HENRY DAVID THOREAU: A STUDY OF CHARACTER

II

APPROVED:

Floyd Stovall
Major Professor

G. W. Sampson
Minor Professor

Floyd Stovall
Director of the Department of English

J. A. Sharp
Chairman of the Graduate Council
HENRY DAVID THOREAU: A STUDY OF CHARACTER

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the North Texas State Teachers College in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Sabra Parsons, B. A.

Denton, Texas

August, 1940
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PREFACE</th>
<th>iii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. A SURVEY OF THE CRITICISM OF THOREAU</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE MAN OF FEELING</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. THE POET-NATURALIST</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THE HUMORIST</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. THE SOLITARIAN</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. THE THINKER</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

Because Henry David Thoreau has long been regarded as eccentric rather than great, I have endeavored, in this thesis, to unfold traits that the ordinary critic fails to recognize, that a casual reviewer usually overlooks, and that the intermittent reader misses. I have made an earnest attempt to point out the many, many ways in which he was remarkably humane, and certainly not such a confirmed recluse as may at first be imagined, judging by his love of retirement and his preference for only a few friends. This eccentric retirement is always remembered, his aggressive individualism is ever kept in mind, and his philosophy is usually considered commendable but Utopian; however, only the careful reader discovers that his originality often became jocular, that his humor was not always crabbed or sarcastic, and that underneath his superciliousness was a hearty response to the finer things: beauty, music, family affection, friendship, and love.

Thoreau was unquestionably a distinct personality, admirably suited to the particular niche which he occupied and glorified. His personality pattern was developed, however, against a background of the out-of-doors, upon which he depended for his best self-expression. Supported by this
background, he was attractive, happy, animated, fearless, and capable; but removed to a different setting, he became inefficient, fearful, silent, and retiring. His stronger personality was definitely disintegrated when nature's background was removed. That personality had an admixture of the traits of both introvert and extrovert. It was that mixture that prevented his being predominantly a selfish, perverse rebel. It was that mixture that made possible the utilization of his own forces in achieving outstanding success. It was that mixture that made him not altogether an amiable person, certainly not wholly a cantankerous anarchist, but a thoroughly likable American.

Fearing that the criticisms of others might influence me in forming my opinions, I have based my study of Thoreau's character solely upon his writings. It was only after the writing of Chapters II–VI that I read what the English and American critics had said about him. These ideas I have reviewed briefly in Chapter I. In addition, I have occasionally expanded paragraphs and added footnotes giving the opinions of others on various traits of his character.
CHAPTER I

A SURVEY OF THE CRITICISM OF THOREAU

Naturally both hearty approval and harsh criticism would come to a person who launched forth in an altogether new direction from the beaten paths of conventionality. Thoreau was no exception to this rule. During his lifetime he received more criticism than praise; however, in recent years his aim in life has been more fully understood, his cause championed, and his most severe critics criticized. For every guffaw, there is answering plaudit; for every word of scorn, there is one of praise; for everything condemned, something else is justified; for every assailant, there is a panegyrist.

As opinions vary, so do apppellations. I have found bestowed, conferred, or thrust upon Thoreau eighty-six titles, ranging in degrees of dignity and prestige from those of writer, poet, philosopher; down through unoffensive tags like Holy Lander, born supernaturalist, and narrow-chested seer; on to such condescending terms as shanty-man, elf of the woods, a wild apple, and even a literary germicide; and finally to angry epithets like bum, good-for-naught, and wild man. Some have considered him an artist, others a voluble talker; some a pioneer, others a dreamer; one an iconoclast in literature,
another an imitator of Emerson. While one calls him a pom-
pous rustic, another uses the term "awkward New Englander"; but still another refers to him as a true American. While to one critic he is a moralist, to another he is "a good hater." Thoreau's habits are reflected in such terms as refuser, economit, and observer; his disposition is described in the names: "prickly protege," hypocritical weakling, and a born protestant (spelled with a little p); but genuine criticism prevails in such names as literary epicure, nineteenth century ephuist, and "one of the pistillate plants kindled to fruitage by Emersonian pollen." Hence, for the last century Thoreau's characteristics, habits, and attainments have been diagnosed, measured, classified; belittled, exaggerated, ridiculed; explained, condoned, commended. After all, the various criticisms and objections make not the least difference. Although his works may be transcendental or matter-of-fact, clear and plain or paradoxical, they still are refreshing in their accounts of everyday occurrences, homely thoughts and deeds, and plain common-sense philosophy.

Opinions have been freely given concerning Thoreau's purpose in going to Walden. Canby expresses the belief that he went in pursuit of life. 1 Van Doren suggests, "Thoreau wished to see what pure Transcendentalism was, and he went to Walden." 2 James Playsted Wood is of the opinion that "he

went into the woods in order to act—to act in such a way that he might stand independent, free, and vigorous, ever afterward.”

Llewellen Powys declares that the retreat to Walden was "a dramatic gesture." John Burroughs thinks that he simply retired for study and contemplation. Grant Loomis says that it is quite probable that Thoreau's going to Walden was the result of his reading Zimmerman's Betrachtungen über die Einsamkeit five years before, but Raymond Adams contends that Thoreau first showed his philosophy of simple, independent living in his commencement address at Harvard in 1837. The revelations in the Journal and in Walden concerning the manner in which he spent his time while there disclose his purpose better than the comment of any biographer or critic.

Of Thoreau's solitude at Walden, Brooks Atkinson says that he was "gratifying his love for the wild by living close to the out-of-doors," but Lowell ridicules that same solitude because it was only two miles from Concord. He doubts the

---


"wholesome constitution" of anyone who likes a wilderness for more than a passing mood or a short vacation. Furthermore, he adds, "Solitary communion with nature does not seem to have been sanitary or sweetening in its influence on Thoreau's character." For the older he grew, the more cynical he became.

Thoreau's daily living was the subject of other severe criticism and caustic remarks. Just as Lowell has censured his tolerance of all wildlife and his intolerance of uncouth humanity, Stevenson later writes, "If Thoreau had been a man instead of a manner of elm tree, he would have felt that he saw his friends too seldom." But Atkinson says that Thoreau's life was one furrow, deep and straight. Lowell says, "His life was a search for the doctor"; but Burroughs says positively that that is not true. Stevenson thinks he was too busy improving himself. Concerning the outcome of Thoreau's chosen mode of living, Emerson says, "He had in a short life exhausted the capabilities of this world," but

---

10 Ibid., 206.
13 John Burroughs, The Last Harvest, p. 105.
Van Doren claims that the *Journal* denies such a statement. He recalls to our minds Thoreau's bewilderment and pain at the loss of a friend, and adds that it was Thoreau's ambition to exhaust the "capabilities of the world."  

16 Again, Lowell affirms that Thoreau would have profited greatly if he had been familiar with ordinary men and had known their fine qualities, because his sympathies would have widened, and his writings would have had a larger circle of readers.  

17 In answer to that reproof, Bradford Torrey lists the kinds of people who interested Thoreau and with whom he felt at home: a Canadian woodchopper, fishermen, a Cape Cod sailor, a Wellfleet oysterman, a Nauset woman, a country soldier boy.  

18 Could any list include more ordinary men?  

19 Ideas of Thoreau's philosophy varied, too. Stevenson boldly states that it was Thoreau's ambition to become an Oriental philosopher.  

19 Edward B. Hinckley declares that "whenever a philosophical thought appears, it is warped out of its true course by the bias of the author and his partiality for himself";  

20 Canby settles the matter of philosophy by

---

16 Van Doren, *op. cit.*, p. 110.  
saying, "When he sat down to expound philosophy as such, it was someone else's philosophy." Burroughs bases his estimate of Thoreau, not upon his philosophy, but upon his life and his contribution of America's greatest, if not only, nature classic. Atkinson aptly sums the matter up by saying that Thoreau's philosophy was "a magic compound of observation and dreaming" that could not withstand scientific examination. He considers Thoreau's ideas so vividly alive that they strike close to the sources of our unhappiness today. Moreover, he is of the opinion that the qualities of Thoreau's happiness lay wholly within himself. Van Doren, on the other hand, believes that Thoreau will be remembered longer as a philosopher than as a naturalist. Although his philosophy might fall in richness, Van Doren maintains that it is highly spiced.

Humor in Thoreau's writings is disputed perhaps as much as any other topic. Long ago Stevenson wrote, "Thoreau had plenty of humor until he tutored himself out of it," and Lowell said, "Thoreau had no humor." Canby says he was a wit, not a humorist. On the other hand, Torrey terms his humor

---


24 Stevenson, op. cit., p. 144. 25 Lowell, op. cit., p. 204.

a "pleasant sour" and "natural drollery,"\textsuperscript{27} while Van Doren lists humor among Thoreau's six outstanding qualities,\textsuperscript{28} and says, "It was his saving humor, finally, which trimmed the excesses of his Journal when he went into print."\textsuperscript{29} Atkinson considers his humor a "matter of proportion,"\textsuperscript{30} and says that Thoreau was forever playing with words, and even "made sport of his neighbors in withering irony."\textsuperscript{31} Burroughs, too, acknowledges the presence of humor, but adds that a "vinous fermentation had taken place more or less in it."\textsuperscript{32}

The \textit{Week} and \textit{Walden} are, of course, more widely known than any of Thoreau's other writings; however, some interesting comment has been made about other works. Of the Journal there is a difference of opinion. Emerson says that it is "the best clue to Thoreau's thinking."\textsuperscript{33} Atkinson says that it is his biography, but Foerster describes it as "meaningless."\textsuperscript{34} Although the only unity of the Journal is a whole-hearted devotion to nature, Atkinson warmly praises it as "one of the most precious works in American literature,"\textsuperscript{35} as one

