

[These are uncorrected page proofs from Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion* (Univ. of California Press, 2010)]

APPENDIX

Excerpts with Commentary on the Writings of Henry David Thoreau

The following excerpts parallel the paragraphs in chapter 3 that summarized the major themes in Thoreau's work and that are especially pertinent to this study. I have generally quoted Thoreau's earlier writings, such as *Walden* (1854), his most famous and best-known work, toward the beginning of each section. "Walking," which was published in 1862 in the *Atlantic Monthly* and includes his most famous aphorism, "in Wildness is the preservation of the World," is available online and in many anthologies.¹ "Walking," "Wild Apples," and "Huckleberries" are excerpted from *Henry David Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems*, edited by Elizabeth Hall Witherell.² The latter two essays were prepared for publication in the *Atlantic Monthly* during the last few months of Thoreau's life in 1862 (and published posthumously). They were extracted and reworked from a longer manuscript, "Wild Fruits," which became available in *Faith in a Seed* and *Wild Fruits*, both edited by Bradley Dean.³ Because Thoreau found the time shortly before his death to revise these essays, there are fewer errors and confusing parts in them than elsewhere in the "Wild Fruits" manuscript. *The Maine Woods* (1864) was written during eleven summers and earlier than "Wild Fruits," which was unfinished when he died. Some of *The Maine Woods* was published while Thoreau was alive; I took excerpts from it from a book collecting many of Thoreau's major works, *Henry David Thoreau: A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers; Walden, or Life in the Woods; the Maine Woods; Cape Cod*.⁴ The "Notes on the Texts" and the chronologies in the two Library of America editions helpfully

locate the times of writing, publication, and editorial challenges that resulted from Thoreau's untimely death. Also very helpful is *The Annotated Walden*, edited by Philip Van Doren Stern.⁵

The excerpts below are divided into themed sections that parallel the discussion in chapter 3. Thoreau's words appear as regular text, without quotation marks, with spellings and punctuation as in the original. Italics indicate passages I believe are especially pertinent to this volume's themes, and my own comments are in brackets. Thoreau's original emphasis or italics appear underlined.

The Simple, Natural, and Undomesticated (Free) Life

Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor. . . . There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. . . . To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts . . . , but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically.⁶

Men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon plowed into the soil for compost. By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before. (155) [Calling the New Testament an "old book," Thoreau attacks hubris by valuing humans as compost.]

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. (150)

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. . . . I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it

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proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. . . . Still we live meanly, like ants. . . . Our life is frittered away by detail. . . . Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand. . . . Simplify, simplify. (222)

The customs of some savage nations might, perchance, be profitably imitated by us, for they at least go through the semblance of casting their slough annually; they have the idea of the thing, whether they have the reality or not. (202–3; 193 for other examples)

How near to good is what is WILD!

Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him. One who pressed forward incessantly and never rested from his labors, who grew fast and made infinite demands on life, would always find himself in a new country or wilderness, and surrounded by the raw material of life. He would be climbing over the prostrate stems of primitive forest trees.⁷

Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps. When, formerly, I have analyzed my partiality for some farm which I had contemplated purchasing, I have frequently found that I was attracted solely by a few square rods of impermeable and unfathomable bog—a natural sink in one corner of it. That was the jewel which dazzled me. I derive more of my subsistence from the swamps which surround my native town than from the cultivated gardens in the village. . . . How vain, then, have been all your labors, citizens, for me! (241–42) [In other words, how vain have been the efforts of the townfolk to civilize him.]

My spirits infallibly rise in proportion to the outward dreariness. Give me the ocean, the desert, or the wilderness! In the desert, pure air and solitude compensate for want of moisture and fertility. The traveler Burton says of it—“Your MORALE improves; you become frank and cordial, hospitable and single-minded. . . . In the desert, spirituous liquors excite only disgust. *There is a keen enjoyment in a mere animal existence.*” (242)

In literature it is only the wild that attracts us. Dullness is but another name for tameness. . . . English literature, from the days of the minstrels to the Lake Poets,—Chaucer and Spenser and Milton, and even Shakespeare, included,—breathes no quite fresh and, in this sense, wild strain. It is an essentially tame and civilized literature, reflecting Greece and Rome. Her wilderness is a green wood,—her wild man a

