ngagement with

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

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

Ktaadn

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

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

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

Robinson is correct in seeing that "'Ktaadn' is primarily the narrative of a spiritual quest in which the ascent of the mountain represents the path to enlightenment."[20]

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

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

In retrospect, it is significant that Thoreau had immediately felt that "natu4(h 0 Tc 0t p)-2(as)-5(h-4(e

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

Chesuncook

Chesuncook, based on Thoreau's second Maine Woods trip in 1853, was a vehicle for Thoreau to approach Nature once more; the essay presented him as "exhilarated by the sight of the wild fir and spruce-tops, and those of other primitive evergreens, peering through the mist in the horizon."[53] Within the forest depths a heightened appreciation of nature ensued in the still of the night where "we heard, come faintly echoing, or creeping from far, through the moss-

goes about his destiny, the red face of man."[57] Thoreau, however, did not really engage with the American Indian in his *Ktaadn* report, though a missionary church-building on Indian Island drew his comment that "good [Catholic] Canadian it may be, but it is poor Indian."[58] Admittedly there remains Thoreau's figure of the "degraded" Indian.[59] Although Bridgman sees this term as indicating an emerging disillusionment with the Indian, in truth such decline was viewed by Thoreau as stemming from the damaging effects of materialistic white Western civilisation, undercutting the traditional wisdom of the Indian.[60] That such traditional Indian wisdom was an early attraction for Thoreau is evident from his *Journal*: "the charm of the Indian to me is that he stands free and unconstrained in Nature, is her inhabitant and not her guest and wears her easily and gracefully."[61] This led to his hope to "ge5.01 0 TdTJ -26.91 1n h0(t)- weaT0.008 Tw -03(e)-6(e)4(a)4(nd unp63(ha)4(t)1(hor)3(e)-a6EMC /Pa

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The "Machine age" was no great advancement for Thoreau, merely facilitating destruction and depletion; for example, he says, "they have lately, as I hear, invented a machine for chopping up huckleberry-bushes fine, and so converting them into fuel!"[83] He was himself engaged in farming experiments at Walden, but in a different, holistic, ecological way.[84]

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

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

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

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

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

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

Allegash & East Branch

wondered in his *Journal*, "who ever saw one? Are they not a piece of modern mythology?"[100] Subsequently,

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

In his *Journal* Thoreau noted this incident only briefly, albeit positively: "it [i.e. the phosphorescent wood] suggested to me how unexplored still are the realms of nature, that what we know and have seen is always an insignificant portion."[102] However, in his *Maine*

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

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

In fact, American Indian religion—its cosmology and mythology—is never really discussed directly in *The Maine Woods*. Instead, there is continuing observation of Indian customs and languag

reference and inspiration. Channing, his friend, considered in 1875 that "his love of wildness was real," for "held the Indian's creed, and believed in the essential worth and integrity of the plant and animal. This was religion to him."[125] Similarly, Burroughs had thought in 1882 that "Thoreau was, probably, the wildest civilized man this country has produced, adding to the shyness of the hermit and woodsman the wildness of the poet, and to the wildness of the poet the greater ferity and elusiveness of the mystic."[126] Thoreau's religious spirituality has been well re-emphasised by Hodder, but his focus is "three primary documents of his collected writings—*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, *Walden*, and the journal."[127] The value of *The Maine Woods* is that it brings out further depths and dimensions within Thoreau's spirituality, revealing him to be something of a "mystic, prophet, ecologist" who regards spirituality as expressed throug

[51] Thoreau, *Journal*, 4.54 (7 September 1851).
[52] Ibid., 3.186 (9 February 1851).
[53] Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 86.
[54] Ibid., 103.
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[97] Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 158,12-3.
[98] Frank Speck, "Penobscot Shamanism," *Memoirs* (*American Anthropological Association* 6.3, 1920), 239-88.
[99] Bridgman, *Dark Thoreau*, 229.
[100] Thoreau,