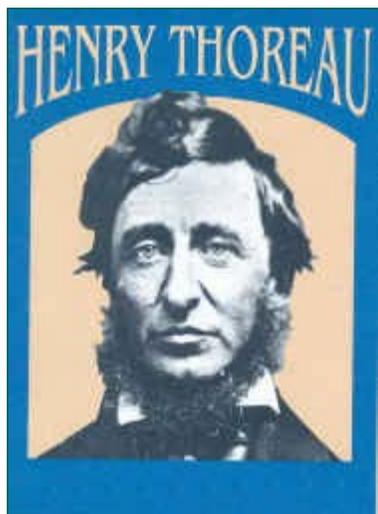


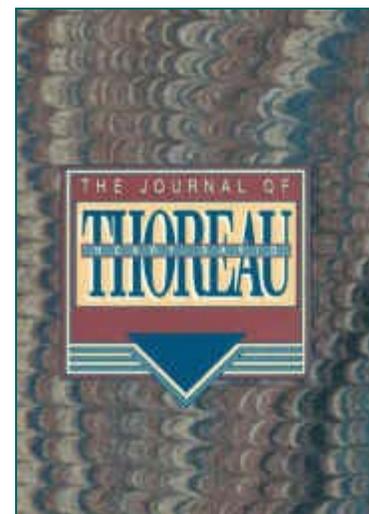
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A READER'S JOURNAL

The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, Vol. 11
by
Henry David Thoreau

Volume 11 , July 1858 to February 1859
Published by Peregrine Smith Books/UT in 1984
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2008



Shortly after I began reading this journal volume in July, I decided to read Thoreau's daily adventures in step with him, 149 years distant from him. By September 12 we were in step and stayed that way

through the winter, when by January I decided to pace my way through the rest of the journal ahead of him, knowing that he would catch up with me in a few weeks anyway. This lock step pace allowed me to reflect on the difference in climate from New England⁽¹⁾ and my current home in New Orleans, about 2,000 miles south of Concord. I was thus pleased to read Thoreau's comments on the liberating effects of a lake and especially a river, since New Orleans is situated with a large lake open to the sea on one side and the broadest river in America on the other. In a walk of an hour or so, one can leave the shores of Lake Pontchartrain, walk through downtown New Orleans, and arrive at the banks of the Mississippi River. By Thoreau's measure, New Orleans has great wings on its back!

[page 4, 5] There is something in the scenery of a broad river equivalent to culture and civilization. Its channel conducts our thoughts as well as bodies to classic and famous ports, and allies us to all that is fair and great. I like to remember that at the end of half a day's walk I can stand on the bank of the Merrimack. It is just wide enough to interrupt the land and lead my eye and thoughts down its channel to the sea. A river is superior to a lake in its liberating influence. It has motion and indefinite length. A river touching the back of a town is like a wing, it may be unused as yet, but ready to waft it over the world. With its rapid current it is a slightly fluttering wing. River towns are winged towns.

In this review I will expand the number of photos which I began in my reviews of two previous Thoreau Journals, and I will include a photo for each plant that Thoreau describes in a quoted passage in this review. Here is the first example from July 2, 1858. Photos of the two possible plants are shown for comparison. Note the umbrella-shaped stems with terminating flowers which are common to both, which is what *umbelliferous* refers to. With no flowers, Thoreau could not unambiguously identify the plant.



[page 5] I returned through the grass up the winding channel of our little brook to the camp again. Along the brook, in the rank grass and weeds, grew abundantly a slender umbelliferous plant mostly just out of bloom, one and a half to four feet high. Either *Thaspium aureum* or *Cryptotaenia Canadensis* (Sison).



While ascending Mt. Washington, Thoreau and Wentworth were invited by a miner to dine with him and his assistant in a mountain shanty. The wind was so strong it blew fire down the stove vent and nearly burnt the shanty down.

[page 15, 16] *July 7.* A merry collier and his assistant, who had been making coal for the summit and were preparing to leave the next morning, made us welcome to this shanty, and entertained us with their talk. We here boiled some of our beef-tongues, a very strong wind pouring in gusts down the funnel and scattering the fire about through the cracked stove. This man, named Page, had imported goats on to the mountain, and milked them to supply us with milk for our coffee. The road here ran north and south to get round the ledge. The wind, blowing down the funnel, set fire to a pile of dirty bed-quilts when I was out, and came near burning up the building. . . . The wind blowed(2) very strong and in gusts this night, but he said it was nothing to what it was sometimes, when the building rocked four inches.

[page 16] *July 8.* I noticed [this plant] this morning and the night before at and above the limit of trees: *Oxalis Acetosella*, abundant and in bloom near the shanty and further down the mountain, all over the woods . . .



Thoreau suggests that one can get lost easily without a compass on the mountaintop because a cloud can envelope it in a fog without any advance warning. Even though one can find a road if one travels in a straight line for 8 or 9 miles, the fog will not allow that without a compass. One will most likely travel in a circle without realizing it. I discovered in my studies of Rudolf Steiner's works that the etheric body moves in circles, an effect which is particularly noticeable in children. They all have a naturally strong etheric body and thus their love of any activity which involves circular motions. This tendency of our etheric body to move in circles remains in adults and that explains why people lost in the woods or in a fog tend to move in circles even though they think they are moving in straight line.

[page 23] *July 8.* Descending straight by compass through the cloud, toward the head of Tuckerman's Ravine, we found it an easy descent over, for the most part, bare rocks, not very large, with at length moist springs places, green with sedge, etc., between little sloping shelves of green meadow, where the hellebore grew, within half a mile of top, and the *Oldenlandia cærulea*, or mountain fly-honeysuckle, in bloom, only two specimens; it is found in the western part of Massachusetts.



Mt. Washington was one among several mountains of the region named after the first four presidents. In this next passage Thoreau regales us with a sunset view of clouds and mountains and how

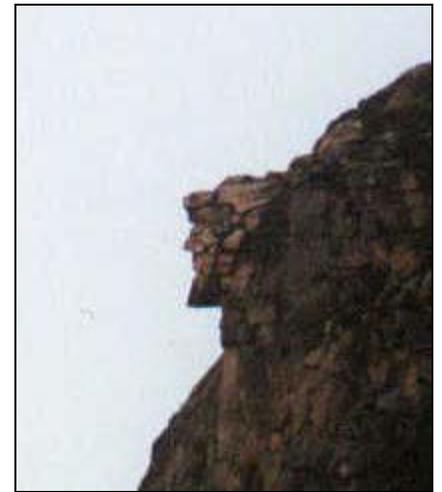
the cloud caps each presidential namesake in turn.

