THE WRITINGS OF HENRY D. THOREAU

WALDEN

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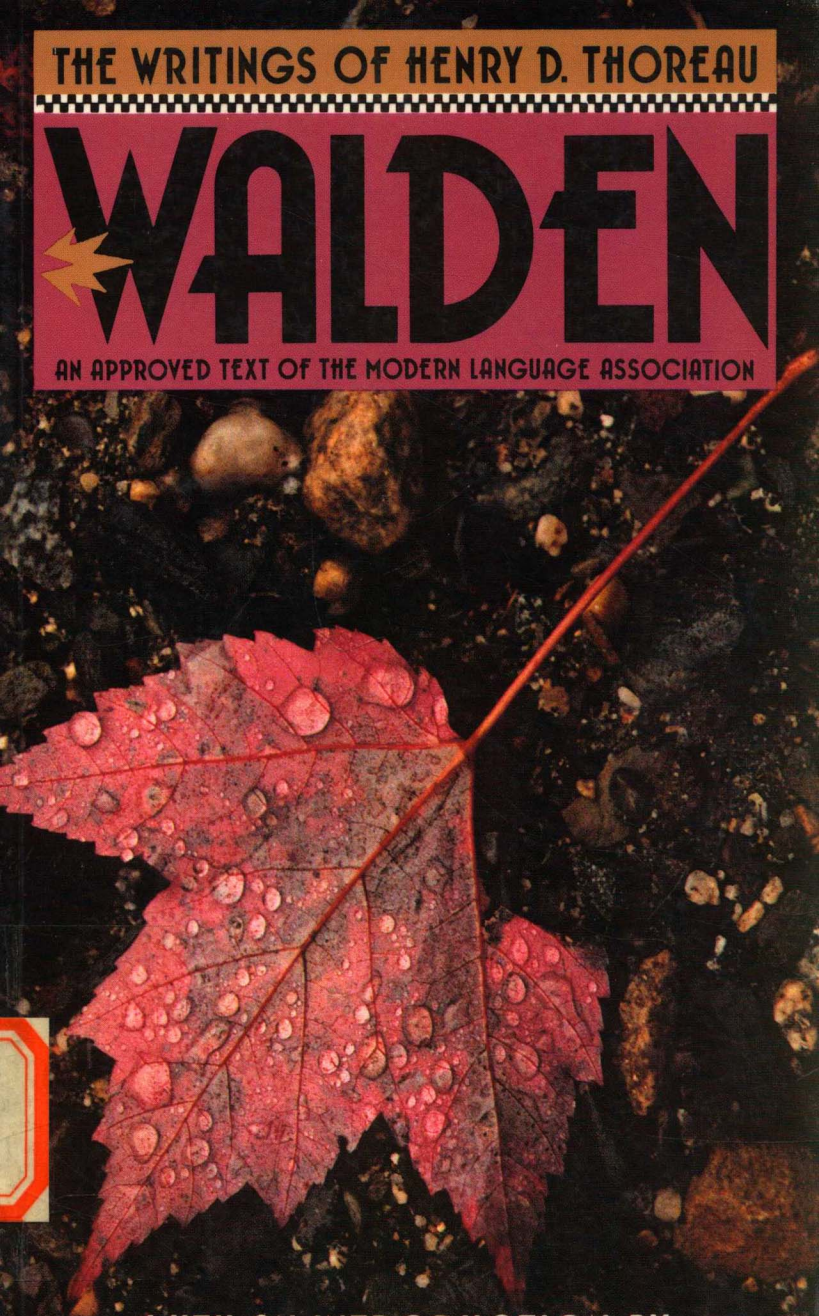

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Joyce Carol Oates

HENRY D. THOREAU

Walden

EDITED BY J. LYNDON SHANLEY

INTRODUCTION BY JOYCE CAROL OATES

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The Writings of
Henry D. Thoreau

Walden

I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.

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Introduction

> *I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one . . . but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries!—Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come into contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the* solid *earth! the* actual *world! the* common sense! Contact! Contact! Who *are we*? where *are we*?
>
> —Thoreau, "Ktaadn and the Maine Woods," 1848

Of our classic American writers Henry David Thoreau is the supreme poet of doubleness, of evasion and mystery. Who is he? Where does he stand? Is he to be defined even by his own words, deliberately and fastidiously chosen as they are, and famously much revised? The facts of his life, available in any Thoreau "chronology," seem more detached from the man himself than such facts commonly do: Thoreau warns us that the outward aspect of his life may be "no more I than it is you." He boasts of having the capacity to stand as remote from himself as from another. He is both actor and spectator. He views himself as a participant in Time as if he were a kind of fiction—"a work of the imagination only." We know with certainty of the historical man, born 12 July 1817, Concord, Massachusetts, and who died 6 May 1862, Concord, Massachusetts; what lies between is a mystery.

