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AND

On the Duty of Civil Disobedience

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

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or, LIFE IN THE WOODS

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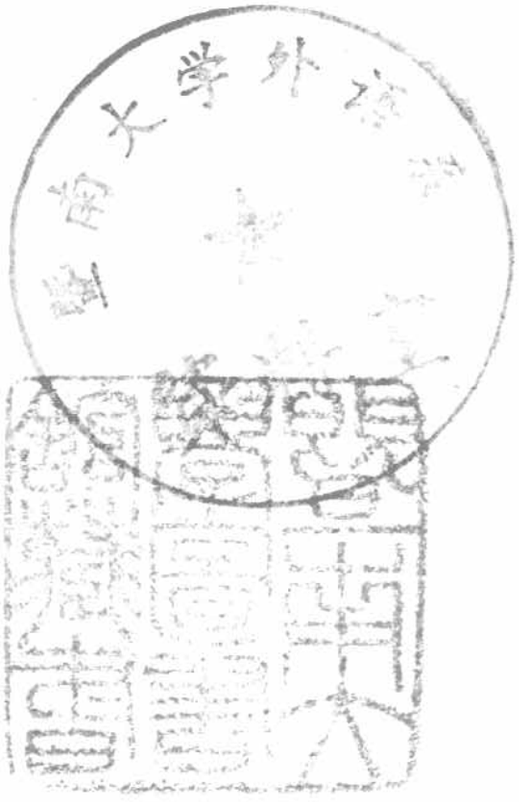

WALDEN
or, Life in the Woods

ON THE DUTY OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Henry David Thoreau

With a New Introduction by Charles R. Anderson

COLLIER BOOKS
A Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.
NEW YORK

First Collier Books Edition 1962
NINTH PRINTING 1977

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 62-11022

Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.
866 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022

Printed in the United States of America

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Introduction

WALDEN IS UNIQUE. There is nothing quite like it in all of Western literature. Reading it for the first time is an unforgettable experience, and one that should be part of every American's education. No matter how it may be ranked, everybody agrees that this is a remarkable book, though there is little agreement as to what makes it so. It has been praised for style, for its descriptions of the natural world, its satire on materialism, its account of one man's attempt to lead a self-reliant life; and rightly so, for each of these approaches has its strong appeal to a certain class of readers. Yet even when taken all together, somehow they fail to discover what is original and timeless in *Walden.* Its central vision lies deeper and must be probed for. But perhaps it is wise to begin with these interests that lie on the surface.

The most striking thing about Thoreau's masterpiece is the extraordinary simplicity of the experiment in living it records. Once sure of his purpose and plan, he quietly walked out of civilization into the woods, only a mile and a half beyond Concord village, and built his own house on the shores of Walden Pond. There for over two years he lived a self-contained and joyous life, supporting himself entirely by the labor of his own hands, his needs so slight that six weeks' work a year was sufficient. Having satisfied himself and achieved his ends, he returned to civilized society. It was as simple as that. Others have lived on the bare subsistence level through necessity or fate—forty-niners in the gold rush days, tramps, incompetents hopelessly trapped in poverty. But Thoreau reduced the necessities of life to a minimum voluntarily, and for utterly different reasons. Even the skimming reader will see that he was aiming at a special kind of independence, by freeing nine-tenths of his time from the burden of toil. The close reader will find a higher motive still.

The story of this experiment in simple living, presented as a kind of how-to-do-it, takes on a romantic quality like that associated with Melville's account of how to kill a whale in *Moby-Dick* and Franklin's advice on how to get rich in his autobiography. Any factual record can make fascinating reading if the

details are precise and vividly rendered. American authors are notably talented at this, and Thoreau could make an air of magic rise from his facts. He confronted them with the freshness and wonder of Adam at the dawn of creation. To the frontiersman's sharp powers of observation he added the poet's skill in expression. And his uncanny knack for doing things, which had won him local fame as a "character" in his village, is part of the romance of *Walden* as well as its anchor to realism.

