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TOM LYNCH

The "Domestic Air" of Wilderness: Henry Thoreau and Joe Polis in the Maine Woods

Generally speaking, a howling wilderness does not howl:
it is the imagination of the traveler that does the howling.
—H. D. Thoreau, "The Allegash and East Branch"

Great difference between me and white man.
—Joe Polis, qtd. in "The Allegash and East Branch"

In Emerson's funeral oration for Henry Thoreau, he criticizes Thoreau's writing—somewhat uncharitably given the occasion—for what he considers Thoreau's use of "a trick of rhetoric...of substituting for the obvious word and thought its diametrical opposite. He praised wild mountains and winter forests," Emerson complains, "for their domestic air." This criticism suggests the considerable distance between Emerson's and Thoreau's views of nature. Emerson, who sees nature as wholly other—as what he defines in his essay "Nature" as "not me"—cannot imagine the forests and mountains as his domicile.

On the other hand, a tendency persists to see Thoreau as one entirely at home in wild nature—a tendency, that is, to accept his "trick of rhetoric" as accomplished fact rather than as a perpetual but never fully attained desire. For example, Max Oelschlaeger argues in *The Idea of Wilderness* that "the most recent readings of Thoreau...find him to be a thinker who discovers the essential and creative affinity between wild nature and Homo sapiens [and] questions the presumed ontological dichotomy between the primitive and civilized" (134).

I would contend, however, that the very notion of "wilderness" usually employed by Thoreau and endorsed by Oelschlaeger maintains precisely the ontological barrier between humans and nature Emerson so carefully erected and Thoreau is praised for having dismantled. And given the profound influence of Thoreau in the development of contemporary ideas about wilderness—"it is no exaggeration to say that today all thought of the wilderness flows in *Walden's* wake" (Oelschlaeger 171)—an examination of Thoreau's wilderness ideology can inform not only our ecocritical analysis of his writings but also some components of the conceptualization and practice of "wilderness" protection.

Thoreau's "Allegash and the East Branch," from the *Maine Woods* collection, provides a particularly useful excursion on which to examine his wilderness ideology. It is one of the final works in the Thoreau corpus and

hence suggests his mature vision. On this trip he spent significant time in intimate contact with what he considered to be wild nature; and he did so in the company of Joe Polis, a sophisticated Penobscot Indian who was literate in white culture as well as an expert in his own culture's ways of being at home in nature.¹ Polis lived on Indian Island in the Penobscot River, across from Oldtown. Thoreau remarks with some surprise that "his house was a two-story white one, with blinds, the best looking that I noticed there, and as good as an average one on a New England village street" (215). Polis had served his tribe as a representative to Augusta and Washington D.C., and when in Boston had called upon Daniel Webster (269).

Polis's ability to straddle the divide between white and Penobscot culture challenged Thoreau's ideas about the place of humans in nature. As Robert Sayre has demonstrated, Thoreau's ideas of Indians are constrained by the limited categories of savage/civilized available to him. William Rossi suggests "just as it was impossible to imagine Thoreau's writing apart from the categories of 'wild' and 'civilized' that so deeply informed his thinking, so was it virtually impossible for Thoreau himself to think about native peoples outside of the territory these categories defined" (11). Linda Frost proposes that, due to his literacy, "Polis complicates Thoreau's conception of nature itself, his access to written texts of Anglo culture actually upsetting the nature/culture dualism" (37). And this is certainly true, but I would further argue that a comparison of Thoreau's notion of the Maine woods as a wilderness with Polis's notion of it as a home illustrates even more clearly how Polis effaces the nature/culture (or wild/civilized) duality that serves as a basis for both Thoreau's and, by extension from him, contemporary wilderness ideology. Furthermore, Thoreau's polarized categories had a debilitating effect on his experience in Maine. For in spite of Polis's efforts to teach him differently, Thoreau maintained a notion of wilderness that led him to remain more alienated from the natural world and less at home there than he needed to be and hence limited the richness of his experience.

