

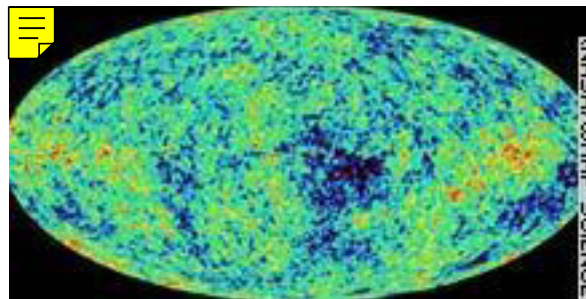
THE AURORA BOREALIS



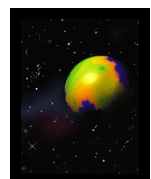
"The Universe, as has been observed before, is an unsettlingly big place, a fact which for the sake of a quiet life most people tend to ignore. Many would happily move to somewhere smaller of their own devising, and this what most beings in fact do."



— Douglas Adams (from LIFE, THE UNIVERSE AND EVERYTHING, the 3rd book of the HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY "trilogy in five parts")



I see the northern lights over my shoulder to remind me of the esquimaux, and that they are still my contemporaries on this globe, —that they too are taking their walks on another part of the planet— in pursuit of seals perchance.



1619

The term “[Aurora Borealis](#)” was coined by [Galileo Galilei](#) to suggest the resemblance of the Northern Lights to an early dawn in the northern sky.

ASTRONOMY

Galileo was supposing incorrectly that the phenomenon was caused by sunlight reflecting from the high atmosphere. I will illustrate the mystery he was musing about with a painting made in 1865 by Frederic Edwin Church:



According to the article “Aurora and Airglow” in VAN NOSTRAND’S SCIENTIFIC ENCYCLOPEDIA:

The auroral zones are defined as the regions of maximum occurrence. They are roughly circular [and centered on the geomagnetic poles] with a radius of approximately 23 degrees of latitude. The northern auroral zone reaches its lowest geographic latitude over eastern Canada; the southern, over the ocean south of Australia. At times of geomagnetic disturbance, the aurora appears at lower latitudes and in very great magnetic storms may be observed in the tropics. The frequency of occurrence of aurorae at lower latitudes correlates with the cycle of solar activity.

1719

December 19, night: The white people of [Boston](#) for the first time, a full century after the term “*aurora borealis*” had been coined, noticed that phenomenon in their sky. The report was circulated that a mysterious face had seemed to form in the atmosphere — many wondered whether this might be an indication of the [Last Judgment](#).

HERE COME DA JUDGE!

Of course it wasn't the Last Judgment and there wasn't a face in the sky, so I will illustrate this with a painting made in 1860 — we can pretend that the mammal in the foreground of Dennis Gale's painting is an earless Boston Harbor seal rather than a generic painter's seal:¹



AURORA BOREALIS



September 7, Sunday: ...I see the northern lights over my shoulder to remind me of the esquimaux, and that they are still my contemporaries on this globe, —that they too are taking their walks on another part of the planet— in pursuit of seals perchance....

1. How observant they were! –Or maybe it was backscatter of light from the town's newly installed gas street lamps?

AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

1729

March: At [Newport, Rhode Island](#), there was an appearance of the *Aurora Borealis*.

1730

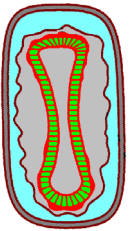
 At [Newport, Rhode Island](#) was seen an *Aurora Borealis*.

ASTRONOMY

After a death due to the [small pox](#), citizens exhibiting symptoms were quarantined on an island in Coasters Harbor.

A mob attempted to tear apart the local jail.

On Long Island the Reverend Henry Loveall, also known as “Desolate Baker,” was exposed and disgraced.



1737

May 7, Tuesday: At Philadelphia “was seen an *aurora borealis*.”²



ASTRONOMY

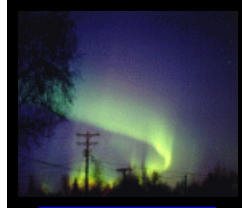
2. The citizens of Boston had observed such a phenomenon in 1719.

AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

1749

“17th of 12mo.”: In the skies over Philadelphia: “There was last evening an extraordinary appearance of the [aurora borealis](#), which moved from north-east to north-west, and back again.”



ASTRONOMY

1750

February 16, Monday: At Philadelphia, “a very bright [aurora borealis](#).”



1756

January 2, Friday: At 4PM, at the country town of Tuam in Ireland, an exceedingly bright light suddenly occurred in the entire sky. This strange phenomenon faded by imperceptible gradations until, by 7PM, “a sun of streamers” could be observed as being stretched across the sky from west to east, and it was undulating like the waters of a rippling stream. These streamers gradually became discolored and then they flashed away toward the north. At the same time that the manifestation flashed away toward the north, all in the town experienced a sort of shock although this shock, whatever it was, seemed not to do any damage.³

SKY EVENT

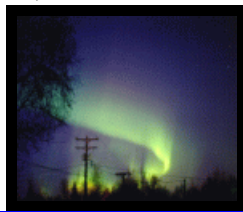


AURORA BOREALIS

An earthquake table lists the New England quake on this day as “1756JAN02 42.30 71.10 3 MA BOSTON.”

1839

September 4, Wednesday: According to the journal of [Friend Thomas B. Hazard](#) or Hafsard or Hasard of [Kingstown, Rhode Island](#), also known as “Nailer Tom,”⁴ there had been “strange [Northern lights](#) last night.”



AURORA BOREALIS



Sept 4th [Wednesday of WEEK] As we shoved away from this rocky coast, before sunrise, the smaller bittern, the genius of the shore, was moping along its edge, or stood probing the mud for its food, with ever an eye on us, though so demurely at work, or else he ran along over the wet stones like a wrecker in his storm-coat, looking out for wrecks of snails and cockles. Now away he goes, with a limping flight, uncertain where he will alight, until a rod of clear sand amid the alders invites his feet; and now our steady approach compels him to seek a new retreat. It is a bird of the oldest [Thalesian](#) school, and no doubt believes in the priority of water to the other elements; the relic of a twilight antediluvian age which yet inhabits these bright American rivers with us Yankees. There is something venerable in this melancholy and contemplative race of birds, which may have trodden the earth while it was yet in a slimy and imperfect state. Perchance their tracks, too, are still visible on

3. This has been said to have been an especially powerful episode of Northern Lights, but if it had been that, would it not have been reported also from the larger towns of Ireland such as Belfast, Dublin, or nearby Galway?

4. He was called “Nailer Tom” because his trade was the cutting of nails from scrap iron, and in order to distinguish him from a relative known as “College Tom,” from another relative known as “Shepherd Tom,” and from his own son who –because he had fits– was known as “Pistol-Head Tom.”



AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

the stones. It still lingers into our glaring summers, bravely supporting its fate without sympathy from man, as if it looked forward to some second advent of which he has no assurance. One wonders if, by its patient study by rocks and sandy capes, it has wrested the whole of her secret from Nature yet. What a rich experience it must have gained, standing on one leg and looking out from its dull eye so long on sunshine and rain, moon and stars! What could it tell of stagnant pools and reeds and dank night fogs! It would be worth the while to look closely into the eye which has been open and seeing at such hours, and in such solitudes its dull, yellowish, greenish eye. Methinks my own soul must be a bright invisible green. I have seen these birds stand by the half dozen together in the shallower water along the shore, with their bills thrust into the mud at the bottom, probing for food, the whole head being concealed, while the neck and body formed an arch above the water.

Thoreau's smaller bittern, the Green Heron, like all members of the heron family, catches its food with quick stabs of its bill. It does not probe the mud as do many species of shorebird. Since Green Herons often feed in still, shallow water, reflections may have caused Thoreau to think their bills were thrust into the mud. It must be remembered that Thoreau had no optical equipment at this time to aid his observations. -Cruikshank, Helen Gere. THOREAU ON BIRDS (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964)



Sept 4th Wednesday. Hooksett east bank 2 or 3 miles below the village, opposite mr. Mitchels.

On Thursday, Thoreau and his brother halted at a point east of Uncannunuc Mountain near Manchester, New Hampshire. They hung their tent and buffalo robes in a farmer's barn to dry and then continued on foot up the Merrimack until it became the Pemigewasset and then the Wild Amonoosuck to its very fountainhead. This part of the adventure is not included in the book. However, Thursday morning as the brothers lay in their tent listening to the rain, they found such enjoyment in birds as those who never venture into a wet world can never know. -Cruikshank, Helen Gere. THOREAU ON BIRDS (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964)



AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

A WEEK: The small houses which were scattered along the river at intervals of a mile or more were commonly out of sight to us, but sometimes, when we rowed near the shore, we heard the peevish note of a hen, or some slight domestic sound, which betrayed them. The lock-men's houses were particularly well placed, retired, and high, always at falls or rapids, and commanding the pleasantest reaches of the river, -for it is generally wider and more lake-like just above a fall,- and there they wait for boats. These humble dwellings, homely and sincere, in which a hearth was still the essential part, were more pleasing to our eyes than palaces or castles would have been. In the noon of these days, as we have said, we occasionally climbed the banks and approached these houses, to get a glass of water and make acquaintance with their inhabitants. High in the leafy bank, surrounded commonly by a small patch of corn and beans, squashes and melons, with sometimes a graceful hop-yard on one side, and some running vine over the windows, they appeared like beehives set to gather honey for a summer. I have not read of any Arcadian life which surpasses the actual luxury and serenity of these New England dwellings. For the outward gilding, at least, the age is golden enough. As you approach the sunny doorway, awakening the echoes by your steps, still no sound from these barracks of repose, and you fear that the gentlest knock may seem rude to the Oriental dreamers. The door is opened, perchance, by some Yankee-Hindoo woman, whose small-voiced but sincere hospitality, out of the bottomless depths of a quiet nature, has travelled quite round to the opposite side, and fears only to obtrude its kindness. You step over the white-scoured floor to the bright "dresser" lightly, as if afraid to disturb the devotions of the household, -for Oriental dynasties appear to have passed away since the dinner-table was last spread here,- and thence to the frequented curb, where you see your long-forgotten, unshaven face at the bottom, in juxtaposition with new-made butter and the trout in the well. "Perhaps you would like some molasses and ginger," suggests the faint noon voice. Sometimes there sits the brother who follows the sea, their representative man; who knows only how far it is to the nearest port, no more distances, all the rest is sea and distant capes, - patting the dog, or dandling the kitten in arms that were stretched by the cable and the oar, pulling against Boreas or the trade-winds. He looks up at the stranger, half pleased, half astonished, with a mariner's eye, as if he were a dolphin within cast. If men will believe it, *sua si bona norint*, there are no more quiet Tempes, nor more poetic and Arcadian lives, than may be lived in these New England dwellings. We thought that the employment of their inhabitants by day would be to tend the flowers and herds, and at night, like the shepherds of old, to cluster and give names to the stars from the river banks.

CAT



AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

[The full Latin expression that goes with “*sua si bona norint*” is “*O fortunatos nimium, sua si bona norint*,” which means “O more than happy, if they only knew their advantages,” and was used by [Virgil](#) to describe those who led the rustic bucolic agricultural life. We can say, therefore, that Virgil is a presence not only in Thoreau’s WALDEN, but also in A WEEK.]

1840

July 1, Wednesday: Publication of [THE DIAL: A MAGAZINE FOR LITERATURE, PHILOSOPHY, AND RELIGION](#) (Volume I, Number 1, July 1840), a journal of Transcendentalist thought named in honor of the sundial, began at this point and continued into 1844:

“The name speaks of faith in Nature and in Progress.” – The Reverend James Freeman Clarke

This initial issue of [THE DIAL](#) included [Henry Thoreau](#)’s essay on the Roman satirist [Aulus Persius Flaccus](#), which has been termed his “first printed paper of consequence.”