Even his most practical activities are invariably transformed into something else. Baking bread becomes a ritual and eating it a kind of sacrament. His work in the bean field does not prompt him to an essay on farming; instead, he speaks of his joy in walking the rows barefooted, "dabbling like a plastic artist in the dewy and crumbling sand," and vows that another summer he will plant such seeds as truth, simplicity, faith, and innocence. When the task of housebuilding is completed his comment is hardly that of a carpenter: his airy cabin reminds him of one he had seen in the mountains "fit to entertain a traveling god." Clearly the chronicle of his outward life is not an end in itself. In fact the whole mode of autobiography in this book is just a device for presenting his materials. He meets the issue on page one with an ironic understatement to the effect that all books are subjective, since the only thing an author really knows is his own life. Choice of the first person or the third is merely a matter of technique.

So with his criticism of civilization. Whether it takes the form of direct satire of a materialistic society or is implied from his own economy, it is only the negative side of his theme. He dispenses with the problem of basic necessities by exaggeration rather than serious argument. The old adage that clothes make the man offered an easy target for caricature: "Dress a scarecrow in your last shift, you standing shiftless by, who would not soonest salute the scarecrow?" Central heating would naturally be a subject for travesty by the man whose advice to anyone shivering from cold was to take a brisk walk: the rich are not simply kept comfortably warm, he says, "they are cooked *à la mode*." Confessing that his one-room cabin was needlessly luxurious, he suggests a solution for the staggering problem of housing mankind by saying that he could have bought one of the railroad workers' abandoned tool boxes, six feet long by three feet wide, for a dollar. To those who doubt the adequacy of his minimum diet he boasts, "I can live on board nails." This is the ultimate in exaggeration, but as an expression of his aspiration to live in the spirit alone, it is an appropriately extravagant term for fasting.

Even when he pretends to seriousness in the statistics of his personal experiment, they constitute a kind of witty adventure in bookkeeping. Spread out in his book, like pages from a ledger, they make a joke of economic man's biggest bugbear, the high cost of living. Multiplied by ten, to arrive at some sort of modern currency equivalent, the figures are still ridiculously low—less than $300 for his house and about $10 a month for all his other expenses combined. Yet he emphatically denies that his purpose is to achieve economic reform or to write a handbook for others to live by. Each man must find his own way of life. This was simply his way for a time, and for a special purpose.

Was that purpose merely a return to nature in the Wordsworthian sense, or did he aspire to become another Audubon and study it as an amateur scientist? Those who admire *Walden* for its descriptive passages seem to think its chief value is to furnish a calendar of the rural year for nature lovers, and such collections have been made. Certainly its pages are liberally sprinkled with accounts of animals, birds, fishes, flowers, weeds, trees, wind and sky, stars and ponds. But despite his talents in this line Thoreau refused the designation of scientist, preferring the broader one of naturalist, then went far beyond that. In declining membership in the Association for the Advancement of Science, he gave as his reason the impossibility of defining his specialty for people who did not believe in "a science which deals with the higher laws."

All his descriptions move steadily away from nature as an end in itself. His whippoorwills and frogs turn into satirical figures of man. He begins his account of a partridge and her chicks like an ornithologist, with precise details of their appearance and habits. But the passage ends with a series of images for their serene eye: it is a gem, a limpid well, a mirror of the sky, reflecting "the purity of infancy" and "a wisdom clarified by experience." The pond itself is described in detail in all weathers and seasons, including the most accurate measurements as he surveys its area and sounds its depths, only to lead to the surprise conclusion that it is a symbol: "While men believe in the infinite some ponds will be thought to be bottomless." Thoreau was not compiling an anthology of vignettes of the natural world. His purpose was not a return *to* nature but a pilgrimage *through* nature to spirit. "Nature is hard to be overcome," he declared, "but she must be overcome."

