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Apostles of Wilderness: American Indians and Thoreau's Theology of the Wild

LYDIA WILLSKY-CIOLLO

“MOOSE. INDIAN.” According to his friend, poet William Ellery Channing, these were the final words of Henry David Thoreau.¹ Spoken at his deathbed, a traditional site of grappling with the fate of the soul, these words have cast a mythic and mysterious aura around a question that has plagued scholars of the poet-naturalist: what did Thoreau want with American Indians? They are undoubtedly a persistent preoccupation of his; less definitive is the intention behind such studious interest. Like many things Thoreauvian, what he wanted with American Indians invites numerous, often conflicting answers, compounded by the fact that Thoreau himself appears many-minded about everything from their character to their plight. Many have noted his affinity for American Indians who “stand free and unconstrained in Nature,” a view that one cannot miss in his writings, both private and public.² Their knowledge of the American wilderness was as close to original as possible, and became a crucial yardstick by which he measured both early and contemporary reports of natural history.³ However, as illustrated in recent studies, Thoreau was

¹Channing, *Thoreau, The Poet-Naturalist: With Memorial Verses*, new ed. (Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed, 1902), 20.

²Henry David Thoreau, “April 26, 1841” in *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, 14 vols., ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), 1:253.

³For example, see July 23, 1852, *Journal*, 4:136.

beholden to the prevalent ethnographic tropes of the nineteenth century, which juxtaposed Euro-American “civilization” against indigenous American “savagery.”⁴ In a journal entry of December 1856, Thoreau spoke hopefully of the possibility of Indian “progress” in moving past their “savage nature,” yet only a year later would he lament that Indians were “resignedly passing away in spite of our efforts to Christianize and educate them,” doomed by “fixed habits of stagnation.”⁵ Further complicating the picture is the fact that Thoreau often exhibited aversion to the effects of civilization on Indians. Perhaps most famous is his line from the “Ktaadn” chapter of *The Maine Woods*, where, upon seeing a Catholic church amidst the “forlorn” Penobscot settlement in Oldtown, Maine, he wrote that “a row of wigwams, with a dance of pow-wows, and a prisoner tortured at the stake, would be more respectable than this.”⁶ The presence of those institutions and agents of civilization at the center of Indian village life was so affronting because it appeared to signal the winnowing of the central and instinctive connection Indians held with nature.

Thus, the desire to cast Thoreau as either friend or foe of the Indian employs the wrong conjunction: it is not “either or,” but “both and.” Literary historian Gordon Sayre accurately summarizes this phenomenon: “The polarization between East and West, self and Other, civilization and barbarism is not as absolute as one might assume.”⁷ Thoreau *both* admired, valued, and found inspiration from American Indians *and* essentialized,

⁴Joshua David Bellin’s work has been particularly seminal on this account, *The Demon of the Continent: Indians and the Shaping of American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); “In the Company of Savagists: Thoreau’s Indian Books and Antebellum Ethnology,” *The Concord Saunterer* 16 (2008): 1–32; and “Taking the Indian Cure: Thoreau, Indian Medicine, and the Performance of American Culture,” *New England Quarterly* 79 (2006): 3–36; See also how Elizabeth Hanson captures Thoreau’s use of the savage-civilized dichotomy, *Thoreau’s Indian of the Mind. Studies in American Literature* (Lewiston, ME: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 4: chap. 5.

⁵December 30, 1856, January 23, 1858, *Journal*, 9:202, 10:252.

⁶Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 7.

⁷Gordon M. Sayre, *The Indian Chief as Tragic Hero: Native Resistance and the Literatures of America, from Moctezuma to Tecumseh* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 22.

pitied, and at least passively accepted if not actively desired the “inevitable” extinction of the “red man” as a race. This is not simply ambivalence, but rather a position that makes sense if one considers Thoreau’s orientation toward his literary footprint as fundamentally religious and specifically theological.

Until his death at forty-four, Thoreau was enmeshed in a lifelong project, that of crafting a practical theology of wilderness or the wild through and in the experience of nature. I use the term “theology,” not religion, deliberately to denote that Thoreau was concerned primarily with the study of the divine in nature and not with the institutional or communitarian aspects that generally accompany formal religions. In pursuit of an authentic—and individual—experience of the divine in the natural world, Thoreau developed a belief system that grappled with the relationship between God and humanity, immortality, and salvation. That his theology of the wild resembled little the established orthodoxy of his day is the result of an eclectic set of religious and philosophical influences. Additionally, the term “practical” signifies Thoreau’s hope that his theology would aid his (and others’) real-world efforts to cope spiritually with the inexorable advance of civilization.

Ultimately his theology provided a rationale and a method for seeking how to be wild or “naturalized” in a civilized world. People need “not only to be spiritualized, but *naturalized*, on the soil of earth” he implored in the final chapter of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.⁸ Much like the parable of Adam and Eve, Thoreau believed that human beings had experienced a Fall, one that did not mire them in original sin but that had rendered them unable to tap into their wild, natural, and, therefore, divine selves. Persistent winnowing of sacred forests and the spread of white civilization in its many forms were the culprits, and their inevitable advance made a true return to wild living seem improbable. Yet, however mournful he may have been at the prospect of losing the primeval

⁸Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 379.

forest, over time and through his own excursions and daily life, Thoreau came to the conclusion that Euro-Americans, himself included, could not live in the wilderness, as the nearby Penobscot had only centuries before. For their souls to survive being cut off physically from wilderness, then, they must cultivate this wilderness within. The wild or naturalized person was eternal. Feeling in him or herself “not [the Father] but [the] Mother stir” inside; the naturalized being “becomes immortal with her immortality.”⁹ The naturalized person was also reconciled with God because God was in nature. Saved from society’s most soul-wearing effects and debilitating vices, the naturalized person could live in the civilized world but like the converted Christian or the Bodhisattva, was buffered by his or her internal wildness.

The question remained for Thoreau, how does one become naturalized? Thoreau became increasingly convinced—and the later fervor of his engagement with Indian history and lore is testament to this—that the Indian was the key. Who knew wilderness better than those Thoreau perceived as closest to nature in its pre-civilized, and therefore prelapsarian, state? American Indians. Their closeness to nature was their primary appeal not only because he perceived them to live closer to nature than anyone at that moment, but also because in their history, language, mythology, and daily life they recalled the American wilderness in its pre-colonial form. Thoreau’s acceptance of the ethnocentric view that Indians were relics of the past and slated for extinction only further fueled his desire to learn all he could. Increasingly, Thoreau saw himself through the lens of spiritual colonialism as the conservator, translator, and minister of Indian knowledge and their spiritual connection to nature. In other words, not just nature, but also the Indian must be preserved; for the latter, however, the preservation was not physical, but spiritual. Thoreau believed he must imbibe from the vanishing Indian all that he is to save the soul of a modern, civilized America as well as his own.

⁹Thoreau, *A Week*, 379, 378.

Developing Wildness as a Theological Principle

Thoreau's theology was not ascribed to him from birth but evolved over time, shaped by his religious upbringing, surrounding, choice in reading and conversation partners, and, not a little bit, by personality. Constitutionally curious and critical of established religious institutions, Thoreau's religious thought can be described as part Christian (both Puritan and Unitarian), part Asian, particularly Hindu, religious thought, part Greek and Roman philosophy, part German Idealism, and all Transcendentalism, particularly in the doctrines of self-reliance and the divinity of the soul.¹⁰ The outlet for his eclectic intellectual history as it began to form itself from an inchoate group of principles into a focused system of thought was writing. What he chose to write was nature.

Nature seemed the natural topic for Thoreau, whose personal inclination since youth had been to be outside and whose involvement with Transcendentalism, which emphasized the return to nature as a source of truth and divinity, merely strengthened the draw of the wild. The religious significance of this focus, however, evolved as he recorded the world around him. He expressed the fundamental belief behind the phenomenon of "come-outerism," or the flight to nature, in his 1842 address, "The Natural History of Massachusetts," writing that it was in nature, specifically from the fragrance of the "life-everlasting" found in "high pastures," not in society that one found "health."¹¹ The health of which he spoke was of both a spiritual and physical variety (Thoreau generally refused to

¹⁰For the religious thought of Transcendentalism, including its debt to German Idealism, see the following, for example: David Robinson, "A Religious Demonstration: The Theological Emergence of New England Transcendentalism" and Robert D. Richardson, "Schleiermacher and the Transcendentalists" in *Transient and Permanent: The Transcendentalist Movement and Its Contexts*, ed. Charles Capper and Conrad E. Wright (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society and Northeastern University Press, 1999); Philip Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), and Rene Welleck, "The Minor Transcendentalists and German Philosophy," *NEQ* 15 (1942): 652-680.

¹¹Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 9; Thoreau, "The Natural History of Massachusetts" in *Henry David Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherall (New York: Library Classics of the United States, 2001), 22.

parse the physical and the spiritual).¹² In his daily excursions recorded in his journal as much as in his published travel narratives, Thoreau threaded the line between “the timeless and universal” and the “temporal and specific,” believing that truth was both “immanent” and “transcendent” in nature, so, then, was the experience of Nature both sensorial and intellectual.¹³ In fact, the development of his senses became a spiritual exercise—or phrased differently, Nature educated the spiritual senses, since spirit and matter were essential parts of the same whole. Thus, to have spiritual sight meant not just to look at nature but to develop “a true sauntering eye.”¹⁴ As Thoreau would later proclaim in his essay “Walking,” the derivation of “saunter” was “sainte terre,” which translated to “holy land.”¹⁵ Thus the saunterer literally was a holy-lander—one who walks on sacred ground and, by extension, a “true sauntering eye” is one that perceives nature’s holiness wherever its gaze falls.

