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Henry D. Thoreau: Edited by J. Lyndon Shanley: Walden

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Introduction

A CENTURY and a half after its initial publication, *Walden* has become such a totem of the back-to-nature, preservationist, anti-business, civil-disobedience mind-set, and Thoreau so vivid a protester, so perfect a crank and hermit saint, that the book itself risks being as revered and unread as the Bible. Of the American classics densely arisen in the middle of the nineteenth century—Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* (1850), Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), to which we might add Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1854) as a nation-stirring best-seller and Emerson's essays as an indispensable preparation of the ground—*Walden* has contributed most to America's present sense of itself. In a time of informational overload, of clamorously inane and ubiquitous electronic entertainment, and of a fraught, globally challenged, ever more demanding workplace, the urge to build a cabin in the woods and thus reform, simplify, and cleanse one's life—"to front," in Thoreau's ringing verb, "only the essential facts of life"—remains strong. The vacation industry, so-called, thrives on it, and camper sales, and the weekend recourse to second homes in the northern forests or the western mountains, where the pollutions of industry and commerce are relatively light. "Simplify, simplify," *Walden* advises, and we try, even though a twenty-first century attainment of a rustic, elemental simplicity entails considerable complications of budget and transport.

Thoreau would not scorn contemporary efforts to effect his gospel and follow his example. *Walden* aims at conversion, and Thoreau's polemical purpose gives it an energy and drive missing in the meanders of the sole other book he saw into publication during his short lifetime, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849).

Like *A Week*, *Walden* is a farraginous memoir, and was subject to Thoreau's habit of constant revision and expansion, going through seven known drafts, but it all forms a defense of his eccentric reclusion. A vigorous, humorous tone asserts itself at the outset:

I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life, which some would call impertinent, though they did not appear to me at all impertinent, but, considering the circumstances, very natural and pertinent.

The circumstances, a malaise of drudgery and petty distraction in the society around him, are described, and his general wish "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." However, he passes over a very practical motive: he wanted to be a writer and, like many another of like ambition, needed privacy, quiet, and a "broad margin" where his mind could roam.

He built a single-room cabin on his mentor Emerson's land, more than a mile south of Concord village, in the spring of 1845, and moved in on July 4, declaring his own independence. In the next two years he completed a draft, later expanded, of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, based on a canoe trip he and his brother John had taken in 1839, as well as composing the first draft of *Walden* and a long essay on Thomas Carlyle, part of which he gave as a lecture at the Concord Lyceum in 1846. In July of 1846 he refused to pay his accumulated town poll taxes, on the grounds that the national government condoned and protected slavery, and spent one night in jail, thus laying the basis for his celebrated essay "Civil Disobedience." Later in that same year he travelled for the first time to Maine and wrote most of the

essay "Ktaadn." Thoreau was twenty-seven when he took up residence in the cabin by Walden Pond; he had graduated from Harvard nineteenth in his class, tried teaching, helped his father in the family pencil business, did local odd jobs for a dollar a day, lived with the Emersons for two years as handyman and gardener, left Long Island after a brief spell of tutoring and testing the literary market, and, despite Emerson's sponsorship and a few poems and essays in the Transcendentalist quarterly *The Dial*, had made no mark. He emerged from the cabin in 1847 as essentially the Thoreau known to literary history.

His appearance was sufficiently arresting to have attracted a number of descriptions. The fastidious but not unfriendly Hawthorne, a sometime resident of Concord, described him in 1842 as "a young man with much of wild original nature still remaining in him. . . . He is as ugly as sin, long-nosed, queer-mouthed, and with uncouth and somewhat rustic, although courteous manners. . . . [He] seems inclined to lead a sort of Indian life among civilized men—an Indian life, I mean, as respects the absence of any systematic effort for a livelihood." James Kendall Hosmer recalled how an older Thoreau "stood in the doorway with hair which looked as if it had been dressed with a pine-cone, inattentive grey eyes, hazy with far-away musings, an emphatic nose and disheveled attire that bore signs of tramps in woods and swamps." His New Bedford disciple Daniel Ricketson recalled, as phrased by Thoreau's biographer Walter Harding, "the gentleness, humanity, and intelligence of Thoreau's blue eyes" and noted that "though his arms were long, his legs short, his hands and feet large, and his shoulders markedly sloping, he was strong and vigorous in his walk." His voice was impressive, even toward the end, when tuberculosis had weakened it. On his last journey, a rather desperate excursion to Minnesota for the possibly healing effects of its supposedly drier climate, the minister upon whom