Robin Hood. There is plenty of genial love of Nature, but not so much of Nature herself. Her chronicles inform us when her wild animals, but not when the wild man in her, became extinct. (244)

In short, all good things are wild and free. There is something in a strain of music, whether produced by an instrument or by the human voice—take the sound of a bugle in a summer night, for instance—which by its wildness, to speak without satire, reminds me of the cries emitted by wild beasts in their native forests. It is so much of their wildness as I can understand. *Give me for my friends and neighbors wild men, not tame ones. The wildness of the savage is but a faint symbol of the awful ferocity with which good men and lovers meet.* (246) [This remarkable passage laments the disappearance of the wild human being and suggests that commentators who think Thoreau never escaped prudish Victorian sexual mores might have missed something.]

I love even to see the domestic animals reassert their native rights,—any evidence that they have not wholly lost their original wild habits and vigor. (246)

I rejoice that horses and steers have to be broken before they can be made the slaves of men, and that men themselves have some wild oats still left to sow before they become submissive members of society. (247)

We have a wild savage in us, and a savage name is perchance somewhere recorded as ours. (248)

I would not have every man nor every part of a man cultivated, any more than I would have every acre of earth cultivated. (249)

While almost all men feel an attraction drawing them to society, few [today] are attracted strongly to Nature. In their reaction to Nature men appear to me for the most part, notwithstanding their arts, lower than the animals. . . . How little appreciation of the beauty of the landscape there is among us! (251)

As I came home through the woods with my string of fish, trailing my pole, it being now quite dark, 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 that wildness which he represented. *Once or twice, however, while I lived at the pond, 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 could have been too savage for me. The wildest scenes had become unaccountably familiar. I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or,*

*as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good.*⁸

The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that *in Wildness is the preservation of the World*. Every tree sends its fibers forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plow and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind. Our ancestors were savages. The story of Romulus and Remus being suckled by a wolf is not a meaningless fable. The founders of every State which has risen to eminence have drawn their nourishment and vigor from a similar wild source. It was because the children of the Empire were not suckled by the wolf that they were conquered and displaced by the children of the Northern forests who were.⁹ [In this passage from “Walking,” Thoreau intimated that his fundamental loyalty was to the wild earth and that the well-being of human beings and their societies was completely dependent on it.]

The Wisdom of Nature

But since I left those shores the woodchoppers have still further laid them waste, and now for many a year there will be no more rambling through the aisles of the wood, with occasional vistas through which you see the water. My Muse may be excused if she is silent henceforth. How can you expect the birds to sing when their groves are cut down?¹⁰ [Here in *Walden*, Thoreau averred that nature was needed for poetry and spirituality—as a muse—and conservation was needed to protect the muse; at this time conservation was more indirectly valued than in later writings.]

I served my apprenticeship and have since done considerable journey-work in the huckleberry field. Though I never paid for my schooling and clothing in that way, it was some of the best schooling that I got and paid for itself. . . . THERE was the university itself where you could learn the everlasting Laws, and Medicine and Theology, not under Story, and Warren, and Ware, but far wiser professors than they. Why such haste to go from the huckleberry field to the College yard?

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As in old times they who dwelt on the heath, remote from towns, being backward to adopt the doctrines which prevailed in towns, were called heathen in a bad sense, so I trust that we dwellers in the huckleberry pastures, which are our heathlands, shall be slow to adopt the notions of large towns and cities, though perchance we may be nicknamed huckleberry people. But the worst of it is that the emissaries of the towns come more for our berries than they do for our salvation.¹¹

A Religion of Nature

There is nothing inorganic. These foliaceous heaps lie along the bank like the slag of a furnace, showing that Nature is “in full blast” within. *The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history*, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, *but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit—not a fossil earth, but a living earth*; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic.¹² [It is hard to imagine a clearer statement of organicism, unless it is the next excerpt.]

I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man. There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still. (263)

But I was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood, and seemed to foresee my recovery. In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. *I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and humanest was not a person nor a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again.* (264) [This is one of Thoreau’s most personal expressions of kinship and friendship with all life-forms, along with his felt sense of the personhood and beneficence of nature; more such passages follow.]