Perhaps for these reasons, and because of the redoubtable tone of Thoreau's voice, he is the most controversial of American writers. Whether he writes with oneiric precision of thawing earth, or a ferocious war between red and black ants, or the primeval beauty of Mt. Katahdin in Maine, or in angry defense of the martyred John Brown ("I do not wish to kill or be killed but I can foresee circumstances in which both of these things would be by me unavoidable"), he as-

serts himself with such force that the reader is compelled to react: what compromise is possible? Always Thoreau tells us, *You must change your life*. Where his fellow Transcendentalists spoke of self-reliance as a virtue Thoreau actively practiced it, and gloried in it—"Sometimes, when I compare myself with other men, it seems as if I were more favored by the gods than they"; where most writers secretly feel superior to their contemporaries Thoreau is blunt, provoking—"The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad." Yet his own position is frequently ambiguous, and even what he meant by Nature is something of a puzzle. Who is the omniscient "I" of *Walden*?

So intimately bound up with my imaginative life is the Henry David Thoreau of *Walden*, first read when I was fifteen, that it is difficult for me to speak of him with any pretense of objectivity. Any number of his pithy remarks have sunk so deep in my consciousness as to have assumed a sort of autonomy: *As if you could kill time without injuring eternity. Be it life or death we crave only reality. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. Why so seeming fast, but deadly slow?* So close to my heart is *Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes* I might delude myself it is my invention. Eventually I would read other works of Thoreau's and even teach *Walden* numberless times (in startling but always fruitful juxtaposition with, among other texts, Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books and *The Hunting of the Snark*), but it is the *Walden* of my adolescence I remember most vividly—suffused with the powerfully intense, romantic energies of adolescence, the sense that life is boundless, experimental, provisionary, ever-fluid, and unpredictable; the conviction that, whatever the accident of the outer self, the truest self is inward, secret, inviolable. "I love to be alone," says

Thoreau. "I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude." The celebrant of earthly, and of earthy, mysteries, Thoreau is also a celebrant of the human spirit in contradistinction to what might be called the social being—the public identities with which we are specified at birth and which through our lifetimes we labor to assert in a context of other social beings similarly hypnotized by the mystery of their own identities. But "self" to Thoreau appears to be but the lens through which the world is perceived, and as the world shifts on its axis, as season yields to season, place to place, one enigmatic form of matter to another, the prismatic lens itself shifts. "Daily to be shown matter"—what does it mean? If there is a self it must be this very shifting of perspective, this ceaseless transformation and metamorphosis. If in 1854, the very year of *Walden*'s publication, Thoreau could note in his journal, "We soon get through with Nature. She excites an expectation which she cannot satisfy," the testament of *Walden* is otherwise. What more radical perspective: "Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?"

Thoreau's appeal is to that instinct in us—adolescent, perhaps, but not merely adolescent—that resists our own gravitation toward the outer, larger, fiercely competitive world of responsibility, false courage, and "reputation." It is an appeal as readily described as existential, as Transcendentalist; its voice is unique, individual, skeptical, rebellious. The greatest good for the greatest number—the sense that we might owe something to the state—the possibility that life is fulfilled, not handicapped, by human relationships: these are moral positions not to be considered. "I have lived some thirty years on this planet," Thoreau says boldly, "and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me anything, to the purpose."

Can it be true, or is it a useful fiction, that the cosmos

is created anew in the individual?—that one can, by way of a defiant act of self-begetting, transcend the fate of the species, the nation, the community, the family, and—for a woman—the socially determined parameters of gender? Surely it is doubtful that Nature is a single entity, a noun congenial to capitalization:

> The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature,—of sun and wind and rain, of summer and winter,—such health, such cheer, they afford forever! and such sympathy have they ever with our race, that all Nature would be affected, and the sun's brightness fade, and the winds would sigh humanely, and the clouds rain tears, and the woods shed their leaves and put on mourning in midsummer, if any man should ever for a just cause grieve.

(How to reconcile this Nature with the Nature of lockjaw and tuberculosis, of agonizing deaths and prolonged griefs? Thoreau himself was to die young, aged forty-four, of consumption.) Yet these fictions, these willed metaphors, very nearly convince within the total argument of *Walden*. We believe even while disbelieving, even as we cannot entirely believe, but do—or wish to—in what Thoreau tells us repeatedly of the autonomy of the human soul. Quite apart from his mastery of the English language—and certainly no American has ever written more beautiful, vigorous, supple prose—Thoreau's peculiar triumph as a stylist is to transform reality itself by way of his perception of it: *his* language. What is the motive for metaphor in any poet—in any poetic sensibility—but the ceaseless defining of the self and of the world by way of language? In his journal for 6 May 1854 Thoreau writes: "All that a man has to say or do that can possibly concern mankind, is in some shape or other to tell the story of his love,—to sing; and, if he is fortunate and keeps alive, he will be forever in love. This alone is to be alive to the extremities."

