

Review Essays

Walking and Thinking with Thoreau

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Henry David Thoreau, *Excursions*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer (Princeton UP, 2007), 650 pp., \$65.00 cloth.

*F*irst published nearly 150 years ago, Thoreau's *Excursions* has recently been made available as a long-awaited installment of the standard Princeton Edition of *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, under the helm of senior editor and Thoreau scholar Joseph J. Moldenhauer. An eclectic anthology reissued in various guises over the years, the provenance of *Excursions* is complicated by its posthumous publication and seemingly variegated contents. Its initial 1863 edition comprises essays both published and unpublished, which read together span Thoreau's entire writing career. Some of the texts included had, as far as we know, been left untouched by Thoreau for nearly twenty years. Others had evolved slowly through a succession of manuscripts and lecture deliveries; this while yet others were evidently assembled in some haste, from loose drafts and journal entries, as Thoreau braved his terminal illness during the early 1860s.

Surface eclecticism aside, however, the *Excursions* materials display an overarching thematic unity which underscores an integral aspect of Thoreau's writings overall, namely their frequent narrative basis

in walks, rambles, and hikes. As such the *Excursions* essays form a chronological (if admittedly partial) log not only of Thoreau's actual travels on foot, but of his evolving philosophical and scientific thoughts on the merits of walking as an epistemological exercise. While Thoreau's sheer pleasure of spending time outdoors on foot is a staple of the essays, so also is his ensuing appetite for new knowledge of his environs, natural and cultural.

In working toward an assessment of the new edition of *Excursions*, I will comment first on the essays included in their order of initial publication or known genesis. These texts in the main offer the reader a rare opportunity to entertain Thoreau's thoughts as they developed, rather than the experience of a settled, well-reflected retrospective such as those of *A Week* and *Walden*. The precocious Transcendentalist writer of the early 1840s, setting out for nearby fields, streams, and hills, soon blends a budding naturalist's queries and findings into his texts, and as his quest broadens and deepens during the 1850s and early 1860s he brings all manner of discourses into his core, sojourn structure: homiletic, jeremiad, agricultural tract, political pamphlet, biblical genealogy, travel brochure and Baedeker – in addition to ever richer strands of local natural and cultural history, folklore, and mythology.

Following the tracks of Thoreau in *Excursions*, one realizes how walking and thinking became near symbiotic to him from the very outset, and how the process molded his refreshingly original frame of mind. His first published essay, reflecting his assignment to review a number of new works of natural history, was carried by the transcendentalist journal *The Dial* in 1842. Thoreau's text was entitled "Natural History of Massachusetts," yet it only tokenly formed a review – rather a rambling series of nature observations by a freely sauntering young man of letters.

After a digressive introduction, chiding the disease of society while contrasting with examples of nature's health, Thoreau at length feels compelled "to draw a little nearer to our promised topics." He dutifully turns to the volume of entomology entrusted to his judgment, but

instead of comments on its contents in a disciplinary context – as might be expected – he describes its effects on his own person. Entomology, he declares, “extends the limits of being in a new direction, so that I walk in nature with a sense of greater space and freedom” (7).¹

One may note here the early insouciance with which Thoreau approached the task of formal criticism, and it is hardly surprising that he was seldom offered the task in future. Indeed, the refreshing idiosyncrasy Thoreau displayed as a reader arguably ranks with that of D.H. Lawrence in the latter’s literary-historical mode several generations later: both men make each text their very own, and the devil-may-care what others make or expect of it. A further aspect of Thoreau’s general outlook is made evident by his turn toward the personal. He almost never read in the service of independent, detached science or literary criticism as such. Rather, he saw reading as related to his own quest of self-improvement on the one hand, and to discovering as much as possible of his local or visited landscape – its cultural history, animals, plants, and geological traits – on the other. In time he came to see such learning, wherever garnered, as a frequent prerequisite for observation – amounting to a credo that one normally does not see what one does not expect. Reading books, then, was not a cloistered activity sequestered from outdoor explorations to Thoreau: instead, it served to call up an old Swedish saying, “as straw to the clay”: it coalesces around and reinforces a larger project of self-cultivation through diligent observation of word and field alike.

Insofar as thoughts generated from reading and walking would kindle transcendental insight, the more the better. As Thoreau puts it in his chronicle “A Walk to Wachusett,” printed in *The Boston Miscellany* of January 1843, “The landscape lies far and fair within, and the deepest thinker is the farthest travelled” (31). The correspondence between outer and inner landscapes remains implicit as Thoreau carefully records his approach, ascent, and descent of Wachusett with his hiking companion. But his tenor is unmistakable: “as we passed through the open country, we inhaled the fresh scent of every field, and all nature

lay passive, to be viewed and travelled” (32-33). Beyond the masculine quest ethos and sexualized phrasing – inevitably recalling Anette Kolodny’s “lay of the land” exposure of patriarchal metaphor – nature is depicted as a terrain yielding valuable experience that may be reaped for spiritual insight by the walker. In transcendentalist terms, nature thus apprehended speaks to reason rather than understanding; to intuition rather than calculation. The mountain peak itself of course offers more in this romantic regard than the nether regions: “In passing over these heights of land, through their thin atmosphere, the follies of the plain are refined and purified” (43). And the lofty firmament of stars, in turn, imparts not only clarity but truth to their earnest observer: “We see laws which never fail, of whose failure we never conceived; and their lamps burn all the night, too, as well as all day; so rich and lavish is that nature, which can afford this superfluity of light” (40).

