

PEOPLE MENTIONED IN WALDEN



SOME PEOPLE MENTIONED IN WALDEN:

MÎR CAMAR UDDÎN MAST OF DELHI, INDIA

As an exercise: try to find some Westerner, anybody other than Thoreau, who has **ever** referred in English to this 18th-Century Mughal poet from Delhi's Sufi poetry!

How many readers of WALDEN grasp that even by mentioning a low-rent guy like Mîr, Henry was in effect issuing a political statement? The Camars in India are mere leather workers (this name might be rendered into the English as "Mîr, the low-caste leather-worker of the Islamic faith whose life is so overwhelmed with love for Allah that sheer existence has become for him an ecstasy"), which is to say, decidedly unclean – their caste status approaches that of the Untouchables. An equivalent gesture in today's America might be to quote from the poetry of the janitor at your town's slaughterhouse.

Jeff Cramer, in his notes to WALDEN, identifies this person with Mîr "Qamar-uddin Minnat, Persian and Urdu poet, a native of Delhi, who died in Calcutta in 1793" (repositioning a city in India as in the vicinity of Mount Parnassus!) – but this Mîr simply was not that Mîr. In fact we have no information whatever as to when or where the poet mentioned by Thoreau was born or died, except that his *florut* was in Delhi and during the 18th Century.

**“NARRATIVE HISTORY” AMOUNTS TO FABULATION,
THE REAL STUFF BEING MERE CHRONOLOGY**

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WALDEN: My residence was more favorable, not only to thought, but to serious reading, than a university; and though I was beyond the range of the ordinary circulating library, I had more than ever come within the influence of those books which circulate round the world, whose sentences were first written on bark, and are now merely copied from time to time on to linen paper. Says the poet Mîr Camar Uddîn Mast, "Being seated to run through the region of the spiritual world; I have had this advantage in books. To be intoxicated by a single glass of wine; I have experienced this pleasure when I have drunk the liquor of the esoteric doctrines." I kept Homer's Iliad on my table through the summer, though I looked at his page only now and then. Incessant labor with my hands, at first, for I had my house to finish and my beans to hoe at the same time, made more study impossible. Yet I sustained myself by the prospect of such reading in future. I read one or two shallow books of travel in the intervals of my work, till that employment made me ashamed of myself, and I asked where it was then that **I** lived.

PEOPLE OF
WALDEN

MÎR CAMAR UDDÎN MAST

JOHN CHARLES FRÉMONT

HOMER



THE PEOPLE OF WALDEN:

MÎR CAMAR UDDÎN MAST

PEOPLE MENTIONED IN WALDEN

1781

[Charles Wilkins](#) was appointed as translator of Persian and Bengali to the Commissioner of Revenue, and as superintendent of the East India Company's press.



During this year and the following one, according to Professor [Joseph-Héliodore-Sagesse-Vertu Garcin de Tassy](#), [Mîr Camar uddîn Mast](#) was associating with an honorable M. Jones (this could not have been [Sir William Jones](#), as during these years he was still on the far side of the world, not yet having embarked aboard the frigate *Crocodile* to set sail toward Calcutta, [India](#)).

NOBODY COULD GUESS WHAT WOULD HAPPEN NEXT



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1839

Professor [Joseph-Héliodore-Sagesse-Vertu Garcin de Tassy](#)'s major work *TARIKH-E-ADABIYAT-E-HINDIVI WA HINDUSTANI*. The initial volume of his *HISTOIRE DE LA LITTÉRATURE HINDOUI ET HINDOUSTANI* was published at Paris under the auspices of the Oriental Translation Committee of Great Britain and Ireland and dedicated *A SA MAJESTÉ LA REINE DE LA GRANDE-BRETAGNE*. From this [Henry Thoreau](#) would on September 11, 1849 extract snippets pertaining to [Kabîr](#) and to [Mîr Camar uddîn Mast](#):



M. GARCIN DE TASSY, I

On prétend que les vers de Kabîr ont quatre sens différents: l'illusion (mâyâ), l'esprit (âtmâ), l'intellect (man), et la doctrine exotérique des Védas.