On this trip Thoreau employed Joe Polis as both a guide through the woods and a mentor in Penobscot culture. "I told him that in this voyage I would tell him all I knew, and he should tell me all he knew, to which he readily agreed" (229). Thoreau could hardly have chosen a better guide. In addition to being a skilled woodsman, Polis was, unbeknown to Thoreau, a noted shaman.² Maine folklorist Fannie Eckstorm, whose family had a close acquaintance with the Penobscot Indians, remarks that Polis had "a mind that knew the advantage of control of unseen forces and the reputation for being a shaman" (185). This reputation is supported by Eckstorm's conversations with Polis's niece.

Regarding Penobscot shamanism, Eckstorm relates that because the tribes believed "unseen powers...resided in every force of nature and in every object, animate or inanimate," it was inevitable that

there should exist human champions to cope with these forces, which were often malignant. Thus there arose individuals whom the Indians called *medéoulinwak* (variously translated by them as "spiritual men," or "witch men"), who had *ktahándo*, magic power (which they called "spiritual power" or "witch power"), who were assisted by their *baohíganal*, or animal spiritual helpers, the messengers who were sent out by the master to do his bidding. The English word "wizard" most nearly represents the idea of the *medéoulin*; the word 'shaman' is the term used by anthropologists. (98-99)

Polis, then, is a specialist in his culture's way of understanding, interacting with, and controlling the forces of nature. Though keeping his magical side a secret, (shamanism at the time lacked its current marketability) Polis does inform Thoreau that "he was a doctor, and could tell me some medicinal use for every plant I could show him" (321), a knowledge he demonstrates on several occasions.

The difference between Polis's vision of nature and Thoreau's acceptance of the idea of wilderness and the culture/nature dichotomy implicit in it is perhaps best illustrated in the incident when Thoreau's cousin and companion, Edward Hoar, gets lost. While descending Webster Stream, Thoreau and Polis were separated from Hoar. The nearly frantic Thoreau shouts through the woods, but Polis reacts with seeming indifference:

The Indian showed some unwillingness to exert himself, complaining that he was very tired, in consequence of his day's work, that it had strained him very much getting down so many rapids alone; but he went off calling somewhat like an owl. I remembered that my companion was near-sighted, and I feared that he had either fallen from the precipice, or fainted and sunk down amid the rocks beneath it. I shouted and searched above and below this precipice in the twilight till I could not see, expecting nothing less than to find his body beneath it. For half an hour I anticipated and believed only the worst. I thought what I should do the next day, if I did not find him, what I could do in such a wilderness. (355)

Indeed Thoreau does not find Hoar that evening and finally relents to bed down in what he describes as "the most wild and desolate region we had camped in," though one suspects his friend's being lost in it increases its wildness and desolation. At the first glimmer of morning, as was his wont, Thoreau awakens, anxious to renew the search. Polis, however, seeming selfishly callous, "wanted his breakfast first." But, Thoreau tells us, "I reminded him that my companion had had neither breakfast nor supper" (358). Later in the morning, Thoreau and Polis find Hoar:

We had launched our canoe and gone but little way down the East Branch, when I heard an answering shout from my companion, and soon after saw him standing on a point where there was a clearing a quarter of a mile below, and the smoke of his fire was rising near by. Before I saw him I naturally shouted again and again, but the Indian curtly remarked, "He hears you," as if once was enough. (359)

And perhaps it was.

