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THOREAU: WALDEN AND OTHER WRITINGS

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LIFE WITHOUT PRINCIPLE

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Selections from
A WEEK ON THE CONCORD AND MERRIMACK RIVERS,
CAPE COD, THE MAINE WOODS
and the
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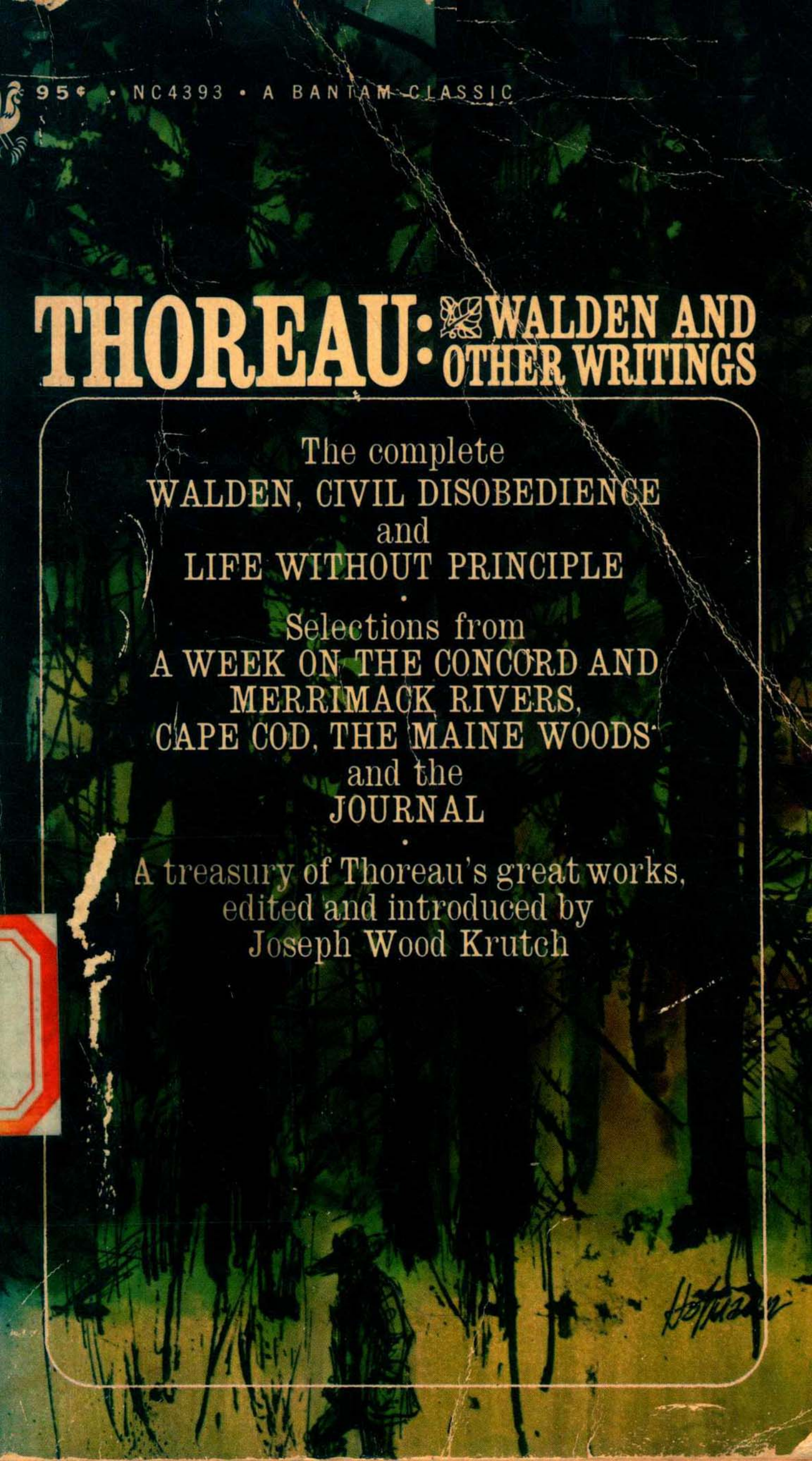
A treasury of Thoreau's great works,
edited and introduced by
Joseph Wood Krutch



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EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
JOSEPH WOOD KRUTCH

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THOREAU:
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Introduction

I love my fate to the very core and rind." So wrote Henry David Thoreau and nothing could be more characteristic of him.

