

WALDEN

AND OTHER WRITINGS OF

HENRY

DAVID

THOREAU

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INTRODUCTION

By BROOKS ATKINSON

I

THOREAU was the genius of Concord, where he was born on July 12, 1817. Although that venerable and tranquil town was sheltering two other eminent men of letters—Emerson and Hawthorne—and at least two minor literary notables—Alcott and Channing—Thoreau was bone of Concord's bone and flesh of Concord's flesh, and he could never be torn away from the town where he was born. Several other New England towns might have nourished him well; (he was a man of infinite resource and could find all truth within himself) There are towns in the White Mountains or on Cape Cod that would have provided a career for him; if he had lived in them his healthy prose would have caught their rhythm and his character would have taken shape in their image, for he was the poet of New England locality. But if Concord was fortunate in numbering him amongst her subjects, he was fortunate in Concord where the meadows were fertile, the hills gentle, the woods hospitable, and where the natural resources were rich without being wild. For there was a pond in Concord—Walden Pond—which all the world recognizes now as a masterpiece, and two pleasant rivers flowed through the bosom of the town, filled with fluvial treasures and offering passage to other parts of the universe.

Nor was that all Concord had to offer a man of original mind and great personal character. Lying close to Boston,

where the intellectual life of America was most resolute, Concord was simmering with ideas. When Thoreau was a young man Emerson was already the fountain-head of Concord's intellectual and spiritual life. Transcendentalism, which believed in the infinity of man, flowed out of Emerson's books, lectures, neighborhood relationships and walks in the fields. Everything Emerson said and did was part and parcel of his faith. But he was no solitary in Concord. Concordians in general were alert. People discussed religion, philosophy and politics in the parlors, church vestries, at the stores and even along the streets. Already famous in national history, Concord was making spiritual history by the interest it cultivated in the vague, aspiring ideas of the time. It was a fine place for a man whose curiosity about life was unlimited.

Having chosen a good town for his nativity Thoreau also chose good parents and relatives. His father was descended from sea captains and merchants from the Channel island of Jersey; his grandfather had accumulated moderate wealth from privateering and storekeeping in Boston. His mother had descended from a wealthy and notable Tory family whose estates had been confiscated during the Revolution. By the time of Thoreau's generation the wealth on both sides had dwindled to almost nothing; his immediate family was always hard-pressed. But his parents were people of independent mind, probity and vigor of spirit, and they were capable of hard work. Although their means were limited they sent Henry to Harvard College, Class of 1837, for they believed in cultivating the mind. Being practical people, they may have hoped to have him succeed in one of the established professions, as other good students generally did. But the profession he practiced was a strange one that he evoked from his private character, and it paid him nothing but his self-respect. If his parents, his brother and sisters were disappointed there is no record of regret

or rebuke. They were people of intelligence and principle; probably they always understood his potentialities and admired his vital integrity, and it is certain that they loved him with the warm affection of a family that lived on intimate terms.

To some of his neighbors Thoreau seemed austere. But his family had all the best of him, which was affectionate, kind and loyal; and whenever Thoreau wrote to his mother from Staten Island or to his sisters in Roxbury or Bangor, the thoughts were homely, the style was glowing and the concern with family affairs was anxious. When his father died he dropped in large part the career he had carved out of himself and Concord and took over the responsibilities of the head of the family. Although that burden must have involved a considerable sacrifice he accepted it calmly and discharged his duty, for the Thoreaus were in the habit of regarding personal honor as a natural part of their lives.

He was a writer. He was the author of thirty-nine manuscript volumes, only two of which were published during his lifetime; and it is doubtful if he ever earned much more from his writings than they cost him. (For the volumes of which he was author were almost entirely the journals where he industriously assembled his thoughts and observations and tried to extract the basic truth of the cosmos.) In fact, his journals were the core of his life; he confessed to them and then drew sustenance from them, "as a bear sucks his claws in winter;" and all his published works were made out of them. "Henry Thoreau—Writer of Journals" might well be the description of his profession. *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* are only parts of the treasures buried in his copy-books.