he called in Chicago, the Unitarian Robert Collyer, remembered:

His words also were as distinct and true to the ear as those of a great singer. . . . He would hesitate for an instant now and then, waiting for the right word, or would pause with a pathetic patience to master the trouble in his chest, but when he was through the sentence was perfect and entire, lacking nothing, and the word was so purely one with the man that when I read his books now and then I do not hear my own voice within my reading but the voice I heard that day.

How did Thoreau achieve his literary voice, which has worn better, to a modern ear, than Emerson's more fluent, worldly, and—to be expected from a former clergyman—oratorical one? The outward sweep of Emerson's pithy, exhortative sentences rather wearies the reader now; we feel the audience before him, basking as he beams epigrams and encouragements into their faces. The mood of Thoreau is more interior; the eye is not on an audience but on a multitudinous world of sensation, seen and named with precision. Consider these sentences from near the beginning of *A Week*:

We glided noiselessly down the stream, occasionally driving a pickerel from the covert of the pads, or a bream from her nest, and the smaller bittern now and then sailed away on sluggish wings from some recess in the shore, or the larger lifted itself out of the long grass at our approach, and carried its precious legs away to deposit them in a place of safety. The tortoises also rapidly dropped into the water, as our boat ruffled the surface amid the willows breaking the reflections of the trees. The banks had passed the height of their beauty, and some of the brighter flowers showed by their faded tints that the season was verging towards the afternoon of the year; but this sombre tinge enhanced their sincerity, and in the still unabated heats they seemed like the mossy brink of some cool well.

All is limpid observation, gliding from one bittern to another, until the startling remark that fading color enhanced the flowers' "sincerity," as if they have been pressing a case. The long paragraph goes on to enumerate, with the Latin names, the flowers of the Concord meadows, and ends with reminiscence of the mornings when the writer, on the water before sunrise, witnessed the sudden opening of water lilies to the touch of dawn sun, when "whole fields of white blossoms seemed to flash open before me, as I floated along, like the unfolding of a banner." This is not exactly "nature writing," though it holds the freshness of a continent still being explored and catalogued, as by a Humboldt or an Audubon; it is a live, particularized demonstration of Emerson's hopeful boast, set forward in its most theological form in his slim first book, *Nature*, that "every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact"—that Nature is at bottom Spirit, that "Spirit alters, moulds, makes it." Emerson approvingly quoted Swedenborg's "The visible world and the relation of its parts, is the dial plate of the invisible" and asserted, "The axioms of physics translate the laws of ethics." Imbibing Idealism from Emerson, Thoreau soaked himself in Nature's great metaphor, and became a scientist of sorts—"a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot," he later called himself—and an autobiographer. He gathered, and transferred to journals amounting in the end to two million words, rare moments and observations of increasing refinement and subtlety, harvested where he would. Emerson, like other respectable citizens of Concord, was skeptical of enterprise so personal and quizzical, confiding to his journal that "Thoreau wants a little ambition in his mixture. . . . Instead of being the head of American engineers, he is captain of a huckleberry party." Thoreau's taste for figurative huckleberry-gathering took him far afield, walking Cape Cod's wave-beaten coast and ascending to the stony summit

of Maine's Mount Ktaadn, but he always returned to the little wilderness of Concord, a microcosm that was cosmos enough.

