

DAVID SCOTT

Thoreau's "Wisdom" of the Maine Woods

Introduction

Henry David Thoreau's published and unpublished writings show a deep engagement with Nature.¹ His explorations took him along the rivers of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, the glades and ponds of *Walden*, and what Huber calls the "wildest country" of the forests and mountains of *The Maine Woods*—leading Buell to dub him "the patron saint of American environmental writing."² The reflections of this "romantic naturalist" were typified in 1842 with his first published essay, *Natural History of Massachusetts*, which expressed his hope that "I too may through the pores of Nature flow" since "Nature is mythical and mystical always."³ Thoreau's horizons were those of "transcendental ecocentrism."⁴ He was aware of the deeper, ultimately spiritual, associations surrounding such matters, writing in his *Journal* that "the fact is I am a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot."⁵ His near contemporaries stressed these perspectives. In his obituary eulogy on Thoreau, Emerson asserted that "so much knowledge of Nature's secret and genius few others possessed, none in a more large and religious synthesis."⁶ Channing considered him "the poet-naturalist."⁷ Torrey's judgement of 1899 remains true, that "he was to be a writer, and nature was his theme.... Nature was not his playground, but his study, his Bible, his closet, his means of grace."⁸ Thoreau's walks and

searches for wisdom in New England could lead him symbolically towards Asia, in his well-known “sauntering eastward” that was so evident in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) and *Walden* (1854).⁹ In these works he explored yogic contemplation, Confucian ethics and Sufi poetical rhapsodies, which indeed represented “Light from the East” for a “Yankee sort of Orientalist.”¹⁰ Hodder’s fine re-emphasis on the religiosity at play in these books and in his *Journal* can, however, be supplemented further by highlighting Thoreau’s journey in his lesser-known, posthumously published *The Maine Woods* (1864),¹¹ the focus of this study. Robinson’s perception is important: “to insist that written words are living utterances and that the sounds of nature are a language was a crucial step in Thoreau’s attempts to make his literary endeavours part of a larger quest for enlightenment at Walden... writing became an essential part of a spiritual practice.”¹² It is argued here, however, that *The Maine Woods* presents a different picture of Thoreau’s developing religiosity. In it he transcends *Walden*’s East-West dichotomies through engaging with the world of the American Indian, seen as primeval, and with Nature itself.

Within the text of *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau’s three trips of 1846, 1853, and 1857 are described and reflected on, under the subheadings of *Ktaadn*, *Chesuncook*, and *Allegash & East Branch*. His travel recollections are more than just surface description: they are deeper and critical. As Moldenhauer notes, “it is Thoreau’s persistent concern in *The Maine Woods* with the preservation of the fragile wilderness environment that explains the recent renewal of the book’s popularity;” it exhibits what Cornell calls a Thoreauvian intertwining of “Native American and environmental thought.”¹³ Sayre rightly sees this as representing “a psychological as well as geographic journey.”¹⁴ However, it was also a spiritual journey and reflection. Entering the text, we enter Thoreau’s vision of the world and of the individual. There was—literally and metaphysically—wisdom in those woods. Each section of *The*

Maine Woods will now be looked at: namely, *Ktaadn*, *Chesuncook*, and *Allegash & East Branch*.

Ktaadn

In any study of Thoreau and Nature, his essay *Ktaadn* is a vital counterpoise to *Walden*. It reflects a break during the summer of 1846 from his longer stay at Walden between 1845 and 1847, when he ascended Mt. Katahdin. Thoreau's approval in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* of the Vedic verse "nothing... is more gentle than Nature" had been followed in *Walden* by a picture of the quiet Taoist-like sage, sitting peacefully in harmony with Nature, amidst the mellow, tranquil sunshine overlooking Walden Pond. There, "rapt in revery... I realized what the Orientals mean by contemplation."¹⁵ However, Nature need not necessarily be soothingly or comfortably "still." Nature was not necessarily something subject to or indeed, in a sense, controlled by such settled, contemplative, disciplined observances and wisdom from the Orient. Nature also existed on its own elemental and primordial terms. This was what Thoreau encountered on Mt. Katahdin, whose height and starkness "presented a different aspect from any mountain I have ever seen"—"connecting the heavens with the earth."¹⁶

Katahdin was the culmination of a series of Thoreau's mountain encounters, notably Nawshawtuct Hill in 1837, Mt. Greylock in 1839 and Mt. Wachusett in 1842. Wachusett was an important precursor to Katahdin, in that it led to Thoreau's "first such excursion narrative" and provided "not just a rejuvenating escape from social routine, but a revelatory exposure to an unusually powerful scene of natural beauty."¹⁷ The scale of Thoreau's ascents had been increasing over time, as had his reflections on their wider and deeper spiritual significance, all of which came to a climax with his journey to Mt. Katahdin, known to the Indians as "Greatest Mountain." At 5267 feet, Katahdin was the highest of the Maine mountains, whose

“tops are sacred and mysterious tracts.”¹⁸ That Katahdin’s heights challenged and confronted the traveller is recognised in Thoreau’s comment at the start of his journey that “here, then, one could no longer accuse institutions and society, but must front the true source of evil.”¹⁹ As he saw it, evil lay not in the mountain itself but in Man’s all too frequent estrangement from Nature.