When he graduated from college he might have had hopes of a less private career. (He was a serious young man. He had already made up his mind that most of the ways by which men earn a living are degrading and that men sell

themselves into perpetual bondage by conforming to the traditional ways of the world. Most of his principles that developed into passionate accusations in his mature philosophy are to be found in his college essays, for the life of Thoreau was a straight, firm line of moral development from youthful introspection into the militant wisdom of his last years. At first he tried to teach school, which was the ordinary profession of college graduates. In association with his brother, who was an attractive, high-spirited young man with considerable ability, Thoreau did teach school in Concord for a year or two, much to the delight of the students and their parents. Like everything with which he was connected, it was no routine scheme for earning a living, but a forward-looking school that gave full value in book education and that tried to enrich the lives of the students by personal association with the teachers during walks in the fields and picnics on the river where some of the more luxuriant facts about life could be learned. All his life Thoreau had a winning way with children; more than some of their elders, they could appreciate the kindness and frankness of a naturally upright man. But his brother died, a particularly agonizing death that left its mark on everyone who loved him, and Thoreau gave up the school.

For a few years he had no settled employment. He lived in Emerson's home, taking charge of all those practical things to which the grand old man of Concord was so conspicuously unsuited; he toiled over his thoughts, which was his lifetime occupation, and wrote for *The Dial*, which was the Pierian Spring of Transcendentalism. For a few months he lived with William Emerson's family on Staten Island, New York, as a tutor, meanwhile apparently looking around in New York for a literary association where he could find a market for his wares. But the magazines and newspapers in New York in 1843 were not ready to pay cash for the kind of fiercely independent thoughts Thoreau struggled

with in his journals. Presently he was back in Concord, which he regretted having left, and settled down with his family in their pencil business. Probably he knew, what he had long suspected, that the world was not ready to receive him on his own exacting terms.

(If Thoreau had never gone to live alone in a hut at Walden Pond it is possible that he would never have been celebrated. That was the most dramatic thing he ever did; the chronicle of his adventure is a classic.) In 1845 the time was ripe for a bold move. He was at loose ends; his brother's death was still a source of misery. Furthermore, he was a romantic youth, under the mask of truculent sobriety; (he was only 28 years of age, a lover of nature and an honest and capable workman with his hands.) As it happened, a friend of his had lived one winter in a hut on the shore of a pond in the next township and Thoreau very likely helped him build the camp. As Thoreau's bosom companion, Ellery Channing, wrote in the spring of 1845: "It seems to me you are the same old sixpence you used to be, rather rusty, but a genuine piece. I see nothing for you in this earth but that field which I once christened 'Briars'; go out upon that, build yourself a hut and there begin the process of devouring yourself alive."

By the end of March he borrowed an axe from Alcott, cut down some white pine timber beside Walden Pond to frame a hut, and on Independence Day, which was highly propitious, he moved in and lived there alone for two years. (Watching and listening, studying, thinking, dreaming, attending to the varying moods of the pond, writing in his journals, trying the virtue of the great world outside by the simple truths of his secluded existence—all that brought his career to fruition.) Although he left the hut in 1847 and supported himself by surveying, pencil-making and other homely crafts, he had found the path to a wise approach to life at Walden Pond, and from that time on he was a man whose

destiny was in full view. Sometimes Thoreau seemed needlessly morose in his responses to human society; it was late in life before he threw down his guards and took men as good companions with human gusto. But the opening up of his career began at Walden; after that camping experience with its philosophical, economic and romantic aspects he wrote with confidence, force and clarity; he understood and rejoiced in his place in the world.)

