



Reading Thoreau's Gait

by Brent Ranalli

"Every movement reveals us.... We judge a horse not only by seeing him handled on a racecourse, but also by seeing him walk, and even by seeing him rest in a stable."

—Michel de Montaigne¹

Thoreau was a prodigious walker. By his own account, his constitution required walking four hours a day at least.² And he did not walk as others did. His contemporaries agreed that the self-styled "saunterer" had a distinctive gait. If, as Montaigne supposes, Caesar's character can be read in his amorous affairs as well as in affairs of state, and Alexander's in his manner of playing chess as well as in his manner of waging war, could Thoreau's character—like a racehorse's—be read in his gait?

Walter Harding's compilation *Thoreau as Seen by His Contemporaries* includes no fewer than eleven pieces of testimony from ten of Thoreau's contemporaries about his walking style (Franklin Benjamin Sanborn is represented twice). Passages from William Ellery Channing's *Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist* and two memoirs by Julian Hawthorne bring the total number of texts to fourteen.³ Some of the recollections date from Thoreau's student days, traversing Harvard Yard, and others from later life. There is no reason to believe the "peculiar stride which all who have walked with him remember" (Sanborn's words) varied over the course of his adult life.

In fact, the gait's consistency is one of its distinguishing features. Thoreau had a "measured stride," recalled George Hoar, and Edward Emerson recalled a "long, direct, uniform pace." With a stride of a standard length, Thoreau could pace sixteen rods accurately, Ralph Waldo Emerson recalled, and find his way better by his feet than his eyes at night in the woods. Thoreau indeed relied on pacing to measure distances in some of his informal surveying work.⁴

We can introduce other features of the gait by teasing apart one of the more opaque accounts. Isaac Newton Goodhue recalls that "when teaching in Concord, I knew Thoreau rather intimately. I look back on him striding with duck-like legs across the common toward his weather beaten home. He had a long body low to the ground."



Courtesy of the New Bedford Whaling Museum

A sketch of Thoreau by Daniel Ricketson, "H. D. Thoreau returning to his Shanty from Concord," circa 1855.

The "duck-like" impression could have been created by extended straight legs, necessary for Thoreau's long stride. No fewer than eight of the other thirteen accounts describe the stride as "long," and Thoreau himself alludes to the "wide intervals between the dots" of his regularly spaced footprints in the snow.⁵

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“Duck-like” also suggests a slightly awkward and comical effect, possibly heightened by the combination of the long stride with Thoreau’s short stature. Julian Hawthorne describes an “undersized, awkward figure, striding with unexpectedly long steps.” Sanborn, we have already seen, called the gait “peculiar”; two others (Rose Hawthorne and George Hoar) used the word “ungainly.” On the other hand, Thoreau’s Concord neighbor, Ann Bigelow, interviewed by Edward Emerson, recalled that she “knew at once by his gait and bearing that he was a gentleman.” Edward Emerson himself recalled the step being graceful: “his body was active and well-balanced, and his step could be light, as of one who could leap or dance or skate well at will.” Still, testimony from those who had actually seen him skate or dance confirms the general impression of ungainliness. Sophia Peabody Hawthorne recalled watching Thoreau skating once: he performed “dithyrambic dances and Bacchic leaps on the ice—very remarkable, but ugly.”⁶ During a musical evening with Bronson Alcott and Channing at the Ricketsons’, the hosts recalled Thoreau “keeping time to the music perfectly, but executing some steps more like Indian dances than the usual ballroom figures... it was earnest and spontaneous, but not particularly graceful.”⁷

Goodhue’s statement that Thoreau “had a long body low to the ground” is a little puzzling. It could refer, again, to the peculiarly long stride of a short man, giving an impression more horizontal than vertical. Alternately, it could mean that he was bent forward at the waist, in the manner of Groucho Marx, perhaps keeping a close eye on the ground. We know that Thoreau had an uncanny ability to spot Indian arrowheads in the soil. John Weiss recalls him walking about the Harvard campus with eyes that “seemed to rove down the path, just in advance of his feet,” and Channing too recalled “his eyes bent on the ground.” But it is doubtful that his upper body was characteristically doubled forward. George Hoar commented that Thoreau had an “erect carriage which made him seem something like a soldier,” and that this was the source of the nickname, “the Trainer,” given him by Concord schoolboys. Bigelow also described Thoreau as “erect,” and it would be hard to square a doubled-over posture with the appearance of a “gentleman.”