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27}Torrey, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 121.
\item \textsuperscript{28}Van Doren, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 8.
\item \textsuperscript{29}Ibid., p. 12.
\item \textsuperscript{30}Atkinson, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 140.
\item \textsuperscript{31}Ibid., p. 143.
\item \textsuperscript{33}Emerson, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 110.
\item \textsuperscript{34}Norman Foerster, "Thoreau," \textit{Nature in American Literature}, p. 141.
\item \textsuperscript{35}Atkinson, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 127.
\end{itemize}
of lofty thoughts, translucent descriptions, and meritorious apothegms. Burroughs identifies the Journal as Thoreau’s companion at first, but says Thoreau later became its victim, because he lived for it, read for it, and walked for it.36 Again he dubs it a hungry, omnivorous monster that constantly called for more, but that "something more" was sometimes only a last year’s bird’s nest. Of Cape Cod Hinckley says that it reads "like a tired journal,"37 but he claims a "shallowness" even in Thoreau’s best work. Raymond Alden considers Walden one of the few great books.38 Atkinson says, too, "For beauty, precision, richness, faith, and profundity, I think no book of our literature equals Walden."39 Likewise, Van Doren believes, "There can be little doubt that the spirit of Walden has pervaded the American consciousness, stiffened the American lip, steadied the American nerve, in a ponderable degree."40 Burroughs realizes that the book abounds in various shortcomings and failures: tipsy rhetoric, false analogies, irreconcilable substitutions for correct words, tricks of exaggeration, inconsistent and even erroneous data; yet he said, "The book has a plus vitality that is rarely equalled."41

36Burroughs, "Another Word on Thoreau," The Last Harvest, p. 147.
37Hinckley, op. cit., p. 221.
39Atkinson, op. cit., p. 100. 40Van Doren, op. cit., p. 128.
41Burroughs, op. cit., p. 147.
Upon one point all critics seem to agree: that Thoreau was a master sentence-builder. Lowell considers him an artist in rhetoric, and says that his style is in keeping with the simplicity and purity of Thoreau's life. He admits that the quotations are nuggets of pure gold, his sentences are perfect, and the images are fresh from nature.42 He complains, however, that "trifles are recorded with an over-minute punctuality and conscientiousness of detail."43 Even Stevenson grants that Thoreau's sentences are "solidly built," but says, too, that Thoreau could not "clothe his opinions in the garments of art, for that was not his talent."44 Emerson, however, disagrees with the last statement. He recognizes Thoreau's power of description as well as his excellence of literary style. He lists, from unpublished manuscripts, twenty-two quotations which contain unusual comparisons, figures of speech and coined words, and words used graphically.45 All devices are "garments of art." Hinckley admits that Thoreau had a fine gift of description, "which he exercises only too rarely."46 Atkinson's comment on Thoreau's style is:

42Lowell, op. cit., p. 209.
43Ibid., p. 207.
44Stevenson, op. cit., p. 131.
46Hinckley, op. cit., p. 218.
No writer has conveyed the essentials of his thought more completely. Each sentence carries a full load ... his prose is glorious.\footnote{Atkinson, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 73.} 

Joining the other critics in lauding the separate sentence, he says it carries a "firm cargo of meaning." Likewise, he considers Thoreau a genius for interpreting Nature by simply reporting what he saw, heard, and smelled. He has reproduced the vivid colors of the sunset, the hum of the telegraph wire, and the smell of the azalea or the bruised pine. Of \textit{Walden} Atkinson says, "No book smells so much of the American soil."\footnote{Ibid., p. 100.} Again we wonder about Stevenson's "garments of art." Torrey considers both sentences and paragraphs excellent; but the sentences are always complete, logical, "well-packed."\footnote{Torrey, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 126.} Clarence Gohdes writes of Thoreau's style, "Thoreau's 'square prose' that Stevenson admired is, to be sure, as full of its own crisp flavor as an apple in a basket of pomegranates."\footnote{Clarence Gohdes, "Henry Thoreau, Bachelor of Arts," \textit{Classical Journal}, XXIII(1928), 335.} Burroughs thinks all other nature writers are "tame and insipid"\footnote{Burroughs, "Another Word on Thoreau," \textit{The Last Harvest}, p. 112.} beside Thoreau, and maintains that practically everything he wrote has a tang and pungency that shows rare descriptive powers. In only one reference is it implied that Thoreau's ideas were not original. Loomis says it is not
unlikely that some of Thoreau's ideas came from the Betrachtungen über die Einsamkeit, by Zimmerman. He claims that Thoreau and Zimmerman have written similar material about solitude, simplicity, leisure, and music, but that Thoreau had read Zimmerman in his youth. Whereas the German put his ideas in brief chapters, Thoreau scattered his thoughts throughout books and journals. Loomis adds, however, "Basically, the ideas of the two men are alike in many ways, but if Thoreau was an advocate of the principles of the Betrachtungen, he was an original disciple." In opposition to that idea, Torrey says, "His work ... is all the fruit of his own tree."

It is obvious from the critical opinions that Thoreau's contemporaries did not understand what he meant by his mode of living. During the succeeding generation people still did not understand; but during the progress of industrialism his ideas began to clarify, and there was a reversal of the verdict of his own generation. Finally, in the 1930's people began recognizing the importance of his thought, his life, his achievement. Believing that the nineteenth century conception of Thoreau's being egotistic, eccentric, a misanthrope, and a crank was due directly to Lowell's criticism, Wood has condensed in calendar form, the highlights of Thoreau's position during the last fifty years:

1893--A ten volume edition of Thoreau's works was published.

52Loomis, op. cit., p. 792. 53Torrey, op. cit., p. 122.
1900—Thoreau had fallen into an abeyance, like all writers, great or small.

1908—A twenty volume edition was published. Thoreau received tributes from many quarters.

1920—He was called the "individualist of the individualists" in the New York Times.

1927—He was described as a mystic, a poet, a thinker with valid ideas.

1928—Critics were considering his ideas.

1930—A New York lawyer held up Thoreau to a graduating class as a good example of a free individual.54

1939—The study of Thoreau was gaining emphasis. A new biography by Henry Seidel Canby revived, in American consciousness, both Thoreau and his works.

Varied are the conclusions about Thoreau's value to literature and his position among writers. Powys is harshest of the critics in saying, "At his best, he is second best."55

Lowell closes his most famous criticism of the author by saying, He belongs . . ., if not with the originally creative men, with the scarcely smaller class who are peculiar and whose leaves shed their invisible thought-seed like ferns.56

At Thoreau's funeral Emerson declared, "The country knows not yet, or in the least part, how great a son it has lost."57

Canby believes that Thoreau belongs with the true discoverers

of America; and that because he is more timely than Emerson, "he is not dead yet."58 Although Thoreau died at the age of forty-five, Torrey contends that he "lived a long life and ... left a long memory."59 He believes that "without a question, he wrote for the future."60 Henry E. Hurd says that Thoreau anticipated our modern conception of education, that he was an example of both the project and the laboratory methods, and that "he went about stabbing men awake."61 Burroughs describes Thoreau's fame as little more than a bud at the time of his death, in 1862, but says that it steadily increased, and that in the close of the nineteenth century it had not reached its full leaf and flower.62

Thus, critics have haggled over Thoreau's eccentricities, they have maligned him for every thought that was similar to Emerson's, they have meddled with his immortality, and they have searched throughout the years for solutions to his paradoxes and for details of his association with Lidian Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Ellen Sewell; yet Canby is probably right when he says that Thoreau's own writings contain about all there is to know about him.


59 Torrey, op. cit., p. 94. 60 Ibid., p. 126.


CHAPTER II

THE MAN OF FEELING

Despite the fact that Henry David Thoreau has had many friends, admirers, biographers, and critics during his lifetime and in recent years, too many of the average Americans still vaguely recall him as "the man who wrote about birds, beasts, and ants in the woodpile," or "the eccentric who isolated himself at Walden," or even "the hermit who lived on twenty-seven cents a week." Apparently overlooked or forgotten are his attractive qualities: the consistency in pursuing a definite aim in life, the tenderness and affection, and the appreciable wit and philosophy. In his nature were odd but delightful paradoxes. Though he was prudent, he was undeniably romantic; though he was usually serious, he was frequently amusing and clever; though he was undoubtedly an individualist, he was first an individual, with traits too human and noble to be ignored or treated lightly.

He thrived happily in the simplest way of living, preferring water from the spring, bread that he had baked, garments that he had made, shelter of his own construction, and fuel gathered with his own hands. He refrained from buying any necessities of life, because he believed that each purchase cheated himself of the rich experience of providing it.
To him all trade was artificial, complex, and usually unnecessary. Labor for sustenance was honorable, but labor for profit, luxurious living, or a substantial bank account was degrading. His work-a-day world consisted of the enjoyable tasks of picking berries and other fruits, cultivating his bean field, or collecting driftwood for the cold blasts of winter. Although he was a tiller of the soil, he valued uncultivated and uncultivable fields, and great rocky or moist tracts. He depended upon neither the encouragement nor the praise of contemporaries to urge him on in his writing, for he was challenged and inspired by the moaning storms, the roaring of a swollen stream, a distant mountain top that seemed a part of the earth that was undefiled, or the outline of pines against a brilliant sunset.

The very simplicity of the things which pleased Thoreau's eye is like an accusation to us who overlook beauty in our daily surroundings. For Thoreau no extensive continental tours nor trips abroad were inviting. He found scenery sufficient in his own vicinity. The attractions included the clear green sprouts of the sassafras and its large, fragrant buds; the reflections of light on the waving crests of the

---

1Henry D. Thoreau, _Walden_, II, 178.  
2Ibid., 171-184.  
3Ibid., 171.  
4Thoreau, _Journal_, VII, 320.  
5Ibid., 320.  
6Ibid., 288.  
7Ibid. 23.
pines; and the rambling course of a brook over soft sand. Concord, like other New England communities, abounded in places and objects of ordinary interest, but Thoreau found in each a particular beauty that delighted either his mind or his senses. As a business man might enjoy the scent of burning tobacco in his favorite pipe, Thoreau liked to smell a burning meadow in dry weather; as a perfumer might choose a rare fragrance, Thoreau preferred the odors of broken twigs of the black birch or bruised pine leaves. The humble little cabin in Walden Woods was surrounded by inspirations for Thoreau's keen senses, and he had only to sit in the door to be wholly content.

For recreation Thoreau was again easily pleased. New or popular diversions could not compare with his daily walks, which were sometimes in broad fields, sometimes through a tangled spruce swamp, and sometimes up a favorite hill or along the frozen river. The rambles there were always made entertaining by birds, small animals, or a newly blossoming plant. No battle of wits in a parlor game could equal the shrewdness of a fox upon hearing or scenting danger.