The information that arose through such heightened perception was profoundly theological. First and foremost, developed spiritual senses led to the knowledge that God was immanent in Nature. As a Transcendentalist, Thoreau’s precise definition of God appropriates and defies traditional Christian theology. On the one hand, his journal is replete with references in which Thoreau appears to take for granted the sovereignty, singularity, and maleness of God. However, he once admitted to his friend Harrison Blake that, though he used the term “God” to describe the being he hoped to love and venerate, he was “not

¹²A number of scholars have noted Thoreau’s belief, often presented over against Emerson, perhaps unfairly cast as an immaterialist, that the material and the spiritual were equally important, real, and wholly inseparable. Albanese, *Nature Religion*, 90–91; Richard J. Schneider, *Henry David Thoreau* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 7; Joel Porte, “‘God Himself Culminates in the Present Moment’: Thoughts on Thoreau’s Faith,” *The Thoreau Society Bulletin* 144 (1978): 3, and Harding, “Swedenborgian Spirit and Thoreauvian Sense: Another look at Correspondence,” *Journal of American Studies* 8 (1974): 71.

¹³Stephen Spratt, “‘To Find God in Nature’: Thoreau’s Poetics of Natural History,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 45 (2012): 163.

¹⁴September 13, 1582, *Journal*, 4:351.

¹⁵Thoreau, “Walking” in *Henry David Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems*, 225.

sure that that is the name.”¹⁶ Furthermore, the God described in Thoreau’s writings is not the historical and personal deity of the Bible. Though he still employed traditionally Christian language to describe the personhood of God, the site of the connection as well as the human ability to know Him are informed by Transcendentalist concepts of correspondence and of humanity’s inherent divinity. As a Transcendentalist, Thoreau “based his faith on human participation in the divine mind.”¹⁷ The mind of God, furthermore, is known “in his [*sic*] works” and the way to glorify Him was to “[come] out here and behold a thousand painted butterflies and other beautiful insects which people the air.” The spiritual necessity of an exterior worship space had prompted Emerson—and later Thoreau—to chide worshippers who sat in pews in churches to worship a deity whose presence had effectively been boxed out.¹⁸

The revelation that God was to be found in nature led Thoreau naturally to his second theological doctrine: the path to salvation. Notwithstanding confessional variations from a traditional, Christian standpoint, salvation refers to the reconciliation of humanity to God. Human beings, as a result of the Fall are both sinful by nature and liable to sinful behavior, which is a blemish on humanity that separates them from God. Thus, attaining salvation—by grace, by ritual, by faith—meant an ontological change had taken effect. The sinner, either cloaked in the righteousness of Christ or sacralized from within, had become sinless and, therefore, worthy of residing in the presence of God even while retaining his or her humanity (one did not then become divine). Thoreau, arising out of a Unitarian

¹⁶Thoreau to H.G.O Blake, April 3, 1850 in *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York: New York University Press, 1958), 257–58.

¹⁷Nina Baym, “Thoreau’s View of Science,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26 (1965): 228.

¹⁸This is recalled in Emerson’s Divinity School Address whereby he muses wistfully that the snow falling outside the church window preached with greater vigor than the preacher, Barzillai Frost. Conrad Wright, “Emerson, Barzillai Frost, and the Divinity School Address,” *Liberal Christians: Essays on American Unitarian History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970). Thoreau expresses his own critique of wayward churchgoers in the Sunday chapter of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, 63–77, and a journal entry of May 1, 1859 (*Journal*, 12:170–71).

tradition emphasizing humanity's potential and essential goodness and a Transcendentalist movement highlighting its innate divinity, did not believe that human nature was ontologically separate from God. The cause of separation between human beings and God or "sin," as he defined it, related to humanity's unnatural state. Sin, in traditional orthodox Christian understanding, is framed as loss—the loss of control of the will, of humans' pristine nature, and of proximity to God. For Thoreau, however, sin is framed as neglect: allowing one's innate divinity to atrophy, by denying one sustenance from the source of divinity: nature.¹⁹ Having left the forest for the modern world and eschewing their original, naturalized state or essential wildness, human beings effectively cut themselves off from divinity—that of God and their own.

Cut off from God is the traditional definition of eternal death—both physical and spiritual—or hell in Christian theology (though hell takes on a more vivid and substantive reality in certain interpretations). Thoreau indicates little to no belief in the concept of eternal death or literal hell. Yet, his concept of an earthly, spiritual death is quite keen. For Thoreau, spiritual death or hell is a present reality, one that most civilized people experience by their alienation from nature. "What shall we do with a man who is afraid of the woods, their solitude and darkness?" asked Thoreau along these lines, "What salvation is there for him?"²⁰ Yet, hope remained. Much like hell was a condition of earthly existence, so was heaven a present possibility. "We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish, a purely sensuous life," wrote Thoreau in *A Week*.²¹ Thus, salvation signified entry to this earthly heaven, wherein each person had returned to his or her wild and naturalized state.

¹⁹The word "sin" rarely appears in Thoreau's published works. When it does, as in *Walden*, it is to show that the cure for sin almost always involves some sort of contact or return from nature (i.e. the notion that while the sun burns, even the "vilest sinner" may return. Thoreau, *Walden* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004], 314).

²⁰November 16, 1850, *Journal*, 2:100.

²¹Thoreau, *A Week*, 382.

Thoreau conceived of immortality or eternity as an extension of this sensuous heaven. Becoming naturalized also meant achieving “immortality within nature.”²² Just as Thoreau changed the temporal and physical orientation of heaven, so he upended traditional Christian notions of linear time where the world marched toward the kingdom of God and the Final Judgment. Forging a connection to nature enabled one to participate in its eternal cycle of death and rebirth in the present moment. Nature, even while lying fallow in winter, bore new life each year. “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,” mused Thoreau, “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, lisping birds and trickling rills?”²³ Thus, there was no end of days; immortality did not begin after some final apocalypse, but was already possible through nature’s annual renewal. Even as the human body decayed, the “divine faculty” of the true “seer”—or the person who came to nature with senses attuned to God—remained eternally youthful.²⁴ This evokes Thoreau’s Transcendentalized reading of Hindu philosophy where the idea of “sustained transcendence” is a possibility.²⁵ In his understanding, transcendence and immortality are possible even while living and retaining one’s body since their achievement is the result of a feeling of connection or absorption into nature. Knowing and understanding nature, feeling connected to it in its original and pristine state, then, became the practical and necessary means of being saved in the here and now and for all eternity.

The question remained: *how* exactly could one effect a closer understanding of and relationship to nature? The common

²²Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 1973), 234.

²³Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 81.

²⁴January 27, 1854, *Journal*, 6:80.

²⁵Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 89.

critique among those who disapproved of Transcendentalist aims was that they were merely “visionaries who [announced] a new future of glorious transformation,” but then never explained “how it is to be achieved.”²⁶ Perhaps realizing that walking around Concord’s domesticated wilderness was not the same as seeking primitive nature, Thoreau sought more actively for closeness to a primordial time, to an original wilderness, where the divine could be met in an undiluted state.²⁷ Yet, he lacked the skill and knowledge to bring about such encounters with the wildness of wilderness. Thus, it was in the translation of theological categories to their practical application that Thoreau turned to the American Indian. For Thoreau, the “country in its primitive state” was always linked to remnants of Indian life recovered in scattered arrowheads but more importantly to the Indian him- or herself.²⁸ Thoreau needed Indians to mediate sacred encounters with the divine in wild places, but more so, to translate and package wild nature for the civilized person much as writers of the Bible had packaged the saving word of God. For him, Indians were the apostles of America’s wilderness.

Finding Wildness Among the Indians

Before delving into Thoreau’s engagement with American Indians, it is necessary, first, to establish the culture out of which his Indian interest emerged. The ethos of the formative years of colonial expansion between the fifteenth and nineteenth century are summed up by Pauleena MacDougall who writes, “Europeans had the confidence, based upon their religious beliefs and the scientific revolution, that they could comprehend and eventually control everything around them. They were not of

²⁶Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 77.

²⁷Robert Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau’s Reading: A Study in Intellectual History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014): 107–8; Rosalie Murphy Baum, “Thoreau’s Concept of the Wild,” *The Concord Saunterer* 17 (1984): 41–42; Joshua David Bellin, *Medicine Bundle: Indian Sacred Performance and American Literature, 1824–1932* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 32.