The rest of his career is quickly stated. In 1849 he published at his own expense *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, which was the record, with glorious discursions, of a boat voyage he had made with his brother into New Hampshire ten years earlier. In 1854 he published *Walden*, which slowly brought his original rebellion to the notice of the world. Meanwhile, in various contemporary periodicals he published *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, which is an insurgent essay that has helped to reshape the world; also his savory records of journeys to Canada, the Maine Woods and Cape Cod, and many other minor essays. All his life he and the other members of his family had been ardent abolitionists, and at times took part in helping Negro slaves to escape. In 1845 he had personally seceded from the Union as the most earnest protest he could make against a government that tolerated slavery, and he spent a night in jail to make his point public. When John Brown defied the government at Harper's Ferry, Thoreau, who was eminently a practical man, found a concrete cause that illuminated all he had ever thought and written about freedom; suddenly he was transfigured into a man of action. His several speeches on John Brown are grand summonses to battle—angry, rebuking and founded on principle.

Soon after this inspiring episode in his career his health began to fail rapidly. Although he made one desperate attempt to recover it by a futile journey to Minnesota, he soon realized that he was doomed, and he patiently spent the

last two frail years of his life getting his myriad papers in order, compiling articles from his journals for the *Atlantic Monthly*—sometimes riding out with his sister to look on the beauties of Concord which he had devoted his life to discovering and describing. His submissive death was the surest proof that he wholly believed the faith he had lived. He had no regrets or misgivings. "One world at a time," he said to Channing, who was speculating on the hereafter. When someone else inquired whether he had made his peace with God, he answered, "We have never quarreled." On May 6, 1862, when he was almost 45 years of age and when the fruit blossoms were out and the fragrance was coming in at the window, he died, as he had lived, with complete faith in the wisdom of nature. His sister remarked that he was the most upright man she had ever known.

II

(As a writer Thoreau embraced so many subjects that it is still difficult to catalogue him. He was "poet-naturalist," as Channing described him; but he was also philosopher, historian, economist, rebel, revolutionary, reporter. Apart from its poetic record of an idyllic adventure, *Walden* is the practical philosophy of rebellion against the world's cowardly habits of living.) Most formless of his books and yet most winning and light-hearted, *The Week* is a compound of thought, scholarship, speculation and narrative. *The Maine Woods* is the most pungent and profound study of woods and camping that has ever been written. On the *Duty of Civil Disobedience* is an eloquent declaration of the principles that make revolution inevitable in times of political dishonor. The John Brown papers are political pamphleteering. Large portions of the journals are character studies of the people in Concord whom Thoreau most admired. Although he rarely left Concord and seldom read the news-

papers he was well informed about the life of his times and had fiery opinions about slavery and justice. His achievements in those fields have somewhat overshadowed the range of his scholarship and the brilliance of his detached portraits of people. Almost nothing escaped the keen eyes and mind of this tireless writer; there is a bewildering variety in his work.

Although it is impossible to catalogue him neatly there is in everything he did a concrete point of view that gives a clear-cut unity to the abundance and disarray of his writing. Primarily he was a moral philosopher. From those first tentative college essays, which are touching in their youthful fortitude, to the fulminating John Brown polemics there was a grave, responsible, pure-minded attitude toward life in all his work. He had a passion for wise and honorable living. (As a whole, the Transcendentalists were not systematic philosophers, bent on arranging the pattern of life into a logical sequence. Quite the contrary: they believed in living by inspiration. Believing that man and the universe were God, they worshipped Him by trying to live in spiritual harmony with the great laws of nature—trying humbly to be good men. Their philosophy was little more than a collection of "thoughts," of individual aspirations and manifestations distilled from the sunshine and the mist over the river. They believed that they were living the good life, not by accumulating knowledge or acquiring possessions, but by quickening their awareness of the beauties of nature and human nature. Thoreau yearned to be as pure and innocent as the flowers in the field. Although the Transcendentalists were not as a whole consistent churchgoers in a period when churchgoing was an integral part of community life, they were nevertheless deeply religious people. In a humble way, they represented God on earth; they were His agents because they were trying to live in His image and they believed that men might yet find Heaven on earth by looking

into their own hearts for the rules of life and by following the direction of their finest instincts.)