F. O. Matthiessen, in his *American Renaissance*, points out how much the great writers of that renaissance owed to the English writers of the seventeenth century—Donne and Herbert, Marvell and Browne—with their belief in correspondences between the little and the large, the inner world of the self and the outer world of Nature. “The heart of man,” Donne wrote, “Is an epitome of God's great book / Of creatures, and man need no farther look.” George Herbert put it, “Man is one world, and hath / Another to attend him,” thus extending Nature into the unseen realms of heavenly solicitude. By a great leap of kinship, the metaphysicals of the seventeenth century ignited in the spiritual descendents of seventeenth-century Puritans a blaze of introspectively charged particulars.

Walden lives in its particulars. The long opening chapter, “Economy,” joyously details just how to build a house—“a tight shingled and plastered house, ten feet wide by fifteen long, and eight-foot posts, with a garret and a closet, a large window on each side, two trap doors, one door at the end, and a brick fireplace opposite”—down to a list of expenses totalling \$28.11½. Briskly marketing to the world his program of austerity and self-reliance, he itemizes the few foodstuffs he paid for and the profits he obtained from his seven miles of bean rows. He tells us how to make his unleavened bread of rye and Indian meal, and “a very good molasses either of pumpkin or beets.” In another experiment, he eats a woodchuck, enjoying it “notwithstanding its musky flavor,” though he doubts it will become an item for the village butcher. He shares the details of his housekeeping with us:

Housework was a pleasant pastime. When my floor was dirty, I rose early, and, setting all my furniture out of doors on the grass, bed and bedstead making but one budget,

dashed water on the floor, and sprinkled white sand from the pond on it, and then with a broom scrubbed it clean and white. . . .

Further—and this is a stroke of his sensitive, pawky genius—he contemplates his momentarily displaced furniture and the nuance of enchanting strangeness:

It was pleasant to see my whole household effects out on the grass, making a little pile like a gypsy's pack, and my three-legged table, from which I did not remove the books and pen and ink, standing amid the pines and hickories. . . . It was worth the while to see the sun shine on these things, and hear the free wind blow on them; so much more interesting most familiar objects look out of doors than in the house.

Many things, in Thoreau's liberated state, are worth the while to see—the feeding manners of chickadees, and the trickles of spring thaw along the railroad cut, “resembling, as you look down on them, the lacinated lobed and imbricated thalluses of some lichens.” At the same moment he is “cheered by the music of a thousand tinkling rills and rivulets whose veins are filled with the blood of winter which they are bearing off”; at other times he eavesdrops on “the faint wiry peep” of the baby woodcock being led by their mother through the swamp. In *Walden's* most bravura chapter, “Sounds,” he hears not only the cries and rustles of myriad creatures but, with surprising approval, the whistle and racket of the Fitchburg Railroad train as it makes its way, a hundred rods off, along the edge of Walden Pond:

Commerce is unexpectedly confident and serene, alert, adventurous, and unwearied. It is very natural in its methods withal, far more so than many fantastic enterprises and sentimental experiments. . . . I am refreshed and expanded when the freight train rattles past me, and I smell the stores which go dispensing their odors all the way from Long Wharf to Lake Champlain.

His admiration of Nature is not selective; it includes the "iron steed" that thrusts its noisy way into his woods, earning several pages of paean capped by one of his best-known poems, beginning "What's the railroad to me? / I never go to see / Where it ends."

The Concord of the 1840s, where, in Thoreau's perception, men "lead lives of quiet desperation," slave-drivers of themselves with "no time to be any thing but a machine," was by our lights a bucolic world, the steam engine being the technological ultimate and the main labor farm labor. It is the farmer, according to Thoreau, whose "poor immortal soul" is "well nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed"; it is a farmer he encounters in the middle of the night, driving his livestock to a dawn appointment in Boston, while the unencumbered hermit returns to sleep in his cozy cabin. Thoreau was a Harvard graduate and the scion of a small industrialist, John Thoreau the pencil-manufacturer. In the local social scale he was something of a gentleman, and he asserts a gentleman's prerogative in pursuing his unprofitable hobbies. We slightly wince, on behalf of those more tightly bound to laborious necessity, when we read that "to maintain one's self on this earth is not hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely" and that "by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of living." Not everyone is offered free land to squat on for a personal experiment nor can draw so freely on the society of a nearby village. Thoreau makes light of most men's need to work, and ignores the wave of industrial toil that is breaking upon New England. In his week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers he takes small note of the factories that made of this river the New World's first industrial zone, whose cruel exploitations Melville sought to dramatize in his short story "The Tartarus of Maids."