²⁸Thoreau, *A Week*, 194.

the natural world, but distinct from it.”²⁹ Whereas many of the native people who the colonizers encountered made their home in and drew their vitality from the deepest and darkest places in nature—wilderness, in other words. Thus, the evolution of a concept of wilderness became synonymous with the Indian. The casting of Indians as “of the wilderness” or wild referred not just to Indians’ physical condition but to their cultural and their spiritual condition as well. Drawing upon the language of Roderick Nash, the Indians suffered from a “wilderness condition,” one characterized by its potential for licentiousness and inhuman savagery; the further from civilization, the further from order and the further from God.³⁰ Thus, when European settlers arrived to tame the wilderness, it included believing “very strongly that their mission was to change the nature of the Native people.”³¹

As with other theaters of colonization in the New World, the pervasive belief among European settlers that American Indians were by nature “wild” and “savage” had the intended effect of relegating the latter to an earlier phase of societal development. Roy Harvey Pearce famously coined the phrase “savagism” to describe this position and the accompanying conviction that it was the duty of the more advanced society to Christianize and civilize those stuck in an earlier phase of existence.³² Savagism, or “conversionism” as proposed more recently by Joshua David Bellin, represented a self-fulfilling prophecy where religious and political aims met for the purpose of subduing an intransigent obstacle to western expansion.³³ Conversionism served as a psychic salve for any reservations Europeans may have had about seizing territory inhabited by indigenous people. In the process, such

²⁹Pauleena MacDougall, *The Penobscot Dance of Resistance: Tradition in the History of a People* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2004), 46.

³⁰Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 5th ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), chap. 2.

³¹MacDougall, *Penobscot Dance of Resistance*, 46.

³²Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 121.

³³Bellin, *The Demon of the Continent*, 15.

rationalizations stripped American Indians not only of their right to the land but to their very humanity. The growing perception that Indians were unchangeable in their barbarity would affect even the most genuine missionary.

At their outset, missions to American Indians had operated on the assumption that they could be converted. However, as years turned to centuries and natives held tightly to their customs, it seemed in the view of their colonizers that American Indians were only “lowered, not raised” by contact with Euro-Americans.³⁴ Gradually, the argument for civilizing through Christianizing began to lose favor in light of the continued advance of the western frontier and the proliferation of scientific and ethnologic racism. It is difficult to say whether one fueled or produced the other. What is clear is that while frustration grew over the unwillingness of American Indians to divest themselves of their allegedly savage practices, the US government continued to push for the swift settlement of the West, and ethnographers came to their aid with a scientific rationale for why the Indian should go.

Much as savagism had helped assuage the cognitive dissonance of early colonial settlement, theories of scientific and ethnologic racism justified the urgency and impatience of the makers of US Indian policy. Yet, at this stage the underlying question had morphed; rather than “can native people be civilized,” they asked, “are native people human?”³⁵ Perhaps the most effective expounders of the theory that American Indians fell earlier on some timeline of human development were Lewis Henry Morgan and Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, both of whom Thoreau read and quoted frequently in his Indian Notebooks. Morgan was most responsible for “disseminating a belief in pervasive, essential Indianness” that was “immune to variation or amelioration.”³⁵ Cast as scientific fact, American

³⁴Philip Weeks, *“Farewell, My Nation”: American Indians and the United States in the Nineteenth Century*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2016), 29–30.

³⁵Bellin, “In the Company of Savagists,” 4. Morgan’s most significant contributions to Indian ethnography and theories of ethnologic racism were *League of the Ho-De’-No-Sau-Nee, Iroquois* (1851) and *League of the Iroquois* (1847). Thoreau quotes from the latter extensively in his eighth Indian Notebook (378–406).

Indians' refusal to adapt to western civilization was attributed to an innate inability to move past their current condition. Indians were, simply put, a different sort of being, subhuman, over whom the Euro-Americans could hold dominion. It was Schoolcraft, however, who posited a biblical origin to what he perceived as Indian intransigence. "Indianness" was the result of a "lapsed state" rooted in the "dispersal of various races of men" in Genesis. Indians from the start had been drawn to the wilderness, which resulted in their stagnation and would lead eventually to their extinction.³⁶ The scientific and biblical bases for the ideological dehumanization of American Indians led naturally to their physical dehumanization through the stripping of rights, property, and, ultimately, identity. Need and means met and married in the ethnologic racism that grounded nineteenth-century US Indian policy.

It was not just the Indian Commissioner who found value in the work of Schoolcraft and others. The ethnographic study of indigenous people, which in the nineteenth century was a relatively new genre in the burgeoning field of anthropology, found an audience among many whose degree of interest ranged from professional to casual. Thoreau can be said to fall somewhere in between the two poles. Not an ethnographer by trade, he read much and widely in all things Indian including Schoolcraft's *Alcic Researches* and *The Indian in his Wigwam*, which he quoted extensively in the Indian Notebooks.³⁷ As Joshua David Bellin illuminated in his seminal article "In the Company of Savagists," Thoreau's eager transcription of Schoolcraft's works

³⁶Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading*, 105. Schoolcraft made this argument in his six-volume series appearing between 1851 and 1857, titled *Historical and Statistical Information Respecting the History, Condition, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Company). This study was originally commissioned by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

³⁷See his borrowing record at Harvard library, published in Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Emerson the Essayist: An Outline of His Philosophical Development Through 1836 with Special Emphasis on the Sources and Interpretation of Nature*. 2nd vol. (Hartford, CT: Transcendental Books, 1972), 192–94; Schoolcraft, *Alcic Researches*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1839); *The Indian and His Wigwam* (New York, Dewitt & Davenport, 1848). Colloquially referred to as Thoreau's Indian Notebooks, the actual title is *Extracts from Works Relating to Indians*, 11 vols. (Manuscript Collection, Morgan Library, MA 595–606, Thoreau 43–54).

reveals that Thoreau, at least, found value in the latter's work—he wrote no marginal critiques of his findings, as he occasionally did elsewhere, which is testament to this—or, at most, employed Schoolcraft to support for his own views on American Indians.³⁸

During the height of his period of Indian interest and after having come in contact with Schoolcraft and those with similar views, he wrote in his journal of 1854, what reads like a lament to the foregone conclusion that the Indians were destined to die out:

We survive, in one sense, in our posterity and in the continuance of our race, but when a race of men, of Indians for instance, become extinct, is not that the end of the world for them? Is not the world forever beginning and coming to an end, both to men and races? Suppose we were to foresee that the Saxon race to which we belong would become extinct the present winter—disappear from the face of the earth—would it not look to us like the end, the dissolution of the world? Such is the prospect of the Indians.³⁹

Robert Sattelmeyer describes this “almost gothic taste for melancholy reminders of the Indians’ decline” while romanticizing their primitive virtues as a relatively consistent theme throughout Thoreau’s life.⁴⁰ Some, like Robert Sayre, believed that Thoreau eventually overcame his savagist inclinations, particularly following his interactions with Joe Polis in 1857. It is telling that Thoreau expressed reservation at the idea of publishing the manuscript that would become *The Maine Woods* because he worried how the portrayal of Polis would appear to him.⁴¹ Sayre argues that Thoreau’s references to Polis in the text as simply “the Indian” show that he recognized him “as a person who illustrated the depth and diversity of Indians.”⁴²

³⁸Bellin, “In the Company of Savagists,” 5–10.

³⁹December 28, 1853, *Journal*, 31–32.

⁴⁰Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau’s Reading*, 102.

⁴¹Thoreau to James Russell Lowell, January 23, 1858, *Correspondence*, 504.

⁴²Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indian*, 184–85; Albert Keiser, “Thoreau’s Manuscripts on the Indians,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 27 (1928): 196.

Further, Thoreau's period of fervent gathering of Indian knowledge terminated the year following his excursion with Polis. Arguably the relationship between the two men made it more difficult for Thoreau to accept the findings of Indian ethnographers.

Despite his vocal support for abolition and the plight of the Indians, Thoreau did not channel his sorrow and respect for American Indians into any formal or active attempt at defending them. Given this fact, one could also read Thoreau's labeling of Polis as "the Indian" as a means of distancing himself from his personal relationship while simultaneously boiling down Polis as a representative of all Indians—a fact that complicates the notion of Polis as a representation of Indian "diversity." Chastened though Thoreau may have been by his affiliation with Polis, the Indian still represented a source for and mediator of the American wilderness rather than a people whose traditions and lives deserved protection in their current tribal contexts. Unlike the US government, his aims were preservationist: he needed to preserve, not squelch, some essential Indianness. Yet, just like the US government, Thoreau's preservationism arose from the fact that he needed something *from* the American Indians, not land, per se, but the "source of universality and rebirth."⁴³ Thus, the ways in which Thoreau engaged with American Indian history, traditions, and the people themselves exhibit his own translation of Schoolcraft and other theorists for his own, spiritual aims. His theological system evolved in conjunction with his growing knowledge about American Indians. So as he imbibed the scientific theory that the Indians were somehow doomed to extinction, his desire to preserve carefully the Indian connection to the wild became a matter of spiritual necessity, which can be seen first of all in the expedited pace of Indian research in the 1850s and then through the ways in which he extracted Indian knowledge (exegesis), sought to approximate Indian spiritual discipline in his own life (practice), and memorialized Indians and "Indianness" in his writings (canon).

⁴³Hanson, *Thoreau's Indian of the Mind*, 11.