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“How vast and profound is the influence of the subtile powers of Heaven and of Earth!”

“We seek to perceive them, and we do not see them; we seek to hear them, and we do not hear them; identified with the substance of things, they cannot be separated from them.”

“They cause that in all the universe men purify and sanctify their hearts, and clothe themselves in their holiday garments to offer sacrifices and oblations to their ancestors. It is an ocean of subtile intelligences. They are everywhere, above us, on our left, on our right; they environ us on all sides.” (266) [In an adjacent note, Philip Van Doren Stern (borrowing from Lyman Cady) indicated that Thoreau took these three quotes from *The Doctrine of the Mean*, which is attributed to Tzu See, Confucius’s grandson. This is an early example of how often those engaged in dark green religion are influenced by religious philosophies originating in Asia or find in such traditions words that resonate with their own perceptions and feelings; in this case, the quotes capture an animistic perception. See also the notation on “intelligences” after the next excerpt.]

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. Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself? (269) [In an adjacent note, Stern equated “intelligence” with “communication”; in context, then, this passage has both pantheistic (earthly) and animistic (floral) intimations. Stern also noted a comment in an early draft of the manuscript that did not end up published, “God is my father and my good friend—men are my brothers—but nature is my mother and sister.” It may be that this was left out because Thoreau increasingly eschewed theistic language.]

Man at length stands in such a relation to Nature as the animals which pluck and eat as they go. The fields and hills are a table constantly spread. Diet-drinks, cordials, wines of all kinds and qualities, are bottled up in the skins of countless berries for their refreshment, and they quaff them at every turn. They seem offered to us not so much for food as for sociality, inviting us to a pic-nic with Nature. We pluck and eat in remembrance of her. It is a sort of sacrament—a communion—the not forbidden fruits,

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*which no serpent tempts us to eat. Slight and innocent savors which relate us to Nature, make us her guests entitle us to her regard and protection.*¹³

[The next excerpts from *The Maine Woods* are among Thoreau's most animistic.]

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! But the pine is no more lumber than man is, and to be made into boards and houses is no more its true and highest use than the truest use of a man is to be cut down and made into manure. There is a higher law affecting our relation to pines as well as to men. A pine cut down, a dead pine, is no more a pine than a dead human carcass is a man. Can he who has discovered only some of the values of whalebone and whale oil be said to have discovered the true use of the whale? Can he who slays the elephant for his ivory be said to have “seen the elephant”? These are petty and accidental uses; just as if a stronger race were to kill us in order to make buttons and flageolets of our bones; for everything may serve a lower as well as a higher use. 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.

*Is it the lumberman, then, who is the friend and lover of the pine, stands nearest to it, and understands its nature best? Is it the tanner who has barked it, or he who has boxed it for turpentine, whom posterity will fable to have been changed into a pine at last? No! no! it is the poet . . . —who knows whether its heart is false without cutting into it . . . —No, it is the poet, who loves them as his own shadow in the air, and lets them stand. I have been into the lumber-yard, and the carpenter's shop, and the tannery, and the lampblack-factory, and the turpentine clearing; but when at length I saw the tops of the pines waving and reflecting the light at a distance high over all the rest of the forest, I realized that the former were not the highest use of the pine. It is not their bones or hide or tallow that I love most. It is the living spirit of the tree, not its spirit of turpentine, with which I sympathize, and which heals my cuts. It is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still.*¹⁴ [This is from the section titled “Chesuncook.” The last sentence of this passage is one of Thoreau's most animistic (and counter-homocentric). It was removed when the essay was initially published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, probably because it was con-

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sidered pagan and blasphemous. Thoreau took offense at the deletion and asked that the sentence be published in the next issue, but the editor refused (1050).]

[The next excerpt is from “The Allegash and East Branch,” the third and final part of *The Maine Woods*. It begins with Thoreau’s delight and amazement over phosphorescent wood, which he saw for the first time during this forest journey with his American Indian guide, Joe Polis.]