Thoreau's protest centers on the end-product of industry, the consumerism that urges us to buy its products; his proposed remedy is doing without: "A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone." This includes doing without sex ("The generative energy, which, when we are loose, dissipates and makes us unclean, when we are continent invigorates and inspires us"), and would carry with it, as Hawthorne sensed, an end to most of the interactions that form civilization, a return to "Indian life" and beyond—to a degree of individual independence that no human society, least of all a tribal one, could tolerate. His retreat to the cabin and the retreats to the land that his masterwork has helped inspire were luxuries, financed by the surplus that an interwoven, slave-driving economy generates. Even so staunch a Thoreauvian as E. B. White (whose own withdrawal to the Maine coast was financed by the ad revenues of a New York magazine), in writing a tribute for *Walden's* hundredth anniversary fifty years ago, admitted that "the plodding economist will . . . have rough going if he hopes to emerge from the book with a clear system of economic thought," and that Thoreau sometimes wrote as if "all his readers were male, unmarried, and well-connected." But if it cannot be swallowed as a cure-all, *Walden* can be relished as a condiment, a flavoring, a head-clearing spice. White, remembering how the book heartened him when he read it in his youth, saw *Walden* as "an invitation to life's dance, assuring the troubled recipient that . . . the music is played for him, too, if he will but listen and move his feet." "Love your life," Thoreau wrote, "poor as it is."

Walden can be taken as an antidote to apathy and anxiety. With its high spirits and keen appeals to the senses, it fortifies. Its time of writing was a troubled time for Thoreau, young but old enough to have accomplished more, and for the nation, laboring under the cloud of the

slavery issue and the coming Civil War. If Thoreau did not make much of the industrial revolution, he felt the crisis in belief whereby even the almost creedless stopgap of Unitarianism demanded too much faith. Nature studies led to naturalism, to philosophical materialism. "Darwin, the naturalist," is cited early in *Walden*, as witness to those "inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego" who went "naked with impunity, while the European shivers in his clothes"—model citizens of Thoreau's utopia of doing without. Walter Harding's biography, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (1965), tells us that the ailing Thoreau lived to read, in 1860, Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and "took six pages of notes on it in one of his commonplace books, and . . . liked the book very much." But the theological furor over the book did not engage him, nor affect his own thinking. He had once experienced, *Walden* confides, "a slight insanity in my mood" whereby Nature seemed unfriendly, a mood quickly cancelled by a sense, in a gentle rain, of "an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me": "There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still."

Thoreau resembled Darwin in his patient observations and Benjamin Franklin in his inventive practicality. Unlike most Transcendentalists, he could *do* things—tend garden and make home repairs for Emerson, or actualize with real carpentry Bronson Alcott's fanciful vision of a summerhouse. "I have as many trades as fingers," he says in *Walden*. Between 1849 and 1861 he completed over two hundred surveys, mostly in and around Concord. He figures in Henry Petroski's technological history of the pencil (*The Pencil*, 1990) as the inventor, not long after his graduation from Harvard, of a seven-foot-high grinding machine that captured only the particles of graphite fine enough to rise highest into the air; for a time, Thoreau pencils were the best—the least gritty—in

America. We trust the narrator of *Walden* and his spiritual aspirations better because of repeated examples of his practical know-how. A call to ethereality begins with a trick of fitting an ax tight to its handle:

One day, when my axe had come off and I had cut a green hickory for a wedge, driving it with a stone, and had placed the whole to soak in a pond hole in order to swell the wood, I saw a striped snake run into the water, and he lay on the bottom, apparently without inconvenience, as long as I staid there, or more than a quarter of an hour; perhaps because he had not yet fairly come out of the torpid state. It appeared to me that for a like reason men remain in their present low and primitive condition; but if they should feel the influence of the spring of springs arousing them, they would of necessity rise to a higher and more ethereal life.