The Indian As Sacred Text: Exegesis

Reading was the entry point of inquiry in the intellectual and Transcendentalist context out of which Thoreau emerged. Though Transcendentalists placed a premium on the authority of experience and intuition, rarely did they embark upon an endeavor, spiritual or otherwise, without first consulting the sources. In this sense, Thoreau's interest in Native Americans is comparable to late medieval humanists' study of the Bible. Erasmus and other sixteenth-century humanists advocated for *ad fontes* or the return to the sources, believing the most accurate and truthful relation of divine truth was best found in the original sources and original language. The basic assumption upon which humanism rests, then, is the existence of a pristine and original sacred text untainted by the corruption of human institutions.⁴⁴ For Thoreau, the sacred text to be recovered was not literally textual: divine nature itself, in its pre-colonial form, was the sacred manuscript in question. He "read" nature on a daily basis in his native Concord and then translated its revelations onto the page; however, the nature of his beloved Concord was domesticated in comparison to the wilderness that seventeenth-century settlers had encountered. Even the densest and remotest corners of Concord's forest resounded with the sounds of civilization, namely the whistle of the railroad or the clacking of the western telegraph. Nature he found all around him, but nature in its earliest, uncorrupted form was increasingly hard to find. So at one level, Thoreau's orientation toward American Indians, generally, and to the Penobscot Indians who served as his guides, more specifically, was exegetical: their knowledge, histories, and myths about nature were to his theology of the wild what the Greek New Testament was to early modern Christianity.

Thoreau's exegesis of American Indians' knowledge and practices occurred in three primary ways: in extensive study of early accounts of Indian life and history, in cataloguing and absorbing Indian language, and in recording and reimagining

⁴⁴Alistar E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1987).

Indian myth. Thoreau's interest in the earliest written accounts reflected a lifelong interest in the presence of American Indians in New England's history. Thoreau was a veritable divining-rod for arrowheads, seeming only to think the word and one would appear at his feet. During the last decade of his life, this mysterious and magnetic affinity intensified into a comprehensive need to collect information about Indian life, primarily in America, but outside as well. This need was reified in the "Indian Notebooks" which he began composing in 1847 until April of 1861—though 1852–1858 represented the years of most fervent recording.⁴⁵ Many have speculated as to the purpose of the Notebooks. Initially Franklin Sanborn, then others like Albert Keiser, believed that Thoreau intended to write a history of the Indian for which the Notebooks would have served as source material—a fact seemingly corroborated by the presence of a proposed table of contents written on loose-leaf paper and slipped into the first Notebook.⁴⁶ Undoubtedly, the material recorded in the Notebooks influenced his published works, most notably, *The Maine Woods*, though excerpts and references appear in *A Week*, *Walden*, and *Cape Cod*, among others.⁴⁷ Thoreau's intention for a stand-alone history of the American Indian is more nebulous. Robert Sayre detects a difference between the Indian Notebooks as source material versus that for his other written works. For *A Week*, *Walden*, and his posthumously published manuscripts, Thoreau's journal often served as a place where the writer tested different ideas or experimented with prose that eventually made its way into

⁴⁵There are numerous accounts that reference this phenomenon, including many mentions in Thoreau's journal. Sayre opens *Thoreau and the American Indians*, describing Thoreau's "uncanny gifts" for finding arrowheads (ix, 110). Sattelmeyer; *Thoreau's Reading*, 105. There are actually twelve Notebooks counting one dedicated to his travels in Canada.

⁴⁶Keiser, "Thoreau's Manuscript on the Indians," 184. The looseleaf paper contains a list of Thoreau's proposed topics as compared to those of Schoolcraft's in the fifth volume of the latter's *Historical and Statistical Information*. Thoreau's list is considerably longer and includes an array of topics beginning with "Ante Columbian History" and ending with "Arts and Uses Derived from Indians." Thoreau, *Extracts from Works Relating to Indians*, 1st vol, MA 596, CN Thoreau 44.

⁴⁷Brianne Keith, "Thoreau's 'Indian Books' and Bradley Dean's 'Broken Task': A Personal Remembrance," *Thoreau Soc. Bul.* 260 (2007): 1.

print. With the exception of marginal asides and the occasional comment or gloss, the Indian Notebooks are primarily a collection of quoted passages from over two hundred sources, covering practically the entire gamut of Indian life, culture, and history and it is difficult to detect a topical focus, let alone the hint of a narrative direction. As Sayre wrote, Thoreau's reading and notetaking on Indians represented "a wilder raw material that seldom went straight into his finished work."⁴⁸ While this does not preclude the possibility that Thoreau at one time considered the possibility of writing a book on the Indians, the Notebooks' eventual purpose, according to Sayre, was most likely a personal Indian "Bible" of sorts, intended for the edification of a man who saw knowledge of the Indians as instrumental to the "progression of a developed spiritual philosophy."⁴⁹

In either case, for an aspiring exegete of nature such as Thoreau, the impulse to seek the earliest written accounts of the New World and its indigenous peoples was perhaps the simplest means to return to pre-civilization America. These accounts were compelling in their own right, namely for what their European authors said about the landscape of the New World, particularly of his native New England. Thoreau gravitated for this reason to written accounts like that of John Josselyn's *New England Rarities Discovered* (1672). Intrepid voyagers like Josselyn (1638–1675) "stood nearer to nature, nearer to the facts, than this, and hence their books have more life in them."⁵⁰ Their "open-eyed" wonder at the various flora and fauna was precisely Thoreau's response (or that which he wished to effect) in his own writings on nature. Josselyn and the like were like the "American Adam discovering and new-naming magical beasts in the Garden."⁵¹ Of equally great interest to Thoreau were Europeans' descriptions of the

⁴⁸Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indian*, 108; Keiser, "Thoreau's Manuscript on the Indians," 184, 192.

⁴⁹Richard Henry Fleck, *Henry Thoreau and John Muir Among the Indians* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1985), 8; Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading*, 106–7.

⁵⁰January 9, 1855, *Journal*, 7:108–9.

⁵¹Philip F. Gura, "Thoreau and John Josselyn," *NEQ* 48 (1975): 508, 515.

indigenous peoples with whom they came in contact. In a winter journal entry of 1853, Thoreau remarked that “I think myself in a wilder country, and a little nearer to primitive times, when I read in old books which spell the word savages with an *l* (salvages), like John Smith’s ‘General Historie of Virginia, etc.,’ reminding me of the derivation of the word from *sylva*.” *Sylva*, translated meant the forest trees of a particular region. While it is too much to speculate whether Smith would have agreed with his interpretation, for Thoreau this seventeenth-century spelling was a closer approximation of who the pre-colonial American Indians were: not “savages,” but “*salvages*, men of the *woods*.”⁵²

Smith’s was one of a few accounts by English settlers that Thoreau employed, and one of the few that focused exclusively on Virginia; Thoreau preferred to read and excerpt those devoted to his beloved New England. Regional specificity aside, he was often skeptical of English accounts for what he perceived as a lack of authority or reliability.⁵³ For the opposite reason, he made regular use of the *Relations des Jésuites de la Nouvelle-France* (a series of published chronicles by Jesuits in French Canada spanning 1632 to 1673). Thoreau perceived the Jesuits’ attempts at converting indigenous people in Canada as genuine; their religious overtures did not mask other, potentially more sinister, intentions.⁵⁴ Even more important, however, the French Jesuits exhibited a tremendous respect for the Indians, treating them as a “separate and independent people.”⁵⁵ That he felt he could trust the descriptions of the Jesuits was a gift of immeasurable value for Thoreau who, as the exegete, had the immensely difficult task of reading through the agenda of colonial authors to uncover a true account of Indian and pre-civilized life in the New World. “The History of New

⁵²February 23, 1853, *Journal*, 4:494.

⁵³Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indians*, 126–27; Keiser, “Thoreau’s Indian Manuscripts,” 186–87.

⁵⁴January 22, 1852, *Journal*, 3:218.

⁵⁵Lawrence Willson, “Thoreau and Roman Catholicism,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 42 (1956): 164.

England would read very differently if written by Frenchmen," he once remarked.⁵⁶

The French came close, but even their accounts were only a pale facsimile of the more elusive ideal of an Indian account of natural history. Closer to the wilderness that Thoreau wished to recover were the Indians of his time, who, while removed by some generations from those who had actually lived in the American Eden, had inherited the knowledge of nature from their forebears. From a textual and exegetical standpoint, their knowledge of Indian language and religious cosmologies were foundational for Thoreau's desire to reconstruct a primitive American wilderness. Indian language—that which was recorded in early sources, but more often that which came via Joe Polis and Joe Aitteon, Thoreau's Penobscot guides in the Maine Woods—provided him with a natural, "biblical" language. His guides spoke the Penobscot dialect: a language that would bring any hearer "back to the origins of [the native] race's experience in the New World." Thoreau constantly enjoined Polis and other guides to "converse in their primitive tongue."⁵⁷ Reflecting the New England and Puritan imperative to seek a "primitive" existence, one closest to an early, pristine and apostolic time, their words provided him with an entry into a world that existed before the civilizing urge of Europeans. In *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau recounts an evening spent "lying there listening to the Indians." He describes his own curiosity and ignorance as to their speech writing that "[there] can be no more startling evidence of there being a distinct and comparatively aboriginal race, than to hear this unaltered Indian language, which the white man cannot speak nor understand." Hearing Joe Aitteon and his fellow Penobscot converse allowed Thoreau to return to an original, sacred time where he could stand "or rather [lie], as near to the primitive man of America, that night, as any of its discoverers ever did."⁵⁸

⁵⁶Quoted in Willson, "Thoreau and Roman Catholicism," 164.