Robinson is correct in seeing that “‘Ktaadn’ is primarily the narrative of a spiritual quest in which the ascent of the mountain represents the path to enlightenment.”²⁰ During the ascent, Thoreau’s familiar horizons of perceived physical reality were reshaped and deconstructed.²¹ Amidst the shifting “skirts of the cloud which seemed forever drifting over the summit,” familiar anchors of operation were challenged:

some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends.... His reason is dispersed and shadowy, more thin and subtile, like the air.²²

In contrast to his sense of Nature’s “gentle” tranquillity in *Walden*, on Katahdin’s heights he came face to face with “Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature.... She does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, why came ye here?”—to which Thoreau’s poetic reply is: “my way / Lies through your spacious empire up to light.”²³ Such “secrets” point to what Friesen sees as Thoreau’s general “Nature mysticism,” as his “seeing beyond the verge of sight” towards the still higher light.²⁴

Thus, Thoreau’s sense of Nature on Katahdin is different in tone from the benign portrayal in *A Week* and *Walden*. On Katahdin, he considers that “we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast and drear and inhuman.”²⁵ Such language has puzzled commentators. On the one hand, in using such language, is Thoreau just “bewildered” and “disorientated” (as Harding and Meyer suggest), close to “alienation from nature... amidst desperate disturbance” (in Blair’s phrase), and responding to something that

he “could not face” (as Bridgman asserts)?²⁶ Or, on the other hand, is he describing a form of religiously charged epiphany, as Hoag argues?²⁷

Such a religious—i.e. spiritual-mystical—interpretation is convincing. In broad phenomenological terms, mountains have traditionally been “endowed with a twofold holiness: on the one hand they share in the spatial symbolism of transcendence—they are ‘high’, ‘vertical’, supreme’, and so on—and on the other, they are the special domain of all hierophanies of atmosphere, and therefore the dwelling of gods.”²⁸ As a transcendentalist, Thoreau uses both frameworks. Mountains are not barren emptiness; instead, there is a “cosmological symbolism of the centre in which mountains play such an important part.... high places are impregnated with sacred forces. Everything nearer to the sky shares with varying intensity, in its transcendence,” so that “every ascent is a breakthrough, as far as the different levels of existence are concerned, a passing to what is beyond, and escape from profane space.”²⁹ This is what was in play for Thoreau at Mt. Katahdin. There is, as he says, “the unmistakable impression of a profound and mysterious encounter with the sources of being” on its high slopes.³⁰ Even at the time, in 1864, an anonymous reviewer in the *Church Monthly* (signing himself “A Parish Priest”) had recognised that there was “no lack of religious instinct” in *The Maine Woods*, and pinpointed the “reverent” tone surrounding “the feeling of mountain power with a sympathy” in Thoreau’s portrayal.³¹

In retrospect, it is significant that Thoreau had immediately felt that “nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful.”³² This anticipates much of Rudolph Otto’s later classical phenomenological definition of the “numinous” in *The Idea of the Holy* (1917, as *Das Heilige*)—the experience underlying religion, an experience characterised by *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. As *mysterium*, the numinous was “wholly other,” different from anything we experience in ordinary life, and thereby evoking a reaction of awed silence. As *tremendum*, the numinous was “aweful” (i.e. awesome, inspiring awe, rather

than just awful, bad), overpowering, energy-creating. Finally, as *fascinans*, the numinous was ultimately attracting and fascinating. Thoreau's summit experience seems, then, not just one of panicked terror and rejection, as some commentators have seen it, but rather a reference to this *numinous* type of experience, mediated and manifested in Nature. Though Blair and Trowbridge see Thoreau's Katahdin experience as "opposed" to his gentler Walden formulations, and as expressing a "religious significance... not felt on Katahdin," in truth it was complementary, leading to a fuller picture of the *numinous*.³³

For Thoreau this setting was underpinned by religion, albeit a primeval pre-Christianity, in which Katahdin featured as "a place for heathenism and superstitious rites... we walked over it with a certain awe."³⁴ Katahdin posed zen-like, existential challenges—challenges of a *koan*-type riddling—to Thoreau's own sense of being, prompting him to ask,

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 in 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?³⁵

This sequence represents initial disorientation, question, then emergent reality, amidst the thinner mountain air. It was a Maine equivalent of the Himalayas, or indeed Dean's sense of "Thoreau on Mount Katahdin, like Moses on Mount Sinai."³⁶ Thoreau's Katahdin may have been a "wilderness of words" but it was not a wilderness of perceptions and impact.³⁷

Thus, as Thoreau returned to resume and conclude his Oriental contemplations at Walden, a different strand of wisdom concerning Nature and "reality" had been encountered at Katahdin, taking Thoreau "beyond the brink of fear," to emerge as a "speaker for wilderness."³⁸ In such a vein, in his ongoing essay³⁹ *Walking*, he could declare, "I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness," a state of Nature that had been encountered in its fullness at Katahdin.⁴⁰ It was, though, a Nature untouched, and unmediated by human presence: not so much "Mother Nature" as "Matter Nature."⁴¹

Contrary to Bridgman's assertion that Katahdin's "hard impersonal grandeur had shocked him back in 1846, and there was never any indication that he had any desire to climb it again," Katahdin and what it represented remained a consistent pole for Thoreau.⁴² Soon after his return, he was asking his sister to send him any information she had on Katahdin.⁴³ In 1851, he recorded in his *Journal* that "my desire to commune with the spirit of the universe... to bear my head through atmospheres and over heights unknown to my feet, is perennial and constant."⁴⁴ His 1852 *Journal* includes musings on Conantum-top.⁴⁵ During his second Maine Woods trip, along the Chesuncook, Thoreau made a point of detouring to catch sight of Katahdin.⁴⁶ In 1856 he told Blake of his desire "to soar" to "ecstasy... at the summits."⁴⁷ In fact, he made plans to ascend Katahdin on his third Maine Woods trip, along the Allegash and East Branch reaches, but these were cancelled due to his companion's ill-health.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, he still held firm to his vision of the mountain, as is evident from his letter to Blake:

the aspect of the world varies from year to year... but I find the *truth* is still *true*, and I never regret any emphasis which may have inspired Ktaadn... the source still of fertilizing streams, and affording glorious views from its summits, if I can get up it again.⁴⁹