To read Thoreau in adolescence is to read him at a time when such statements carry the weight, the promise, of

prophecy; "to be alive to the extremities," with no fixed or even definable object for one's love, seems not merely possible but inevitable, and desirable. As existence precedes essence, so emotion precedes and helps to create its object. If the human world disappoints us—as in adolescence it so frequently does, not only in falling short of its ideals but in failing to grant us the value we wish for ourselves—we have the privilege of repudiating it forever in exchange for the certainty of a far different kind of romance, or religious mission. "We should be blessed if we lived in the present always, and took advantage of every accident that befell us," Thoreau says, but such vigilance is possible only if one has broken free of human restraints and obligations—plans for the future, let's say, or remorse over one's past acts; only if the object of one's love is not another human being. Thoreau proposed marriage to a young woman named Ellen Sewall in 1840, was rejected, and forever afterward seems to have turned his energies—his "love"—inward to the mysterious self and outward to an equally mysterious Nature. "I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once . . . but I was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood, and seemed to foresee my recovery," Thoreau says in that most eloquent of chapters, "Solitude." Here aloneness is so natural, so right, lonesomeness itself is a slight insanity. Even Nietzsche's celibate prophet Zarathustra, that most alone of men, admits to being lonely; and does not shrink from saying "I love man," though his love is not returned.

But all art is a matter of exclusions, rejections. To write of one subject is to ignore all others. To live one life passionately—to drive it into a corner, reduce it to its lowest terms, see whether it be "mean or sublime"—is necessarily to detach oneself from other lives. If Henry David Thoreau is an emblematic and even a heroic figure for many writers it is partly because the "Henry David Thoreau" of *Walden* is so triumphant a literary creation—a fiction, surely, metaphorical rather than human, pieced together as we now know by

slow painstaking labor out of the journals of many years. (At the time of his death Thoreau left behind an extraordinary record—thirty-nine manuscript volumes containing nearly two million words, a journal religiously kept from his twentieth year until his death.) But so superb a stylist is Thoreau we always have the sense as we read of a mind flying brilliantly before us, throwing off sparks, dazzling and iridescent and seemingly effortless as a butterfly in flight: What an eye, we are moved to think—what an ear! what spontaneity! In fact *Walden* is mosaic rather than narrative, a carefully orchestrated symbolic fiction and not a forthright account of a man's sojourn in the woods. More important still, we should understand Thoreau's "I" to be a calculated literary invention, a fictitious character set in a naturalistic but fictitious world. Surely the bodiless and seemingly nameless persona who brags for humanity rather than for himself had no historical existence and might be set beside Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, Melville's Ahab, and Twain's Huckleberry Finn as one of the great literary creations of the nineteenth century. Like his Transcendentalist companions Thoreau scorned the art of fiction ("One world at a time," he might have said wittily in this context too), while not acknowledging that the art of fiction takes many guises, just as telling the truth requires many forms.

Certainly the meticulous craftsmanship of *Walden*—reminiscent of the obsessive, fanatic, imspired craftsmanship of Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*—gives the book another dimension, another angle of appeal, of particular interest to writers. Writing is not after all merely the record of having lived but an aspect of living itself. And if there are those to whom living is a preparation for writing—why not? Only a sensibility hostile to the act of writing, or doubtful of writing's validity to life, would wish to criticize—as, oddly, many critics have criticized Thoreau for the very precision of his prose!—as if writing poorly were a measure of sincerity. (Alfred Kazin, for instance, in *An American Procession*, speaks slightingly of Thoreau as having written

rather than "achieved" ecstasy: "Whatever the moment was, his expression of it was forged, fabricated, worked over, soldered from fragmentary responses, to make those single sentences that created Thoreau's reputation as an aphorist and fostered the myth that in such cleverness a man could live." But in such art a man *did* live. And, in any case, the most difficult experiences to record are those we have actually experienced: we toil to express what we have felt without premeditation.)

Thoreau is, as I have suggested, the quintessential poet of evasion, paradox, mystery. If like Walt Whitman he contradicts himself—very well, he contradicts himself. A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds, but disparity itself may well lie in the mind of the beholder.

Who are we?—*where* are we? Thoreau repeatedly asks. He confesses or brags that he knows not the first letter of the alphabet, and is not so wise now as the day he was born. Though the voice of *Walden* is the voice of Thoreau's other works, one is hard put to characterize the self behind it. And even the object of his ecstatic love, Nature, is elusive, teasingly undefined. Is there Nature, or merely nature? Richer and more palpable in every respect than Emerson's Nature—as how could it fail to be—Thoreau's Nature is at times airily Platonic, at other times minute, graphic, gritty, unsparing. It is Transcendentalist and sentimental, Puritan and "obscene," existential and amoral, by turns. All we know with certainty is that it is mute: "Nature puts no question and answers none which we mortals ask."