[page 39, 40] July 13. After the sun set to us, the bare summits were of a delicate rosaceous color, passing through violet into the deep dark-blue or purple of the night which already invested their lower parts, for this night-shadow was wonderfully blue, reminding me of the blue shadows on snow. There was an afterglow in which these tints and variations were repeated. It was the grandest mountain view I ever got. In the meanwhile, white clouds were gathering again about the summits, first about the highest, appearing to form there, but sometimes to send off an emissary to initiate a cloud upon a neighboring peak. You could tell little about the comparative distance of a cloud and a peak till you saw that the former actually impinged on the latter. First Washington, then Adams, then Jefferson put on their caps, and you saw the latter, as it were, send off one small nucleus to gather round the head of Madison.

The next day Thoreau visited Franconia Notch, known for its famous profile of a man in a rock formation, and even camped on the slopes of a mountain named after the French general Lafayette of the Revolutionary War.

[page 41] July 13. Saw the Stratford Peaks, thirty or forty miles north, and many mountains east of them. Climbed the long hill from Franconia to the Notch, passed the Profile House, and camped half a mile up the side of Lafayette.

In this next passage Thoreau speaks of the need for what we know today as rest areas for the traveler, but he spells out a more simple requirement than parking spots, picnic tables, and sanitary restrooms. He asks merely for places along the road where a weary traveler may stop, make a small fire, and camp over-night during his journey without being yelled at by irate landowners.



[page 55] July 18. What barbarians we are! The convenience of the traveler is very little consulted. He merely has the privilege of crossing somebody's farm by a particular narrow and maybe unpleasant path. The individual retains all other rights, — as to trees and fruit, and wash of the road, etc. On the other hand, these should belong to mankind inalienably. The road should be of ample width and adorned with trees expressly for the use of the traveler. There should be broad recesses in it, especially at springs and watering-places, where he can turn out and rest, or camp if he will. I feel commonly as if I were condemned to drive through somebody's cow-yard or huckleberry pasture by a narrow lane, and if I make a fire by the roadside to boil my hasty pudding, the farmer comes running over to see if I am not burning up his stuff. You are barked along through the country, from door to door.

[page 55] July 18. Within one mile of top: *Potentilla tridentata*, a very little fir, spruce, and canoe birch, one mountain-ash, *Alsine Grænländica*, diapensia, ...

In this next passage we encounter two usages which seem a bit strange to our eyes and ears today. The spelling of the verb "stayed" and the metaphor for a lightning strike as something "falling" which brings to mind Zeus tossing his thunderbolts to ground in the Greek myths.

[page 64] July 22. The next of the marsh hawk is empty.

It has probably flown. C. and I took refuge from a shower under our boat at Clamshell; staid an hour at least. A thunderbolt fell close by. A mole ran under the boat. The wind canted round as usual (is not this owing to the circular manner of storms?) More easterly, and compelled us to turn the boat over. Left a little too soon, but enjoyed a splendid rainbow for half an hour.

[page 69] Aug. 2. What I have called the *Panicum latifolium* has now its broad leaves, striped with red, abundant under Turtle Bank, about Bath-Place.



A river plant, the bladderwort or utricularia, was apparently in full purple bloom as Thoreau landed his boat near Fair Haven Pond.



[page 73] Aug. 5. The purple utricularia is *the* flower of the river to-day, apparently in its prime. It is very abundant, far more than any other utricularia, especially from Fair Haven Pond upward. That peculiar little bay in the puds, just below the inlet of the river, I will call Purple Utricularia Bay, from its prevalence there.

Thoreau bemoans the value of country life, if one is no longer allowed to pick huckleberries or



other wild fruit freely. He says that it "reduces huckleberries to a level with beef-steak." Blueberries are considered to be cultivated huckleberries and lack the ten or so hard seeds.

[page 78, 79] I suspect that the inhabitants of England and of the Continent of Europe have thus lost their natural rights with the increase of population and of monopolies. The wild fruits of the earth disappear before civilization, or are only to be found in large markets. The whole country becomes, as it were, a town or beaten common, and the fruits left are a few bips and haws.

Thoreau had little use for society, be it of the New England or New York variety. Neither had he much use for newspaper editors, clergy, or politicians. The former he saw as horses with blinders on in full harness drawing the wagon of culture and the latter as a mere froth on the heady brew of society.

[page 86] Aug. 9. It is surprising to what extent the world is ruled by cliques. They who constitute, or at the least lead, New England or New York society, in the eyes of the world, are but a clique, a few "men of the age" and of the town, who work best in the harness provided for them.

[page 87] Aug. 9. The editors of newspapers, the popular clergy, politicians and orators of the day and office-holders, though they may be thought to be of very different politics and religion, are essentially one and homogeneous, inasmuch as they are only the various ingredients of the froth which ever floats on the surface of society.

About one hundred and fifty years ago, the first transatlantic telegraph cable was laid. No doubt the lightning speed of communication over such a long distance began the process of shrinking the world which continues today. We can follow other quantum leaps in communication, the first telephone cable, the first satellite broadcasts, and now the ubiquitous Internet — each one in its day heralded a speed of communication which is called "unprecedented", but consider that giant leaps in communication have occurred many times since the days of Thoreau. In this next passage you can hear him wailing about the how the news is hailed as one might today decry the intensity of coverage of a world event by a Fox, CNN, or other news channel.

[page 87] Aug. 9. The newspapers have just told me that the transatlantic telegraph-cable is laid. That is important, but they instantly proceed to inform me how the news was received in every larger town in the United States, — how many guns they fired, or how high they jumped, — in New York, and Milwaukee, and Sheboygan; and the boys and girls, old and young, at the corners of the street are reading it all with glistening eyes, down to the very last scrap, not omitting what they did at New Rochelle and Evansville. And all the speeches are reported, and some think of collecting them into a volume! ! !