[“AULUS PERSIUS FLACCUS”](#): The life of a wise man is most of all extemporaneous, for he lives out of an eternity that includes all time. He is a child each moment, and reflects wisdom. The far darting thought of the child’s mind tarries not for the development of manhood; it lightens itself, and needs not draw down lightning from the clouds. When we bask in a single ray from the mind of Zoroaster, we see how all subsequent time has been an idler, and has no apology for itself. But the cunning mind travels farther back than Zoroaster each instant, and comes quite down to the present with its revelation. All the thrift and industry of thinking give no man any stock in life; his credit with the inner world is no better, his capital no larger. He must try his fortune again to-day as yesterday. All questions rely on the present for their solution. Time measures nothing but itself. The word that is written may be postponed, but not that on the lip. If this is what the occasion says, let the occasion say it. From a real sympathy, all the world is forward to prompt him who gets up to live without his creed in his pocket.





THE DIAL, JULY 1840

Thoreau would later recycle this paper on the satirist Persius with 28 minor modifications into the “Thursday” chapter of [A WEEK ON THE CONCORD AND MERRIMACK RIVERS](#):

A WEEK: The life of a wise man is most of all extemporaneous, for he lives out of an eternity which includes all time. The cunning mind travels further back than Zoroaster each instant, and comes quite down to the present with its revelation. The utmost thrift and industry of thinking give no man any stock in life; his credit with the inner world is no better, his capital no larger. He must try his fortune again to-day as yesterday. All questions rely on the present for their solution. Time measures nothing but itself. The word that is written may be postponed, but not that on the lip. If this is what the occasion says, let the occasion say it. All the world is forward to prompt him who gets up to live without his creed in his pocket.

Thoreau’s effort turned two tricks of interest. First, he espoused an attitude of turning away from creedal closedness, associating creedal closedness with immodesty and openness with modesty rather than vice versa and developing that attitude out of comments such as *Haud cuivis promptum est, murmurque humilesque susurros / Tollere de templis; et aperto vivere voto* which translates as “It’s not easy to take murmurs and low whispers out of the temple and live with open vow.” Second, Thoreau perversely insisted on translating *ex tempore* in its literal etymological sense “out of time” ignoring what had become the primary sense of the phrase: “haphazard,” “improvised.” Thoreau mobilized this phrase to summon people to live not in time but in eternity: “The life of a wise man is most of all extemporaneous, for he lives out of an eternity that includes all time. He is a child of each moment, and reflects wisdom.... He must try his fortune again to-day as yesterday. All questions rely on the present for their solution. Time measures nothing but itself. The word that is written may be postponed, but not that on the lip. If this is what the occasion says, let the occasion say it. From a real sympathy, all the world is forward to prompt him who gets up to live without his creed in his pocket.” The force of the essay, then, was to provide Thoreau an opportunity to preach his own doctrines by satirizing a minor Roman satirist, and he admits as much: “As long as there is satire, the poet is, as it were, *particeps criminis*.” Thoreau is of course that poet, that accessory to the crime.

Robert D. Richardson, Jr. points out that Thoreau ignored a trope in Persius that had been admired by [John](#)



Dryden, in order to do quite different things with this material:



With the cool effrontery of an Ezra Pound, Thoreau declares that there are perhaps twenty good lines in Persius, of permanent as opposed to historical interest. Ignoring the elegant shipwreck trope Dryden so admired in the sixth satire, Thoreau gives the main weight of his essay to a careful reading of seven of those lines. Two lines,

It is not easy for every one to take murmurs and low Whispers out of the temple -*et aperto vivere voto*- and live with open vow,

permit Thoreau to insist on the distinction between the "man of true religion" who finds his open temple in the whole universe, and the "jealous privacy" of those who try to "carry on a secret commerce with the gods" whose hiding place is in some building. The distinction is between the open religion of the fields and woods, and the secret, closed religion of the churches.

EZRA POUND

I would point out here that those who are familiar with the poetry of the West Coast poet of place, Robinson Jeffers (and I presume Richardson to be as innocent of knowledge of Jeffers as was Jeffers of knowledge of Thoreau), rather than see a linkage to the spirit of a poet who worshiped the Young Italy of Benito Mussolini, will choose to perceive a more direct linkage to Jeffers's stance of "inhumanism." But to go on in Richardson's comment about the "Aulus Persius Flaccus" essay:

Thoreau's best point takes a rebuke from the third satire against the casual life, against living *ex tempore*, and neatly converts it into a Thoreauvian paradox. Taking *ex tempore* literally, Thoreau discards its sense of offhand improvisation and takes it as a summons to live outside time, to live more fully than our ordinary consciousness of chronological time permits.

The life of a wise man is most of all extemporaneous, for he lives out of an eternity which includes all time.

Interpreting Persius through the lens of Emerson's "History," Thoreau contends that

All questions rely on the present for their solution. Time measures nothing but itself.

Thoreau's Persius has gone beyond Stoicism to transcendentalism, insisting on open religious feelings as opposed to closed institutional dogmatic creeds, and on a passionate articulation of the absolute value of the present moment.

(Well, first we have Thoreau being like a later poet who was renowned for his personal as well as his political craziness, and then we have Thoreau being an Emerson impersonator, interpreting things through the lens of the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. That's about par for the course, on the Richardson agenda.)

This initial issue also contained some material from Charles Emerson:



AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

The reason why Homer is to me like a dewy morning is because I too lived while Troy was, and sailed in the hollow ships of the Grecians to sack the devoted town. The rosy-fingered dawn as it crimsoned the tops of Ida, the broad seashore dotted with tents, the Trojan host in their painted armor, and the rushing chariots of Diomedea and Idomeneua, all these I too saw: my ghost animated the frame of some nameless Argive.... We forget that we have been drugged with the sleepy bowl of the Present. But when a lively chord in the soul is struck, when the windows for a moment are unbarred, the long and varied past is recovered. We recognize it all. We are no more brief, ignoble creatures; we seize our immortality, and bind together the related parts of our secular being.

– Notes from the Journal of a Scholar, The Dial, I, p. 14

This initial issue also contained on page 123 the poem by [Ellen Sturgis Hooper](#) “I slept and dreamed that life was Beauty” from which [Thoreau](#) would quote a large part as the conclusion of his “House-Warming” chapter.⁶

[WALDEN](#): The next winter I used a small cooking-stove for economy, since I did not own the forest; but it did not keep fire so well as the open fire-place. Cooking was then, for the most part, no longer a poetic, but merely a chemic process. It will soon be forgotten, in these days of stoves, that we used to roast potatoes in the ashes, after the Indian fashion. The stove not only took up room and scented the house, but it concealed the fire, and felt as if I had lost a companion. You can always see a face in the fire. The laborer, looking into it at evening, purifies his thoughts of the dross and earthiness which they have accumulated during the day. But I could no longer sit and look into the fire, and the pertinent words of a poet recurred to me with new force.–

“Never, bright flame, may be denied to me
Thy dear, life imaging, close sympathy.
What but my hopes shot upward e'er so bright?
What by my fortunes sunk so low in night?
Why art thou banished from our hearth and hall,
Thou who art welcomed and beloved by all?
Was thy existence then too fanciful
For our life's common light, who are so dull?
Did thy bright gleam mysterious converse hold
With our congenial souls? secrets too bold?
Well, we are safe and strong, for now we sit
Beside a hearth where no dim shadows flit,
Where nothing cheers nor saddens, but a fire
Warms feet and hands – nor does to more aspire
By whose compact utilitarian heap
The present may sit down and go to sleep,
Nor fear the ghosts who from the dim past walked,
And with us by the unequal light of the old wood fire talked.”

Mrs. Hooper



PEOPLE OF
WALDEN

ELLEN STURGIS HOOPER

6. Would she be married to Concord's Harry Hooper, and would he possibly be related to the signer of the [Declaration of Independence](#) who lived in the south after attending Boston's Latin School?



AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

It is to be noted, as an exercise in becoming aware of how much our attitudes toward copyright have changed, that in the original edition the last line, indicating that the poem was by a Mrs. Hooper, did not appear.

The poem as it had been published in [THE DIAL](#) had been entitled “The Wood Fire.” It would appear that Thoreau had intended to quote even more of the poem, and that seven beginning lines had been suppressed in the process of shortening the [WALDEN](#) manuscript for publication:

**“When I am glad or gay,
Let me walk forth into the brilliant sun,
And with congenial rays be shone upon:
When I am sad, or thought-bewitched would be,
Let me glide forth in moonlight’s mystery.
But never, while I live this changeful life,
This Past and Future with all wonders rife,
Never, bright flame, may be denied to me,
Thy dear, life imaging, close sympathy.
What but my hopes shot upward e’er so bright?
What by my fortunes sunk so low in night?
Why art thou banished from our hearth and hall,
Thou who art welcomed and beloved by all?
Was thy existence then too fanciful
For our life’s common light, who are so dull?
Did thy bright gleam mysterious converse hold
With our congenial souls? secrets too bold?
Well, we are safe and strong, for now we sit
Beside a hearth where no dim shadows flit,
Where nothing cheers nor saddens, but a fire
Warms feet and hands – nor does to more aspire
By whose compact utilitarian heap
The present may sit down and go to sleep,
Nor fear the ghosts who from the dim past walked,
And with us by the unequal light of the old wood fire talked.”**



Thoreau’s poem “Sympathy,” or “To a gentle boy” also appeared in this 1st issue of [THE DIAL](#).

The title of the journal came from a phrase that Bronson Alcott had been planning to use for his next year’s diary,

DIAL ON TIME THINE OWN ETERNITY

and the “dial” in question was a garden sundial.⁷ For purposes of this publication Bronson strove to emulate 7. The name, of course, carried metaphysical freight. For instance, in his 1836 essay NATURE [Emerson](#) had quoted the following from Emmanuel Swedenborg — the Swedish religious mentor whom he would later characterize, in REPRESENTATIVE MEN, as the type of “the mystic”:



The visible world and the relation of its parts, is the dial plate of the invisible.

And in December 1839, [Emerson](#) had written in his journal:

I say how the world looks to me without reference to Blair’s Rhetoric or Johnson’s Lives. And I call my thoughts The Present Age, because I use no will in the matter, but honestly record such impressions as things make. So transform I myself into a Dial, and my shadow will tell where the sun is.



**Sophia Peabody (Hawthorne)’s Illustration for the 1st Edition of
“To a Gentle Boy” in TWICE-TOLD TALES**



the selections from his writings that [Waldo Emerson](#) had excerpted at the end of the small volume NATURE, attempted, that is, to cast his wisdom in the form of epigrams or “Orphic Sayings” which, even if they were unchewable, at least could be fitted into one’s mouth. In the timeframe in which these were being created, Alcott was reading [Hesiod](#) (he had in his personal library HESIOD’S WORKS, TRANSLATED FROM THE GREEK, BY MR. T[HOMAS] COOKE, SECOND EDITION, 1740), Dr. Henry More, the Reverend Professor Ralph Cudworth, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. When these were finally published, they were the only transcendental material to appear in [THE DIAL](#), of 24 pieces, that would bear the full name of the author rather than be offered anonymously or bear merely the author’s initials. It was as if the other transcendentalist writers associated with [THE DIAL](#) were saying to their readers, “Look, this is A. Bronson Alcott here, you’ve got to make allowances.” Here is one of the easier and more pithy examples:

Prudence is the footprint of Wisdom.

Some of these things, however, ran on and on without making any sense at all, and here is one that was seized upon by the popular press and mocked as a “Gastric Saying”:

The popular genesis is historical. It is written to sense not to the soul. Two principles, diverse and alien, interchange the Godhead and sway the world by turns. God is dual, Spirit is derivative. Identity halts in diversity. Unity is actual merely....

Well, I won’t quote the whole thing. Was Bronson Alcott a disregarded Hegelian who had never heard of Hegel? Wouldn’t this be a better world if [G.W.F. Hegel](#) also had been ignored? Go figure.⁸The initial issue included

Americans of Thoreau’s day accepted as axiomatic the Lockean-Jeffersonian principle that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, and Thoreau did not challenge this axiom. But he applied it in an unorthodox way. The unit that gives consent, he asserts, is not the majority but the individual. The reason, he explains, is that consent is a moral judgment, for which each individual is accountable to his own conscience. The majority, on the other hand, is not a **moral** entity and its right to rule not a moral entitlement. As Bronson Alcott, who set Thoreau the example of resistance to civil government, aptly put it, “In the theocracy of the soul majorities do not rule.” The alleged right of the majority to rule, Thoreau declared, is based merely on the assumption that “they are physically the strongest.”



a poem by Christopher Pearse Cranch, “To the [Aurora Borealis](#)”:

Arctic fount of holiest light,
Springing through the winter night,
Spreading far behind yon hill,
When the earth lies dark and still,
Rippling o’er the stars, as streams
O’er pebbled beds in sunny gleams;
O for names, thou vision fair,
To express thy splendours rare!