WALDEN: Why level downward to our dullest perception always, and praise that as common sense? The commonest sense is the sense of men asleep, which they express by snoring. Sometimes we are inclined to class those who are once-and-a-half witted with the half-witted, because we appreciate only a third part of their wit. Some would find fault with the morning-red, if they ever got up early enough. "They pretend," as I hear, "that the verses of Kabir have four different senses; illusion, spirit, intellect, and the exoteric doctrine of the Vedas;" but in this part of the world it is considered a ground for complaint if a man's writings admit of more than one interpretation. While England endeavors to cure the potato-rot, will not any endeavor to cure the brain-rot, which prevails so much more widely and fatally?

PEOPLE OF
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KABÎR

The source which reported this "pretending" (exegeting?) was cited in a footnote of the *HISTOIRE DE LA LITTÉRATURE HINDOUI ET HINDOUSTANI* as [Horace Hayman Wilson](#)'s *ASIATIC RESEARCHES*, Volume XVI, page 62.



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PEOPLE MENTIONED IN WALDEN

Thoreau also would render [Mîr Camar uddîn Mast](#)'s

Etant assis, parcourir la région du monde spirituel: j'ai eu cet avantage dans les livres. Être enviré par une seule coupe de vin: j'ai éprouvé ce plaisir lorsque j'ai bu la liqueur des doctrines ésotériques.

as:

WALDEN: My residence was more favorable, not only to thought, but to serious reading, than a university; and though I was beyond the range of the ordinary circulating library, I had more than ever come within the influence of those books which circulate round the world, whose sentences were first written on bark, and are now merely copied from time to time on to linen paper. Says the poet Mîr Camar Uddîn Mast, "Being seated to run through the region of the spiritual world; I have had this advantage in books. To be intoxicated by a single glass of wine; I have experienced this pleasure when I have drunk the liquor of the esoteric doctrines." I kept Homer's Iliad on my table through the summer, though I looked at his page only now and then. Incessant labor with my hands, at first, for I had my house to finish and my beans to hoe at the same time, made more study impossible. Yet I sustained myself by the prospect of such reading in future. I read one or two shallow books of travel in the intervals of my work, till that employment made me ashamed of myself, and I asked where it was then that **I** lived.

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The full selection on [Mîr Camar uddîn Mast](#) from which Thoreau was here extracting, on pages 331-2 of Volume I of this *HISTOIRE DE LA LITTÉRATURE HINDOUI ET HINDOUSTANI*,¹ reads as follows:

Mîr Camar uddîn Mast¹, de Delhi, descendait par sa mère du saïyid Jalâl Bukhârî Mîr. Il retira des avantages littéraires de la société de Mîr Nûr uddîn Nawed et de Mîr Schams uddîn Faquîr, et fut initié par eux aux difficultés de la versification. Il fut un des disciples du spiritualiste le maulawî Fakhr uddîn, et se dévoua à la vie spirituelle, en sorte que Bénî Narâyan le nomme faquîr. Il a écrit beaucoup de vers hindoustani et persans; il avait une grande célérité de conception; il s'énonçait avec esprit et pureté de langage. En 1196 de l'hérige (1781-1782), il était attaché à l'honorable M. Jones.² Il était très-enclin à l'amour, et faisait beaucoup attention à la beauté. Alî Ibrâhîm cite deux pages et demie de ses vers hindoustani, et Bénî Narâyan, un gazal mystique qui me paraît très-geau dans l'original. Je joins ici la traduction de quelques hémistiches de ce poème:

Aujourd'hui j'ai vu en songe ma bien-aimée; j'ai vu la lumière de Dieu sous le voile. Moi qui suis néant, m'unir à son essence: j'ai vu ce spectacle pareil à celui de la bulle d'eau qui se perd dans l'Océan.....

Étant assis, parcourir la région du monde spirituel: j'ai eu cet avantage dans les livres. Être enivré par une seule coup de vin: j'ai éprouvé ce plaisir lorsque j'ai bu la liqueur des doctrines ésotériques.

J'ignore si ce poète est le même dont parle Mushafî, et qu'il donne comme disciple de Mîr Amânî Açad, et comme un des habitués de ses réunions littéraires.

1. *mst* [these characters are printed from right to left in Farsi script] *ivre*.
2. Probablement le célèbre Sir W. Jones.

