear in the late Journal and provide a convenient way of dating his acquaintance with a particular work.

The later notebooks strictly devoted to extracts from his reading, all commencing around 1850, consist of the following: two commonplace books, one intended for “facts” and another originally for “poetry”; a notebook on reading related to the history and early exploration of

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Canada and Cape Cod; and eleven volumes of "Indian books," as he called them, of extracts on the history and culture of North American Indian tribes. The two commonplace books are perhaps the most interesting of these volumes intrinsically, for they suggest that Thoreau at first tried to distinguish in his reading notes between "poetry" (in the broadest Transcendental sense of any literary material that contained some significant idea, expression, or insight), and "facts"—either striking or interesting phenomena that might be evidence of some process or law of nature, or the sort of data that might someday flower into truth in the manner of the story of the bug that hatched from the apple-tree table in the concluding chapter of *Walden*. Not surprisingly, however, he found it impossible to maintain this distinction, as he confessed in the Journal within a year or so of beginning the parallel notebooks: "I have a commonplace book for facts and another for poetry, but I find it difficult to preserve the vague distinction which I had in my mind, for the most interesting and beautiful facts are so much the more poetry and that is their success" (JL 1.3.31f.).

This remark was probably made with specific reference to the *Heimsókningslaga*, historical and legendary accounts of Norse kings that Thoreau was currently reading and ambivalently making extracts from in both notebooks, but in any event he soon ceased to make "poetry" extracts at all, and he used the remaining leaves of the poetry commonplace book to continue his fact notebook when the latter was filled in 1857 or 1858. His professional interest in literary subjects was waning as his interest in history and natural science was waxing, although there is no indication that he considered these more factual disciplines fundamentally less poetic if rightly pursued. It needs to be borne in mind that Thoreau's extracts of "facts" from a particular work do not always register the nature of his interest in the book itself or indicate its significance to him. Oftentimes he noted oddities, colorful details or incidents, or even casual remarks that he might later work into or allude to in his own writing. In *Walden*, for example, when he describes having killed a woodchuck that had been ravaging his bean field, he observes casually that he "effect[ed] his transmigration, as a Tartar would say," and a Tartar does in fact say this in a passage from a travel book that he had copied into the "fact" book. But on the other hand, the entries cannot be categorized as predominantly of this character: Some are clearly made for purposes of study, some express ideas that

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20. The source of the Tartar's remark is Evariste Régis Huc's *Recollections of a Journey through Tartary, Tibet, and China* (see Bibliographical Catalogue).
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The Canada notebook, whose contents and chronology have been described in detail by Lawrence Willson, had its origins in Thoreau’s excursion to Montreal and Quebec in the fall of 1850. He characteristically studied the geography and history of the places he visited, both to intensify the experience of his infrequent travels and to help him prepare to write about the journeys and the locale, but his reading on Canada tended to an unusual extent to spill over and extend into other areas of interest. He began the notebook in November 1850, shortly after his return, and made a number of extracts from various works of history and cartography that were useful to him in preparing “An Excursion to Canada” between late 1850 and early 1852, when he sent the essay to Horace Greeley to try to find a publisher. Other extracts and notes in the volume, however, not all directly related to the Canada excursion, were made between 1850 and 1856 in a separate section. Although varied in nature, this second set of extracts mainly treats the early cartography of New England and Canada and the inadequacy of contemporary historians who failed to take into account (out of an Anglophilic bias, Thoreau implies) the earliest and most accurate French sources for the history and the mapping of the continent. He would treat this subject at great length in the last chapter of Cape Cod, “Provincetown,” citing many of the sources in the Canada notebook, and the notebook most importantly reflects his growing fascination with the drama of early exploration and his excitement at the parallel discovery of the relatively unknown history of that exploration by nations—especially the French—other than the English.

