



THE JOURNAL
1837–1861
HENRY DAVID
THOREAU

PREFACE BY
JOHN R. STILGOE

HENRY DAVID THOREAU (1817–1862) was born and lived the greater part of his life in Concord, Massachusetts. He studied at Harvard, where he became a disciple of Emerson, and after graduating in 1837 returned to Concord to teach school with his brother. In Concord, he became acquainted with the members of the Transcendentalist Club and grew especially close to Emerson, for whom he worked as a handyman. Thoreau also began to write for *The Dial* and other magazines, and in 1839 he made the boat trip that became the subject of his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849). On July 4, 1845, he moved into the hut he'd constructed on Walden Pond, where he remained until September 6, 1847—a sojourn that inspired his great work *Walden*, published in 1854. In the 1850s, Thoreau became increasingly active in the abolitionist cause, meeting John Brown at Emerson's house in 1857 and, after the attack on Harpers Ferry, writing passionately in Brown's defense. Short trips to Maine and Cape Cod resulted in two post-humously published books (*The Maine Woods* and *Cape Cod*), and a visit to New York led to a meeting with Walt Whitman. Suffering from tuberculosis, Thoreau traveled to the Great Lakes for the sake of his health, but finding no improvement and realizing that he was going to die, returned home to Concord to put his papers in order and to write his final essays, drawing as always on the Journal, the work that was the source of all his other works and the defining undertaking of his adult life.

DAMION SEARLS is the author of *Everything You Say Is True*, a travelogue, and *What We Were Doing and Where We Were Going*, stories. He is also an award-winning translator from German, French, Norwegian, and Dutch, most recently of Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Inner Sky: Poems, Notes, Dreams* and Marcel Proust's *On Reading*. He has produced an experimental edition of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, called *or The Whale*, and his translation of the Dutch writer Nescio's stories is forthcoming from NYRB Classics.

JOHN R. STILGOE is the author of many books and the Robert and Lois Orchard Professor in the History of Landscape at Harvard University.

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NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS



New York

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PREFACE

“To Pine Hill for chestnuts.” And on the way an Irish-immigrant woman and her son, bent double under loads of firewood, Old World in appearance but doing “the squaw’s part in many respects” encounter the solitary walker. Another day, “To owl’s nest. The young owls are gone.” Periodically fledglings flown. But the day after, a question recorded. “What if we feel a yearning to which no breast answers? I walk alone.” Then some thoughts about frivolity, society, and personal shallowness. On the last day of one September, a musing about the color of leaves: “The white ash has got its autumnal mulberry hue.” But then something more. “It is with leaves as with fruits and woods, and with animals and men; when they are mature their different characters appear.” And the next day, something else, down by the railroad track. “Just put a fugitive slave, who has taken the name of Henry Williams, into the cars for Canada.”

Here find the private musings of a solitary seer, the odd man of Concord. “Hornets, hyenas, and baboons are not so great a curse to a country as men of a similar character,” Thoreau decided one early-autumn day. But then again, he knew he had circumscribed his life, focused his energy within the town bounds of Concord, walking the edges as a surveyor, pacing the whole as a self-appointed visionary. “It is a charmed circle which I have drawn around my abode, having walked not with God but with the devil. I am too well aware when I have crossed this line.”

What line? He knew the town boundary lines, knew enough to look beyond, to see “such near hills as Nobscot and Nashoba,” the far-off glimmerings of others in the sunlight. He knew the paths and byways and shortcuts and railroad rights-of-way and the rivers along which he rowed and skated and swam. He knew the line dividing his private goals from “the mean and narrow-minded men” he scorned, as when one of sixty asked about buying a bearing orchard when he might have planted fruit trees thirty years earlier. Arrogant, supercilious, observant, but often doubting himself, he wrote for himself, averring that “most New England biographies and journals—John Adams’s not excepted—do not affect me like opening of the tombs.” And the tombs he meant lay in the Concord graveyard, not Luxor.

Winter prompted him to ponder journalizing. He moved about the house, from one sunny window to another. “My Journal is that of me which would else spill over and run to waste,” but then again, maybe not. Another winter day, another vision of the book. “To set down such choice experiences that my own writings may inspire me and at last I may make wholes of parts.” Journalizing is not journalism but “a distinct profession” rescuing details and truths from oblivion. “Contemplation of the unfinished picture may suggest its harmonious completion,” every thought “a nest egg” a long time from hatching. “Thoughts accidentally thrown together become a frame in which more may be developed and exhibited. Perhaps this is the main value of a habit of writing, of keeping a journal, that so we remember our best hours and stimulate ourselves.” And in another January, years later, something similar but not the same: “In keeping a journal of one’s walks and thoughts it seems to be worth the while to record those phenomena which are most interesting to us at the time.” Indeed, “Such is the weather.” The weather. That which shapes the Concord-circumscribed world, the affair of just farmers and vagrants, the turn of seasons, the color of everything, the fall of light and shadow, the weather. Here is much about weather, including weather beyond the window-pane but not beyond the manuscript book, and in all weather, much of the footprints of Henry David Thoreau, the man who “thus *tracks himself*” in journal pages, he who worried at how much “is out of my line.”

Faces bothered him. "In the evening went to a party. It is a bad place to go to,—thirty or forty persons, mostly young women, in a small room, warm and noisy." Women loud, women pretty. A jumbled, lost in the clacking roar. "I rarely look people in their faces," he concluded, before recording a far more pleasant encounter with an old farmer in the woods, farmer and journal writer eating crackers and cheese together. But then, a few months later, faces and looking again. "When a man asks me a question, I look him in the face. If I do not see any inquiry there, I cannot answer it." And with not. "His face expressed no more curiosity or relationship to me than a custard pudding." From parties and public encounters and most other "machinery of modern society," from what the Journal records as autumn melancholy, Thoreau fled to the woods, to solitude. "The society of young women is the most unprofitable I have ever tried. They are so light and flighty that you can never be sure whether they are there or not there." Like the owls, they are very often gone. Faces float in the pages that follow: they swirl like leaves in the slow-flowing Concord. They float faster in the rain. "Here is a rainy day, which keeps me in the house." Here is a Thoreau raw, colliding, recording, not the polished author of a book about life on the edge of Walden Pond.

