

THOREAU AND TRANSCENDENTALISM

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Thoreau was perhaps the most militant Transcendentalist. Yet through the years he has been cast as a hermit, naturalist, classics student, scholar of Oriental lore, scholar of New England legend and history, scholar of the American Indian, primitivist or "apostle of the wild," man of letters, writer of perfect prose, walker, Puritan, Pantheist, and Transcendentalist. I am sure he was a reader of Swedenborg's theological writings. But before all these, he was a *mystic*: man had only to seek God in solitude, reverence, and faith; every soul could possess the ability to communicate with that from which it was made. It was a matter of intuition—each man was potentially a mystic.

The secret is Thoreau's search for reality—his desire to escape into reality—the true and ideal world of which this is only a reflection. Through consciousness, he could become one with God and one with Nature. All the various roles he was cast in, including that of a Transcendentalist, he used as instruments, as means to an end. Natural history—Nature was one of the doors by which he could gain entrance to the inner, finer heaven of things. Scholarship was another door—classics—the noblest thoughts of man, Oriental lore—mysticism and contemplation. The study of primitive man (the American Indian for example) was another door—and cultivation of the wild in himself. For Thoreau felt he had to get back to the beginning of things; he wanted to feel the sensations of earlier man, and earlier times; he thought the message was always clearer and purer in the beginning. This is why he needed solitude for revelation and inspiration, why he denounced society, why "the best study of mankind is Nature"⁷ why he liked the classics. Virgil he also used for nature descriptions, Ovid for mythology; the "Antigone" of Sophocles was responsible in part for Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, and *John Brown*. Thoreau searched books for confirmation of the reality of his own experience.

Thoreau warred against materialism, opportunism, hypocrisy—anything preventing man from getting into the essences of life. Nature was a moral hieroglyph—what he called "goodness

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crystallized." He identified with nature, searched for the key to its untranslatable aphorisms. What was transcendental to him was some ultimate truth *beyond* phenomena and actuality, caught through suprarational communication from nature to man. Contrasted with Emerson, he put greater emphasis on scholarship and finish, used the past to a greater degree, and employed a closer application to nature.

Some of the charges against him were: he had an adolescent idealism, he was dedicated to self-justification; he had a tiresome insistence that Concord meadows were more impressive than the world; he was a home-centered youth; his intellectual convictions were rationalizations of his needs and desires; and especially that his ideas were Emerson's. But his search for perfection, his singleness of purpose and resolution, his elevated piety endowed Thoreau, without his knowing it, with perennial youth.

Emerson, however, defined idealism, while Thoreau lived and recorded it; he lived his life for his life itself; he created, not a system, but himself. After his two books failed, his Journal became an end in itself. One good method of understanding Thoreau: read Emerson's essay on him. Thoreau was of course influenced and patronized by Emerson—his work was labeled Emerson's—and not until the literary revolution of the 1920's did Thoreau receive proper recognition. James Russell Lowell was a key figure in holding back Thoreau's reputation. Now Thoreau's reputation has grown steadily, at the expense of Emerson's. Emerson is abstract—you can't pin him down. His distilling of experience into external truth is not tied to anything, it is all generalized statements. One reason for this: Emerson admired Francis Bacon's essays—epigrammatic, unattached. So Emerson used "theme and variation," not narrative, not logic. Thoreau based his books on a central experience. *Walden* has inescapable bases in facts, deeds, an experiment. It has "retreat" appeal—like *Rasselas*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Typee*, *Robinson Crusoe*. It had to come, appealingly, from "scratch," and it was a *challenge* to all who read it.

A few "a priori" Thoreauvian thoughts: God is good. Thus knowledge of God through Nature is good. Or, God is good. God created Nature. Thus Nature is good.