Surviving in the woods, he becomes a student of physical process. Water swells wood; dead leaves absorb the sun's heat: "The elements . . . abetted me in making a path through the deepest snow in the woods, for when I had once gone through the wind blew the oak leaves into my tracks, where they lodged, and by absorbing the rays of the sun melted the snow, and so not only made a dry bed for my feet, but in the night their dark line was my guide." The pond covered with winter ice moves him to especially close observation; as he had anatomized the spring thaw, so the winter freezing prompts his minute inspection of bubbles, "narrow oblong perpendicular bubbles about half an inch long, sharp cones with the apex upward." In a warm spell, they expand and run together, "often like slivery coins poured from a bag, one overlapping another"; at the end of the passage he lifts his almost microscopic examination of "the infinite number of minute bubbles" into the resounding open: "These are the little air-guns which contribute to make the ice crack and whoop." He veers close to the secret of microorganisms when he asks, "Why is it that a bucket of water

soon becomes putrid, but frozen remains sweet forever?" The question evaporates, however, in the dry witticism, "It is commonly said that this is the difference between the affections and the intellect."

As the railroad cuts expose new geology, the commercial ice-cutting in the winter of 1846–47 gives Thoreau new opportunities for perceiving ice, remarking distinctions in tint as precisely as the contemporary landscapist Frederic Edwin Church rendered icebergs. Early in 1846, Thoreau seized the opportunity of a frozen Walden to perform the chief technical labor of his years there. "With compass and chain and sounding line," cutting holes in straight lines in several directions, he sounds the pond, presenting the reader with a drawn map, forty rods to an inch, and a scale profile of the bottom. The pond had been long rumored to be bottomless: "It is remarkable how long men will believe in the bottomlessness of a pond without taking the trouble to sound it." The surveyor is proud to announce, "I can assure my readers that Walden has a reasonably tight bottom at a not unreasonable, though at an unusual, depth." Ponds are shallower than we imagine: "Most ponds, emptied, would leave a meadow no more hollow than we frequently see." Most mysteries, by the same token, yield to the emptying action of patient scientific examination. Readers new to *Walden* may be surprised at the high proportion of its energy given to empirical exploration and demonstration. The Romantic Nature-celebrant wears the polished spectacles of Franklin and the *philosophes*. Thoreau's purpose is to reconcile us, after centuries of hazy anthropocentricity, to Nature as it is, relentless and remorseless. We need to be called out from the shared comforts and illusions of village life.

We need the tonic of wildness. . . . We can never have enough of Nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and Titanic features. . . . We need to

witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander. We are cheered when we observe the vulture feeding on the carrion which disgusts and disheartens us and deriving health and strength from the repast.

On the path to his little cabin, he relates, there was a dead horse, whose aroma repulsed him but heartened him with "the assurance it gave me of the strong appetite and inviolable health of Nature." The vision of "Nature red in tooth and claw," which desolated Tennyson and other Victorian Christians, is embraced by Thoreau:

I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp—tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises and toads run over in the road; and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood! With the liability to accident, we must see how little account is to be made of it. The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence. . . . Compassion is a very untenable ground.

He sounds, as it were, the fatal bottom of our organic existence, and yet claims not merely to accept the universe, as another Transcendentalist, Margaret Fuller, put it, but to rejoice in it.