"A man hangs out innumerable signs by which we may know him." Here stand signs, not all clear. "Bathing is an undescribed luxury. To feel the wind blow on your body, the water flow on you and to have you, is a rare physical enjoyment this hot day." He swam, then stood at the confluence of cold brook and warm pond. "When I thrust my arm down where it was only two feet deep, my arm was in the warm water of the pond, but my hand in the cold water of the brook." Another July, years later. "I find the water considerably colder at the bottom while I stand up to my chin, but the sandy bottom is much warmer to my feet than the water. The heat passes *through* the water without being absorbed by it much." Sensory experience produces the joy and even ecstasy for which he notes, once, the Journal exists. He smelled pennyroyal while walking along a hillside, backtracked, sniffed, and found a tiny solitary plant, trodden. He examined guns. Precisely. "Looked at a Sharp's rifle, a Colt's revolver, Maynard's, and a Thurber's revolver." Some have smoother actions than others. "The last fires faster (by a steady pull), but not so smartly." Not as nice in the hand, dry-fired or not. A warm day in December, "true Indian summer," and "the walker perspires" and enjoys the perspiration: a November years later brings weather "finger-cold" and air "so bracing and wholesome" it makes him cast stones on the first ice. And by that November, the journal writer eats differently, once avoiding meat, tea, coffee, "etc., etc.," because "it appeared more beautiful to live low and fare hard." But change sweetens his palate and diet and table. "I find myself somewhat less particular," and "grown more coarse and indifferent," more a gourmand and less the hoer and eater of beans.

"All this you will see, and much more, if you are prepared to see it,—if you *look* for it," he notes on a November rainy day when he walked out to Poplar Hill, what he asserts might be any hill. Look acutely, descry the "bright-red tops or crescents of the scarlet oaks," and delight. "Otherwise, regular and universal as this phenomenon is, you will think for threescore years and ten that all the wood is this season sere and brown." So appears not the sign but the sign painter, the word colorist, the practical, frost-nipped-hands philosopher. "Objects are concealed from our view not so much because they are out of the course of our visual ray as because there is no intention of the mind and eye toward them." So emerges one core of the Journal. "We do not realize how far and widely, or how near and narrowly, we are to look. The greater part of the phenomena of nature are for this reason concealed from us all our lives." Journal becomes prism. "The actual objects which one person will see from a particular hilltop are just as different from those which another will see as the persons are different." Transcendentalism slogs through mud, over hobble ice, uphill, outdoors, in bad weather. Transcendentalism grates, scrapes, works. "The scarlet oak must, in a sense, be in your eye when you

go forth." The mind is its own paint pot, its own discovery, its own creator of serendipitous findings of rare plants and the disguised slave catcher lurking near the railroad depot.

"The colors are now: light blue above (where is my cyanometer? Saussure invented one, and Humboldt used it in his travels); landscape russet and greenish, spotted with fawn-colored plowed lands, with green pine and gray or reddish oak woods intermixed, and dark-blue or slate-color water here and there." So one May 1st apparition, recorded, and enlivened by "a strong, invigorating scene up from the fresh meadows. But Thoreau knew the limits of words, even the limits of the well-disciplined eye. "We are armed with language adequate to describe each leaf in the field, or at least to distinguish it from each other, but not to describe a human character." But the pages following at least sketch Thoreau, making a hazy-mirror self-portrait, including such long, involved, despairing passages as that beginning "I once set fire to the woods." Here find the color of Thoreau, then the color illuminated and shaded by the circumscribed landscape and society of Concord and by the telegraph tapping out the weather in New York and Portland, the telegraph line not out of his line, not in the end.

"I would fain make two reports in my Journal, first the incidents and observations of to-day; and to-morrow I review the same and record what was omitted before, which will often be the most significant and poetic part." So he wrote after decades of keeping the Journal, still musing on what he experienced, what he recorded, and what the record became, aging like winter apples. "The men and things of to-day are wont to lie fairer and truer in to-morrow's memory." Journal-writing conjures hyper-reality, then, enduring sharpness of shape that slices deeply time and again. "Often I can give the truest and most interesting account of any adventure I have had after years have elapsed, for then I am not confused, only the most significant facts surviving in my memory." What follows here is not the memory of Thoreau but his memory mine, his private store of promptings, his paint-pot person notes, and his record of making and writing that record. "I now begin to pluck wild apples," interrupted one September entry. And here follows his harvest.

—JOHN R. STILGCO

INTRODUCTION

In 1837, David Henry Thoreau was twenty years old. He would soon begin to call himself Henry David Thoreau, but he never changed his name legally or officially, and throughout his life many people in Concord continued to call him “David Henry,” Thoreau stubbornly correcting them. He graduated from Harvard College, where Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered his stirring Phi Beta Kappa address, “The American Scholar,” on August 31; whether Thoreau attended the lecture is not known but he surely read and absorbed it, having already checked Emerson’s manifesto *Nature* out of the library in April and in June, and the two men became close when Thoreau returned to his family home in Concord in the fall. Thoreau would live with his family for the rest of his life except for a short stay in New York a couple of years helping out at the Emersons’ while Ralph Waldo was away on lecture tours, and the two years, two months, and two days that he lived in a cabin he built for himself on Emerson’s woodlot at Walden Pond. Perhaps more important than anything else that happened to him in 1837, Thoreau began to keep a journal: “‘What are you doing now?’ he asked. ‘Do you keep a journal?’ So I make my first entry to-day.” The “he” in this first entry is undoubtedly Emerson.

Thoreau’s journal started out as a notebook among others, for quotations, mini-essays, and poetry. He often tore out pages to use as drafts for his books, lectures, and essays, and for other reasons, so that the first dozen years of the journal—chronologically more than half—survive only in fragments, sometimes secondhand (for example, from his first two volumes of 546 and 396 pages, neither of which survives, Thoreau selected a limited number of entries and recopied them in 1841, calling the result “Gleanings—Or What Time Has Not Reaped Of My Journal”). He spent the 1840s honing his craft as a writer and published his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, in 1849, but that book was a commercial disaster, plunging him into debt (some practical consequences of this failure are described in the memorable entry of [October 28, 1853](#)). As a result, he redirected his ideas about authorship, of writerly vocation, and of the meaning of publication. Around 1850, he began to keep journal entries regularly and date them consistently; instead of tearing out pages, he preserved the volumes intact, making marginal list marks and copying the passages he wanted into other notebooks, drawing vertical lines through copied text. No longer a grab bag, the journal became the *Journal*: a record of an investigation of dailyness, seasons, and the relationship between self and nature—a hybrid and an incompletable book but a book in its own right nonetheless, with an ecology all its own.

