

The Picture of Homeric Health: Alek Therien in *Walden*

Freya Riebling

85th Annual Meeting of the International Thoreau Society, Concord, MA, July 9, 2026

Alek Therien, the woodchopper in *Walden*, is rugged, content, and in Thoreau's words, "cousin to the pine and the rock."¹ Although Therien has never lacked admiring readers, the academic literature on him is slight; much of it is decades old; and I believe it often misreads Thoreau's portrait of him. Earlier accounts tended to see Thoreau as attracted to Therien while also looking down on him, the cultivated transcendentalist amused by a healthy but spiritually dormant primitive.² I want to suggest something different. A close reading of *Walden* reveals a philosophical appreciation of Therien's organic vigor.

Therien has what Thoreau calls "simple Homeric health."³ Thoreau doesn't tell us what simple Homeric health is. But he shows us, in his portrait of Therien, the qualities this health entails. Therien is simple, natural, vital, moral, animal, practical, seasonal, humble, and mobile. These are all terms that Thoreau, across his collected works, uses as synonyms for health.

Therien does not manifest every Thoreauvian virtue. He is more complacent and less curious about the world than any protege of Emerson could be. As Thoreau frames it, the

¹ Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 146-147. Although Thoreau does not refer to him by name in *Walden* ("he had so suitable and poetic a name that I am sorry I cannot print it here," 144), Therien is identified in a journal entry on July 14, 1845. Henry D. Thoreau, *Journal 2: 1842-1848*, ed. Robert Sattelmeyer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 160.

² For earlier scholarship, see Robert W. Bradford, "Thoreau and Therien," *American Literature* 34, no. 4 (1963); Leonard N. Neufeldt, "The Making of Alek Therien: Journal Antecedents of Therien as Literary Character," *The Concord Saunterer* 12, no. 2 (1977). For suggestion of a possible homosexual attraction on Thoreau's part, see Walter Harding, "Thoreau's Sexuality," *Journal of Homosexuality* 21, no. 3 (2008).

³ Henry D. Thoreau, "Thomas Carlyle and His Works," *Early Essays in Miscellanies*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer and Edwin Moser (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 248. Thoreau is speaking of the poet William Wordsworth, but the phrase applies with equal if not greater force to Therien, as I believe the evidence adduced here will show.

intellectual and spiritual man in Therien are “slumbering as in an infant.”⁴ Yet this unrealized potential does not prevent Thoreau from seeing Therien as an embodiment of health. It simply defines the kind of health Therien has. In this way, Thoreau’s portrait of Therien invites us to think of different healths for different people.

“Nature is but another name for health,” Thoreau writes in “Huckleberries.”⁵ “All nature is doing her best each moment to make us well. . . . Do not resist her.”⁶ Yet often we do resist her, as when a sick man “brought to the brink of the grave by an unnatural life, instead of imbibing only the great influence that Nature is, drinks only the tea made of a particular herb, . . . continues his unnatural life, . . . and so sickens and dies.”⁷ Thoreau’s prescription is less to bring nature into our lives than to bring our lives into nature: “Unless our feet at least [stand] in the midst of nature, all our faces [will] be pale and livid.”⁸

Therien’s feet stand there, in the midst of nature. He can do no other. He moves through the woods as one of nature’s creatures, which all men are, but few accept. Chickadees recognize his presence as natural and “alight on his arm” as if upon a tree branch.⁹ He lives and works closely with the land. He can get everything he needs to sustain his lifestyle from nature. He hunts meat in the woods and eats outdoors on a log. Thoreau links environmental and individual wellness, as Michael Branch and Jessie Pierce note, and Therien confirms this connection.¹⁰ His

⁴ Thoreau, *Walden*, 147.

⁵ Henry D. Thoreau, “Huckleberries,” *Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York: Library of America, 2001), 501.

⁶ Thoreau, “Huckleberries,” 501.

⁷ Henry D. Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. V, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 394.

⁸ Henry D. Thoreau, “Natural History of Massachusetts,” in *Excursions*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 4.

⁹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 146.

¹⁰ Michael P. Branch and Jessica Pierce, “‘Another Name for Health’: Thoreau and Modern Medicine,” *Literature and Medicine* 15, no. 1 (1996): 130.

diet is healthy because it is a function of lived experience proximate to the land. Thoreau believes that food is healthy when we are immersed in the environment it comes from. This is why he says a huckleberry never reaches Boston. In Boston it does not have the nutritional value of a huckleberry because the connection to local fields has been severed.¹¹

But health is more than just physical, so what about Therien's mind and heart? Are they also healthy? Thoreau seems to criticize him here. He says: "I never . . . could get him to take the spiritual view of things; the highest that he appeared to conceive of was a simple expediency, such as you might expect an animal to appreciate."¹²

The woodchopper, to be sure, is no Transcendentalist. Yet pragmatism suits him and his ecosystem. Therien gives the best answers in philosophical discussions, Thoreau says, because he stresses the practical importance of each matter. When Thoreau asks him if he's thought of any new ideas over the summer, Therien responds: "Good Lord . . . a man that has to work as I do, if he does not forget the ideas he has had, he will do well. May be the man you hoe with is inclined to race; then, by gorry, your mind must be there; you think of weeds."¹³ Wherever Therien is, his mind is there. He is not just physically but also psychologically immersed in his world. Living in reality, unconfused by theory, contributes to his mental and spiritual health.