Most men, it seems, are to some extent disappointed and discontented. We complain of our luck, lament that we did what we did, or did not do what we did not. Things might have been better had we been born somewhere else or under some different circumstances. We missed our chance; did not get our deserts. We are trapped in a life which we should not have chosen. Or, as Thoreau himself wrote on another occasion, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." But he, who was unique in so many respects, was unique in this also. "I have heard no bad news," he said. He believed himself to be that very rare thing, a happy man, and he had no regrets.

So startling a phenomenon ought to attract great attention in an age like our own, especially when, as in Thoreau's case, this happy man gave an explicit account of the means by which he had achieved his rare success. Yet most of those who read that account, even most of those who read it with sympathy and admiration, do not follow his advice—either because, they say, they cannot or because they conclude that only for that very special sort of person Thoreau happened to be would it work.

The lesson he had taught himself, and which he tried to teach others, was summed up in the one word "Simplify." That meant simplify the outward circumstances of your life, simplify your needs and your ambitions; learn to delight in the simple pleasures which the world of Nature affords. It meant also, scorn public opinion, refuse to accept the common definitions of success, refuse to be moved by the judgment of others. And unlike most who advocate such attitudes, he put them into practice.

One result has been that one of his books is now almost universally regarded as among the six or eight undoubted

masterpieces of American literature. But it was not so regarded during his own lifetime, and even those few villagers who knew him personally tended to think of him either as a mere eccentric or, at best, as one who had failed to fulfill his promise. Even more significant, perhaps, is the fact that those who have come after and have recognized him as a classic have shown little inclination to follow him.

If "Simplify" is the one word which sums up his teaching, it also sums up better than any other could what his own contemporaries were not doing and what we have, increasingly, tended not to do. They lived in an age of increasing complexity and great hope; we in an age of still greater complexity and growing despair. Yet few believe that our problems can be solved as he solved his—even though many of his jibes come home to us more forcibly than they did to those of his own day. Consider, for example, this comment on Progress defined in terms of increasing material and mechanical complexity:

"Men have an indistinct notion that if they keep up this activity of joint stocks and spades long enough all will at length ride somewhere, in next to no time, and for nothing; but though a crowd rushes to the depot, and the conductor shouts 'All aboard!' when the smoke has blown away and the vapor condensed, it will be perceived that a few are riding, but the rest are run over—and it will be called, and will be, 'a melancholy accident.'"

Yet though the critics of our society admit that many have indeed been run over, they are usually convinced that the cure for the evils of complexity is more complexity still, and the cry "all aboard" is now not at the railroad station but at the launching pad of a rocket for the moon.

It is not that Thoreau's writings have not been read and pondered. Some of them have been translated into nearly every major language of the world, including the Japanese. Nor has he failed to influence many of the most significant of subsequent teachers and reformers. Tolstoy, Gandhi and the early leaders of what was to become the British Labor Party, all acknowledged their debt to him. Even some of the communists have claimed him as on their side. But none of these admirers has been willing to take him whole. They usually concentrate upon his criticism of our social and economic system and refuse to accept his alternatives. They disregard his insistence on the primary importance of a life

led in a communion with Nature and his uncompromising individualism which insists that it is the individuals who must first reform themselves if society is to be reformed; not that a reformed society will reform men. More important still is the fact that most have reversed his emphasis in another respect also. Instead of advocating a simple society they have continued to put their faith in the material abundance and complexity which, so they insist, will be a blessing if it is available equally to all. To Thoreau what they call "a high standard of living" is, as they define it, a curse, no matter how widely distributed. To him it would seem that they, in their own way, are worshiping the same false gods most men of his day fell down before.