This *Journal* is not literally what Thoreau wrote each day: he often wrote up entries days later, from his notes, and as the cross-referencing footnotes show, he would also go back years later and make further additions and connections. Instead, the *Journal* is a record of what he and Nature did on a given day and how those doings affected each other. In the course of his life Thoreau may have discovered new species of bream, perfected the technology of manufacturing pencils, and anticipated modern techniques of cranberry farming, but his most lasting discoveries were about the interactions between different systems: how the seasons affect water levels, how animals propagate seeds, how one growth of forest trees succeeds the previous one, how the lake affects the shore or the river the riverbank and, most centrally, how the life he led shaped Henry David Thoreau and vice versa. Emerson had four children, was a beloved lecturer, and connected well with other people, and he wrote about *Self-Reliance*; Thoreau never married, is not known to have had any lovers, and was naturally prickly, defensive, and off-putting, and the deepest and most passionate intelligence in his writing concerned connection and relation—Concord is not only the subject of a pun in the first line of *Walden*, it is

Thoreau's main subject. (Then again, this dichotomy of character is too neat: Emerson, for instance, left his sick wife, Lidian, and their young children in Thoreau's care to go to Europe in 1847, writing coldly to Lidian, "I foresee plainly that the trick of solitariness never can leave me," while Thoreau wrote to Emerson, "Lidian and I make very good housekeepers. She is a very dear sister to me. [Young Eddy Emerson] very seriously asked me, the other day, 'Mr. Thoreau, will you be my father?'" The extent to which one's attention outward and attention inward intermingle is always a deeper mystery than it may seem.) Thoreau writes with surprising perceptiveness and empathy about others—poor Irish laborers, escaped slaves he helped send north to Canada, fellow villagers—and in a deeper sense his writing, especially *Walden*, speaks to readers with extraordinary intimacy, making claims upon us that some of us enjoy and others reject. I think of Thoreau's cabin, along with Proust's cork-lined room, as the two iconic sites of literary communion, of burrowing into the heart of the reader by looking inward in solitude. (Proust too started off as a follower of Emerson's, and at one point planned to translate *Walden* into French; when he read excerpts in another translation, he praised them by saying: "It is as though one were reading them inside oneself, so much do they arise from the depths of our intimate experience.")

Thus the purpose of Thoreau's Journal was not simply to gather as many details and facts as possible but to provide his connecting, analogizing intelligence with more to connect—more to, as he would say, "turn into poetry." Readers, or at least critics, of Thoreau were slow to pick up on this synthesizing quality. Although long recognized as an important quarry for biographical information, a testing ground for Thoreau's other works, and a storehouse of some of the finest nature writing in the English language, the Journal was not often considered as a literary work of its own until the 1980s. There have been many editions of selected bits of the Journal, but it is a book ill served by selection because it is above all a book of rhythms: the long ebb and flow of the year and the quicker rhythms of Thoreau's roving from topic to topic. The present book—the largest one-volume edition yet published—is conceived as an abridgment, not a selection: it aims to preserve the feel of the Journal as a whole.

Some books are ill-served by abridgments, too, and admittedly much of what is most essential in this one is lost: its scope, its dailyness. There is simply no way to streamline experiencing the fact that Thoreau wrote a longish essay about the events of the day, day after day, month after 80- or 100- or 120-page month. His life, as Hans Richter once said about Kurt Schwitters's, was more full of incidents each day than the entire Trojan War, and any abridgment of, say, June 23, 1852, from nine pages down to one or two will lose a lot. That said, the premise and prerequisite of this edition is that much essential about the Journal survives abridgment.

Since my primary goal has been to preserve the feel of the Journal as a book in its own right, I avoided surrounding the text with thumbnail biographies or explanatory notes—this edition can simply be read; supplementary information is easily available elsewhere; the volume is already long enough. Nor did I divide the Journal into calendar years or months, because it is not primarily an annual or chronicle. Some pauses to catch one's breath are useful, though, so there are chapter breaks, which I placed in the least extrinsic way possible by having them correspond to the physical volumes of Thoreau's handwritten original. (The sixteenth surviving handwritten volume, when he began his full-fledged journal practice, was labeled "III" by Thoreau; the previous one was labeled "II" and there are none surviving labeled "I." Throughout part two of the present edition, beginning with chapter III—that is, throughout the Journal proper—the chapter numbers and occasional chapter titles are how Thoreau labeled each of his physical notebooks.)

The early, notebooky years of the Journal are different in character than the rest, and I have abridged them drastically. Still, the differences have been rather overstated by writers on Thoreau.

The same associative mind is at work, only with such a thin seedbed of facts to work from and exploit the connections among that the results are necessarily more affected and “literary.” It is only when Thoreau’s experience, and the Journal itself, had snowballed to a large enough scope that he could use it fully:

Perhaps this is the main value of a habit of writing, of keeping a journal.... Having by chance recorded a few disconnected thoughts and then brought them into juxtaposition, they suggest a whole new field in which it was possible to labor and to think. Thought begat thought. (January 22, 1852)

The later years of the Journal, in turn, have often been dismissed as too facty, too scientific and not literary or philosophical enough. This, I think, is flatly not true. Thoreau is as concerned as ever to make the facts interesting, to see them in relation to himself and others. His notes are simply more detailed and specific than yours or mine would be, his patience irritating to those who do not share it like the Concord farmer who saw him spend a whole day watching the bullfrogs (see [note](#)). But it is precisely because of Thoreau’s patience that the animals came to him. The ideas too.