The Indian notebooks make up Thoreau’s largest single repository of extracts from his reading—eleven volumes containing nearly three thousand manuscript pages of text on all aspects of American aboriginal history, culture, and allied subjects. How (or even whether) he intended to employ these notes directly in his literary projects cannot be known with any certainty, but they do represent a monument to a major intellectual interest of the last dozen years of his life. The evolution of this specific interest will be taken up in the next chapter; suffice it to say for the present that the Indian books, like the other notebooks just described, appear to have their inception in the period following the publication of A Week. As Linck C. Johnson has argued, the first surviving Indian book appears to have been started (in a manner analogous to the Canada notebook) as a response to or in anticipation of Thoreau’s first trip to Cape Cod in October 1849—so that it might with equal aptness be called the “Cape Cod notebook.” Thereafter its focus shifted toward the Indian, and its successors continued this emphasis.

In short, by 1850 Thoreau had begun to study in a fairly systematic fashion the three main interests of the second phase of his career—natural history, early American history, and the history of North American Indians before contact with Europeans—and had a series of notebooks and a regularly kept Journal in which he recorded his reading in these and ancillary fields during the remainder of his life. His pursuits were taking an increasingly scholarly and scientific direction, and if he sometimes voiced disappointment with what seemed a corresponding loss of emotional attachment to his inquiries, his intellectual curiosity remained undiminished. This faculty propelled him to work diligently and for the most part happily on these projects over the years, patiently adding information to his records and incorporating it into ongoing literary projects. His life had settled into patterns that normally permitted him to spend a portion of each day on his studies—both out of doors and within—and he had greatly improved access to libraries and to books in general. That the problem of getting a living was always more vexing philosophically and ethically than actually and practically to Thoreau. Countering the fact that he always could (and often did) make a comfortable living in the pencil business were a series of impassioned engagements (in his writing) with the idea of a man’s proper calling: in his Harvard commencement address, in “The Service,” in the first two chapters of Walden, in “Life Without Principle,” and in many of his letters, especially to H.G.O. Blake. On a different sort of practical level, though, he shared the dilemma faced by most if not all American writers in the nineteenth century, and like them he had to make concessions to a culture that tended not to acknowledge or reward many of its most serious artists. His solution was characteristic and distinctive: Rather than work at a newspaper or take on editorial piece work, seek a gouvernment that would allow him to pursue his interests and write with a minimum of distraction from professional routine.

23. “Into History: Thoreau’s Earliest ‘Indian Book’ and His First Trip to Cape Cod,” Emerson Society Quarterly 28 (4 Qtr. 1985): 75-88. See also Sayre, Thoreau and the American Indians, p. 308, who suggests that the first Indian notebooks may have been begun somewhat earlier when Thoreau was at Walden.
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Shifting Emphases, 1850–1854

Since the surviving records of Thoreau's reading for the 1850s are more extensive than for the earlier decades, it will be best to treat the main areas topically in a separate chapter in order to suggest something of the outline and development of his principal interests. As I have already suggested, these interests involve varieties of history—natural history, the early history of North American discovery and exploration, and the history of American Indian tribes. None of these subjects was new to him, of course, but each assumed a significance in the early fifties that it had not had earlier. At the same time, a number of other interests, more or less related to these principal ones and carried over from the previous decades, need to be considered and briefly assessed as well.

From a literary standpoint, the early fifties culminate in the publication of Walden in 1854, and although that book incorporates Thoreau's reading less obtrusively and in more sophisticated ways than had A Week, it too is representative of a stage in Thoreau's intellectual maturation, a stage at which his mastery of familiar subjects (poetry, the classics, travel, Oriental scripture) is balanced against his growing absorption in natural history and history of other types as well: the history of New England, of Concord and Walden Pond, and ultimately of himself.

His interest in travel writing, for example, remained strong and in fact is often not to be distinguished from his more formally historical studies. A book such as William Bartram's Travels was not only a literary classic of the genre (it had inspired passages in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" nearly fifty years before Thoreau read it) but also an important source of information about natural history and the customs of Indian tribes in the South. The account of the "busk" or ceremony of purification and renewal in "Economy" in Walden is derived from Bartram, and other early travel writers such as John Josselyn, William Wood, and Timothy Dwight provided similar information for Prominent scientists like Darwin, Lyell, and Humboldt published accounts of their travels that were rich in information about natural science, and accounts of Arctic and South American explorations furnished details about aboriginal life in those regions that were pertinent to Thoreau's own study of North American Indian cultures. It is typical, then, to find extracts from such travel works in his natural history commonplace books or Indian notebooks.