Thoreau’s youthful preaching was mainly done outdoors, describing nature as a more pristine and true scripture for those who would brave the elements and, as the case may be, their own mental and corporeal lethargy. In “A Winter Walk,” published in *The Dial* of October 1843, however, Thoreau seems at first to backpedal from this conviction. He gravitates toward classical decorum in giving his landscapes very faint local contours, while peppering his text with a rhetorical conceit of contradiction – snow warm as cotton; forests rendered natural cities; a sunrise described as a clash of cymbals. Ralph Waldo Emerson for one was exasperated, and in his role as *Dial* editor cut liberally in Thoreau’s text. What probably worried Emerson more than Thoreau’s stylistic mannerisms, however, was the uncertain loyalty to basic tenets of transcendentalism on display.

In “A Winter Walk” Thoreau employs Emersonian analogies between the human and natural in such a way as to quietly suggest parody, as when he declares that summer is in the heart of every healthy man: “There is the south. Thither have all birds and insects migrated, and around the warm springs in his breast are gathered the robin and the lark” (60). This may at best correspond to Emerson’s notion that

ideal man will (re)make nature into his realized will, but by the same token it amounts to a hackneyed and sentimentalized view of the Not-Me. Thoreau contrasts the sentiment most effectively with detailed examinations further on of a woodcutter's discarded chip and a dried-up beech leaf tossed by the wind. Both residues are said to be self-sufficient in that they bear witness to larger processes in and of themselves; the chip may be interrogated to reveal no less than "a history of the world" (65), while the leaf will supply "its log rolled up" to such a one who has the inclination and patience to read it (67). In each case pathetic fallacy is discarded, and no extrapolation is made to spiritual counterweights or intuitive verities: the narrator's focus remains firmly on the present of his rendered environment and its traces of history. The two waste products – chip and parched leaf – are elevated to bear witness of a cycle which may properly (albeit anachronistically) be called cybernetic, in conflating the human and the natural into an immanent, analogous whole – where everything may speak of itself and other phenomena and actors of the world, but remain silent about what may or may not reign beyond it.

It may be that Emerson's close relationship with Thoreau at the time hindered him from expressing his concerns in full. Thoreau tended his mentor's garden in Concord, and saw to a span of chores in the household when Emerson was away lecturing. Thoreau also left for a brief stint as tutor of Emerson's older brother William's two sons on Staten Island, the plan being to combine pedagogical work with making inroads into the literary market of New York. As it happened, the strategy largely failed, mainly due to Thoreau's own discomfiture at being away from home in an urban environment (his bouts of somnolence at the time – which did little to help him adapt – were probably psychosomatic). Thoreau's letters to his sister Helen reveal his keen longing not only for his family, but also for the woods and pastures of Concord.

When Thoreau did return to Concord near Christmas of 1843, it was a permanent homecoming. While he would embark on a number of expeditions outside his county limits during the coming years, Concord

would remain his firmly-lodged base-camp. Thoreau soon settled into a routine of daily journal-keeping, which became increasingly ambitious with time. Largely a collection of intermittent quotes, extracts and derivative musings in its first few years, the journal gradually became a more independent seedbed for the writer's lecturing and writing projects – and much of their content was garnered from observations made during his daily walks.

Interestingly, Thoreau's two completed books, *A Week* of 1849 and *Walden* of 1854, were both begun in the mid-1840's, and both eventually published as retrospective accounts by a near decade (the boat journey of *A Week* took place in 1839, while Thoreau's stint at Walden Pond lasted between 1845 and 1847). To this one may add the curious fact that both books were largely structured by waters, involving boating, sluicing, fishing, swimming, skating, sounding, and the like – all this while the nature essays retained their essentially terrestrial character, most often framed by walks or hikes. True, the posthumously published *The Maine Woods* and *Cape Cod* were originally conceived in essay form, and contained their share of portaging, canoeing, wreck-inspecting, and beach-combing, yet nevertheless Thoreau's preferred structure in his shorter nature-oriented pieces remained the local country walk.

This need not be conceived as odd, however: foot travel offers many pragmatic benefits to the writer of essays (to say nothing of the journal-keeper). Insofar as the walks depicted are short and circular, they lend enough space for a chosen theme with pointed digressions, while also promising closure with the expected homecoming at the end. Thoreau made much use of this sojourn form in the essays collected as *Excursions* soon after his death, and arguably so by both design and habit. The design element becomes evident when one compares his finished nature essays with the journal notes supporting them: the former frequently employ notes winnowed from years of journalizing, packing the latter with such vivid detail and pithy observations as even a supremely talented writer could hardly hope for from a random, isolated

outing. (Does this render them fictional? Not necessarily: one might better call them 'aggregated' or 'ideal' walks, showing the potential of observation and thought inherent in actual saunters that Thoreau made.) The habitual sense, in turn, would stem from the obvious but often overlooked fact that Thoreau practiced it virtually every day in his journal, describing his setting out and return from innumerable walks in his vicinity.