Seasons mattered deeply to Thoreau and I have tried to preserve the balance between the seasons from his long summer walks to his heavier reading in the snowed-in winters. Months mattered to him too: his first book was organized as a week, and his second, *Walden*, as a year; the massive project Thoreau was building toward in the last years of his life, which he sometimes called his “Kalendary” (after John Evelyn), would have covered just about everything in the ecosystem—the “economy,” in Thoreau’s term—of Concord. I made sure to include one set of months less abridged than the rest, a representative Thoreau calendar with an extra March to fetch the year around:

[March 1853](#)

[April 1856](#)

[May 1852](#)

[June 1851](#)

[July 1852](#)

[August 1854](#)

[September 1851](#)

[October 1857](#)

[November 1858](#)

[December 1856](#)

[January 1855](#)

[February 1860](#)

[March 1859](#)

These 180 pages constitute a sort of book within the book and might fruitfully be read on their own. They are still abridged—those thirteen months in full would be twice the length of the book in your hands—but they let you see, in somewhat fuller form, what April meant to Thoreau, or July, or glorious October. Finally, of course, days are at the heart of any journal. Many readers, myself included, like to read a day’s entry on the anniversary of that day, which is a good way to flip and browse in this book. However, I could rarely keep a day’s entire entry, typically eight or ten or fifteen pages long. Whenever I did, I indicated it by putting the date in capital letters, thus any entry with a

uncapitalized date is less than Thoreau's full entry, even long entries like August 30, 1856 (six pages here; twelve pages in full).

Across the arc of the Journal as a whole, I reflected Thoreau's changing interests; for the year when he was preoccupied with, say, turtles, I kept a lot of entries about turtles, and I always tried to keep enough texture to show, for example, his depression and reduced writing in 1855, after *Walden* was published. This is part of what I mean by trying to produce an abridgment of the whole, not just a selection of "the good bits." There are plenty of good bits here, of course, but the point is that they are not as good when torn out of context. To take one example, "The bluebird carries the sky on his back" ([April 3, 1852](#)) is a great line: the bluebird comes with the spring and thus can be said to bring it as much as vice versa; Thoreau reverses apparent cause and effect to emphasize interconnection, in a powerful visual rhyme that captures too how eagerly he welcomed the spring after the burden of hard New England winters. Of the four major one-volume selections from the Journal before the present edition, two keep only this one line from April 3, 1852; two omit the day altogether. I chose to keep another paragraph—with its sunlight and landscape full of light, the reflections from the grass, and Thoreau locating himself "on the back of the hill"—because some alchemy of these details is what produces the poetic insight.

To abridge nine-tenths of the letter while preserving the spirit, I have had to cut not only entries but paragraphs and sentences within entries, sometimes even parts of sentences, splicing the remainder together. A few of these cuts are to make the text more readable: I omit Latin names from some of his lists of sightings, since this edition conveys his use of botanical terminology well enough; I tend to skip obscure allusions rather than footnoting them; Thoreau's cross-references often take the now archaic form "*vide* 19th *inst.*," and I avoided replacing "*vide*" with "see" but saw no reason to keep "*inst.*"; and so on. The overwhelming majority of cuts, however, are solely for space, not to change the tone. For instance, Thoreau mentions the time and destination of his walks almost every day; I kept only enough to convey the rest. I abbreviated some of his longer lists, and indicated in brackets the scope of what was omitted. I condensed the thirty-nine pages on John Brown (October 19–22, 1855) into a few of the most powerful lines, then kept Thoreau's references to Brown in later entries, to suggest the depth of his engagement. The entry of September 6, 1858, is fourteen paragraphs long, and I kept half of one, with four sentences cut from the middle and the following phrase in brackets omitted: "It is much larger than what I saw before; is still abundantly in flower; four and a half feet high, [leaves, perhaps arundinaceous, eighteen inches long; panicle, nine inches long]." In all these cases and throughout the rest of the book, the goal of my editorial interventions was to let Thoreau's Journal speak for itself as much as possible, so rather than call attention to them with ellipses and give the book a patchwork appearance, I let them do their work in silence. (The interested reader can always check an entry against Thoreau's original; see the "About the Text and Suggested Reading" section for bibliographical information.)

Perhaps it would be helpful to look at one example in greater detail. The entry of [May 23, 1855](#) is four and a half pages long, is trimmed to a page in this edition. I cut his dateline ("P.M.—T. Ministerial Swamp") and a first general paragraph ("The poet must bring to Nature the smooth mirror in which she is to be reflected.... No genius will excuse him from importing the ivory which is to be his material"), matters which are conveyed elsewhere in this edition, and also the beginning of the day's details: "That small veronica (*V. arvensis*) by Mrs. Hosmer's is the same with that on the Cliff; there is also the smooth or *V. serpyllifolia* by her path at the brook. This is the fifth windy day. A May wind—a washing wind. Do we not always have after the early thunder-showers a May storm?" and a few sentences more. I kept the sentence about lupines after the passage on "the *flavor* of m

thoughts,” to indicate the presence of concrete facts and avoid too much sententiousness, but cut the rest of the paragraph: “Whiteweed will open perhaps to-morrow or next day. For some time dandelions and mouse-ear have been seen gone to seed—autumnal sights. I have not yet seen a white oak (and put with it swamp white and chestnut) fairly in bloom.” Another omitted half page follows on dor-bugs, geum, and a fragrance “as if the vales were vast saucers full of strawberries, as if our walks were on the rim of such a saucer”; in my second paragraph I removed the sentence in brackets below, not for any fault of its own but only because the rest could survive without it:

White clover. I see the light purple of the rhodora enlivening the edges of swamps—another color the sun wears. [It is a beautiful shrub seen afar, and makes a great show from the abundance of its bloom unconcealed by leaves, rising above the andromeda.] Is it not the most showy *high-colored* flower or shrub? Flowers are the different colors of the sunlight.

Finally, my last paragraph—the third-to-last paragraph of Thoreau’s full entry—omits the sentence in brackets below:

An abundance of pure white fringed polygalas, very delicate, by the path at Harrington’s mud-hole. Thus many flowers have their nun sisters, dressed in white. At Loring’s Wood heard and saw a tanager. That contrast of a *red* bird with the green pines and the blue sky! Even when I have heard his note and look for him and find the bloody fellow, sitting on a dead twig of a pine, I am always startled. (They seem to love the darkest and thickest pines.) That incredible red, with the green and blue, as if these were the trinity we wanted. Yet with his hoarse note he pays for his color. I am transported; these are not the woods I ordinarily walk in. [He sunk Concord in his thought.] How he enhances the wildness and wealth of the woods! This and the emperor moth make the tropical phenomena of our zone. [There is warmth in the pewee’s strain, but this bird’s colors and his note tell of Brazil.]