1. Be aware that when the 2d edition of this work by M. Garcin de-Tassy would appear in 1847, the text as “revue, corrigée, et considérablement augmentée” would be not at all similar to the above.



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1849

September 11, Tuesday: [Henry Thoreau](#) checked out, from [Harvard Library](#), the two volumes of Simon-Alexandre Langlois (1788-1854)'s *HARIVANSA; OU, HISTOIRE DE LA FAMILLE DE HARI, OUVRAGE FORMANT UN APPENDICE DU MAHABHARATA* (Paris, 1834).

S.-A. LANGLOIS, I

S.-A. LANGLOIS, II

He would try his hand at translating from this French translation of the original Sanskrit: "The transmigration of the seven Brahmins."



WALDEN: After a still winter night I awoke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to answer in my sleep, as what-how-when-where? But there was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking in at my broad windows with serene and satisfied face, and no question on *her* lips. I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight. The snow lying deep on the earth dotted with young pines, and the very slope of the hill on which my house is placed, seemed to say, Forward! Nature puts no question and answers none which we mortals ask. She has long ago taken her resolution. "O Prince, our eyes contemplate with admiration and transmit to the soul the wonderful and varied spectacle of this universe. The night veils without doubt a part of this glorious creation; but day comes to reveal to us this great work, which extends from earth even into the plains of the ether."

[HARIVANSA](#)



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Thoreau also checked out Professor Joseph-Héliodore-Sagesse-Vertu Garcin de Tassy's *HISTOIRE DE LA LITTÉRATURE HINDOUI ET HINDUSTANI* (Paris: Printed under the auspices of the Oriental Translation Committee of Great Britain and Ireland, *TOME I, BIOGRAPHIE ET BIBLIOGRAPHIE*, 1839; *TOME II, EXTRAITS ET ANALYSES*, 1847).



M. GARCIN DE TASSY, I

M. GARCIN DE TASSY, II



After September 11: “They pretend that the verses of Kabir have four different senses; illusion, spirit, intellect, & the exoteric doctrine of the vedas” See Wilson as above.

The poet Mîr Camar uddîn Mast of Delhi who flourished in the last century says “Being seated, to run through the region of the spiritual world; I have had this advantage in books. To be intoxicated by a single glass of wine; I have experienced this pleasure when I have drank the liquor of the esoteric doctrines.”

To have a brother or a sister — to have a gold mine on your farm — to find diamonds in the gravel heaps before your door — how rare these things are

—To share the day with you — to inhabit the earth. Whether to have a god or goddess for companion in your walks or to walk alone — with hinds & villains & carles. Would not a friend enhance the the beauty of the landscape as much as a deer or hare. Every thing would acknowledge & serve such a relation. the corn in the field & the cranberries in the meadows. The flowers & the birds would bloom & sing with a new impulse. There would be more fair days in the year.

What a difference whether you have a brother on earth or not.

Whether in all your walks you meet only strangers or in one house is one who knows you. & whom you know. The Hindoos by constitution possess in a wonderful degree the faculty of contemplation — they can speculate — they have imagination & invention & fancy. The western man thinks only with ruinous interruptions & friction — his contemplative faculty is rusty & does not work. He is soon aground in the shallows of the practical— It gives him indigestion to think. His cowardly *legs* run away with him — but the Hindoo bravely cuts off his legs in the first place. To him his imagination is a distinct & honorable faculty as valuable as the understanding or the legs— The legs were made to transport it — & it does not merely direct the legs. How incredibly poor in speculation is the western world!— one would have thought that a drop of thought & a single afternoon would have set afloat more speculations—

What has Europe been *thinking* of these two thousand years. A child put to bed half an hour before its time would have invented more systems — would have had more theories set afloat would have amused itself with more thoughts. But instead of going to bed and thinking Europe has got up and gone to work, and when she goes to bed she goes to sleep. We cannot go to bed & think as children do The Yankee cannot sit but he sleeps— I have an uncle who is obliged to sprout potatoes on sundays to keep him awake. The Hindoo thinks so vividly & intensely that he can think sitting or on his back — far into a siesta He can dream awake.

Their imaginations are lava or pumice in the cold state — torpid Icelandic— It was not in such a temperature that the lava flowed into these beautiful forms. More genial circumstances would melt the rock.