Thoreau was the most enduring of the lot because he had the most intimate knowledge and understanding of nature and was, accordingly, practical and concrete. That was the source of what Emerson admired as "the baken strength" in his writing. For Thoreau did not merely write verses to the evanescent beauties of the out-of-doors and stroll placidly through the fields after a stuffy day in the study; he made it his business to know everything that he could about nature from personal observation. He wanted to know the cold by the tingle in his finger-tips and the darkness by stumbling through the woods at night, and he felt most elated when his senses were as alert as those of the woodchuck and the loon. He felt that his whole life was on the most solid footing when his boots were deep in the riverbank muck in the springtime. Although he acquired an enormous fund of knowledge by the persistence of his goings forth in all kinds of weather and by the extraordinary capacity he had for observation, he was not a modern scientist. On the contrary, he suspected science because he believed that it dealt in specimens rather than in life. No one has ever given himself to nature so passionately, so confidently, so privately. It was a rich, turbulent, exhausting life he led. Although the world was at loose ends and his neighbors lived lives of "quiet desperation," he believed that he was on the right track and had nothing but immortality to fear when he was present to greet the first bluebird in late February or early March and to find the first hepatica blooming among the late snowdrifts. Spring always convinced him that he could live forever on the lavish bounty of God. God was good: he knew because he listened to the song of God in the woods.

(Everything remarkable about Thoreau sprang directly from his devotion to nature. It was nature more than man, it was the out-of-doors more than books or political discussions

that taught him the necessity for independence.) A free man himself—free by his own principle and vigilance—he despised the cowards who conformed. He had a poor opinion of his townsmen who mortgaged their lives for a farm and pushed a house, barn and sixty-acre woodlot down through the long years before them. He disliked the gentlemen who had isolated themselves from life by civil employment or social artifice. He was contemptuous of the million compromises men make with their governments to acquire wealth or to preserve the peace on a false basis. As for himself, he knew the fundamentals of life so thoroughly from personal association with the flowers he ministered unto and the woodlots he surveyed for his neighbors, that he had no intention of making any compromises with his genius whatsoever, and he swore that he at least should be a free man though everyone else sold his soul to comfort and convenience.)

That is why he refused to pay a poll tax to a government that tolerated slavery, and that is why John Brown was his man. (All his life he had been conducting an individual rebellion against the slavery of thought, commerce and manners.) When John Brown rebelled against Negro slavery at Harper's Ferry on principle alone at the certain risk of his life, Thoreau completely understood him. It was his sort of thing on a greater scale. It was what he had been waiting for. Although some of his neighbors counselled caution Thoreau took the initiative into his own hands, summoned a village meeting and plead with his townsmen for justice and action with more cogency and eloquence than he had ever imparted to a speech before. He carried the John Brown defense to Boston at considerable personal risk. Although the militant John Brown episode may seem alien to the life of a solitary philosopher it was really the logical and brilliant climax to his philosophy. (To love nature was to worship freedom. To believe in nature was to rebel.)

Certainly it was no passport into good society. Especially in his early years before his philosophy was fully formed and when perhaps he felt a little wounded by the world's indifference to his talents, he had a truculent way with people and it annoyed or grieved them according to their natures. There was in those days a tactiturn or forbidding streak in his deportment. One of his neighbors said she could love him but that she could not like him. Emerson said: "Henry is—with difficulty—sweet." For the brazenly independent life he had set his mind on living put him on the defensive in a town accustomed to the amenities. Being shy and abnormally sensitive, Thoreau protected himself by erecting around him a high wall of reserve, skepticism and external misanthropy. To those who had never glanced down into the ringing depths of his character he was an odd stick, and many people resented him.

That rasp in his social relations was a defect of personality rather than the truth of his character. Fundamentally, he was a man of abiding affections. Although he distrusted gentleman and hated impostors he had such exalted standards of friendship that his friends sometimes had difficulty in meeting his requirements. For the simple, honest folks of the town he had great relish and he liked to talk to them and keep well posted on their affairs. He admired an honest farmer more than a clever publican, and made no secret of his preference. When he believed that he was among friends he could be an exuberant comrade on occasions. With Channing, his familiar companion out-of-doors, he was on terms of long-suffering and humorous affection; there was "an inexhaustible fund of good fellowship" in Channing, to use Thoreau's own words of appreciation. Although his moral philosophy had given him an austere appearance he had a Yankee sense of humor; he liked puns and ludicrous incongruities and comic turns of phrase.