Though Weiss and Channing recall Thoreau gazing down at the ground ahead of him (see also the accompanying drawing by Daniel Ricketson), others place his gaze higher. Rose Hawthorne recalls Thoreau walking with eyes staring into nothingness. Frank Preston Stearns recalls Thoreau “looking straight before him, but at the same time observing everything.”

What was the pace of the stride? One informant (Sanborn) describes it as “brisk,” adding that he “never seems tired.” Another (Edward Nealy) says that “he always walked with easy long steps; it would tire me well to keep up with him.” A third (Edward Emerson) says that “when he walked to get over the ground one thought of a tireless machine, seeing his long, direct, uniform pace.” From these excerpts it would appear that Thoreau did not exert himself unduly in his characteristic stride, but that he possessed considerable speed and stamina. R.W. Emerson confirms this impression, saying that Thoreau could “probably outwalk most countrymen in a day’s journey.” By his own account, Thoreau walked virtually every day, and “sometimes for several days together.”⁸

Channing recalls the style of walking as a “swinging gait.” It appears to have been only the legs that did the swinging, not

the arms, for Channing also notes that he walked with “his hands perhaps clasped behind him or held closely at his side, the fingers made into a fist.”

Thus we are left with a reasonably clear picture of the gait itself: a uniform, confident, long-legged stride, carriage erect, arms clasped behind or straight by his side, at a pace that was brisk but did not require any extraordinary exertion for one so physically fit. What then, if anything, did the gait signify about Thoreau’s character? The overwhelming majority of our informants thought it signified *something*. They used labels as shorthand: he had the gait of a soldier, a machine, an Indian, a gentleman. Sanborn, in two separate comments, described Thoreau as making a “rustic” impression.

These pithy labels suggest a wealth of connotations. If I were to attempt to offer an overarching interpretation, I would start with Thoreau’s own statement, reported by Emerson, that he “wanted every stride his legs made.” This statement of deliberateness suggests discipline, self-mastery. This interpretation is supported by the brisk, uniform pace and erect carriage, and the mechanical and martial associations the gait had for some of his contemporaries. It suggests even a certain neurosis in the extent of exertion of self-control.⁹

The contrast between Thoreau’s apparently extreme self-regulation and his passionate embrace of and advocacy for freedom and “wildness” is striking, and indeed these two attributes must certainly have been connected. How attractive to the rigidly self-disciplined Thoreau must have been the presumed life of the native “wild man”: solitary (as Thoreau was, and imagined the Indian to be) and free (as the Indian was widely acknowledged to be, and Thoreau aspired to be).

The connection between freedom and self-control had been explored by other philosophers. Immanuel Kant, for example—another compulsive walker (whose rounds were so regular, the citizens of Königsberg were said to have set their clocks by it¹⁰)—argued that in order to exercise freedom of the will fully and properly, one must first master oneself and regulate one’s passions. Kant had opinions about the character of the Native Americans too: he thought they possessed “no motive force, for they are without affection and passion.”¹¹ Kant does not draw it out, but the clear implication of his philosophical doctrine and his anthropological prejudice is that Indians make freedom look easy—when one is comparatively passionless, self-mastery requires no great struggle. Emerson said precisely the same about Thoreau: “He had no temptations to fight against,—no appetites, no passions, no taste for elegant trifles.” And thus it is perhaps no coincidence that “he much preferred a good Indian” to the company of his townsmen.¹² But the very rigidity of Thoreau’s gait is one clue that suggests that there was indeed a simmering “motive force” that required a tight lid. (And it must be recognized that Native Americans of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were surely neither as “passionless” nor as “solitary” as Kant and Thoreau and many other Europeans and Euro-Americans imagined.¹³)

But Thoreau’s gait suggests more than simply self-regulation. Thoreau’s avowal that he “wanted every stride his legs made” rings true as highlighting another aspect of Thoreau’s character. To *want every stride one makes* is not simply to make only wanted strides, any more than (as the March Hare reminded Alice) to get what one likes is to like what one gets. To want every stride is to accept and embrace even the missteps.

