On Thoreau’s Trail in the Maine Woods:
A Photographic Journey Worth Taking,
Critics Howling in the Wilderness

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“The question is not what you look at—
but how you look & whether you see.”
Thoreau, Journal, 5 August 1851

If this essay’s aim is as true as Scot Miller’s camera work, it will give readers a sense of the eye-opening experience awaiting them in a new book of photographs inspired by Thoreau’s The Maine Woods (1864), now a century-and-a-half old but still as wild as the Katahdin wind on Henry’s cheek—the same wind that, Walden assures us, “forever blows” on Olympian mountains everywhere on eternally present mornings. Miller’s book figuratively represents, in images—and literally re-presents, in words—Thoreau’s sites, sights, and insights to be found, then and now, in the Maine Woods. Sites are where there is, sights are what you see there, and insights are what you take from and make of what you there observed. Thoreau, The Maine Woods—A Photographic Journey through an American Wilderness artfully includes all three.

This essay also relates Miller’s work to the trail left by commentators who set out over the years to track Thoreau in The Maine Woods but too
often lost him on Mount Katahdin. Or, more accurately, in “Ktaadn” he lost them. The publication sesquicentennial of Thoreau’s tripartite Maine travel account is an appropriate time to seek him again on that wilderness mountain. The one serious gap in Miller’s photographic record involves the problem that has skewed much, though not all, critical commentary to this day. It does not provide a faithful representation of what Thoreau experienced on Katahdin that impressed him so much for so long—a climactic encounter with sublime nature that validated his philosophy and influenced the rest of his career. In Miller’s defense, what he simply omits, errant critics get wrong. His is the lesser offense.

Scot Miller previously crossed creative paths with Henry Thoreau, publishing an illustrated edition of Walden for that book’s 150th anniversary in 1994 and an illustrated Cape Cod in 2008, both in conjunction with the Walden Woods Project. His latest Thoreau volume, A Photographic Journey, evolved over seven years, many trips to Maine, and a collective four months—120 days—of attentive exposure to his own and Thoreau’s Maine. Unlike Thoreau, who smartly traveled in summer and early fall, Miller’s tracing of Henry’s trips occurred throughout the year, the better to view Maine’s wildness in seasonal trim and tone. Jeffrey Cramer’s insightful “Foreword” and Miller’s personable “Introduction” form an apt gateway to both the Maine Woods and The Maine Woods, reminding those who enter of Thoreau’s precept: different viewpoints yield different views.

Thoreau, The Maine Woods: A Photographic Journey through an American Wilderness is an organic book beyond the “green” methods and materials used to produce it. Instead of just photographs captioned with quotations or a text ornamented with pictures, Miller’s book combines these
formulaic approaches and provides a good deal more. It dynamically integrates a complete text of Thoreau’s *The Maine Woods* (edition curiously unspecified) with a book’s worth of Miller photographs (88 in all), with each medium elucidating the other in an extended conversation. The result is a hybridized volume with cross-pollinating parts, two art forms exploring each other’s meanings. A complex interplay of literary and photographic imagery is the organizing principle of this two-mastered book. Together, the Maine Woods of Thoreau’s symbolic words and Miler’s emblematic photographs characterize a nature in and above time, as unfathomably deep as “the universe is wider than our views of it” (*Walden*, 320).

Words and photographs here engage in various productive ways. Always a key to a photo’s inclusion is its caption, usually a *Maine Woods* quotation followed by the date on which Miller took his picture. The juxtaposition is intriguing. While the *Maine Woods* captions seemingly bridge the temporal gap between that venerable text and the photographic images it inspires, the anachronistic coupling of a very old quotation with a quite recent photo date suggests the divide between Thoreau’s perspective and Miller’s. This book, after all, is a framed debate between two different men from two different times, one of whom is dead. As sole survivor, Miller gets the final word. Indeed, in the matter of extracts, many of which adorn page margins of the reprinted *Maine Woods* in this book, Miller (or an editor/advisor) selects which Thoreau utterances get emphasized as focusing, “Power Point” style highlights. The choices, overall, seem thematically apt and worth the attention they invoke, but would Thoreau think so too? Completing the clever design (in two senses) of this attractive book are drawings of Maine Woods leaves and evergreen needles. Subtle
background to Thoreau’s text, these leaves-on-leaves fall from the margins as if blown by the wind. A single drawn loon gets the last laugh after Thoreau’s text.