Indeed, this pattern of walking by morning or afternoon and writing by evening became so ingrained with Thoreau that he evidently took it as a serious affront when he was interrupted or distracted. There are two particularly well-known examples of this related in Thoreau's political essays. The first can be found in "Civil Disobedience" of 1849, where the writer's classic night-in-jail peripety upon refusing to pay his poll tax is followed not by formal protests at the State's aggression toward Mexico, nor by rhetorically muscular *habeas corpus* indignation, but by sudden and utter disdain for the very realm of the political: "I was put into jail as I was going to the shoemaker's to get a shoe which was mended. When I was let out the next morning, I proceeded to finish my errand, and, having put on my mended shoe, joined a huckleberry party, who were impatient to put themselves under my conduct; and in half an hour, – for the horse was soon tackled, – was in the midst of a huckleberry field, on one of our highest hills, two miles off; and then the State was nowhere to be seen."² While this was a symbolically rife gesture, serving to diminish the opposing governmental force by ignoring it, many of Thoreau's readers and sponsors found it hard to fathom. Emerson, for instance, recalled the passage in his 1862 eulogy of Thoreau, lamenting that his erstwhile protégé had opted to captain a berrying-party instead of "engineering for all America."

The second example occurs in "Slavery in Massachusetts" (1854). Here Thoreau swerves from a fierce issue-driven indictment of local politicians' and voters' ineffectual stances toward human bondage, to the following remarks: "I walk toward one of our ponds, but what signifies the beauty of nature when men are base? We walk to lakes to see

our serenity reflected in them; when we are not serene, we go not to them. Who can be serene in a country where both the rulers and the ruled are without principle? The remembrance of my country spoils my walk" (*ibid*, 108). To be fair, this turning-inward toward the private is only gradual, and the narcissism and latent self-aggrandizement remains tempered by political awareness. The gesture becomes more problematic, however, when Thoreau chooses to cap his essay with a rumination on the white water-lily, a specimen of which he apparently chances upon by the pond just alluded to. He compares it to those he criticizes: "I scent no compromise in the fragrance of the water-lily. /.../ In it, the sweet, and pure, and innocent, are wholly sundered from the obscene and baleful" (*ibid*, 108). Again, while the intended symbolism is clear enough, the analogy is surprisingly poor: a white water-lily called to signal and perfume a purportedly virtuous bystander hardly inspires the reader, whether friend or foe. More telling, perhaps, is the disengagement implicit in the flower fable. It comes across as the product of an erupting transcendentalist *hauteur* by which real-world political concerns are rendered inferior to loftier spiritual aims.³ Political action, meanwhile, is ironically reduced to living and thinking well by one's own lights.

It is enlightening to approach Thoreau's travelogue "A Yankee in Canada" with this staunch focus on foot travel and its merits. In the fall of 1850, Thoreau and his frequent walking companion Ellery Channing opted for a cheap railway excursion to Canada, a USD \$5 roundtrip Boston-Montreal with an overnight steamer detour to Quebec included. The two men were an unlikely duo among 1,346 other subscribers, and Thoreau's lack of enthusiasm in his published account some two years later is the stuff of minor legend. Consider his beginning: "I fear I have not got much to say about Canada, not having seen much; what I got by going to Canada was a cold" (79). What follows is a predictably dull account, glimmering now and then in the cultural-historical sketches, but all the more distanced by the chosen, passive-passenger mode of locomotion: iron horse and riverboat. Thoreau summarizes his fault-

finding by pointing to a perceived French-British-cum-Canadian predilection for ritual and institutionalism: "All things appeared to contend there [i.e., in Canada], as I have implied, with a certain rust of antiquity /.../ the rust of conventions and formalities" (146). More explicitly, "if your wealth in any measure consists in manliness, in originality, and independence, you had better stay here [i.e., in the United States]" (147). Thoreau closes with the caveat that his impressions have been quickly amassed, and, previous reservations notwithstanding, admits that "I should like still right well to make a longer excursion on foot through the wilder parts of Canada" (163).

It has often been said that Thoreau's Journals come to full maturity around 1850, and one may extend this argument to cover his remaining nature essays as collected in *Excursions*. Mention has been made of his early efforts eventually included in the anthology, "Natural History of Massachusetts," "A Walk to Wachusett," "A Winter Walk," and "A Yankee in Canada," all save the last seeing their genesis during the early 1840s. The remaining essays forming the second half of the collection – omitting the fugitive and inferior "The Landlord" of 1843, of which more later – all evince strong journal roots, culling materials from most of the 1850s in their finished form. They are "An Address on the Succession of Forest Trees," "Walking," "Autumnal Tints," and "Wild Apples."

I should perhaps have put citation marks around "finished form" above, as Thoreau scrambled to assemble the latter three with what strength he had left during his terminal illness in the early 1860's, eventually dictating to his sister Sophia when too weak to wield pen and paper himself. In all likelihood he would have preferred to polish the essays further, and in a larger sense his habitual method of composition (journal-lecture-essay-book) left most of his texts works-in-progress by his own standards.

