

INTRODUCTION: THOREAU'S GARMENT OF ART

Thoreau was the vegetarian who ate meat; the conservationist who surveyed woodlots in Walden Woods; the pacifist who endorsed violence; the hermit who loved gossip. This is not to support his detractors who label him a hypocrite. It is, instead, to confirm that he was a questioner of the very concepts we have come to associate with his name. Thoreau was a seeker, a seer, a teacher. Being confident, not convinced, he would not complacently let yesterday's answer settle today's discourse. He was faithful, not dogmatic; principled, not sanctimonious; and transcendently alert and expectant, not experientially adamant and stolid.

Robert Louis Stevenson dismissed Thoreau as one who "could not clothe his opinions in the garment of art, for that was not his talent."¹ Thoreau may have anticipated such a denunciation when he wrote in *Walden*, "I trust that none will stretch the seams in putting on the coat, for it may do good service to him whom it fits."² Or as he more bluntly put it, also in *Walden*, "It is not all books that are as dull as their readers."³

The time Thoreau lived in and wrote about was a period of ferment in the United States. It was the era that produced Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. In the decades bracketing his move to Walden Pond, Brook

Farm and Fruitlands were established, the Indian Removal Act and the Fugitive Slave Act were both made law, the Irish suffered the potato famine and immigrated to New England in unprecedented numbers, banks failed, various movements were giving birth to various reforms, and the country was heading toward Civil War.

EARLY LIFE

Concord, Massachusetts, the town in which Thoreau was born and where he would spend most of his life, had, in the first half of the nineteenth century, a population of about two thousand. It was primarily an agricultural community, although manufacturing was on the increase, as it was everywhere. The train would reach Concord around the same time Thoreau moved to Walden Pond in 1845. Famous for its part in the American Revolution, Concord was the place where, as Emerson put it, “the shot heard round the world”⁴ was fired just under forty-one years before Thoreau was born.

And here, on the 12th of May, 1817, David Henry Thoreau was born in his grandmother’s house on Virginia Road. He would reorder his name to Henry David Thoreau around the time of his graduation from Harvard. His immediate family consisted of his father, John, and his mother, Cynthia, and his two older siblings,

Helen and John Jr. His younger sister, Sophia, who would be born two years later, was the only one of the four Thoreau children to live beyond forty-four years, the age at which Henry died.

The family worked to send Thoreau, whom they considered more academically inclined than his older brother, to Harvard in 1833. Harvard, in those days, was small and somewhat provincial, and had moved away from its initial Puritan roots toward a more liberal Unitarianism. Thoreau neither excelled nor failed, graduating nineteenth in a class of forty-seven. Before heading back to Concord he participated in the August 30 graduation "conference," "The Commercial Spirit of Modern Times, considered in its Influence on the Political, Moral, and Literary Character of a Nation." The next day Emerson read his "The American Scholar" to the graduating class, although it is not certain whether Thoreau stayed to hear his fellow Concordian.

On returning to his hometown Thoreau began to seek employment. To support himself throughout his life, Thoreau would take on various forms of work. As he later wrote to his Harvard class secretary, Henry Williams, he did not know whether what he did was "a profession, or a trade, or what not. It is not yet learned, and in every instance has been practised before being studied. . . . It is not one but legion. I will give you some of the monster's heads. I am a Schoolmaster—a Private Tutor, a Surveyor—a Gardener, a Farmer—a Painter, I mean a House Painter, a Carpenter, a Mason, a Day-Laborer, a Pencil-Maker, a Glass-paper Maker, a Writer, and sometimes a Poetaster."⁵

But following graduation he pursued one of the options for which his time at Harvard had prepared him: teaching. He searched for a teaching position and had a job in Concord's Center Grammar School by mid-September, resigning within the month because he was unwilling to cane his students. It was a period in which educational reform was in the air, and Thoreau would not accept the old ways when he was able to see that there were alternatives. Bronson Alcott had opened his Temple School in Boston in 1834, teaching through dialogue, rather than rote, and without resorting to corporal punishment. Horace Mann, after being appointed secretary to the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1837, effected change and improvement in the public school system. Elizabeth Peabody would open the first American kindergarten in 1860.