After September 11: —We have a saying an East quarter bargain i.e. a secret one— The Copper mines —the old silver mine now deserted —the holt —the great meadows— The Baker Farm —Conantum —Beck-Stows swamp —the Great Fields —Poland —The Dam Meadows —The Eastabrooks place —Jenny Dugan’s — The Ministerial Lot —Fairy land —Sleepy Hollow —Laurel glen Talls Island The bog-iron mines —The old lime-kiln —the place where the cinnamon stone was found —Hayne’s Island— I usually went across lots & some times I swam the river holding my clothes up in one hand to keep them dry. & at last crawling out the other side like an otter or I forded broad deep & rapid streams on temporary Peruvian bridges which I constructed, by letting

BAKER FARM



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fall a rider across & using a steady pole— – The Gulf meadows Caesar’s –the Caedar Swamp –Paul Dudleys – John Le Gross’ Country –The Price place –Capt Bate’s The Fort of the rocks— ’s Folly the Old Marlboro road. The Bridle road the 2nd Division

Between Anurnsuck & strawberry hills in Mr Hapgood’s pasture I have measured a chestnut 23 feet in circumference at a foot from the ground. Well meadow— For brooks we have Cold brook –Pantry Brook – Well meadow brook –Nut meadow Brook Wrights brook –Nagog –brook –Nashoba brook –Fort Pond brook – Saw Mill brook –Mill brook –Spencer brook. &c &c.

For hills –Nagog famous for huckleberries where I have seen hundreds of bushels at once –Nashoba –of Indian memory –from which you see Uncanunuc Mt well –Strawberry hill –from which you glimpse Nagod Pond – Annurnsuck –Ponkawtasset –Balls hill Fair Haven –Round –Goodman’s –Willis’s Nobscot –where old Gen Nixon lived –by the Sudbury inn v poetry Turnpike hill –Lincoln Hill –Bare hill Mt Tabor, Pine hill, Prospect hill Nawshawtucl. Wind mill Hill. &c

For ponds Walden –Flints or Sandys White Now, since the railroad & the Irish have prophaned Walden – the most beautiful of all our lakes –a gem of crystal –(v tree story) It deserves a better name– One has suggested God’s drop –another Yellow pine lake another Hygae’s Water, and another To be sure its shores are white & I used to gather its sand in my youth to make sand paper with.

IRISH

JAMES BAKER

**LIFE IS LIVED FORWARD BUT UNDERSTOOD BACKWARD?
— NO, THAT’S GIVING TOO MUCH TO THE HISTORIAN’S STORIES.
LIFE ISN’T TO BE UNDERSTOOD EITHER FORWARD OR BACKWARD.**

September 13, Thursday: [Henry Thoreau](#) was reading portions of the *MAHABHARATA*, as well as Professor [Joseph-Héliodore-Sagesse-Vertu Garcin de Tassy](#)’s *HISTOIRE DE LA LITTÉRATURE HINDOUI ET HINDOUSTANI*,



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M. Garcin de Tassy

Note that Jeff Cramer, in his notes to WALDEN, identifies this [Mîr Camar uddîn Mast](#) with Mîr "Qamar-uddin Minnat, Persian and Urdu poet, a native of Delphi, who died in Calcutta in 1793," repositioning a city in India as in the vicinity of Mount Parnassus! On a following page appear two snippets from this work by Garcin de Tassy that Thoreau checked out, demonstrating that this Mîr simply was not that Mîr. In fact we have no information whatever as to when or where the poet Mîr mentioned by Thoreau was born or died, except that his *florut* was in Delhi and during the 18th Century (his name might be rendered into the English as "Mîr, the low-caste leather-worker of the Islamic faith whose life is so overwhelmed with love for Allah that sheer existence has become for him an ecstasy").

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MINNAT.