Whether one accepts or rejects his philosophy, one cannot understand it except as a whole in which the negative criticism of things as they are is intended to clear the way for a vision of things as they ought to be, namely, expressed in a society where intense individualism, "plain living and high thinking," and a love of Nature which is almost religious much more than compensate for the surrender of all those supposed goods which a complexly abundant society either provides now or promises for the future.

"I was born," so he wrote, "in the most favored spot on earth—and just in the nick of time, too." The most favored spot was the village of Concord, Massachusetts where the American Revolution had begun. The date was July 12, 1817, and when he said it was "just in the nick of time," he probably meant just not too late for him to grow up in what was still a simple village society and to learn to love a countryside in which wild Nature had not yet been completely tamed. But there was another respect also in which 1817 was "just in the nick of time." He would be coming to manhood in the very middle of what the critic Van Wyck Brooks was to call "The Flowering of New England." Five of the few American writers now regarded as classics —Poe, Emerson, Hawthorne, Whitman and Melville—were his near contemporaries. Emerson was a neighbor who exercised a great influence upon him, Hawthorne lived also for a time in Concord, and Whitman he at least met and admired. Moreover, and almost as important perhaps, is the fact that these great men are only the best remembered of a whole group of unconventional thinkers, writers and re-

formers who helped make midcentury New England alive with unconventional ideas, some foolish and some profound, which at the very least encouraged Thoreau in his own nonconformities.

His father, John Thoreau, was the son of a protestant emigrant from the Channel Islands; his mother, the daughter of a Congregational minister named Asa Dunbar. On both sides Henry's grandparents had been rather substantial people, but his father had wandered unsuccessfully from storekeeping to schoolmastering and back to storekeeping again. During Henry's childhood the father was operating a home industry devoted to the making of lead pencils, and the child grew up in gentile poverty.

Various members of the family were marked by amiable eccentricities, which Thoreau was later to describe, and his older brother John was an amatuer naturalist who no doubt introduced him to the fields and woods. He describes his boyhood as happy in the pursuit of simple instinctive pleasures, and he was always passionately devoted to home and family despite the fact that the one thing universally known abut him is that he went to live for a time alone in a cabin by a pond. "In youth," he wrote later, "before I lost any of my senses, I can remember that I was all alive, and inhabited my body with inexpressible satisfaction; both its weariness and its refreshment were sweet to me." Again: "I have seen the time when I could carry a gun in my hand all day long on a journey, and not feel it to be heavy, though I did not use it once." In manhood he hated killing, and when he made a trip to Maine he went with the moose hunters only, he said, as "chaplain" and "conscientious objector."

After schooling in a private Concord academy, Thoreau entered Harvard University in 1833, and there he devoted himself principally to the study of literature. He made a sufficiently good impression to be invited upon graduation four years later to deliver one of the several commencement addresses. It was evidently during the four years at college that the pattern of his thought began definitely to form.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, his neighbor and elder friend, was probably the most important early intellectual influence upon him, and he read Emerson's first important essay, "Nature," which appeared while he was in college. The commencement address was entitled "The Commercial Spirit," and it

included sentences which already struck the keynote of his philosophy: "Let men cultivate the moral affections, lead manly independent lives; let them make riches the means and not the end of existence, and we shall hear no more of the commercial spirit. . . . This curious world which we inhabit is more wonderful than it is convenient; more beautiful than it is useful; it is more to be admired and enjoyed than used." That same year he began to keep the enormous journal which fills fourteen volumes in the printed edition, and its first sentence is equally prothetic: "I seek a garret. The spiders must not be disturbed, nor the floor swept, nor the lumber arranged."