No theater could offer such drama as that of a wood where a

---

8Ibid., VIII, 177.  
10Ibid., 336.  
14Ibid., 326.  
16Ibid., X, 316.  
9Ibid., X, 258.  
11Thoreau, Walden, II, 123.  
13Ibid., IX, 413.  
15Ibid., 385.
great hawk screamed for prey, or where the young rested in the nest, waiting for food. No refreshment could please his palate like the huckleberries from Bear Hill. Life itself was his amusement.

Just as he resorted to simple things for his diversion, so, too, did he depend upon simple language to express his thoughts. In writing, he preferred sentences with unmodified verbs and no expletives. In lecturing he avoided smooth, gracious, fluent words, accompanied by graceful gestures. He spoke and wrote in a simple, straightforward style, with no unnecessary palaver. He elected to further his education and enrich his experiences by haunting pathless swamps and primitive forests, in preference to merchants' exchanges or students' libraries, for that was living. "I love to live," said he.

Contrary to popular beliefs, Thoreau showed a thoughtful regard for others. He addressed himself to the mood or the need of the correspondent, thus making an obvious difference in the content of his letters. To his garrulous mother he itemized new purchases of clothing, related the extent and condition of his wardrobe, replied carefully to the small

---

17 Ibid., 147.  
18 Ibid., 318.  
19 Ibid., VIII, 257.  
20 Ibid., X, 257.  
21 Ibid., IX, 444.  
22 Thoreau, Familiar Letters, VI, 163.
talk of her letter to him, and commented upon the possible interests and activities of those at home.\textsuperscript{23} To Helen he often wrote in pedagogical style, advising her about books for her teaching, or making recommendations for her own reading program.\textsuperscript{24} Once he composed the entire letter in Latin,\textsuperscript{25} which contained descriptions of nature, comment upon the daily news events, and advice for her reading.\textsuperscript{26} Again he sent a poem of ten stanzas, which he had composed and written in his journal. To Sophia, however, he wrote about simpler interests: Hawthorne's return to their community,\textsuperscript{27} news of the local sewing circle and out-of-town visitors,\textsuperscript{28} and even accounts of Sam Black, the family's pet cat. He remembered her fondness for flowers, and often described those around him or commented upon their beauty and importance to one's life.\textsuperscript{29} He gave her details of his surroundings and his experiences while in Eagleswood, surveying and teaching.\textsuperscript{30} His few letters to Mrs. Emerson contained, besides accounts of his daily adventures, frank admissions of his appreciation of her friendship. She was an inspiration to him, and he did not hesitate to confess her influence. He was ever mindful of her love for flowers, and

\begin{align*}
\textsuperscript{23} & \textit{Ibid.}, 106. \quad \textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid.}, 25. \\
\textsuperscript{25} & \text{Archibald MacNechean called this letter "the most significant memorial of his college career."} \\
\textsuperscript{26} & \textit{Thoreau, Familiar Letters}, VI, 27-30. \\
\textsuperscript{27} & \textit{Ibid.}, 364. \quad \textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid.}, 193. \\
\textsuperscript{29} & \textit{Ibid.}, 31-32. \quad \textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid.}, 286-89.
\end{align*}
suggested that he send her a red honeysuckle and a tulip tree. His little kindnesses and his deep regard for this older woman showed that he was quite amiable. In his communications with Ralph Waldo Emerson, he freely expressed his opinions of their contemporaries; but he always gave his friend news of the children, Lidian, and the home in general. When writing to Harrison Blake, a graduate of Harvard and a close friend, Thoreau wrote much as he would talk to himself, sometimes philosophizing, sometimes criticizing, and sometimes offering his most intimate thoughts of love.

Thoreau's letters show, better than any record that we have, his solicitude for the welfare and health of the members of his family and of his friends; for example, his sympathy for his aunt Maria, his inquiries about Sophia, and his anxiety about Mrs. Emerson. Likewise do we see a thoughtfulness of both the person addressed and other members of the family, or other associates. Although he directed his letters to his mother, he said, "Father will know that this letter is to him as well as to you." Frequent he sent messages to acquaintances, special friends, or other members of the family. It was not unusual for the last few paragraphs of his letter to begin with, "Tell------------that... ."

This tenderness of heart was not limited only to people. He

31 Ibid., 76-77.  
32 Ibid., 145, 153.  
33 Ibid., 160-170.  
34 Ibid., 111.
was sincerely sympathetic with suffering animals, saying of
the oxen, "It is painful to think how they may sometimes be
overworked." Thoreau's response to music was also evidence
of an agreeable character. Although he did not know the sci-
ence of harmonious sounds nor, perhaps, even the principles
of harmony, his ear was pleased by the melody and rhythmical
succession of tones in the birds' notes and the musical
stridulations of the insects, especially those of the cricket.
Not always did the sounds invoke merriment or happiness.
Thoreau understood and responded to something profound and
mysterious in the solemn mourning of the owl, for the cry
seemed sad and tearful. He heard music in the rattle of the
railway cars and in the distant lowing of cattle. He was ap-
preciative of even the faintest murmur, saying, "Unless the
humming of the gnat is as music of the spheres, and the
music of the spheres is as the humming of the gnat, they are
naught to me." Because nature, to him, was "cheerfully and
musically earnest," and because he considered her voice in
the telegraph harp as that of the gods, he heard messages of
priceless things and absolute truths.

Mechanical music pleased him, too, though his response
was again not always happy. Nathaniel Hawthorne's music box

36 Ibid., 46.
37 Ibid., IX, 279.
38 Thoreau, A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers, I, 185. Hereafter, this volume will be referred to merely as the Week.
reminded Thoreau of his brother John's death, and he relived in his memory the dear association of the past. Something in the strains of the little tune, though played automatically by the clockwork of a strange apparatus, caused him to accept resignedly John's death and to say, "What right have I to grieve who have not ceased to wonder? . . . The same everlasting serenity will appear in the face of God, and we will not be sorrowful if he is not." 39

Since musical sounds were so enjoyable and so expressive, Thoreau lamented that men used the gift so sparingly. He compared their employment of musical talents with a bird's singing once in twelve years, or with a plant's blossoming once in a century. 40 Again he said, "It is surprising that so few habitually intoxicate themselves with music, so many with alcohol." 41 For him music transformed the humdrum part of life into a glorious adventure, crowded with keen interest, intense speculation, and complete satisfaction. "Music lifts me above the dust and mire of the universe." 42

Sometimes melodious sounds gave him resolute endurance and surpassing courage. "When I hear music, I fear no danger. I am invulnerable." 43 At other times a harmonious strain gave him a tranquillity that nothing else could effect.

40 Thoreau, *Journal*, VIII, 132. 41 Ibid., IX, 120.
42 Ibid., X, 172. 43 Ibid., 173.
"Music can make the most nervous chord vibrate healthily."\textsuperscript{44}

His comparison of daily living with man's response to music accounts, perhaps, for his failure, or refusal, to follow the throngs of pleasure-seekers and money-makers.

A man's life should be a stately march to a sweet but unheard music, and when to his fellows it shall seem irregular and inharmonious, he will only be stepping to a livelier measure, or his nicer ear hurry him into a thousand symphonies and concordant variations. There will be no halt ever, but at most a marching on his post, or such a pause as is richer than any sound when the melody runs into such depth and wildness as to be no longer heard, but implicitly consented to with the whole life and being. He will take a false step never, even in the most arduous times, for the music will not fail to swell into greater sweetness and volume, and itself rule the movement it inspired.\textsuperscript{45}

Music, however, was not necessary to Thoreau's contemplation. To lose himself in thought he had only to sit on a huge boulder and look off toward some familiar locality, to drift in his boat along the river, to rest on the grass and watch white clouds in a summer sky, or to watch a flower unfold. Such freedom from noise and excitement was always favorable for deep thought. Usually those meditations were either recorded in his journals or included in his personal correspondence. They concerned any subject from the soliloquy of a damp pine log upon being taken home by an Irishman, to his own musings about the continuance of life and inevitableness of death. Sometimes he gazed on a thickly frozen pond and thought that the ice must be a curious phenomenon.

\textsuperscript{44}\textit{Ibid.}, 335. \textsuperscript{45}\textit{Ibid.}, VIII, 265-66.
to the pickerel, for he himself had always marvelled that it became as perfect water as if it had been melted for a million years. Sometimes as he watched an eagle soaring higher and higher until it was lost among the clouds, he wondered what were its thoughts. The flight of wild geese gave him the migratory spirit, but he translated his restlessness as a prophecy of the final migration of souls to a serener place and a search for eternal rest. The tolling of a distant funeral bell naturally turned his thoughts to life and death; so, too, did the short afternoons of autumn.

As the afternoons grow shorter, and the early evening drives us home to complete our chores, we are reminded of the shortness of life, and become more pensive at least in this twilight of the year. We are prompted to make haste and finish our work before the twilight comes.

Such ordinary occurrences, yet such a wealth of observation!

The occupations and customs of those about him always attracted Thoreau and furnished material for intense thought; for example, the extractions of sand for the brickyards caused him to muse long about the slow and delicate process by which the globe was made. Again, pedagogy aroused him to say, "It is strange that men are in such haste to get fame as teachers rather than knowledge as learners." Hence,

---

46 Ibid., X, 25.  
47 Ibid., 247.  
48 Ibid., IX, 413.  
49 Ibid., 98.  
50 Ibid., VII, 115.
Thoreau gave serious deliberation to everything he saw, heard, or did; and he can truthfully be called "the thinker."