His interest in other subjects, however, notably Oriental philosophy and religion, diminished perceptibly during the decade. When Thoreau reestablished his borrowing privileges at Harvard in the fall of 1849, among his first withdrawals were a number of Oriental works, from which he made lengthy extracts in an early commonplace book which still had some blank pages. He even translated into English a French translation of "The Transmigration of the Seven Brahmans," a tale he found in Harrwansa, ou Histoire de la Famille de Hari, an appendix to the Hindu epic the Mahabharata. Since he had told President Sparks that he needed to consult the library for professional purposes, and since his other withdrawals in 1849 were of books that he needed for his Cape Cod lecture, it is possible that Thoreau may have contemplated some literary project on Oriental literature at this time. He had considered the subject for several years, had treated it briefly in A Week, and had read James Elliot Cabot's "The Philosophy of the Ancient Hindoos" in the inaugural issue of the Massachusetts Quarterly Review the previous year. In November 1849 he told H.G.O. Blake, after quoting passages about the freedom of the yogin absorbed in contemplation and detached from the world, "To some extent, and at rare intervals, even I am a yogin" (COR, 251). This apparent renewal of interest in Eastern philosophy and religion may thus be related to his own adoption of a more settled mode of life and the beginning of the previously described regular rituals of walking, writing, and reading, of which Thoreau speaks in the same letter. It may also reflect an attempt on his part to explain and justify philosophically the retired life that he was to lead henceforth. Whatever the causes, his enthusiasm
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Chapter 3 was relatively short-lived and led to no discernible literary results beyond the translation of the "Seven Brahmins" tale (which he never attempted to publish). In *Walden*, passages from the Eastern scriptures sharpen Thoreau's critique of his countrymen's modes of life and provide examples and analogues for his own more contemplative path. He does not tend to wield them, as he had done in *A Week*, as a stick with which to beat Christianity. The idea of the yogin's life is fully integrated into the perspective of the narrator, so that he can describe quite naturally in "The Pond in Winter" the interpenetration of East and West when "the pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges" (p. 298). Significantly, the most resonant Eastern fable in *Walden*, the story of the artist of Kouroo, is apparently a product of Thoreau's own invention, demonstrating the extent to which he had internalized and absorbed this material.

By 1851, reading the Harivansa again, he could self-deprecatingly summarize the influence of such works on himself as essentially confirming tendencies already present: "Like some other preachers, I have added my texts—derived from the Chinese and Hindoo scriptures—long after my discourse was written" (JL 2, 192). In 1854 he withdrew the *Bhāgavat-Gītā* and *Vishnu-Purāṇa*, both already familiar to him, from Harvard, but thereafter he seldom demonstrated an active interest in the subject—no further library withdrawals, infrequent and casual allusions in the Journal, and no extracts in the notebooks. When his English friend Thomas Cholmondeley sent him a magnificent gift of forty-four volumes of Oriental works in 1855 he responded warmly and gratefully, but he does not seem to have been inspired to read or reread the books themselves to any significant extent. Charming avers, with uncharacteristic plainness, "After he had ceased to read these works, he received a collection of them as a present, from England" (JL 5, 43). He was critical of De Quincey as one of the contemporary writers (Dickens was another, he thought) who "express themselves with too great fullness and detail" and "lack moderation and sententiousness" (JL 2.418), but some quality obviously attracted him as well. Perhaps it was the high stature that De Quincey claimed for prose composition itself. In his essay on Herodotus, a passage from which Thoreau copied into one of his commonplace books, De Quincey makes claims for prose that Thoreau, then working through the latter stages of revision on *Walden*, may well have found congenial or even inspiring. Speaking of Herodotus as the original writer of prose, De Quincey argues: "If prose were simply the negation of verse...indeed, it would be as slight nominal honour to have been the Father of Prose. But this is ignorance, though a pretty common ignorance. To walk well, it is not enough that a man abstain from dancing. Walking has rules of its own; the more difficult to perceive or to practise as they are less broadly pronounced. . . . Numerous laws of transition, connection, preparation, are different for an actor in verse and a writer in prose. Each mode of composition is a great art; well executed, is the highest and most difficult of arts." 28