Thoreau did not sow or till the soil, so far as I can tell, but he did harvest. He harvested what he saw on his daily walks and in this next passage, he uses *harvest* as a metaphor to infuse meaning into the description of his walks.

[page 96] Aug. 12. That very handsome high-colored fine purple grass grows particularly on dry and rather unproductive soil just above the edge of the meadows, on the base of the hills, where the hayer does not deign to swing his scythe. He carefully gets the meadow-hay and the richer grass that borders it, but leaves this fine purple mist for the walker's harvest.

In his tale of the summer ducks, we feel a twinge of poignancy when the ducks no longer appear because Goodwin shot them and a certain Mrs. ate them. Those ducks peopled the river for Thoreau's solitary boating trips and would come near to him, and now he misses them. Like the man who killed the goose that laid the golden eggs, the enjoyment of the flesh of the dead goose never rose to that of the beauty of the golden eggs. Ah, those missing ducks!

[page 107] Aug. 16. Goodwin shot them, and Mrs. _____, who never sailed on the river, ate them. Of course, she knows not what she did. What if I should eat her canary? Thus we share each other's sins as well as burdens. The lady who watches admiringly the matador shares his deed. They belonged to me, as much as to any one, when they were alive, but it was considered of more importance that Mrs. _____ should taste the flavor of them dead than that I should enjoy the beauty of them alive.



[page 113] Aug. 19. You may say it is the first day of autumn. You notice the louder and clear ring of crickets, and the large, handsome red spikes of the *Polygonum amphibium* are now generally conspicuous along the shore.

On the first official day of Fall, Thoreau spies some seed pods, and the next day he makes himself a square sail which he likens to an ox pulling his boat. I daresay there are few people today who would use that metaphor, having never experienced the actual pulling of a plow by an ox. Note how he recognizes the evil of too quick travel is that we spend less time *living* in the surroundings we pass along the way.

[page 116] *Aug. 21.* I still see the patch of epilobium on Bee Tree Hill as plainly as ever, though only the pink seed-vessels and stems are left.

[page 116, 117] *Aug. 22. P. M.* — I have spliced my old sail to a new one, and now go out and try it in a sail to Baker Farm. It is a "square sail" some five feet by six. I like it much. It pulls like an ox, and makes me think there's more wind abroad than there is. The yard goes about with a pleasant force, almost enough, I would fain imagine, to knock me overboard. How sturdily it pulls, shooting us along, catching more wind than I knew to be wandering in this river valley. It suggests a new power in the sail, like a Grecian god. I can even worship it, after a heathen fashion. And then, how it becomes my boat and the river, — a simple homely square sail, all for use not show, so low and broad! *Ajacean.* The boat is like a plow drawn by a winged bull. If I had had this a dozen years ago, my voyages would have been performed more quickly and easily. But then probably I should have lived less in them.



Here Thoreau muses on another kind of harvest, a harvest of the mind, from which purplish culms rise into the air bearing grains of thought to be threshed, baked into goodness, and digested.

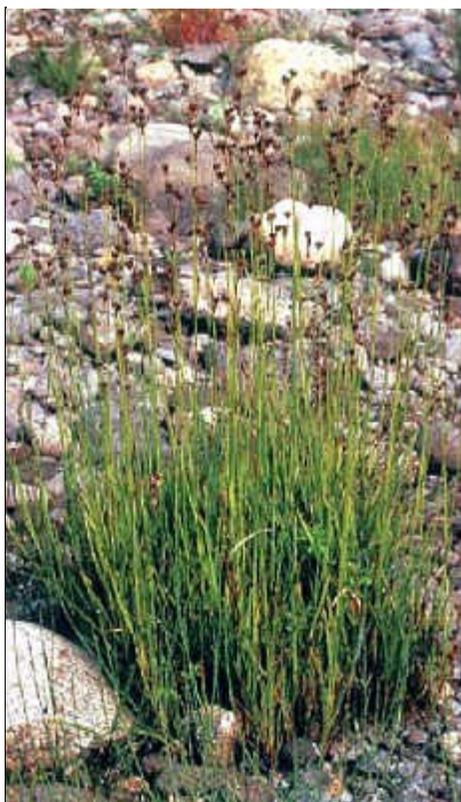
[page 130, 131] *Aug. 29.* The ghost-horse (*Spectrum*) is seen nowadays, several of them. All these high colors in the stems and leaves other portions of plants answer to some maturity in us. I presume that if I am the wiser for having lived this season through, such plants will emblazon the truth of my experience over the face of nature, and I shall be aware of a beauty and sweetness there.

Has not the mind, too, its harvest? Do not some scarlet leaves of thought come scatteringly down, though it may be prematurely, some which, perchance, the summer's drought has ripened, and the rain loosened? Are there no purple reflections from the culms of thought in my mind? . . .

Almost the very sands confess the ripening influence of the August sun, and, methinks, with the slender grasses waving over them, reflect a purple tinge. The empurpled sands. Such is a consequence of all this sunshine absorbed into the pores of plants and of the earth. All sap or blood is wine-colored. The very bare sands, methinks, yield a purple reflection. At last we have not only the purple sea, but the purple land.

Thoreau comments on the difficulty of writing of the natural world. One must first acquire the words to use for the things one observes. This reveals in a curious inverted way how valuable Thoreau's Journals can be for someone who loves the out-of-doors: one can find words for things and then discover the thing itself in the wild, growing and living. Thoreau has already done the hard work and we can enjoy the fruit of his labor a century and a half later.

[page 137] *Aug. 29.* How hard one must work in order to acquire his language, — words by which to express himself! I have know a particular rush, for instance, for at least twenty years, but have ever been prevented from describing some [of] its peculiarities, because I did not know its name nor any one in the neighborhood could tell me it. With the knowledge of the name comes a distincter recognition and knowledge of the thing. That shore is now more describable, and poetic even. My knowledge was cramped and confined before, and grew



rusty because not used, — for it could not be used. My knowledge now becomes communicable and grows by communication. I can now learn what others know about the same thing.

Aug. 30. P. M. — To bayonet rush by river.

What we look for we find and in the looking for one thing we miss other things in the process. It is as if our intentions reside in our eyes and creates a selective perceptibility.

[page 153] Sept. 9. How much more, then, it requires different intentions of the eye and the mind to attend to different departments of knowledge! How differently the poet and the naturalist look at objects! A man sees only what concerns him.