Contrary to popular belief, Thoreau was not cold and unresponsive to his friends and relatives. In fact, he was so obsessed with thoughts of love that he made numerous references to his emotions. Sometimes the most trivial subject was turned to conjectures of love; for example, in writing of reading, he said, "There may be elocution and pronunciation to satiety, but there can be no good reading unless there is good hearing also. It takes two, at least, for this game, as for love, and they must co-operate."51 Once while observing two great fishhawks in the sky, perfectly paired, he asked, "Where is my mate, beating against the storm with me?"52 On a subject that is worthwhile and ageless, Thoreau uttered oracles that would make an interesting book in themselves. Some of his figurative statements about affection are beautiful in their simplicity, "Love goes alone unscared through wildnesses,"53 and "In love we impart to each . . . the best of ourselves."54 On other occasions his assertions were proverbial, as "Veneration is the measure of love,"55 or "Love tends to purify the sublime itself."56 Hence, by the turn of his expressions we realize that love was as

51 Ibid., 52. 52 Ibid., IX, 159.
53 Ibid., VII, 133. 54 Ibid., IX, 2.
55 Ibid., VIII, 251. 56 Ibid., I, 232.
important to Thoreau in his day as it is with us now; it was always a pure devotion, preeminent affection, and sacred relation. He respected no one who jested on the subject, saying once, "What can be the character of that man's love?"57

To Thoreau love brought fame and growth, but that love was the tender regard which Mrs. Emerson, "a very dear sister,"58 showed for him. Their affection arose from mutual esteem and good will, and resulted in perfect harmony of an ideal friendship. Thoreau valued highly her understanding nature and the inspiration that she was to him. "What wealth it is to have such friends that we can not think of them without elevation."59 [Thoreau was a person who gave even to the absence of a dear friend an unexpected value or importance.] After he had left the Emerson home, he said of Lidian, "Nothing makes the earth seem so spacious as to have friends at a distance; they make the latitudes and longitudes."60 Perhaps an explanation of the sincere friendship between the Emersons and Thoreau lies in their fulfilling his one requirement of a true friend: "My friend is one who takes me for what I am."61 Casual acquaintances might interest Thoreau while they were imparting information, but

57 Ibid., VIII, 251.
58 Thoreau, Familiar Letters, VI, 136.
59 Ibid., 89
60 Ibid., 76.
61 Thoreau, Journal, IX, 144.
he believed "the herd of men multiplied many times will never come up to the value of one friend." For Thoreau real friendships did not cease, and only rarely did they decay. He was so careful in his choice of friends that it was always a mutual regard that lasted through the years.

Although Thoreau's neighborliness and friendliness are evident when we search the Journal and his letters for clues, never did he go on record as showing human weakness. He studiously refrained from expressing his grief in the death of his brother, John, although we know that they were affectionate and close; likewise, we have nothing personal about Ellen Sewell—if there was anything personal to tell. There is not one word about pleasures, laughter, pity, and charity. In his Journal are seven entries dated December 25, but there is nothing about Christmas, peace, and good-will. Among the many desirable traits, certainly an emotional responsiveness is not included.

One of Thoreau's most admirable traits was his conscientiousness in all activities. Firmly believing his own words, "Men are great in proportion as they are moral," he always acted according to his own convictions, even refusing conformity if he lacked entire belief; for example, he seldom went to church, never voted, and refused to pay his poll tax. He had not only definite feelings of right and wrong, but

62 Ibid., X, 310.  
63 Ibid., VIII, 210.
also the moral courage to execute those beliefs. When he did attend a church service and liked any part of the worship, he candidly admitted it; but he was never found regularly co-operating with an organization that he termed "a rotting institution." He was whole-heartedly loyal to whatever he could conscientiously approve and respect, but never hypocritically faithful to anything. Hence, he preferred being in jail to paying a poll tax, and he unhesitatingly eulogized John Brown.

Being equally as conscientious in his personal habits, Thoreau neither used tobacco nor drank wine. His use of stimulants depended upon his projects, such as walking tours or long excursions, when he considered strong tea an excellent refreshment. He was once sorely troubled about his own behavior, the burning of the woods in 1844. He settled the matter, however, by convincing himself that he had done no more than lightening frequently did; thereafter the incident troubled him no more.

His uprightness of spirit was also evidenced in his declaration that he aspired to be a channel of thought of the

64Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*, VI, 97.
65Ibid., 225.
66Thoreau, *Journal*, IX, 374-381.
Courts of Heaven instead of the profanity of the barroom and police courts.\textsuperscript{69} He had no respect for a certain man's debauch and his desertion of his wife, saying in a letter to Emerson, "His sun went down, \textit{to me}, bright and steady enough in the west, but it never came up in the east."\textsuperscript{70} He always scorned artificiality, triviality, and transient views; but underneath his contempt for mere conventions of society were an uncanny understanding of human nature and a genuine love for his fellow-man.

He realized that the inhabitants of Concord looked on him with compassion and thought it an unfortunate destiny that he walked and rowed in solitude;\textsuperscript{71} nevertheless, he considered his time well-spent if he had found a strange bird's nest or an Indian relic, or even if he had tasted sweet acorns.\textsuperscript{72} He knew that his acquaintances were curiously amused by his gathering driftwood, but he knew, too, that they would never understand that he enjoyed doing things for himself.\textsuperscript{73} He could always tell whether or not his audiences liked his lectures.\textsuperscript{74} He was satisfied if they listened, for then he knew as well as they. Some of Concord understood him, too, and shared his interest in nature. Mr. Farmer gave him

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{69} Thoreau, \textit{Journal}, VIII, 343.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Thoreau, \textit{Familiar Letters}, VI, 149.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Thoreau, \textit{Journal}, IX, 124. \textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 35.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 132. \textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 449.
\end{itemize}
a detailed account of seeing an old swallow feed her young, and others frequently showed him with pride good catches of fish. Mr. Miles described a marsh hawk's mating, habits, and feeding technique, while another neighbor showed him a pestle which his son had found while plowing. There was always an affinity between Thoreau and old Brooks Clark, whether the common interest was the spoils of a day's ramble in the woods, the accomplishment of daily tasks, or the completion of an undertaking. Dr. Harris described to him his recent discovery of a new species of glow-worm. Thus, there prevailed a harmony between Thoreau and those Concord neighbors who, too, loved nature, preferred a simple life, and found pleasure and satisfaction in following their interests.

We are constantly invited to be what we are, as to something worthy and noble. I never waited but for myself to come round; none ever detained me, but I lagged and staggered after myself.

Thoreau had sufficient confidence in, and dependence upon, himself and his ability that he could live and be happy in merely "waiting for himself" and relying upon his own resources. He preferred collecting and splitting his own wood to securing it from a farmer, because in providing his fuel he read many histories of trees, and in burning it he mused

75Ibid., 242.
76Ibid., 306-7.
77Ibid., 344.
78Ibid., 540.
79Ibid., X, 316.
80Ibid., IX, 132.
contentedly upon his adventure in securing it. He felt a certain satisfaction in having in his wood-box an assortment of woods: chestnut, dead pine, an old plank from the bridge, and a snag of an oak stump. For his evening's entertainment, such a variety surpassed any musty volume from the village library. Just as he relied upon himself for fuel, and often upon that fuel for his reveries, so he trusted his own guidance and knowledge:

Why should we ever go abroad, even across the way, to ask a neighbor's advice? There is a nearer neighbor within us incessantly telling us how we should behave. But we wait for a neighbor without to tell us of some false, easier way. 81

Practically all experiences, pleasant or disagreeable, were, in some way, elevating to Thoreau. When a river was well frozen, he could then go about where walking was impossible in summer. Too, he could make a skating tour, getting a bird's-eye view of the river, surveying both length and breadth, and connecting the formerly explored regions into one unit. Examining the old cellar of the Winthrop home, he found unfamiliar plants, classified and named them correctly, and used the information in "Succession of Forest Trees." 82 He relied solely upon his rambles and his meditation for the material for his books. Although his publications numbered only two during his lifetime, various works were later

81 Thoreau, Familiar Letters, VI, 243.
82 Thoreau, Excursions and Poems, V, 201–2.
compiled from his journals. Even the reflection of light on leaves and window panes inspired him, for in them he recognized the possibilities of the theme "November Lights." Sleepless nights were no source of worry to Thoreau, for "A wakeful night will yield as much thought as a long journey." He regarded his poverty a blessing, because thus was he "nailed down" to his native region, Concord, and therefore studied it and loved it more than any other locality. Realizing that sorrow had for the individual a separate integral interest, he believed that to regret deeply was really to live again, afresh. Hence, both sorrow and regret served to enrich his life instead of to embitter him.

Thoreau was sufficiently resourceful to put his major disappointments to good use. He interpreted his imprisonment as an opportunity for broadening his horizon, comparing it with travel in a far country. His strange experiences stimulated original observations. Because he had a new perspective, it seemed that he heard the village sounds for the first time. The kitchen of an adjacent inn furnished a wholly new and rare experience, for he saw and heard everything that occurred there. The new types of individuals who were his associates arrested his attention and piqued his interest. Nothing went unnoticed, and no part of that ordeal was counted a loss.

He felt neither dismay nor defeat when the unsold copies

---

83 Thoreau, Journal, IX, 290. 84 Ibid., X, 292.
of his Week were delivered to him. On the contrary, he even considered their return inspiring.\textsuperscript{85} Lack of sales left him undaunted; therefore, he continued writing. He had that mixture of initiative, ingenuity, persistence, and common sense that enabled him to profit by a failure. His capability and alertness made him see a practical side of the situation; his sense of humor, the amusing.

Thoreau had other traits that, according to the principles of psychology, are proof of a definite resourcefulness. He was adept at handling tools, especially driving nails; good at building fires; quick to recognize footsteps; extremely persistent; and fond of domestic animals, especially cats.

That remarkable perseverance which Thoreau demonstrated became sometimes a constant pursuit or an extreme exertion. On a warm spring day he crawled on his stomach to get a better view of black ducks on Willow Bay.\textsuperscript{86} Once obtaining that view, he watched tirelessly. Seeing the parallelism and order of their position while swimming rewarded him amply for any discomfort that he suffered. Again he climbed twenty-three or twenty-four feet up a maple to examine and identify a peculiar basket-work of twigs. While at that lofty post he studied carefully the technique of the building, marvelling at the artistic execution of the mere task of putting twigs and grass together.

\textsuperscript{85}Ibid., IX, 164. \textsuperscript{86}Ibid., VII, 198.
With the greatest of care one September morning he traced a strange note to its source. The sound led first to a sandy shore, where Thoreau looked and listened painstakingly. Finally deciding that the sound came not from a hiding place in the grass, but from the viscous sand of the shore, he found an upheaval, opened a small crack, and discovered a mole cricket. On another occasion he heard a singular buzzing sound, which resembled the hum of a fly or bee caught in a spider's web. After searching unceasingly for some time, he discovered that the noise came from the earth around a few blades of dead grass, which vibrated in the slight breeze. That was all, but for Thoreau nothing was too minute to merit his most faithful study, and no movement was uninteresting. Still another time he watched bees feed at a box in which he had poured a mixture of honey and water. He marked a few of the bees and noted the direction and time of their flights. Since they were gone from the box twenty-two minutes, he concluded that they must have flown about three-fourths of a mile. Through just such careful investigations did Thoreau become well-informed in the lore of the woods.