The nuns in white after “the different colors of the sunlight” earlier, the trinity and vaguely Christlike “bloody” tanager, the “wildness and wealth of the woods,” and finding tropical phenomena even in New England were what I felt needed to be preserved in this paragraph. Now all this attention to what is not included makes the present edition seem like a poor thing indeed—as of course it is, compared to the 7,000-page whole—but my hope is that the reader coming across page 200 in this book will not feel the lack.

Like any journal, Thoreau’s is repetitive, which suggests natural places to shorten the text but they are precisely what need to be kept in order to preserve the feel of a journal, Thoreau’s in particular. I trimmed many of Thoreau’s repetitions but kept them whenever possible, because they are important to Thoreau and because they are beautiful. Sometimes he repeats himself because he is drafting or revising, constructing sentences solid enough to outlast the centuries. Sometimes he repeats himself because he is struck yet again by the sound of the crickets or the look of the moonlight or the misanthropy of November. Such repeated reports, I imagine, pleased him, as someone who valued habit and character so highly. Sometimes, I suspect, he copied his own words because he liked to copy: no one’s commonplace books could run to a million words—those are just the ones that survive, in addition to a two-million-word Journal, and enormous quantities of other writing—without a sheer love of sitting with pen in hand, a printed book and a blank page both open before him. Thoreau was a *writer*, and re-writer. *Walden* went through seven drafts longhand.

Finally, I should say that this abridgment does not claim to be objective. I chose passages for inclusion not necessarily because of their importance to Thoreau's biography, or to cultural or natural history, but because I liked them: the book is shaped by my personal proclivities as much as by anything else—a preference for berrying over fishing, owls over muskrats, ice over sunsets, to name a few at random. Thoreau himself always insisted that this personal approach is the most truthful, the *only* truthful way to respond to the world:

The reason why naturalists make so little account of color is because it is so insignificant to them; they do not understand it. But the lover of flowers or animals makes very much of color. To a fancier of cats it is not indifferent whether one be black or gray, for the color expresses *character*. (October 1861)

There is no such thing as pure *objective* observation. Your observation, to be interesting, i.e. to be significant, must be *subjective*. The sum of what the writer of whatever class has to report is simply some human experience.... The man of most science is the man most alive. (May 6, 1854)

In trying to preserve the character of Thoreau's book, then, I have not tried to repress the fact that I fancy it—it was less important to me to be objective than to be engaged and alive to what the book was doing to me as I read it. That's how Thoreau read too:

I read of the Amazon that its current, indeed, is strong, but the wind always blows up the stream. This sounds too good to be true. (July 23, 1860)

You can see him, deep in his final illness, picturing himself on the river, feel him living what he read. For now, enough explanations. "As to criticism, man has never to make allowance to man; there is naught to excuse, naught to bear in mind. All the past is here present to be tried; let it approve itself as it can" (November 5, 1839). This abridgment is "a record of my discoveries," as Thoreau called his *Journal*, and it aims to be capacious enough for readers to make discoveries of their own.

—DAMION SEARL

ABOUT THE TEXT AND SUGGESTED READING

EDITIONS OF THE JOURNAL

The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, 14 vols., edited by Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, was first published in 1906 and is currently in print in a two-volume edition from Dover Books, photoreduced but easily readable; it was also reprinted by Peregrine Smith Books in 1984 with voluminous introductions by Walter Harding and including a lost volume first published by Perry Miller as *Consciousness in Concord* in 1958. Any of these editions is highly recommended for the reader who wants 6,000 more great pages where this book came from. Although flawed and incomplete in certain ways, as later editors have often discussed, the 1906 edition provided more than enough material and its editors' free correction of spelling, capitalization, and so on was suitable for this abridgment, so the 1906/1984 edition was my main source text. I have simplified it occasionally, for example by either using Torrey and Allen's bracketed interpolations without the brackets or by omitting them altogether.

The material from Thoreau's [1861 trip](#) to Minnesota is taken from *The First and Last Journeys of Henry David Thoreau*, 2 vols., edited by F.B. Sanborn (Boston: Bibliophile Society, 1905).

The definitive scholarly edition of the Journal is being published in sixteen volumes by Princeton University Press in their series *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau*. To date, seven volumes are in print, each costing around \$100; the material not yet in book form is available online at www.library.ucsb.edu/thoreau/writings_journals.html. This edition is the only reliable one for scholars, and it contains a substantial amount of early material that was found or reconstructed since the 1906 edition. However, the text is scrupulously unmodernized—for example, leaving Thoreau's casual original punctuation untouched—so it was less suitable for the present edition. A few proper names omitted from the 1906 edition, out of consideration for people who were still alive or their families, were supplied from the Princeton Journal, and one rather dirty [drawing](#) suppressed in 1906 was restored from the Morgan Library's copy of Thoreau's Journal. My thanks to Elizabeth Witherell, editor of *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau*, for her assistance.

A Year in Thoreau's Journal: 1851, edited and with an excellent introduction by H. Daniel Peck (Penguin Classics, 1993), presents a full, unabridged year of the Princeton Journal text in accessible form.

The four one-volume selections mentioned in my introduction are Odell Shepard, *The Heart of Thoreau's Journals* (1927, 1954; Dover, 1961); Laurence Stapleton, *H.D. Thoreau: A Writer's Journal*, with a very good introduction (Dover, 1960); Carl Bode, *The Selected Journals of Henry David Thoreau* (Signet, 1967); and Jeffrey S. Cramer, *I to Myself: An Annotated Selection from the Journal of Henry D. Thoreau* (Yale University Press, 2007), the largest of the four, with plentiful annotations but with roughly half the text of the present edition and at times, in my view, privileging historical information over the Journal itself. Walter Harding's *Selections from the Journals* (Dover, 1995) is fifty-five pages long. There are many other thematic selections available, on mountains, cats and dogs, and so forth; several blogs are devoted to Thoreau's Journal as well.

OTHER WRITINGS BY THOREAU

Walden is his masterpiece. *Wild Fruits*, edited by Bradley P. Dean and first published by W.W. Norton in 2000, is a reconstruction of Thoreau's unfinished late work drawn largely from the Journal: a wonderful book and the best indication we are ever likely to have of where Thoreau's writing was going at the end of his life. *The Maine Woods* is his best straightforward travel writing.