A botanist absorbed in the pursuit of grasses does not distinguish the grandest pasture oaks. He as it were tramples down oaks unwittingly in his walk.

One of the brightest and most visible comets of the nineteenth century was discovered by Giovanni Donati on June 2, 1858. Thoreau mentions Donati's Comet several times in his Journal, but without its name because it had been discovered so recently.

[page 179, 180] Sept. 23. When we had put out our bayberry fire, we heard a squawk, and, looking up, saw five geese fly low in the twilight over our heads. We then set out to find our way to Gloucester over the hills, and saw the comet very bright in the northwest. After going astray a little in the moonlight, we fell into a road which at length conducted us to the town.

[page 185] Sept. 29. Astronomers can calculate the orbit of that thistle-down called the comet, now in the northwest sky, conveying its nucleus, which may not be so solid as a thistle's seed, somewhither, but what astronomer can calculate the orbit of my thistle-down and tell where it will deposit its precious freight at last? It may still be traveling while I am sleeping.

[page 199] Oct. 5. The comet makes a great show these nights. Its tail is at least as long as the whole of the Great Dipper, to whose handle, till within a night or two, it reached, in a great curve, and we plainly see stars through it.

By the end of September in New England the days have gotten shorter. To a traveler who goes on foot such as Thoreau, this has an interesting aspect, which he points out to us.

[page 188] Sept. 30. Walking early in the day and approaching the rocky shore from the north, the shadows of the cliffs were very distinct and grateful(3) and our spirits were



buoyant. Though we walked all day, it seemed the days were not long enough to get tired in.



While reading Thoreau's journals about these plants, I have often wondered what a fringed gentian looks like. So I took the opportunity to do a little research and find a photo of one to go with this next passage. From the color of the flowers, one can tell where "Gentian Violet", a very purple antifungal solution once used for coating the umbilical cord stub of a newborn, came from.

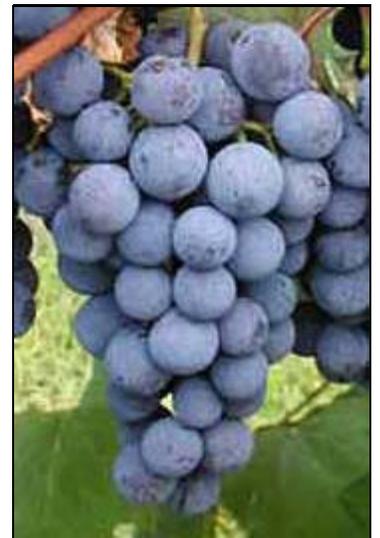
[page 189] Oct. 1. The fringed gentians are now in prime. These are closed in the afternoon, but I saw them open at 12 M. a day or two ago, and they were exceedingly beautiful, especially when there was a single one on a stem. They who see them closed, or in the afternoon only, do not suspect their beauty.

The levity of Thoreau in this next passage will be missed by any one who does not know what field of study is ornithology.

[page 191] Oct. 2. The garden is alive with migrating sparrows these mornings. The cat comes in from an early walk amid the weeds. She is full of sparrows and wants no more breakfast this morning, unless it be a saucer of milk, the dear creature. I saw her studying ornithology between the corn-rows.

Thoreau doesn't name the comet he sees each night in the northwest, perhaps the name has not reached him as yet, but he doesn't need to name the purple grapes he picks in his hometown, does he?

[page 192] Oct. 2. Sailed to Baker Farm with a strong northwest wind. Got a peck of the small long-bunched grapes now turned purple under Lee's Cliff. The bunches are about six inches long by one and a half, and quite dense and cylindrical commonly. They are now apparently just in their prime, to judge from color.

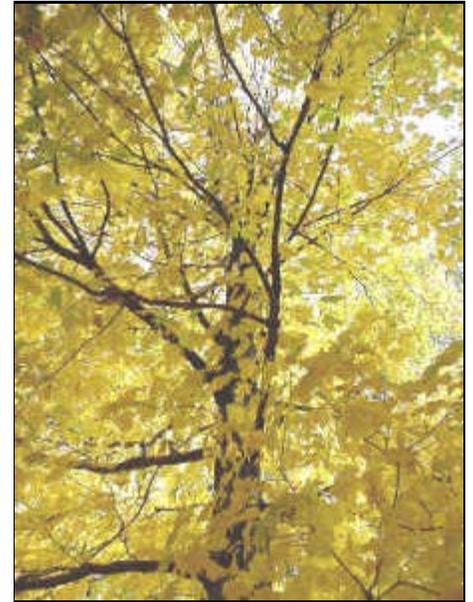


With the advent of Fall, Thoreau finds that his thoughts are clearer at the same time that the air is clearer. Everything in the world seems more distinct. No doubt this is the reason that school years typically begin in this season of the year.

[page 216] Oct. 17. Methinks the reflections are never purer and more distinct than now at the season of the fall of the leaf, just before the cool twilight has come, when the air has a finer grain. Just as our mental reflections are more distinct at this season of the year, when the evenings grow cool and lengthen and our winter evenings with their brighter firs may be said to begin. And painted ducks, too, often come and sail or float amid the painted leaves.



The sugar maple trees which decorate



Concord's Common so brilliantly each Fall were brought there from the country as straight poles with the tops cut off and were joking referred to as bean-poles. These poles are now like festival poles on which brightly colored flags are hung by Nature every autumn as a golden harvest.

[page 218, 219] Oct. 18. All children alike can revel in this golden harvest. These trees, throughout the street, are at least equal to an annual festival and holiday, or a week of such, — not requiring any special police to keep the peace, — and poor indeed must be that New England village's October which has not the maple in its streets. This October festival costs no powder nor ringing of bells, but every tree is a liberty-pole on which a thousand bright flags are run up. Hundreds of children's eyes are steadily drinking in this color, and by these teachers even the truants are caught and educated the moment they step abroad. It is as if some cheap and innocent gala-day were celebrated in our town every autumn, — a week or two of such days.



One day Thoreau takes a ride to Sam Barrett's mill and compares the cobwebs in the mill to the riggings of a fine sailing ship, a man-of-war. Here we can appreciate how Thoreau lived a full life among what others might consider mundane objects, such as a mill.

