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“In Wildness is the Preservation of the World”
The Natural History of Henry Thoreau

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Thoreau as “Natural Historian”

I want to begin by glossing the second part of my title first: “The Natural History of Henry Thoreau.” I intended to suggest a double meaning by using this phrase—that is, I hoped to imply that Thoreau was employed throughout his life in producing writing that can be located in the genre of “natural history” but that, in addition, the history of his life was a “natural” one—one that situated him radically in nature and linked him closely with the environment. He lived, if you will, a more natural life than most of us do because he chose deliberately to study nature. But he did so in the spirit of his mentor, Emerson, when the older man insisted that the ancient injunction, “know thyself,” was to be replaced by a newer one, “study nature.” Thoreau would not only study nature but also study *himself* in nature.

Thus his most famous book, *Walden*, has a double focus: both the place in Concord, Massachusetts, where he lived in a small cabin next to a pond for two years, two months, and two days, and the reportorial and reflective “I” through whose keen vision we share the experience. In his hands, “natural history” becomes autobiography as well as a scientific-seeming investigation of the environment. The observer is present not simply to record data but to reflect on their possible meaning and value in relation to himself. He will accordingly reserve the right to include poetry, parable, mythology, and moral aphorism along with scientific data in order to round out the account he is producing.

When Thoreau died in 1862, the Concord town clerk listed his occupation as “natural historian.” But Thoreau himself had provided a more comprehensive definition some years before: “The fact is,” he said, “I am a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot.” Students of Thoreau have often considered these categories to be mutually exclusive, but he thought otherwise. In his first significant publication, “Natural History of Massachusetts,” Thoreau insisted that “nature is mythical and mystical always and works with the license and extravagance of genius.” The true man of science, he argues, “will know nature better by his finer organization; he will smell, taste, see, hear, feel, better than other men. His will be a deeper and finer experience. We do not learn by inference and deduction, and the application of mathematics to philosophy, but by direct intercourse and sympathy.”

As it happens, the genre of natural history writing into which Thoreau was self-consciously inserting himself, at a time when the distinction between “amateur naturalist” and “professional scientist” had not yet firmed up, was essentially personal and literary—what one commentator calls “genially informal records of regional flora and fauna.” Gilbert White, with whose enormously popular book, *The Natural History of Selborne*, Thoreau’s work has often been compared, was engaged in what he himself calls *autopsia*—a Greek word which we now exclusively apply to the grim job of examining corpses for forensic purposes, but which White uses in the root sense to mean “seeing for one’s self.” It denotes, as E. D. H. Johnson tells us, "the observer's open-minded reliance on the evidence of his own eyes. Shorn of abstract speculation and hearsay, [such] descriptions have the authenticity of direct experience." Naturalists like White, Johnson continues, were concerned "with *animate* nature, unlike the closet scientist who anatomizes his specimens in the laboratory. This means that in their writings they were constantly endeavoring to capture and portray the living drama of the natural world in all its vibrant interrelatedness." This was also Thoreau's goal, which was why he fell on White's book with evident pleasure.

Another book, first published, like White's, in 1789, probably elicited a similarly enthusiastic response from Thoreau. I refer to Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia,* which, though not devoid of "abstract speculation and hearsay," insists nevertheless on precise observation, mensuration, and the weighing of evidence, while allowing itself spasms of poetic description and moralizing commentary. Closer to Thoreau's own lifetime was the early work of another gifted amateur, Charles Darwin, whose *Voyage of the Beagle*—a great favorite of Thoreau's—is an amiable mixture of personal observation, raw data, taxonomical catalog, and wide-ranging theory. This kind of natural history writing, in the words of John Hildebidle, "can thus be described as informal, inclusive, intensely local, experiential, eccentric…and utilitarian, yet in the end concerned not only with fact but with fundamental spiritual and aesthetic truths." It is "this broad notion of natural history, a paying of attention to the past *and* the present, firmly based in the local and the immediate, but not refusing any possible source until it has been assessed and weighed, which can stand as a home, in literary terms, for *Walden* and for much else of Thoreau's work."