Thoreau occasionally lost his footing. When hiking in Tuckerman's Ravine on Mount Washington in 1858 he sprained an ankle, and was unable to move about the next day. Emerson, in his eulogy for Thoreau, put a positive spin on the incident, saying that when Thoreau fell he serendipitously discovered an example of *Arnica mollis*, a plant he had been seeking. Emerson appears to have the story garbled—Thoreau found the *Arnica* the previous day, according to his journal (8-9 July 1858), and Harding says that after soaking the foot in ice-cold water to reduce the swelling Thoreau sent his companions out to collect some of the *Arnica* for its healing properties.¹⁴ But the spirit of Emerson's anecdote—making Thoreau appear like the Buddhist monk of the koan, who, clinging to a cliffside with a tiger above and a deadly plunge below, turns the situation to some good by finding and savoring a strawberry—is accurate enough. Channing recalls that during his day of forced rest Thoreau was in perfectly good cheer: "Thoreau was unable to move on, but he sat and entertained [his companions]

heartily."¹⁵ Thoreau's journal entry contains no suggestion that he felt sorry for himself for losing his ability to ramble and botanize—rather, after the fashion of the monk in the koan, he relished the visit a small owl paid the evening of the injury, coming within several yards of the camp where he lay.

In mountain hiking Thoreau would frequently abandon the trail and chart a path to a destination by compass needle. In life as well he sought to live up to a philosophy of individualism and self-determination, to "step to the music which he hears," though it be the beat of a different drummer. Thoreau marched through life the way he sauntered and hiked across campus, around town, and through the woods: with discipline and purpose, toward inner-directed goals along self-chosen paths. In the case of Thoreau, Montaigne appears to be vindicated: the philosopher's character can be read in his gait as well as in his words and deeds.

• **Brent Ranalli** is an environmental policy professional and a scholar at the Ronin Institute.

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Notes

1 Michel de Montaigne, "Of Democritus and Heraclitus," Book I, No. 50 in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Murdoch Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958 [1580]), 219.

2 Henry D. Thoreau, "Walking," in *Excursions*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 187.

3 Testimony gathered by Walter Harding, *Thoreau as Seen by His Contemporaries* (New York: Dover, 1989), comes from Ralph W. Emerson (20), John Weiss (32), Rose Hawthorne (78), Frank Preston Stearns (78), Franklin B. Sanborn (98, 147), George F. Hoar (109), Edward Emerson (136), Mrs. Edwin Bigelow (i.e., Ann Bigelow), as recorded by Edward Emerson (211), Edward Nealy, as recorded by Edward Emerson (214), and Isaac N. Goodhue (217). See also Ellery Channing, *Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist: with Memorial Verses* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1873), 17-18, and Julian Hawthorne quoted by Gary Scharnhorst in "The Most Dismal Fraud of the New England Transcendental Group": Julian Hawthorne on Thoreau." *The Concord Saunterer* 17 (2009): 125-136; 125, 129. Quotations from these individuals, unless otherwise attributed, come from these sources.

4 Patrick Chura, *Thoreau the Land Surveyor* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2010), 28, 52, 160.

5 Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971 [2004]), 265.

6 Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 88.

7 Sanborn, *Literary Life* (Boston: R.G. Badger, 1909), 397.

8 Thoreau, "Walking," 190

9 This speculation is consistent with Walter Harding's thesis about Thoreau's apparent repression and sublimation of his sexuality: "Thoreau's Sexuality," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 21.3 (1991): 23-45.

10 Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 273.

11 From Kant's 1772 lecture on "Philosophical Anthropology," quoted in J. McIver Weatherford, *Indian Givers* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1990), 126.

12 Quoted in Harding, *Thoreau as Seen by His Contemporaries*, 16.

13 On the question of solitariness, see Robert F. Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1977.

14 *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, vol. XI, July 2, 1858 - February 28, 1859, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1906), 27, 32; Harding Days, 401.

15 Channing, *Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist*, 44.