THE JOURNAL

1837–1861

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Edited by

DAMION SEARLS

Preface by

JOHN R. STILGOE

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INTRODUCTION

In 1837, David Henry Thoreau was twenty years old. He would soon begin to call himself Henry David 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 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 them "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 the 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; see p. 232). As a result, he redirected his ideas of 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: an investigation of dailyness, seasons, and the relationship between self and nature—a hybrid and 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 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 a 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 of 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 riverbanks, 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 concerns 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 selections 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 to 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 incident 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 else 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 annal 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 is 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 explore 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 the note on p. 493). 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 "Kalendar" (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 (pp. 178–193)
April 1856 (pp. 374–384)
May 1852 (pp. 131–142)
June 1851 (pp. 49–58)
July 1852 (pp. 149–162)
August 1854 (pp. 272–281)
September 1851 (pp. 71–84)
October 1857 (pp. 456–474)
November 1858 (pp. 519–531)
December 1856 (pp. 416–429)
January 1855 (pp. 293–307)
February 1860 (pp. 595–609)
March 1859 (pp. 544–559)

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 an 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 years 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, p. 121) is a great line: the bluebird comes with the spring and thus can 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's locating himself "on the *back* of the hill"—because some alchemy of these details is what produced 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 remainders 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, 1859) 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, 1853, four and a half pages long, is trimmed to a page in this edition (p. 200). I cut his dateline ("P.M.—To 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 Cliffs; 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 my 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 sentences 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 these 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, 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 misery 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 a 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 reads.

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 if 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 Searls