One needs to add, however, that this generic "home" and the natural observation it domesticated was put under increasing pressure, even in Thoreau's own lifetime, by the relentless tendency toward professionalization and the consequent denigration of "amateur" work. The tension between the two is nicely exemplified in Clarence King's *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada,* which records the youthful experience of a budding geologist, just out of Yale College, in 1863—the year after Thoreau's death. Traveling alone in a stage-coach on his way to Bear Valley, King found himself "preyed upon by sell-reproach, and in an aggravated manner," because on his arrival in the Sierras the senior paleontologist—apparently observing King mooning at the impressive landscape—said "with unwonted severity, 'I believe that fellow had rather sit on a peak all day, and stare at those snow-mountains, than find a fossil in the metamorphic Sierra.'" Stung by the remark, King brooded over the implications of the incident: "Can it be? I asked myself; has a student of geology so far forgotten his devotion to science? Am I really fallen to the level of a mere nature-lover?"

It may be that a similar mood of self-reproach overtook Thoreau in the spring of 1847, when he was still living at Walden Pond, and allowed himself, briefly, as one student puts it, a "flirtation with institutionalized science." Contacted, apparently, by James Elliot Cabot (later to be Emerson's literary executor and biographer), who was working for Louis Agassiz, Harvard's new Professor of Geology and Zoology, Thoreau over a period of some weeks trapped, packed, and sent off to Harvard assorted fish, tortoises, snakes, mice, and even a live fox, asking in return only that Cabot and Agassiz might answer some of his own questions about scientific nomenclature. During this period—from spring 1846 to spring 1847—as Laura Walls tells us, Thoreau seems to have been "taking his first steps toward a methodized approach to nature: measuring the [fish], surveying ponds and taking their temperature, collecting specimens as part of a scientific network." At the same time, Walls continues, Thoreau "also regarded what he was doing with uncertainty and suspicion, warning himself that method alone was insufficient, that measurements diminished the sublime, that 'fact' and accuracy were gained at the expense of 'genius.'" Perhaps Thoreau was remembering what he had written only a few years earlier in the conclusion to "Natural History of Massachusetts":

> It is with science as with ethics—we cannot know truth by contrivance and method; the Baconian is as false as any other, and with all the helps of machinery and the arts, the most scientific will still be the healthiest and friendliest man, and possess a more perfect Indian wisdom.

Despite his lifelong infatuation with scientific nomenclature, Thoreau's interests did not really coincide with those of Louis Agassiz, as we might surmise from a strange and wonderful passage in the penultimate chapter of *Walden,* in which Thoreau responds ecstatically to the song of the robin: "0 the evening robin, at the end of a New England summer day! If I could ever find the twig he sits upon! I mean *he;* I mean *the twig.* This at least is not the *Turdus migratorius.*"

Thoreau is not interested in generic birds. Rather he longs to experience the quiddity of this individual bird in the very place from which he sings. Thoreau means to engage, not in scientific investigation, but in a confrontation. This robin is not the *Turdus migratorius* in two senses. First, in its particularity it is not the abstract bird named in the Latin nomenclature for the genus of thrushes; and second, it equally eludes the category *migratory* thrush because it is a permanent resident of Thoreau's holistic vision of Walden Woods—as firmly fixed in his imagination as Keats's nightingale was in his. The song of the robin calls to Thoreau, not from the pages of an ornithological manual, but from the depths of wild nature, as does the singing of another member of the *Turdidae* family, the wood thrush, whose note, Thoreau says,

> …affects me like music, affects the flow and tenor of my thoughts, my fancy and imagination. It lifts and exhilarates me. …It is a medicative draught to my soul. …I long for wildness, a nature which I cannot put my foot through, woods where the wood thrush forever sings … where I might have a fertile unknown for a soil about me. …a New Hampshire everlasting and unfallen.

And that brings me to the first part of my title: Thoreau's passion for "wildness."

"In Wildness is the Preservation of the World"

Now let me draw your attention back to 1962—a time that is as remote to current Cornell undergraduates as the roaring Twenties were to me when I was a college student in the mid-1950s. It was in 1962 that the Sierra Club of California published a volume of exquisite nature photographs by Eliot Porter that he executed as an accompaniment to selections from the writings of Henry Thoreau. The title of the book, *In Wildness is the Preservation of the World*, was drawn from Thoreau's lecture "Walking; or, the Wild," itself first published just after Thoreau's death one hundred years earlier in 1862. The appearance of that Sierra Club volume proved to be a watershed event—effectively the beginning of the modern ecology movement, with its heightened concern for the protection and preservation of the natural environment. The book enjoyed wide circulation and helped set the tone for the emerging decade of the 60s—a time, as we know, not just of "Green" awareness but also of Thoreauvian protest and civil disobedience.

