Sense, Truth, and Beauty

Scot Miller could easily take as his motto Thoreau's 1858 declaration that "the wood-path and the boat are my studio." The landscape captured through his lens has evolved slowly over millennia. It deserves a slow and thoughtful approach, a turning and a returning to the same site again and again, at different times, at different seasons, at different angles.

In examining the writing process, Thoreau wrote, "We do not want a Daguerreotype likeness." Oddly, this same view could be used to express the difference between a pedestrian photographic likeness of a place and a soaring artistic representation, one in which the photographer knows that waiting for that certain slant of light so that the colors are saturated to just the right degree, or for the clouds to move so that the shadows fall in a way to provoke mystery and not merely darkness, is what creates art. When we, as observers of that art, are oblivious to the challenges that underlie the image, we are rewarded with what Thoreau called the "highest condition of art."

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From Thoreau's first excursion to Maine in May 1838 to search (unsuccessfully) for a teaching position, to his last in 1857 to travel the Allegash and Penobscot Rivers, the Maine woods became a place to which he returned both in body and in mind. Three of his six excursions became the basis for the essays in this book: his 1846 ascent of Mount Katahdin; his 1853 observation of a moose-hunt; and his 1857 river excursion.

In each essay Thoreau examines his own personal relationship with nature, following the advice he gave to his friend Harrison Gray Otis Blake, who wanted to write about a tour he had taken up Mount Washington:

> Let me suggest a theme for you: to state to yourself precisely and completely what that walk over the mountains amounted to for you,—returning to this essay again and again, until you are satisfied that all that was important in your experience, is in it. Give this good reason to yourself for having gone over the mountains, for mankind is ever going over a mountain....It did not take very long to get over the mountain, you thought; but have you got over it indeed? If you have been to the top of Mount Washington, let me ask, what did you find there?...It is after we get home that we really go over the mountain, if ever. What did the mountain say? What did the mountain do?

This letter is crucial to understanding Thoreau's role as a writer, not just in relation to the mountain, but in relation to all he encountered: the moose, the rivers, the lakes, and the people he met along the way. What did these

do? What did these *say* to him? "The actual objects which one man will see from a particular hilltop," Thoreau wrote in his "Autumnal Tints" essay, "are just as different from those which another will see as the beholders are different....We cannot see anything until we are possessed with the idea of it, take it into our heads, and then we can hardly see anything else...."

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Thoreau's last recorded intelligible words before his death on May 16, 1862 were not of Concord but of Maine: "moose" and "Indian." He held a life-long interest in Indians, from his early interest in Indian lore (expressed in an 1837 letter to his brother, written in mock-Indian dialect) to his growing and mature respect for a people he saw slowly disappearing, and who had something to teach that those of European descent could not appreciate. Had he written more than what we find scattered in his journal and his writings on Maine, his anthropological and sociological studies of Indians would rival those of William Bartram, Francis Parkman, and Alexis de Tocqueville. As he wrote after his final excursion to Maine:

> I have made a short excursion into the new world which the Indian dwells in, or is. He begins where we leave off. It is worth the while to detect new faculties in man,—he is so much the more divine; and anything that fairly excites our admiration expands us. The Indian, who can find his way so wonderfully in the woods, possesses so much intelligence which the white man does not,—and it increases my own capacity, as well as faith, to observe it. I rejoice to find that intelligence flows in other channels than I knew.

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"A man sees only what concerns him," Thoreau observed. What concerned Henry David Thoreau in the mid-nineteenth century and what concerns Scot Miller today may not be that far different. They both observe a changing landscape and world, and they both document it in their own special way: Thoreau through his pen, Miller through his lens. And they both understand what Emerson said: "There is a higher work for Art than the arts."

Thoreau expressed it this way in a letter to Emerson: "It is the height of art that on the first perusal plain common sense should appear—on the second serene truth—and on the third beauty—and having these warrants for its depth and reality, we may then enjoy the beauty forever more." Common sense, truth, and beauty. In Thoreau's words we read the truth. In Scot Miller's photographs we see the beauty. May we now find the common sense to preserve this landscape, and to know, each in our own way, what the mountain says.

– Jeffrey S. Cramer
Curator of Collections
The Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods

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