Katahdin had become a pointer to fundamental truths. Thoreau asserted "you must ascend a mountain to learn your relation to matter, and so to your own body," as he had at Katahdin, and admitted "I keep a mountain anchored off eastwards a little way, which I ascend in my dreams both awake and asleep... it ever smokes like an altar with its sacrifice."⁵⁰ Thus, the external mountain had become interiorised, as is evident also from a *Journal* poem (29 October 1857): "a spiral path within the pilgrim's soul / Leads to this mountain brow."

Katahdin's underlying theme and distinctive message for his reader was that primary and ultimately religious sense of the presence of primordial Nature. In his *Journal* Thoreau could thus write in 1851 about Nature's "mystery. May we not probe it, pry into it... to the

discovery of the divinity in Nature.”⁵¹ Nevertheless, in his quest to find pathways to Nature, Thoreau could look for others’ “wisdom” concerning it. As he had put it earlier that year in his *Journal*, “it is remarkable how few passages, comparatively speaking, there are in the best [Anglo-American] literature of the day which betray any intimacy with Nature.”⁵² The paucity of such wisdom in Western culture spurred him to seek it not only from Asia, as in *A Week* and *Walden*, but also from the Native American soil, in *The Maine Woods*. This was in part a question of its physical manifestation in the woods, valleys and mountains of Maine, but it also concerned its closest human intermediary, the American Indian.

Chesuncook

Chesuncook, based on Thoreau’s second Maine Woods trip in 1853, was a vehicle for Thoreau to approach Nature once more; the essay presented him as “exhilarated by the sight of the wild fir and spruce-tops, and those of other primitive evergreens, peering through the mist in the horizon.”⁵³ Within the forest depths a heightened appreciation of nature ensued in the still of the night where “we heard, come faintly echoing, or creeping from far, through the moss-clad aisles, a dull, dry, rushing sound... like the shutting of a door in some distant entry of the damp and shaggy wilderness.”⁵⁴ Told that it was a tree fall, Thoreau mused

there is something singularly grand and impressive in the sound of a tree falling in a perfectly calm night like this, as if the agencies which overthrow it did not need to be excited, but worked with a subtle, deliberate, and conscious force.⁵⁵

Moreover, *Chesuncook* was a vehicle for Thoreau to approach traditional Indian wisdom concerning Nature.

One sign of this was his deliberate choice in hiring as a guide Joe Aitteon, “an Indian, mainly that I might have an opportunity to study his ways.”⁵⁶ In *Ktaadn*, the American Indian had been a somewhat distant figure as “he glides up the Millinocket and is lost to my sight, as a more distant and misty cloud is seen flitting by behind a nearer, and is lost in space. So he

goes about his destiny, the red face of man.”⁵⁷ Thoreau, however, did not really engage with the American Indian in his *Ktaadn* report, though a missionary church-building on Indian Island drew his comment that “good [Catholic] Canadian it may be, but it is poor Indian.”⁵⁸ Admittedly there remains Thoreau’s figure of the “degraded” Indian.⁵⁹ Although Bridgman sees this term as indicating an emerging disillusionment with the Indian, in truth such decline was viewed by Thoreau as stemming from the damaging effects of materialistic white Western civilisation, undercutting the traditional wisdom of the Indian.⁶⁰ That such traditional Indian wisdom was an early attraction for Thoreau is evident from his *Journal*: “the charm of the Indian to me is that he stands free and unconstrained in Nature, is her inhabitant and not her guest and wears her easily and gracefully.”⁶¹ This led to his hope to “get a clear report from the Indian... for he is more conversant with pure nature.”⁶²

American Indian lore could, however, manifest itself in various ways in *Chesuncook*. One of its aspects was the “abundant and beautiful” names for flora and fauna.⁶³ In addition, the antiquity of the Indian presence in America became acutely real to Thoreau in an overnight stay at an Indian camp:

to hear this unaltered Indian language, which the white man cannot speak nor understand... I felt that I stood, or rather lay, as near to the primitive man of America, that night, as any of its discoverers ever did.⁶⁴

Meanwhile, Indian reserve was conspicuous during a moose hunt: “I observed, while he [Aitteon] was tracking the moose, a certain reticence or moderation in him. He did not communicate several observations of interest which he made, as a white man would have done” and “he stepped lightly and gracefully, stealing through the bushes with the least possible noise, in a way in which no white man does,—as it were, [intuitively] finding a place for his foot each time.”⁶⁵

However, Thoreau’s hope of acquiring wisdom from the American Indian was frustrated to some extent by the actual situation encountered along the Chesuncook. He felt

some antipathy: “White men and Indians who come here are for the most part hunters, whose object is to slay as many moose and other wild animals as possible... What a coarse and imperfect use Indians and hunters make of Nature!”⁶⁶ There was, indeed, what Altherr discerns as some “ambivalence toward hunting” in Thoreau who, although he could see its wilder more natural side as superior to that of the staid farmer, saw it also as something to be ultimately transcended in the quest for the “Higher Laws” posited in *Walden*.⁶⁷ On the one hand, Thoreau could say:

I think that I could spend a year in the woods, fishing and hunting, just enough to sustain myself, with satisfaction. This would be next to living like a philosopher on the fruits of the earth which you had raised, which also attracts me.⁶⁸

On the other hand, although Bridgman regards him as “titillated” by such moose killings, Thoreau in fact denounced it: “this hunting of the moose merely for the satisfaction of killing him,—not even for the sake of his hide... [is] no better, at least, than to assist at a slaughter-house.”⁶⁹

Here the “Lower Laws” developing in Western civilisation and dragging down the Indian were a concern for Thoreau. Western civilisation was changing the Indian relationship to Nature: “talking with him [Joe] about subsisting wholly on what the woods yielded, game, fish, berries, etc., I suggested that his ancestors did so,” but “he answered, that he had been brought up in such a [white] way that he could not do it. ‘Yes,’ said he, ‘that’s the way they got a living, like wild fellows, wild as bears. By George! I shan’t go into the woods without [such white] provision,—hard bread, pork, etc.’”⁷⁰ Typically, Thoreau could point out the ironies involved in the meeting of cultures, marvelling at “how far men go for the material of their houses...into far, primitive forests, beyond the bounds of their civilization, where the moose and bear and savage dwell, for their pine-boards for ordinary use,” whilst “on the other hand, the savage soon receives from cities, iron arrow-points, hatchets, and guns, to point his savageness with.”⁷¹ This Western impact was of dubious value for Thoreau,

epitomised at Oldtown where “the little [Indian] boys met us with bow in hand and arrow on string, and cried, ‘Put up a cent.’ ... Alas for the Hunter Race! the white man has driven off their game, and substituted a cent in its place.”⁷²

Meanwhile the moose hunt was the spark for Thoreau’s own crisis of conscience and readiness to criticise fundamental assumptions prevalent around him, since “Nature looked sternly upon me on account of the murder of the moose.... Every creature is better alive than dead, men and moose and pine-trees, and he who understands it aright will rather preserve its life than destroy it.”⁷³ From such a position, Thoreau is then led to look back to nature and the role of the woods. In part this can seem an ecologically oriented concern, wrapped up in transcendentalist overtones: to him it is “strange that so few ever come to the woods to see how the pine lives and grows and spires, lifting its evergreen arms to the light,—to see its perfect success; but most are content to behold it in the shape of many broad boards brought to market, and deem *that* its true success!... There is a higher law affecting our relation to pines.”⁷⁴

Thoreau’s “religious” sense of Nature and the gateways to it is then re-affirmed in a typically transcendentalist way through “the poet,” for it is he “who makes the truest use of the pine... and lets them stand.”⁷⁵ Empathetic language ensues: “it is the living spirit of the tree, not its spirit of turpentine, with which I sympathize, and which heals my cuts,” he says, following it with this controversial assertion: “it [the pine tree] is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still.”⁷⁶ Bridgman dismisses this as somewhat hypocritical posturing on Thoreau’s part.⁷⁷ However, serious religious sentiments underpinned this affirmation from Thoreau, who saw himself as “born to be a pantheist.”⁷⁸ Its pantheistic tone, cutting across Christian sensibilities, led to Russell Lowell deleting the controversial line when he published the essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* in July

1858, which in turn prompted angry correspondence from Thoreau, about Lowell being “bigoted and timid” and acting “in a very mean and cowardly manner.”⁷⁹

Amidst such metaphysical overtones, Thoreau went on in *Chesuncook* to pose trenchant critiques of various emerging land practices in America. This has led to him being seen as something of a “pioneer ecologist and conservationist” (Whitford), with “a new vision for civilization and nature” (Botkin), and a “politics of nature” (Newman).⁸⁰

Land defoliation was a general concern for him in *Chesuncook*, Thoreau asking “what are we coming to in our Middlesex towns?—a bald, staring town-house, or meeting-house, and a bare liberty-pole, as leafless as it is fruitless, for all I can see.”⁸¹ America’s growing fuel needs, reflecting her industrialisation, were leading to

willow-rows lopped every three years for fuel or powder,—and every sizable pine and oak, or other forest tree, cut down within the memory of man!... We shall be reduced to gnaw the very crust of the earth for nutriment.⁸²

The “Machine age” was no great advancement for Thoreau, merely facilitating destruction and depletion; for example, he says, “they have lately, as I hear, invented a machine for chopping up huckleberry-bushes fine, and so converting them into fuel!”⁸³ He was himself engaged in farming experiments at Walden, but in a different, holistic, ecological way.⁸⁴ Conversely, “such [so-called] ‘improvements’ in husbandry” are a cause for concern in *Chesuncook*, where he writes,

the farmer sometimes talks of “brushing up,” simply as if bare ground looked better than clothed ground, than that which wears its natural vesture,—as if the wild hedges... were *dirt*.⁸⁵

Industrial-commercial overproduction was an unwelcome development for Thoreau: “as for the beauty of one of these ‘model farms,’ ... they are, commonly, places merely where somebody is making money.... The virtue of making two blades of grass grow where only one grew before does not begin to be superhuman.”⁸⁶

Thoreau was not advocating living permanently in the wild; instead, he advocated a middle position of varied local urban-rural settlements retaining aspects of Nature, the goal a “smooth, but still varied landscape,” with the “the wilderness, necessary... for a resource and a background, the raw material of all our civilization.”⁸⁷ The wilderness was seen by Thoreau not as a quantitative resource for commercial-industrial exploitation, but as a resource for aesthetic development: “for beauty, the poet must, from time to time, travel the logger’s path and the Indian’s trail, to drink at some new and more bracing fountain of the Muses, far in the recesses of the wilderness.”⁸⁸ As for society, Thoreau could conclude his *Chesuncook* essay with a call for

national preserves, where no villages need be destroyed, in which the bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may still exist, and not be “civilized off the face of the earth,”—our forests... not for idle sport or food, but for inspiration and our own true re-creation? or shall we, like villains, grub them all up, poaching on our own national domains?⁸⁹

One consequence of note was Thoreau’s role as John Muir’s “spiritual and literary mentor” vis-à-vis ecological management.⁹⁰ This was mediated in part through Muir’s reading and annotations of *The Maine Woods*.⁹¹ Another was the creation of the Yosemite Valley Park in California in 1864, the first National Park at Yellowstone in 1872, and, indeed, measures for the protection of Mt. Katahdin itself.