Of the essays, my favorite is "Wild Apples": a powerful late essay and proof of Thoreau's undiminished powers, of how he continued to integrate facts of nature with facts of the spirit. It is contained in *Wild Fruits* but dispersed between the main text and appendices; it is better read in any of the collections of Thoreau's essays in which it appears. Essays covering the same ground as parts of the Journal include "Autumnal Tints," "Huckleberries," "Slavery in Massachusetts," and the three essays on John Brown.

Among the many online sources, www.library.ucsb.edu/thoreau is the most reliable.

BIOGRAPHIES

Robert Sullivan's recent *The Thoreau You Don't Know* (HarperCollins, 2009) is a lively and very good introduction to Thoreau and his times, especially useful for anyone who comes to Thoreau with the impression that he was basically a cranky, unpleasant person. Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (1965, 1982; Princeton University Press, 1992), is the best chronicle of the historical facts of Thoreau's life. Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (University of California Press, 1986), is the best source for Thoreau's reading and thought and the intellectual context of the Journal.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1817 David Henry Thoreau is born on July 12, in Concord, Massachusetts. Siblings: Helen (b. 1812), John (b. 1815), and Sophia (b. 1819).
- 1835 Catches the tuberculosis he will suffer from throughout his life, and which will eventually lead to his death
- 1836 Teaches school with Orestes Brownson, the most politically radical Transcendentalist: a tough, pro-labor reformer who advocated destroying banks and abolishing inherited wealth. Emerson's *Nature* published.
- 1837 Graduates Harvard College and returns to Concord during the Panic of 1837, a major nationwide economic downturn whose effects would last for years, with bank failures and record fore-closures and unemployment. Gets a job teaching but resigns after being told to use corporal punishment on his students. Begins his lifelong involvement in the family pencil and graphite business; his improvements make Thoreau Pencils the highest quality in America. Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* published. October 22: Begins his Journal.
- 1838 Opens a private school, later with his brother, John. Henry teaches Latin, Greek, French, and sciences; the school emphasizes reasoning and field trips over rote memorization. Henry and John both fall in love with seventeen-year-old Ellen Sewall. On August 31, Henry and John leave for a two-week trip on the Concord and Merrimack rivers. John
- 1839 proposes to Sewall and is accepted, but her mother convinces her to break the engagement. Henry then proposes by letter and is rejected. "I never felt so badly sending a letter in my life," Ellen later says.
- 1840–41 Publishes his first essays and translations; the peak of his efforts writing poetry. John cuts himself with a razor on January 1, develops lockjaw, and dies in Henry's arms on January 11. Henry suffers psychosomatic symptoms of lockjaw so severe that his family
- 1842 fears for his life. He recovers, then Emerson's young son Waldo, whom Thoreau had helped raise, also dies. John's death is probably the great loss of Henry's life. Hawthorne, thirteen years older than Henry, moves to Concord and they become friends.
- 1843 After publishing two well-received nature essays, moves to Staten Island for seven months where he tutors Emerson's nephew and tries to make it as a writer in New York; homesick, often ill, and unable to find regular literary employment, moves back to Concord.
- 1844 Accidentally starts a fire that burns down much of the Concord woods.
- 1845 On July 4, moves into a cabin he has built on Emerson's land near Walden Pond, where he would stay for two years, two months, and two days. Remains in close contact with family and friends.
- 1846 Spends a night in jail for not paying his taxes, the centerpiece of his most influential essay "Resistance to Civil Government" or "Civil Disobedience" (1849).
- 1849 Henry's sister Helen dies of tuberculosis. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, expanded and reconceived as a book to honor John's memory, is published; Emerson had encouraged Thoreau to agree to pay the costs, but then gives it a lukewarm review. The book is a commercial failure; Thoreau begins regular work as a surveyor to pay off his debts.

- 1850 Around this time, reconceives of the project of his Journal. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* published.
- 1851 Is enraged by passage of Fugitive Slave Act and becomes increasingly involved in the Underground Railroad. Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* and Melville's *Moby-Dick* published.
- 1852 Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* and Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* published.
- 1854 *Walden* published, a modest success that leads to increased work as a lecturer, and widespread admirers.
- 1855 First edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* published.
- 1856 A long trip to survey in Perth Amboy, New Jersey; meets Whitman, who gives him an inscribed copy of *Leaves of Grass*.
- 1859 Father dies; Henry takes over the family business. John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry: Thoreau had heard him speak and given money, now delivers a fiery speech to large audiences in Concord, Worcester, and Boston; organizes and speaks at a memorial in Concord on the day of Brown's execution, December 2; and helps a fugitive member of Brown's group escape to Canada.
- 1860 Reads Darwin's *Origins of Species*, some of whose ideas he had been arriving at independently. Catches a cold (probably the flu from Bronson Alcott on November 29, and spends the evening of December 3 staying up late arguing about John Brown instead of resting), which develops into bronchitis and his final illness.
- 1861 Illness continues to worsen; travels to Minnesota in the summer in a last attempt to improve his health (the dry climate was thought to be good for lung problems). Back in Concord, unable to go outdoors much of the time, spends his last months cross-referencing the Journal, compiling over 750 pages of enormous lists and charts of a wide range of seasonal phenomena, and pulling together his last essays, the books *The Maine Woods* and *Cape Cod*, and the work that would eventually be published as *Faith in a Seed* and *Wild Fruits*.
- 1862 When asked if he has made his peace with God, replies, "I was not aware we had quarreled." Dies on May 6, age forty-four; last words are "moose" and "Indian."

PERSONS OFTEN MENTIONED IN THE JOURNAL

<i>R.W.E. or E.</i>	<i>Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau's mentor, patron, and friend</i>
Emerson	Usually refers not to Ralph Waldo but to George B. Emerson, author of <i>Report on the Trees and Shrubs of Massachusetts</i>
Gray	Asa Gray, author of the popular <i>Manual of the Botany of the Northern United States</i>
W.E.C. or C.	(William) Ellery Channing, Thoreau's most frequent companion on walks and other excursions
Sophia	Henry's sister, who shared many of his interests: frequent companion on walks and excursions by boat, antislavery activist, botanist, and later editor of Henry's papers

The identity of other individuals is either given in a short note in the text or should be clear from context. Bracketed footnotes and bracketed italicized text in the body are mine; other footnotes and bracketed notes in the text are Thoreau's.