Obviously he already knew what kind of life he wanted to lead and where he wanted to go though it seemed to his acquaintances, then as always, that he lacked what they could recognize as a "direction." "I love," he said later, "a broad margin to my life," and in his most famous work: "It is not necessary that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow, unless he sweats easier than I do."

Before leaving college he had once visited New York City with his father to sell pencils, and just after graduation he taught for a few days in the Concord public school which he left in a huff because the overseers insisted that he administer corporal punishment. Next year he opened a private school with his brother John which was given up soon after John became ill in 1841. Meanwhile he published several rather unimportant essays in the new magazine *The Dial,* and gave some lectures before the Concord lyceum. But none of these activities could provide even a very modest living, and in 1841 he went to stay with the Emersons as handyman though also as friend and member of the family. There he remained for two years.

Shortly before entering the Emerson household, Thoreau experienced what was to be the nearest he ever came to "falling in love." In July 1840 he and brother John paid a visit to Ellen Sewell, daughter of a Unitarian minister of Scituate, Massachusetts, who had stayed a while with the Thoreaus the summer before. Both of the brothers found, or thought themselves, in love with her. Each, without telling the other, proposed marriage. Ellen was disposed to accept Henry, but yielded to the objections of her father who feared unconventional ideas and rejected him. Too much could very easily be made of this incident for it is doubtful

that Henry, who greatly feared any infringement of his liberty, would have actually welcomed matrimony. Six years later he wrote a letter of humorous alarm to Emerson (then on a visit to England) concerning one Sophie Foord, who was a tutor to the Emerson children: "She did really wish to—I hesitate to write—marry me. That is the way they spell it . . . I sent back as distinct a 'no' as I have learned to pronounce after considerable practice, and I trust this 'no' has succeeded. I really had anticipated no such foe as this in my career."

Inevitably the attempt has sometimes been made to explain Thoreau's rejection of conventional life and conventional ambitions as the result of his disappointed love for Ellen Sewell. No less inevitably attempts have been made to psychoanalyze him as the victim of "sexual repression." But all evidence is lacking. If there is a psychoanalytical explanation of his attitude toward women—and it is not more unusual than many of his other attitudes—the determinants are too deeply buried ever to be uncovered. We must simply accept the fact that bachelorhood was, or seemed to him to be, his natural state. A wife would have certainly been what he called in the letter just quoted, a foe to his career.

Emerson believed that Thoreau had great talents and was disturbed at what seemed his lack of ambition to use them. He suggested that Thoreau should go to stay for a while with Emerson's brother on Staten Island and attempt to find some profitable literary connection in New York. There Thoreau met Horace Greeley, who was helpful in a small way, and he called on the elder Henry James with whom he discussed the New England transcendental movement. But no one seemed to want his talents and he was, not unexpectedly, distressed by a big city. "When will the world learn that a million men are of no importance compared with one man?"

After an absence of less than seven months he was back in Concord, and instead of returning to the Emerson household, he rejoined his own family to help in pencil-making. A little more than a year later, in March 1845, he began to build with his own hands the little one-roomed cabin on the shore of Walden Pond. On July 4th of the same year he moved into it and began the experiment by which he is best remembered and which was to suggest his greatest book.

For this symbolic withdrawal from the world there were many motives. The simplest of them was, in his own words, this: "Finding that my fellow citizens were not likely to offer me any room in the court house, or any curacy or living anywhere else, but I must shift for myself, I turned my face more exclusively than ever to the woods, where I was better known." But that is, of course, not the only explanation. His new retreat was to be also a sylvan equivalent of that garret he had early determined to find. He was, he said, determined to "move away from public opinion, from government, from religion, from education, from society," and determined also "to meet myself face to face."