It is important to note that in his famous sentence Thoreau wrote "wildness" and not "wilderness"—though some disbelieving readers, and even an occasional Thoreau scholar, have "erred" in scanning Thoreau's sentence. (That is a Thoreauvian pun: I mean they have unwittingly added what they must have felt was the missing "er.") Though the concept of "wilderness" may exemplify what Thoreau meant by "wildness," they are not—as I shall attempt to demonstrate—the same thing. The best concise gloss on Thoreau's distinction is offered by the late Sherman Paul, a leading Thoreauvian:

> Thoreau didn't say *wilderness*, he said *wildness* because … more than the actual wilderness itself he valued its psychic correlative: *wildness,* the instinctual; *wildness* as *willed-ness,* the expression of will, in the interest of keeping open one's vital, instinctual life.

If that sounds more like William Blake or D. H. Lawrence than Thoreau, it is because he was early appropriated by bland nature-lovers who preferred their hermit of Walden Woods purged of his wildness. Thus Waldo Frank, an important American cultural critic of the 1920s and '30s, could write:

> When we were boys, we all had tedious uncles who professed to be very fond of Thoreau. They said that Thoreau was a great naturalist; that he wrote delightfully of butterflies and mushrooms. These uncles were typical good citizens of old America: altogether dull—mindless and sober paragons. We decided that their favorite author could be no favorite of ours. We took it for granted that Thoreau also was a stuffy bore.

Though Henry David may be a bore to some, he is certainly not stuffy. As Cornell's own E. B. White observes, "Thoreau was master of a prose … at once strictly disciplined and wildly abandoned." Thoreau's butterflies may be generally delightful, but he is quick to notice that they begin their careers as "voracious caterpillar[s]"; he is the poet not only of immortal robins and sportive loons but also of vultures feeding on carrion and dead horses spicing the air as he strolls near his cabin. He loves nature when it is pretty and charming, but he also needs "the tonic of wildness." He is "earnest to explore and learn all things," and that includes an "infinitely wild" nature that is "mysterious and unexplorable," "unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because [it is] unfathomable." His mushrooms, as we shall see, are less the fairy-tale book toadstools, on which are perched enchanted bullfrog princes, than they are the dark funguses that embody some of nature's unspeakable secrets.

Thoreau's journal entries on funguses are invariably noteworthy—evidence that they represent and embody for him the rankest and most primitive aspects of the wild nature he claimed to be unable to get enough of. Undoubtedly one of the strangest passages Thoreau ever wrote exemplifies the bizarre attraction he felt toward these earthy artifacts that strained to an extreme degree the tensions he felt as "a mystic, a Transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot." The passage in question—which I have reproduced for you in the handout and which, for strategic reasons, I am in part projecting in its manuscript form on the screen—offers us Henry David Thoreau at the limits of his quest for the wild, anticipating, *mutatis mutandis,* Conrad's Kurtz in *The Heart of Darkness* confronting the "horror" that appears to do him in.

This "remarkable fungus," actually less "rare" than Thoreau thought it was, he learns from Loudon's *Encyclopedia* has the Latin nomenclature *phallus impudicus,* which Thoreau, as an expert Latinist, understands to mean "immodest" or "unchaste" phallus. In fact, given Thoreau's obsession with etymology, it is worth noting that such English derivatives from the Latin *pudere,* to be ashamed, as *pudency, pudic,* or *pudical* ("pertaining to the parts which modesty requires to be concealed") and *pudicity* ("modesty") were all current terms, as is evidenced by Webster's 1853 edition of *An American Dictionary of the English Language.* Today we have only *pudency, impudent* (which has traveled away from its root meaning), the rare *impudicity,* and the more familiar *pudendum* or *pudenda* —meaning, of course, "external genital organs" (*American Heritage Dictionary*), or "the parts of generation," to use Webster's 1853 definition. This would have been the etymological background, without doubt fully present to Thoreau's consciousness, as he investigated this fungus that he calls "a perfect phallus." The question I see forming in Thoreau's mind is, simply, this: are the organs of generation—the focus of the most powerful natural instincts we possess—truly "shameful," as the Latin derivation of *pudenda* suggests? Notice that Thoreau's stinkhorn, to use its common name, is to him "in all respects a most disgusting object," yet, nevertheless, "very suggestive."