[page 224] Oct. 19. Am pleased again to see the cobweb drapery of the mill. Each fine line hanging in festoons from the timbers overhead and on the sides, and on the discarded machinery lying about, is covered and greatly enlarged by a coating of meal, by which its curve is revealed, like the twigs under their ridges of snow in winter. It is like the tassels and tapestry of counterpane and dimity in a lady's bedchamber, and I pray that the cobwebs may not have been brushed away from the mills which I visit. It is as if I were aboard a man-of-war, and this

were the fine "rigging" of the mill, the sails being taken in. All things in the mill wear the same livery or drapery, down to the miller's hat and coat. I knew Barrett forty rods

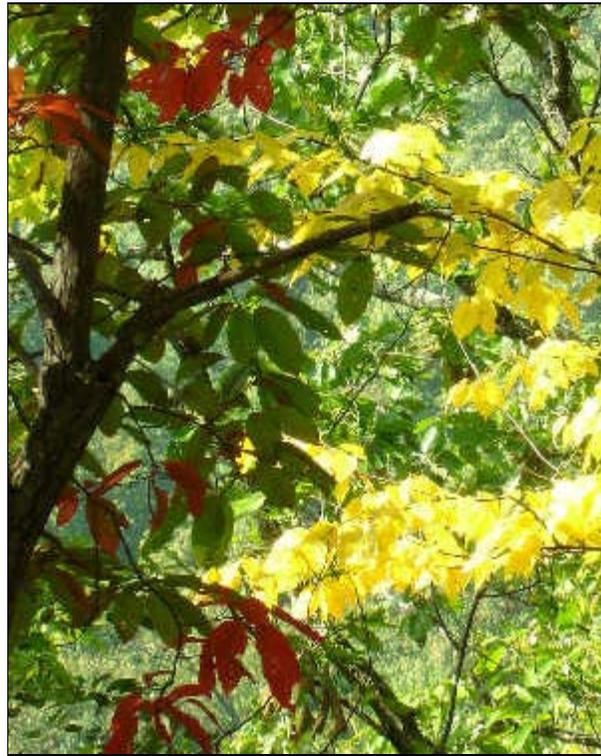
off in the cranberry meadow by the meal on his hat.

On an Indian Summer day, Thoreau finds himself adorned with a fine rigging of gossamer as he returns home from a walk abroad. This fine white threads of unknown origin appear from time to time in his Journals.

[page 229, 230] Oct. 20. My black clothes are white with the gossamer they have caught in coming through the fields, for it streams from every stubble, though it is not remarkably abundant. Flocks of this gossamer, like tangled skeins, float gently through the quiet air as high as my head, like white parachutes to unseen balloons.

Thoreau loves the colors of October with its "red sunset sky." He likens the colors of the leaves to a hero's banner which is like the flower which precedes the fruit of his deeds.

[page 243] Oct. 24. Color stands for all ripeness and success. We have dreamed that the hero should carry his color aloft, as a symbol of the ripeness of his virtue. The noblest feature, the eye, is the fairest-colored, the jewel of the body. The warrior's flag is the flower which precedes his fruit. He unfurls his flag to the breeze with such confidence and brag as the flower its petals. Now we shall see what kind of fruit will succeed.



Even the humble bud of a pussy willow (*Salix discolor*) or an azalea in October can evoke heights of metaphoric fancy from Thoreau. In a footnote we find that he underscored the word *gems* in this next passage because of its roots in the Latin word for a bud, *gemma*. Having conjured up gems on the breast of Nature in one passage, he follows a few days later with Nature stripping herself for battle.

[page 246] Oct. 25. Now that the leaves are fallen, the long yellow buds (often red-pointed) which sleep along the twigs of the *S. discolor* are very conspicuous and quite interesting, already even carrying our thoughts forward to spring. I noticed them first on the 22d. They may be put with the azalea buds already noticed. Even bleak and barren November wears these gems on her breast in sign of the coming year. How many thoughts lie undeveloped, and as it were dormant, like these buds, in the minds of men!

[page 260] Oct. 29. Nature now, like an athlete, begins to strip herself in earnest for her contest with her great antagonist Winter. In the bare trees

and twigs what a display of muscle!

Is there any greater joy than to go nutting in November? For me, the picking of pecans from the grounds

under a majestic pecan tree and eating them as I pick them is a great joy. Thoreau enjoys his daily walks to the post office as if they were nuts he plucked to take home and enjoy in front of the fire on a winter evening. On his solitary walks, he has always a friend nearby.



[page 274] Nov. I. And yet there is no more tempting novelty than this new November. No going to Europe or another world is to be named with it. Give me the old familiar walk, post-office and all, with this ever new self, with this infinite expectation and faith, which does not know when it is beaten. We'll go nutting once more. We'll pluck the nut of the world, and crack it in the winter evenings. Theatres and all other sightseeing are puppet-shows in comparison. I will take another walk to the Cliff, another row on the river, another skate on the meadow, be out in the first snow, and associate with the winter birds. Here I am at home. In

the bare and bleached crust of the earth I recognize my friend.

[page 312] Nov. II. This is the month of nuts and nutty thoughts, — that November whose name sounds so bleak and cheerless. Perhaps its harvest of thought is worth more than all the other crops of the year. Men are more serious now.

On his walks, he sometimes indulges himself in a bit of oak-wine.

[page 278] Nov. 2. The sap is now frequently flowing fast in the scarlet oaks (as I have not observed it in the others), and has a pleasant acorn-like taste. Their bright tints, now that most other oaks are withered, are connected with this phenomenon. They are full of sap and life. They flow like a sugar maple in the spring. It has a pleasant astringent taste, this strong oak-wine.

Thoreau is not lonely when he walks alone because he carries his friends with him in an ideal form. It is as if his friends grow in stature the longer he is away from them, and upon meeting them, he is sad because they do not measure up to his ideal.