At Walden he would also be closer to Nature which he thought was already disappearing from the village. Nevertheless, it is a very great mistake to think of him as a mere romantic primitivist who wanted to become a Noble Savage. He himself said that "decayed literature makes the best soil," and that he sometimes walked the woods as an heir to the ages. But he did have also a great sympathy for what he called "wildness." As a good if somewhat unorthodox transcendentalist he believed in the reality of those Higher Laws which a man properly attuned might learn by intuition, but he believed that they were most likely to be revealed to those who could, at moments, come close to that Nature to which these Higher Laws were somehow related. Thus he recognized in himself an instinct towards the higher life, but also another towards "a primitive, rank and savage one." "I love the wild not less than the good . . . I like sometimes to take rank hold on life and spend my day more as the animals do." He was sure that the wild, though not so admirable as the high, was at least better than that life of quiet desperation which results from too much concentration on "getting ahead" in the material sense.

Though the very intensity of Thoreau's own imagination made to retreat to Walden Pond a legend and a symbol, he was no Robinson Crusoe. The cabin was only a mile and a half from the center of the village and only a half a mile from the main road leading to it. He had many visitors and he walked often, sometimes almost daily, into Concord. What he had done was less to embark upon an adventure than to make a gesture. And what he wanted to prove was that one does not have to go far in any physical sense to "get away from it all." *Multum in parvo*—much in little—

was his motto, and in many ways he illustrated his conviction that it is not magnitude but intensity of realization which counts. All hell, he had written in a notebook, is suggested by a spark; and "I have traveled a good deal in Concord." He could be as alone at Walden as he could have been in Timbuktu. "It is in vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves . . . I shall never find in the wilds of Labrador any greater wildness than in some recess in Concord, i.e., than I import into it."

Despite the fact that when one thinks of Thoreau one thinks first of his residence at Walden Pond, it lasted only from July 1845 to September 1847, and even this stay was interrupted for a trip into the Maine woods. Thoreau had never planned this as a permanent way of life. It was an experiment intended to answer for himself a question, namely, how simple can a life be and still be a good one? Most people seemed to think that the more things they had the better off they would be, and they enslaved themselves to acquire what turned out to be only a burden. He determined to test an opposite extreme, but having proved to himself that one need have very little to be happy, having banished any fear that he could not be content with almost nothing, he saw no reason for continuing the experiment in so extreme a form. "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could learn what it had to teach, and not, when I come to die, discover that I had not lived . . . I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one . . . Perhaps if I had lived there much longer, I might live there forever. One would think twice before he accepted heaven on such terms."

Yet he had been, if one can believe his own account, supremely happy there—walking the woods to observe the birds and the small animals, noting the phenomena of the seasons, talking with a simple Canadian wood chopper who worked happily felling trees for Concord fireplaces, and cultivating his little garden, or as he put it, "making the earth say beans instead of grass." He was also, though one is likely to forget the fact, writing, for Thoreau was a born writer which means both that he had a gift for using

words effectively and that he had an irresistible need for self-expression.

Into his voluminous journal went a record of his daily life as well as every thought, observation and little adventure. From that journal he was later to quarry out the material of his masterpiece, but at Walden he completed his first book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*—ostensibly an account of a boating trip he had made with brother John six years before the retirement to Walden, but into which was put also a miscellany of thoughts, notions and comments on his reading. It was published at his own expense in 1849 in an edition of one thousand copies of which less than three hundred had been sold four years later.

When Thoreau left his cabin he went again to the Emerson household where he lived for a year while Emerson was in Europe. Then, still refusing as always to settle into a career, he returned to his parent's house, helping sometimes with the pencil-making and selling, and sometimes practicing the profession of surveyer which he had taken up as an outdoor occupation involving no commitment to a routine but providing a small livelihood without taking too much off the margin around his life. Even to his friend and sponsor Emerson it seemed that he was frittering away his talents though he himself, so he said, found many advantages in being what he called the humblest man in the village. Nevertheless, he did publish an occasional essay and deliver an occasional lecture in Concord or elsewhere. More important is the fact that he was slowly putting into shape his account of the Walden experiment. It was published, this time by a commercial publisher, in 1854, or seven years after he had left the pond-side. It did not go entirely unnoticed but was not generally recognized as the masterpiece it is until after its author was dead.