"Walking," which Thoreau gave as a lecture from the early 1850s on, is a model of sustained tone, never losing its stride whether humorously and zestfully preaching the virtues of "going à la sainte terre" (185) or homiletically admonishing those who would cut down trees

and forests in the name of progress. Buoyancy and sureness combine to entertaining effect, and Thoreau appears full of easy confidence in his choice of vocation as “Holy Walker” tending Westward. While few specifics of landscape are given, indeed few particulars of any kind (save regarding the Old Marlboro Road and Spaulding’s farm), readers return from the piece convinced that they are made privy to core aspects of Thoreau’s philosophy – and aptly so, as it was always intended as a mode and reflection of practical life, of life lived and exercised, beyond the words.

“An Address on the Succession of Forest Trees,” given first as a lecture in 1860, also features a relaxed, even mildly self-mocking narrator. He presents himself as a local surveyor who for several years – beyond his paid tasks in determining property limits – has been intrigued to explain how pine trees are frequently succeeded by oaks, and vice versa. Readers of Thoreau’s journal will recognize observations made during the full run of the 1850s entries in the essay, the fruits of innumerable walks and surveys in the environs.

Those aware of Thoreau’s intellectual pursuits in 1860 will also note interesting echoes of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* of the year before; a copy had reached Concord Town Library in January of 1860. In his concluding chapter, Darwin called for more studies to be made as to how species – botanical as well as zoological – have come to be transported from one locality to another. His book also famously sharpened the debate between those who believed in “special creation” (where species were continually borne and placed in their environments by God) and those who preferred a developmental process or “reproduction with modification.” It is fairly evident that Thoreau sided with the latter in his focus on natural as opposed to supernatural explanations of succession. Belief in spontaneous germination was still strong among local farmers, while some alternately held that seeds could lie dormant for ages before sprouting under the proper circumstances. Thoreau, strengthened by an impressive log of observations, could now explain how wind, squirrels, and birds brought their

respective agencies to the process. While he was not first to suggest their importance, his experiences laid a solid empirical foundation for the hypothesis.

Had Thoreau then completely abandoned his transcendentalist roots by 1860? While he proves not to subscribe to spontaneous creation (however triggered) in his succession essay, he still admits to marvelling at the power of seeds. To him they harbor a mysterious and wonderful blueprint, vested with the amazing potential of plants and fruits barely imaginable from their own humble appearance. In a sense, this line of reasoning and sentiment harks back to the romantics' organic principle, which as it were transcended material causation in supplying a sum (a pattern, design, or other organization) greater than the random aggregation of its discrete parts.⁴

Then again, the flowering of the seed is no longer a fully cloaked magical process to the Thoreau nearing his mid-40s. In concluding "Natural History of Massachusetts" almost two decades earlier, the young Thoreau had warned his readers "not [to] underrate the value of a fact; it will one day flower in a truth" (27). In other words, there was hope not only for the poet-seer but for the scientist patiently accumulating facts in the hope of discerning higher law. Precisely *how* the fact would bloom is left unclear in 1842, but by the time Thoreau delivered "An Address on the Succession of Forest Trees," empirical wealth supplies both the argument and the answer. Indeed, in reading the two essays side by side one may see that Thoreau's early disdain toward what he deemed "Baconian science" gradually dissolved. In "Natural History" he characterizes the "true man of science" as one whose sensuousness rather than intellect is activated:

[he] 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. (28)

To arrive at the conclusions presented in "Succession," however, Thoreau had precisely to lean on method and (admittedly simple) mathematics: covering the same ground over and over, diligently counting nuts and seeds and seedlings, hoping to discern patterns of growth and spread. And while he does not discuss Bacon further in his extant writings, he may have come to understand that the rationale underlying Bacon's stringent methodology was based on the conviction that the biblical Fall had caused a momentuous diminution of human power. The sacred role of science, as Bacon consequently – and quite radically – saw it, was to restore man's position by furthering his knowledge of the natural world and its laws.

"Autumnal Tints" and "Wild Apples," conclude the edition of *Excursions* under consideration. Both essays bear evidence of Thoreau's patient, journal-culling method of composition. In his essay on the splendors of autumn foliage, Thoreau garners materials jotted down throughout the 1850s into an essay forming an annotated, rapturous calendar of leaf-turnings and -falls, guiding the reader vicariously out-of-doors to follow the swirls and explosions tree by tree. It is ironic and tragic that Thoreau's last lecture, held in Waterbury, Connecticut in December 1860, was faulted as monotonous in delivery and with little practical or poetical content by a local paper. The manuscript Thoreau read was "Autumnal Tints," and while his poor health by all accounts affected his performance, his text was and remains rich in both poetry and passion. There is none of Frost's later, resigned New England lament – "then leaf subsides to leaf" – but instead an animated sense of *festivitas*, of "cheap and innocent galadays" (245) displaying leaves such as form "innocent stimulants of bright and cheering prospects," serving "to keep off melancholy and superstition" (247).