The next day the Indian 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. 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 which are still secrets to us.* (731) [This demonstrates respect for the intimate knowledge of nature among indigenous Americans, but Thoreau was also dismissive of much of this knowledge; in this he was like many contemporary ethnobiologists.]

I did not regret my not having seen this before, since I now saw it under circumstances so favorable. *I was in just the frame of mind to see something wonderful, and this was a phenomenon adequate to my circumstances and expectation, and it put me on the alert to see more like it.* [This is a remarkable acknowledgement of the importance of a preexisting disposition to perceive—a modern understanding of the social construction of reality.] *I exulted like “a pagan suckled in a creed” that had never been worn at all, but was bran new, and adequate to the occasion. I let science slide, and rejoiced in that light as if it had been a fellow-creature. I saw that it was excellent, and was very glad to know that it was so cheap. A scientific explanation, as it is called, would have been altogether out of place there.* That is for pale daylight. Science with its retorts would have put me to sleep; it was the opportunity to be ignorant that I improved. *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,—not an empty chamber, in which chemistry was left to work alone, but an inhabited house,—and for a few moments I enjoyed fellowship with them.* Your so-called 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 truth. *It suggested, too, that the same experience always gives birth*

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to the same sort of belief or religion. One revelation has been made to the 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 [Thoreau emphasized “his”]. Long enough I had heard of irrelevant things; now at length I was glad to make acquaintance with the light that dwells in rotten wood. Where is all your knowledge gone to? It evaporates completely, for it has no depth. (731–32) [I think this passage makes clear that Thoreau had his doubts, as would nearly any modern person with a scientific background, about animistic perception. He indicates that, on the one hand, his animistic fellowship with woodland spirits was “for a few moments” only. But he also considers those experiences, although momentary, authentic glimpses into an entirely real world not usually perceived by civilized humans but available to those who are receptive to them.]

*I believe that there is a subtile magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright.*¹⁵ [This excerpt from “Walking” suggests a pantheistic, panentheistic, or organicist worldview. It is one of Thoreau’s most pantheistic-sounding passages, in which nature itself is perceived to be a divine guide to those who are open to such guidance.]

When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable and, to the citizen, most dismal, swamp. I enter a swamp as a sacred place,—a SANCTUM SANCTORUM. There is the strength, the marrow, of Nature. (242)

I believe in the forest, and in the meadow, and in the night in which the corn grows. (239)

I am no worshipper of Hygeia, who was the daughter of that old herb-doctor Æsculapius, and who is represented on monuments holding a serpent in one hand, and in the other a cup out of which the serpent sometimes drinks; but rather of Hebe, cup-bearer to Jupiter, who was the daughter of Juno and wild lettuce, and who had the power of restoring gods and men to the vigor of youth. She was probably the only thoroughly sound-conditioned, healthy, and robust young lady that ever walked the globe, and wherever she came it was spring.¹⁶ [Thoreau essentially stated that he worshiped the renewing power of spring.]

Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed

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in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did. . . . That man who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred, and auroral hour than he has yet profaned, has despaired of life, and is pursuing a descending and darkening way. . . . The Vedas say, “All intelligences awake with the morning.” [This is yet another reference to that which can only be considered an animistic perception, one of the many passages that also shows the influence of the Vedic scriptures on Thoreau’s religious imagination.] Poetry and art, and the fairest and most memorable of the actions of men, date from such an hour. All poets and heroes, like Memnon, are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at sunrise. To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. (220, 221) [Religion is about more than belief—it is about practice—and here Thoreau made an astute observation about the religious dimensions of some of his daily nature-related rites.]

Laws of Nature and Justice

The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?¹⁷

A simple and independent mind does not toil at the bidding of any prince. (193)

There is something servile in the habit of seeking after a law which we may obey. We may study the laws of matter at and for our convenience, but a successful life knows no law. It is an unfortunate discovery certainly, that of a law which binds us where we did not know before that we were bound. Live free, child of the mist—and with respect to knowledge we are all children of the mist.¹⁸

Nowadays almost all man’s improvements, so called, as the building of houses, and the cutting down of the forest and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more and more tame and cheap. . . . I looked again, and saw him standing in the middle of a boggy stygian fen, surrounded by devils, and he had found his bounds without a doubt, three little stones, where a stake had been driven, and looking nearer, I saw that the Prince of Darkness was his surveyor. (230) [John Muir would soon also liken those who defiled nature to Satan.]