Again Thoreau's persistence was evidenced by hours of resigned waiting and keen expectation. It was not unusual for him to watch a seed pod until it burst or to wait from

\[87\text{Ibid.}, X, 27.\]
\[88\text{Ibid.}, X, 169.\]
\[89\text{Ibid.}, IX, 45.\]
\[90\text{Ibid.}, X, 24.\]
fifteen to thirty minutes for the re-appearance of a bird or animal.\textsuperscript{91} He would frequently sit or stand motionless for one-half hour, waiting for another chirp or native note that he had not recognized. Through his spy-glass he would sometimes watch a young hawk for one hour. He watched a moth unfold on his window, although the procedure required all day. He noted the revelation of new beauty every fifteen minutes; and finally, when the moth was preparing for its evening flight, Thoreau gave it ether, thus preserving it in its perfect state.\textsuperscript{92} For more than one-half hour he watched a painted tortoise prepare a hole, lay several eggs, and then cover them. So unobtrusive and unnoticeable was Thoreau that he remained eighteen inches from the procedure.\textsuperscript{93} Such waiting and watching were never exhausting when he was seeking truth or information. Sometimes, however, Thoreau's persistence involved neither action nor marked attention; it was merely deliberate meditation. "I could study a single piece of bark for hours."\textsuperscript{94}

Sometimes Thoreau's persistence became doggedness, for he worked assiduously on his writings. The notes hastily jotted down during a walk or sail were at leisure revised, corrected, fully written, and sometimes revised again. Then they were copied into a volume. Later the same information

\textsuperscript{91}\textit{Ibid.}, 31. \hfill \textsuperscript{92}\textit{Ibid.}, VIII, 16. \hfill \textsuperscript{93}\textit{Ibid.}, 179-82. \hfill \textsuperscript{94}\textit{Ibid.}, X, 258.
might be broken up for an essay or a lecture; for example, "The Service" from *Walden*. He was thus habitually diligent in some employment or pursuit, certainly never slothful nor idle. Whether his industry was bodily or mental, he believed that "industry is its own wages."95

Every detail of Thoreau's life, practically everything that he did or said, reveals his prudent economy; yet some of the entries in his journals give a new slant on his frugality. When he visited the Highland Light on Cape Cod, he thought it a pity that some of the poor did not have an opportunity to profit by the light there, since their using it could not rob the mariner.96 He considered a neighbor shiftless and unthrifty because he left his boat out all winter for two years in succession. He was as gravely concerned about a waste of time as an ordinarily economical person would be about his savings. He disliked wasting a mile or an afternoon.

Thoreau's failure to acknowledge or conform to the precepts of the Bible or even to the practices of the local church often brought upon himself the unjust accusation of being a disbeliever. Thoreau was religious. His religion, however, should be termed natural religion, because it was based upon the evidence of God in natural phenomena and in

96 *Thoreau, Cape Cod and Miscellanies*, 171.
everyday living. "God exhibits himself to the walker in a frosted bush today as much as He did in a burning one to Moses of old."\(^97\) In writing of the rainbow, he said, "While men cultivate flowers below, God cultivates flowers above; He takes charge of the pastures in the heavens."\(^98\) He also considered the rainbow a vision of God's face—beautiful, shining, glorious.\(^99\) Thoreau's notebook of quotations and outlines of his readings during his senior year at Harvard\(^100\) discloses his ideas even then of the Sabbath:

The order of things should be somewhat reversed; the seventh should be man's day of toil, wherein to earn his living by the sweat of his brow; and the other six his Sabbath of the affections and the soul—in which to range his widespread garden and drink in the soft influences and sublime revelations of Nature.\(^101\)

Thoreau expressed his system of faith and worship in the tenet, "Our hour is the Sabbath; our abode, a temple; our gifts, peace offerings; our conversation, a communion; our silence, a prayer."\(^102\) Again in his Journal he recorded another view

\(^97\)Thoreau, Journal, X, 99. \(^98\)Ibid., VIII, 270.

\(^99\)John Brooks Moore, in his essay "Thoreau Rejects Emerson" says, "Nature seems to be Thoreau's only road to God," while Foerster believed that Thoreau found God by contemplation.

\(^100\)This notebook, a collection of one hundred and sixty-eight pages, is in the Pierpoint Morgan Library, New York.


\(^102\)Thoreau, Journal, VIII, 251.
of man's supplication: "The only prayer for man is to be a-doing." Thoreau's daily activities proved the sincerity of that belief. During his last illness he made this significant reply to a friend's description of a pleasant walk in early spring: "Yes. This is a beautiful world; but I shall see a fairer." That note of certainty proves that he thought much about his soul and immortality. It proves, too, his peace with God, although he had not "quarreled with Him."

His criticisms of the ritual of the church were not malignant; they were his sincere convictions, simply recorded much as he preserved his ideas about everything else. When he met Brooks Clark, childish, old, and bent, carrying home a dead robin and his shoes full of apples, he found inspiration in the old man's cheeriness, which he decided was worth one thousand church sacraments, and was more devout than a prayerful mood. Again he compared values by saying, "The ringing of the church bell is a much more melodious sound than any that is heard within the church."

103 Ibid., IX, 100.


105 Hosmer makes the statement that Thoreau "considered that he was already in the vestibule of heaven while yet in Concord."

criticisms voiced exactly the same objection that is heard today.

It is wonderful, wonderful, the unceasing demand that Christendom makes on you, that you speak from a moral point of view. Though you be a babe, the cry is, repent, repent. The Christian world will not admit that a man has a just perception of any truth unless at the same time he cries, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner."107

Thoreau did not consider himself a persistent and incorrigible transgressor; nor did he feel himself utterly condemned by the law of God. "I must be as good as I am made to be good."108 When challenged by Horace Greeley to a controversy on the Bible, Thoreau said, "The one thought that I had was that it would give me real pleasure to know that he loved it as sincerely and enlightenedly as I did . . ."109 No doubt he followed his own golden rule, for he said, "It steads us to be as true to children and boors as to God Himself. It is the only attitude that will meet all occasions."110 Thoreau so completely analyzed to their depths the vital experiences of his own life and the evidences in nature of the existence of a Supreme Being that he sought and found the divine plan for his own life, and then worked it out to its full perfection.

This divine plan, it is true, seemed peculiar and disappointing to many of his acquaintances, but it was a

realization of the single purpose that he had in life, "to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life." Thus, he spent most of his time in really living instead of making a living.

Thoreau did not set out to convince others of the wisdom of a simple life separated from their fellows; he did not try to prove that a hermit's life was better than ordinary social life; he did not even want people to follow his example. On the other hand, he did want to give his soul room to expand; to find out what he could do with his natural gifts of eye, ear, mind, and heart; to observe wild life closely and sympathetically; and to record faithfully his discoveries in nature and himself. Instead of catering to popular tastes, he firmly believed in being faithful to his genius and to writing of the things that interested him most. "My work is writing," he said; ". . . the theme is nothing, the life is everything!" Wholeheartedly did he follow this aim, content in his work and enthusiastic in his discoveries. With the sole purpose of catching light and life to satisfy his intellectual hunger, he spent interminable hours in scanning rising floods, ranging forests, and threading remote swamps. And the repast thus garnered not only fed Thoreau during the nineteenth century, but also has gratified

the twentieth century searchers as well. Always he was more vitally concerned about the fire in his heart than the one on his hearth, for he invariably questioned and doubted any worthy accomplishment in warming himself by a fire which consumed considerable fuel: cones and fat knots of a giant pine, bark of the white birch, or drift from the river. He even reminded himself that God was not the ash-man, and that he should eventually give an account of his deeds and time.113 His conscience ever reminded him that merely living was not meritorious, so he strove to invest himself and give to the world the fruits of that investment, thus following his own advice in a letter to Helen in 1840: "It will do the world no good hereafter, if you merely exist and pass life smoothly or roughly, but to have thoughts and write them down, that helps greatly."114

His speculations, then, were not in money, but in real values: a fine situation for a house, a ramble through unexplored swamps, or the fur of an animal that was scarce; the returns of such ventures were rare descriptions, informative records, and introspective philosophy.

More than merely satisfying himself with the simple life and intimate companionship with nature, Thoreau felt a duty to Concord, and perhaps to Massachusetts, to mold his

113 Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*, VI, 245.
114 Ibid., 31.
thoughts, ornament them little or none, and give them to an understanding public. In 1856 he refused to teach, saying that he was "engaged to Concord and to his own private pursuits by ten thousand ties." In fulfilling this engagement, Thoreau compiled notes that revealed and recorded Concord and vicinity.

Considering, then, his personal traits with even mild curiosity, one can see qualities wonderfully fine: an uprightness and singleness of purpose that were consistent in everyday occurrences, in his dealings with his fellow-men, and in the meticulous records he left; a resourcefulness that proved invaluable both to himself and to his readers; and a tenderness that displayed itself in loyal friendships, sincere devotion, and benignity to the creatures of the wood. Thoreau's reflection in his journals and in his letters resembles one of those pieces of ancient Arabesque, in which many patterns are employed and fantastically interlaced or put together to make a unique combination of beauty, interest, and originality; and such, we have reason to believe, was the living man when he devoted himself to Concord and vicinity.
CHAPTER III

THE POET-NATURALIST

Unless one is especially interested in science, an unimaginative naturalist may be a bore; but Thoreau regarded nature with the eyes of a poet.¹ His eye was educated to catch anything on the ground, and his ear was tuned to detect the faintest native note. The most ordinary aspects of nature were sources of beauty to Thoreau, whose appreciation was often evidenced by attention to the point of complete absorption and whose subsequent record retained the color, the sound, or the vision. Things that to others were trivial and ordinary were to him phenomena worth recording, or inspirations that either kindled his imagination or encouraged him in his quest for a quiet but full life. While his fellow-citizens seemed to prefer a good joke next to a good dinner, Thoreau, without doubt, would have chosen for his gratification a strange bird's nest, a rare flower, or industrious bees. For him every season held vast possibilities.