What accounts for the differing responses of Thoreau and Polis to the disappearance of Hoar? Certainly Thoreau's friendship with Hoar is partly responsible; and he anticipated with dread informing Hoar's next of kin of his demise. But, as the guide and hence to some degree the responsible party, Polis should have felt a similar anxiety. However I think a larger factor is that Thoreau, for all his intimacy with nature, is not truly domesticated to it. It is not yet his home. To Polis, a grown man's spending a night alone in the woods is simply not a matter of concern. What's to fear? Thoreau's anxiety is the howling of his own imagination. At an earlier point in the journey, Thoreau tells us of Polis that "he sometimes... went a-hunting to the Sebcois Lakes, taking the stage, with his gun and ammunition, axe and blankets, hard bread and pork, perhaps for a hundred miles on the way, and jumped off at the wildest place on the road, where he was at once at home" (274), a behavior remarkable to Thoreau, given his idea of wilderness.

However what seemed a trackless wilderness to Thoreau was in fact a terrain criss-crossed with routes, as anthropologist of Penobscot culture Frank Speck explains:

Travel through the extensive forests in the old days did not present the difficulties that one might imagine, at least as far as getting lost is concerned. This was because the whole inhabited area was divided off into hunting territories owned by the different bands of consanguineous families. Each band was well acquainted with its own district, no matter how extensive it might be. Furthermore, there were trails, '*a'udi*', "path," winding through the districts used by the hunters and trappers of the band. Ordinarily there were two main "paths" running perpendicular to each other, north and south and east and west, quartering each tract. Moreover, all the trails were blazed either with the owners' family "emblems" (the animal outlines), or with trail signs not only warning transpassers but leading strangers to the main headquarters or to the temporary camps along the main routes. (*Penobscot Man* 77)

And, he concludes, "it appears that in the old days the whole interior wilderness was covered with a network of trails, allowing little reason for anyone to get lost for very long in the woods" (*Penobscot Man* 207). One wonders what basis exists to call a landscape so intricately organized a wilderness. In calling it one, however, Thoreau must avoid awareness of

the degree to which the Penobscot had engineered and in a sense domesticated the landscape. To understand the landscape as the Penobscot do would deprive Thoreau of the thrilling wilderness experience he is seeking.

This disparity in cultural understandings of nature has been concisely articulated by Lakota Indian Luther Standing Bear who, in contrasting what he perceived to be the European attitude to nature with that of his own people, remarked "we did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled wild growth as wild. Only to the white man was nature a wilderness" (26). Though Standing Bear is Lakota, not Penobscot, Joe Polis would no doubt have concurred in this assessment. To people such as Standing Bear or Polis, for whom every plant and animal was a food source or medicine, and every landmark had an ancient history, nature, however "wild," was home. As William Bevis remarks, for the traditional Native Americans "nature is not a secure seclusion one has escaped to [ala Thoreau and so many of his literary descendents], but is the tipi walls expanded, with more and more people chatting around the fire. Nature is filled with events, gods, spirits, chickadees, and deer acting as men. Nature is 'house'" (602).

Though of a different tribe, Polis shared Standing Bear's conception of nature as a home inhabited by many creatures, and, true to his pledge to teach Thoreau what he knew, he seems to have attempted to initiate Thoreau into this understanding. Early on the trip, Thoreau says, "I awoke in the night, I either heard an owl from deeper in the forest behind us, or a loon from a distance over the lake" (244-45). He got up to tend the fire and observed "partly in the fire, which had ceased to blaze, a perfectly regular elliptical ring of light" (245). He recognized it as "phosphorescent wood, which," he says, "I had so often heard of, but never chanced to see" (245). "The next day," he continues,

the Indian told me their name for this light, —*Artoosoqu'*,—and on my inquiring concerning the will-o'-the-wisp, and the like phenomena, he said that his "folks" sometimes saw fires passing along at various heights, even as high as the trees, and making a noise. I was prepared after this to hear of the most startling and unimagined phenomena, witnessed by "his folks;" they are abroad at all hours and seasons in scenes so unfrequented by white men. Nature must have made a thousand revelations to them which are still secrets to us. (247)

Thoreau describes his discovery of the phosphorescent wood as a highlight of his trip. He learns from this, he says, "that the woods were not tenantless, but chokefull of honest spirits as good as myself any day,—not an empty chamber, in which chemistry was left to work alone, but an inhabited house—and for a few moments I enjoyed fellowship with them" (248).