But all this is very selfish, I have heard some of my townsmen say. I confess that I have hitherto indulged very little in philanthropic

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enterprises. . . . While my townsmen and women are devoted in so many ways to the good of their fellows, I trust that one at least may be spared to other and less humane pursuits. You must have a genius for charity as well as for anything else. As for Doing-good, that is one of the professions which are full. Moreover, I have tried it fairly, and, strange as it may seem, am satisfied that it does not agree with my constitution. Probably I should not consciously and deliberately forsake my particular calling to do the good which society demands of me, to save the universe from annihilation; and I believe that a like but infinitely greater steadfastness elsewhere is all that now preserves it. But I would not stand between any man and his genius; and to him who does this work, which I decline, with his whole heart and soul and life, I would say, Persevere, even if the world call it doing evil, as it is most likely they will.¹⁹

If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life. . . . Philanthropy is almost the only virtue which is sufficiently appreciated by mankind. Nay, it is greatly overrated; and it is our selfishness which overrates it. A robust poor man, one sunny day here in Concord, praised a fellow-townsmen to me, because, as he said, he was kind to the poor; meaning himself. . . . I would not subtract anything from the praise that is due to philanthropy, but merely demand justice for all who by their lives and works are a blessing to mankind. (207–9)

Our manners have been corrupted by communication with the Saints. . . . If, then, we would indeed restore mankind by truly Indian, botanic, magnetic, or natural means, let us first be as simple and well as Nature ourselves, dispel the clouds which hang over our own brows, and take up a little life into our pores. Do not stay to be an overseer of the poor, but endeavor to become one of the worthies of the world. (211)

*To preserve wild animals implies generally the creation of a forest for them to dwell in or resort to. So it is with man.*²⁰

The civilized nations—Greece, Rome, England—have been sustained by the primitive forests which anciently rotted where they stand. They survive as long as the soil is not exhausted. Alas for human culture! (243)

An Ecocentric Moral Philosophy

[The next several excerpts from “Wild Huckleberries” represent some of Thoreau’s most mature thinking. They show his double critique of centralized economic power and of unbridled human numbers, and the concomitant decline in biological diversity (before the concept was developed) and thus his ecocentric moral sentiments. Some environmentalists would also find in such passages support for their anticapitalist and/or Malthusian convictions.]

I suspect that *the inhabitants of England and the continent of England have thus lost in a measure their natural rights, with the increase of population and monopolies. The wild fruits of the earth disappear before civilization, or only the husks of them are to be found in large markets. The whole country becomes, as it were, a town or beaten common, and almost the only fruits left are a few hips and haws.*

What sort of a country is that where the huckleberry fields are private property? When I pass such fields on the highway, my heart sinks within me. I see a blight on the land. Nature is under a veil there. I make haste away from the accursed spot. Nothing could deform her fair face more. I cannot think of it after but as the place where fair and palatable berries, are converted into money, where the huckleberry is desecrated.

It is true, we have as good a right to make berries private property, as to make wild grass and trees such—it is not worse than a thousand other practices which custom has sanctioned—but that is the worst of it, for it suggests how bad the rest are, and to what result our civilization and division of labor naturally tend, to make all things venal.²¹

All our improvements, so called, tend to convert the country into the town. But I do not see clearly that these successive losses are ever quite made up to us. . . . It is my own way of living that complain of as well as yours. . . .

Thus we behave like oxen in a flower garden. The true fruit of Nature can only be plucked with a fluttering heart and a delicate hand, not bribed by any earthly reward.