The basic theme of *Walden* is "find yourself, renew yourself, start anew." It was written seasonally, that is, the chapters are tied to seasons: one to three are (roughly) Spring, four to twelve are Summer, thirteen is Autumn, Fourteen to sixteen are Winter;

chapter seventeen is Spring again. The general theme is that of rebirth, renewal, waking up. The leisurely pace of the book is appropriate to the roll of the seasons. The general message can be found in anecdotes; the central idea—"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," in their "winter of discontent."

The key to Thoreau could be this: he is not against civilization in wishing a return to primitive life. In his love for the present he felt one could get down to the primitive, noble man inside himself. That man now is man past and future. Eternity is all around man. And if he can but get below the surface, and transcend life, he will find himself in a brotherhood with Nature.

Brought to life by Emerson's book *Nature*, inspired with its idealism, Thoreau probably first began his Transcendental eclecticism. Remember the Transcendental belief that spiritual knowledge, moral judgment, and conscience were innate in man. The child was born with a receptive ability to hear God's voice, and then was corrupted. So the Transcendentalists wished to return to the days of childish innocence led by the inner light. Thus through a mystical experience, man could achieve a heaven on earth. This pursuit of the days of youth to find spiritual reality is true to Transcendentalists.

Thoreau's instinctive ideas of the ecstasy of his youth were made articulate by the idealism of Emerson's *Nature*, and confirmed by his reading of the Hindu *Bhagavad-gita*. The Hindus purified their hearts in order to feel the presence of God in Nature. They learned and practiced simplicity of living. They penetrated the external reflection of this world, and found a reality behind it. This longing for reality brought happiness and success. It was a way of life, a search. So *Walden* was then a spiritual quest, for a reawakening of that ecstasy Thoreau felt in his youth, accepting the Hindu dictum to seek what is homogenous to one's own nature, for from his youth he had felt a particular calling to the woods, feeling intuitively that there was a unifying spirit in the world that flowed through both man and Nature. He had a passion for Nature as an experience. In *Walden* we see him seeking to live a life of simplicity and purification. And in search of eternal truths through the youth's intuition, he came up with answers to solve the problems of the people of America, especially in the choice of careers. His Hindu asceticism was *not* Puritanism, nor the Transcendentalists' intellectual passion for moral perfectibility, nor Emerson's faith in the strength of the superior ideal. It was just a way of life, a search and not so much a

progress. Thoreau was interested in "being" not "doing."

Using Thoreau's parable in "Economy"—"I long ago lost a hound, a bayhorse and a turtle-dove, and am still on their trail/I undertook to explain *Walden* as an analogy of that search of Thoreau's. The examination of *Walden* interpreted the parable as a search for the ideal life—through finding the perfect correspondence of Nature to man, through a life of simplicity: shucking opinion, prejudice, tradition, delusions and appearance, through finding what were for him the essential facts of life, through searching for the eternal in himself and in the world, through getting back to the beginning of things, through his mystic intuition of reality, and through finding heaven all around him—(see "The Pond in Winter," where Walden Pond is Heaven).

More than one expert has thought that in the end Thoreau became almost purely a classifier—as a Naturalist—at a time when he could perhaps have attained a working synthesis of science and his transcendentalism. For he was intuitively positive that the outward form of a plant, flower, pond, or fish was a translucent pattern hiding an inner significance for universal life. Thoreau, an idealist legislating for eternity, was pushed off his quest by the failure of his books in 1849 and 1854. The latter part of his Journals was full of scientific and natural history data. Success came too late to Thoreau—he died at age forty-five, in 1862; sixty years later *Walden* became an American classic. Thoreau, politically the most conscious of the Transcendentalists, an acute observer of both natural and social facts, finally was recognized as an outstanding prose stylist, and his Journals (1837-1862), the source of all his books, are an important American literary document. Something of Thoreau is prescribed reading every Spring—when we think of rebirth, regeneration, and "heaven all around us," in our search for the ideal life—the hound, bay horse, and turtle-dove that we all lost, back in the beginning. ■