⁵⁷Philip F. Gura, "Thoreau's Maine Woods Indians: More Representative Men," *American Literature* 49 (1977): 378.

⁵⁸Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 136–37.

These reverential encounters with tribal language are supplemented with Thoreau's meticulous cataloguing of both Penobscot and Abenaki language which made Thoreau seem aware of the inadequacy of his own native tongue for describing natural phenomena. Perhaps he would have agreed with Robert Kern's assessment that the possibility of an "ecocentric poet" was a fallacy because language inevitably mediates and therefore distorts the experience of natural things as they are.⁵⁹ Thoreau expressed frustration at this sort of inter-species aphasia when he remarked that when he heard a "bird singing, I cannot think of any words that will imitate it. What word can stand in place of a bird's note?"⁶⁰ It was for this reason that he vastly preferred Indian languages because they seemed to express exactly and simply a given natural phenomenon. Partial to Father Sebastien Rasle's dictionary of Abenaki, he mused approvingly in his journal of 1858 that what Indians "have a word for, they have a thing for." The Indians have words which "are not in our botanies," he continued, but "which imply a more practical and vital science." Yet, what this vast botanical vocabulary revealed for Thoreau was precisely that the Indian was "much more conversant . . . with any wild animal or plant than we are," that "the Indian stood nearer to wild nature than we."⁶¹

This "dictionary of Indian languages," coupled with the many Penobscot words provided by Joe Polis, gave him a mode of description beyond scientific taxonomy. Indian language, and Indian knowledge more broadly, as a living expression of nature and natural phenomena, provided a spiritual curative to the coldness of scientific observation. Because Thoreau often struggled with balancing the precision of the scientist with the soul of the poet, he was often critical of books on natural history, which "[aimed] commonly to be hasty schedules, or inventories of God's property" written by "some clerk" and "do not in the least teach the divine view of nature, but the popular view or

⁵⁹Kern, "Fabricating Ecocentric Discourse in the American Poem (and Elsewhere)," *New Literary History* 37 (2006): 432.

⁶⁰May 7, 1852, *Journal*, 4:31.

⁶¹March 5, 1858, *Journal*, 10:293-95.

rather the popular method of studying nature.”⁶² In fact, when Thoreau was prompted by the Association for the Advancement of Science to complete a form stating his interests, he feared that his particular interests would not be considered scientific. “The fact is,” he wrote, “that I am a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot.”⁶³ If Thoreau’s theological proposition was correct and studying nature served as a means of reconciling humanity to God, then both the method employed in observing nature and the language one used to describe these observations must be imbued with reverence and religious intention.⁶⁴ Thoreau expounded upon the primary difference between the scientist and the scientist-poet a few months after issuing his reply to the AAS, noting that it was the latter, who “has the most use for nature as the raw material of tropes and symbols with which to describe his life.” Continuing, he wrote that “The man of science, who is not seeking for expression but for a fact to be expressed merely, studies nature as a dead language.”⁶⁵ Science without reverence deadened nature’s divinity. To become the “complete scientist,” one must “[reacquire] instincts,” which are possessed “by animals and possibly Indians,” and which attune one to nature’s “universal rhythm.”⁶⁶ Luckily for the would-be scientist, Thoreau believed it was possible to reacquire Indian instincts. Instincts, which he conveniently recasts in *The Maine Woods* as “merely sharpened and educated senses,” began with the translation of crude, European languages into the lilting and spiritualizing cadence of the Indian tongue.⁶⁷

Not just Indian language itself, but the language of Indian myth was of particular interest to Thoreau. Myths, in their most basic religious sense, are narrative efforts to understand creation, redemption, death, and salvation or, put differently, to

⁶²Thoreau, *A Week*, 98.

⁶³March 5, 1853, *Journal*, 5:4; He officially declined membership in the AAS, Thoreau to Spencer F. Baird on December 19, 1853, *Correspondence*, 309.

⁶⁴Baym, “Thoreau’s View of Science,” 224.

⁶⁵May 10, 1853, *Journal*, 5:135.

⁶⁶Baym, “Thoreau’s View of Science,” 226.

⁶⁷Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 185.

understand the divine, the world, and humanity's relationship to both. Thoreau recorded numerous Indian myths replete with images of nature in his Notebooks and in certain of his published works. In light of Thoreau's exegetical desire to read nature through the eyes of the Indian, perhaps there was no better textual form than myth for revealing how American Indians "wrote" (or, more often, communicated orally) the sacred history of nature. Unlike his cataloguing of Indian language, for which there was not much more to do but record, Thoreau sought a more active role when it came to Indian myth. A number of literary critics have alluded to the fact that, in his reading of Indian myths, Thoreau went beyond the role of the traditional exegete—whose objective was to closely approximate the author's meaning in a given sacred text—to desiring instead to become the author, the myth-maker himself. According to Bellin, myths were significant for Thoreau, not necessarily for their content, but by allowing him to "recover for himself the original condition in which the early creators of great myths found themselves."⁶⁸ By divorcing these myths from their "original tribal context," the exegete is transported not into the tribal present where these myths constitute a living piece of their tradition, but to a "time of origin in America," a prelapsarian, pre-colonial past.⁶⁹

In the fourth Indian Notebook, Thoreau made a point of recording in its entirety the Algonquin myth of the Great Serpent who is killed during his attempts to destroy humanity and the world through a flood. Following the Serpent's death, various animals work together to stop the flood, which they accomplish by diving under the water to find earth and then blowing the earth onto the water, causing the flood waters to subside.⁷⁰ It seems likely that this account, recorded in his notebook sometime in 1851, would find its way into Thoreau's revision of *Walden*, specifically its concluding moments. "There

⁶⁸Bellin, *Demon of the Continent*, 157.

⁶⁹Hanson, *Thoreau's Indian of the Mind*, 47.

⁷⁰Thoreau, *Extracts from Works Relating to Indians*, MA 598, CN Thoreau 46, 4:97–99.

is a solid bottom every where [*sic*],” he writes, lamenting, however, that few seem able to find it, as they slowly drown in spiritually “destructive materialism.”⁷¹ Always looking down for “a solid foundation,” Thoreau admonished those who “hang by the beam of the scale and try to weigh less,” to hunker down to the earth, “to weight, to, settle, to gravitate,” and find themselves again rooted to the source of spiritual renewal.⁷² In this manner, Thoreau actively projected the modern spiritual crisis he sought to combat into Indian myth. No longer just reader but writer of myth, Thoreau reimagined this cosmology as a fight against the materialistic tendencies of the modern world, which like the animals in the myth, involved a return to the source of all life, to the earth itself. Through their language and myth, Thoreau found one way to absorb the American Indians’ natural affinity and almost symbiotic understanding of nature.

The Indian as Model: Practice

Beyond the exegetical, the Indian was also the model for the devotional practices that facilitated access to the divinity in and of nature. Just as there are standards of behavior for traditional houses of worship such as churches, so were there proper ways of conducting oneself, particularly one’s body, while in nature. These behaviors were not merely gestures of reverence, but were required to make connection to the divine possible. If the natural world was their church, Indians knew best how to conduct themselves in its sanctuary to effect just such a connection. Thoreau’s interests in Indian devotion, however, were not of a literal sort. Besides an interest in their cosmologies, he never expressed interest in native religious practices in their contemporary forms. He recorded a number of religious rituals in his Indian Notebooks, but his interests were far more diffuse and they took up no more space than any other aspect of Indian history or life. For Thoreau, Indian piety was manifested in their ability, first, to discern nature’s messages and desires

⁷¹Thoreau, *Walden*, 330; Hanson, *Thoreau’s Indian of the Mind*, 72.

⁷²Thoreau, *Walden*, 330.

for its various creations and, second, to translate these revelations both into their daily life and into their behavior while in nature.

Born and reared in wilderness, American Indians (or at least the primitive Indians of his imagining) experienced a symbiosis with nature in a way that those reared in towns did not. Thoreau included himself among townfolk, even though some, like Emerson, attributed an Indian sensibility to the mystic of Walden. "His power of observation seemed to indicate additional senses," wrote Emerson, asserting that had Thoreau been "born among Indians, he would have been a hunter."⁷³ Yet, in his own reading and research, Thoreau encountered those who believed that such instincts were confined to Indians, the children of wilderness, and had not passed to white settlers, the conquerors of the wild. In his seventh Indian Notebook, Thoreau quoted Randolph Marcy whose assessment of the knowledge Indians gained from examining a trail read: "These faculties appear to be intuitive, and confined exclusively to the Indian: I have never seen a white man that could judge of these matters with such certainty as they."⁷⁴ Writing in *Walden*, Thoreau likened the shimmering lights of the pond to the light of spiritual illumination. His awareness of this "correspondence" was the result of a "habit of vision" that he had "deliberately cultivated" whereas Indians, who were accustomed to seeing the divine in the material, came to such revelations "spontaneous[ly]."⁷⁵ Thoreau found similar intuition in the Indians' facility with crafting canoes. Nature, argued Thoreau, had anticipated the shaping of the canoe when "the birch was made." The Indian, being spiritually in tune with Nature's purposes, divined the use of the birch, and the canoe became the vessel for water travel.⁷⁶ If such closeness to nature and God

⁷³Emerson, "Thoreau" in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 388.