Mir Camar uddin Minnat³, de Dehli, selon Lutf⁴, descendait par sa mère du saïyid Jalâl Bokhârî, célèbre saint musulman. Il fut d'abord disciple de Muhammad Câim, puis, surtout pour le persan, de Mir Schams uddin Faqîr; il eut aussi des rapports littéraires avec Futuwat Huçain Khân. Selon Lutf, il fut élevé dans la maison de Schâh Wali ullah Muhdis, et ce fut l'illustre contemplatif, le maulawî Fakhr uddin, qui l'instruisit dans la science du spiritualisme. Il fut initié à l'art des vers par Faqîr, et au bon goût poétique par Nûr uddin Nawed; il acquit ainsi dans la littérature une réputation méritée. Son calâm, dit Lutf, fit honte au pinceau du célèbre Bihzâd. Il avait des connaissances variées, et

¹ مهربان *affectionné, ami.*

² Dans le catalogue des livres de Farzâda Cûli, il y a l'indication de deux manuscrits des œuvres de cet écrivain. Le premier est intitulé دیوان و مرثیہ از مہربان خان *Diwân et marciya de Mihrbân Khân*; le second, قدری از ریختہ مہربان خان *Portion des poésies de Mihrbân Khân.*

³ ممت *obligation et supplication.*

⁴ Selon Mushafi, il était natif de سنوی پت *et selon Béné Narâyan, de سنیت.*

possédait entre autres l'arabe et le persan. Il a écrit en prose et en vers, dans ce dernier idiome, différents ouvrages, et s'est fait par là un nom distingué parmi les écrivains qui, dans l'Inde, se sont servis du persan pour écrire leurs compositions. On cite surtout de lui un ouvrage dans le genre du *Gulistan*, ouvrage intitulé *Schakaristân*, ou Sucrerie. Il a aussi écrit en hindoustani, et c'est seulement comme écrivain hindoustani que Lutf, Mushafi et Béné Narâyan le citent dans leurs ouvrages. En 1191 de l'hégire (1777-1778 de J. C.), à cause de la dévastation de Dehli, il alla à Lakhnau, où il resta quelque temps, puis il se rendit à Calcutta, en 1206 (1791-1792), et trois à quatre mois après, la fièvre le saisit et le conduisit au tombeau. Il mourut dans cette dernière ville, en 1207 (1792-1793), et y fut enterré. Mushafi donne un tarikh de cinq vers sur sa mort, et un échantillon de ses poésies hindoustani. De son côté, Lutf en cite deux pages.

MAST.

Mir Camar uddin Mast¹, de Dehli, descendait par sa mère du saïyid Jalâl Bukhârî Mir. Il retira des avantages littéraires de la société de Mir Nûr uddin Nawed et de Mir Schams uddin Faqîr, et fut initié par eux aux difficultés de la versification. Il fut un des disciples du spiritualiste le maulawî Fakhr uddin, et se dévoua à la vie spirituelle, en sorte que Béné Narâyan le nomme faqîr. Il a écrit beaucoup de vers hindoustani et persans; il avait une grande célérité de conception; il s'énonçait avec esprit et pureté de langage. En 1196 de l'hégire (1781-1782), il était attaché à l'honorable M. Jones². Il était très-enclin à l'amour, et faisait beaucoup attention à la beauté.

Ali Ibrâhim cite deux pages et demie de ses vers hindoustani, et Béné Narâyan, un gazal mystique qui me paraît très-beau dans l'original. Je joins ici la traduction de quelques hémistiches de ce poème :

Aujourd'hui j'ai vu en songe ma bien-aimée; j'ai vu la lumière de Dieu sous le voile. Moi qui suis néant, m'unir à son essence: j'ai vu ce spectacle pareil à celui de la bulle d'eau qui se perd dans l'Océan.....

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J'ignore si ce poète est le même dont parle Mushafi, et qu'il donne comme disciple de Mir Amâni Açad, et comme un des habitués de ses réunions littéraires.



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In “Going Inside” on page 98 of WHEREVER YOU GO, THERE YOU ARE: MINDFULNESS MEDITATION IN EVERYDAY LIFE (NY: Hyperion, 1994), John Kabat-Zinn has allowed [Thoreau](#) to travel in the company of [Kabîr](#) and of Lao-tzu:

Don't go outside your house to see the flowers.
My friend, don't bother with that excursion.
Inside your body there are flowers.
One flower has a thousand petals.
That will do for a place to sit.
Sitting there you will have a glimpse of beauty
inside the body and out of it,
before gardens and after gardens.
— [Kabîr](#)

The heavy is the root of the light.
The unmoved is the source of all movement.