"Wild Apples," finally, has aptly been called Thoreau's most successful "familiar essay" by Walter Harding, who praises its amalgam of wit and wisdom, fact and fancy.⁵ Indeed, the etymologies and potted histories of the apples mentioned recall the humor and enthusiasm of both "Walking" and the concluding chapter of *Walden*, while the double entendre retains all the youthful dexterity and tongue-in-cheek at work in earlier lectures, essays, and books. Speaking of wild-apple shrubs stunted by grazing cattle, Thoreau remarks: "No wonder they are prompted to grow thorns at last, to defend themselves against such foes. In their thorniness, however, there is no malice, only some malic acid" (273).

Thoreau scholar Steven Fink has compellingly argued that "Wild Apples" also forms "a highly crafted personal autobiography, a national biography, and an American jeremiad" beyond its more obvious concerns and appeals.⁶ He sees the figure of the writer behind the apple – indigenous, wild, and rooted all at once; not catering to conventional tastes, but supplying original fare – at least where he has finally been able to fend against bovine audiences and their lax literary expectations, with thorn and thicket where necessary, and with time on his side. Fink also reads Thoreau's wild apple as quintessentially American, of European lineage to be sure, but planted and rooted in new and promising soil; an American Adam of enterprise and independence. The jeremiad toward the essay's end darkens its tone, however, in warning that the wild apple will soon be gone: the cider industry, the rise of grafting, and a disinclination to plant trees freely in out-of-the-way locales will be its eventual ruin. Thoreau quotes the prophet Joel on what will ensue: "the apple tree, even all the trees of the field, are withered: because joy is withered away from the sons of men" (289).

One notices several strands of Thoreau's concerns woven together in "Wild Apples," including his combined will of conveying the many free bounties of nature and a life of simplicity, while warning that nature must be valued as independently as possible if any of its wild traits are to remain. Robert Sattelmeyer has convincingly argued that Tho-

reau is concerned in this late essay to bridge the divide between man and nature:

the apple embodies simultaneously man's dominion over nature and his fall from harmony with it – the ultimate paradox of human knowledge. If we understand the story of the Fall at one level to represent the separation of man from original harmony with nature, a falling into self-consciousness in which nature began to be perceived as the *other*, then the history of the apple tree becomes the history of man's relation to nature. How the apple tree is defined and perceived is at any moment an index of our condition with respect to that original harmony and our prospects of regaining it. (ibid., xxxiii)

Here one might add, in conclusion, that the Adamic paradox Sattelmeyer outlines is one that has important repercussions also with regard to Thoreau's philosophical outlook on nature. Following transcendentalist logic, external nature is highly valued but not *qua* nature – rather as an alternate scripture acting as a conduit or vessel toward spiritual enlightenment – toward grasping higher law. There are many indications in the *Excursions* essays that Thoreau became less and less interested in such derived law, while all the more keen to understand nature's processes and seasonalities on its own terms – “one world at a time,” as he succinctly put it on his deathbed. His youthful enthusiasm also had to face the irony that his local landscape, however idyllic it may have seemed, was the simultaneous product of natural and cultural history. Thus, in absolute scriptural terms, it formed a hybrid text subject to criss-crossing, sometimes obscured discourses at once human and environmental.

Thoreau made his great attempt to resist such corruption in the “Sounds” chapter of *Walden* (extant in significant portions already in the 1846-47 first draft of the book⁷), employing all manner of rhetorical tools to literally *translate* his experience of pure nature to the reader. Ultimately, however, the railroad incursion into his enclave becomes

overpowering, both in its tangible apparition and as a symbol of pervasive (cultural) technology: it points, in the end, also to the standardized tracks made by the conventions of writing, however much one may resist them.⁸ The later Thoreau, if we consider his writings from the 1850's and on, was less troubled by such redemptive disappointments, while more attuned to proto-scientific methods of inquiry regarding nature and natural history. Thoreau also proved less hectoring, more conciliatory, and pragmatic in his calls for environmental protections – witness his pleas for communal parklands in *Walking*, and for berry and tree reserves in the unpublished manuscripts, since presented as *Faith in a Seed* (1993) and *Wild Fruits* (2000), edited by the late Thoreau scholar Bradley P. Dean – thereby acknowledging the realities of industrial revolution and urbanization, however much he may have regretted them at heart.



Excursions has a curious provenance as a collection. It was first assembled in 1863 by Thoreau's one remaining sibling, his sister Sophia, probably aided by Ralph Waldo Emerson and possibly with various input from others, such as Thoreau's publisher Jamer T. Fields, his former friends Daniel Ricketson and Benjamin Franklin Sanborn, and his erstwhile walking companion Ellery Channing. "Still," as Moldenhauer cautions, "*Excursions* was not named by Thoreau, who had not even designated the contents of a collection before he died" (343). This is of course as far as we know from extant documents, since Thoreau may have divulged a wish for a posthumous collection orally to Sophia or other close acquaintance. The 1863 Ticknor & Fields Edition includes the essays reprinted in the new Princeton Edition, minus "A Yankee in Canada," while harboring a since-dropped biographical essay by Emerson (modeled fairly closely after his eulogy) and sparse thematic collection of Journal notes entitled "Night and Moonlight," the latter given only once as a lecture in 1854 and apparently never repeated or reworked since.