⁷⁴Thoreau, *Extracts from Works Relating to the Indians*, MA 602, CN Thoreau 50, 7:402. Marcy's account was titled "Exploration of the Red River of Louisiana in the Year 1852" and was published in 1852/1853.

⁷⁵Harding, "Swedenborgian Spirit and Thoreauvian Sense," 76.

⁷⁶June 17, 1853, September 4, 1854, *Journal*, 5:265-66; 7:10.

was an instinct exclusively born in the Indian, then there was little Thoreau could do to alter his spiritual DNA. This brings Thoreau's renaming of "instinct" as "sharpened and educated sense" into higher relief. This simple literary elision was actually a critical reinterpretation that reflected his theological aims. If Indians' apprehension of Nature's design and desires could be acquired through education and practice—self-culture for the former Unitarian—then Thoreau could not only know nature as the Indian did, but impute "Indianness" onto and into himself.

Knowledge of Indian language helped Thoreau imagine a closer relationship to primitive nature, but calling something by its natural and most original name could only take one so far—and, as the saying went, one learned better by doing. Beginning even before his Indian interest took on the spiritual gravity that it would in the 1850s, Thoreau had been at work disciplining mind and body in order to focus his senses on divine nature. He had already found precedent for such practice in the example of the Greek Stoics and Hindu philosophers he read. In his journal of 1837, Thoreau expressed a desire to be compared to Stoics like Zeno of Citium who cultivated an "indifference of mind" toward worldly successes or failures which left the mind free to ponder higher truths. Later, he would encounter the principle of "non-attachment" in the *Laws of Manu* and the *Vedas*, which he believed went beyond the detachment of the Stoics and enabled the practitioner to participate in the world without feeling bound or attracted to it. Hindu philosophers, in Thoreau's view, had gone further than those of Christian or even Greek and Roman stock by exploring how, through "a disciplined withdrawal of one's mental powers from a concern for the empirical world," one could remain open to the "discovery of new 'doctrines'" while remaining wholly in the world.⁷⁷

As he began to implement a principled non-attachment during the 1840s, Thoreau began to connect a philosophy of non-attachment and the practices of American Indians. His time

⁷⁷Winfield E. Nagley, "Thoreau on Attachment, Detachment, and Non-Attachment," *Philosophy East and West* 3 (1954): 308, 311.

in the cabin at Walden Pond was an attempt to put these philosophical ideals into practice, by simplifying and decluttering his life of the distractions of civilization. Writing about his aims in *Walden*, Thoreau effectively summarized the essential question that his two-year sojourn had sought to answer: whether it was possible through the cultivation of a sort of “primitive and frontier life” “to combine the hardiness of these savages with the intellectualness of the civilized man?”⁷⁸ In other words, Thoreau’s self-imposed isolation was not for reason of misanthropy or even natural reclusiveness but rather to approximate what he perceived as the Indian way of life free from those “artificial wants” of society which had “proved a curse rather than a blessing to the human race.”⁷⁹ For those American Indians still living near (if no longer in) the primitive forest, the wilderness served as a buffer from the distractions and soul-killing vices of white civilization. For Thoreau, who left the relative isolation of Walden Pond in 1847, without a forest to divide him from his village, affecting the simplicity of Indian life would have to serve as the spiritual buffer to replace a physical one.

Of what did Indian simplicity consist, then? Most basically, the American Indian of Thoreau’s envisioning was the “good” or “noble” Indian who was untainted by the vices of civilization and for whom home was not a physical destination, but a cultivated interior, and who needed very little to live happily in nature. Living in nature meant working and understanding its resources—through farming, hunting, crafting, and merely surviving. Why go to the market when one could grow or trap one’s food? Why hire builders when one could make shelter for oneself as the American Indians had done for centuries? He attempted this sort of life while at Walden. More practically for Thoreau, it was Indians’ ability to bring a consciousness of nature with them anywhere and thus, to always be at home in its

⁷⁸Thoreau, *Walden*, 13, 11.

⁷⁹H.S. Salt, “Henry D. Thoreau” in *Thoreau in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates*, ed. Sandra Harbert Petruionis (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 136.

wilderness. Asking Joe Polis whether he was glad to be home again following their journey up the Allegash in 1857, Polis had replied, "It makes no difference to me where I am," to which Thoreau had commented that such a response was "the Indian's pretence always." Polis had previously recounted a story of nearly freezing to death in the wilderness but eventually making his way back home; on another occasion, he boasted that he could make it back to Oldtown (the main Penobscot village) in just three days over rocky terrain were they to abandon him without a canoe.⁸⁰ Polis became Thoreau's patron Indian saint for many reasons, one being his (at least stated) ability to divest himself of everything, but himself and his wits—to be unattached. Though Polis had a family and lived happily enough in town, in Thoreau's view he was the most wild, most natural, when he lived most simply.

Thoreau's attribution of simplicity to Indian life repeats a common nineteenth-century assumption. First, it implies that Indian life is, at base, simple and not the variegated, diverse, and complex network of kinship and tribal societies that it was. Thus, it is unlikely that Polis truly felt the site of his home was incidental—it may be, he said as much for Thoreau's benefit, properly reading his white companion as having certain expectations of "Indianness." Secondly, and more subtly, the implication is that he, as the civilized (white) person, could successfully cut himself off from society for his benefit, whereas American Indians doing so only expedited their march toward extinction. Of course, American Indians could not successfully enter civilized society either because it would have a different but equally deleterious effect on them as a race. Essentially, they had no recourse—they were damned if they civilized and damned if they did not. The effect, discussed in greater detail in the next section, was of the reification of the "Indian" as an essentially good but ultimately tragic figure. The irony of this image was that this ideal and mythic Indian was praised for the very primitiveness and simplicity for which he was being punished through forced removals and cultural genocide. The

⁸⁰Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 296, 183–84.

prevalence of the view of American Indians as simpler and, in a sense, purer reveals an essential paradox of nineteenth-century savagist theory, namely that Indians were simultaneously lambasted for their savage intransigence and employed as a primitive check to corrupt civilization. The “truly civilized,” from this perspective, meant to be “simpler, less sophisticated, rationally self-controlled, enlightened.”⁸¹ Thoreau suffered like many from the cognitive dissonance of holding both positions: Indians were becoming extinct due to their primitive state, but it was their primitive state that must be preserved because society could not survive without it. When Thoreau proposed, hopefully, in *Walden*, that it may be possible to live “as to secure all the advantage” of Indian life “without suffering any of the disadvantage,” he was actively grappling with this contradiction.⁸²

This grappling, then, is manifested in the fact that Thoreau did not attempt to replicate Indian life exactly as he romanticized it. In other words, he did not move to the Maine wilderness because it would defeat the purpose of non-attachment, that is to live in the world without feeling bound to its vicissitudes. Reflecting his pattern of engagement with American Indians in the development of his practical theology, Thoreau interpreted and translated what he perceived as Indian simplicity into his own daily life. While at Walden, the practice of simplicity took the form of a principled frugality, a modest but successful attempt at farming supplemented by supplies brought from town that resulted in a simple, primarily vegetarian diet and a great deal of time spent in the careful, often silent, approach to the nature he found around him. These practices were beneficial in their own right, particularly in Thoreau’s realization that in order to support such a simple life he would only need to work six weeks out of the year.⁸³ Upon returning to town life with his foray into subsistence farming at an end—the most obviously physical manifestation of a simplified life—Thoreau’s cultivation of Indian

⁸¹Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*, 138.

⁸²Thoreau, *Walden*, 31–32.

⁸³Thoreau, *Walden*, 70.

simplicity became directed primarily toward the ethical or spiritual ends of such discipline, particularly as it heightened his sensitivity to nature's revelations.

As a result of his focus on doing much with very little, many of his contemporaries (and some historians) have attributed to Thoreau the title of "ascetic" or more often "hermit," most often because of his seemingly abstemious lifestyle and (perhaps over-exaggerated) reputation for reclusiveness. Looking to religious ascetics as a point of comparison, then, the purposeful stripping of identity markers, particularly those pertaining to class, the self-imposed isolation, and the disciplining of the body through abstention though varying according to tradition had the effect of focusing the ascetic on experience and knowledge of the divine. Much of this aligns with Thoreau's own activities and spiritual aims—and he certainly found precedent in his previous reading of Hindu texts. Unlike many religious ascetics, however, Thoreau did not make body-denial a requirement of spiritual illumination. Rather than create the "perfect, denaturalized body," Thoreau had sought to develop "'carnal knowledge' of the earth" precisely through the thorough naturalization of his body. He attempted to increase his bodily awareness, because it was through his body and its senses that he could "know" nature.⁸⁴ One need only recall the revelation near the summit of Ktaadn that his body was made of the same material as its craggy peak and the primitive forest that surrounded him ("Contact! Contact! Contact!" he had cried in awe and ecstasy).⁸⁵ Thoreau, in this way, moved much closer to the American Indians than he did to the Stoics or Hindu philosophers: he neither renounced the body nor dissolved the physical for the sake of the spiritual. One must detach from the material of civilization for simplicity's sake, not from the material of nature. Nature was always edifying to both body and soul and, ideally, imbibing it, not just spiritually,

⁸⁴Andrea Nightingale, "Auto-Hagiography: Augustine and Thoreau," *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 3rd ser. 16 (2008): 113, 123, 124.