Among the Indians, the earth and its productions generally were common and free to all the tribe, like the air and water—but among us who have supplanted the Indians, the public retain only a small yard or common in the middle of the village . . . I doubt if you can ride out five miles in any direction without coming to where some individual is tolling in the road—and he expects the time when it will all revert to him or his heirs. This is the way we civilized men have arranged it. (495)

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I am not overflowing with respect and gratitude to the fathers who thus laid out our New England villages. . . . If they were in earnest seeking thus far away “freedom to worship God,” as some assure us—why did they not secure a little more of it, when it was so cheap and they were about it? At the same time that they built meeting-houses why did they not preserve from desecration and destruction far grander temples not made with hands? (495–96)

[“Wild Huckleberries” then turns to some remarkably prescient, practical suggestions about landscape design in the construction of townships, suggesting that rivers/riparian areas be kept “a common possession forever” (496)—and that the hills and mountains should be protected as sacred places/temples (497).]

I think that each town should have a park, or rather a primitive forest of five hundred or a thousand acres . . . , a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation. (500) [The effort to protect and restore the commons (community-owned or controlled land managed for the well-being of all) is a common denominator of much radical environmentalism globally. Such passages are another reason that environmental activists generally view Thoreau as an elder in their movement.]

I know it is a mere figure of speech to talk about temples nowadays, when men recognize none, and associate the word with heathenism. Most men, it appears to me, do not care for Nature, and would sell their share in all her beauty, for as long as they may live, for a stated and not very large sum. Thank God they cannot fly and lay waste the sky as well as the earth. We are safe on that side for the present. It is for the very reason that some do not care for these things that we need to combine to protect all from the vandalism of a few. (497–98) [This passage sounds prophetic when read in our own time of intensifying alarm about the destruction of the atmospheric commons.]

Loyalty to and the Interconnectedness of Nature

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization: the minister and the school-committee, and every one of you will take care of that.²²

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Fishermen, hunters, woodchoppers, and others, spending their lives in the fields and woods, in a peculiar sense a part of Nature themselves, are often

in a more favorable mood for observing her, in the intervals of their pursuits, than philosophers or poets even, who approach her with expectation. *She is not afraid to exhibit herself to them.*²³ [Here in *Walden* and in the previous excerpt, the famous introduction to “Walking,” are strong expressions of belonging and loyalty to nature, as well as the idea that those who live off the land are more likely to have a spiritual understanding than “civilized” people.]

Thus it appears that the sweltering inhabitants of Charleston and New Orleans, of Madras and Bombay and Calcutta, drink at my well. In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat-Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. (418)

I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Bramin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges. With favoring winds it is wafted past the site of the fabulous islands of Atlantis and the Hesperides, makes the periplus of Hanno, and, floating by Ternate and Tidore and the mouth of the Persian Gulf, melts in the tropic gales of the Indian seas, and is landed in ports of which Alexander only heard the names. (418) [The deep and global interrelationships in nature, captured in these reflections, are reinforced by Thoreau’s understanding of the positive role death plays in natural cycles. Like many ecologists, he viewed death as a prerequisite for nature’s vitality and not something to be feared or unduly mourned, as in the next excerpts.]

Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness—to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. (433–34)

At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the

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sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thunder-cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander. We are cheered when we observe the vulture feeding on the carrion which disgusts and disheartens us, and deriving health and strength from the repast. There was a dead horse in the hollow by the path to my house, which compelled me sometimes to go out of my way, especially in the night when the air was heavy, but the assurance it gave me of the strong appetite and inviolable health of Nature was my compensation for this. I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp—tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises and toads run over in the road; and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood! With the liability to accident, we must see how little account is to be made of it. The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence. Poison is not poisonous after all, nor are any wounds fatal. Compassion is a very untenable ground. It must be expeditious. Its pleadings will not bear to be stereotyped. (434) [This acceptance and even reveling in the circle of life is common among ecologists, in my experience; there is a certain matter-of-factness about it or, alternatively, an expression of delight in the very process of eating and being eaten. This is a common way of thinking among participants in dark green religions, especially the most ecologically literate among them.]

. . . Such is the home of the moose, the bear, the caribou, the wolf, the beaver, and the Indian. Who shall describe the inexpressible tenderness and immortal life of the grim forest, where Nature, though it be mid-winter, is ever in her spring, where the moss-grown and decaying trees are not old, but seem to enjoy a perpetual youth; and blissful, innocent Nature, like a serene infant, is too happy to make a noise, except by a few tinkling, lispings birds and trickling rills?