The 1863 Ticknor & Fields Edition went through at least sixteen reprints until the advent of the new and substantially rearranged River-

side Edition carried by Houghton Mifflin in 1894 (362f).⁹ The prime mover behind the initiative was the senior house editor Horace Elisha Scudder, who had for some time been detecting errors in the old plates and wished to correct them. Sophia Thoreau had died in 1876, Emerson in 1882, and while Ricketson, Sanborn and Channing all remained alive until the turn of the century (Sanborn until 1917), none were involved in the new Houghton Mifflin effort. The Riverside Edition scrapped Emerson's biographical sketch, while adding "A Yankee in Canada" and two shorter pieces, "May Days" and "Days and Nights in Concord," derived from journal material initially culled by Thoreau's friends H.G.O. Blake and Channing respectively, and both subsequently published in literary journals during 1878.

In 1906, responding to heightened interest in Thoreau's character and writings by critics and the public at large, the Thoreau aficionado Francis H. Allen of Houghton Mifflin brought out an ambitious twenty-volume Manuscript Edition of Thoreau's texts with his editorial team. The fifth volume of the series corresponded to the earlier Riverside Edition *Excursions*, and was now titled *Excursions and Poems*. It contained the same essays in the same order, while omitting "May Days" and "Days and Nights in Concord"; their contents were now printed among the fourteen volumes of Journal included in the new edition. The poems appended were in turn culled from Thoreau's prose writings, exclusive of the Journal.

The next noteworthy edition of *Excursions* took over seven decades to arrive, given the title *The Natural History Essays* as edited by Robert Sattelmeyer in 1980.¹⁰ Sattelmeyer followed the 1906 Walden Edition (a less expensive corollary to the Manuscript Edition of the same year, based on the same plates), while omitting "Night and Moonlight" as proven non-authorial in its printed form. Likewise Sattelmeyer silently dropped "The Landlord" from the contents, probably on thematic grounds, since the essay has little to do with either natural history or excursions as such. There was also a significant addition in "Huckleberries," an essay admittedly not prepared for publication by Thoreau,

but extant in an intermediate draft in a longer manuscript non-authorially labelled "Notes on Fruits" (while the wrapping in Thoreau's hand has "Wild Fruits"; "Wild Apples," subsequently reworked by Thoreau, was also lifted from this manuscript). "Huckleberries" had recently been transcribed by Leo Stoller, and was made available to Sattelmeyer for his edition (since then, Bradley P. Dean has edited the full run of the "Wild Fruits" manuscript and related materials in the two volumes mentioned above, although the texts remain to be presented in the standard Princeton Edition of Thoreau's writings).

This brings us at length to Joseph J. Moldenhauer's and Princeton's recent edition of *Excursions*, which true to tradition varies somewhat as compared to earlier ones. It scraps as extraneous the journal-based and more or less non-authorial "May Days," "Days and Nights in Concord," and "Night and Moonlight," opts out of appending poems, and retains "A Yankee in Canada," first seen in the Riverside Edition, and "The Landlord," as seen in all editions save Sattelmeyer's, which admittedly formed a thematic selection. It hovers between being true to the first edition (to whatever degree this was authorially sanctioned) and thematic unity. Fidelity to the 1863 Ticknor & Fields Edition would explain why "The Landlord" is included, but not "A Yankee in Canada," which fits with the other essays in being more or less excursion-based, unlike "The Landlord." It seems a shame that "The Landlord" was not relegated to the *Early Essays and Miscellanies* volume of the Princeton Edition, issued in 1975, as it undeniably jars with the other pieces included.

Yet this is at most a minor quibble, as Moldenhauer's impressive "Editorial Appendix" – covering more than half of his new edition's 650 pages – provides much valuable information that is new to scholars and lay readers alike. Moldenhauer has clarified, for instance, the considerable extent to which Emerson cut Thoreau's *Dial* manuscript of "A Winter Walk." The reconstituted version presented here will be an eye-opener to anyone who recalls having read this early Thoreau essay elsewhere; there are now added bold jabs at conventional Christianity,

as well as long quotes from the works of the Scottish poet Gavin Douglas (1474-1522).

But why not follow the first printed version, someone might ask? Moldenhauer explains in his textual introduction that his

eclectic or critical text is neither an exact reprint of any printed document nor a literatim transcription or facsimile reproduction of a manuscript document. It is an analytically-constructed text whose editor selects that one of the various documentary forms of the finished text over which the author exercised the greatest degree of control, and then emends it to reproduce as nearly as possible the author's intention. (366)

He clarifies further on that intention in this context – specifically regarding accidentals such as punctuation, spelling, and word-division – is understood as entropic, in other words that “the surviving finished form closest in time to the author's composition is the most reliable” (367). The principles chosen are spelled out, for in these editing contexts there is no obvious way to determine what is uncontroversially best: all comes down to competence and judgment, educated guesses and choice.