GLEANINGS

By all means use sometimes to be alone.
Salute thyself: see what thy soul doth wear.
Dare to look in thy chest; for 't is thine own:
And tumble up and down what thou find'st there.
Who cannot rest till he good fellows find,
He breaks up house, turns out of doors his mind.

HERBERT, *The Church Porch*.

Friends and companions, get you gone!
'T is my desire to be alone;
Ne'er well, but when my thoughts and I
Do domineer in privacy.

BURTON, *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

Two Paradises are in one,
To live in Paradise alone.

MARVELL, *The Garden*.

GLEANINGS—OR WHAT TIME HAS NOT REAPED OF MY JOURNAL

[October 1837—March 1842]

Oct. 22 [1837]. “What are you doing now?” he asked. “Do you keep a journal?” So I make my first entry to-day.

SOLITUDE

To be alone I find it necessary to escape the present,—I avoid myself. How could I be alone in the Roman emperor’s chamber of mirrors? I seek a garret. The spiders must not be disturbed, nor the floor swept, nor the lumber arranged.

The Germans say, “Es ist alles wahr wodurch du besser wirst.”

THE MOULD OUR DEEDS LEAVE

Oct. 24. Every part of nature teaches that the passing away of one life is the making room for another. The oak dies down to the ground, leaving within its rind a rich virgin mould, which will impart vigorous life to an infant forest. The pine leaves a sandy and sterile soil, the harder woods a strong and fruitful mould.

So this constant abrasion and decay makes the soil of my future growth. As I live now so shall I reap. If I grow pines and birches, my virgin mould will not sustain the oak; but pines and birches, on perchance, weeds and brambles, will constitute my second growth.

DUCKS AT GOOSE POND

Oct. 29. Two ducks, of the summer or wood species, which were merrily dabbling in their favorite basin, struck up a retreat on my approach, and seemed disposed to take French leave, paddling off with swan-like majesty. They are first-rate swimmers, beating me at a round pace, and—what was to me a new trait in the duck character—dove every minute or two and swam several feet under water, in order to escape our attention. Just before immersion they seemed to give each other a significant nod, and then, as if by a common understanding, ’t was heels up and head down in the shaking of a duck’s wings. When they reappeared, it was amusing to observe with what a self-satisfied, darn-it-how-he-nicks-’em air they paddled off to repeat the experiment.

THE ARROWHEAD

A curious incident happened some four or six weeks ago which I think it worth the while to record. John and I had been searching for Indian relics, and been successful enough to find two arrowheads and a pestle, when, of a Sunday evening, with our heads full of the past and its remains, we strolled to the mouth of Swamp Bridge Brook. As we neared the brow of the hill forming the bank of the river, inspired by my theme, I broke forth into an extravagant eulogy on those savage times, using more violent gesticulations by way of illustration. “There on Nawshawtuct,” said I, “was their lodge, the

rendezvous of the tribe, and yonder, on Clamshell Hill, their feasting ground. This was, no doubt, favorite haunt; here on this brow was an eligible lookout post. How often have they stood on this very spot, at this very hour, when the sun was sinking behind yonder woods and gilding with his last rays the waters of the Musketaquid, and pondered the day's success and the morrow's prospects, and communed with the spirit of their fathers gone before them to the land of shades!

"Here," I exclaimed, "stood Tahatawan; and there" (to complete the period) "is Tahatawan's arrowhead."

We instantly proceeded to sit down on the spot I had pointed to, and I, to carry out the joke, to lay bare an ordinary stone which my whim had selected, when lo! the first I laid hands on, the grubby stone that was to be, proved a most perfect arrowhead, as sharp as if just from the hands of the Indian fabricator!!!

HOAR FROST AND GREEN RIVER

Nov. 28. Every tree, fence, and spire of grass that could raise its head above the snow was this morning covered with a dense hoar frost. The trees looked like airy creatures of darkness caught napping. On this side they were huddled together, their gray hairs streaming, in a secluded valley which the sun had not yet penetrated, and on that they went hurrying off in Indian file by hedgerows and watercourses while the shrubs and grasses, like elves and fairies of the night, sought to hide their diminished heads in the snow.

The branches and taller grasses were covered with a wonderful ice-foliage, answering leaf for leaf to their summer dress. The centre, diverging, and even more minute fibres were perfectly distinct and the edges regularly indented.

These leaves were on the side of the twig or stubble opposite to the sun (when it was not bearing toward the east), meeting it for the most part at right angles, and there were others standing out at all possible angles upon these, and upon one another.

It struck me that these ghost leaves and the green ones whose forms they assume were the creature of the same law. It could not be in obedience to two several laws that the vegetable juices swelled gradually into the perfect leaf on the one hand, and the crystalline particles trooped to their standard in the same admirable order on the other.

The river, viewed from the bank above, appeared of a yellowish-green color, but on a near approach this phenomenon vanished; and yet the landscape was covered with snow.

HEAVEN ON EARTH

Jan. 6. As a child looks forward to the coming of the summer, so could we contemplate with quiet joy the circle of the seasons returning without fail eternally. As the spring came round during so many years of the gods, we could go out to admire and adorn anew our Eden, and yet never tire.

WHAT TO DO

March 5. But what does all this scribbling amount to? What is now scribbled in the heat of the moment one can contemplate with somewhat of satisfaction, but alas! to-morrow—aye, to-night—it is stale, flat, and unprofitable,—in fine, is not, only its shell remains, like some red parboiled lobster shell which, kicked aside never so often, still stares at you in the path.

What may a man do and not be ashamed of it? He may not do nothing surely, for straightway he

dubbed Dolittle—aye! christens himself first—and reasonably, for he was first to duck. But let him do something, is he the less a Dolittle? Is it actually something done, or not rather something undone?

COMPOSITION

March 7. We should not endeavor coolly to analyze our thoughts, but, keeping the pen even and parallel with the current, make an accurate transcript of them. Impulse is, after all, the best linguistic and for his logic, if not conformable to Aristotle, it cannot fail to be most convincing. The nearer we approach to a complete but simple transcript of our thought the more tolerable will be the piece, for we can endure to consider ourselves in a state of passivity or in involuntary action, but rarely of our efforts, and least of all our rare efforts.

