…for a man to write this well every day."

So commented the great literary critic [Alfred Kazin](#) on Henry David Thoreau's Journal, which he kept quite regularly from his Harvard College graduation in 1837 to just a few months before his death.

Kazin is right: the Journal is a real gem of American letters and philosophy, with whole lot of great nature writing thrown in. I am currently reading Penguin Books' [wonderful edition](#) of the Journal from 1851; I did not think it possible that the man could have another masterpiece like Walden in him, but sure enough, he does.

To my mind, Thoreau's image as the patron saint of American nature writing is actually misleading: he was after something more universal. Nature was the means by which humanity can discover the transcendent; it was not the end in and of itself. (Which is why Thoreau was a Transcendentalist; get it?). But still, being the window into the transcendent is not too shabby.

Here's part of an entry from February 27th, which I read this morning:

> Of two men, one of whom knows nothing of a subject, and what is extremely rare, knows that he knows nothing — and the other really knows something about it, but thinks that he knows all — What great advantage has the latter over the former? Which is the best to deal with?

> I do not know that knowledge amounts to anything more definite than a novel & grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we had called knowledge before. An indefinite sence [sic] of the grandeur & glory of the Universe. It is the lighting up of the mist by the sun

> But man cannot be said to know in any higher sense, than he can look serenely & with impunity in the face of the sun.

This is superb reminder for intellectuals and academics.

The Penguin edition's choice of 1851 is not an accident: it was an extraordinary year for Thoreau. But it is great as a starter. Next up: Princeton University Press' [comprehensive edition](#). It will take a long time to get through — and be worth every moment.