From the sapling-spined, autumn-foliage cover to the front-and-back end papers, where the same beached canoe image suggests departures and returns, Miller’s pictures fulfill the promise of a “photographic journey” through the Maine Woods. Sumptuous images, mid-range and panoramic, of forests, mountains, clouds, skies, and waters of shifting size, speed, and difficulty grace pages fronting Thoreau’s *Maine Woods* text or intercept it on two-page spreads, all relating to his narrative in various ways. Many feature up-close images of something specifically noted by Thoreau—a plant, a moose, a topographical feature. Others are more atmospheric or match the tone of his narrative voice. Contrast is a thematic motif: light and dark, water and land, clear cuts and new growth. And because, as Miller says, the Maine Woods of Thoreau’s travels have not survived unchanged, some photos portray time-lapse aspects of those woods today—a rusting gear from a long-defunct engine, the Victorian/modern shoreline of contemporary Greenville, a pontoon airplane docked near fiberglass canoes—all in juxtaposed contrast to the time-old wilderness, same seeming but evolving, and the fixed text like an image on an urn.

*The Maine Woods*, readied by Thoreau from lectures and essays and published posthumously in 1864, is about three excursions into the wilderness of Maine—in 1846, 1853, and 1857. The first piece, “Ktaadn,” deals with canoe and batteau travel on rivers and lakes, with bushwhacking through white pine forests over felled or fallen trees, and with a final ascent and descent of Mount Katahdin, paradoxically successful because it failed
to reach the cloud-bound summit and, in doing so, gave a veiled revelation of the mystical nature behind “the shores of America.” The theme is human hubris and limitation confronted by sublime wildness. The second essay, “Chesuncook,” portrays moose hunting and lumbering, hunters and loggers and Indians, as misuses and misusers of the wilderness, leading to the conclusion that wilderness must be preserved because, as he says in the great essay “Walking,” “in Wildness is the preservation of the world” and the soul. The third account, “The Allegash and East Branch,” involves another look at Maine Woods nature with the guidance of a redeeming native spirit, one Joe Polis of the Penobscot Tribe, a canoe-paddling bear of a man at home, by turns, in his civilized Oldtown house and the vast wilderness outside its door. Civilization and the wild, to him “It makes no difference” (MW, 296). “The Allegash and East Branch” is thematically about losing oneself in nature and thus finding what Thoreau terms, in Walden, “the infinite extent of our relations” (171). Joe Polis’s ability to approach that loss and gain canonized him in Thoreau’s hagiography.

Scot Miller’s book does a fine job illustrating “Chesuncook” and “The Allegash and East Branch” as well as quoting these two works in captions and the marginalia accompanying The Maine Woods text. Together, Miller’s images, captions, and excerpts get to the heart of these two accounts—account used here, as so often employed by Thoreau, to indicate not just the story of an experience but its summed value in the Transcendental ledger. For “Chesuncook” and “The Allegash and East Branch,” Miller chooses cannily and gets it right.
For “Ktaadn,” however, although the images, captions, and extracts are self-justifying, a major thematic omission haunts this portion of the book. Miller’s illuminated manuscript (religious pun intended) of Thoreau’s pilgrimage to Maine’s “highest land” (*MW*, 3)—“sacred and mysterious” ground to Indians (*MW*, 65)—contains no photograph evoking the epiphanic *close contact with the sublime* that caused Thoreau to see what he saw there and make of it what he did in his subsequent “Ktaadn” account. The Thoreauvian sublime is prominent in *The Maine Woods*, preeminent in “Ktaadn,” but underrepresented in Miller’s images, especially those identified with the climactic mountain event. This neglect leaves a hole in Miller’s photographic story; however, that vacant space is not surprising in the historical context of the “Ktaadn” narrative’s critical reception. For almost all of the more than 150-year history of “Ktaadn” (since its serialized 1848 publication in the *Union Magazine of Literature and Art*), most commentators have strayed from Thoreau’s guidance, not just bypassing his main point, as does Miller, but radically mistaking his point of view.