Thoreau’s encounter with Nature in his 1853 *Chesuncook* journey, seen through his own eyes and those of the American Indian, became a spur to continuing interest in those avenues. Thus, in an 1856 *Journal* entry, Thoreau wrote, “I am reminded that this my life in nature... is lamentably incomplete.” He expanded:

many of those animal migrations and other phenomena by which the Indians marked the season are no longer to be observed. I seek acquaintance with Nature,—to know her moods and manners. Primitive Nature is the most interesting to me.... I wish to know an entire heaven and an entire earth.⁹²

This was the impetus for his third trip to the Maine Woods in 1857, and a fuller encounter with the American Indian.

Allegash & East Branch

The 1857 trip, written up in his *Allegash & East Branch* essay, presented a particularly strong sense of Indian wisdom through the figure of another Indian guide, Joe Polis. Admittedly Bridgman sees Thoreau as “disappointed” in Polis.⁹³ However, in reality, Thoreau’s positive profiling of him put Polis on the pedestal of the meritorious “Representative Men” alongside Emerson’s European giants like Plato.⁹⁴ Emerson’s funeral oration for him spoke of Polis as one of three men (along with John Brown and Walt Whitman) who had “deeply impressed Thoreau.”⁹⁵

In a literary sense, the portrayal of Polis was far more developed and rounded than his earlier portrayal of Joe Aitteon. Consequently, Murray sees Polis as showing Thoreau’s “developing art of characterization,” while Sayre goes so far as to regard Polis as “the most fully developed person (after the author himself) to appear anywhere in Thoreau’s writing.”⁹⁶ Thoreau described Polis as having a “strange remoteness in which the Indian ever dwells to the white man,” yet one capable of quiet dignity and, if need be, duplicity when dealing with some of Thoreau’s boorish companions.⁹⁷ Polis, though moving in the white world, also moved in the older Indian world as a renowned shaman.⁹⁸

Thoreau’s interest in Indian botanical names was maintained on this trip. This had been first sparked by his own interested observation of lights in the woods: “phosphorous wood.” Bridgman dismisses this as merely showing how “vulnerable” Thoreau was, amidst “fantasies, daydreams” and “false interpretations.”⁹⁹ However, Thoreau treated such phenomena with seriousness and interest. Of this curious phenomenon he had earlier

wondered in his *Journal*, “who ever saw one? Are they not a piece of modern mythology?”¹⁰⁰

Subsequently,

the next day the Indian [Polis] told me their name for this light,—*Artoosoqu'*,—and on my inquiring concerning the will-o'-the-wisp, and the like phenomena, he said that his “folks” sometimes saw fires passing along at various heights, even as high as the trees, and making a noise.¹⁰¹

In his *Journal* Thoreau noted this incident only briefly, albeit positively: “it [i.e. the phosphorescent wood] suggested to me how unexplored still are the realms of nature, that what we know and have seen is always an insignificant portion.”¹⁰² However, in his *Maine Woods* text, he reflects at greater length on this potential reservoir of Indian lore:

I was prepared after this to hear of the most startling and unimagined phenomena witnessed by “his folks,” they are abroad at all hours and seasons in scenes so unfrequented by white men. Nature must have made a thousand revelations to them [the American Indians] which are still secrets to us [the white man].¹⁰³

From that level of nature-lore Thoreau could then look more deeply and religiously within Nature, so that, as he says, “I exulted like ‘a pagan...’. It suggested to me that there was something to be seen if one had eyes. It made a believer of me more than before. I believed that the woods were not tenantless, but choke-full of honest spirits as good as myself any day.” The result was profound: “for a few moments I enjoyed fellowship with them. Your so-called [white] wise man goes trying to persuade himself that there is no entity there but himself and his traps, but it is a great deal easier to believe the [Indian’s] truth.”¹⁰⁴

Bridgman, again in a negative vein, dismisses this as involving “Indians [such as Polis] who were too severely flawed to function successfully as priests of the mysteries of the wilderness.”¹⁰⁵ However, wider cross-religious implications, like those in relation to Oriental traditions in *A Week* and *Walden*, emerge from this episode in *The Maine Woods*. To Thoreau, it all

suggested, too, that the same experience always gives birth to the same sort of belief or religion. One revelation has been made to the [American] Indian, another to the white man. I have much to learn of the Indian, nothing of the missionary. I am not sure but all that would tempt me to teach the Indian my religion would be his promise to teach me *his*.¹⁰⁶

The irony, however, was that Western civilisation was already undermining traditional Indian religion through Christian missionary conversions, Polis telling Thoreau how “he went to church at Oldtown when he was at home; in short, he did as he had been taught by the whites.”¹⁰⁷ Thus, in a further irony, Thoreau’s subsequent description of Indian religion is of the Christian Sunday observances in the woods by these Indian converts.¹⁰⁸