In one of the didactic chapters of *Walden,* "Higher Laws," Thoreau speaks of an unsettling experience:

> As I came home through the woods . . . I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for the wildness which he represented. [At another time] I found myself ranging the woods, like a half-starved hound, with a strange

> abandonment, seeking some kind of venison which I might devour, and no morsel would have been too savage for me. The wildest scenes had become unaccountably familiar.

Thoreau tells us he finds in himself an instinct toward the higher, or spiritual, life; and another toward a primitive and savage one. He reverences them both: "I love the wild no less than the good." For *wildness* and *goodness* must ever be separate. As the chapter develops, however, Thoreau repudiates the physical life with the astounding statement—in *Walden* of all books—"Nature is hard to be overcome but she must be overcome." In this new context it appears that Nature is abruptly aligned with the feminine, the carnivorous, and the carnal; though a man's spiritual life is "startlingly moral" one is nonetheless susceptible to temptations from the merely physical, or feminine; urges to indulge in a "slimy beastly life" of eating, drinking, and undifferentiated sensuality. Thoreau speaks as a man to other men, in the hectoring tone of a Puritan preacher, warning his readers not against damnation (in which he cannot believe—he is too canny, too Yankee) but against succumbing to their own lower natures: "We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers." Sensuality takes many forms but it is all one—one vice. All purity is one. Though sexuality of any kind is foreign to *Walden*, chastity is evoked as a value, and a chapter which began with an extravagant paean to wildness concludes with a denunciation of the unnamed sexual instincts. ("I hesitate to say these things, but it is not because of the subject,—I care not how obscene my *words* are,—but because I cannot speak of them without betraying my impurity. We discourse freely without shame of one form of sensuality, and are silent about another.")

Did Woman exist for Thoreau except as a projection of his own celibate soul, to be "transcended"? Though a radical thinker in so many other regards, Thoreau is profoundly conservative in these matters, as his conventional trope of

Nature as "she" suggests. In the chapter "Reading," for instance, he differentiates between spoken and written languages, the language we hear and the language we read. The insight is profound, the expression crude and unexamined:

> The one is commonly transitory, a sound, a tongue, a dialect merely, almost brutish, and we learn it unconsciously, like the brutes, of our mothers. The other is the maturity and experience of that; if that is our mother tongue, that is our father tongue, a reserved and select expression, too significant to be heard by the ear, which we must be born again in order to speak.

The expression "born again" suggests the fundamentally religious bias of this classic misogyny.

Elsewhere Thoreau's Nature is unsentimental, existentialist. In "Brute Neighbors," for instance, Thoreau observes an ant war of nearly Homeric proportions and examines two maimed soldier ants under a microscope; the analogue with the human world is too obvious to be emphasized. In the rhapsodic passage with which "Spring" ends, wildness and Nature are again evoked as good, necessary for our spiritual wholeness. We need to witness our own limits transgressed: "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." The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence. And we have no doubt who the "wise man" is.

Similarly unsentimental but cast in a Transcendentalist mode is the long and brilliantly sustained passage in "Spring" in which Thoreau studies the hieroglyphic forms of thawing sand and clay on the side of a railroad embankment. In this extraordinary prose poem Thoreau observes so minutely and with such stark precision that the reader experiences the phenomenon far more vividly than he might ever hope to in life. As the earth thaws, numberless little streams are formed to overlap and interlace with one an-

other, taking on the quality of leaves and vines and resembling "the laciniated lobed and imbricated thalluses of lichens"—or do they rather evoke coral, leopards' paws, birds' feet? brains or lungs or bowels? excrements of all kinds? The grotesque vegetation possesses such beauty Thoreau imagines himself in the very presence of the Artist who made the world and himself: "I feel as if I were nearer to the vitals of the globe, for this sandy overflow is something such a foliaceous mass as the vitals of the animal body." In Nature all forms mimic one another. The tree is but a single leaf—rivers are leaves whose pulp is intervening earth—towns and cities are the ova of insects in their axils!

Where in later life Thoreau would become obsessed with facts, data, matter ("the *solid* earth! the *actual* world!"), here he argues for so compelling a correspondence between man and the fantastical designs on the embankment we are led to see how mysticism is science, science mysticism, poetry merely common sense. The earth is not a fragment of dead history, "stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book," but living poetry like the leaves of a tree; not a fossil earth but a living earth. In these lines Thoreau is writing at the very peak of his inimitable powers, yet the result, the elaborate metaphor in sand and clay, reads smoothly, "naturally."

The universe is after all wider than our views of it.

—Joyce Carol Oates
Concord, Massachusetts
July, 1985

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