Thoreau’s Maine Woods travels confirmed his belief, worked out in a Harvard class assignment, that nature is inherently sublime and the wild is the most palpable manifestation of that sublimity. The wild/sublime, for Thoreau, is characterized by physical phenomena—forces and features of nature—that embody a power, grandeur, vastness, and mystery associated with infinity and with God. Lightning, earthquakes, storms, the ocean, mountains: these and their like evoke, in the receptive, the sublime experience of awe, wonder, fear—and, for Thoreau, something fundamentally more. Edmund Burke, whose *Philosophical Enquiry into the
Thoreau responded to in an 1837 college essay, concluded that “‘terror is in all cases whatsoever . . . the ruling principle of the sublime.’” Burke’s pronouncement Thoreau emphatically rejects: “I would make an inherent respect, or reverence, which certain objects are fitted to demand, that ruling principle; which reverence, as it is altogether distinct from, so shall it outlive, that terror to which [Burke] refers, and operate to exalt and distinguish us, when fear shall be no more.” He adds, “The calm and self-collected alone, are conscious of their sublimity. . . . The Deity would be reverenced, not feared.” “Yes, that principle which prompts us to pay an involuntary homage to the infinite, the incomprehensible, the sublime, forms the very basis of our religion. It is a principle implanted in us by our Maker.”

For Thoreau, the sublime experience was an intense encounter with an imposing physical nature that, rightly construed, was also the embodiment of an informing spirit—and the considered residue of this experience was reverence for that spirit and for its physical counterpart and host. “Ktaadn” records both ends of his alchemic conversion experience from fear to reverence, its exclamatory, ecstatic language true to the initial physical mountain contact and faithful to the lasting impression of informing spirituality in the material world. The famous “Contact!” passage is Thoreau’s after-the-fact depiction of something like Wordsworth’s “emotion recollected in tranquility,” agitated to be sure, spirited above all. A Thoreau journal entry of 27 January 1853 declares that “the Almighty is wild above all,” a pronouncement with three congruent meanings: first, more than any other attribute, the essence of God is wildness; second, God’s wildness is
reflected in, but transcends, the wildness of anything else; third, the wildness of God transcends our capacity to fathom it.

When Thoreau comes to Katahdin, he comes prepared for—and finds—the sublime. The wild, in his lexicon, is another name for the sublime—for that boundary-breaking, extra-vagant imperative that makes some forms of nature daunting, but also makes some domesticated cows jump fences and some civilized humans plumb physical phenomena to prove their infinite depth and expand their personal horizons. Not coincidentally, Thoreau in “Ktaadn” reports: “Leaping over a fence, we began to follow an obscure trail. . . . [O]n either hand, and beyond, was a wholly uninhabited wilderness.” Note the pun on “holy” (MW, 16).

With terror as its ruling principle, the Burkean sublime sends off those who experience it with their tails between their legs. This debilitating effect anticipates the trauma of a world-view, derived from Darwin, according to which natural forces deterministically control a human species no longer privileged as God-imaged lords of creation. This perceived demotion, this loss of importance and autonomy, characterizes the work of post-Thoreau turn-of-the-century literary naturalists (distinguished from scientific naturalists) such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser. Among Thoreau commentators, a rear-view naturalistic reading of his experience on Katahdin has been the reigning interpretation, persistent, if less pervasive, to this day. According to this anachronistic reading, Thoreau’s Transcendental idealism failed the mountain’s fearsome test, never to fully recover. When applied as a lens to Thoreau’s subsequent texts, this conclusion distorts what is viewed. “Generally speaking,” Thoreau says in “The Allegash and East Branch,” “a howling wilderness
does not howl: it is the imagination of the traveller that does the howling” (MW, 219). Commentators on “Ktaadn” and “Contact!” have too often imagined him howling in post-traumatic stress on the wilderness mountain, the ocean-fronting coast, and other alleged trouble spots in his place-based writings, when in fact he found even in Darwin’s development theory the testimony “to a sort of constant new creation.” “We find ourselves in a world that is already planted, but is also still being planted as at first” is his tribute to an ongoing genesis.⁹

In one of his many comments on anticipation as a visual aid, Thoreau says in his journal (4 November 1858), “We cannot see anything until we are possessed with the idea of it, and then we can hardly see anything else.” To appreciate nature, to get at its meaning, an “intention of the mind and eye” is essential.¹⁰ What you see in nature is what you seek: this is a Thoreau mantra. Notably, however, with an eye to seeing both the trees and the forest, his bifocal prescription also calls for an unfocused “sauntering of the eye” whereby “my senses wander as my thoughts—my eyes see without looking” (13 September 1852 / Journal 5, 343-44). The two views complement each other in their conscious engagement with nature, and both apply to his journal declaration, “My profession is to be always on the alert to find God in nature—to know his lurking places” (7 September 1851).¹¹