What a place to live, what a place to die and be buried in! There certainly men would live forever, and laugh at death and the grave. There they could have no such thoughts as are associated with the village graveyard,—that make a grave out of one of those moist evergreen hummocks!²⁴ [In this passage from “Ktaadn” in *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau conveyed an important idea in all religion, namely, what comprised an authentic death; he also seemed to express a post-theistic naturalism.]

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Moral Evolution

One farmer says to me, “You cannot live on vegetable food solely, for it furnishes nothing to make bones with”; and so he religiously devotes a part of his day to supplying his system with the raw material of bones; walking all the while he talks behind his oxen, which, with vegetable-made bones, jerk him and his lumbering plow along in spite of every obstacle.²⁵[This is a great example of how Thoreau made a point with ironic humor.]

There is a period in the history of the individual, as of the race, when the hunters are the “best men,” as the Algonquins called them. We cannot but pity the boy who has never fired a gun; he is no more humane, while his education has been sadly neglected. This was my answer with respect to those youths who were bent on this pursuit, trusting that they would soon outgrow it. No humane being, past the thoughtless age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature, which holds its life by the same tenure that he does. The hare in its extremity cries like a child. I warn you, mothers, that my sympathies do not always make the usual PHILANTHROPIC distinctions. (341)

Such is oftenest the young man’s introduction to the forest, and the most original part of himself. He goes thither at first as a hunter and fisher, until at last, if he has the seeds of a better life in him, he distinguishes his proper objects, as a poet or naturalist it may be, and leaves the gun and fish-pole behind. The mass of men are still and always young [immature, morally and spiritually] in this respect. (341; also see 342)

Is it not a reproach that man is a carnivorous animal? True, he can and does live, in a great measure, by preying on other animals; but this is a miserable way—as any one who will go to snaring rabbits, or slaughtering lambs, may learn—and he will be regarded as a benefactor of his race who shall teach man to confine himself to a more innocent and wholesome diet. Whatever my own practice may be, *I have no doubt that it is a part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilized.* (344) [It is interesting to consider whether the many contemporary greens who eschew eating animals or even using animal products in some ways echo Thoreau’s sentiments in *Walden*.]

. . . Yet, for my part, I was never unusually squeamish; I could sometimes eat a fried rat with a good relish, if it were necessary. I am glad to

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have drunk water so long, for the same reason that I prefer the natural sky to an opium-eater's heaven. (345)

I carry less religion to the table, ask no blessing; not because I am wiser than I was, but, I am obliged to confess, because, however much it is to be regretted, with years I have grown more coarse and indifferent. Perhaps these questions are entertained only in youth, as most believe of poetry. My practice is "nowhere," my opinion is here. Nevertheless I am far from regarding myself as one of those privileged ones to whom the Ved [Vedas] refers when it says, that "he who has true faith in the Omnipresent Supreme Being may eat all that exists," that is, is not bound to inquire what is his food, or who prepares it; and even in their case it is to be observed, as a Hindoo commentator has remarked, that the Vedant limits this privilege [of animal eating] to "the time of distress." (345) [In such sections from *Walden*, one can see a drift away from anthropocentrism and a hope that human beings as a whole will leave behind hunting and fishing as they mature spiritually and become more intimate with nature. In the next excerpt, Thoreau indicated that the natural life leads to health, including the idea now prevalent in green circles that people should eat locally the natural produce of the season.]

Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influences of each. . . . Be blown on by all the winds. Open all your pores and bathe the tides of nature, in all her streams and oceans, at all seasons. Miasma and infection are from within. . . . For all nature is doing her best each moment to make us well. She exists for no other end. Do not resist her. With the least inclination to be well we should not be sick. . . . Nature is but another name for health.²⁶

In short, as a snow-drift is formed to where there is a lull in the wind, so, one would say, where there is a lull of truth, an institution springs up. But the truth of blows right on the over it, nevertheless, and at length blows it down. What is called politics is comparatively something so superficial and inhuman, that, practically, I have never fairly recognized that it concerns me at all.²⁷ [This excerpt from "Life without Principle" follows harsh criticism of imperial adventurism by agents of the United States in the Amazon. Here Thoreau's anarchistic feelings fused with his trust in nature: eventually, he seems to have believed, bad institutions will crumble because they do not cohere with truth, a sentiment not un-

common among latter-day participants in dark green religion. Such dark green religionists would today make more clear that the truth to which they refer is the dependence of society on nature and that unsustainable societies will not last.]