8. July 1840, [The Dial](#), “Orphic Sayings,” xvii.



AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

Blush upon the cheek of night,
Posthumous, unearthly light,
Dream of the deep sunken sun,
Beautiful, sleep-walking one,
Sister of the moonlight pale,
Star-obscuring meteor veil,
Spread by heaven's watching vestals;
Sender of the gleamy crystals
Darting on their arrowy course

From their glittering polar source,
Upward where the air doth freeze
Round the sister Pleiades;--

Beautiful and rare Aurora,
In the heavens thou art their Flora,
Night-blooming Cereus of the sky,
Rose of amaranthine dye,
Hyacinth of purple light,
Or their Lily clad in white!

Who can name thy wondrous essence,
Thou electric phosphorescence?
Lonely apparition fire!
Seeker of the starry choir!
Restless roamer of the sky,
Who hath won thy mystery?
Mortal science hath not ran
With thee through the Empyrean,
Where the constellations cluster
Flower-like on thy branching lustre.

After all the glare and toil,
And the daylight's fretful coil,
Thou dost come so mild and still,
Hearts with love and peace to fill;
As when after revelry
With a talking company,
Where the blaze of many lights
Fell on fools and parasites,
One by one the guests have gone,
And we find ourselves alone;
Only one sweet maiden near,
With a sweet voice low and clear,
Whispering music in our ear,--
So thou talkest to the earth
After daylight's weary mirth.
Is not human fantasy,
Wild Aurora, likest thee,
Blossoming in nightly dreams,
Like thy shifting meteor-gleams?

[Thoreau](#)'s own copy of this issue of [THE DIAL](#) is now at Southern Illinois University. It exhibits his subsequent pencil corrections.



Aulus Persius Flaccus

If you have imagined what a divine work is spread out for the poet, and approach this author too, in the hope of finding the field at length fairly entered on, you will hardly dissent from the words of the prologue,

“Ipse semipaganus
Ad sacra Vatum carmen affero nostrum.”

Here is none of the interior dignity of Virgil, nor the elegance and fire of Horace, nor will any Sibyl be needed to remind you, that from those older Greek poets, there is a sad descent to Persius. Scarcely can you distinguish one harmonious sound, amid this unmusical bickering with the follies of men.

One sees how music has its place in thought, but hardly as yet in language. When the Muse arrives, we wait for her to remould language, and impart to it her own rhythm. Hitherto the verse groans and labors with its load, but goes not forward blithely, singing by the way. The best ode may be parodied, indeed is itself a parody, and has a poor and trivial sound, like a man stepping on the rounds of a ladder. Homer, and Shakspeare, and Milton, and Marvel, and Wordsworth, are but the rustling of leaves and crackling of twigs in the forest, and not yet the sound of any bird. The Muse has never lifted up her voice to sing. Most of all satire will not be sung. A Juvenal or Persius do not marry music to their verse, but are measured faultfinders at best; stand but just outside the faults they condemn, and so are concerned rather about the monster they have escaped, than the fair prospect before them. Let them live on an age, not a secular one, and they will have travelled out of his shadow and harm's way, and found other objects to ponder.

As long as there is ~~nature~~, the poet is, as it were, *particeps criminis*. One sees not but he had best let bad take care of itself, and have to do only with what is beyond suspicion. If you light on the least vestige of truth, and it is the weight of the whole body still which stamps the faintest trace, an eternity will not suffice to extol it, while no evil is so huge, but you grudge to bestow on it a moment of hate. Truth never turns to rebuke falsehood; her own straightforwardness is the severest correction. Horace would not have written satire so well, if he had not been inspired by it, as by a passion, and fondly cherished his vein. In his odes, the love always exceeds the hate, so that the severest satire still sings itself, and the poet is satisfied, though the folly be not corrected.

A sort of necessary order in the development of Genius is, first, Complaint; second, Plaint; third, Love. Complaint, which is the condition of Persius, lies not in the province of poetry. Ere long the enjoyment of a superior good would have changed his disgust into regret. We can never have much sympathy with the complainer; for after searching nature through, we conclude he must be both plaintiff and defendant too, and so had best come to a settlement without a hearing.

I know not but it would be truer to say, that the highest strain of the muse is essentially plaintive. The saint's are still tears of joy.

[“nature” should
read “satire”]



But the divinest poem, or the life of a great man, is the severest satire; as impersonal as nature herself, and like the sighs of her winds in the woods, which convey ever a slight reproof to the hearer. The greater the genius, the keener the edge of the satire.

Hence have we to do only with the rare and fragmentary traits, which least belong to Persius, or, rather, are the properest utterance of his muse; since that which he says best at any time is what he can best say at all times. The Spectators and Ramblers have not failed to cull some quotable sentences from this garden too, so pleasant is it to meet even the most familiar truths in a new dress, when, if our neighbor had said it, we should have passed it by as hackneyed. Out of these six satires, you may perhaps select some twenty lines, which fit so well as many thoughts, that they will recur to the scholar almost as readily as a natural image; though when translated into familiar language, they lose that insular emphasis, which fitted them for quotation. Such lines as the following no translation can render commonplace. Contrasting the man of true religion with those, that, with jealous privacy, would fain carry on a secret commerce with the gods, he says, –

“Haud cuivis promptum est, murmurque humilesque
Tollere susurros de templis; et aperto vivere voto.”

To the virtuous man, the universe is the only sanctum sanctorum, and the penetralia of the temple are the broad noon of his existence. Why should he betake himself to a subterranean crypt, as if it were the only holy ground in all the world he had left unprofaned? The obedient soul would only the more discover and familiarize things, and escape more and more into light and air, as having henceforth done with secrecy, so that the universe shall not seem open enough for it. At length, is it neglectful even of that silence which is consistent with true modesty, but by its independence of all confidence in its disclosures, makes that which it imparts so private to the hearer, that it becomes the care of the whole world that modesty be not infringed.

To the man who cherishes a secret in his breast, there is a still greater secret unexplored. Our most indifferent acts may be matter for secrecy, but whatever we do with the utmost truthfulness and integrity, by virtue of its pureness, must be transparent as light.

In the third satire he asks,

“Est aliquid quò tendis, et in quod dirigis arcum?
An passim sequeris corvos, testâve, lutove,
Securus quò per ferat, atque ex tempore vivis?”

Language seems to have justice done it, but is obviously cramped and narrowed in its significance, when any meanness is described. The truest construction is not put upon it. What may readily be fashioned into a rule of wisdom, is here thrown in the teeth of the sluggard, and constitutes the front of his offence. Universally, the innocent man will come forth from the sharpest inquisition and lecturings, the combined din of reproof and commendation, with a faint sound of eulogy in his ears. Our vices lie ever in the direction of our virtues, and in their best estate are but plausible imitations of the latter. Falsehood never attains to the dignity of entire falseness, but



is only an inferior sort of truth; if it were more thoroughly false, it would incur danger of becoming true.

“Securus quò pes ferat, atque ex tempore vivit,

is then the motto of a wise man. For first, as the subtle discernment of the language would have taught us, with all his negligence he is still secure; but the sluggard, notwithstanding his heedlessness, is insecure.

The life of a wise man is most of all extemporaneous, for he lives out of an eternity that includes all time. He is a child each moment and reflects wisdom. The far darting thought of the child's mind tarries not for the development of manhood; it lightens itself, and needs not draw down lightning from the clouds. When we bask in a single ray from the mind of Zoroaster, we see how all subsequent time has been an idler, and has no apology for itself. But the cunning mind travels farther back than Zoroaster each instant, and comes quite down to the present with its revelation. All the thrift and industry of thinking give no man any stock in life; his credit with the inner world is no better, his capital no larger. He must try his fortune again today as yesterday. All questions rely on the present for their solution. Time measures nothing but itself: The word that is written may be postponed, but not that on the life. If this is what the occasion says, let the occasion say it. From a real sympathy, all the world is forward to prompt him who gets up to live without his creed in his pocket.

In the fifth satire, which is the best, I find,

*“Stat contrà ratio, et recretam garrit in aurem.
Ne liceat facere id, quod quis vitiabit agendo.”*

Only they who do not see how anything might be better done are forward to try their hand on it. Even the master workman must be encouraged by the reflection, that his awkwardness will be incompetent to do that harm, to which his skill may fail to do justice. Here is no apology for neglecting to do many things from a sense of our incapacity, – for what deed does not fall maimed and imperfect from our hands? – but only a warning to bungle less.

The satires of Persius are the farthest possible from inspired; evidently a chosen, not imposed subject. Perhaps I have given him credit for more earnestness than is apparent; but certain it is, that that which alone we can call Persius, which is forever independent and consistent, was in earnest, and so sanctions the sober consideration of all. The artist and his work are not to be separated. The most wilfully foolish man cannot stand aloof from his folly, but the deed and the doer together make ever one sober fact. The buffoon may not bribe you to laugh always at his grimaces; they shall sculpture themselves in Egyptian granite, to stand heavy as the pyramids on the ground of his character.

T.



AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

1847

August 1, Friday: [Herman Melville](#) got married with Elizabeth Shaw, daughter of [Lemuel Shaw](#), the Chief Justice of Massachusetts. That night, coincidentally of course, there would be a brilliant display of [northern lights](#) over the city of [Boston](#).⁹

SKY EVENT



AURORA BOREALIS

1851

September 7, Sunday: At this point [Henry Thoreau](#) originated what eventually would become, after four distinct revisions during Fall 1854 during preparations for the lecture he would deliver on December 4, 1854 at Railroad Hall in [Providence](#), a leaf now in the Houghton Library. Just prior to his death Thoreau submitted a revised version of this lecture to James Fields for print publication as an essay, including this leaf which he had not included in the lecture as it had been delivered in [Rhode Island](#), and the essay would be published as his “LIFE WITHOUT PRINCIPLE”. Here is the final version as it would posthumously be published:

It seems to me that there is nothing memorable written upon the art of life – at least in these days. By what discipline to secure the most life? I would like to know how to spend this evening; not how to economize time, but how to spend it – that the day may not have been in vain. It is plain that men are not well employed. We explore the coast of Greenland but leave our own interior blank. I would fain go to that place or condition where my life is to be found. I suffer that to be rumor which may be verified. We are surrounded by mystery; as big a drapery [sic] which adapts itself to all our motives, and yet most men will be reminded by this of no garment but their shirts and pretend perchance that the only mystery left is the magnetic character of the North Pole. That is the great problem nowadays. To devote your life to the discovery of the divinity in Nature, or to the eating of oysters! I have read how many car-loads of oysters are sent daily from Connecticut to western New York. So it seems that some men are devoted even to the mere statistics of the oyster business, who perhaps do not get any oysters!

9. If the earth moved for these newlyweds, that of course would need to be put down also as coincidence. Nuptials being transacted, the couple would settle in New-York, where the groom was to write reviews for the [Literary World](#) under Evert Augustus Duyckinck. During this year, publication of *OMOO: A NARRATIVE OF ADVENTURES IN THE SOUTH SEAS*, a narrative found by its audience to be titillatingly suggestive of its creator’s sexual adventurousness. There seems to be no evidence that [Henry Thoreau](#) ever glanced at this or any of [Melville](#)’s later works, after his initial perusal of *TYPÉE* in the fall of 1846 (Thoreau seems to have stepped past Melville into more original sources such as William Ellis’s POLYNESIAN RESEARCHES).

AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS



Now, here is the original initial first version of this finished product, as it appeared as of this date:



September 7, Sunday: We sometimes experience a mere fulness of life, which does not find any channels to flow into. We are stimulated but to no obvious purpose. I feel myself uncommonly prepared for **some** literary work, but I can select no work. I am prepared not so much for contemplation, as for forceful expression. I am braced both physically and intellectually. It is not so much the music—as the marching to the music that I feel.