He appreciated summer's infinite wealth of palatable berries and fruits, warm waters for bathing, mossy banks for repose;  

¹Archibald MacMechan expressed the belief that Thoreau "hardly views nature as a poet," whereas Burroughs said, "There runs through his works a vein of purest and rarest poetry."
autumn air that was more exhilarating than the oldest wine, and that made possible a view of a distant horizon or the firm outline of a lofty mountain; winter's flurry of snow, broken edges of shining ice, window-panes frosted in heavy, intricate patterns, and trees with branches of ice foliage; and spring with her tender young grass, balmy breezes, and refreshing showers.

Especially was he interested in the wildlife of the Concord thickets. His store of knowledge concerning the birds seemed unlimited, for he knew well their first appearances and their first songs, the lark's habit of singing in the still, sunny hour after sunrise, the differences in appearance and habit of various species of sparrows, the diet of the granivorous birds, the habits and haunts of the loon, and the migrating habits of ducks and geese. He preferred hearing the voice of the owl to that of the most eloquent man, hearing the song of the thrush to any opera music, and never again tasting a hen's egg to not seeing a hawk circling high overhead. He enjoyed watching the birds plumming themselves on a sunny limb, seeing a bittern

---

4. Ibid., 194.
5. Ibid., IX, 447.
6. Ibid., 251.
7. Ibid., VIII, 274.
8. Ibid., X, 330.
9. Ibid., 25.
10. Ibid., VIII, 125.
11. Ibid., X, 167.
trailing its long legs in the water,\textsuperscript{12} and holding a newly-hatched partridge in his hand.\textsuperscript{13} He knew how to find galleries in banks occupied by mice and moles,\textsuperscript{14} how to judge the woodchuck's actions by his tracks and teeth marks,\textsuperscript{15} and how the turtles hid their eggs.\textsuperscript{16} All insects commanded his attention, but the lacy winged dragon fly dipping gracefully about his beloved pond could hold him immovable for a longer time than any other insect of his acquaintance. His spirit was ever stimulated by the surprises that he found in nature's appearances, her strangeness, her glamour.

The fauna of Concord, however, attracted no more of Thoreau's attention than did the flora. It seems that his attention was repeatedly attracted by lichens. He was perfectly familiar with the climatic conditions favoring their growth, sometimes writing in his journal, "It is a lichen day."\textsuperscript{17} Knowing well the texture, shapes, and color of the lichens, Thoreau frequently compared other interests with them; for example, a coat was termed "a torn lichen leaf,"\textsuperscript{18} and again, "some lichenous thoughts still adhere to us."\textsuperscript{19} He was exhilarated by the sight of the sassafras, and declared that he "fell in love with a shrub oak."\textsuperscript{20} Each plant was important

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., IX, 413. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{13}Ibid., VIII, 221.
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., VII, 113. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 151.
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., VIII, 105. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{17}Ibid., IX, 323, 405.
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., X, 270. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{19}Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{20}Ibid., IX, 367.
for its beauty, for its variety, or perhaps even for its unsightliness or offensive odor. He wrote, "Nature imitates all things in flowers . . . the most beautiful and the ugliest, the most fragrant and the most offensive." He found unexplorable mazes of weeds remarkable in their density, the fungi absorbingly interesting in their miraculous production and their rapid wasting away, and gnarled wild apples handsome in their rustiness. Of wild apples he knew the history, uses, seasons of growth and ripening, traits, marketing, and the names of twenty-eight varieties. He knew where spring came earliest and where summer lingered longest; but once upon going to Lee's Cliff on June 6, he found a new summer, and consequently remarked, "I feel a little fluttered in my thoughts, as if I might be too late." He was so intimate with nature that he knew the "June look of a river--dark, smooth, reflecting surfaces in the shade." He knew that the waxwort, in twining about the smooth sumach, always wound against the sun. He knew the natural changes of the pine needles, and the story of the seeds: the structure of their thin membrane, their transportation, and their reproduction. In fact, Thoreau was intellectually wealthy so far as the flora and fauna of Concord were concerned.

21 Ibid., VIII, 123.

22 Thoreau, Excursions and Poems, V, 290.

23 John Burroughs said, "He watched the approach of spring as a doctor watches the development of a critical case."
Quite often Thoreau's most beautiful lines are descriptions of plant life in his own vicinity, and he becomes a poet as well as a naturalist when he composes such lines as

... the edge of maple swamps where alder tassels and white maple flowers are kissing the tide that has risen to meet them.  

Green pines on this side, brown oaks on that, the blue sky overhead, and the white counterpane all around.

The landscape is the color of a russet apple, which has no golden cheek.

The sea nibbling ... at the continent.

To Thoreau nature never acted in a prose mood; each action was evidence of enthusiasm, and each detail expressed a beautiful or exalted thought. Hence, he saw poetry in the thrill of spring, the happiness of summer, the contentedness of autumn, and the patient repose of winter. Likewise, beauty abounded in the new layers of a shell, the intricacies of a seed pod, or the late blooming of the witch hazel.

Although Thoreau seemed in his element while carefully observing the minutest details of either plants or animals, never did he miss the beauty of nature's more expensive views or her variety of weather. He liked the sombre, cloudy days;

---

24 Torrey said, "In all his books it would be next to impossible to find a pretty phrase."


26 Ibid., X, 357.  

27 Ibid., IX, 364.

28 Thoreau, Cape Cod and Miscellanies, 15.
the warm and cloudless moonlight nights; and the myriads of stars, brightly twinkling in a fathomless sky. He considered glorious the silence and peace of the snow-clad landscape with half-buried fences and bushes, hoary houses, and a warm sun over all; or other winter scenes whose icy covering he sometimes imagined to be a sparkling armor and sometimes an array of glittering diamond pendants. Always the beauty and stillness of the scene aroused in him a rare poetical appreciation of nature's work, and always he could record his impression so that the reader's eyes were opened to the beauties and secrets of nature.

No less important to Thoreau was the activity of nature, such as the first snow-storm of the season, the rolling clouds charged with electricity, the ripening of various berries and nuts, or the brook meandering over soft sand. He was keenly interested in all reflections and shadows on the sandy bottoms of streams. Long did he observe and speculate upon the fine air bubbles, which looked like minute globes of quicksilver; the shining particles in the sand; the distinct ripple marks; and the almost lentiform shadows of insects, grasses, and leaves.

Nowhere in all American literature do we find a man more responsive to nature, and he adequately expressed such a

30 ibid., 212.
31 ibid., VIII, 243.
correspondence by saying, "My pulse must beat with nature." After a hard day's work he could best recover his senses in the quiet evening hours, feeling himself clarified and calmed by nature's "healing sympathy." At other times, when he was not weary, he experienced distinct gladness and stimulation. He was comforted by a warm, dripping rain on his umbrella, and he felt in complete harmony with nature as he lay, drenched by a drizzling rain, on a bed of wild oats on the side of a bare hill. The wonderfully clear air after a hailstorm not only extended his vision to new spires, remote hills, and strange towns, but also unfolded within him new vigor, and complete satisfaction with nature. Furthermore, he considered a breath of cold, wholesome air a panacea, a solitary night voyage on the river a solace, and the sunset in a wooded valley a blessing. He wrote in 1851, "The man is blessed who every day is permitted to behold anything so pure and serene as the western sky at sunset, while revolutions vex the world."32

He was especially responsive to two sounds: the notes of a wood-thrush and a vibrating chord. The swelling strain of the "telegraph harp" was to Thoreau the poetry of the railroad, "the lyre that is as old as the world."33 When it hummed steadily, he thought that "beauty, fragrance, music, sweetness, and joy of all kinds were for the virtuous";34 when it trembled

32Ibid., X, 39.  
33Ibid., VII, 263.  
34Ibid., VIII, 43.
and wavered, he was deeply touched; when it was quiet, he was lonely. Although the exact nature of the accompanying zephyr was a mystery to Thoreau, he always understood the music, melodious, inspiring, and everlasting in his memory. Both the thrush’s song and the harp made him sane, gave him freedom, reversed his views about things, and reminded him of his immortality. Those sounds were music, ecstasy, sermons, and inspiration.

He ever marvelled at the roar of the surf, of the winds, of the waterfalls;\textsuperscript{35} and at the thickly iced weeds, stumps, and fruits that appeared so greatly enlarged.\textsuperscript{36} Incredible were spring’s fresh garments of green, summer’s colorful print, autumn’s raiment of red and gold, winter’s robe of glistening white. He was fascinated by the steam curling from the roofs on a warm day after a freeze; cheered by the sight of swarms of gnats in the warm spring sun, or the dense phalanxes of maples stationed in the fall along the borders of the meadows; and encouraged by a snow-flake’s perfection and beauty, for he was thus reminded that nature had lost none of her pristine vigor. Again and again was Thoreau so utterly surprised by the beauty of the landscapes that he sat down and beheld the scene leisurely, noting the minutest details. Nature satisfied his yearning more completely than did his friends, for “The seasons and all their changes are in me.”\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{35}\textit{Ibid.}, X, 102-3. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{36}\textit{Ibid.}, 30. \\
\textsuperscript{37}\textit{Ibid.}, IX, 57.
Feeling the charm of the cobweb tapestry in the grist mills, and of the dewy cobwebs of early morning, he poetically called them "little napkins of the fairies spread on the grass" and "little gossamer veils and scarfs... dropped from the shoulders of the fairies that danced on the grass the past night." It took little in nature to thrill Thoreau; yet those ordinary objects became extraordinarily beautiful when seen with his eyes. His journal entries not only hold a vast fund of information but also suggest the ministry of common things when viewed sympathetically. He saw, thought, and wrote about the little-big things and the big-little things of nature and life; moreover, he reminded us that the smallest things are often ladders reaching straight to the greatest.