[page 281, 282] Nov. 3. How long we will follow an illusion! On meeting that one whom I call my friend, I find that I had imagined something that was not there. I am sure to depart sadder than I came. Nothing makes me so dejected as to have met my friends, for they make me doubt if it is possible to have any friends. I feel what a fool I am. I cannot conceive of persons more strange to me than they actually are; not thinking, not believing, not doing as I do; interrupted by me. My only distinction must be that I am the greatest bore they ever had. Not in a single thought agreed; regularly balking one another. But when I get far away, my thoughts return to them. That is the way I *can* visit them. Perhaps it is unaccountable to me why I care for them. Thus I am taught that my friend is not an actual person. When I have withdrawn and am alone, I forget the actual person and remember only my ideal. Then I have a friend again.

Walking about in winter is like walking through an empty house for Thoreau, and he is cheered by the slightest indication of life on the premises.

[page 290] Nov. 7. What struck me was a certain emptiness beyond, between the hemlocks and the hill, in the cool, washed air, as if I appreciated even here the absence of insects from it. It suggested agreeably to me a mere space in which to walk briskly. The fields are bleak, and they are, as it were, vacated. The very earth is like a house shut up for the winter, and I go knocking about it in vain. But just then I heard a chickadee on a hemlock, and was inexpressibly cheered to find that an old acquaintance was yet stirring about the premises, and was, I was assured, to be there all winter. All that is evergreen in me revived at once.

What does it mean to be a writer? Thoreau digs in deeply on this theme and offers us a down-to-earth metaphor. How often we read a writer who digs deeper than the soil is, and offers us only muck in which we get as stuck as he did, unable to extract nutrients from it. There is wisdom in the furrow of our pen if we but notice the nature of the soil we unearth with it.

[page 304] Nov. 9. It is of no use to plow deeper than the soil is, unless you mean to follow up that mode of cultivation persistently, manuring highly and carting on muck at each plowing; — making a soil, in short. Yet many a man likes to tackle mighty themes, like immortality, but in his discourse he turns up nothing but yellow sand, under which what little fertile and available surface soil he may have is quite buried and lost. He should teach frugality rather, — how to postpone the fatal hours, — should plant a crop of beans. He might have raised enough of these to make a deacon of him, though never a preacher. Many a man runs his plow so deep in heavy or stony soil that its sticks fast in the furrow. It is a great art in the writer to improve from day to day just that soil and fertility which he has, to harvest that crop which his life yields, whatever it may be, not be straining as if to reach apples or oranges when he yields only ground-nuts. He should be digging, not soaring. Just as earnest as your life is, so deep is your soil. If strong and deep, you will sow wheat and raise bread of life in it.

One day he notices a young hawk swoop down on a farmer's hens, and the farmer raises his gun to kill it. Thoreau sees the fate of the hawk taken home to the kids and the dog as equivalent to that of the body of Hector, which was "dragged so many times around Troy." But he notices primarily the missing fact of the hawk, who will no longer soar the skies.

[page 305, 306] Nov. 9. But alas for the youthful hawk, the proud bird of prey, the tenant of the skies! We shall no more see this wave-like outline against a cloud, nor hear his scream from behind one. He saw but a pheasant in the field, the food which nature has provided for him, and stooped to seize it. This was his offense. He, the native of these skies, must make way for those bog-trotters from another land, which never soar. The eye that was conversant with sublimity, that looked down on earth from under its sharp projecting brow, is closed; the head that was never made dizzy by any height is brought low; the feet that were not made to walk on earth now lie useless along it. With those trailing claws for grapnels it dragged the lower sky. Those wings which swept the sky must now dust the chimney-corner, perchance. So weaponed, with strong beak and talons, and wings, like a war-steamer, to carry them about. In vain were the brown-spotted eggs laid, in



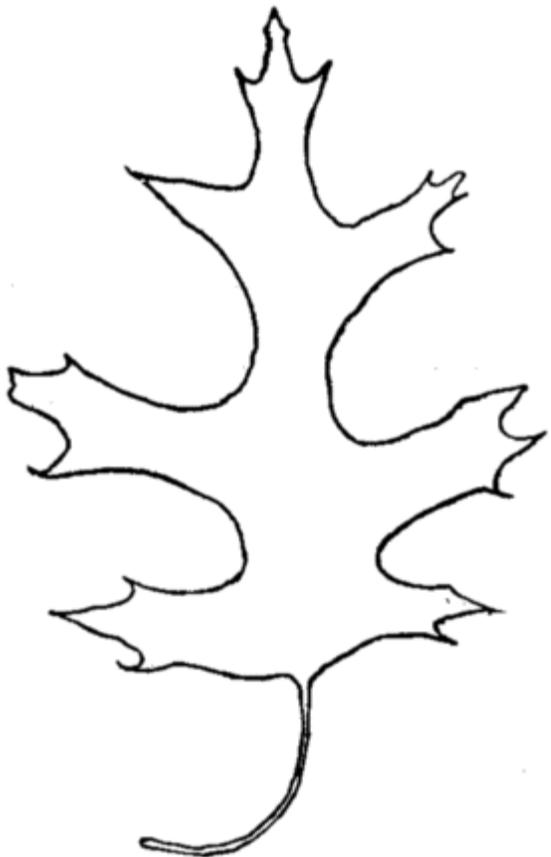
vain were ye cradled in the loftiest pine of the swamp. Where are your father and mother? Will they hear of your early death? before ye had acquired your full plumage, they who nursed and defended ye so faithfully?

It is not only the colors of a leaf that can send Thoreau into flights of reverie and metaphoric expression, but the mere shape of a leaf may do it also. Take this passage on the scarlet oak leaf. The figure from page 314 is reproduced here to go along with the description. The drawing and the text are by Thoreau.

[page 314] Nov. 11. The scarlet oak leaf! What a graceful and pleasing outline! a combination of graceful curves and angles. These deep bays in the leaf are agreeable to us as the thought of deep and smooth and secure havens to the mariner. But both your love of repose and your spirit of adventure are addressed, for both bays and headlands are represented, — sharp-pointed rocky capes and rounded bays with smooth strands. To the sailor's eye it is a much indented shore, and in his casual glance he thinks that if he doubles its sharp capes he will find a haven in its deep rounded bays. If I were a drawing master, I would set my pupils to copying these leaves, that they might learn to draw firmly and gracefully. It is a shore to the aerial ocean, on which the windy surf beats. How different from the white oak leaf with its rounded headlands, on which no lighthouse need be placed!

As it gets colder, Thoreau experiences winter's approach and sees the earth breath being exhausted from the ground.