I feel that the juices of the fruits which I have eaten the melons & apples have ascended to my brain—& are stimulating it. They give me a heady force. Now I can write nervously. Carlyle’s writing is for the most part of this character.

Miss Martineau’s last book is not so bad as the timidity which fears its influence.¹⁰ As if the popularity of this or that book would be so fatal—& man would not still be man in the world. Nothing is so much to be feared as

10. [Thoreau](#) was presumably referring to the correspondence of the notorious free-thinker Harriet Martineau with her friend Henry Atkinson, which was being published during this year by J. Chapman of London as *LETTERS ON THE LAWS OF MAN’S NATURE AND DEVELOPMENT*. Martineau shocked many readers with her acceptance of her friend’s “necessarianism, materialism [and] perfectibilism.”



fear– Atheism may be popular with God himself.

What shall we say of these timid folk who carry the principle of thinking nothing & doing nothing and being nothing to such an extreme– As if in the absence of thought that vast yearning of their natures for something to fill the vacuum–made the least traditionary expression & shadow of a thought to be clung to with instinctive tenacity. They atone for their producing nothing by a brutish respect for something. They are as simple as oxen and as guiltless of thought & reflection.– their reflections are reflected from other minds. The creature of institutions–bigoted–& a conservatist– can say nothing hearty. he cannot meet life with life–but only with words. He rebuts you by avoiding you. He is shocked like a woman. Our extatic states which appear to yield so little fruit, have this value at least–though in the seasons when our genius reigns we may be powerless for expression.– Yet in calmer seasons, when our talent is active, the memory of those rarer moods comes to color our picture & is the permanent paint pot as it were into which we dip our brush

Thus no life or experience goes unreported at last–but if it be not solid gold it is gold-leaf which gilds the furniture of the mind. It is an experience of infinite beauty–on which we unfailingly draw. Which enables us to exaggerate ever truly. Our moments of inspiration are not lost though we have no particular poems to show for them. For those experiences have left an indelible impression, and we are ever and anon reminded of them. Their truth subsides & in cooler moments we can use them as paint to gild & adorn our prose. When I despair to sing them I will remember that they will furnish me with paint with which to adorn & preserve the works of talent one day. They are like a pot of pure ether.

They lend the writer when the moment comes a certain superfluity of wealth–making his expression to overrun & float itself. It is the difference between our river now parched & dried up exposing its unsightly & weedy bottom–& the same when in the spring it covers all the meads with a chain of placid lakes, reflecting the forests & the skies.

We are receiving our portion of the Infinite. The **Art of life!** Was there ever anything memorable written upon it? By what disciplines to secure the most life–with what care to watch our thoughts. To observe not what transpires, in the street–but in the mind. & heart of me! I do not remember any page which will tell me how to spend this afternoon. I do not so much wish to know how to economize time–as how to spend it–by what means to grow rich. That the day may not have–been in vain.

What if one moon has come & gone with its world of poetry–its weird teachings–its oracular suggestions–So divine a creature–freighted with hints for me, and I not use her. One moon gone by unnoticed!!

Suppose you attend to the hints to the suggestions which the moon makes for one month–commonly in vain–will they not be very different from any thing in literature or religion or philosophy. The scenery, when it is truly seen reacts on the life of the seer. How to live– How to get the most life! as if you were to teach the young hunter how to entrap his game. How to extract its honey from the flower of the world. That is my every day business. I am as busy as a bee about it. I ramble over all fields on that errand and am never so happy as when I feel myself heavy with honey & wax. I am like a bee searching the livelong day for the sweets of nature. Do I not impregnate & intermix the flowers produce rare & finer varieties by transferring my eyes from one to another? I do as naturally & as joyfully with my own humming music–seek honey all the day. With what honied thought any experience yields me I take a bee line to my cell. It is with flowers I would deal. Where is the flower there is the honey–which is perchance the nectareous portion of the fruit–there is to be the fruit–& no doubt flowers are thus colored & painted–to attract & guide the bee. So by the dawning or radiance of beauty are we advertised where is the honey & the fruit of thought of discourse & of action– We are first attracted by the beauty of the flower, before we discover the honey which is a foretaste of the future fruit. Did not the young Achilles (?) spend his youth learning how to hunt? The art of spending a day. If it is possible that we may be addressed–it behoves us to be attentive. If by watching all day & all night–I may detect some trace of the Ineffable–then will it not be worth the while to watch? Watch & pray without ceasing–but not necessary in sadness–be of good cheer. Those Jews were too sad: to another people a still deeper revelation may suggest only joy. Dont I know what gladness is? Is it but the reflex of sadness, its back side? In the Hebrew gladness I hear but too distinctly still the sound

of sadness retreating. Give me a gladness which has never given place to sadness.



I am convinced that men are not well employed—that this is not the way to spend a day. If by patience, if by watching I can secure one new ray of light—can feel myself elevated for an instant upon Pisgah—the world which was dead prose to me become living & divine—shall I not watch ever—shall I not be a watchman henceforth?—If by watching a whole year on the city's walls I may obtain a communication from heaven, shall I not do well to shut up my shop & turn a watchman? Can a youth—a man—do more wisely—than to go where his life is to be found? As if I had suffered that to be rumor—which may be verified. We are surrounded by a rich & fertile mystery— May we not probe it—pry into it—employ ourselves about it—a little? To devote your life to the discovery of the divinity in Nature or to the eating of oysters would they not be attended with very different results?¹¹

I cannot **easily** buy a blank book to write thoughts in, they are all ruled for dollars & cents.¹²

If the wine which will nourish me grows on the surface of the moon—I will do the best I can to go to the moon for it.

The discoveries which we make abroad are special and particular—those which we make at home are general & significant. The further off the nearer the surface. The nearer home the deeper. Go in search of the springs of life—& you will get exercise enough. Think of a man's swinging dumb bells for his health—when those springs are bubbling in far off pastures unsought by him! The seeming necessity of swinging dumbbells proves that he

11. This entry would inspire [Thoreau](#) as he began to write "WHAT SHALL IT PROFIT" in late 1854:

The art of life! Was there ever anything memorable written upon it? By what disciplines to secure the most life, with what care to watch our thoughts. To observe what transpires, not in the street, but in the mind and heart of me! I do not remember any page which will tell me how to spend this afternoon. I do not so much wish to know how to economize time as how to spend it, by what means to grow rich, that the day may not have been in vain.... How to live. How to get the most life.... How to extract its honey from the flower of the world. That is my everyday business. I am as busy as a bee about it.... The art of spending a day. If it is possible that we may be addressed, it behooves us to be attentive.... I am convinced that men are not well employed, that this is not the way to spend a day.... We are surrounded by a rich and fertile mystery. May we not probe it, pry into it, employ ourselves about it, a little? To devote your life to the discovery of the divinity in nature or to the eating of oysters, would they not be attended with very different results?



has lost his way.

To watch for describe all the divine features which I detect in Nature.

My profession is to be always on the alert to find God in nature—to know his lurking places. To attend all the oratorios—the operas in nature.

The mind may perchance be persuaded to act—to energize—by the action and energy of the body. Any kind of liquid will fetch the pump.

We all have our states of fullness & of emptiness—but we overflow at different points. One overflows through the sensual outlets—another through his heart another through his head—& another perchance only through the higher part of his head or his poetic faculty— It depends on where each is tight & open. We can perchance thus direct our nutriment to those organs we specially use.

How happens it that there are few men so well employed—, so much to their minds, but that a little money—or fame—would by them off from their present pursuits!¹³

7th still: To Conantum via fields Hubbards Grove & grain field To Tupelo cliff & Conantum and returning over peak same way. 6. P M I hear no larks [Eastern Meadowlark] [Sturnella magna] sing at evening as in the spring—nor robins. only a few distressed notes from the robin— In Hubbards grain field beyond the brook—now the sun is down. The air is very still— There is a fine sound of crickets not loud The woods & single trees are heavier masses in the landscape than in the spring. Night has more allies. The heavy shadows of woods and trees are remarkable now. The meadows are green with their second crop. I hear only a tree toad or song sparrow [Melospiza] [melodia] singing as in spring at long intervals. The Roman wormwood is beginning to yellow—green my shoes.— intermingled with the blue—curls over the sand in this grain field. Perchance some poet likened this yellow dust to the ambrosia of the Gods. The birds are remarkably silent At the bridge perceive the bats are out. & the yet silvery moon not quite full is reflected in the water. The water is perfectly still—and there is a red tinge from the evening sky in it. The sky is singularly marked this evening. There are bars or rays of nebulous light springing from the western horizon where the sun has disappeared, and alternating with beautiful blue rays, by far more blue than any other portion of the sky these continue to diverge till they have reached the middle & then converge to the eastern horizon—making a symmetrical figure like the divisions of a muskmelon—not very bright yet distinct.— though growing less & less bright toward the east. It was a quite remarkable phenomenon encompassing the heavens, as if you were to behold the divisions of a muskmelon thus alternately colored from within it.

A proper vision—a colored mist. The most beautiful thing in Nature is the sun reflected from a tearful cloud. These white and blue ribs embraced the earth. The two outer blues much the brightest & matching one another. You hear the hum of mosquitoes.

Going up the road. The sound of the crickets is now much more universal & loud. Now in the fields I see the white white streak of the neottia in the twilight— The whippoorwills [Whip-poor-will] [Caprimulgus vociferus] sing far off. I smell burnt land somewhere. At Tupelo Cliff I hear the sound of singers on the river young men & women—which is unusual here—returning from their row. Man's voice thus uttered fits well the spaces— It fills Nature. And after all the singing of men is something far grander than any natural sound. It is wonderful that men do not oftener sing in the fields—by day & night. I bathe at the north side the cliff while the moon shines round the end of the rock— The opposite Cliff is reflected in the water. Then sit on the S side of the Cliff in the woods. One or two fireflies—could it be a glowworm— I thought I saw one or two in the air (—that is all in this walk) I hear a whippoorwill uttering a cluck of suspicion in my rear— He is suspicious & inquisitive. The river stretches off southward from me. I see the sheeny portions of its western shore interruptedly for a quarter of a mile—where the moon light is reflected from the pads.— a strong gleaming light while the water is lost in the obscurity.

I hear the sound from time to time of a leaping fish—or a frog—or a muskrat or turtle.— It is even warmer **methinks** than it was in August—& it is perfectly clear the air. I know not how it is that this universal cricket's creak should sound thus regularly intermittent—as if for the most part they fell in with one another & creaked in time—making a certain pulsing sound a sort of breathing or panting of all nature. You sit twenty feet above the still river—see the sheeny pads. & the moon & some bare tree tops in the distant horizon. Those bare tree tops add greatly to the wildness.

12. [Thoreau](#) would later copy this into his early lecture “WHAT SHALL IT PROFIT”, combining it with an entry made on June 29, 1852 (JOURNAL 4:162) to form the following:

[Paragraph 6] I cannot easily buy a blank book to write thoughts in; they are all ruled for dollars and cents. If a man was tossed out of a window when an infant, and so made a cripple for life, or scared out of his wits by the Indians, it is regretted chiefly because he was thus incapacitated for—business! I think that there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business.



AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

Lower down I see the moon in the water as bright as in the heavens—only the water bugs disturb its disk—and now I catch a faint glassy glare from the whole river surface which before was simply dark. This is set in a frame of double darkness on the east i.e. the reflected shore of woods & hills & the reality—the shadow & the substance bipartite answering to each. I see the northern lights over my shoulder to remind me of the Esquimaux & that they are still my contemporaries on this globe—that they too are taking their walks on another part of the planet.— in pursuit of seals perchance.

The stars are dimly reflected in the water— The path of water-bugs in the moon's rays is like ripples of light. It is only when you stand fronting the sun or moon that you see their light reflected in the water. I hear no frogs these nights—bull-frogs or others—as in the spring— It is not the season of sound.