Therefore I don't see Thoreau as condescending to his friend. He calls Therien a "simply and naturally humble" man who believes in "honesty and the like virtues."¹⁴ The woodsman interests him because he is "so quiet and solitary and so happy withal; a well of good humor and contentment which overflow[s] at his eyes."¹⁵ Sometimes Therien "tumble[s] down and roll[s]

¹¹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 173.

¹² Thoreau, *Walden*, 150.

¹³ Thoreau, *Walden*, 149.

¹⁴ Thoreau, *Walden*, 147, 150.

¹⁵ Thoreau, *Walden*, 146.

on the ground with laughter.”¹⁶ At other times he beholds the trees and exclaims, “I can enjoy myself well enough here chopping; I want no better sport.”¹⁷ He lives less self-consciously than Thoreau, but no less deliberately. He walks to work “without anxiety or haste.”¹⁸ Unlike so many others in Concord, he doesn’t sacrifice his physical health and “hurt himself” for the sake of his work.¹⁹ He isn’t striving for another life. He is content where he is in both time and space. He is on the journey of the man who has already arrived.

And yet—Thoreau says: “the intellectual and what is called spiritual man” in Therien “were slumbering as in an infant.”²⁰ We may wonder, then, whether Homeric health arises despite this intellectual and spiritual dormancy, or because of it. The answer depends on the person. For Thoreau to reject his own intellectual development would be a corruption of his nature. But Therien’s nature is otherwise. It is his nature to live as “cousin to the pine and the rock.” Health means Therien being completely Therien, not Therien becoming Thoreau. In other words, Thoreau does not construct health as a decontextualized Platonic ideal. If we treat health as a single abstract value, we are tempted to assume we already know what it must mean for everyone, as Antonio Casado da Rocha notes.²¹ But if different people value different conceptions of health differently, health becomes personal without becoming arbitrary.

The resulting outlook is less progressive for someone like Therien than for Thoreau. Therien chuckles when a reformer asks him whether he does not wish to change the world. “No,”

¹⁶ Thoreau, *Walden*, 146.

¹⁷ Thoreau, *Walden*, 146.

¹⁸ Thoreau, *Walden*, 145.

¹⁹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 145.

²⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, 147.

²¹ Antonio Casado da Rocha, “The Value of Health in the Writings of H. D. Thoreau,” *Environmental Values* 18, no. 2 (2009): 211.

he responds simply. “I like it well enough.”²² We might wonder how the Thoreau who gave us “Civil Disobedience” can accept this quietism. Yet rather than dismissing Therien’s outlook, he seems to respect the contrarian stance. Perhaps this is one reason why Thoreau says speaking with Therien “would have suggested many things to a philosopher.”²³

Therien’s wisdom doesn’t display itself in books and lectures. But it is a wisdom that the books and lectures of the Concord Transcendentalists valorized. He is genuine and unperformative. He “would not play any part.”²⁴ In a text so opposed to the sickness of false lives, borrowed opinions, and theatrical respectability, could any praise be higher?

Ultimately, I think this “simple Homeric health” offers a useful frame for the text and project of *Walden* itself. Thoreau describes his friend as “Homeric” for a reason. In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, he writes: “It is enough if Homer but say the sun sets. He is as serene as nature, and we can hardly detect the enthusiasm of the bard. It is as if nature spoke. He presents to us the simplest pictures of human life . . . man must not think twice to appreciate his naturalness. . . . His more memorable passages are as naturally bright as gleams of sunshine in misty weather.”²⁵ To Thoreau, Homer is natural, and therefore healthy and good. Thoreau’s passion for classical studies is well known, but I think the *Iliad* shapes *Walden* more deeply than many of us recognize. It is the only book Thoreau brings to Walden, and it provides a heroic grammar for his life there. Making a woodchopper into a Homeric man is only one of the ways in which Thoreau reenchants his world and reinvigorates his spirit.

²² Thoreau, *Walden*, 148.

²³ Thoreau, *Walden*, 148.

²⁴ Thoreau, *Walden*, 147.

²⁵ Henry D. Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, ed. Carl F. Hovde et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 91-92.

Stanley Cavell and others have described *Walden* as a search for a remedy to sicknesses of the self.²⁶ Thoreau diagnoses the maladies of over-civilization: acquisitiveness, hurry, alienation from our bodies, from nature, and from our own present lives. As antidotes, he prescribes simple, natural tasks. We can wake up, simplify, walk, wander, bathe, listen, inhale, exhale, and laugh—and so recover the present and natural. Therien does these things without anyone prescribing them, and without needing to recover anything. He does these things with the ease of a falling leaf, or a blooming flower, or a flooding pond, or a melting flake of snow. He acts naturally, in a way that Thoreau and most of the rest of us need to learn or relearn to do. Often this requires unlearning what we have been told to do. In this way, I think, Therien reminds us that to be healthy is not always to become better, or wiser, or holier, or happier. Sometimes it is just to become more naturally what we already are.

Freya Riebling is an early-career researcher in Classics and Comparative Literature, investigating Thoreau's reception of Homer with the support of an Ancient Worlds, Modern Communities grant from the Society for Classical Studies.

The author wishes to express gratitude for encouragement and input received from: Dr. Karolina Sekita, Lecturer in Classics, Brasenose College, Oxford; Dr. Elisa Mlikes, History Teacher, Horace Mann School; Henrik Otterberg, Thoreau Society Bulletin bibliographer; and Brent Ranalli, editor of the Bulletin.

²⁶ Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, exp. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 80.