Thoreau had a distinct preference for cloudy weather, saying, "I love very well this cloudy afternoon, so sober and favorable to reflection..." He could hear sounds better and could maintain more easily his trend of thought; however, he missed no opportunity to observe the overcast skies, finding sometimes clouds in the forms of flames, the surf, ancient vessels, or huge caps. Not only did he note the shapes and arrangements of the clouds, but he again proved himself a poet-naturalist in his brief description, "A cloud like an embroidered banner." His descriptions of the colors were

38 Ibid., 381.  
40 Ibid., IX, 96.  
39 Ibid., VIII, 346.  
41 Ibid., VIII, 154.
meticulously worded, and resulted in such terms as "cold slate-colored," "grayish-silver," "mother-of-pearl tints," "dun," "dun golden," and "rose-tinted." He knew and recorded according to science the various arrangements: cirrus, stratus, cumulus, and "melon-rind." He considered a rain more interesting if during the shower he could watch it from beneath a bridge or from his upturned boat on the bank, because the water betrayed every drop, while the land did not. The translucence of a raindrop always fascinated Thoreau, for the rays of light were transmitted just enough to intrigue him into pleasant musing.

So keen was this naturalist's ear that he detected, identified, and responded to sounds that an ordinary person would overlook or disregard. It was music to his ears to hear water falling on rocks or rippling under the prow of a boat, wind sighing in the sails, or the echo of footsteps on frozen ground. The echo of his own voice held for him a special magic or charm as it vibrated and returned with a sound that seemed no longer his own, but the voice of the woods. For so many seasons had he listened attentively to the songs of birds, beasts, and insects, that he knew and revelled in the bluebird's soft warble, the blackbird's sharp whistle, the snow bunting's low rippling, the grackle's subdued chattering, or the partridge's reverberating drumming.

---

42 Ibid., 183. 43 Ibid., IX, 98.
Likewise he was an authority on the chuckle of the ground squirrel, the sonorous hooting of the owl, or the slight murmur of insects. With him observation ever preceded interpretation; imagination lent color and originality, but never once took the place of the initial close scrutiny. Therefore his purely practical application resulted in new meaning, new beauty, and new guidance. As a man he recognized and described the music of these creatures of the woods, but as a poet he interpreted their language; for example, he understood the wood-frog to be saying, "Wurrrk, wurrrk, wur-r-r-k, wurk," and the bull frog to be calling, "Er-roonk-er-er-roonk-er-er-er-roonk." He knew the nuthatch's first cry of "Quah quah," but later recognized the change in its notes to something like "To what what what what what"; and the chickadee's early "Day, day, day," which changed in late spring to the phoebe notes. He interpreted the owl's mournful cry to be the lamentation, "Oh-o-o-o-o that I had never been bor-r-r-r-n," while the purple finch sang, "A twitter witter weete wee, a witter witter wee," which is, even in print, a lilting strain and a catching air.

Equally delightful were the more common sounds, such as the creaking of a wagon on a frosty night, the cracking of

the ground as the nights grew colder, and the crackling of dry leaves and twigs under his feet. Liking all sounds, he wrote in his journal, "The commonest and cheapest sounds, as the barking of a dog, produce the same effect on fresh and healthy ears that the rarest music does."\(^{49}\) The air seemed so especially full of sounds just after sunset that for Thoreau life seemed serene, and he bravely supplanted fears.\(^{50}\)

Nature was not always a passive experience to Thoreau; he found both enjoyment and inspiration in any evidence of excitement of the elements,\(^{51}\) whether it was the angry surge of dark waves, the blustering gale from the northwest, or the steady imprisoning rain of winter.\(^{52}\) He liked to take fluvial walks up and down a quiet stream, discovering in the shallow water nests of bream, heaps of stones, strange, waveswept weeds and leaves, and tiny furrows made by the clams on the warm, sandy bottom.\(^{53}\) He liked to be alone with the sandy stretch of beach and the hollow roar of the sea, for he felt the insignificance of himself. He deliberately exposed himself to a northeast storm on the Atlantic side of Provincetown, to see the breakers, to hear their din, to

\(^{49}\)Ibid., X, 41. \(^{50}\)Thoreau, *Walden*, II, 59.


\(^{52}\)Archibald Mackechnie gave an apt description of Thoreau's acceptance of the weather by saying, "Rain and winter come in their season; but they never seem to touch him; the rain does not wet, and the winter does not chill."

feel their chill, and to come away with nature's vibrant voice ringing in his ears.  

The many sights and varied sounds did more for Thoreau than to present a panorama of beautiful pictures, accompanied by appropriate music; they unfolded a deep purpose and harmony in nature. He was impressed by the reflections of light on twigs, leaves, window panes, and water, realizing that such reflections would be repeated on the coats of ice in the later season. He considered the coloring of wildlife as nature's sympathy and concern for its protection. He found beauty and purpose in decay. A dry oak leaf, with the pulpy part eaten away by an insect, furnished Thoreau with a delicate network of veins that far surpassed the beauty of the leaf earlier in the year. Even the rippling of the birds' wings was an endless repetition, and their flight was similar to his most intimate, inward experiences. Thoreau never included among the disturbances of nature the howling of a storm, the rustling of leaves, or the patter of rain, for they were harmonious counterparts of the great scheme of things. "A sky without clouds is a meadow without flowers, a sea without sails." 

It was not only Thoreau's persistent observation and

54Thoreau, Cape Cod and Miscellanies, IV, 210.
55Thoreau, Journal, IX, 122. 56Ibid., 440.
57Ibid., 291. 58Ibid., VIII, 225.
sincere appreciation of nature that made him an artist with his pen and a poet with his expressions, but it was also his imagination, his creative power to reproduce beautifully the material seen every day, his power to combine his experiences for an elevated purpose. He saw in the normal lives of plants and animals hidden meanings, possible stories, new sources of beauty; and he expressed these ideas as only a poet-naturalist could; for example, in writing of the autumn tints of the maples, he imagined the leaves' whispering to each other, "When shall we redden?" and the trees' saying, "I am the last to blush, but I blush deeper than any of ye," or "I bring up the rear in my red coat—we scarlet ones... have not given up the fight." Upon finding a lone crimson tree before the others had changed, he was taken completely by surprise and thought of it as an encampment of red men or foresters. In the spring as the trees put forth their abundant foliage, Thoreau called the leaves "myriads of little parasols which tried to shield the earth and roots from the sweltering summer heat."

Again he planned a perfect little idyl one day when he saw a small boy wearing a home-made cap of a woodchuck's skin. He imagined the older brother's adventure with the

----

59Thoreau, Excursions and Poems, V, 260.
60Ibid., 281.  
61Ibid., 259.
animal, the capture, the story told at home about it, the promise of a cap to Johnny, the killing and curing, the final completion by mother or sister, and the lad's subsequent joy. 63 He often imagined the soliloquy of an arrowhead upon being picked up and thrust into his pocket. 64 In spite of his poetic imagination and this persistent observation, however, Thoreau was never able to suggest the nature of the water bugs' communications among themselves. 65 He mused long over a new ravine, formed during a thaw; 66 over the roots and rootlets of a bunch of herd's-grass; 67 over the deep indentations in the margins of the maple leaves, identical with those of the preceding year; 68 and over the pronounced growth of grass after a warm rain. 69 On the other hand he could lose himself in meditation upon finding gnats behind the bark of a dead pine; 70 marks of rats' teeth on clam shells; 71 and the signs of rabbits' gnawing various shrubs. 72

Sunsets always addressed themselves to Thoreau's imagination, and as he witnessed the beauty taking various forms and colors, he preferred maintaining his own fanciful images

---

63 _Ibid._, VII, 25. 64 _Ibid._, 2, 3.
65 _Ibid._, X, 245. 66 _Ibid._, VII, 23.
67 _Ibid._, 270. 68 _Ibid._, VIII, 134.
69 _Ibid._, VII, 316. 70 _Ibid._, 123.
71 _Ibid._, 11-12. 72 _Ibid._, 96.
to having the phenomenon explained. Usually he went out at least fifteen minutes before sunset and then stayed until the afterglow had faded into dusk, and the first star appeared. Then, satisfied and refreshed, he returned home. In winter he was out at four-thirty for this daily wonder, often shivering and actually suffering while he waited. As the seasons passed, Thoreau saw in the sunsets such objects as castles on fire, a burning furze plain, isles and continents, arctic scenery, a strange western city, or the jaws of a huge alligator. Of the latter he wrote,

The sun having set, my long, dark blue cloud has assumed the form of an alligator, and where the sun has disappeared it is split into two tremendous jaws, between which glows the eternal city, its serrate lips all coppery-golden, its serrate fiery teeth. Its body lies a slumbering mass along the horizon.

Again he wrote a single line that recorded adequately the brief glow in the west, "It is like a candle extinguished without smoke." At other times the sunset was the stimulus for speculation about life, our Creator, Captain Brown's fate, or the morrow's weather. Not disciplining himself in meditations at this evening hour, he has left us most unusual and very colorful descriptions of the time of day which

73 Ibid., IX, 330.  
75 Ibid., IX, 17.  
77 Ibid., 330.  
79 Ibid., IX, 257.  
81 Ibid., VIII, 2.  
74 Ibid., VIII, 247.  
76 Ibid., 429.  
78 Ibid., VIII, 363.  
80 Ibid., X, 23.
ranked, among his preferences, second only to the morning hours.

The shrub oak, too, invoked his imagination. Standing near it and ruminating freely, he was reminded of the squirrels', the partridges', and the rabbits' uses of it; of injuries to the eyes, and pricks on the fingers. Then his mind was crowded with reminiscences of other shrub oak patches and the similar occurrences in them. When he heard a woodpecker tapping on a tree, he explained its purpose as "knocking at the door of a sluggish grub to tell him that spring had arrived."