The copious quasi-scientific details that follow (measurement, minute observation and description) function, I think, as a kind of distancing strategy, allowing Thoreau to employ his status as an objective scientific investigator in order to hold at bay, temporarily, other issues of a more speculative or philosophical kind that are obviously pressing in on him. The fascination of the abomination is clearly driving him—forcing him to take this "offensive" object into the Thoreau house (one wonders what the family's reaction was!), so that he might get to know it as well as he learned to "know beans" in *Walden.* (Let us remember one of the most celebrated moments in that book, when Thoreau tells us of his determination "to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world.") Now he has cornered the *phallus impudicus* —he likens it to a "dead rat"—and the question that occurs to him as he faces down this disgusting representative of nature's wild generative energy is unquestionably among the most interesting he ever asked: "Pray, what was Nature thinking of when she made this? She almost puts herself on a level with those who draw in privies."

Thoreau's question is consciously arch—I mean cute—because he knows perfectly well that Nature does not "think" in our sense of the word, or rather "thinks" only through its creations (to cite *Walden* again: "Nature puts no question and answers none which we mortals ask"). So he will have to do Nature's thinking for her and provide his own answer. And why not, since he describes himself as "leaves and vegetable mold." Nature, it seems, was "thinking" of propagation, at least of propagation of the species *phallus impudicus*. But Thoreau's question presses him and us further into our speculative corner, for Nature was doubtlessly thinking of Thoreau himself and other males, with their organs of generation. Are they "shameful"? Is Nature itself shameful or rather simply shameless—blindly furthering its ends through whatever means it evolves? (One thinks inevitably of Molly Bloom's "it's only nature.") If Nature, in producing the stinkhorn, "almost puts herself on a level with those who draw in privies," what are we to think of our own provincial Virgil—our guide through the Inferno of Nature's generative underworld—who himself, as we can see, draws a picture of the *phallus impudicus* in the privacy of his journal? So, as we are led to conclude, Thoreau too is implicated in Nature's grand design, or in its almost unspeakable "meanness." I say "almost unspeakable" because Thoreau is in fact determined to speak and to represent the truth of the natural world. He tells us in *Walden*:

> I hesitate to say these things, but it is not because of the subjects, —I care not how obscene my *words* are,—but because I cannot speak of them without betraying my impurity. …We are so degraded that we cannot speak simply of the necessary functions of human nature.

When we do learn to speak simply of them—to use without shame every resource of language and art at our disposal to represent the world and ourselves in it—Thoreau implies we shall no longer be fallen creatures, but rather "wild" and "good" at the same time. We shall be at once perfect naturalists and perfect Transcendentalists.

If I seem to place undue emphasis on one strange passage in Thoreau's massive journal, I do so because other entries on funguses throughout his journal point to the same nexus of concern. Thus, for example, on a warm and muggy August day in 1853 he comes upon a fungus more than a foot in diameter that has already begun to deliquesce and tells us that the ground around it "is covered with foul spots" where it has dissolved. For most of his walk, he continues,

> The air is tainted with a musty, carrion-like odor, in some places very offensive, so that I at first suspected a dead horse or cow. They impress me like humors or pimples on the face of the earth, toddy-blossoms, by which it gets rid of its corrupt blood. A sort of excrement they are.

Employing the rhetorical trope of prosopopeia, or personification, Thoreau views this offensive natural object as the face of a corrupt nature disfigured by what he likens to blotches on the face of a drunkard. Nature, through a process which presumably is also natural, is bleeding itself, casting out its filth; and this would appear to be part of its vigor—its ability to change and prosper.

Thoreau's giving a human face to nature in this passage corroborates, I think, what we have already seen—that he is very close to identifying with the process he observes; and, indeed, further confirmation is not far to seek. In another journal entry he observes that,

> The simplest and most lumpish fungus has a peculiar interest to us, compared with a mere mass of earth, because it is so obviously organic and related to ourselves, however mute. … the humblest fungus betrays a life akin to my own. It is a successful poem in its kind.

Perhaps Thoreau was thinking of Keats's line—"The poetry of earth is never dead"—but he is certainly ringing changes on it, roughing it up, so to speak. This is a living poetry of earth but it is not pretty or delicate; and it implicates us in the evidence it gives of primitive, seemingly impure energy. Thoreau writes in 1856, the year of the *phallus impudicus* entry:

> It is in vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. It is the bog in our brains and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us, that inspires that dream. I shall never find in the wilds of Labrador any greater wildness than in some recess in Concord, *i.e.*, than I import into it."