We can explore some of the implications of Polis's conversation with

Thoreau by turning to the anthropologist Frank Speck's discussion in "Penobscot Shamanism." Speck recounts a tale regarding the will-o'-the-wisp flames in which his informant recalls the following incident:

I was hunting up in the country by the waters of the St. John River. One night a tremendous ball of fire appeared rushing through the air moving upstream. It had a large head and behind was a snake-like body. I could even see scars on the cheek of the creature. Pretty soon another appeared. I thought they were "fire creatures," *eskuda'hit*, but my father said they must be *madeoli'nuwak*. (252)

This *madeoli'nuwak* is what Eckstorm had defined as "spiritual men" or "witch men"—a designation which she applied to Polis himself.

Speck further informs us that "Every magician [such as Polis] had his helper which seems to have been an animal's body into which he could transfer his state of being at will.... The helper then is known by the term *baohi'gan*, a very interesting term which may be explained as meaning 'instrument of mystery'" (249). One might readily speculate—and speculate is all one might do—that Polis's *baohi'gan* was an owl. Note that before discovering the phosphorescent wood, Thoreau was awakened by the hoot of an owl, and that at several other points of the journey Polis imitates an owl's hooting: "a cat owl [Great Horned Owl] flew heavily over the stream, and he, asking if I knew what it was imitated very well the common hoo, hoo, hoo, hoerer, hoo, of our woods" (267). While Thoreau and Polis were searching for Hoar, as we have seen, Polis "went off calling somewhat like an owl" (355). After Hoar is found he informs them that "he thought it likely that he had heard the Indian call once the evening before, but mistook it for an owl" (360). Towards the end of the voyage, Thoreau says, "as we glided swiftly down the inclined plane of the river, a great cat-owl launched itself away from a stump on the bank, and flew heavily across the stream, and the Indian, as usual, imitated its note" (384). This "as usual" suggests that Polis always expressed his fellowship with the owls by hooting whenever he encountered him.

But Thoreau's insight, sparked by his discovery of the *arotoosoqu'*, that nature could be considered an inhabited house, though powerful, seems not to be sustained; his sense of fellowship with the inhabitants of nature's house, as he said, lasted only "a few moments." As a later event suggests, this sense is overwhelmed by the persistence of his wilderness ideology:

Just before night we saw a musquash (he did not say muskrat), ...swimming downward on the opposite side of the stream. The Indian, wishing to get one to eat, hushed us, saying, "stop, me call 'em;" and, sitting flat on the bank, he began to make a curious squeaking, wiry sound with his lips, exerting himself considerably. I was greatly surprised,—thought I had at last got into the wilderness, and that he was a wild man indeed, to be talking to a musquash!

I did not know which of the two was the strangest to me. He seemed suddenly to have quite forsaken humanity, and gone over to the musquash side. (282)

This scene suggests the ways Thoreau's desire to experience wilderness inflects his understanding. Why does this conversation between man and musquash evoke "wildness"? Wouldn't it be at least equally plausible to see this conversation as an example of what Bevis calls the idea of "Nature as house"? Thoreau's ideology of wilderness pushes Polis over to the musquash side, to Emerson's "not me," rather than bringing the musquash over to the human side.