Moldenhauer's editorial practice is an interesting and sympathetic one, especially for an ambitious edition entirely devoted to Thoreau. Naturally this has its costs. First of all, regarding an essay such as “A Winter Walk,” here rendered in expanded version, it must be remembered by future scholars and students making use of the present text (it will certainly remain standard for a long time to come) that the alterations and additions now in place would be unrecognizable to Thoreau's contemporary readers and critics, and to many after them. Less laboriously put, one must recall that the reception of “A Winter Walk” to date is almost exclusively based on the version printed in *The Dial*, for better or worse.

Granted, Thoreau soon developed an allergy toward editors' high-handedly making unauthorized changes when printing his submitted

manuscripts, and on occasion he withdrew his remaining materials in vexation as a consequence. In this light, welcoming Emerson's "pretty free omissions" (as he described them himself) back into "A Winter Walk" seems natural. Beyond the sceptre of meddling editors, however, there is the equally well-known fact that Thoreau himself meddled constantly with several of his own texts, reshaping them for successive contexts. Ultimately, then, one must recall that "intention" is a pliable concept that is subject to change, sometimes even with authors themselves.

Yet this is again speculative with regard to the text in question (it seems Thoreau left "A Winter Walk" alone after a brief correspondence on its status with Emerson in 1843), while Moldenhauer's choice of "eclectic or critical text" is based on tangible, available documentation from the time of the text's genesis. His policy is also, it must be recalled, consistent with the principles laid out for the Princeton Edition at a nascent stage. A similar editing practice pervades *Early Essays and Miscellanies*, for instance, and this was issued nearly thirty-five years ago (with Moldenhauer already then a contributing editor).

It is true that the Princeton Edition has received some mixed reactions toward its policies, perhaps best illustrated by Walter Harding and Michael Meyer, writing in 1980:

In the mid-1960's, through the cooperation of the National Endowment of the Humanities and the Modern Language Association[,] work was begun on a full new edition of Thoreau's writings. /.../ [The volumes] are edited by a group of outstanding Thoreau scholars who are applying the latest techniques of bibliographical and scholarly research. As a result, for the first time we are seeing some of Thoreau's works as he intended them to appear, and as a bonus we are seeing a number of hitherto unpublished works. Our only caveat is that bibliographic theorists for a time controlled the NEH-MLA projects and imposed rules that wasted much

time and space in counting commas and charting end-of-line hyphens, time, and space that might better have been devoted to more helpful annotations.¹¹

Here I feel a need to protest mildly on behalf of the Princeton editors' successive and laboriously-produced volumes. First, while it is true that sizeable portions of the technical apparatus as mentioned by Harding and Meyer will be of little concern to the average reader, the critic or scholar will often be rewarded by consulting them – especially, of course, regarding material where only notoriously difficult Thoreau manuscript is extant as documentation. This applies particularly but not exclusively to the Journal, which was at times ruthlessly handled in Houghton Mifflin's 1906 Manuscript and Walden editions – a fact that is brought home by the Princeton volumes' slowly but surely superseding their precursors as standard sources.

The extreme care with which the texts and commentaries have been established in the Princeton Edition also guard against common and all-too-human error in the form of transcriptional corruption, which in other cases can inadvertently balloon to unfortunate proportions. Robert Sattelmeyer's otherwise excellent history-of-ideas introduction to his essay collection mentioned above provides a case in point. While discussing the intriguing chip of wood in "A Winter Walk," Sattelmeyer misquotes Thoreau in rendering the latter's characterization of the chip to the effect that it "contains inscribed on it the whole history of the woodchopper and *his* world" (*ibid.*, xviii, my emphasis; *cf. ibid.*, main text, 61, which gives the correct phrasing). Thoreau's actual formulation is "and of *the* world," which quite significantly conflates human and natural realms of action.¹² From Sattelmeyer's innocent mistake, one may instead take the phrase to connote a closed human circuit, something the late Thoreau scholar Frederick Garber also did – evidently inspired by Sattelmeyer's slip – in his own later gloss on the passage.¹³

The Princeton Edition praxis is also valuable for the historical contexts it gives surrounding the print history of the texts in question, not-

ably including indexes of their contemporary reception. Moldenhauer supplies a number of salient quotes from the autumn of 1863 regarding *Excursions*. The *Boston Post* reviewer claimed that Thoreau's "brain was awfully out of joint, so his translations of nature are only distorted glimpses of what she is" (348). More progressive papers and journals were positive, however, and praised Thoreau's "original genius," his "powerful and independent" mind with its "earnest and profound" feeling for nature (350). This while critics from the conservative press, even when appreciative of Thoreau's essay style as such, remained sceptical of his religion, pointing – like the *Congregationalist* reviewer – to Thoreau's supposedly "pantheistic or naturalistic" tendencies (349). The *Christian Advocate and Journal*, meanwhile, praised Thoreau's "keenness [sic] of eye" while claiming him "stone blind" to supernatural truth. And the *Boston Review*, finally, summarized this line of critique in deeming Thoreau's essays "not written from a Christian point of view" (349ff).