In fact, American Indian religion—its cosmology and mythology—is never really discussed directly in *The Maine Woods*. Instead, there is continuing observation of Indian customs and language: “I asked him how he guided himself in the woods. ‘O,’ said he, ‘I can tell good many ways.’”¹⁰⁹ Thoreau’s interpretation of this is intriguing:

it appeared as if the sources of information were so various that he did not give a distinct, conscious attention to any one, and so could not readily refer to any when questioned about it, but he found his way very much as an animal does. Perhaps what is commonly called instinct in the animal, in this case is merely a sharpened and educated sense.¹¹⁰

Western assumptions over “knowledge, all labelled and arranged” were challenged by intuitive Indian modes where “often, when an Indian says, ‘I don’t know,’ in regard to the route he is to take... his Indian instinct may tell him still as much as the most confident white man knows. He... relies on himself at the moment.”¹¹¹ Meanwhile, Indian lore showed itself also in the healing field: “our Indian [Polis] said that he was a doctor, and could tell me some medicinal use for every plant I could show him. I immediately tried him. He said that the inner bark of the aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) was good for sore eyes; and so with various other plants, proving himself as good as his word.”¹¹²

However, the impact of the Western world was already damaging such reservoirs of Indian wisdom since “according to his [Polis’] account, he had acquired such knowledge in

his youth from a wise old Indian with whom he associated, and he lamented that the present generation of Indians ‘had lost a great deal.’”¹¹³ But at the same time, Polis was himself involved in the outer “white world” of land negotiations in Maine and visits to Washington.¹¹⁴ American domestic politics, though, were rather grubby and mundane for Thoreau and environmentally unsound. Thus, he reflects that,

the Anglo-American can indeed cut down, and grub up all this waving forest, and make a stump speech, and vote for Buchanan on its ruins, but he cannot converse with the spirit of the tree he fells, he cannot read the poetry and mythology which retire as he advances; [as] he ignorantly erases [American Indian] mythological tablets in order to print his handbills and town-meeting warrants on them... he cuts it down, coins a *pine-tree* shilling, (as if to signify the pine’s value to him,) puts up a *deestric* school-house, and introduces Webster’s spelling-book.¹¹⁵

Unfortunately, to Thoreau, civilisation change was already affecting these Maine reaches:

things are quite changed since I was here eleven years ago. Where there were but one or two houses, I now found quite a village, with saw-mills and a store... and there was a stage-road to Mattawamkeag, and the rumor of a stage. Indeed, a steamer had ascended thus far once, when the water was very high.¹¹⁶

Ironically then, although Thoreau had left Western civilisation to engage with primeval nature in the Maine Woods, those same woods were already being reduced, during the period of his travels between 1846 and 1857. The growing challenge of American urban and industrial growth reflected a “Machine Age” loathed by Thoreau, which was simultaneously far away but also worryingly near, for the Maine Woods he was visiting.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

A final question to pose is what Thoreau actually derived from his external and internal explorations in the Maine Woods—what were the “lessons of the forest?”¹¹⁸ Lynch considers that Thoreau, though reaching out, was still limited in the extent to which he was able fully to appropriate Polis’ holistic Indian wisdom.¹¹⁹ Bridgman gives a negative profiling of their

relationship.¹²⁰ However, the immediate aftermath of Thoreau's final trip to the Maine Woods with Polis, saw two letters, in August 1857, both praising Polis. Marston Watson was told that of him as "the chief man of the Penobscot tribe of Indians" from whom Thoreau had "learned a great deal."¹²¹ These sentiments were elaborated further the next day in a letter to Blake, in which Thoreau wrote:

having extended my range, I have made a short excursion into the new world which the Indian dwells in, or is. He begins where we leave off. It is worth the while to explore new faculties in man—he is so much the more divine... it increases my own capacity, as well as faith, to observe it.¹²²

His *Journal* similarly noted that "the Indian stood nearer to wild nature than we.... It was a new light when my guide [Polis] gave me Indian names for things for which I had only scientific ones before. In proportion as I understood the language, I saw them from a new point of view... a life within a life... as it were threading the woods between our towns still."¹²³

Thoreau's Oriental explorations are well known, as noted at the start of this article. Yet, his explorations into Nature through the American Indian gateway deserve their own acknowledgment. Indeed, on the day of his father's death, 3 February 1859, Thoreau could still note that though

some have spoken slightly of the Indians... we wish to know particularly what manner of men they were, how they lived here, their relation to nature, their arts and their customs, their fancies and superstitions... they wandered in these woods, and they had their fancies and beliefs connected with the sea and the forest, which concern us quite as much as the fables of Oriental nations do.¹²⁴

If *A Week* and *Walden* saw Thoreau exploring the wisdom of the Orient, then *The Maine Woods* bears witness to Thoreau's turning towards the wisdom of the American Indian—with both trails pointing to the deeper inner Self and Nature.