A further example of Thoreau's response to Polis's efforts to domesticate him to the Maine woods can be seen in Thoreau's reaction to Polis's rendering of a traditional Penobscot tale. Every place Thoreau traveled in the "wilderness" of Maine had been named by the Penobscot. Thoreau pesters Polis with questions about such names, but every name also had a story, and Thoreau was surprisingly inattentive to these stories, as suggested by his sarcasm following Polis's tale of the origin of Mount Kineo and the basis of the name Moosehead Lake:

While we were crossing this bay, where Mount Kineo rose dark before us, within two or three miles, the Indian repeated the tradition respecting this mountain's having anciently been a cow moose,—how a mighty Indian hunter, whose name I forget, succeeding in killing this queen of the moose tribe with great difficulty, while her calf was killed somewhere among the Islands in Penobscot Bay, and, to his eyes, this mountain had still the form of the moose in a reclining posture, its precipitous side presenting the outline of her head. He told this at some length, though it did not amount to much, and with apparent good faith, and asked us how we supposed the hunter could have killed such a mighty moose as that,—how we could do it. Whereupon a man-of-war to fire broadsides into her was suggested, etc. An Indian tells such a story as if he thought it deserved to have a good deal said about it, only he has not got it to say, and so he makes up for the deficiency by a drawing tone, long-windedness, and a dumb wonder which he hopes will be contagious. (235)

The hero who killed the moose and whose name Thoreau forgets was Glooskap, the primary mythological culture hero of the Penobscot, credited with, among many other feats, the invention of the canoe Thoreau was seated in (Speck, *Penobscot Man* 58). C. G. Leland, chronicler of Algonquin Indian tales, repeats Thoreau's account of Polis's story, and then harshly chastises Thoreau for his ignorance:

This concluding criticism is indeed singularly characteristic of Mr. Thoreau's own nasal stories about Nature, but it is as utterly untrue as ridiculous when applied to any Indian storytelling to which I have ever listened, and I have known the near relatives of the Indians of whom he speaks, and heard many

of them tell their tales. This writer [Thoreau] passed months in Maine, choosing Penobscot guides expressly to study them, to read Indian feelings and get at Indian secrets, and this account of Glooskap, whose name he forgets, is a fair specimen of what he learned.... Such a writer can, indeed, peep and botanize on the grave of Mother Nature, but never evoke her spirit." (66n)

Thoreau was interested in gathering the original place names from Polis, but was unaware of the importance of the stories behind those names. Polis knew the stories of his place, Thoreau did not, or at least did not appreciate the ones he did know. Hence Polis was at home, and Thoreau wandered in a wilderness of the interstices of his ignorance.

George Cornell suggests that "there is little doubt that Native peoples...influenced Thoreau's environmental perceptions. Native peoples acted as the guides, not only for Thoreau's physical wandering in the woods of Maine, but for his inner search for an understanding of place" (13). Yet Thoreau's dismissive attitude to Polis's tale indicates that his understanding of place did not include sympathy with traditional stories that serve to create precisely the sense of emplacement he so admires in Polis. An illustration of the way awareness of stories about a landscape can lead one to feel at home there can be found in Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko's comments that even when a little girl alone in the desert of northern New Mexico, she says,

I was never afraid.... I carried with me the feeling I'd acquired from listening to the old stories, that the land all around me was teeming with creatures that were related to human beings and to me. The stories had also left me with a feeling of familiarity and warmth for the mesas and hills and boulders where the incidents or actions in the stories had taken place. (qtd. in Turner 330-331)

In all likelihood such stories served a similar purpose for Polis, comforting him and providing him with a sense of home wherever he travelled in Penobscot country.

Thoreau did, however, acknowledge a particular insight into the importance of indigenous place names that compromises his wilderness ideas and that should serve as a caution to contemporary proponents of the idea of wilderness. He remarks how interesting it is "to the white traveler, when he is crossing a placid lake in these out-of-the-way woods, perhaps thinking that he is in some sense one of the earlier discoverers of it, to be reminded that it was thus well known and suitably named by Indian hunters perhaps a thousand years ago" (370). This is an observation we would do well to consider, for such a remembrance—that a placid lake in "out-of-the-way woods" was "well known and suitably named by Indian hunters" applies throughout the continent. European place names on the natural landscape signify, among other things, a denial of humanity to the native people who had already named them, an elision of their presence in

the vocabulary of landscape, an elision necessary to sustain the illusion of wilderness.