Thoreau searched for a new position while participating in the family pencil business. The business began in 1821 when Thoreau's uncle, Charles Dunbar, discovered a deposit of plumbago (graphite) in New Hampshire. Thoreau's father soon joined in, eventually becoming sole proprietor. Thoreau assisted in the family business, which consisted of pencil making and later the selling of plumbago, for which, owing to the invention of electrotyping, there came to be a high demand.

Thoreau continued to make inquiries about teaching positions in Massachusetts, New York, Maine, and as far away as Virginia and even Kentucky. Unable to secure a teaching job, he opened his own school. Starting with four students in September 1837, by July 1838 he was able to reopen the recently closed Concord

Academy, with his brother, John, soon joining him, and with a full complement of twenty-five students learning experientially, and by conversation and dialogue.

EMERSON

Ralph Waldo Emerson had moved to Concord in 1834. Stories vary slightly as to how and when he and Thoreau became acquainted, but by October 22, 1837, Emerson, who had published his influential book *Nature* the year before, was showing a keen interest in the recent Harvard graduate, asking the questions that prompted the first entry in Thoreau's two-million-word Journal: "What are you doing now? . . . Do you keep a journal?"⁶

Emerson's influence on Thoreau may be deduced from words—inspiring, oracular, and transcendental—uttered in the address he read to Thoreau's class at Harvard: "If the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him. Patience,—patience;—with the shades of all the good and great for company; and for solace, the perspective of your own infinite life; and for work, the study and the communication of principles, the making those instincts prevalent, the conversion of the world. Is it not the chief disgrace in the world, not to be an unit;—not to be reckoned one character;—not to yield that peculiar fruit which each man was created to

bear. . . . We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds.”⁷

Thoreau was ready to embrace what Emerson had to offer. As he wrote in his *Journal*, “We see so much only as we possess,”⁸ or, perhaps even more pertinently, “I think we may detect that some sort of preparation and faint expectation preceded every discovery we have made.”⁹

Initially their connection was of that of mentor and student, but as Thoreau came into his own, not just as a writer, but as an individual who could not, or would not, be considered merely an Emerson disciple, their relationship suffered a strain that forced them to realign and adjust. The friendship that developed was more equal and respectful. Fifteen years after Thoreau’s death Emerson’s admiration continued to grow. Writing to George Stewart, Jr., in 1877, Emerson said that “Thoreau was a superior genius. I read his books and manuscripts always with new surprise at the range of his topics and the novelty and depth of his thought. A man of large reading, of quick perception, of great practical courage and ability,—who grew greater every day, &, had his short life been prolonged would have found few equals to the power and wealth of his mind.”¹⁰

LOVE

In July of 1839 the seventeen-year-old Ellen Devereux Sewall came to Concord to visit her brother, Edmund,

who was enrolled in the Thoreau brothers' school, and her aunt, Prudence Ward, who was a boarder in the Thoreau family home. Both Thoreau brothers fell in love with her during her two-week visit. There is little in Thoreau's writings that points to his romance, but one line in his *Journal* that is unquestionably about Ellen expresses his love in all its power and anguish: "There is no remedy for love but to love more."¹¹

In September John went to Scituate, Massachusetts, to visit Ellen, and in the summer of 1840 Ellen returned to Concord. After a boating excursion Henry wrote, "The other day I rowed in my boat a free—even lovely young lady—and as I plied the oars she sat in the stern—and there was nothing but she between me and the sky."¹²

When Ellen returned to Scituate, John soon followed with the intention of proposing marriage. Henry described his anxiety during John's visit to Scituate as "an aeon in which a Syrian empire might rise and fall."¹³ Although she briefly accepted, the engagement was broken off. By November Henry had written to Ellen, himself proposing marriage. At her father's insistence this time Ellen wrote to Henry on November 10 rejecting his proposal. The following week she wrote to her aunt, Prudence Ward: "I never felt so badly at sending a letter in all my life. I could not bear to think that both those friends whom I have enjoyed so much with would now no longer be able to have the free pleasant intercourse with us as formerly."¹⁴