From careful studies of the much that survives of Thoreau's notes, first drafts and revisions, we now know that *Walden* was composed with infinite care and polished again and again, but one of the charms of the book is the fact that it seems so informal, so spontaneous and so easy. The narrative of life by the pond-side furnished a sort of framework, but on that framework Thoreau manages to support the whole of his philosophy. The book is divided into

eighteen chapters each devoted to a topic. Some, like "The Beanfield," "The Ponds," "Brute Neighbors," etc., are largely descriptive. Others like "Economy" and "Higher Laws," are expository or argumentative, though there is no continuous, orderly presentation of the main themes from first to last so that the shape of the book preserves the main outlines of that account which it professes to be, namely an account of his somewhat eccentric experiment in ultra-simple life.

Actually there are four related if distinct subjects discussed and they might be enumerated thus: (1) That life of quiet desperation which most men lead. (2) The economic fallacy which is responsible for their condition. (3) What delights a simple life led close to Nature yields. (4) Those higher laws which man begins intuitively to perceive if he mounts the ladder leading from mere wildness to some austere but gentle life in Nature such as Thoreau himself was leading and, finally, to those mystical insights of which he got occasional glimpses.

Though he never set forth in systematic form the elements of an inclusive system, they are present. He has, for example, a theory of wages and costs: "The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it." And it is one of his most fundamental convictions that the getting of most of the comforts, complexities and luxuries we think necessary costs more of our life than they are worth. He has also a theory which suggests Carlyle—whom he had read—or even Karl Marx—whom he had not. "I cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men get clothing . . . since, as far as I have heard or observed, the principal object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched." Yet he differed in a very fundamental respect from most of those who have since reached similar conclusions. They would reform society and trust that a reformed society would produce reformed men. Thoreau insists, on the contrary, that reform begins with the individual and that if men would only come to their senses society would, willy-nilly, become what it should be. His description of life close to the bone as he lived it at Walden is, among other things, a deliberately comic contrast with the cluttered and enslaved existence most men think it necessary to live.

Many readers are exasperated, as a majority of the few contemporaries who read him were exasperated, by his paradoxes and the near impossibility of cornering one who is master of so many techniques of escape. Sometimes the retreat to Walden appears as a demonstration of universal significance; sometimes it is merely the personal expedient of a man who found it, for the moment, convenient. On the opening page he says that he writes merely because some of his neighbors have expressed a curiosity concerning his way of life. But the following paragraph admits a didactic purpose: "I would fain say something . . . concerning . . . you who read these pages, who are said to live in New England; something about your condition . . . 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." When he is accused of being selfish, of not "doing good," or of not relieving the poor, he retreats into the most ferocious individualism. When, so he says, he has offered to maintain certain poor persons as comfortably as he maintains himself, they have preferred to remain as they are. "As for doing good . . . I have tried it fairly, and strange as it may seem, am satisfied that it does not agree with my constitution." Or again, "I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad." And yet, when you catch him at it, trying to make it better is precisely what he is doing.

Different readers inevitably find different parts of Walden most meaningful and most sympathetic. Comparatively few are equally interested in or convinced by its social theories; its defense of an individualism in which each man is bid to save himself as he can; its celebration of the beauty and interest of the natural world; and, finally, its mystical overtones. But the book is a masterpiece partly because it does make these diverse things seem part of a whole in which each element is necessary if any are to seem entirely reasonable. Few have ever tried to imitate his life in its entirety. Indeed, he said that he hoped no one would. Many have learned something from him. Yet, to accept some but not all of his ideas and ideals is often to make those taken less easily tenable. Each gives support and logical defense to the others.

The publication of his masterpiece and its very modest success (no second printing was made during his lifetime)