Those who have felt that *Walden* is chiefly distinguished for its style have come closest to the right approach, but all have stopped far short of using this approach to discover the

book's inner meaning. Most have been content with praising the author as a master sentence maker, whether of sharp aphorism or poetic flash. Some have even culled from the book a collection of "Gems from Thoreau," as if all the rest were a desert of utilitarian prose or at best a pleasant volume of rural essays. What is needed, however, is not a vocabulary for praising the style of occasional sentences that gleam like Emersonian nuggets, but a technique for reading his masterpiece as a whole. If Thoreau is to be ranked as a major literary figure, along with Hawthorne, Whitman, and the others, his one great book must be shown to be a created work of art.

Why not try an entirely different approach and read *Walden* not as a series of expository essays but as a poem? This is to assume that every word counts, that its whole significance resides in its language, its structure of images, its symbolism—and is not separable from them. Exploring it in these terms, one finds that the social criticism and the naturalist's observations are literary counters, just as "autobiography" is the author's effective mask. The book has long been recognized as both negative and affirmative, but its dual purpose has usually been taken to be merely the rejection of a materialistic civilization in favor of a simple natural life. Approached instead as a poem, *Walden* is an experience recreated in words for the purpose of getting rid of the World altogether and discovering the Self. Its real theme is the search for perfection.

Two strategies of language—wit and metaphor—serve Thoreau for the negative and positive poles of his quest. The first predominates in the introductory chapters, the second in the body of the book. They give *Walden* its direction and open out its many contrasts: not only society and solitude, the complex and simple, but matter and spirit, nature and God. Man cannot achieve his high aims by rejecting the one and leaping into the other, but must work his way up through the jungle of the world to the perfection he seeks. His weapons for doing so, as the alert reader will find to his delighted surprise on every page, include the whole arsenal of wit: puns, extravagance, parody, satire, and so on. The goals themselves and the journey toward them are rendered in an intricate series of image-clusters: animal, leaf, food, shelter; the imagery of light, growth, and decay; and above all the circle as a pervasive and paradoxical symbol. In the chorus of birds it becomes the harmony of nature man seeks to enter, in Walden Pond the purity he yearns for. Yet the closer his communion with nature the more he is caught in its limitations. For the circle is also the cycle of the seasons and man's own little life rounded by a sleep. So it be-

comes the trap of time, from which he can escape only by some sort of immortality: by a vertical leap of the imagination, by the creation of an aspiring work of art, by rebirth in a second "earned" spring in contrast with the given one of youth.

There is plenty of surface appeal offered by *Walden,* to be sure, in its social satire, its charming nature scenes, its unusual story of an experiment in economy. But students who probe beneath this to a closer reading of the text will find a reward greater than they dreamed of—never-failing entertainment in the subtle play of words and ideas, layer after layer of unfolding significance in the symbolism and imagery. And in its web of wit and metaphor they will discover an intricate structure that successfully unifies the whole. Few works of the creative imagination are more deliberately constructed. Few have their meaning more embedded in a complex pattern of words. *Walden* can be most satisfactorily read as a poem, though it is written in the guise of prose.

* * *

"On the Duty of Civil Disobedience," Thoreau's most famous essay, is the product of a very different talent. Criticism of society, which is a means to an end in the book, is here the end in itself. There is no better method of proving that *Walden* is a created work of art than to compare its mode of treating this subject with that in the essay. "Civil Disobedience" is not literature but polemics. Instead of disposing of the world by wit in order to launch a quest for spiritual perfection, he attacks materialism head-on in its political manifestation as the State, which man must secede from if its actions are evil. His mode is reasoned argument—serious rather than witty, expository rather than metaphorical—based on the Transcendental doctrine of the all-sufficient individual. The chief relation of essay to book is that the former constitutes a sort of personal declaration of independence from communal obligations such as to make the Walden adventure possible.