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Chapter 3

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Another field that he cultivated in a desultory fashion in the 1850s was “literary” nonfiction. Fiction, of course, he read scarcely at all during his adult life, although he had had a fair acquaintance with Irving, Cooper, and Scott, as well as lesser novelists, during his college years. He apparently read no more of Melville after Typee [1846], and no more of Hawthorne after Mosses from an Old Manse [1846], which he mentions in a rather awkward poem in A Week [pp. 18–19]. He owned for a time a copy of The Scarlet Letter, probably a gift from the author, but crossed it off his library catalogue as either lost or given away.) He also appears not to have continued to read Carlyle avidly after his 1846 lecture and essay, perhaps because his own abolitionist convictions were growing stronger as Carlyle was expressing increasingly strident opinions on the other side, but he was quite strongly attracted during the fifties to both De Quincey and Ruskin.

De Quincey’s works were being published for the first time in a uniform edition by Ticknor and Fields (the author having finally acquired the necessary leisure to collect his works after a lifetime of being jointly hounded by his creditors and his opium habit), and Thoreau kept up with and looked forward to new volumes as they appeared at something like yearly intervals. He read Literary Reminiscences (containing anecdotes about Wordsworth and Coleridge, among others) and The Caesars shortly after their publication in 1851, and Historical and Critical Essays and Theological Essays, which appeared in 1853 and 1854, respectively. It is probably to Historical and Critical Essays that he refers in a Journal entry in March 1853 that suggests his continuing interest in and critical concern with Concord libraries: “I told Stacey the other day that there was another volume of De Quincey’s Essays (wanting to see it in his library). ‘I know it,’ says he, ‘but I shan’t buy any more of them, for nobody reads them.’ I asked what book in his library was most read. He said ‘The Wide, Wide World’” (JL 3.43).

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In any event, it is perhaps mildly surprising to find that Thoreau should have preserved a regard for and a continuing interest in De Quincey, a writer known chiefly for The Confessions of an English Opium Eater. One doubts that Thoreau, who once told Alex Therien in his cups that he might as well go home and cut his throat, would have much sympathy for De Quincey's long-standing laudanum habit; nor did he approve of what he considered De Quincey's narrow-minded and merely orthodox defense of the English church (JL 4.486). All these objections aside, De Quincey was one of the most gifted and original prose writers of the century, and that is more than enough reason for Thoreau to have read him carefully. And, given all these differences, Thoreau may have been attracted also to De Quincey's methods of handling classical, scholarly, and arcane subject matter in ways that made it lively and readable.

Another unexpected enthusiasm he acquired was for Ruskin. In 1847 he asked H.G.O. Blake: "Have you ever read Ruskin's books? If not, I would recommend you to try the second and third volumes (not parts) of his 'Modern Painters.'" He was reading the fourth, and have read most of his other books lately. They are singularly good and encouraging, though not without crudeness and bigotry. The themes in the volumes referred to are Infinity, Beauty, Imagination, Love of Nature, etc.,—all treated in a very living manner. I am rather surprised by them. It is remarkable that these things should be said with reference to painting chiefly, rather than literature. The 'Seven Lamps of Architecture,' too, is made of good stuff; but, as I remember, there is too much about art in it for me and the Hottentots. We want to know about matters and things in general. Our house is yet a hut" (COR, 497). Once again, as with De Quincey, one suspects that it was the "very living manner" in which Ruskin's subjects, especially nature, were treated that principally attracted Thoreau, for, as he suggests in the passage, he affected to be not much interested in art criticism as such.