The word "bog," I need to point out, has a double meaning, for it refers not only to a swamp or mud-hole but also (in British slang then and now that Thoreau was well aware of) to a privy or toilet.

Thoreau's point is startling and seems to anticipate a notion we might loosely call Freudian: our dream of a sublime and fecundating wildness to be found in the environment is the upward and outward displacement of our natural functions. Or, as Thoreau puts it in what seems to be a prudish passage in the "Higher Laws" chapter of *Walden*:

> The spirit can for the time pervade and control every member and function of the body, and transmute what in form is the grossest sensuality into purity and devotion. The generative energy, which, when we are loose, dissipates and makes us unclean, when we are continent invigorates and inspires us.

That may sound like Thoreau's own peculiar Transcendental "Joy of non- Sex" or Dr. Strangelove worried about preserving his precious bodily fluids, but let us remember Freud's dictum that the repression of sexual energy may issue either in a neurotic symptom or in a work of art. Thoreau's point is that the so-called "lower" functions and the so-called "higher" functions are not distinct but correlative *forms* of the same energy. That is why he insists on saying, again in the same chapter of *Walden*:

> I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good.

It was certainly in the spirit of Thoreau that D.H. Lawrence expressed his desire to "escape ... into the vital cosmos, to a sun who has a great wild life." For all of us, Lawrence argues, "the vast marvel is to be alive"; for humans "as for flower and beast and bird, the supreme triumph is to be most vividly, most perfectly alive." We "ought to dance with rapture," he continues, "that we should be alive and in the flesh, and part of the living, incarnate cosmos." In similar fashion, Thoreau seems to hearken back to William Blake, for whom "every thing that lives is holy" and whose devilish wisdom proclaims that Energy—the Blakean equivalent of Thoreau's Wildness—"is the only life and is from the Body, and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy," which is "Eternal Delight." When Imagination reunites with and redeems humanity's fallen sexual energy, as at the end of Blake's prophetic poem *Milton,* the moment of "psychic transformation" (Morton Paley's phrase) is associated by Blake with "the wild thyme, the lark, and the dawn." It is an eminently Thoreauvian moment, whereby regeneration is achieved in a natural setting through a new union of body and spirit.

Let us return once more to my title—to Thoreau's famous sentence, "In Wildness is the Preservation of the World." Why "Preservation"? Why does "Wildness" *preserve* the world? The simplest answer is one that is frequently given by concerned ecologists—namely, that the zealous guarding of wild land, wild creatures, and wild flora is the only way to protect the earth from despoliation. That is certainly one of the implications of Thoreau's sentence, and the reason why he is usually considered the patron saint of the modem Green movement. But, as Melville's Captain Ahab would say, there is a "little lower layer," something further lurking in Thoreau's sentence. Of course we have already noticed that Thoreau loves the instinctual—the generative energy with which we are all endowed, the potential energy lying dormant in seeds, the indefatigable push of the seasons and turning of the world on its axis—because it preserves the world by perpetually offering it a fresh start. There is a lovely passage in the "Spring" chapter of *Walden* that captures Thoreau's excitement at the wild energies that pulse through Walden Woods as the time of renewal gets under way:

> In April the pigeons were seen again flying express in small flocks, and in due time I heard the martins twittering over my clearing. …In almost all climes the tortoise and the frog are among the precursors and heralds of this season, and birds fly with song and glancing plumage, and plants spring and bloom, and winds blow, to correct this slight oscillation of the poles and preserve the equilibrium of nature.

A curious ending to Thoreau's sentence: he figures the coming of spring as a "slight oscillation of the poles," which is held in check by the wild activity he observes—activity that "preserve[s] the equilibrium of nature." It is as if Thoreau were saying that the world is "preserved" from being overwhelmed by cosmic forces through the seasonal tug-of-war that any of us can take note of locally.