The episode in his life that triggered his attack on the State occurred during his residence at Walden Pond. He went to jail because he had refused to pay taxes as a gesture of protest against a government that supported slavery and the Mexican War. In the book it is recorded in a casual aside of less than ten lines, but it becomes the dramatic center of the essay. The event itself is rendered vividly and the philosophy of civil disobedience it leads to is worked out with unanswerable logic, provided one accepts his premise: "The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right."

The essay became the most influential of his writings, serving,

for example, as a model for Gandhi's campaign of passive resistance in India and as a handbook for the underground in Nazi-occupied Europe. "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" is a key document in the history of individualism. Thoreau could have been a trenchant social critic, but he only exercised this talent on rare occasions. In the bulk of his writings he is a poet, exploring the potentialities of the free and independent self in its pilgrimage through the world and beyond, to the realm of spirit. Once, in *Walden,* his vision found expression in a style and structure that makes the book one of the masterpieces of American literature.

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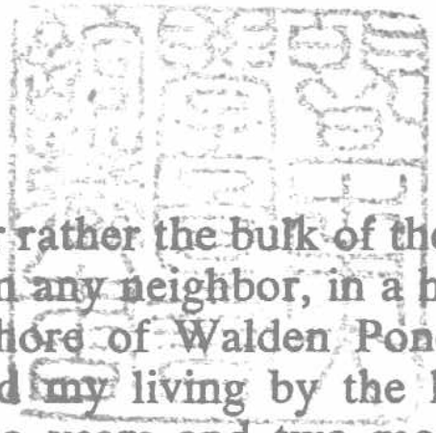
WALDEN

or, LIFE IN THE WOODS

ON THE DUTY OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Chapter 1

Economy



WHEN I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again.

I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life, which some would call impertinent, though they do not appear to me at all impertinent, but, considering the circumstances, very natural and pertinent. Some have asked what I got to eat; if I did not feel lonesome; if I was not afraid; and the like. Others have been curious to learn what portion of my income I devoted to charitable purposes; and some, who have large families, how many poor children I maintained. I will therefore ask those of my readers who feel no particular interest in me to pardon me if I undertake to answer some of these questions in this book. In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience. Moreover, I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely it must have been in a distant land to me. Perhaps these pages are more particularly addressed to poor students. As for the rest of my readers, they will accept such portions as apply to them. I trust that none will stretch the seams in putting on the coat, for it may do good service to him whom it fits.

I would fain say something, not so much concerning the Chinese and Sandwich Islanders as you who read these pages, who are said to live in New England; something about your

condition, especially your outward condition or circumstances in this world, in this town, what it is, whether it is necessary that it be as bad as it is, whether it cannot be improved as well as not. I have traveled a good deal in Concord; and everywhere, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways. What I have heard of Bramins sitting exposed to four fires and looking in the face of the sun; or hanging suspended, with their heads downwards, over flames; or looking at the heavens over their shoulders "until it becomes impossible for them to resume their natural position, while from the twist of the neck nothing but liquids can pass into the stomach;" or dwelling, chained for life, at the foot of a tree; or measuring with their bodies, like caterpillars, the breadth of vast empires; or standing on one leg on the tops of pillars,—even these forms of conscious penance are hardly more incredible and astonishing than the scenes which I daily witness. The twelve labors of Hercules were trifling in comparison with those which my neighbors have undertaken; for they were only twelve, and had an end; but I could never see that these men slew or captured any monster or finished any labor. They have no friend Iolaus to burn with a hot iron the root of the hydra's head, but as soon as one head is crushed, two spring up.

I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of. Better if they had been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolf, that they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in. Who made them serfs of the soil? Why should they eat their sixty acres, when man is condemned to eat only his peck of dirt? Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born? They have got to live a man's life, pushing all these things before them, and get on as well as they can. How many a poor immortal soul have I met well-nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and wood-lot. The portionless, who struggle with no such unnecessary inherited encumbrances, find it labor enough to subdue and cultivate a few cubic feet of flesh.

But men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon plowed into the soil for compost. By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as