⁸⁵Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 70–71.

but physically, would sharpen his spiritual senses and enable Thoreau to live wildly in the world.

Thus, American Indians, whose physical comportment in nature suggested precognitive or possibly supernatural awareness, influenced Thoreau's belief that the work of the body directly affected the soul. Beyond the ethic of simplicity, Thoreau studied the ways Indians moved in nature. On land, Indians left little sign of their presence, and yet they could retrace their steps exactly "without a compass, or the sigh or noise of the river," even as their white companions "could not have kept our course many minutes." On the water, Indians seemed to cut through the surface with little disturbance and to turn the canoe with almost imperceptible effort.⁸⁶ Just as he hoped to educate the senses by detaching from the material of civilization, Thoreau hoped that by educating his body through repeated retreats into nature he would acquire the kinesthetic awareness of the Indian. Quoting Baron de la Hontan in Indian Notebook IV, Thoreau wrote that Indians "having acquired the knowledge of certain things by a long experience & by habit, as to traversing forests a hundred leagues without straying" or knowing "exactly the hour of the day and night, although the weather [be] cloudy," reveal the result of "extreme attention" which "can be natural only to people as little distracted as they are."⁸⁷ Disciplined senses enabled the seeker to take in one's surroundings swiftly and avoid disturbing the natural world surrounding him or her, which, in turn, made it possible to sense nature's revelations. This bodily awareness, when practiced repeatedly, led to a closer, natural connection between the American Indian and the wilderness.⁸⁸

The deliberateness with which Thoreau modeled his body on the American Indian is—and was—most keenly observed in his manner of walking. During his experience moose-hunting with his Penobscot guide Joe Aitteon in 1853, he described how Aitteon pursued his quarry; he "stepped lightly and gracefully,

⁸⁶Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 251, 186–87.

⁸⁷Thoreau, *Extract from Works Relating to the Indians*, 4:91–92.

⁸⁸Nightingale, "Augustine and Thoreau," 118.

stealing through the bushes with the least possible noise, in a way in which no white man does, as it were, finding a place for his foot each time.”⁸⁹ Thoreau was often described as having an Indian gait, which Brent Ranalli argues bore three distinct characteristics: stepping on the ball of the foot, turning the toe inward, and placing the feet in line, one after the other. Ranalli argues that the attribution of “Indianness” to Thoreau’s manner of walking was truer of his posture and his downward gaze than of his actual gait. Rose Hawthorne Lathrop reported that Thoreau “strode . . . with long steps, placing one foot exactly before the other according to Indian fashion.”⁹⁰ Whether or not Thoreau modeled his precise mode of walking on the Indian does not detract from his belief that Indian surefootedness was a bodily practice to, well, practice if one wished to move in nature with ease. Such ease in nature would lead naturally to an even greater ability to open the senses to the divine; if one was not concerned with the placement of the body, then the mind and soul could focus. Further, the Indian gait would be effective while in nature and in the modern world. By adopting this posture anywhere, one could feel transported to the forest, even though his body “may walk the smooth streets of Worcester.”⁹¹

The Indian as Saint: Canon and Memorial

Thoreau’s emulation of the Indian’s mode of life and bodily awareness make sense in light of his desire to approximate the closeness of the Indian to the wilderness. Yet at the same time he modeled himself after their current example, he distanced himself from them in his mind and in his writing. In October 1857, Thoreau recorded finding another arrowhead on the ground remarking, “the race is as clean gone—from here—as

⁸⁹Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 112.

⁹⁰See Ranalli’s excellent, unpublished paper “Walk Like an Indian,” delivered at the 2016 Annual Gathering of the Thoreau Society in Concord, MA; Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, “Glimpses of Force: Thoreau and Alcott” (1891) in *Thoreau in His Own Time*, 145–46.

⁹¹Thoreau to H.G.O. Blake, January 1, 1859, *Correspondence*, 538.

this sand is clean swept by the wind. Such are our antiquities. These were about our predecessors. Why, then, make so great ado about the Roman and the Greek, and neglect the Indian?" Continuing, he wrote, "here is a print still more significant at our doors, the print of a race that has preceded us, and this the little symbol that nature has transmitted to us."⁹² This allusion to Indians as the race that "preceded" and is now gone is startling primarily because only a month earlier, he had embarked on his final excursion to Maine in the company of Joe Polis, Thoreau's perfect, mythic Indian. At the same time that Thoreau gathered facts and knowledge directly from Indian stories and Indians themselves, he relegated them to the past. As Pearce writes, "Americans, who had found [Indians] and were failing to save them, needed, above all, to understand them before they should be gone forever."⁹³ Thus, perhaps the most significant effect the racial theories of the day had upon Thoreau's writings on American Indians was in the degree to which he psychologically and temporally distanced himself from the Indians he was so desirous to know.

Thoreau wrote about American Indians in a style that was hagiographic: they became the saints of his particular American theology. In most religious traditions, there are holy and representative figures of the past (often dead) to which devotees may go for guidance, solace, or, occasionally, censure. This was true even for Transcendentalists. Emerson, while he called for a "new teacher" to lead the next generation of religious seekers, wrote about the merits of the "representative men" of history.⁹⁴ For Thoreau, the Indian was both the new teacher and the representative man of the past—new in the knowledge he brought for the nineteenth-century citizen but also lost to another, earlier world. Thus, the process of canonizing Indians in his writings effectively froze them in time and treated them as though their death, cultural and otherwise, had already occurred. For Thoreau, the notion that Indians could evolve

⁹²October 22, 1857, *Journal*, 10:118.

⁹³Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*, 182.

⁹⁴Gura, "Thoreau's Maine Woods Indians," 366.

and still *be* Indian was difficult to reconcile with his view of them as an inherently primitive, dying race. Thus the Indian “saints” in his writings performed “Indianness” as he conceived it, and those who did not were subject to his censure. He wrote, almost prescriptively, in *A Week*, that the Indian “will not exchange his savageness for civilization” and “does well to continue Indian.”⁹⁵ The Indian would forever be “the man of the woods,” not because all Indians lived in the woods but because of the codification of that assumption in the writing of his day, which imprinted in Thoreau the Indian’s association with the wilderness as the first priest of nature’s divinity.⁹⁶

The two patron saints of Thoreau’s envisioning were Joe Aitteon and Joe Polis, each representing a different variation of the Indian saint: Aitteon, the hunter, and Polis, the naturalist. One of the traditional tropes of savagism was that the Indian was, by nature, a “solitary, self-reliant hunter.”⁹⁷ Ironically a tremendous amount of Indians’ food supply came through farming.⁹⁸ Savagists viewed farming as a practice that led to a sense of land-ownership, which was the first step toward civilization. Thus, the notion that Indians were also farming and *still* not being civilized to the degree and at the pace desired by white colonizers led ethnographers to gloss over Indian agrarian practices in favor of a hunter archetype. Even Thoreau, whose Indian Notebooks were filled with descriptions of crops grown by various tribes in different climates, repeated the traditional belief of the Indian as a hunter first and foremost and that such a hunter ranked lower on the civilized scale. He wrote in his journal of June 1853 that hunting was “oftenest the young man’s introduction to the forest and wild,” but after going “thither as a hunter and fisher,” when the “naturalist or poet distinguishes what attracted him”—his desire for closeness to nature—he “leaves the gun and fishing-rod behind.” Highlighting the waystation quality of hunting for any person

⁹⁵Thoreau, *A Week*, 56.

⁹⁶October 26, 1853, *Journal*, 5:457.

⁹⁷Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indian*, xi.

⁹⁸Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*, 66.

on the path toward civilization and spiritual illumination, he concluded, writing, “even in civilized society, the embryo man (speaking intellectually) passes through the hunter stage of development.”⁹⁹ Less than three months after composing these words, Thoreau seemed to meet the personification of this view in the person of Joe Aitteon.

As the hunter saint, Aitteon represented the Indian in all his past nobility: a figure to remind the reader of courage and resourcefulness, of one who moved fleetly and dominantly through the primitive forest while also highlighting the tragedy of his allegiance to a dying world. Like many men with prodigious imaginations, the notion of trekking through the wilderness with an experienced Indian provided Thoreau with a certain youthful thrill. From a spiritual standpoint, what was more true to life in the primitive wilderness than hunting? Hunting required sure-footedness, instinct, and bravery, all of which Indians seemed to draw from nature at its oldest and wildest. Yet, when the moment of the hunt finally arrived, it shocked Thoreau into the bloody present rather than the sacred past. Aitteon, Thoreau recalled, had wounded a moose, prompting him and Thoreau to go in search for it. When they found the moose—now dead—and Aitteon began to go about the business of skinning it, Thoreau recoiled at what he saw as “a tragical business.” In fact, wrote Thoreau, “the afternoon’s tragedy, and my share in it, as it affected the innocence, destroyed the pleasure of my adventure.”¹⁰⁰ Though initially exhilarated by the prospect of a hunting trip with an Indian guide, the experience itself proved *too* much “wild” for Thoreau. He had seen wildness in its starkest aspect and realized that, much like a life lived only in civilization, a life lived only in the wilderness was equally damaging to the spirit. This particular moment seemed to bring out in Thoreau all of the conditioned disgust of the civilized person at witnessing where his food came from—a reminder of the barbarity behind the plated feast. By captioning this moment, and, his later witness of moose carcasses

⁹⁹June 26, 1853, *Journal*, 5:304.