The pose of cultural savage ("me and the Hottentots") is one he liked to assume in such circumstances, but if he was not much interested in painting he was very much interested in the artistic depiction of nature and in equipping himself generally with the vocabulary, sense of perspective, and if possible the eye of the painter and the art critic. He had read and written about Burke's ideas of the sublime and the beautiful in college, and early in the 1850s he read carefully several of William Gilpin's popular books on picturesque scenery, so it is appropriate that he should have read Ruskin. In addition to Modern Painters

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and Seven Lamps of Architecture, the books he mentions in the letter to Blake, Thoreau made extracts from The Elements of Drawing in one of his commonplace books, and his mention of having read "most of his other books lately" suggests that he probably knew Ruskin's most famous work, The Stones of Venice (1851-1853), although he does not specifically refer to it or to other of Ruskin's works. In the final analysis, although he found Ruskin "singularly good," he parted company with him as with so many other English writers for having failed (largely as a result of following conventional Christian orthodoxy, Thoreau thought) to carry his love of nature to its ultimate extension as a means to the worship of divinity. In a Journal entry of about the same time as the letter to Blake he says that Ruskin "expresses the common infidelity of his age and race. . . . The love of Nature and fullest perception of the revelation which she is to man is not compatible with the belief in the peculiar revelation of the Bible which Ruskin entertains" (JL 10.147). The Transcendentalists' persistent criticism of orthodox Christianity and established churches was that an insistence on "peculiar" or singular revelation such as Genesis or the gospels announced blinded humanity to the continuous and ever-present revelation that could be found through nature.

In sharp contrast to his interests and tastes in the previous decade, Thoreau's reading of poetry in the 1850s consisted almost exclusively of contemporary English and American verse. His taste was not wonderfully discriminating, by modern standards anyway, but along with Emerson, he was among a very small number of his contemporaries who recognized and responded to the genius of Whitman's Leaves of Grass in 1855 and 1856. He gave a qualified approbation to Coventry Patmore's recently published The Angel in the House in a letter to Blake in 1856, saying, "Perhaps you will find it good for you" (COR, 422). Whether he found it good for himself or not, it is certainly curious to find this unsentimental bachelor celebrant of chastity recommending a poem that extols (albeit with Victorian delicacy and circumlocution) sexual love and marriage. Blake was married, though; perhaps Thoreau thought he might find it instructive. (He had earlier sent Blake copies of his own essays "Love" and "Chastity and Sensuality.") A useful shorthand index to the tone and subject of Patmore's poem, which is no longer widely read, might be his friend Edmund Gosse's praise of its author's handling of the central theme: "He dwells with chaster ardor on the joys which are the prelude to that mystery of immaculate indulgence."

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one of his commonplace books and owned a copy of Allingham’s *The Music Master… And Two Series of Day and Night Songs*, whose title poem has been aptly characterized by a recent critic of Allingham as “appealing to the worst side of sentimental Victorian taste,” telling as it does the story of two lovers whose exquisitely self-sacrificing reserve keeps them from ever declaring their love. Both Allingham and Patmore were acquaintances of Emerson’s (and Allingham had received a review copy of *A Week*), so it may be that their representation in the short list of contemporary poets Thoreau read is to be attributed as much to professional courtesy as to taste.

A more significant volume of verse that he owned was Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (1850). He had some previous acquaintance with Tennyson’s earlier work, for he had mentioned Tennyson in a journal comment that was a part of his English poets project in the early 1840s (P 436). If he read *In Memoriam*, however (no explicit mention of his having done so is extant), he might well have been attentive to the crisis in belief that Tennyson anatomizes there, for in the 1850s Thoreau’s own reading in natural science (discussed in the next chapter) exposed him to the ideas and trends portrayed in *In Memoriam* that were pushing the consciousness of the literate public slowly but inexorably toward the disturbing implications of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*.

Thoreau’s principal and almost his only voiced enthusiasm for poetry during the decade, however, was for Walt Whitman, and though the circumstances of their acquaintance are well enough known, they are worth describing again as an example of the strengths and limitations of Thoreau’s literary judgment. He owned a copy of the 1855 first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which had probably been recommended to him by Emerson, who had in turn received a copy from Whitman and had praised the book in his famous letter to the poet greeting him “at the beginning of a great career.” Bronson Alcott was also enthusiastic about Whitman, and when Thoreau was surveying in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, in late 1856, Alcott, then living in New York City, took him out to Brooklyn to meet Whitman. There passed a wary but apparently not ungenial interview, and Whitman gave Thoreau a copy of the 1856 second edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Thor