Thus the Master travels all day
without leaving home.
However splendid the views,
she stays serene in herself.
Why should the lord of the country
flit about like a fool?
If you let yourself be blown to and fro,
you lose touch with your root.
If you let restlessness move you,
you lose touch with who you are.
— [Lao-tze, TAO TÊ CHING](#)

Direct your eye right inward, and you'll find
A thousand regions in your mind
Yet undiscovered. Travel them and be
Expert in home-cosmography.
— [Thoreau, WALDEN](#)

TRY: The next time you feel a sense of dissatisfaction, of something being missing or not quite right, turn inward just as an experiment. See if you can capture the energy of that very moment. Instead of picking up a magazine or going to the movies, calling a friend or looking for something to eat or acting up in one way or another, make a place for yourself. Sit down and enter into your own breathing, if only for a few minutes. Don't look for anything – neither flowers nor light nor a beautiful view. Don't extol the virtues of anything or condemn the inadequacy of anything. Don't even think to yourself, “I am going inward now.” Just sit. Reside at the center of the world. Let things be as they are.





THE PEOPLE OF WALDEN:

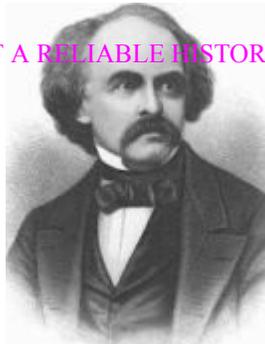
MÎR CAMAR UDDÎN MAST

PEOPLE MENTIONED IN WALDEN

1852

September: An unsigned reviewer in the Christian Examiner in effect called Nathaniel Hawthorne not a fictioner but a liar. For Hawthorne, in the preface to his THE SCARLET LETTER, had adverted that he had in his possession “historical papers which authenticate the story,” a story which involved “the gross and slanderous imputation that the colleague pastor of the First Church in Boston, who preached the Election Sermon in the year after the death of Governor Winthrop, was a mean and hypocritical adulterer,” which is an “outrageous fiction ... utterly without foundation” that could easily “deceive a reader who had no exact knowledge of our history.”

NOT A RELIABLE HISTORIAN



Meanwhile, Ticknor & Co. of Boston was publishing THE LIFE OF FRANKLIN PIERCE, a Democratic candidate campaign biography. They were actually printing more copies of Hawthorne’s tendentious campaign materials than of any book they had previously issued. Most of the copies were paperback (that is, lacking hard covers) and were to retail at \$0.³⁷ 1/2 each.



Henry Thoreau wrote to H.G.O. Blake, enclosing draft essays on “Love” and on “Chastity & Sensuality” in response to a letter which Blake had sent to him about his trepidations on his pending marriage. These were essays he had been working on since 1846. Unfortunately, Thoreau also had evidently made the mistakes of asking advice in this regard from his married friend Emerson, and of allowing Waldo Emerson to see Blake’s



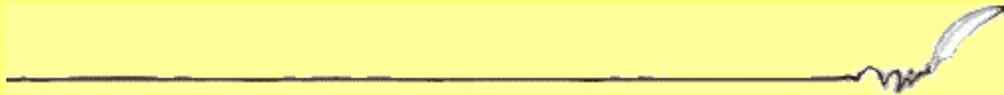
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letter, for we find the following caustic remark in Emerson's journal:

H.D.T. read me a letter from Blake to himself, yesterday, by which it appears that Blake writes to ask his husband for leave to marry a wife.



Mr. Blake,

Here come the sentences — which I promised y[o]u[] You may keep them if you will regard & use them as the disconnected fragments of what I may find to be a completer essay, on looking over my journal at last, and may claim again. I send you the thoughts on chastity and sensuality with diffidence and shame, not knowing how far I speak to the condition of men generally, or how far I betray my peculiar defects. Pray enlighten me on this point if you can.