THE LOSS OF A TOOTH

Aug. 27. Verily I am the creature of circumstances. Here I have swallowed an indispensable tooth, and so am no whole man, but a lame and halting piece of manhood. I am conscious of no gap in my soul but it would seem that, now the entrance to the oracle has been enlarged, the more rare and commonplace the responses that issue from it. I have felt cheap, and hardly dared hold up my head among men, ever since this accident happened. Nothing can I do as well and freely as before; nothing do I undertake but I am hindered and balked by this circumstance. Virtue and Truth go undefended and Falsehood and Affectation are thrown in my teeth,—though I am toothless. But let the lame man shake his leg, and match himself with the fleetest in the race. So shall he do what is in him to do. But let him who has lost a tooth open his mouth wide and gabble, lisp, and sputter never so resolutely.

RIVERS

Sept. 5. For the first time it occurred to me this afternoon what a piece of wonder a river is,—a huge volume of matter ceaselessly rolling through the fields and meadows of this substantial earth, making haste from the high places, by stable dwellings of men and Egyptian Pyramids, to its restless reservoir. One would think that, by a very natural impulse, the dwellers upon the headwaters of the Mississippi and Amazon would follow in the trail of their waters to see the end of the matter.

THE DREAM VALLEY

Jan. 20, 1839. The prospect of our river valley from Tahatawan Cliff appeared to me again in my dreams.

DRIFTING

[April.] Drifting in a sultry day on the sluggish waters of the pond, I almost cease to live and begin to be. A boatman stretched on the deck of his craft and dallying with the noon would be as apt an emblem of eternity for me as the serpent with his tail in his mouth. I am never so prone to lose my identity. I am dissolved in the haze.

July 25. There is no remedy for love but to love more.

The hardest material obeys the same law with the most fluid. Trees are but rivers of sap and wood fibre flowing from the atmosphere and emptying into the earth by their trunks, as their roots flow upward to the surface. And in the heavens there are rivers of stars and milky ways. There are rivers of rock on the surface and rivers of ore in the bowels of the earth. And thoughts flow and circulate, and seasons lapse as tributaries of the current year.

The future reader of history will associate this generation with the red man in his thoughts, and give credit for some sympathy with that race. Our history will have some copper tints and reflections, at least, and be read as through an Indian-summer haze; but such were not our associations. But the Indian is absolutely forgotten but by some persevering poets.

The white man has commenced a new era. What do our anniversaries commemorate but white men's exploits? For Indian deeds there must be an Indian memory; the white man will remember his own only. We have forgotten their hostility as well as friendship.

For the Indian there is no safety but in the plow. If he would not be pushed into the Pacific, he must seize hold of a plow-tail and let go his bow and arrow, his fish-spear and rifle. This the only Christianity that will save him.

His fate says sternly to him, "Forsake the hunter's life and enter into the agricultural, the second state of man. Root yourselves a little deeper in the soil, if you would continue to be the occupants of the country."

But I confess I have no little sympathy with the Indians and hunter men. They seem to me a distinct and equally respectable people, born to wander and to hunt, and not to be inoculated with the twilight civilization of the white man.

Father Le Jeune, a French missionary, affirmed "that the Indians were superior in intellect to the French peasantry of that time," and advised "that laborers should be sent from France in order to work for the Indians."

The Indian, perchance, has not made up his mind to some things which the white man has consented to; he has not, in all respects, stooped so low; and hence, though he too loves food and warmth, he draws his tattered blanket about him and follows his fathers, rather than barter his birthright. He dies and no doubt his Genius judges well for him. But he is not worsted in the fight; he is not destroyed. He only migrates beyond the Pacific to more spacious and happier hunting-grounds.

ÆSCHYLUS

Nov. 5. We are accustomed to say that the common sense of this age belonged to the seer of the last, as if time gave him any vantage ground. But not so: I see not but Genius must ever take an equal stand, and all the generations of men are virtually at a standstill for it to come and consider of them. Common sense is not so familiar with any truth but Genius will represent it in a strange light to it. Let the seer bring down his broad eye to the most stale and trivial fact, and he will make you believe it a new planet in the sky.

As to criticism, man has never to make allowance to man; there is naught to excuse, naught to be in mind.

All the past is here present to be tried; let it approve itself if it can.

POETRY

Jan. 26. No definition of poetry is adequate unless it be poetry itself. The poet does not need to see how meadows are something else than earth, grass, and water, but how they are thus much. He does not need discover that potato blows are as beautiful as violets, as the farmer thinks, but only how good potato blows are.

The poem is drawn out from under the feet of the poet, his whole weight has rested on this ground.

Its eccentric and unexplored orbit embraces the system.

Feb. 14. Beauty lives by rhymes. Double a deformity is a beauty. Draw this blunt quill over the paper and fold it once transversely to the line, pressing it suddenly before the ink dries, and a delicate shaded and regular figure is the result, which art cannot surpass. [*A sheet with specimens is slipped into the Journal.*]

A very meagre natural history suffices to make me a child. Only their names and genealogy make me love fishes. I would know even the number of their fin-rays, and how many scales compose the lateral line. I fancy I am amphibious and swim in all the brooks and pools in the neighborhood, with the perch and bream, or doze under the pads of our river amid the winding aisles and corridors formed by their stems, with the stately pickerel. I am the wiser in respect to all knowledges, and the better qualified for all fortunes, for knowing that there is a minnow in the brook. Methinks I have need even of his sympathy, and to be his fellow in a degree. I do like him sometimes when he balances himself for an hour over the yellow floor of his basin.

April 8. How shall I help myself? By withdrawing into the garret, and associating with spiders and mice, determining to meet myself face to face sooner or later. Completely silent and attentive I will be this hour, and the next, and forever. The most positive life that history notices has been a constant retiring out of life, a wiping one's hands of it, seeing how mean it is, and having nothing to do with it.

June 22. What a man knows, that he does.

When we are shocked at vice we express a lingering sympathy with it. Dry rot, rust, and mildew shock no man, for none is subject to them.

June 26. The best poetry has never been written, for when it might have been, the poet forgot it, and when it was too late remembered it; or when it might have been, the poet remembered it, and when it was too late forgot it.

The highest condition of art is artlessness.

Truth is always paradoxical.

He will get to the goal first who stands stillest.

There is one let better than any help, and that is,—*Let-alone.*

By sufferance you may escape suffering.

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