The one criticism of the Princeton Edition that holds is the very last item on Harding's and Meyer's wish-list: a lack of thorough cultural-historical annotation. The edition is certainly not hastily put together, and at current pace and financing will only – at least by rote reckoning – reach completion in twenty-odd years, having then been operative more or less for some sixty years. This might sound extreme, but considering the projected number of volumes to hover around thirty, devoting a mean of two years per volume is hardly exceptional. There are admittedly separate teams working on the volumes, however, and given the space and time available for each one, adding modest resources and page space for somewhat broader annotation would have been welcome.

Luckily, in the present case there are two Thoreau anthologies extant which form excellent additions to the Princeton *Excursions* when it comes to such helpful, reader-oriented annotation. The first, edited by William Rossi and entitled "*Wild Apples*" and *Other Natural History Essays* (U of Georgia P, 2002), duplicates the contents of Sattelmeyer's 1980 anthology,

and also uses the 1906 Walden Edition as copy-text, along with Leo Stoller's edition of "Huckleberries." Rossi has, it should be added, emended the texts after careful cross-checking with the first journal printings where applicable. Finally, Rossi's sterling introduction of the essays ranks with that of Sattelmeyer of 1980, and this alone is worth the price of the book. Published the same year, Lewis Hyde's *The Essays of Henry D. Thoreau* (New York: North Point Press, 2002) presents a broader anthology with essays both of "natural history" and "politics." From the original *Excursions* lineup, Hyde includes "Natural History of Massachusetts," "A Winter Walk," "Walking," "Autumnal Tints," "An Address on the Succession of Forest Trees," and "Wild Apples." Hyde's long introductory essay on Thoreau's "prophetic voice" and its qualities is a thoughtworthy general statement, making do as it has to with a parallel printing of such Thoreau essays as "Paradise (to be) Regained," "Civil Disobedience," "Slavery in Massachusetts," "Life Without Principle" and the two late texts on the radical abolitionist John Brown. For particulars on the natural history essays, however, Rossi is stronger, supplying a valuable gloss for understanding Thoreau's intricate concept of the "wild" and explaining how natural theology pervaded his education at Harvard, while remaining a tacit assumption among scholars and scientists well into the nineteenth century. Both Hyde and Rossi, beyond their differences, supply a wealth of annotation of interest to lay readers and scholars alike, and should not be missed by those taking a keen interest in Thoreau's *Excursions*. Princeton and Moldenhauer, for their part, should be lauded for finally bringing their long-awaited edition to print; it is an astutely-edited and excellently-presented tome, taking its rightful place as the standard text of *Excursions* for the conceivable future.

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Notes

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Excursions*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer (Princeton UP, 2007). Subsequent references are to this edition and are contained parenthetically in the text.

² Henry David Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, ed. Wendell Glick (Princeton UP, 1973), 83f.

³ I am indebted to Lawrence Buell's discussion of these Thoreauvian passages in *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1995), 36ff.

⁴ Cf. Robert Sattelmeyer, ed., in his introduction to Henry David Thoreau, *The Natural History Essays* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1980), vii-xxxiv (xxv).

⁵ Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau: A Biography*, 2nd rev. ed. (Princeton UP, 1992), 436.

⁶ Steven Fink, *Prophet in the Marketplace: Thoreau's Development as a Professional Writer* (Princeton UP, 1992), 275-85 (275).

⁷ See J. Lyndon Shanley, *The Making of Walden with the Text of the First Version* (U of Chicago P, 1957), 104 & 157-63.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of these aspects, see Henrik Gustafsson, "Tenth Muse Errant: On Thoreau's Crisis of Technology and Language" in *The Concord Saunterer* (New Series: Volume 7, 1999), 54-112.

⁹ Cf. Raymond R. Borst, *Henry David Thoreau: A Descriptive Bibliography* (U of Pittsburgh P, 1982), 39-44, for further details.

¹⁰ I omit mention here of the version carried by Corinth Books of New York in 1962, introduced by Leo Marx. This was a facsimile reprint of the 1863 Ticknor & Fields Edition, and thus constitutes an anachronism in our immediate context. Cf. Borst, *ibid.*, 41.

¹¹ See Walter Harding & Michael Meyer, *The New Thoreau Handbook* (NYU Press, 1980), 211.

¹² Cf. the first printed textual version in *The Dial* Vol. 4, No. 2 (October 1843), 211-26 (218). I have cross-checked with the Riverside Edition (1894), the Walden Edition (1906), Sattelmeyer (1980), Dillman (1990), Rossi (2002), Hyde (2002), and the Princeton Edition (2007). Mindful that a textual corruption might still be lodged in the first, 1863 Ticknor & Fields Edition, I turned to Thoreau expert and

collector James Dawson, who was kind enough to confirm (personal correspondence 6-7 April 2009) that this is not the case. Dawson has generously cross-checked the first 1863 Ticknor & Fields edition and eight distinct reprintings from its plates, plus two facsimiles of the 1863 edition as carried by Corinth Press (1962) and Peter Smith (1975), as well as several reprints in more eclectic collections from the 1970s on.

¹³ See Frederick Garber, *Thoreau's Fable of Inscribing* (Princeton UP, 1991), 78.