Ambivalence and Enigma

[The next excerpt is an enigmatic passage from “Ktaadn,” the first section of *The Maine Woods*, published posthumously in 1864 but based on travels in 1857. It is noteworthy for many things, including an apparent, remnant, dualism between humans and nature, an ambivalence toward wild nature (as both savage and beautiful), and what seem to be contradictory views about animistic perception and those most likely to have it, namely, nature-dwelling Indians. In this excerpt Thoreau labeled such perception “superstitious”—but it is also clear that he found value in such perceptiveness and the way it brings one close to nature; indeed, the end of the passage expresses a belief in the profound mystery of life, a conviction that this includes the mysterious spirit that animates living things, as well as a deep and profound longing for deeper contact and communion with nature.]

Perhaps I most fully realized that this was primeval, untamed, and forever untameable *Nature*, or whatever else men call it, while coming down this part of the mountain. . . . It is difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man. We habitually presume his presence and influence everywhere. And yet we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast and drear and inhuman, though in the midst of cities. *Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man’s garden, but the unhandseled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor waste-land. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made for ever and ever,—to be the dwelling of man, we say,—so Nature made it, and man may use it if he can. Man was not to be associated with it.* [Here, perhaps, remains a man/nature dualism.] *It was Matter, vast, terrific,—not his Mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on, or be buried in,—no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there,—the home, this, of Necessity and Fate. There was there felt the presence of a force not bound to be*

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kind to man. It was a place for heathenism and superstitious rites,—to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we. We walked over it with a certain awe, stopping, from time to time, to pick the blueberries which grew there, and had a smart and spicy taste. Perchance where our wild pines stand, and leaves lie on their forest floor, in Concord, there were once reapers, and husbandmen planted grain; but here not even the surface had been scarred by man, but it was a specimen of what God saw fit to make this world. What is it to be admitted to a museum, to see a myriad of particular things, compared with being shown some star's surface, some hard matter in its home! 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,—that my body might,—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 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?²⁸ [In summary, this passage expresses ambivalence and a struggle for meaning but does not provide compelling evidence that Thoreau had moved profoundly beyond dualistic, anthropocentric beliefs toward considering nature and her creatures sacred and communion with them possible.]

This afternoon's experience [of hunting moose] suggested to me how base or coarse are the motives which commonly carry men into the wilderness. *The explorers and lumberers generally are all hirelings, paid so much a day for their labor, and as such they have no more love for wild nature than wood-sawyers have for forests. Other 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. But, pray, could not one spend some weeks or years in the solitude of this vast wilderness with other employments than these,—employments perfectly sweet and innocent and ennobling? For one that comes with a pencil to sketch or sing, a thousand come with an axe or rifle. What a coarse and imperfect use Indians and hunters make of Nature! No wonder that their race is so soon exterminated.* I already, and for weeks afterward, felt my nature the coarser for this part of my woodland experience, and was reminded that our life should be lived as tenderly and daintily as one would pluck a flower. (683–84) [Thoreau was ambivalent about Indians: he thought them knowledgeable and wise because of their first-hand contact with nature but did not think they always exhibited a proper love for wild nature. In this passage, he expressed a superior attitude and a callous, or at least

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a matter-of-fact view about the demise of Indian cultures. Perhaps ironically, a paragraph later he wrote two of his most animistic passages (see 684–85, and esp. 731, 732). Later in *The Maine Woods*, reflecting on his Indian guide's singing a missionary-taught song in his native language, Thoreau again betrayed his ambivalence, grounded in a clear sense of superiority. Of course, he considered himself superior to most people, of whatever background.]

His singing carried me back to the period of the discovery of America, to San Salvador and the Incas, when Europeans first encountered the simple faith of the Indian. There was, indeed, a beautiful simplicity about it; nothing of the dark and savage, only the mild and infantile. The sentiments of humility and reverence chiefly were expressed. (730)