At Conantum end—just under the wall From this point & at this height I do not perceive any bright or yellowish light on Fair Haven—but an oily & glass like smoothness on its southwestern bay—through a very slight mistiness. Two or three pines appear to stand in the moon lit air on this side of the pond—while the Enlightened portion of the water is bounded by the heavy reflection of the wood on the east It was so soft & velvety a light as contained a thousand placid days sweetly put to rest in the bosom of the water. So looked the north Twin Lake in the Maine woods. It reminds me of placid lakes in the mid-noon of Ind. Summer days—but yet more placid & civilized—suggesting a higher cultivation—which aeons of summer days have gone to make. Like a summer day seen far away. All the effects of sunlight—with a softer tone—and all this stillness of the water & the air superadded—and the witchery of the hour. What gods are they that require so fair a vase of gleaming water to their prospect in the midst of the wild woods by night? Else why this beauty allotted to night—a gem to sparkle in the zone of night. They are strange gods now out—methinks their names are not in any mythology— I can faintly trace its zigzag border of sheeny pads even here. If such is there to be seen in remotest wildernesses—does it not suggest its own nymphs & wood Gods to enjoy it? As When at middle of the placid noon in Ind summer days all the surface of a lake is as one cobweb—gleaming in the sun which heaves gently to the passing zephyr— There was the lake—its glassy surface just distinguishable—its sheeny shore of pads—with a few pines bathed in light on its hither shore just as in mid of a november day—except that this was the chaster light of the moon—the cooler—temperature of the night and these were the deep shades of night that fenced it round & imbosomed. It tells of a far away long passed civilization of an antiquity superior to time—unappreciable by time.

Is there such virtue in raking cranberries—that those men's industry whom I now see on the meadow—shall reprove my idleness? Can I not go over those same meadows after them & rake still more valuable fruits. Can I not rake with my mind? Can I not rake a thought perchance which shall be worth a bushel of cranber?—¹⁴ A certain refinement & civilization in nature which increases with the wildness. The civilization that consists with wildness. The light that is in night. A smile as in a dream on the face of the sleeping lake. There is light enough to show what we see—what **night** has to exhibit—any more would obscure these objects. I am not advertised of any deficiency of light. The actual is fair as a vision or a dream. If ever we have attained to any nobleness—ever in our imagination & intentions—that will surely ennoble the features of nature for us that will clothe them with beauty. Of course no jeweller ever dealt with a gem so fair & suggestive as this actual lake. The scene it may be of so much noble & poetic life—and not merely adorn some monarch's crown.

It is remarkably still at this hour & season—no sound of bird or beast for the most part. This has none of the reputed noxious qualities of night.

13. This would appear in "WHAT SHALL IT PROFIT" as:

[Paragraph 36] It is remarkable that there are few men so well employed, so much to their minds, but that a little money or fame would commonly buy them off from their present pursuit. I see advertisements for **active** young men, as if activity were the whole of a young man's capital. Yet I have been surprised when one has with confidence proposed to me, a grown man, to embark in some enterprise of his, as if I had absolutely nothing to do, my life having been a complete failure hitherto. What a doubtful compliment this is to pay me! As if he had met me half-way across the ocean beating up against the wind, but bound nowhere, and proposed to me to go along with him! If I did, what do you think the Underwriter¹ would say? No, no! I am not without employment at this stage of the voyage. To tell the truth, I saw an advertisement for able-bodied seamen, when I was a boy, sauntering in my native port, and as soon as I came of age I embarked.

¹ Bradley P. Dean has emended the essay copy-text from 'underwriters' on authority of an intermediate lecture-draft manuscript in OCIW (see Dean, "Sound of a Flail," pages 403-404 for a transcription of this manuscript).




AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

On the Peak. The faint sounds of birds—dreaming aloud—in the night—the fresh cool air & sound of the wind rushing over the rocks—remind me of the tops of mts. That is all the earth is but the outside of the planet bordering on the hard eyed sky—equally with drawn & near to heaven. is this pasture as the summit of the white mts— All the earth's surface like a mt top—for I see its relation to heaven as simply. & am not imposed upon by a difference of a few few feet in elevation.— In this faint light all fields are like a mossy rock—& remote from the cultivated plains of day. All is equally savage—equally solitary—& the dif. in elevation is felt to be unimportant. It is all one with caucasus the slightest hill pasture.

The bass wood had a singularly solid look & sharply defined—as by a web or film—as if its leaves covered it like scales—


Scared up a whippoorwill [**Whip-poor-will**  *Caprimulgus vociferus*] on the ground on the hill. Will not my townsmen consider me a benefactor if I conquer some realms from the night? If I can show them that there is some beauty awake while they are asleep.? If I add to the domains of poetry. If I report to the gazettes anything transpiring in our midst worthy of man's attention. I will say nothing now to the disparagement of Day, for he is not here to defend himself.

The northern lights now as I descend from the Conantum house have become a crescent of light crowned with short shooting flames—or the shadows of flames. for some times they are dark as well as white. There is scarcely any dew even in the low lands.

Now the fire in the north increases wonderfully—not shooting up so much as creeping along like a fire on the mts of the north seen afar in the night. The Hyperborean gods are burning brush, and it spread and all the hoes in heaven could'nt stop it. It spread from west to east over the crescent hill. Like a vast fiery worm it lay across the northern sky—broken into many pieces & each piece strives to advance itself worm like on its own muscles It has spread into the choicest woodlots of valhalla—now it shoots up like a single (solitary watch fire) or burning bush—or where it ran up a pine tree like powder—& still it continues to gleam here & there like a fat stump in the burning & is reflected in the water. And now I see the gods by great exertions have got it under, & the stars have come out without fear in peace.

Though no birds sing, the crickets vibrate their shrill & stridulous cymbals especially on the alders of the causeway. Those minstrels especially engaged for night's quire.

It takes some time to wear off the trivial impression which the day has made—& thus the first hours of night are sometimes lost.

There were two hen hawks [**Red-tailed Hawk**  *Buteo jamaicensis*] soared and circled for our entertainment when we were in the woods on that Boon Plain the other day—crossing each others orbits from time to time, alternating like the squirrels of the morning. Till alarmed by an imitation of a hawks shrill cry—they gradually inflated themselves made themselves more aerial and rose higher & higher into the heavens & were at length lost to sight— Yet all the while earnestly looking scanning the surface of the earth for a stray mouse or rabbit.

14. [Thoreau](#) would combine the entries JOURNAL 2:389 (August 15, 1851), JOURNAL 2:470, and JOURNAL 2:477 in “WHAT SHALL IT PROFIT” as:

[Paragraph 96] It is pathetic for me far in the fields in mid forenoon to hear the village clock striking. The bees on the flowers seem to reprove my idleness. Yet I ask myself to what end do they labor? Is there so much need of honey and wax? Is the industry of mankind truly respectable? Is there such virtue in raking cranberries that those men's employment whom I now see in the meadow can rightly reprove my idleness? Can I not go over these same meadows after them and rake still more valuable fruits—rake with my mind? Can I not rake a thought perchance which shall be worth a bushel of cranberries? I will not mind the village clock; it marks time for the dead and dying. It sounds like a knell; as if one struck the most sonorous slates in the churchyard with a mallet, and they rang out the words which are engraved on them—*tempus fugit irrevocabile*.¹ I harken for the clock that strikes the eternal hours. What though my walk is desultory—and I do not find employment which satisfies my hunger and thirst, and the bee probing the thistle and loading himself with honey and wax seems better employed than I, my idleness is better than his industry. I would rather that my spirit hunger and thirst than that it forget its own wants in satisfying the hunger and thirst of the body.²

¹ Latin: “time flies irrevocably.” Bradley P. Dean has emended the manuscript copy-text by italicizing this phrase.

². Compare Matthew 5:6.




AURORA BOREALIS


AURORA BOREALIS

[Thoreau](#) made a comment in his JOURNAL that would be trivialized by [Waldo Emerson](#) after Thoreau's death and then utilized, in its trivialized form, by [Franklin Delano Roosevelt](#) in a famous speech, as part of his legitimization of American progress-thinking:

It is not so much the music – as the marching to the music that I feel.... Nothing is so much to be feared as fear. Atheism may comparatively be popular with God himself.

In this comment, of course, Thoreau was quoting a famous aphorism of Montaigne as of 1580 and Lord [Francis Bacon](#) as of 1623 which had, ten years earlier (1831 ) , been plagiarized by [Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington](#), the general who had become utterly famous by being in command of the opposing forces when the forces of [Napoleon Bonaparte](#) were finally defeated on June 18, 1815.

The only thing I am afraid of is fear.

Thoreau was quoting this famous aphorism, so similar to THE BOOK OF PROVERBS (Chapter 3, verse 25 ) , merely by mentioning it, as today we would say “let a thousand flowers bloom” and bring

everyone's mind to Mao's use of this line from a Chinese classic essay.

Having quoted-by-mentioning, Thoreau went directly on to mock the sort of attitude that had produced such a sentiment, and to mock the iron mind of the Duke, by a caustic deduction about atheism.



The gist of Thoreau's deduction was that, were it really true and meaningful that nothing is so much to be

AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

feared as fear, then atheism, something other than fear, would be something not so much to be feared as fear, and therefore even for God –who of course knows as well as anyone that atheism is a silly doctrine– would prefer being atheistic over being fearful. And we note that this *reductio ad absurdum* occurs in a context in which Thoreau has been ruminating about his mysterious

It is not so much the music – as the marching to the music that I feel.

which was tied of course to the mysterious “different drummer” passage at the end of [WALDEN](#).



[WALDEN](#): Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away. It is not important that he should mature as soon as an apple-tree or an oak. Shall he turn his spring into summer? If the condition of things which we were made for is not yet, what were any reality which we can substitute? We will not be shipwrecked on a vain reality. Shall we with pains erect a heaven of blue glass over ourselves, though when it is done we shall be sure to gaze still at the true ethereal heaven far above, as if the former were not?

DIFFERENT DRUMMER
THE INNER LIGHT



The [Duke of Wellington](#) had presumably been recommending a practiced callousness toward the lives and desires of others, a Roman or Trojan accommodation rather than the traditional Greek one which involved staying in touch with one's affect while at the same time overcoming this affect and thus mastering the situation.

Lessing, in his "Laocoön," stated that "Palnatako gave his Jomsburgers the command to fear nothing nor once to utter the word fear." Wonder who those guys were....

Every once in a while, a Thoreau gathering will attract one or another survivalist, who will sit around for awhile in his camouflage shirt and then, hopefully, go about his business. Has anybody noted the link between the fear of fear, and the very contemporary agenda of the "survivalist"?

Today, the importance of doing away with fear is not sufficiently emphasized. Fear is worse than danger, which it both attracts and arouses. Survival is just socialized fear. Life has been so thoroughly consumed by survival that many believe they will lose everything if the means of survival are threatened. They forget that there is a happy way of ridding themselves of the "necessity" of survival, which is to dissolve it in life.

— Vaneigem, Raoul. THE MOVEMENT OF THE FREE SPIRIT: GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS AND FIRSTHAND TESTIMONY CONCERNING SOME BRIEF FLOWERING OF LIFE IN THE MIDDLE AGES, THE RENAISSANCE AND, INCIDENTALLY, OUR OWN TIME . NY: Zone Books, 1994, page 294

Here is how the "quotation" appeared in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's first inaugural address on March 4, 1933:

This is pre-eminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly, nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So first of all let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.

I will quote the usual account of the development of this extrapolation, from Kenneth C. Davis's DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT HISTORY: EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT AMERICAN HISTORY BUT NEVER

LEARNED:



Most of Roosevelt's campaign speeches had been written for him, but a handwritten first draft of the inaugural address shows this to be Roosevelt's own work. Yet the speech's most famous line was old wine in a new bottle. Similar sentiments about fear had been voiced before. The historian Richard Hofstadter notes that Roosevelt read Thoreau in the days before the Inauguration and was probably inspired by the line "Nothing is so much to be feared as fear."

This DON'T KNOW MUCH simplification elides the fact that Roosevelt was not reading Thoreau directly, but reading him as filtered through the sensibilities of [Emerson](#). Essentially, it can fairly be said, it was **Emerson** that FDR was reading. And the preacher, sorry to say, couldn't figure out how the trout got in the milk.

If you want an apposite remark about fear, you'll have to look to Eleanor Roosevelt rather than to her husband. Here's one, from a poster hanging on the wall of Professor Anita Hill's office, and you'll notice that Eleanor

AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

did not think she was quoting anyone:



Anita Hill

“You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face... You must do the thing you think you cannot do.”