¹⁰⁰Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 118, 121.

laid out to dry, with words like “savage,” Thoreau psychically and spiritually distanced himself from the practice of which he had originally been an eager spectator. Thoreau’s highlighting of this one moment of tragedy does not detract from the experience with Aitteon that had warmed him and impressed him with Indian life—which he memorialized on page in *The Maine Woods*. Aitteon was the hunter saint, the noble savage, whose bravery and guile were admirable traits but whose guidance was supplementary to that of the Indian naturalist and exemplary teacher. For a Transcendentalist always in search of such a teacher, he could not grant that mantle, not wholly at least, to Aitteon.

It was to Polis that he ascribed the role of teacher. Richard Schneider wrote that what Thoreau appreciated about Joe Polis over Joe Aitteon was the former’s ability to “accept the virtues of civilization, reject its vices and still maintain his Indian identity.”¹⁰¹ Polis was the perfect figure to fulfill his particular vision of “Indianness”—that of the “naturalized” individual, who can live on the border of society and wilderness, avoiding the vices of the former and retaining a connection to the latter. Having recently returned from his third and final excursion to Maine in August of 1857—this time traveling up the Allegash and East Branch Rivers with Polis as guide—he described to his friend Harrison Blake how it was to be in the company of “an intelligent Indian.”¹⁰² By intelligent, he was undoubtedly referring to Polis’s skills and encyclopedic knowledge of plants, animals, and paths that enabled him to exist quite happily in nature.¹⁰³ Yet, he is also alluding to Polis’s mantle of respectability by white standards of civility grounded in Indian stereotypes: he lived in a neat little house, was a devout Christian (a fact which surprised and amused Thoreau), and was not a drunk. Further, though Polis was a hunter—he had joined them specifically to hunt moose—his desire to hunt was solely for subsistence without the excess and sport that could accompany it. These facts

¹⁰¹Schneider, *Henry David Thoreau*, 83.

¹⁰²Thoreau to H.G.O. Blake, August 18, 1857, *Correspondence*, 491.

¹⁰³See “The Allegash and the East Branch” chapter of *The Maine Woods* for examples.

allowed Thoreau to see Polis as both Indian enough and not a real Indian, the perfect model for the civilized person.¹⁰⁴ Thus, at the outset, Polis impressed Thoreau not only as a source of knowledge, but as the sort of Indian Thoreau wished to become—one who was Indian in every manner related to nature, and (white) civilized in most everything else. In Polis's spiritual closeness to nature, Thoreau clearly thought he had found what he was seeking. In the same letter of August 1857 to Blake, he wrote that Polis—who even in private correspondence he called “the Indian”—“begins where we leave off.” Polis was “so much the more divine,” “who can find his way so wonderfully in the woods,” and “possesses so much intelligence which the white man does not.” For his part, Thoreau noted that it grew his “own capacity, as well as faith, to observe [Polis]” and his ability to find redeeming qualities in “portions of what seemed brutish before.”¹⁰⁵ In *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau delighted in describing the transportive nature of the Indian's singing and the awe he felt at Polis's skill at survival.¹⁰⁶ Effectively, in his canonical portrayal, Thoreau made Polis the focal point of his spiritual catharsis—a role for which Polis had not asked.

Polis's refusal to downplay the most obvious marker of his “civilizing,” his Christian identity, and his initial unwillingness to converse with Thoreau about the terrain and their course, show that he was most likely savvy to Thoreau's projection of “proper” Indian identity. Through Polis, in fact, we are given a glimpse of the Indian critique of white civilization's hypocrisy, a fact he rather wryly admitted when he noted that he could not tell Thoreau how he was able to navigate so well because there was “Great difference between me and white man.”¹⁰⁷ While at other moments he was forthcoming with information, Polis's denial in this moment reveals his awareness that white people

¹⁰⁴Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indians*, 168; Bellin, “Taking the Indian Cure,” 26.

¹⁰⁵Thoreau to Blake, August 18, 1857, *Correspondence*, 491.

¹⁰⁶Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 178–79, 183–84.

¹⁰⁷Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 185.

perceived the Indian as there for their benefit. Thoreau may have been aware of Polis's perceptiveness—particularly given his willingness to record such exchanges—which may have caused some of the consternation he felt when publishing his account of Polis. It also may have been a result of Thoreau's own awareness that, having met an Indian he greatly respected, he could no longer admit that Indians were frozen in time. Still, the fact remains that Thoreau did write the piece—and at least originally planned to publish it as the third installment of his Maine excursions narrative—which would forever raise Polis to the saintly role of a naturalist who was both wild and civilized. In doing so, he also placed himself between Polis and white society, reifying the assumption that Indians were—no matter how much of white civilization they absorbed—"other." This notion benefits Thoreau directly by making him the translator of Indian sacred language, practices, and knowledge. As Elizabeth Hanson writes, "If there can be no authentic voice of Indian poetry in the white man's dominant culture, there can be a voice of the white self which evaluates, confronts, and transforms the facts and relics the Indian has left behind." The only Indian that could live in society was the white man who had been granted access to Indian knowledge. Through the "figure of the imagined Indian" he built from his extensive reading and first-person encounters, Thoreau ultimately came to a better understanding of his own religious identity: if Indians were nature's apostles, then he was their scribe, their theologian, and their evangelist.¹⁰⁸

The Practice of Wildness in a Wild-less World

Barbara Packer argues that most Transcendentalists, like Thoreau, whose careers were marked by periods of "wild experimentation," were ultimately protected from flights of Romantic "excess" by the Puritan legacy infused in their New England context.¹⁰⁹ By this reckoning, Thoreau chose to leave

¹⁰⁸Hanson, *Thoreau's Indian of the Mind*, 99, i.

¹⁰⁹Packer, *The Transcendentalists*, 274.

the woods because his constitution had been formed by an ethos of self-control and discipline. Nature was a place of sublimity and divinity, but that divinity was often raw, dark, and dangerous. One could also attribute his return to society as a result of his aversion to travel, his homebody tendencies, and his love of Concord. Thoreau declined many invitations to travel and once expressed palpable delight at the return of a “smooth landscape” following his foray into the mountainous terrain of Maine.¹¹⁰ His context and his personality most certainly contributed to his decision to live outside of the wilderness as did his desire to be useful to a reading public. What knowledge could he possibly reveal if he cut himself off from society to live as the Indian had in the primitive, pre-colonial forest? So, his context and his personality certainly contributed to his decision to stay home—but he also had a saving theology to spread.

“I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there,” wrote Thoreau at the end of *Walden*.¹¹¹ Going to the woods at Walden and his excursions to the wilderness in the years that followed were essential for the gathering of vital theological knowledge, but as he indicates in this statement, so was leaving it. Time spent outside in general and in the wilderness specifically was essential if one hoped to know and be reconciled to God and to realize one’s immortality. But one could not always be in the wilderness. Thoreau was no “true” primitivist; he did not seek to rebuild Indian civilization in order to get closest to God.¹¹² More important, such a literal return would signal a regression for humanity in a world where civilization advanced without stopping. It was crucially important that people learn how to *leave* nature properly or risk extinction like the Indian. The development of the senses, to have an impact in an increasingly modernized world, must have a practical and lasting intellectual—even ontological—effect. A fundamentally Thoreauvian feature of his come-outer theology, even as he argued

¹¹⁰Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 155.

¹¹¹Thoreau, *Walden*, 323.

¹¹²Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution through Renaissance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 324.

that a physical return to nature was necessary for the redemption of one's fallen senses, was Thoreau's assertion that the wildness one found in nature could become something transferable *into* society. The poet saw that the encounter with a physical wilderness was essential to maintaining "the spark of the wild alive in man" because "the crucial environment" in which to maintain wildness was "within."¹¹³ Revealed in Thoreau's typically nineteenth-century interaction with American Indians was his goal of finding a way to transport wildness into civilized society.

So Thoreau wrote about the world American Indians had shown him. He translated their words and stories as a biblical humanist in an effort to return to that earlier time where humanity and God were closest without the danger of going there. He modeled the Indian ethos of simplicity and the art of surefootedness in his own experiments and attempts at naturalization in his writings to show his readership how they might focus their mind on forging a saving connection to nature's divinity. Finally, he memorialized the Indians as modern saints of a thoroughly American theology for his readers simultaneously to emulate, critique, but mostly to translate "Indianness" into their own lives. Like all Transcendentalists allergic to conformity, Thoreau did not hope his readers idolized him for his own spiritual pursuits. His aim was always to inspire seekers who were ready to find what had been lost in the process of civilizing. Thoreau describes his ideal religious seeker as "the poet" who is closer to nature "than the lumberman," travels "the Indian trail," and "drinks at some new and more bracing fountain of the Muses, far in the recesses of the wilderness."¹¹⁴ To walk the Indian trail, but not to reside where the Indian resided, to be wild, but not to live in the wilderness, and to engage with God in nature without leaving the comfort of one's home, was the "naturalized" ideal of Thoreau's theological vision.

¹¹³Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 88–89.

¹¹⁴Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 93; Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 121–22, 156.

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