Henry D. Thoreau

THE FUTURE IS MOST READILY PREDICTED IN RETROSPECT





THE PEOPLE OF WALDEN:

MÎR CAMAR UDDÎN MAST

PEOPLE MENTIONED IN WALDEN

2007

January: [Dr. David Scott](#) argued, in "Rewalking Thoreau and Asia: 'Light from the East' for 'A Very Yankee Sort of Oriental'," *Philosophy East and West* (Volume 57, Number 1, pages 14-39),

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that the usual alternative "Was [Thoreau](#) more inspired by what he studied of [Buddhism](#) and [Taoism](#) or more by what he studied of [Hinduism](#)?" should actually offer also a 3d option, of being inspired by what he studied of Islamic [Sufism](#):

Within [Thoreau](#)'s [Hindu](#) appropriations, the "practical" importance for Thoreau of yogic practices is reemphasized. Thoreau's often-cited Buddhist links are questioned. Instead, it is Thoreau's explicit use of [Confucian](#) and Persian [Sufi](#) materials that deserve reemphasis, as do, in retrospect, some striking thematic convergences with [Taoism](#). Thoreau's "Light from the East" focuses on ethical and mystical techniques, infused with lessons from Nature for "a very Yankee sort of Oriental."

...

Thoreau's Persian inspirations were primarily through the matrix of Sufism, the esoteric mystical side of [Islam](#). Sufi egalitarianism and interfaith pluralism was one feature that Thoreau thought well of:²

[A WEEK](#): There are theoretical reformers at all times, and all the world over, living on anticipation. Wolff, travelling in the deserts of Bokhara, says, "Another party of derveeshes came to me and observed, 'The time will come when there shall be no difference between rich and poor, between high and low, when property will be in common, even wives and children.'" But forever I ask of such, What then? The derveeshes in the deserts of Bokhara and the reformers in Marlboro' Chapel sing the same song. "There's a good time coming, boys," but, asked one of the audience, in good faith, "Can you fix the date?" Said I, "Will you help it along?"

PEOPLE OF
A WEEK

REVEREND JOSEPH WOLFF

More important than travelogues was Persian poetry. This was generally accorded high status in Transcendentalist circles, as in Emerson's 1844 essay "The Poet," with Thoreau noting how

2. [A WEEK](#), referring to Wolff's NARRATIVE OF A MISSION TO BOKHARA (1845), a travel source discussed in Christie, THOREAU AS WORLD TRAVELER, pp. 132-135. Elsewhere, in [A WEEK](#), Thoreau asked "hast thou not heard of a Sufi, who was hammering some nails into the sole of his sandal; an officer of cavalry took him by the sleeve, saying, Come along and shoe my horse."



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"poetry is the mysticism of mankind."³ Consequently, Thoreau could lament "the narrowness of his European culture and the exclusiveness of his reading. None of her children has done justice to the poets and philosophers of Persia."⁴ Such soaring Sufi verses pointed toward direct experiential contemplative transformation, expressions, and focus that were of direct interest to Thoreau, as well as to Emerson.⁵

Hafiz (d. 1389) was one Sufi master who attracted Thoreau's attention.⁶ Thus, Thoreau could mention how "'yesterday, at dawn,' says Hafiz, 'God delivered me from all worldly affliction; and amidst the gloom of night presented me with the water of immortality.'"⁷ Hafiz's poetry had also attracted Emerson's interest, as in his presentation of verses "From the Persian of Hafiz" (1847) and extracts in "The Liberty Bell" (1851).

A more sustained Sufi interest came for Thoreau, as also for Emerson, with [Mosleh Od-Din Sa'di](#) (d. ca. 1291), with extracts "From the Gulistan [Rose Garden] of Saadi" appearing in "Ethical Scriptures" in [The Dial](#) in January 1844.⁸ Thoreau first mentioned Saadi in his [JOURNAL](#) on March 23, 1842, with some mentions in [A WEEK](#). One example was in passing, where "in the life of Sadi by Dowlat Shah occurs this sentence: 'The eagle of the immaterial soul of Shaikh Sadi shook from his plumage the dust of his body.'"⁹ Elsewhere Thoreau recounted how "Sadi tells who may travel; among others, 'A common mechanic, who can earn a subsistence by the industry of his hand, and shall not have to stake his reputation for every morsel of bread, as philosophers have said.' He may travel who can subsist on the wild fruits and game of the most cultivated country."¹⁰ Thoreau also evoked Saadi in [WALDEN](#), where Saadi had been the first

3. [A WEEK](#)

4. [A WEEK](#)

5. J. Yohannan, "The Influence of Persian Poetry upon Emerson's Work," [American Literature](#) 14 (1943): 25-41.

6. General profile in INTOXICATION, EARTHLY AND HEAVENLY: SEVEN STUDIES ON THE POET HAFIZ OF SHIRAZ, ed. M. Glunz and J. Burgel (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1991).