Eleanor Roosevelt



(Blanche Wiesen Cook, in her new biography ELEANOR ROOSEVELT (New York: Viking, 1992), offers that since Thoreau was one of Mrs. Roosevelt’s favorite authors when she taught AmLit at the Todhunter School, and since she had a “copy of Thoreau” (pages 402, 494), it was in this copy of Thoreau that her husband found the quote he used in his first inaugural address. However, I regard such a provenance as entirely unlikely, taking into account that it was in the trivialized form in which the quote had passed through the mentation of Emerson that FDR made use of the quote.)

Thoreau was simply undeceived by the “religious” life he saw going on around him in Concord and Cambridge, for he clearly perceived the extent to which “religion is a habit, or rather, habit is religion” in the eyes of his friends and relatives, and he clearly perceived the extent to which their vaunted “Christian virtue of hope” was merely a honorific name they assigned to their complicity in their victimization by fear. His conclusion, as above in this remark about fear versus the fear of fear, and about theism versus atheism, was that, if this is what “religion” amounts to, then “to reject RELIGION is the first step.” Shortly after August 15, 1844; 1974, p.159:

[B]ut for fear death itself is an impossibility.

In his 1837 college essay on the sublime, God, he had said, “would be revered, not feared.” Even at that point he was cognizant of the intimate connection between hope and despair, knew how they mutually implicated and reinforced each other in the manner in which the missiles of the USSR once legitimated the missiles of the USA which in turn....

Henry did not learn his faithfulness in church, he learned it from his elder brother, who said as he was dying:

The cup that my Father gives me, shall I not drink it?

“DeQuincey and Dickens have not moderation enough. They never stutter; they flow too readily.”

-JOURNAL, September 8, 1851

ATTITUDES ON DE QUINCEY
ATTITUDES ON DICKENS

1852



February 19, Thursday: The sky appears broader now than it did. The day has opened its eyelids wider. The lengthening of the days, commenced a good while ago, is a kind of forerunner of the spring. Of course it is then that the ameliorating cause begins to work

To White Pond: Considering the melon-rind arrangement of the clouds – by an ocular illusion The bars appearing to approach each other in the E & W horizons I am prompted to ask whether the melons will not be found to lie in this direction oftenest.

The strains from my muse are as rare now a days –or of late years– as the notes of birds in the winter – the faintest occasional tinkling sound.– & mostly of the woodpecker [red box] kind – or the harsh jay [Blue Jay [red box] *Cyanocitta cristata*] or crow [American Crow [red box] *Corvus brachyrhynchos*]. It never melts into a song. Only the day-day-day of an inquisitive titmouse [Black-capped Chickadee [red box] *Parus atricapillus*].

Everywhere snow – gathered into sloping drifts about the walls & fences – & beneath the snow the frozen ground – and men are compelled to deposit the summer’s provision in burrows in the earth like the ground-squirrel. Many creatures daunted by the prospect migrated in the fall, but man remains and walks over the

AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

frozen snow crust – and over the stiffened rivers & ponds. & draws now upon his summer stores. Life is reduced to its lowest terms. There is no home for you now – in this freezing wind but in that shelter which you prepared in the summer– You steer straight across the fields to that in season. I can with difficulty tell when I am over the river. There is a similar crust over my heart. Where I rambled in the summer–& gathered flowers and rested on the grass by the brookside in the shade – now no grass nor flowers – nor brook nor shade – but cold unvaried snow stretching mile after mile and no place to sit.

Look at White pond, that crystal drop that was, in which the umbrageous shore was reflected & schools of fabulous perch & shiners rose to the surface – and with difficulty you made your way along the pebbly shore in a summer afternoon – to the bathing place– Now you stalk rapidly across where it was muffled in your cloak over a more level snow-field than usual furrowed by the wind – its finny inhabitants & its pebbly shore all hidden & forgotten – and you would shudder at the thought of wetting your feet in it.

Returning across the river just as the sun was setting behind the Hollowell place – the ice eastward of me a few rods where the snow was blown off was as green as bottle glass – seen at the right angle – though all around above & below was one unvaried white – a vitreous glass green.– Just as I have seen the river green in a winter morning. This phenomenon is to be put with the blue in the crevices. of the snow.

So likewise give me leave, or require me to mend my work & I will chip down the vessel on both sides to a level with the notches which I have made.

A fine display of the northern lights after 10 Pm flashing up from all parts of the horizon to the zenith where there was a kind of core formed stretching S S E N N W surrounded by what looked like a permanent white cloud, which however was very variable in its form. The light flashes or trembles upward as if it were the light of the sun reflected from a frozen mist which undulated in the wind in the upper atmosphere.

HOLLOWELL FARM

AURORA

April 22, Thursday: In the afternoon Henry Thoreau walked up the Concord River on the east bank, inspecting flood conditions. At 10PM he saw the aurora.

SKY EVENT



AURORA BOREALIS



April 22. It still rains. The water is over the road at Flints Bridge–and, as I am told, has been for some time over the J. Miles road in the corner–& near the further stone Bridge. So that there is now only the Boston road open–unless we regard the Walden road as coming from Wayland and not from Lee’s bridge. At 9 Am it was 5 1/2 inches higher than the E end of the Eastern truss horizontal part on the S side of the stone Bridge. Up to the top of the lowest stone step on the N side E end of R R bridge. Mr Stacy thinks it was higher 30 years ago when a man horse & sleigh were washed off the Red Bridge road & lodged against a tree in the meadow. And Sam. Barrett thinks it was about 1 foot higher some 35 years ago.– Water a foot deep on Woods Bridge road. Abel Hunt saw a flock of geese [Canada Goose **Branta canadensis**] this morning
This flood tempts men to build boats I saw two on the stocks this morning. It is pleasant work to see progressing.

P.M. — up river–on E side: It takes this day to clear up gradually–successive sun-showers still make it foul. But the sun feels very warm after the storm. This makes 5 stormy days. Sunday–M–T. W. Thursday. The water slightly agitated looks bright when the sun-shines. Saw 4 hawks **soaring** high in the heavens over the swamp bridge brook– At first saw 3, said to myself there must be 4 & found the fourth. Glad are they no doubt to be out after being confined by the storm. I hear bees (?) humming near the brook, which reminded me of the telegraph harp.– I love to see the dull gravity even stolidity of the farmer opposed to the fluency of the lawyer or official person. The farmer sits silent not making any pretensions nor feeling any responsibility even to apprehend the other–while the judge or Governor talks glibly and with official despatch all lost on the farmer who minds it not but looks out for the main chance with his great inexpressive face & his 2 small eyes looking the first in the face & rolling a quid in the back part of his mouth. The lawyer is wise in deeds but the farmer who buys land puts the pertinent questions respecting the title. I observe the *Parmelia saxatilis* in many places now turned a pinkish red. The Yellow lily leaves appear no more advanced than when I first observed them.

DOG

A strange dog accompanied us today—a hunting dog—gyrating about us at a great distance—beating every bush & barking at the birds. with great speed—gyrating his tail too all the while. I thought of what Gilpin says, that he sailed & steered by means of his tail— Sat under Potter’s oak, the ground thickly strewn with broken acorn shells & cups & twigs—the short close nibble sward of last year. Our dog sends off a partridge [Ruffed Grouse [Bonasa umbellus] with a whirl far across the open field & the river like a winged bullet—

From Cliffs see much snow on the mts. The Pine on Lee’s shore of the Pond seen against the light water this cloudy weather—from part way down the cliff is an agreeable object to me. When the outline & texture of white pine is thus seen against the water or the sky it is an affecting sight. The shadow of the cliff on Conantum in the semi-sunshine with indistinct edge & a reddish tinge from bushes here & there!

I want things to be incredible—too good to appear true. C. says “after you have been to the P.O. once you are dammed.”— but I answer that it depends somewhat on whether you get a letter or not. If you would be wise learn science & then forget it.¹⁵

A boat on the river—on the white surface looks black—& the boatman like Charon. I see swarms of gnats in the air. What is that grass with a yellow blossom which I find now on the cliff—? Carex marginata (?) Early Sedge—the earliest grass that flowers. It is the contrast between sunshine & storm that is most pleasing— the gleams of sunshine in the midst of the storm are the most memorable. Saw that winkle-like fungus fresh & green covering an oak stump today with concentric marks—spirally arranged sometimes in a circle. very handsome I love this apparent exuberance of nature.

The maples in the side swamp near well meadow are arranged nearly in a circle in the water. This strange dog has good habits for a companion he keeps so distant— He never trusts himself near us though he accompanies us for miles. On the most retired the wildest & craggiest hill side you will find some old road by which the teamster carted off the wood— It is pleasant some times looking 30 or 40 rods into an open wood where the trunks of the trees are plainly seen & patches of soft light on the ground. The hylas peep now in full chorus, but are silent on my side of the pond. The water at 6 Pm is 1 1/2 inches higher than in the morning, i.e. 7 inches above the iron truss. The strain of the Red wing [Red-winged Blackbird [Agelaius phoeniceus] on the willow spray over the water to-night is liquid bubbling—watery—almost like a tinkling fountain in perfect harmony with the meadow— It oozes, trickles, tinkles, bubbles from his throat. bob-y-lee-e-e & then its shrill fine whistle.

The villagers walk the streets & talk of the great rise of waters.

At 10 Pm the northern lights are flashing – like some grain sown broadcast in the sky. I hear the hylas peep on the meadow as I stand at the door.

The early sedge (?) grows on the side of the Cliffs in little tufts with small yellow blossoms – i.e. with yellow anthers low in the grass.

Mr Holbrook tells me he heard & saw martins [Purple Martin [Progne subis] yesterday.

AURORA

May 10, Monday: Tom Dillingham has reported that during his four years in Vermont he saw the northern lights at least three times, and spoke with people in western Massachusetts who claimed to see them often although not every year. The Aurora Borealis is definitely visible at times over eastern Massachusetts. For instance, while Thoreau was writing in his journal in Concord on this night –well aware that Lajos Kossuth, he of the feathered cap, was due to receive a hero’s welcome on the following day– he noted that “Some look out only for the main chance –& do not regard appearances nor manners –others regard these mainly. It is an immense difference. I feel it frequently– It is a theme I must dwell upon.– There is an Aurora Borealis tonight– & I hear a snoring praying sound from frogs in the river, baser & less ringing and sonorous than the dreamers.”



15. Bradley P. Dean says that Henry Thoreau combined this with a reference to MARK 8:36 in the construction of his early lecture “WHAT SHALL IT PROFIT” paragraph number 73:

[Paragraph 73] When our life ceases to be inward and private, conversation degenerates into mere gossip. I rarely meet a man who can tell me any news which he has not read in a newspaper, and for the most part the only difference between me and my fellow is that he has seen the paper and I have not. But the London Times is not one of the Muses. When a man’s inward life fails he begins to go more constantly to the post office, and despatches couriers to the other side of the globe; and so again he gains the whole world and loses his

BRAD DEAN’S COMMENTARY

AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS



May 10, Monday: I was reminded, this morning before I rose, of those undescribed ambrosial mornings of summer which I can remember, when a thousand birds were heard gently twittering and ushering in the light, like the argument to a new canto of an epic and heroic poem. The serenity, the infinite promise, of such a morning' The song or twitter of birds drips from the leaves like dew. Then there was something divine and immortal in our life. When I have waked up on my couch in the woods and seen the day dawning, and heard the twittering of the birds....

P.M. -Through Deep Cut to Cliffs. I see flocks of a dozen bluebirds [Eastern Bluebird *Sialia sialis*] together. The warble of this bird is innocent and celestial, like its color. Saw a sparrow, perhaps a song sparrow [*Melospiza melodia*], flitting amid the young oaks where the ground was covered with snow. I think that this is an indication that the ground is quite bare a little further south. Probably the spring birds never fly far over a snow-clad country.

July 9, Friday: [Henry Thoreau](#) was extrapolating much invaluable information about antique porcelain inscriptions by reading about the racist skull collection of [Professor Samuel George Morton](#) of the University of Pennsylvania, a collection from which over the years we have been able to extrapolate so very much vital data about hat sizes in various parts of the world in various epochs of the human existence (it's too bad the professor hadn't thought to make a similar collection that would inform us of variations in corresponding shoe sizes and glove sizes).