Thoreau’s revision of Burke’s Philosophical Enquiry magnetized him to the sublime, providing a template for interpreting his Katahdin experience and others like it. That prepared vision allowed him to regard—to see and to appreciate—his experiences with wildness from a spiritually sublime vantage point, and to frame their depictions so that readers might
do the same. The Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden Pond, Cape Cod, Chesuncook Lake, the Allegash and East Branch, all other mountain accounts: Thoreau’s post-1846 descriptions of the sublime are founded on his revision of Burke and grounded on “Ktaadn.” His reverence for the sublime never goes away. On 29 October 1857, he wrote in his journal of a personal mythic mountain, clearly derived from “Ktaadn,” that he repeatedly climbs in dreams and reveries for inspiration. He attests, “Though the pleasure of ascending the mountain is largely mixed with awe,” my thoughts are purified and sublimed by it, as if I had been translated.” And in a parallel letter to H.G.O. Blake of 16 November 1857, he says of this mystical mountain, “I find that I go up it when I am light-footed and earnest. It ever smokes like an altar with its sacrifice. . . . I keep this mountain to ride instead of a horse.”

In Burkean terms, the sublime is what has the power to destroy us, the beautiful what is harmonious and aesthetically pleasing to us. Scot Miller’s photographs of the Maine Woods are, on balance, more beautiful than sublime, more lyrical than disturbing, some striking panoramic exceptions notwithstanding. Missing is any image that captures the spirit of “Contact!” —the more surprising since the full passage is mined for two marginal highlights. There is simply no Miller counterpart to Thoreau’s powerful imagery of this sort: “[H]ere not even the surface had been scarred by man, but it was a specimen of what God saw fit to make this world. . . . I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one . . . but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them . . . . Talk of mysteries!—Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—
rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The *solid* earth! The *actual* world! The *common sense*! *Contact!* *Contact!* *Who are we? where are we?*” (*MW*, 71).

*Who* he is is Henry Thoreau, a *spirit* in a *body*, as he here declares. *Where* he is is likewise two dimensional: on a mountain in awe of the dominant matter there including his physical self, and at home in tranquil Concord, where, as in his “Higher Laws” parable of John Farmer, he lets “his mind descend into his body and redeem it” (*Walden*, 222). In the 16 November 1857 letter to H.G.O. Blake, Thoreau glosses his “Ktaadn” experience of eleven years before: “Going up there and being blown on is nothing. . . . It is after we get home that we really go over the mountain, if ever. What did the mountain say? What did the mountain do?” (498). In his college essay, Thoreau says: “The philosopher sees cause for wonder and astonishment in everything, . . . he has only to reflect, that he may admire” (98). Miller’s sublime is panoramic but distanced. Absent from his photographs is a single in-your-face image of contact with Katahdin: no Stonehenge-scale boulders, no dizzying cascade of Abol Slide rocks (adjoining Thoreau’s presumed route), no Katahdin rough edges to convey what Thoreau’s future Cape Cod guide book terms “a strong emotion of the sublime” and which he in turn cites as “the kind of communication which we love to have made to us.”

Somewhat misleadingly highlighted in Miller’s book, as extracted marginalia with Thoreau’s text, is the early “Ktaadn” statement, “Here [in the wilderness], then, one could no longer accuse institutions and society, but must front the true source of evil” (*MW*, 16). Taken by itself—as in the extract—this pronouncement seemingly attributes evil to the wilderness, a
frequent interpretation that prejudices the “Contact!” passage itself. In the full text, however, the true source of evil is linked not to the wilderness but, in the next sentence, to the human violators of the Maine Woods—the loggers, settlers, and hunters who lack sympathy with the spirit of the pine and feel no kinship with the animal denizens termed “Moose men” by Thoreau (MW, 110). Instead of approaching nature kindly, as a kindred spirit like their dualistic selves, they myopically defile the Maine Woods for gain and sport. When taken in the context of both this “true source” passage and the book as a whole, this advance notice of an evil imported into the wilderness directs a reading of “Contact!” as, in part, an expression of relief from the man-scarred wilderness below the tree line. Indeed, in an obviously related poem not in The Maine Woods, Thoreau declares that “Man Man is the Devil / The source of all evil.”