Nature itself, for Thoreau had become a symbol for the individual's life, within which his own experiences and reflections in *The Maine Woods* were an important frame of

reference and inspiration. Channing, his friend, considered in 1875 that “his love of wildness was real,” for “held the Indian’s creed, and believed in the essential worth and integrity of the plant and animal. This was religion to him.”¹²⁵ Similarly, Burroughs had thought in 1882 that “Thoreau was, probably, the wildest civilized man this country has produced, adding to the shyness of the hermit and woodsman the wildness of the poet, and to the wildness of the poet the greater ferity and elusiveness of the mystic.”¹²⁶ Thoreau’s religious spirituality has been well re-emphasised by Hodder, but his focus is “three primary documents of his collected writings—*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, *Walden*, and the journal.”¹²⁷ The value of *The Maine Woods* is that it brings out further depths and dimensions within Thoreau’s spirituality, revealing him to be something of a “mystic, prophet, ecologist” who regards spirituality as expressed through Nature, and thereby anticipates the “deep ecology” movement of recent times.¹²⁸ Thus, *Ktaadn* reveals an essentially religious side of Nature in its elemental *numinous* majesty, whilst for Thoreau a key to that primordial numinous realm emerges in *Chesuncook* and *Allegash & East Branch* as being through, but ultimately beyond, the American Indian, i.e. the “beautiful but mystic lore of the wilderness” in Thoreau’s “wisdom” of the Maine Woods.¹²⁹

¹ E.g. Sharon Cameron, *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau’s Journal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985)

² Parker Huber, *The Wildest Country: a Guide to Thoreau’s Maine* (Boston: Appalachian Mountain Club, 1981); Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 115.

³ James McIntosh, *Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist: His Shifting Stance Toward Nature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974); Henry Thoreau, “Natural History of Massachusetts” (*The Dial*, July 1842, 19-40), 36.

⁴ William Rossi, “Thoreau’s Transcendental Ecocentrism” in Richard Schneider, ed., *Thoreau’s Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 28-43.

⁵ Thoreau, *Journal* (6 vols., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981-2000), 5.469 (5 March 1853).

⁶ Ralph Emerson, “Thoreau” (*The Atlantic Monthly*, 10 August 1862, 239-49), 245.

⁷ William Channing, *Thoreau the Poet-Naturalist* (1873), ed. Frank Sandborn (Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed, 1902).

⁸ Bradford Torrey, “Thoreau’s Attitude to Nature” (*The Atlantic Monthly*, November 1899, 706-10), 706.

⁹ Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 79-99: “Thoreau Sauntering Eastward.”

¹⁰ David Scott, “Re-Walking Thoreau and Asia: ‘Light From the East’ for ‘A Very Yankee Sort of Oriental,’” (*East-West Philosophy*, 57.1, 2007), 14-39. “Light from the East”—*Ex Oriente Lux*—is Thoreau’s own phrase, used in his *Week* and *Walking* essays, as well as in his *Journal*. “A very Yankee sort of Oriental” was a phrase

in Robert Louis Stevenson's "Henry David Thoreau: His Character and Opinions" (*Cornhill Magazine*, June 1880, rep. *Familiar Studies of Men and Books*, 1882).

¹¹ Alan Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

¹² David Robinson, *Natural Life: Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 108.

¹³ Joseph Moldenhauer, "The Maine Woods" in Joel Myerson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 124-41), 138; George Cornell, "Native American and Environmental Thought: Thoreau and the Transcendentalists" (*Akwe:kon Journal* 9.3, 1992), 4-13.

¹⁴ Robert Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 163.

¹⁵ Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 382-3; Thoreau, *Walden: An Annotated Edition*, ed. William Harding (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 108-9.

¹⁶ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 56-7, 33.

¹⁷ Robinson, *Natural Life*, 44. Thoreau considered the summit as "a place gods might wander."

¹⁸ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 65.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁰ Robinson, *Natural Life*, 130.

²¹ Robert Abrahms, "Image, Object, and Perception in Thoreau's Landscapes: the Development of Anti-Geography" (*Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 46.2, 1991), 245-62.

²² Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 63-4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁴ Victor Friesen, "Seeing Beyond Nature: Thoreau's Nature as Incessant Miracle," *Symposium on Science, Spirituality and the Environment*, Ontario: Brock University, 21-3 1999, <<http://eserver.org/thoreau/beyond.html>>.

²⁵ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 70.

²⁶ Walter Harding and Michael Meyer, *The New Thoreau Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 126; John Blair and Augustus Trowbridge, "Thoreau on Katahdin" (*American Quarterly*, 12.4, 1960, 508-17), 511; Richard Bridgman, *Dark Thoreau* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 202.

²⁷ Ronald Hoag, "The Mark on the Wilderness: Thoreau's Contact with Ktaadn" (*Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 24, 1982), 23-46.

²⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 99.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁰ Robinson, *Natural Life*, 140.

³¹ 'A Parish Priest,' "Henry D. Thoreau" (*Church Monthly*, 7 October 1864), 228-37; rep. Joel Myerson, ed., *Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 431-6), 433.

³² Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 70.

³³ Blair and Trowbridge, "Thoreau on Katahdin," 514, 515.

³⁴ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 70-1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁶ Bradley Dean, "Introduction," in Thoreau, *Wild Fruits* (New York: W. Norton, 2000), ix-xvii, xv.

³⁷ John Tallmadge, "Ktaadn: Thoreau in the Wilderness of Words" (*ESQ*, 31, 1985), 137-48. Also Laura Walls, "Believing in Nature: Wilderness and Wildness in Thoreauvian Science" in Schneider, ed., *Thoreau's Sense of Place*, 15-27.

³⁸ Lewis Leary, "Beyond the Brink of Fear" (*Studies in the Literary Imagination* 7, 1974), 67-76; Jonathan Fairbanks, "Thoreau: Speaker for Wilderness" (*South Atlantic Quarterly* 70, 1971), 487-506.

³⁹ The essay was constantly reworked and modified over many years.

⁴⁰ Thoreau, "Walking" (*The Atlantic Monthly*, 9 June 1862, 657-74), 657.

⁴¹ Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indian*, 165-6.

⁴² Bridgman, *Dark Thoreau*, 223.