When the secret of his life was fairly published in *Walden*

and people began to seek him out as a leader of thought, his defenses began to drop one by one. He had made many friends and did them the honor of taking them seriously. The last eight years of his life were conspicuously social. He visited and was visited. He enjoyed the companionship of congenial people at home, in the woods and on journeys to the White Mountains and the Maine Woods. When his health began to fail there was a need for companionship greater than he had experienced before; and when he planned to go to Minnesota in search of his health he was reluctant to go alone. For Thoreau was no misanthrope. He required, as he said, "broad margins to his leisure," so that his thoughts might grow freely. His perceptions were so acute, his understanding of men was so penetrating that he was unhappy in company that misjudged him. A person who was spiritually coarse wounded him grievously. But he was always civil, courteous and kind in his ordinary relationships around town; he had abundant affection for his family and his friends; he was generous with his talents; and in those last ten years of his life, when his private battle with life was won, he overflowed with good will toward good men. It may have surprised him a little to discover how glorious life can be in the company of good people. Certainly it expanded his horizons enormously.

Since he was all of one piece—man, matter and spirit—it is impossible to discuss his style of writing apart from himself. At his best he wrote the most vigorous and pithy prose in American literature; and no wonder, for his training was extraordinarily complete. On the one hand, he was a remarkable classical scholar; all his life he read Greek and Latin poetry and translated into English poetry the classic verses he admired most. On the other hand, he had learned out-of-doors the great truth of fresh simplicity. There are no literary flourishes in his style; everything grows out of nature, "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity,"

were the three great maxims of his life;) and they stood guard over the notes he scribbled in the field and the sentences he developed out of them when he expanded them in his journal, rewriting more than once until they carried his thought with the greatest strength and directness of statement he could master. "The one great rule of composition—and if I were a professor of rhetoric I should insist on this—is to speak the truth," he said. He approached his subject as though he were the first man to write about this world which has been so long inhabited and so carelessly spattered with ink. Since his mind was clear, the facts are accurately stated, and the thoughts and impressions endure in words that feel concrete—a part of old Mother Earth.

It is noticeable that his writing improved according to his familiarity with a subject. When he first went into the Maine Woods he was in new territory, which put him on his guard, and his Ktaadn essay shows the reserve of a stranger who had not shed his Concord experience. After his third journey, described in the Allegash essay, he wrote with the assurance and enthusiasm of a man who had conquered his subject and enjoyed the labor of recording it. When he first went to Cape Cod he felt uneasy and a little hostile to such meagre land; after his third visit he was writing with the humorous, genial relish of an old inhabitant. (There is no better prose in American literature than the clear, sinewy, fragrant writing in *Walden* which discusses the homely details of house-building and kitchen economy and rejoices in the romantic loveliness of sounds at night and bird notes by day and speculates on the beauties of good living—all in plain images and simple phrases that do not change pace with the change of subject.) Although his writing looks easy, only a man of keen mind and remarkable skill could have made a sentence carry so much baggage and have given living form to impulses of the imagination.

But that was Thoreau—a man with the skill of an artisan

and the aspiration of a poet. He had disciplined himself so that the two were perfectly mated. What he was as a man looks sternly out of every page he wrote; it represents his deliberate conviction. When Thoreau was dying, Bronson Alcott described him in a familiar letter as "the most sagacious and wonderful Worthy of his time, and a marvel to coming ones." That was the generous thought of a neighbor who was moved by the prospect of losing a noble friend. But perhaps it was not unreasonably excessive. For by faith and works Thoreau learned how to live a life, which is a thing rarely heard of; and his writings have helped thousands of his kinsmen to make their lives more rich and honest and able.

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