He met his own death, at forty-four, of consumption, with a serenity admired by much of Concord. "One world at a time," he famously told those seeking to prepare him for the next. He did not quite renounce personal immortality; a number of his phrases tease the possibility, and near the passages above he evokes the "wild river valley and the woods . . . bathed in so pure and bright a light as would have waked the dead," concluding, "There needs no stronger proof of the immortality. All things must live in such a light." Yet the meaning is unclear, a fillip of animal optimism after a book-length, clear-eyed exaltation

of Nature as a chemical and molecular and mathematical construct—Nature seized in the tightening grip of science, and stripped of the pathetic fallacy even in the sophisticated form in which Emerson's Neoplatonism couched it. No more Idealism, no more Platonic forms, no shimmering archetypes having an existence somehow independent of individual things. "No ideas but in things," William Carlos Williams would say in the next century, giving modernism a motto. The poetry of Williams and Eliot and Pound demonstrated that things, assembled even as enigmatic fragments, as images without spelled-out emotional and logical connectives, give vitality to the language and immediacy to the communication between writer and reader. It is the thinginess of Thoreau's prose that still excites us, the athleticism with which he springs from detail to detail, image to image, while still toting something of Transcendentalism's metaphysical burden. Without that burden, which is considerably lighter in the writings posthumously collected as *The Maine Woods* and *Cape Cod*, he comes close to being merely an attentive and eloquent travel writer. Nevertheless, the chaotic, mist-swept top of Mount Ktaadn—"the raw materials of a planet dropped from an unseen quarry"—and the wrecks and wind-stunted apple trees of Cape Cod afford us the metaphysical shudder of a man confronting in implacable nature an image of something purifyingly bleak within himself.

His later years, as the preachments of abolitionists and slaveholders reached their shrill adumbration of bloody war, were marked, even made notorious, by his fiery championing of John Brown, whom he had briefly met in Concord, finding him "a man of great common sense, deliberate and practical," endowed with "tact and prudence" and the Spartan habits and spare diet of a soldier. The peaceable Thoreau extols this grim killer for a practical reason: Brown has taken action, violent action,

against the sanctioned violence of the slavery-protecting state:

It was his peculiar doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder, in order to rescue the slave. I agree with him. . . . I do not wish to kill nor to be killed, but I can foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable. We preserve the so-called "peace" of our community by deeds of petty violence every day.

Thoreau's recognitions endeared him to the revolutionaries of the 1960s: he saw the violence behind the established order, the enslaving nature of private property, and—a trend even stronger now than forty years ago—the media's substitution of "the news" for private reality. "Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous." The word "reality" rings through *Walden*: "Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance . . . till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*. . . . Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business." To the dark immensity of material Nature's indifference we can oppose only the brief light, like a lamp in a cabin, of our consciousness; the invigorating benison of *Walden* is to make us feel that the contest is equal, and fair.

The United States of 1850, at twenty-three millions, was small enough to be addressed as a single congregation. Though famous as the man who lived alone in the woods, as Melville was as "the man who had lived among cannibals," Thoreau was in his gingerly fashion gregarious. Visiting his friends the Loomises in Cambridge, he was once handed, in 1856, and for an awkward moment

was compelled to hold, upside down, the newborn Mabel Loomis, who was to achieve fame as the first editor of Emily Dickinson's poetry and, in the twentieth century, as a leading instance, in Peter Gay's social history *The Tender Passion*, of the sexually fulfilled and unrepresed Victorian female. In 1852 Thoreau, already acquainted with most of New England's writers, visited Walt Whitman in Brooklyn, in the bedroom where Whitman lived in slovenly style with his feeble-minded brother. Although they differed in their estimate of the common man, so that Whitman later diagnosed the Yankee as having "a very aggravated case of superciliousness," and Thoreau pronounced some of the New Yorker's poems as "disagreeable to say the least, simply sensual . . . as if the beasts spoke," both were left with favourable impressions. "He is a great fellow," Thoreau wrote of Whitman in a letter, and of his book of poems, "On the whole it sounds to me very brave & American after whatever deductions. I do not believe that all the sermons so called that have been preached in this land put together are equal to it for preaching." *Leaves of Grass* and *Walden* have emerged over time as the two great testaments of American individualism, assuring the New World, traditional reassurances failing, of the value, power, and beauty of the unfettered self.

—John Updike
May, 2003