[page 317, 318] Nov. 13. Last night was quite cold, and the ground is white with frost. Thus gradually,



but steadily, winter approaches. First there is the bleached grass, then the frost, then snow, the fields growing more and more hoary. There is frost not only on all the withered grass and stubble, but it is particularly thick and white and handsome around the throat of every hole and chink in the earth's surface, the congealed breath of the earth as it were, so that would think at first it was the entry to some woodchuck's, or squirrel's, or mouse's, retreat. But it is the great dormant earth gone into winter quarter's here, the earth letting off steam after the summer's work is over.

Thoreau is not a preacher, but at times he crosses the line when some theme such as freedom of speech inflames him, especially when he perceives that preachers of various sects do their best to squelch any such freedom.

[page 324] Nov. 16. Preaching? Lecturing? Who are ye that ask for these things? What do ye want to hear, ye puling infants? A trumpet-sound that would train you up to mankind, or a nurse's lullaby? The preachers and lecturers deal with men of straw, as they are men of straw themselves. Why, a free-spoken man, of sound lungs, cannot draw a long breath without causing your rotten institutions to come toppling down by the vacuum he makes. Your church is a baby-house made of blocks, and so of the state. It would be a relief to breathe one's self occasionally among men. If there were any magnanimity in us, any grandeur of soul, anything but sects and parties undertaking to patronize God and keep the mind within bounds, how often we might encourage and provoke one another by a free expression!

Thoreau is no man of straw, but a man who takes such deep breaths of inspiration that he would exhaust all the air from one of these so-called preacher's place of worship.

[page 324, 325] Nov. 16. Freedom of speech! It hath not entered into your hearts to conceive what those words mean. It is not leave given me by your sect to say this or that; it is when leave is given to your sect to withdraw. The church, the state, the school, the

magazine, think they are liberal and free! It is the freedom of a prison-yard. I ask only that one fourth part of my honest thoughts be spoken aloud. . What is it you tolerate, you church to-day? Not truth, but a lifelong hypocrisy. Let us have institutions framed not out of our rottenness, but out of our soundness. This factitious piety is like stale gingerbread. I would like to suggest what a pack of fools and cowards we mankind are. They want me to agree not to breathe too hard in the neighborhood of their paper castles. If I should draw a long breath in the neighborhood of these institutions, their weak and flabby sides would fall out, for my own inspiration would exhaust the air about them.

He lambasts the church and recommends that the best preachers if they had any manhood, would best leave the church and play baseball!

[page 325] Nov. 16. The church! it is eminently the timid institution, and the heads and pillars of it are constitutionally and by principle the greatest cowards in the community. The voice that goes up from the monthly concerts is not so brave and so cheering as that which rises from the frog-ponds of the land. The best" preachers," so called, are an effeminate class; their bravest thoughts wear petticoats. If they have any manhood they are sure to forsake the ministry, though they were to turn their attention to baseball.

As for magazines, he blasts them with timidity to print a "whole sentence" — anything freely spoken that might intimidate their bulk of subscribers.

[page 325] Nov. 16. Look at your editors of popular magazines. I have dealt with two or three the most liberal of them. They are afraid to print a whole sentence, a *round* sentence, a free-spoken sentence. They want to get thirty thousand subscribers, and they will do anything to get them. They consult the D.D.'s and all the letters of the alphabet before printing a sentence.

And to finish his attack, he takes on the meeting houses where he experienced them trembling at the thought of what he might say to them. Is this real Christianity or the mere semblance of it? he asks. Instead, they pick on each other's weak spots and create sores which can never heal.

[page 325] Nov. 16. I have been into many of these cowardly New England towns where they *profess* Christianity, — invited to speak, perchance, — where they were trembling in their shoes at the thought of the things you might say, as if they knew their weak side, — that they were weak on all sides. The devil they have covenanted with is a timid devil. If they would let their sores alone they might heal, and they could to the wars again like men; but instead of that they get together in meeting-house cellars, rip off the bandages and poultice them with sermons.

He gives us an example of what happens when such a meeting house has invited him to speak. The silence is deafening when he speaks, but in that silence there is a fructification.

[page 326, 327] Nov. 16. I have been into the town, being invited to speak to the inhabitants, not valuing, not having read even, the Assembly's Catechism, and I try to stimulate them by reporting the best of my experience. I see the craven priest looking round for a hole to escape at, alarmed because it was he that invited me thither, and an awful silence pervades the audience. They think they will never get me there again. But the seed has not all fallen in stony and shallow ground.

In this next passage, Thoreau enjoys November and sings its praises. He seems to be saying that the month is blessed by the Nine Muses of Greece, but it is Latin that he sings to, as *Novem* is Latin for *Nine*. November was originally the Ninth month of the year till the Romans added two Caesars, July (Julius) and August (Augustus), to the yearly mix of months, thereby shifting September (Seven), October (Eight),

November (Nine), and December (Ten) each by two months.

[page 334] Nov. 18. I look south from the Cliff. The westering sun just out of south behind the hill. Its rays from those bare twigs across the pond are bread and cheese to me. So many oak leaves have fallen that the white birch stems are more distinct amid the young oaks; I see to the bone. See those brave birches prepared to stand the winter through on the hillsides. They never sing, "What's this dull town to me?" the maple as skirting the meadows (in dense phalanxes) look like light infantry advanced for a swamp fight. Ah, dear November, ye must be sacred to *Nine* surely.'

In this next passage he describes an air mail delivery of food which his friend Martial Miles observed happening in mid-air between a male and female marsh hawk.

[page 335] Nov. 18. He often watched these birds, and saw that the female could tell when the male was coming a long way off. . . . She would utter a scream when she perceived him, and, rising into the air, she turned over with talons uppermost, while he passed some three rods above, and caught without fail the prey which he left drop, and then carried it to her young. He had seen her do this many times, and always without failing.

For a change, he mentions Thanksgiving Day this year, but notes that he is out in the woods while most people are keeping warm in their homes.

[page 342] Nov. 25. While most keep close to their parlor fires this cold and blustering Thanksgiving afternoon, and think with compassion of those who are abroad, I find the sunny south side of this swamp as warm as their parlors, and warmer to my spirit. Aye, there is a serenity and warmth here which the parlor does not suggest, enhanced by the sound of the wind roaring on the northwest side of the swamp a dozen or so rods off. What a wholesome and inspiring warmth is this!