⁴³ Thoreau, *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (NY: New York University Press, 1958), 187 (24 October 1847).

⁴⁴ Thoreau, *Journal*, 3.185 (9 February 1851).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.148 (25 June 1852).

⁴⁶ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 151.

⁴⁷ Thoreau, *Correspondence*, 424 (21 May 1856).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 491.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 491-2 (18 August 1856).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 498.

- ⁵¹ Thoreau, *Journal*, 4.54 (7 September 1851).
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 3.186 (9 February 1851).
- ⁵³ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 86.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ⁶⁰ Bridgman, *Dark Thoreau*, 224.
- ⁶¹ Thoreau, *Journal*, 1.304 (26 April 1843).
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 2.230 ('1843').
- ⁶³ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 97, also 140.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.
- ⁶⁷ Thomas Altherr, "'Chaplain to the Hunters': Henry David Thoreau's Ambivalence Towards Hunting" (*American Literature* 56.3, 1984), 345-61.
- ⁶⁸ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 119.
- ⁶⁹ Bridgman, *Dark Thoreau*, 221; Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 119.
- ⁷⁰ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 107.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 108-9.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, 146.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, 120-1.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 121-2.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.
- ⁷⁷ Bridgman, *Dark Thoreau*, 218-9.
- ⁷⁸ Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, 131-73.
- ⁷⁹ Thoreau, *Correspondence*, 516, 5.
- ⁸⁰ Philip and Kathryn Whitford, "Thoreau: Pioneer Ecologist and Conservationist" (*Scientific Monthly* 73, 1951), 291-6; Daniel Botkin, *No Man's Garden: Thoreau and a New Vision for Civilization and Nature* (Washington: Island Press, 2001); Lance Newman, *Our Common Dwelling: Henry Thoreau, Transcendentalism, and the Class Politics of Nature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
- ⁸¹ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 153.
- ⁸² *Ibid.*, 154.
- ⁸³ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁴ David Robinson, "'Unchronicled Nations': Agrarian Purpose and Thoreau's Ecological Knowing" (*Nineteenth-century Literature*, 48.3, 1993), 326-40.
- ⁸⁵ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 155, 154.
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.
- ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁰ Richard Fleck, *Henry Thoreau and John Muir Among the Indians* (Hamden: Archon, 1985), 55.
- ⁹¹ Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 529, also 478-9.
- ⁹² Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau* (14 vols., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906, rep. 1949), 8.221 (23 March 1856).
- ⁹³ Bridgman, *Dark Thoreau*, 237.
- ⁹⁴ Philip Gura, "Thoreau's Maine Woods Indians: More Representative Men" (*American Literature* 49.3, 1977, 366-84), 377-82.
- ⁹⁵ Frank Sanborn, "The Emerson-Thoreau Correspondence: Emerson In Europe" (*The Atlantic Monthly*, June 1892, 736-53, 753), being Sanborn's personal recollection of the funeral oratory. The officially "published" oration does not have this, but does note that "in his last visit to Maine he [Thoreau] had great satisfaction from Joseph Polis," Emerson, "Thoreau," 246.
- ⁹⁶ D. Murray, "Thoreau's Indians and his developing art of characterization" (*ESQ*, 21, 1975), 222-9; Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indian*, 172. Also Sayre, "'We Called Him Polis': Charles Bird Kings Joseph Porous and Thoreau's Maine Woods Guide" (*Thoreau Journal Quarterly*, 13.3-4, 1981), 10-14.

-
- ⁹⁷ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 158,12-3.
- ⁹⁸ Frank Speck, "Penobscot Shamanism," *Memoirs (American Anthropological Association 6.3, 1920)*, 239-88.
- ⁹⁹ Bridgman, *Dark Thoreau*, 229.
- ¹⁰⁰ Thoreau, *Journal*, 5.30 (5 May 1852).
- ¹⁰¹ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 180-1.
- ¹⁰² Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, 9.490 (24 July 1857).
- ¹⁰³ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 181.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁵ Bridgman, *Dark Thoreau*, 229.
- ¹⁰⁶ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 181.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 182.
- ¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 194.
- ¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 184.
- ¹¹⁰ Ibid., 185.
- ¹¹¹ Ibid., 184-5.
- ¹¹² Ibid., 235.
- ¹¹³ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁴ Ibid., 197.
- ¹¹⁵ Ibid., 229; episode later cited in Rupert Sheldrake, *The Rebirth of Nature: The Greening of Science and God* (London: Century, 1990), 51-2.
- ¹¹⁶ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 287.
- ¹¹⁷ Henry Canby, "Thoreau and the Machine Age" (*Yale Review*, 20, 1931), 517-31.
- ¹¹⁸ Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indian*, 155-93.
- ¹¹⁹ Tom Lynch, "The 'Domestic Air' of Wilderness: Henry Thoreau and Joe Polis in the Maine Woods" (*Weber Studies* 14.3, 1977), <<http://weberstudies.weber.edu/archive>>.
- ¹²⁰ Bridgman, *Dark Thoreau*, 233-42.
- ¹²¹ Thoreau, *Correspondence*, 488 (17 August 1857).
- ¹²² Ibid., 491 (18 August 1857).
- ¹²³ Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, 11.294,295 (5 March 1858).
- ¹²⁴ Ibid., 11.437-8.
- ¹²⁵ Channing, cited Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, 15.
- ¹²⁶ John Burroughs, "Henry D. Thoreau" (*The Century*, 24 July 1882, 368-80), 371.
- ¹²⁷ Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, 24.
- ¹²⁸ William Wolff, *Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1974). See also Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living As If Nature Mattered* (Layton: Gibbs Smith, 1985).
- ¹²⁹ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 229-30.