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That Walt Whitman, of whom I wrote to you, is the most interesting fact to me at present. I have just read his 2nd edition (which he gave me) and it has done me more good than any reading for a long time. Perhaps I remember best the poem of Walt Whitman an American & the Sun Down Poem. There are 2 or 3 pieces in the book which are disagreeable to say the least, simply sensual. He does not celebrate love at all. It is as if the beasts spoke. I think that men have not been ashamed of themselves without reason. No doubt, there have always been dens where such deeds were unblushingly recited, and it is no merit to compete with their inhabitants. But even on this side, he has spoken more truth than any American or modern that I know. I have found his poem exhilarating encouraging. As for its sensuality,—& it may turn out to be less sensual than it appeared—I do not so much wish that those parts were not written, as that men & women were so pure that they could read them without harm, that is, without understanding them. One woman told me that no woman could read it as if a man could read what a woman could not. Of course Walt Whitman can communicate to us no experience, and if we are shocked, whose experience is it that we are reminded of?

On the whole it sounds to me very brave & American after whatever deductions. I do not believe that all the sermons so called that have been preached in this land put together are equal to it for preaching—We ought to rejoice greatly in him. He occasionally suggests something a little more than human. You cant confound him with the other inhabitants of Brooklyn or New York. How they must shudder when they read him! He is awefully good. (COR, 444–445)

Thoreau goes on to praise *Leaves of Grass* as “a great primitive poem” (an extremely approbative term for Thoreau, who persistently
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That Walt Whitman, of whom I wrote to you, is the most interesting fact to me at present. I have just read his 2nd edition (which he gave me) and it has done me more good than any reading for a long time. Perhaps I remember best the poem of Walt Whitman an American & the Sun Down Poem. There are 2 or 3 pieces in the book which are disagreeable to say the least, simply sensual. He does not celebrate love at all. It is as if the beasts spoke. I think that men have not been ashamed of themselves without reason. No doubt, there have always been dens where such deeds were unblushingly recited, and it is no merit to compete with their inhabitants. But even on this side, he has spoken more truth than any American or modern that I know. I have found his poem exhilarating encouraging. As for its sensuality,— & it may turn out to be less sensual than it appeared—I do not so much wish that those parts were not written, as that men & women were so pure that they could read them without harm, that is, without understanding them. One woman told me that no woman could read it as if a man could read what a woman could not. Of course Walt Whitman can communicate to us no experience, and if we are shocked, whose experience is it that we are reminded of?

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complained about the lack of wild or primitive vigor in English verse) and concludes by calling Whitman "a great fellow." In this letter Thoreau brought himself to focus more directly than in the earlier one on Whitman's poems themselves and less on the phenomenon of Whitman the person—the self-conscious advertisement or artifact of his vision. It is clear that Thoreau is still troubled by the "simply sensual" poems, but on the other hand, he allows that "it may turn out less sensual than it appeared," perhaps an inchoate acknowledgment of Whitman's ultimately symbolic and spiritualizing (while still earthy and, for the day, graphic) presentation of sexuality. The second edition did, in fact, contain a number of new poems explicitly treating sexual themes, such as "I Sing the Body Electric," "A Woman Waits for Me," and "Spontaneous Me." And it was a part of Whitman's self-proclaimed program for the second edition, as he told Emerson, to "celebrate in poems the eternal decency of the amateness of Nature" and not to be one of the "bards of the fashionable delusion of the inherent nastiness of sex, and of the feeble and querulous modesty of depravation."

Thoreau's sense that the most memorable poems were "the poem of Walt Whitman an American & the Sun Down Poem" ("Song of Myself" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" in later editions) is a judgment certainly affirmed by most later readers. It is difficult to point to any particular effect that reading Whitman had on Thoreau's own work at the stage that his life, but tempting to speculate that Whitman might have exerted a far greater influence if Thoreau could have known Leaves of Grass when he was most interested in reading and writing poetry, in his early twenties. What is clear, however, is that Thoreau valued Whitman's poetry highly, despite the limitations imposed upon his taste by prevailing New England and Victorian cultural attitudes toward sex, and it is in some respects remarkable that he was able to see Whitman as clearly as he could since the new poet was in so many ways the opposite of himself: garrulous, urban, expansive, and self-promoting. Only one other contemporary figure stirred his imagination more vividly in this decade, and that was John Brown.