7. [A WEEK](#)

8. General profile in J. Yohannan, THE POET SA'DI (Washington: University Press of America, 1987). Also see Emerson's poem "Saadi" in [The Dial](#), October 1842; "Saadi," [Atlantic Monthly](#), July 1864; and his preface to Gladwin's 1865 translation of SAADI, THE GULISTAN OR ROSE GARDEN.

9. [A WEEK](#)

10. [A WEEK](#)



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exemplar of his "Wise Old Man."¹¹ In that vein, Thoreau advised:

WALDEN: Do not stay to be an overseer of the poor, but endeavor to become one of the worthies of the world. I read in the Gulistan, or Flower Garden, of Sheik Sadi of Shiraz, that "They asked a wise man, saying; Of the many celebrated trees which the Most High God has created lofty and umbrageous, they call none azad, or free, excepting the cypress, which bears no fruit; what mystery is there in this? He replied; Each has its appropriate produce, and appointed season, during the continuance of which it is fresh and blooming, and during their absence dry and withered; to neither of which states is the cypress exposed, being always flourishing; and of this nature are the azads, or religious independents. -Fix not thy heart on that which is transitory; for the Dijlah, or Tigris, will continue to flow through Bagdad after the race of caliphs is extinct: if thy hand has plenty, be liberal as the date tree; but if it affords nothing to give away, be an azad, or free man, like the cypress."

PEOPLE OF
WALDEN

CYPRESS

ANDROMEDA

MOSLEH OD-DIN SA'DI

This section, from Saadi's chapter on "Rules for Conduct in Life," was the passage from Thoreau that Burroughs subsequently chose to conclude his own 1882 profile of Thoreau.¹² As with the Laws of Manu and the Gita, Thoreau was happy to use nature imagery as deeper pointers.

An extended treatment, "Assimilating Saadi," emerges from Thoreau's **JOURNAL** [entry for August 8, 1852, quoted below], Thoreau started from a more pluralist interfaith perspective where "a certain elevation makes all men of one religion. It is always some base alloy that creates the distinction of sects. Thought greets thought over the widest gulfs of time with unerring freemasonry." Within that universal pluralist fraternity came the following sequence: "I know, for instance, that Sadi entertained once identically the same thought that I do, and thereafter I can find no essential difference between Sadi and myself. He is not Persian, he is not ancient, he is not strange to me." Thoreau's readiness to go across time and identity can be commented on, as seen already in his treatment of Zoroaster and of Hindu wisdom. In turn came Thoreau's "by the identity of his thoughts with mine he [**Mosleh Od-Din Sa'di**] still survives. It makes no odds what atoms serve us," which evokes Sufi expression (e.g., **Rumi**) and Whitman's subsequent verses in "A Persian Lesson" (1891), which started with "the

11. J. Steadman, "The motif of the Wise Old Man in Walden," *Modern Language Notes* 75 (1960): 201-204, at p. 202 n. 3.

12. J. Burroughs, "Henry David Thoreau," *The Century* 24 (July 1882): 368-380, at p. 379.



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greybeard Sufi" and moved on to talk of how "it is the central urge in every atom, (often unconscious) ... to return to its divine origins."¹³ Saadi was to become the continuing vehicle there for Thoreau's own 'stream of consciousness,' so that "by sympathy with Sadi I have embowelled him. In his thought I have a sample of him, a slice from his core, which makes it unimportant where certain bones which the thinker once employed may lie; but I could not have got this without being equally entitled to it with himself.... Methinks I can be as intimate with the essence of an ancient worthy as, so to speak, he was with himself."

"MAGISTERIAL HISTORY" IS FANTASIZING: HISTORY IS CHRONOLOGY

13. W. Whitman, "A Persian Lesson," COMPLETE POETRY AND COLLECTED PROSE, ed. J. Kaplan (New York: the Library of America, 1982), pp. 650-651. Also, M. Farzan, "Whitman and Sufism: Towards 'A Persian Lesson,'" American Literature 47 (1976): 572-582, for technical details.



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"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



Prepared: December 1, 2014



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