Another hint about how Wildness preserves the world is provided by Sherman Paul, whom I have already cited on the importance of "keeping open one's vital, instinctual life." Paul goes on: "The will to change: In that, paradoxically, is the *preservation* of the world." Perhaps the paradox is only apparent, since the loss of the impulse to change—to achieve new growth—

would lead not only to physical decay but also to spiritual stagnation. This is “preservation” in the dictionary sense of “preparing things for future use,” or preventing them from “decaying or spoiling.” Thoreau himself provides a gloss—again in the “Spring” chapter—on this all-important function of the will, or instinct, to change:

> In a pleasant spring morning all men’s sins are forgiven. Such a day is a truce to vice. While such a sun holds out to burn, the vilest sinner may return. Through our own recovered innocence we discern the innocence of our neighbors. You may have known your neighbor yesterday for a thief, a drunkard, or a sensualist, and merely pitied or despised him, and despaired of the world; but the sun shines bright and warm this first spring morning, recreating the world, and you meet him at some serene work, and see how his exhausted and debauched veins expand with still joy and bless the new day, feel the spring innocence with the innocence of infancy, and all his faults are forgotten. There is not only an atmosphere of good will about him, but even a savor of holiness groping for expression, blindly and ineffectually perhaps, like a new-born instinct, and for a short time the south hillside echoes to no vulgar jest. You see some innocent fair shoots preparing to burst from his gnarled rind and try another year’s life, tender and fresh as the youngest plant.

Though Thoreau is surely in dead earnest here, he is nevertheless having some fun as he tries to sound like an evangelical preacher. (The tip-off is the sentence, “While such a sun holds out to burn, the vilest sinner may return,” which is Thoreau’s rewriting of a line from a popular hymn by Isaac Watts: “And while the lamp holds out to burn, the vilest sinner may return.” It is tempting to read the part beginning, “You may have known your neighbor yesterday for a thief…” in the tones, say, of a Billy Graham.) Still, the point seems to be the same one he has already made: the “instinctual” self, even in the most hardened reprobate, should be capable of provoking the will to change—the “good will”—in the season of new growth. That “willed-ness,” as Sherman Paul argues, is the “psychic correlative” of Thoreau’s belief in Wildness as the great preserver of worlds. (Sometimes destroyer and preserver together; think of Shelley’s “West Wind.”)

There is finally, and I think most importantly, another sense for Thoreau in which “Wildness is the Preservation of the World,” and that has to do with his work as a writer. As we know, Thoreau believed passionately in the power of writing to change people’s lives if it is willing to take the chance of being exaggerated—a writing that is *“without* bounds”— that takes off for the wilder margins of expression and puts the reader’s mind on the stretch. “It is a ridiculous demand,” he says at the end of *Walden,* “which England and America make, that you shall speak so that they can understand you. Neither men nor toadstools grow so.” How do they grow? Secretly, mysteriously, incomprehensibly. Thoreau wants his writing to be *“extra vagant,”* so that it might be released to wander freely and be “adequate to the truth of which [he has been] convinced.” Writing that fails to provoke the reader in these ways will not preserve the world—that is, get experience convincingly and vitally down on the page. Wildness is the preservation of the word as well as the world—or, rather, world and word are tightly bound together, since, as Wallace Stevens says, “words of the world are the life of the world.”

A peculiar corollary of this theory, for a writer such as Thoreau, is that words of the natural world are the life of the page. He wants and needs to produce a “literature which gives expression to Nature,” as he argues in “Walking; or The Wild”:

> He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring, which the frost has heaved; who derived his words as often as he used them,—transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots; whose words were so true and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring, though they lay half-smothered between two musty leaves in a library,—ay, to bloom and bear fruit there, after their kind, annually, for the faithful reader, in sympathy with surrounding Nature.

Accordingly, words that are true to their natural origins have the power, in Thoreau’s view, to keep the world alive even in what appear to be pages that are “musty leaves in a library.”

The pun in that last phrase, as natural for Thoreau as it was for Whitman, is amplified by Thoreau in a radiant late essay, “Autumnal Tints,” which will draw my talk to its conclusion:

> I formerly thought that it would be worth the while to get a specimen leaf from each changing tree, shrub, and herbaceous plant, when it had acquired its brightest characteristic color, in its transition from the green to the brown state, outline it, and copy its color exactly, with paint in a book which should be entitled, *“October, or Autumnal Tints”*;— beginning with the earliest reddening,—Woodbine and the lake of radical leaves, and coming down through the Maples, Hickories, and Sumachs, and many beautifully freckled leaves less generally known, to the latest Oaks and Aspens. What a memento such a book would be! You would need only to turn over its leaves to take a ramble through the autumn woods whenever you pleased. Or if I could preserve the leaves themselves, unfaded, it would be better still.

Not only is Wildness the life of the book Thoreau imagines; it might also become the very book itself—a collection of brilliant autumnal leaves that, though fallen, remain forever “unfaded,” preserving for us what Thoreau in another place calls “the actual glory of the universe.”