Wildness appreciated preserves the world against anthropocentric civilization’s slumlord abuse. In the essay “Walking,” worked and reworked from 1851 to 1862, Thoreau proclaims, “Give me a Wildness whose glance no civilization can endure” (202). Far from rejecting that sublime wildness, Thoreau in The Maine Woods laments its taming. In “Ktaadn,” soon after “Contact!,” he is troubled by his boatmen’s mastery of a dangerous waterfall: “[T]hey had accomplished a passage in safety . . . as fool-hardy for the unskilful to attempt as the descent of Niagara itself. . . . [F]alls were not to be waded through with impunity like a mud-puddle. There was really danger of their losing their sublimity in losing their power to harm us. Familiarity breeds contempt” (MW, 75). Niagara a mud-puddle? Niagara was, in Thoreau’s time, the principal shrine of the American sublime.
Thoreau aspires to a chastened kinship with Katahdin, “a place . . . to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we,” even as his mountain contact puts him in his place (MW, 70-71). Eschewing a presumptuous familiarity, he would instead rise toward the extra-vagant kinship of moose, bear, and wantonly felled pines gone to an inclusive heaven to tower above him still. As he says in “The Allegash and East Branch,” in a rhapsodic meditation on an encounter with phosphorescent “moose-wood” on a dark forest night: “It made a believer of me more than before. I believed that the woods were not tenantless, but choke-full of honest spirits as good as myself any day” (MW, 179-81). On Katahdin, Thoreau recalls, “There was there felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man”—which is to say, a force not limited to kinship with just the human species (MW, 70). Far from being put off by a natural world imbued with a spirit that includes, but does not favor, mankind, Thoreau is prepared to reverence the sublime in all its forms.

As a tracing of Thoreau’s three Maine Woods journeys and the impressions they produced, Scot Miller’s book is a treasure. A thoughtful picture has a lot to say, and this wilderness book has many sophisticated images—in photographs and in words. The one thing lacking is an image to make us feel the sense of Thoreau’s statement, “I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work” (MW, 70). In light of the history of “Ktaadn” criticism, this may be asking too much. For a multi-staged, mixed-media volume on a complex, controversial subject, with interdependent contributions from arts, crafts, and academic disciplines, Thoreau, The Maine Woods: A Photographic Journey through an American Wilderness is
a lot to like and a worthy contribution to Thoreau studies. What it provides earns a standing ovation.

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For a representative sampling of Scot Miller’s Maine Woods photographs, see this website: www.ThoreausMaineWoods.com. In another venue and context, the Harvard Museum of Natural History (HMNH) is hosting an exhibit titled “Thoreau’s Maine Woods: A Journey in Photographs with Scot Miller.” In addition to some thirty photographs from Miller’s book, the exhibit includes a specimen of painted trillium botanized by Thoreau on his way to Moosehead Lake in 1857, a Penobscot-made snowshoe owned by him, and various Maine Woods flora and fauna from Harvard’s collections. The exhibit, which opened last November with a talk by Miller, runs through February 2015.

Notes


What Alexis de Tocqueville did in observing the American wilderness to the west in the 1830s, Henry David Thoreau did for the American wilderness to the east in the 1850s. East as in Down East: Maine. The Maine Woods: A Photographic Journey is an exploration of a country that would soon be coming to terms with issues of industrialization and preservation, and the reckoning of different cultures colliding. (We seem to be grappling with these same issues today. Such is the timelessness of these Maine Woods.) Published in 1864, after Thoreau’s death, The Maine Woods was one of the first published accounts of recreational travel through Maine’s uninterrupted forest landscape. Primarily organized to commemorate the 150th anniversary of this seminal work, the trip is also being mounted by Maine Woods Discovery and its partners to promote the outstanding recreational opportunities available in the Maine Woods today. The Thoreau-Wabanaki Tour is a wonderfully innovative example of like-minded businesses working together, with support from the non-profit sector, to provide today’s consumers engaging, high quality, off-the-beaten path guided tourism experiences in a truly unique region, the Maine Woods.