CRANIA AMERICANA

Such porcelain objects were not made in [China](#) prior to the creation of the 1st porcelain furnace on record, which was in the Kiang-si province at about the beginning of the 7th Century, and presumably had been at some point been brought to [Egypt](#) from Nang-chang-fu by Arab traders along the Great Silk Road.



AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

Snuff bottles containing the inscription *hoa kai yeu yi nien* or “The flower opens, and lo! another year,” the initial line of a well-known ode to the new year, were common enough in China in that early period. Here are the Chinese characters, to the left in a plainer form, and to the right as the sort of brush strokes that presumably would have appeared on such porcelains:



July 9, Friday: 4 Am- to Cliffs- No dew- no dewy cobwebs- The sky looks mist like not clear blue. An aurora fading into a general saffron color- At length the redness travels over partly from E to W before sunrise & there is little color in the E. The birds all unite to make the morning quire- sing rather faintly not prolonging their strains- The crickets appear to have received a reinforcement during the sultry night. There is no name for the evening red corresponding to aurora. It is the blushing foam about the prow of the sun’s boat- & at eve the same in its wake. I do not often hear the blue bird [Eastern Bluebird *Sialia sialis*] now except at dawn. Methinks we have had no clear winter skies- no skies the color of a robins egg- and pure amber around for some months. These blue berries on Fair Haven have a very innocent ambrosial taste as if made of the ether itself as they plainly are colored with it

I hear the chickadee’s [Black-capped Chickadee *Parus atricapillus*] two wiry notes- The jays [Blue Jay *Cyanocitta cristata*] note resounding along a raw woodside suggests a singular wildness- I hear many scarlet tanagers- the first I have seen this season- which some might mistake for a red eye. A hoarse rough strain comparatively- but more easily caught- owing to its simplicity & sameness. Something like heer chip-er-way-heer chory chay.

A bobolink. How handsome the leaves of the shrub oak- so clear & unspotted a green so firm & enduring like fame- glossy uninjured by the wind- meed for mighty conquerors- and also lighter on the under side which contrast is important The wood thrush [*Catharus mustelina*] sings on a dead treetop. There is an insect in the froth on the vaccinium vacillans. I see the cistus still. The Amelanchiers is a handsome berry- purplish when ripe, though handsomest when red & inkish next the stem.

It must be the cuckoo that makes that half throttled sound at night for I saw one while he made it this morning as he flew from an apple tree when I disturbed him. Those white water lilies- What boats! I toss one into the pan half unfolded & it floats upright like a boat- It is beautiful when half open & also when fully expanded. Methinks I have found the *Asclepias obtusifolia*- which has long horns & is quite fragrant.

[Morton](#) in his *Crania Am.* says -referring to Wilkinson as his authority -that “Vessels of porcelain of [Chinese](#) manufacture, have of late been repeatedly found in the catacombs of Thebes, in Egypt” some as old as the Pharaonic period. And the inscriptions on them “have been read with ease by [Chinese](#) scholars, and in three instances record the following legend: -The flower opens, and lo! another year.” There is something sublime in the fact that some of the oldest written sentences should thus celebrate the coming in of Spring. How many times have the flowers opened and a new year begun! Hardly a more cheering sentence could have come down to us. How old is spring -a phenomenon still so fresh! Do we perceive any decay in Nature? How much evidence is contained in this short & simple sentence respecting the former inhabitants of this globe! It is a sentence to be inscribed on vessels of porcelain. Suggesting that so many years had gone before. An observation as fit then as now.

3 Pm to Clematis Brook The heat today (as yesterday) is furnace-like- It produces a thickness almost amounting to vapor in the near horizon. The RR men cannot work in the deep cut but have come out onto the cause-way where there is a circulation of air- They tell with a shudder of the heat reflected from the rails.- Yet a breezy wind -as it were born of the heat -rustles all leaves. Those drifting piles of clouds -in the north assuming

AURORA



AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

interesting forms –of unmeasured rocky Mts –or unfathomed precipices light colored & even downy above but with watery bases –portend a thunder-shower before night. Well I can take shelter in some barn or under a bridge. It shall not spoil my afternoon.

I have scarcely heard one strain from the telegraph harp this season– Its string is rusted & slackened –relaxed, and now no more it encourages the walker I miss it much– So is it with all sublunary things. Every poet’s lyre looses its tension. It cannot bear the alternate contraction & expansion of the seasons.

The lactuca elongata 4 or 5 feet high with its small pale yellow flowers now closed

How intense & suffocating the heat under some sunny woodsides –where no breeze circulates! I go by Well Meadow Head. The tephrosia which still lingers –is remarkable perhaps for the contrast of its bright or clear purple with its cream colored petals. The veratrum viride in the swamp is already turned yellow & decaying – and half prostrate. Its fall is already come.

I observe that the feverbush here as on conantum died down last winter. The red-lily with its torrid color & sunfreckled spots –dispensing too with the outer garment of a calyx –its petals so open & wide apart that you can see through it in every direction tells of hot weather– It is a handsome bell shape –so upright & the **flower** prevails over every other part. It belongs not to spring. It grows in the path by the town bound. It is refreshing to see the surface of Fair Haven rippled with wind. The waves break hear quite as on the sea shore & with the like effects. This little brook makes great sands comparitively at its mouth which the waves of the pond wash up & break upon like a sea. The ludwigia palustris water purslane on mud in bottom of dry ditches

Bathing is an undescribed luxury –to feel the wind blow on your body –the water flow on you & lave you– is a rare physical enjoyment this hot day. The water is remarkably warm here especially in the shallows –warm to the hand like that which has stood long in a kettle over a fire. The pond water being so warm made the water of the brook feel very cold –& this kept close on the bottom of the pond for a good many rods about the mouth of the brook –as I could feel with my feet –and when I thrust my arm down where it was only 2 feet deep –my arm was in the warm water of the pond, but my hand in the cold water of the brook. The clams are if possible more numerous here, though perhaps smaller than at the shore under the Cliffs. I could collect many bushels of them. The sandy shore just beyond this is quite yellow with the Utricularia cornuta –the small ranunculus –& the gratiola –all growing together They make quite a show– A black snake on the sand retreats not into the bushes but into the pond amid the pontederia. The Rhus glabra is out. At Clematis Pond the small arrowhead in the mud is still bleeding where cows have cropped– In some places the mud is covered with the Ilysanthes gratioides False pimpernel –I think it is this –the **flower** shaped somewhat like a skull-cap (Lindernia of Big)

The bottom of this pond now for the most part exposed –of dark virgin mud soft & moist is an invigorating sight. It is alive with hundreds of small bullfrogs? at my approach which go skipping into the water– Perhaps they were outside for coolness. It is also recently tracked by minks or muskrats in all directions, & by birds. (I should have said that the sand washed down by the brook at Pleasant Meadow covered the muddy bottom of the pond –but where the sandy covering was thin I slumped through it into the mud. I saw there some golden or brownish golden winged devils needles & was struck by the manner in which they held to the tops of the rushes when they alighted –just on one side you would perhaps confound them with the spike? of flowers.) The corylus rostrata beaked hazel with green fruit by Clematis Brook. The milkweeds –syriacas chiefly are now in full flower by the ditch just beyond –& fill the air with a strong scent –5 or 6 feet high– The A. obtusifolia has a handsome waved or curled leaf –& methinks more fragrant flowers By this ditch also grows the Sisymbrium amphibium amphibious cress of Big (apparently Nasturtium palustre of Gray though the pods are tipped with a conspicuous style and are not to be compared for length with the pedicels) It has the aspect & the taste of mustard. A rather high plant in water.

That large Galium Can it be the Cardinal flower here in bud a coarse plant with a leaflike red tipped envelope to its united stamens?

Now adays I scare up the woodcock? by shaded brooks and springs in the woods. It has a carry-legs flight & goes off with a sort of whistle. As you walk now in wood paths your head is encompassed with a swarm of buzzing ravenous flies– It seems almost too hot for locusts Low hills or even hillocks which are stone capped –have rocky summits as that near James Baker’s –remind me of **mts** which in fact they are on a small scale.– The brows of earth –round which the trees & bushes trail like the hair of eye brows –outside bald places –templa. primitive places where lichens grow– I have some of the same sensations as if I sat on the summit of the rocky **mts**. Some low places thus give a sense of elevation. Sleeman says that no boy in India ever robs a bird’s nest. Are they heathenish in that? Walden & White Ponds have a brimful look at present –though the former is not quite so high as when I last observed it. The bare hills about it are reddened in spots where the pine leaves are sere on the ground. The vaccinium vacillans small glaucous blueberry bears here & there a ripe one on the hills –and the rubus Canadense low blackberry bears already a few ripe ones on sandy banks like the RR causeway exposed to the sun. Portulaca oleracea purslane just in flower –bright yellow- in the garden– Observed in the river yesterday a potamogeton with leaves 1/2 inch wide and 4 or 5 long– The white spruce shoots when wilted have the same raspberry fragrance with those of the fir balsam, but not so much of it. Galium apsellum pointed cleavers.



AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

1853

January 31, day: [Henry Thoreau](#) quoted from “System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse’s Telescopes” on pages 2-47 of Volume II of the NARRATIVE AND MISCELLANEOUS PAPERS of [Thomas De Quincey](#), which had just been published in Boston by the firm of Ticknor, Reed, and Fields:

NARRATIVE MISC. VOL. II



January 31st: –Found an Ind. adze in the Bridle-Road at the brook just beyond Daniel Clark Jr’s house. A man is wise with the wisdom of his time only & ignorant with its ignorance– Observe how the greatest minds yield in some degree to the superstitions of their age. [De Quincey](#) (whose pains to prove that was not Christ’s mission to teach men science though he **of course** (!) knew it all,–suggested the above–) says– “This downward direction of the eyes, however, must have been worse in former ages: because, else it never **could** have happened that, until Queen Ann’s days, nobody ever hinted in a book that there **was** such a thing, or **could** be such a thing, as the Aurora Borealis; and in fact, Halley had

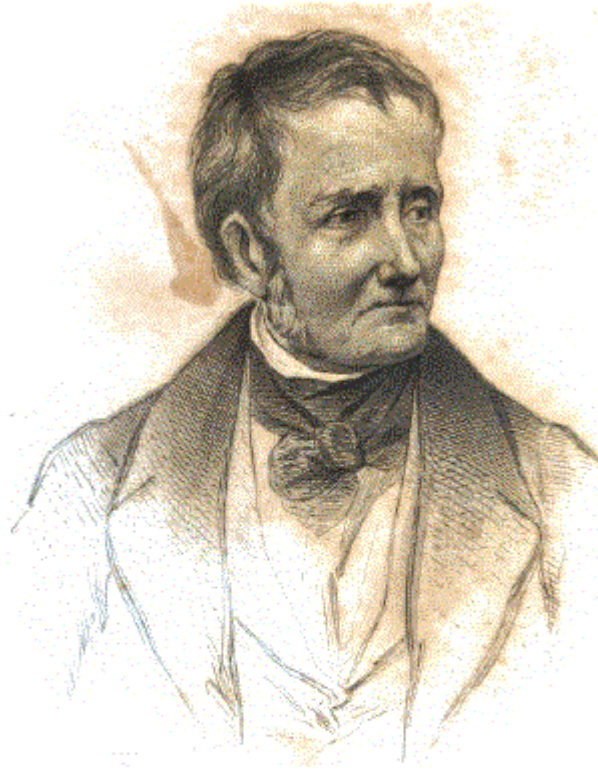
AURORA

AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

the credit¹⁶ of discovering it.”

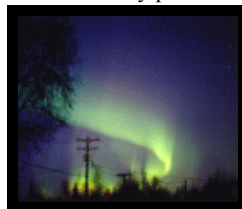
SKY EVENT



*Very truly yours,
Thomas De Quincey.*

ATTITUDES ON DE QUINCEY

16. [De Quincey](#) is of course mistaken, since the aurora borealis had already been seen, and named as such, by [Galileo Galilei](#), before Edmond Halley fils was even a gleam in the eye of Edmond Halley pere.