This denial of indigenous presence is an especial temptation and danger, I think, for environmentalists who promote the preservation of "wilderness" areas, and it constitutes, in a sense, a contemporary version of Manifest Destiny, what Gerald Vizenor calls "manifest manners." For example, Vizenor berates wilderness champion Wallace Stegner, who, he says,

situates the western landscape in the literature of dominance.... The land was unnamed and became a place with names "worn smooth with use," he [Stegner] wrote in an essay. "No place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments." Stegner would never contribute to the annihilation of tribal cultures, [Vizenor concedes] but his concern over names pronounces that the land was untouched and unnamed in tribal stories.... "No place, not even a wild place, is a place until it has had that human attention that in its highest reach we call poetry." His reluctance to honor tribal stories in the blood, land, and oral literature, the names and stories of remembrance, is the course of manifest manners.... (9-10)

As an inheritor of Thoreau's wilderness ideology, Stegner, like Thoreau, dismisses Native tales about the land.

Vizenor has grounds for concern, for wilderness ideology has, unfortunately, been used to displace Native Americans from ancestral territory. In *Playing God in Yellowstone* Alston Chase has itemized the U. S. Park Service's efforts to remove both the physical vestiges and the historical memory of Indian tenancy in, and manipulation of, the Yellowstone ecosystem. And Mark Spence records the fate of the Yosemite Indians, gradually excluded from their homeland, and concludes that "Americans are able to cherish their national parks today only because Indians abandoned them involuntarily or were forcibly removed to reservations" (26).

Environmentalists tend to honor Native Americans as prototypical ecologists yet really fail to incorporate Native American understanding of nature in any meaningful way into their ideology (see Ramsey). In any of its connotations, "wilderness" is a powerful word, perhaps blindingly so. Its ubiquity in the rhetoric of environmentalism underscores its cachet, but may ultimately undermine the very efforts it is employed to serve, for it fosters an imaginative differentiation between humans and nature that ultimately makes nature seem less a home and more a threatening terrain to be conquered.

The problem, then, is to articulate a persuasive case against the destruction of natural regions without resorting to the fallacy of the nature/culture dualism. In this regard, one might argue that the syncretic lifestyle of Joe Polis—equally comfortable conversing with a musquash, an owl, or

Daniel Webster—more than the polarized view of Henry Thoreau, provides a possible model. Drifting down the Penobscot River into Oldtown at the end of his Maine woods excursion, Thoreau "asked Polis if he was not glad to get home again; but there was no relenting to his wildness, and he said, 'It makes no difference to me where I am.' Such is the Indian's pretense always" (406). In spite of Polis's best efforts, there is no relenting in Thoreau's insistence that home and woods are distinct terrains. What Emerson had taken to be Thoreau's "trick of rhetoric" in praising forests "for their domestic air" is revealed here to be an occasional but ultimately rejected ideal for Thoreau, but a normal perspective on life for Polis.

NOTES

¹ For a portrait of Polis, see Robert Sayre's "'We called him Polis'—Charles Bird King's Joseph Porus and Thoreau's Maine Woods Guide." All considerations of Thoreau's relationship to Native Americans, including this one, are indebted to Sayre's *Thoreau and the American Indians*.

² This is, apparently, even more true of Old Molly Molasses, whom Thoreau mentions meeting upon his arrival in Bangor, and of Old John Neptune, whom he visited on his previous trip. Molly Molasses and John Neptune were, Fannie Eckstorm asserts, "the two greatest shamans of their time" (6). Eckstorm further informs us of the local gossip that the two, though each married to others at various times, and never to each other, were consorts who had at least four children together (Eckstorm, 33). Charles G. Leland's 1884 *Algonquin Legends of New England* recounts a number of adventures of the wizard John Neptune, under the initials J.N. (345).

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