Despite Ellen's concerns that their relationship would end, Thoreau remained friends with her, and,

after she married Rev. Joseph Osgood, became friends with her husband and family. Twenty-five years later, on his deathbed, when Ellen's name was mentioned in passing, Thoreau said to his sister, "I have always loved her."¹⁵

DEATHS AND RENEWAL

In April 1841, following a period in which John was ill and weak, the brothers had to close Concord Academy. With the closing of their school, Thoreau again helped out in the family pencil business, writing, on September 8, 1841, "I, who am going to be a pencil-maker tomorrow, can sympathize with God Apollo, who served King Admetus for a while on earth."¹⁶

On the first day of 1842, John cut his finger while stropping his razor. When the wound became infected, tetanus, then commonly called lockjaw, set in. John died on January 11. So close were the brothers, and so overwhelming was John's death, that Thoreau developed sympathetic lockjaw, showing all the symptoms of the disease.

Just over two weeks later Emerson suffered an equally painful loss. His five-year-old son, Waldo, died of scarlet fever. Emerson was able to express his grief in letters to friends and family. Thoreau was not. He did not write a word in his Journal for six weeks.

In time Thoreau decided to memorialize his brother and perhaps purge some of his inexorable grief over John's death by writing a book based on a boat trip the two brothers had taken in 1839, following Ellen Sewall's first visit. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* was the first book Thoreau would write, but he needed to find a place where he could write it.

WALDEN

In March 1845 Thoreau borrowed an ax and began to construct a small house in which to live at Walden Pond. He built it on land owned by Emerson and was given permission to live there in exchange for some work, such as planting pine trees.

Friends and neighbors were curious as to why he went to Walden to live. It was not the sort of place one would expect a Harvard graduate to make his home. The land was nonarable and was used primarily as woodlots. For a long period, well into the twentieth century, it was considered marginal territory. Not only was it unproductive as farmland, it was a place where productive and welcome members of Concord society would not live. It was the home of the Irish immigrants working on the railroad; it was the home of alcoholics; it had been the home of former slaves; and it was now the home of Henry David Thoreau.

The two-year, two-month, and two-day experience at Walden Pond was negligible compared with what it became in Thoreau's mind. As he wrote in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, the book he went to Walden to write, "This world is but canvass to our imaginations."¹⁷ As the river served as the thread in his first book on which to arrange his thoughts on various subjects that concerned him, so the pond and his time there served in his second book as the canvas to his imagination. Questions about which Thoreau thought over the years now began to find a place in the work that he was writing about his time at the pond.

It mattered little whether they were reflections of his actual experience there, or ideas that came to him half a dozen years after he left the pond. His thoughts on living deliberately, on how we should live our lives, and on the influence of nature merged into a truly American work at a time when literature in the United States was just beginning to find its voice.

LECTURER

Thoreau gave a lecture entitled "Society" on March 14, 1838, at Masonic Hall as part of the Concord Lyceum. This was his first public lecture, excluding college exercises at Harvard, and the first of twenty-one lectures he delivered at the Concord Lyceum alone, the last of which, "Wild Apples," was delivered on February 8,

1860. In between he is known to have lectured more than fifty other times.

Although he most often lectured locally, and was not as well known or popular as Emerson, his lecturing activities took him outside Massachusetts, to Pennsylvania, Maine, New Jersey, and Connecticut. In 1859 when the famed orator Frederick Douglass—following John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry and given his association with Brown—decided to go to Canada on the urgent recommendation of friends, Thoreau was asked to give a lecture in Douglass's place.