Thoreau, no less than his contemporaries, was always fascinated with the heroic personality—figures like Whitman or John Brown, who devoted themselves at great personal cost to some ideal—and this familiar nineteenth-century preoccupation led naturally enough to a fondness for biography and autobiography. Emerson's Representative Men and Carlyle's Heroes and Hero-Worship are representative doc-

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sources in New England. In his masterpiece, Thoreau confidently tells his audience not just what he has read but how to read.

The descriptive prose of Walden's "Winter" by virtue of its more copious allusion and illustration, the product of Thoreau's several years of careful revision and filling out of the book's structure during the 1850s, a process which involved not only adding to but integrating into his prose the results of his continuing study. This feature and this process are nowhere more evident than in the Conclusion to Walden, one of the last sections of the book to be written. The rhetorical and thematic high points of the chapter—the advice to live like a traveler at home and become "expert in home-cosmography," the fable of the artist of Kouroo, and the concluding exemplum of the "strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood"—are built and based upon his reading in travel literature, Eastern scriptures, and New England history, respectively. Yet each involves a quite different but equally subtle transformation of sources, from the sly humor of travel literature invoked on behalf of staying home, to the original fable of the artist of Kouroo, loosely modeled on Hindu mythology, to the metamorphosis of the story of the bug, in which Thoreau rescues a trivial incident from a "dry leaf" in the historical collections (a characteristic pun that emphasizes the sterility of both mind and nature unless transformed by spirit and imagination) to stand as a triumphant example of regeneration.

Walden's later chapters were generally written or significantly revised late in the book's genesis. Thus, "Economy" and "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" were relatively complete in the first draft of 1846–1847, while most of "The Pond in Winter" and "Spring," and all of "Conclusion," for example, were written between 1851 and 1854.\(^\text{35}\) The greater particularity of these later chapters, especially "The Pond in Winter" and "Spring," with regard to the description of natural phenomena and seasonal changes reflects Thoreau's growing absorption in the study of natural history during this period. His account of the ice on Walden Pond, for example, or the famous and climactic description of the thawing sand and clay foliage of "Spring" are both informed by his recently acquired habits of careful observation and description.

Likewise, the linking of language itself to natural phenomena, so evident in the sand foliage passage, where the shapes and sounds of various letters are postulated to have some primordial meaning as basic and the meaning of the natural forms themselves, is also the product in part of a new development in his reading. From his early schooling onward, Thoreau had always been interested not only in languages but also in language itself, and as he matured his style grew increasingly to reflect his assimilation and extension of the Transcendentalists' language theory as sketched by Emerson in Nature and developed by him in greater detail in "The Poet": Like nature itself, language is a path back to spirit and to original unity; it is "fossil poetry" that reveals by its history and the etymology of particular words the original and primary significance of nature itself to mankind. Thoreau's contribution to this theory was to take it seriously and literally as a principle of his style, and consequently we find one of his most characteristic stylistic devices to be the often surprising reattachment of a word to its original sense, as when he describes the sand foliage in Walden as "a truly grotesque" vegetation," calling attention to the original significance of "grotesque" (from the same root as "grotto") as coming from underground. He was assisted in this development—perhaps the key signature of his mature style—by his reading during the early 1850s of Richard Trench's On the Study of Words (1851) (itself indebted to Emerson's Nature and "The Poet") and especially by Charles Kraitsir's The Significance of the Alphabet (1846) and Glossology (1852). As the recent work of Michael West and Philip Gura has demonstrated, Thoreau was particularly indebted to Kraitsir for his belief in the primal intrinsic significance of human sounds, a belief manifested most explicitly in his glossological speculations in the "Spring" chapter of Walden. As Gura puts it, "What Thoreau offered as his most important 'lesson' from the worlds of matter and spirit was that words were not merely steps to a higher reality but themselves embodied and reflected the reality, a thought initially suggested to him by Kraitsir.\(^\text{36}\) In his best work, Thoreau wrote painstakingly according to his fundamental principle of reading—"We must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valor and generosity we have"—and much of the perennial vigor of Walden is due to Thoreau's theory and practice of recovering the primeval significance of language, of "re-membering" words and of speaking "without bounds."


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