In this next passage Thoreau mentions the forty years that the farmer Tarbell struggled to get his farm built. The use of score to mean "twenty" goes back to the colonial days to count sheep entering or leaving a pen. One mark or score on a post was made for every twenty sheep which passed the gate.

[page 342, 343] Nov. 25. Pass Tarbell's behind. The farmer, now on the down-hill of life, at length gets his new barn and barn-cellar built, far away in some unfrequented vale. This for twoscore years he has struggled for. This is his poem done at last, — to get the means to dig that cavity and rear those timbers aloft.

Here he describes a salamander which is commonly called the fire salamander, but the description he gives seems at variance with the photo of a fire salamander.

[page 363] Dec. 3. The salamander above named, found in the water of the Pout's Nest, is the *Salamandra symmetrica*. It is some three inches long, brown (not dark-brown) above and yellow with small dark spots beneath, and the same spots on the sides of the tail; a row of very minute vermilion spots, not detected but on a close examination, on each side of the back; the tail is waved on the edge (upper edge, at least); has a pretty, bright eye. Its tail, though narrower, reminds me of the pollywog.



In previous years, Thoreau has made no mention of the holidays which he apparently does not celebrate

with his family, or does not care to mention in his Journal if he does. This year, both Thanksgiving and now Christmas gets a brief mention. Lucky for Aunt Jane that she didn't get thrown out with the bathwater.

[page 381] Aunt Jane says that she was born on Christmas Day, and they called her a Christmas gift, and she remembers hearing that her Aunt Hannah Orrock was so disconcerted by the event that she threw all the spoons outdoors, when she had washed them, or with the dishwater.

In this next passage we get to experience with Thoreau the pleasure of skating on ice, in the words of the song, "to know how it feels to have wings on your heels, and to fly down the street," only for him he flies down a nearby frozen stream or river.

[page 381, 382] Dec. 29. I think more of skates than of the horse or locomotive as annihilators of distance, for while I am getting along with the speed of the horse, I have at the same time the satisfaction of the horse and his rider, and far more adventure and variety than if I were riding. we never cease to be surprised when we observe how swiftly the skater glides along. Just compare him with one walking or running. The walker is but a snail in comparison, and the runner gives up the contest after a few rods. The skater can afford to follow all the windings of a stream, and yet soon leaves far behind and out of sight the walker who cuts across. Distance is hardly an obstacle for him. I observe that my ordinary track is like this: the strokes being seven to ten feet long. The new stroke is eighteen to twenty inches one side of the old The briskest walkers appear to be stationary to the skater. The skater has wings, *talaria*, to his feet. Moreover, you have such perfect control of your feet that you can take advantage of the narrowest and most winding and sloping bridge of ice in order to pass between the button-bushes and the open stream or under a bridge on a narrow shelf, where the walker cannot go at all. You glide securely within an inch of destruction on this the most slippery of surfaces, more securely than you could walk there, perhaps, on any other material. You can pursue swiftly the most intricate and winding path, even leaping obstacles which suddenly present themselves.

After reading Thoreau's Journals with his *whole and round sentences*, the kind he and we seldom find in more erudite tomes and popular magazines, we have become used to finding sentences that while blithely glossing over the requirements of grammar, speak directly to us as if they were spoken by a real Man(4), not some grammarian in a perfect grammar. If we think of it, we could understand that grammar neither laughs nor cries, and is that not what we ask of a real writer: to make us laugh or cry?

[page 386] Jan. 2. When I hear the hypercritical quarreling about grammar and style, the position of the particles, etc., etc., stretching or contracting every speaker to certain rules of theirs, — Mr. Webster, perhaps, not having spoken according to Mr. Kirkham's rule, — I see that they forget that the first requisite and rule is that expression shall be vital and natural, as much as the voice of a brute or an interjection: first of all, mother tongue; and last of all, artificial or father tongue. Essentially your truest poetic sentence is as free and lawless as a lamb's bleat. The grammarian is often one who can neither cry nor laugh, yet thinks that he can express human emotions. So the posture-masters tell you how you shall walk, — turning your toes out, perhaps, excessively, — but so the beautiful walkers are not made.

Thoreau loves the forest. When he enters the forest, he has left civilization behind and is in his natural element. He loves the wild animals like the marsh hawks, the wild fruits like the wild apple, and most of all the wild trees and plants planted and maintained by Nature herself without interference from the bog-slogger human beings who deign to shape Nature in their own image and produce less not more of what

they began with. It is fitting that he, of all people, would notice the origin of the word *forest* itself. Its etymological roots suggest the wild nature that so attracted Thoreau and called him to spend even the most important holidays in its company.

[page 386] Jan. 2. Mediæval, or law, Latin seems to have invented the word " forest," not being satisfied with *silva, nemus*, etc. Webster makes it from the same' root with "'L. *foris*, Fr. *hors*, and the Saxon *faran*, to go, to depart." The allied words "all express distance from cities and civilization, and are from roots expressing departure or wandering," — as if this newer term were needed to describe those strange, wild woods furthest from the centers of civilization.

I noticed that this year I spent my Christmas and Thanksgiving in Thoreau's company, with him in the wilds of Nature. For most of a year I found myself for a short period each day, transported from sub-tropical New Orleans back to New England in the company of a man who mostly suffered few men to accompany him on his adventures abroad, but was somehow delighted to have me along with him as he walked through marsh, swamp, seashore, and mountain, rowed and set sail over the Concord River, and skated over frozen streams with wings on his heels. I returned from these excursions exhilarated and thankful that there was a Henry David Thoreau who wrote in his Journal every day for 14 years, and a little sad that our journey together has only three more years before I close the last page of his Journal, a better man and a happier me.

----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. In the 1970s I lived in New England for five years in the small town of Foxborough about twenty miles or so south of Concord.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

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**Footnote 2.** The use of "blowed" instead of "blew" as the past tense of "blow" was still popular in Thoreau's time.

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Footnote 3. The adjective *grateful* has subsidiary meanings of pleasing or entertaining, which is what Thoreau apparently intended.

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**Footnote 4.** The word "Man" when capitalized is used as a gender-neutral noun designating a human being.

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