SLAVERY AND ABOLITION

Although it was too open and there was nowhere to run or hide if slave-catchers came into the woods, some had said, according to Allen French, "that Henry hid slaves in his hut at Walden."¹⁸ Whether or not there were fugitive slaves at Walden, Thoreau did help slaves on their journey to freedom. French wrote that "it was curious that when strange negroes took the west-bound train, Henry Thoreau was very likely to board it with them, buying tickets to Canada but returning too soon to have used them himself."¹⁹

Moncure Conway described seeing "the singularly tender and lowly devotion of the scholar to the slave. He must be fed, his swollen feet bathed, and he must think of nothing but rest. Again and again this coolest

and calmest of men drew near to the trembling negro, and bade him feel at home, and have no fear that any power should again wrong him.”²⁰

But Thoreau did not want to spend his time as part of the abolition, or any, movement. Finding himself torn between attending to nature and attending to man, Thoreau wrote to his friend H.G.O. Blake, on September 26, 1855, mildly complaining, “I was glad to hear the other day that Higginson and Brown were gone to Ktaadn; it must be so much better to go to than a Woman’s Rights or Abolition Convention.”²¹ By late 1859 it was clear to him that a “man may have other affairs to attend to.”²²

This was not a turning away from emancipation and reform but a turning inward toward self-emancipation and self-reformation. It was not just, as he wrote in “Resistance to Civil Government,” that it was “not a man’s duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong.”²³ Still more, he felt that it was through what he referred to as “the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor” that we can “affect the quality of the day.”²⁴

THE NIGHT IN JAIL

Almost as famous as his stay at Walden Pond was an incident that occurred when he walked into town from

the pond one day in July 1846. Sam Staples, the jailer and tax collector, approached Thoreau requesting his unpaid poll tax. Thoreau refused to pay and Staples put him jail. During the evening while Staples was out, an unidentified person paid the tax to Staples's daughter. When Staples was informed of this by his daughter, he had already removed his boots and was not willing to put them back on, so he did not let Thoreau out until the next morning.

This incident proved to be the impetus for the writing of Thoreau's best-known essay, "Civil Disobedience," originally published as "Resistance to Civil Government," and first presented as a lecture, in February 1848, called "The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government."

As with his river excursion or his stay at the pond, the jailing itself was a minor part of the essay. "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also in prison,"²⁵ he wrote, but the central theme, as he expressed it in the essay, is this: "Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?"²⁶

Thoreau's action, his refusal to pay his poll tax and the resulting night in jail, had little effect. Had he not written his essay, his protest would be as little known as an earlier effort made by Bronson Alcott, who also did not pay his tax and also had his tax paid for him. The ethic of his essay, however, has had great value, both politically and otherwise, for a minister trying to end

racial segregation in the South, or for one man peacefully leading his country to home rule, or for a generation trying to end a war in Vietnam.

WORDS OVER EXPERIENCE

In his description of what makes mythology, Thoreau wrote in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, “So far from being false or fabulous in the common sense, it contains only enduring and essential truth, the I and you, the here and there, the now and then, being omitted.”²⁷ It is this for which Thoreau strove as a writer.

He was not writing autobiography in the strictest sense, nor was he writing memoir, but something that went beyond the confines of those genres. *Walden* is not a book about a man living in the woods but one about a man living. *Cape Cod* is not a simple travel narrative about the easternmost part of Massachusetts but a record of the discovery of that vantage point from which a person can literally as well as figuratively put all America behind him. And in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* Thoreau launched himself on a river that was “an emblem of all progress, following the same law with the system, with time, and all that is made.”²⁸

“To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit,” Thoreau wrote in the “Reading” chapter of

Walden, "is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object. Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written."²⁹

Thoreau's words are paradigmatic of the writer's art. If we are able to read with deliberation, transcendently, only then are we reading "true books in a true spirit," and only then are we able to see that for which Robert Louis Stevenson did not know to look.

For Thoreau, a mountain was never just a mountain, a river never merely a river; though morning was always a beginning, night was never an end; the sun was always illuminating and the wind was always inspiring; and for Thoreau, each phenomenon experienced "must stand for the whole world to you—symbolical of all things."³⁰

NOTES

1. Robert Louis Stevenson, *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), p. 131.
2. *Walden*, p. 4.
3. *Walden*, p. 107.
4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1884), p. 139.
5. *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, p. 186.
6. *Journal*, vol. 1, p. 5.
7. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature; Addresses, and Lectures* (Boston: James Munroe, 1849), p. 110.
8. *Journal*, vol. 1, p. 74.