AURORA BOREALIS

1859

Professor Benjamin Peirce made the prescient suggestion that the development and change of the tails of comets, and the [Aurora Borealis](#) that flickered at the poles of the earth, might be due to one common and as yet undetected solar cause. (Now, of course, we are aware of the high-velocity streams of ionized particles being thrown off by the corona of the sun.)



SKY EVENT

September 2, night: On the night of this day gas street lighting was being introduced to the Hawaiian Islands. Did the attention being paid to this new gas lighting interfere at all with the local experience of an unusual event, the aurora borealis? On this night the aurora borealis Northern Lights were being seen as far south as Rome and Cuba — and there are reports from Hawaii (there were similar effects around the South Pole). Despite the fact that the telegraph, as an invention, was only 15 years old, and thus the number of wires stretched across the landscape was still really minimal, telegraph lines were shorting out both in the United States and in Europe, and causing wildfires. What had happened was “the perfect space storm” — the strongest by far of which we presently have any knowledge, three times more powerful than any we have recently had the opportunity to measure. The sun had erupted and sent charged particles racing outward at an exceptionally high speed, in an expanding bubble of hot gas plasma, and the coronal mass ejection had been aimed straight at the earth. The magnetic field was exceptionally intense, and happened in this case to be aligned in such a manner as not to be neutralized at all by the earth’s normal magnetic field. Although your typical solar storm that we have been able to study using modern instruments needs 3 or 4 days to move from the sun to Earth, in this case the solar wind of plasma particles arrived very soon indeed after a strange powerful event involving numerous sunspots had been observed to be taking place on the surface of the sun on August 28th. Between August 28th and September 2d several solar flares had been observed, and then on September 1st, there was this truly massive flare. The amount of light normally put out in that region on the sun’s surface actually, for one minute, doubled. Since light itself takes about 8 minutes to make the 93,000,000-mile journey from the sun, we calculate that the hot plasma particles made the journey in but 17 hours and 40 minutes! In March 1989 a relatively minor such bubble of sun plasma has shut down the Hydro-Quebec power to an entire Canadian province for more than 9 hours. In 1994 a solar storm caused two of our communications satellites to malfunction in a major way, disrupting newspaper, network television, and nationwide radio service throughout Canada. Other such storms have disrupted cellphone service and GPS systems. We have no grasp of how extensive the damage would be, in our present era of interconnectedness, should such a perfect storm occur again now, nor do we have any theoretical framework by which we might guesstimate either the occurrence or the magnitude of such solar events. All we know for sure is that an event of this magnitude is possible — because one such has already occurred.

AURORA BOREALIS SKY EVENT



1860



November 5. P.M.—To Blood's oak lot.

Measure the great white oak near the bars of the bridle-road just beyond the northeast corner of the Holden (?) farm. At the ground it is about nineteen feet in circumference. At three feet from the ground it is eleven feet and seven inches in circumference, and the same at five feet and apparently more above this. It is about sixteen feet to the lowest limb. The whole trunk standing aslant. It has a black and quite rough bark, not at all like that of the white oaks of Wetherbee's and Blood's lots. There is a large open space amid the huckleberry bushes beneath it, covered with a short and peculiarly green sward, and this I see is the case with other oaks a quarter of a mile off.

There is a large chestnut in the lot east of this, and I observe that its top is composed of many small branches and twigs disposed very regularly and densely, brush-wise, with a firm, distinct, more than semicircular edge against the horizon, very unlike the irregular, open, and more scraggy-twigged oak.

Blood's oak lot may contain about a dozen acres. It consists of red, black, white, and swamp white oaks, and a very little maple. The following are some of the largest that I saw. I measured one black oak which was, at three feet high, four feet eight inches in circumference; another, five feet six inches; and another the same. A red oak was six feet three inches; another, seven feet four inches; another, seven feet four inches; another, seven feet. One swamp white oak was six feet four inches. A white oak was seven feet seven inches, and another the same. The diameter of a third at one foot from ground (sawed off) was thirty-one and a half inches average.

This is quite a dense wood-lot, even without considering the size of the trees, and I was rather surprised to see how much spread there was to the tops of the trees in it, especially to the white oaks. The trees here rise far higher before branching, however, than in open land; some black oaks (if not others) were very straight and thirty to forty feet high without a limb. I think that there was not so much difference in color between the trunks of black and red oaks as commonly. The red oaks were oftener smooth, or smoothish, the largest of them. I saw very little decay. Considering their number and closeness, the trees were on the whole larger than I should have expected, though of course not nearly so large as the largest pasture oaks,—one to two and a half feet in diameter, or say generally (the sizable trees) a foot and a half in diameter. This will probably do for a specimen of a primitive oak forest hereabouts. Such probably was the size and aspect of the trees.

As for its age, I saw the stump of a white oak (not quite so large as those I measured) which had been sawed off at about one foot from the ground within four or five years, perfectly level and sound to the core, and thirty-one and a half inches in diameter. The first thirty-three (?) rings were so close and indistinct as to be impossible to count exactly (occupying three quarters of an inch of the centre); the rest was perfectly distinct. In all one hundred and forty-seven rings; or, by inches from middle, thirty-nine, nine, six, seven, five, eleven, six, four, four, five, six, nine, ten, twelve, and then three quarters of an inch left. From which it appears that it grew much the fastest at about the age of eighty-nine years and very much the slowest for the first thirty-three years.

I am struck by the fact that the more slowly trees grow at first, the sounder they are at the core, and I think that the same is true of human beings. We do not wish to see children precocious, making great strides in their early years like sprouts, producing a soft and perishable timber, but better if they expand slowly at first, as if contending with difficulties, and so are solidified and perfected. Such trees continue to expand with nearly equal rapidity to an extreme old age.

Another white oak stump, not so large but somewhat decayed, had one hundred and sixty and more rings. So that you may say this wood is a hundred to a hundred and sixty years old.

I was struck by the orderly arrangement of the trees, as if each knew its own place; and it was just so at Wetherbee's lot. This being an oak wood, and like that, somewhat meadow [SIC] in the midst, the swamp white oaks with a very few maples occupied that part, and I think it likely that a similar selection of the ground might have been detected often in the case of the other oaks, as the white compared with the red. As if in the natural state of things, when sufficient time is given, trees will be found occupying the places most suitable to each, but when they are interfered with, some are prompted to grow where they do not belong and a certain degree of confusion is produced. That is, our forest generally is in a transition state to a settled and normal condition.

Many young white pines—the largest twenty years old—are distributed through this wood, and I have no doubt that if let alone this would in a hundred years look more like a pine wood than an oak one.

Hence we see that the white pine may introduce itself into a primitive oak wood of average density.

The only sounds which I heard were the notes of the jays, evidently attracted by the acorns, and the only animal seen was a red squirrel, while there were the nests of several gray squirrels in the trees.

Last evening, the weather being cooler, there was an arch of northern lights in the north, with some redness. Thus our winter is heralded.

It is evident that the pasture oaks are commonly the survivors or relics of old oak woods,—not having been set

AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

out of course, nor springing up often in the bare pasture, except sometimes along fences. I see that on the outskirts of Wetherbee's and Blood's lots are some larger, more spreading and straggling trees, which are not to be distinguished from those. Such trees are often found as stragglers beyond a fence in an adjacent lot. Or, as an old oak wood is very gradually thinned out, it becomes open, grassy, and park-like, and very many owners are inclined to respect a few larger trees on account of old associations, until at length they begin to value them for shade for their cattle. These are oftenest white oaks. I think that they grow the largest and are the hardiest. This final arrangement is in obedience to the demand of the cow. She says, looking at the oak woods: "Your tender twigs are good, but grass is better. Give me a few at intervals for shade and shelter in storms, and let the grass grow far and wide between them."

No doubt most of those white pines in pastures which branch close to the ground, their branches curving out and upward harpwise without one erect leading shoot, were broken down when young by cows. The cow does not value the pine, but rubs it out by scratching her head on it.

1864

December 15/16: Continuing his policy of taking the offensive at any cost, General John B. Hood had brought his reduced army before the defenses of Nashville. There, in the most complete victory for Union forces in the entire war, they were repulsed by the forces led by General George H. Thomas.

AURORA

December 20: General Sherman's army reached Savannah in Georgia, leaving behind a path of destruction 60 miles wide all the way from Atlanta. The news of this major Northern victory would be reaching the gazettes of the North at about the same time as a major display of the Northern Lights.

AURORA

December 23: There was a display of the [Aurora Borealis](#) that was visible all the way down into Virginia. This would be taken by some of the more superstitious or religious or selfrighteous among us to indicate God's affirmation of the righteousness of the recent Union triumphs in battle.



AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

1865

There had been, on December 23, 1864, subsequent to a couple of battles won by the North, a display of the [Aurora Borealis](#) that had been visible as far south as Virginia. This had been taken by some as a sign that the Northern cause had the favor of Heaven (anxious people will have strange thoughts). In a painting done in this year by Frederic Edwin Church, some would consider the icebound ship to represent the Union and the aurora as shielding it from harm:





AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

1917

January 4, Thursday: [Calhoun Doty Geiger](#) was born in Jacksonville, Florida.¹⁷

On the first day of New York's legislative session, a bill was introduced to give women in the state the right to vote.

FEMINISM

A Mr. Goppert of the [German](#) Embassy visited Enver, Talaat, and Foreign Minister Halil to convey the message that this "forced Islamization" thingie that was going on in their country –something that had no conceivable connection either with military exigency or with the security of the state– needed to cease instantly.

At 5:45PM there was an [aurora borealis](#), and then at 10:45PM a very pronounced one. "Notwithstanding the advanced phase of the moon, the whole northern half of the hemisphere was affected by it, and had the moon been absent the sight would have been truly magnificent. As it was, great beams shot up vertically and horizontally, the latter forming great arches, and the former appearing like searchlights. Frequently an immense area of the sky would become illuminated as if by a great cloud of mist, and the light would pass up to the zenith with lightning rapidity, appearing like clouds of light being wafted upwards from the N. horizon. The clouds were mostly greenish, like a gas-mantle, but the background of the sky was pale ruby."

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: In addition to the property of others, such as extensive quotations and reproductions of images, this "read-only" computer file contains a great deal of special work product of Austin Meredith, copyright ©2013. Access to these interim materials will eventually be offered for a fee in order to recoup some of the costs of preparation. My hypercontext button invention which, instead of creating a hypertext leap through hyperspace –resulting in navigation problems– allows for an utter alteration of the context within which one is experiencing a specific content already being viewed, is claimed as proprietary to Austin Meredith – and therefore freely available for use by all. Limited permission to copy such files, or any material from such files, must be obtained in advance in writing from the "Stack of the Artist of Kouroo" Project, 833 Berkeley St., Durham NC 27705. Please contact the project at <Kouroo@kouroo.info>.



"It's all now you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."

– Remark by character "Garin Stevens"
in William Faulkner's INTRUDER IN THE DUST



17. The family pronounces its name with the G as in "go" and the EI as in "eager."



AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

Prepared: May 31, 2013

ARRGH AUTOMATED RESEARCH REPORT

GENERATION HOTLINE



This stuff presumably looks to you as if it were generated by a human. Such is not the case. Instead, upon someone's request we have pulled it out of the hat of a pirate that has grown out of the shoulder of our pet parrot "Laura" (depicted above). What these chronological lists are: they are research reports compiled by ARRGH algorithms out of a database of data modules which we term the Kouroo Contexture. This is data mining. To respond to such a request for information, we merely push a button.



AURORA BOREALIS

AURORA BOREALIS

Commonly, the first output of the program has obvious deficiencies and so we need to go back into the data modules stored in the contexture and do a minor amount of tweaking, and then we need to punch that button again and do a recompile of the chronology – but there is nothing here that remotely resembles the ordinary “writerly” process which you know and love. As the contents of this originating contexture improve, and as the programming improves, and as funding becomes available (to date no funding whatever has been needed in the creation of this facility, the entire operation being run out of pocket change) we expect a diminished need to do such tweaking and recompiling, and we fully expect to achieve a simulation of a generous and untiring robotic research librarian. Onward and upward in this brave new world.

First come first serve. There is no charge.
Place your requests with <Kouroo@kouroo.info>.
Arrgh.