Since Thoreau was always especially sensitive to sounds, he created mentally many little dramas in the depths of the woods. A stir, a row, or distressed chatter was material for a tragedy, perhaps a murder. Once on a winter day he found in a box trap the remains of a rabbit which had evidently starved to death. In his sadness over the circumstance, he imagined the distress, the struggle, and the miserable death. Sometimes even so small a thing as the vibration of the lid on his draughty stove moved his imagination to picture a beach setting: gulls flying, waves dashing high, a stranded vessel, and fisherman at work. A wagon

---

82 Thoreau, Excursions and Poems, V, 281.  
83 Thoreau, Journal, VII, 222.  
84 Ibid., IX, 279.  
85 Ibid., 85.  
86 Ibid., 101.
rattling over a bridge late at night made him hear the voice of the village say, "This one sound, and I have done." 87

Thus, as we see, Thoreau invariably saw narrative or poetic possibilities in the smallest units, and realized greatness in the commonplace. Nature's release of the imprisoned splendor of the smallest seed pod or of the pine cone was repeated in Thoreau's vital combination of poetic comprehension and rare appreciation of nature's work. To none but a poet would the sky seem "a blue saucer, overlapping the woods"; the birds' songs be "curls" in the elm trees; and the algae in the ditch resemble seaweed. Ordinary things to the naturalist became extraordinary to the poet. He never failed to spring with each spring into new understanding and deeper appreciation of the wild beauty of nature.

87Ibid., VIII, 224.
CHAPTER IV

THE HUMORIST

Thoreau could never be included in a list of America’s great humorists; nothing could be more foreign to his nature than the role of comedian, wit-snapper, or "funny-man." He certainly had no comic outlook on life; yet his ability to see the amusing side enabled him to see things as they were and as they might be, and still find enjoyment in the disparity. There are evidences of his being original, clever, quaintly humorous, and mildly jocular. Humor in dominating quantity or in superior quality is nowhere in his books, journals, or letters; but there is a permeative wit, especially in his letters; that is more intellectual than emotional. This wit was never a perpetual streaming out of quaint, grotesque, or ridiculous mixtures that made laughable or even amusing passages; it was rather his imaginative and amusing way of occasionally presenting an idea that generated a smile, silent mirth, or perhaps just a glow. It was just a flavor, merely a spiciness, very subtly and sparingly added; yet that quality betrays a man who was not always grave and melancholy.

Thoreau was not interested in amusing others or in being amused; hence, he developed no technique in his humor.
He rarely resorted to puns, and those he did employ were unobtrusive. Some did little more than merely make sense, none were illustrious, but a few were clever. All of these absurdities, however, give evidence of a practical wit which is extraordinary only because it is Thoreau's humor. In visiting the Highland Light with its fifteen Argand lamps, he was appalled that the keeper of the lighthouse sometimes read his newspaper by those lamps. He thought that the man should read nothing less than the Bible, and said, furthermore, that the lighthouse furnished more light than the University.¹ Making a similar play on words in a letter to Emerson about the Lyceum lectures, he wrote, "I lectured this week. It was as bright a night as you could wish. I hope there were no stars thrown away on the occasion."²

Some of his puns were old expressions, sometimes tinged with irony, but his sarcasm was usually mild. After replying to queries of H. B. Storer about the wildlife of Concord, Thoreau closed his letter of February 15, 1847, with the words:

"Trust that you will feather your own nest comfortably without stripping those of the birds quite bare, I am

Yours,
Henry D. Thoreau."³

¹Thoreau, Cape Cod and Miscellanies, IV, 171.
²Thoreau, Familiar Letters, VI, 55.
When Ricketson asked Thoreau in a letter to turn over a new leaf, Thoreau jested about the letter, which had been written on May 10, 1856, but mailed in August, 1857. Thoreau called it a "new leaf" and "turned it over" with interest to read, although he had seen Ricketson during the months intervening between the writing and mailing.  

In a letter to Helen he commented upon the inferiority of a periodical, admitting that its contents were yellow; then he added that he had had the jaundice himself, but knew also what it meant to be well.  

In new material found in Thoreau's manuscripts is the following conclusion to a discussion of things great and small:

Then, great things are not great, but gross, or great only as some pumpkins are—they are some pumpkins. Then little things are not little but fine—they are some huckleberries.

Thoreau could not resist an occasional play on words in his essays, as well as in his letters. Thinking of taverns, he wrote in The Landlord, "Who has not imagined to himself a country inn, where the traveler shall really feel in . . . ?" Again, concerning a similar subject, he wrote, "Roads are made for horses and men of business . . . I am a good horse to travel, but not from choice a roadster."  

---

4Thoreau, Familiar Letters, VI, 312.  
5Ibid., 18.  
7Thoreau, Cape Cod and Miscellanies, V, 154.  
8Ibid., 214.
Emerson about his experiments with trees, Thoreau said, "I . . . have inserted three or four hundred buds (quite a Buddhist, one might say)."  

Sometimes in his letters Thoreau expressed his thoughts in coined words, which invariably revealed his cleverness. In a letter to Helen, he mentioned their similarity of tastes, accounting for it by their "long family-arity." To Richard Fuller he said in closing a long letter, "But I must stop before I get to 17thly." Likewise, in keeping his journals, if the English language provided no suitable word for his particular idea, he coined an expression, the meaning of which could not possibly be misunderstood. Evidently such words were used without any attempt to be humorous, but they reveal unmistakable originality. He described the autumn lights as being "Novemberish," and the later colder days as being "finger-cold," often making such records as, "a bright but cold day, finger-cold." He dubbed as "ever-reds" those trees and shrubs that retained their withered leaves throughout the winter months, because they seemed to be an unnamed class between the deciduous trees and the evergreens. He described the course of a Concord stream as

---

10Ibid., 34.  11Ibid., 67.
13Ibid., 247, 311, 314, 316.  14Ibid., 365.
"musketequiding"\textsuperscript{16} through the pastures and valleys. Inventing the word "chippy" for a neighbor who was intent on gathering pine chips for fuel, he said, "Evidently the quantity of chips in his basket is not enough. It is the chippy idea which he pursues."\textsuperscript{16} With a result that was both effectual and clever, he substituted a German expression meaning I don't know where for a single noun when writing to Harrison Blake that Cholmondeley had been to Concord on his way to the West Indies, "or rather to weiss-nicht-wo."\textsuperscript{17}

Much of Thoreau's wit could be termed more poetic than practical. His letters were frequently flavored with poetic figures, sometimes bold, sometimes delicate, always irresistibly plausible, never really ludicrous, but often witty enough to invite smiles of satisfaction. Now and then he combined in his similes and metaphors a certain inappropriateness with the appropriateness of the idea; yet a kind of lovable honesty underlay all the inappropriateness. For example, he compared the locomotive to a "boiling, sizzling kettle," and the passengers to "potatoes which a fork would show to be done by this time."\textsuperscript{18} In a letter to Emerson he said, "The world is a cow that is hard to milk"\textsuperscript{19}—an unusual

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 117. \textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 242.
\textsuperscript{17}Thoreau, \textit{Familiar Letters}, VI, 343.
\textsuperscript{18}Thoreau, \textit{Journal}, X, 321.
\textsuperscript{19}Thoreau, \textit{Familiar Letters}, VI, 135.
comparison, but perhaps, after all, an accurate expression of Thoreau's feelings.

Because he was original, he sometimes described places in a manner that was both unique and pleasing. In a letter to his sister Sophia, in which he described Emerson's embarkation to Europe, he said, "His stateroom was like a carpeted, dark closet, with a large keyhole for a window."\(^{20}\) To Blake he described the club at Parker House. "I found it hard to see through the cigar smoke, and men were deposited about in chairs over the marble floor, as thick as legs of bacon in a smoke-house. It was all smoke and no salt."\(^{21}\)

His comparisons would likely concern almost anything from a water bug on Walden Pond to his poems or his life. He called science "the maid of all work,"\(^{22}\) and prophesied that someday she would chart the course of a water bug for a day. In a description of a rather pathetic little, poorly clothed "gobbit," Thoreau was evidently unwittingly clever, saying that the lad's clothes became him as if his mother had first "fitted them to a teakettle."\(^{23}\) He called his poems "a few more bolts discharged into the horizon."\(^{24}\)

It must not be supposed that all of Thoreau's similes and metaphors were droll, nor that all of his witty figures

---

\(^{20}\)Ibid., 133.
\(^{21}\)Ibid., 345.
\(^{22}\)Thoreau, Journal, X, 245.
\(^{23}\)Ibid., 274.
\(^{24}\)Thoreau, Familiar Letters, VI, 39.
of speech were comparisons. In an experience with a New England northeaster, he found new adventure and new ideas for a description of such wind. He realized then what it was to face a "migrating sand-bar in the air, which has picked up its duds and is off." Witty personification to describe an ordinary sand-storm! Sometimes his figurative language was hyperbolic. In his comments to Helen about a snow-storm, he wrote, "The very sky is coming down, I guess."26

Numerous letters and records contain witticisms about various phases of nature, for sometimes Thoreau was amused at the appearance or habits of both plant and animal life. Once he mistook a young woodchuck for a piece of rusty iron;27 again, he described the young of the piping plover as "mere pinches of down on two legs."28 In watching the night hawk on her nest, he marvelled at the bird's sphynx-like aspect as he approached, and was so amused by its action that he recorded it thus in his journal: "and after the two days' storm, when you think the hawk had become a fit symbol of the Rheumatism, it suddenly rises into the sky."29

25Thoreau, Cape Cod and Miscellanies, IV, 204.
26Thoreau, Familiar Letters, VI, 29.
27Thoreau, Journal, VIII, 123.
28Thoreau, Cape Cod and Miscellanies, IV, 185.
29Thoreau, Journal, VIII, 64.
Wrapping an apothegm in humor, he wrote of the partridge, "The partridge loves peas, but not those that go with her into the pot."\(^{30}\) Once a wild pig ran through the neighborhood, making havoc of the peace of farmyards and at first thwarting all efforts to capture it. After it was finally driven or baited into a barn where it could be shot, Thoreau concluded that "such pork might be called venison."\(^{31}\) In a letter to Mrs. Lucy Brown he was jocular about receiving sixteen eggs each day, when they kept only thirteen hens, adding, "but the world is young, and we wait to see this eccentricity complete its period."\(^{32}\)

The propagation of plants was an interesting miracle to Thoreau, and he often pondered long over the possibilities of acorns, the persistence of seed vessels, and the unknown laws of nature that govern their reproduction. In speaking of his giant squash, weighing one hundred and twenty-three pounds, he said, "A little mysterious hoeing and manuring was the *abraedabra presto change* that I used."\(^{33}\) He marveled, too, how a few seeds of various kinds planted in the corner of a garden would bring forth such different products from the same soil. Calling the seeds "perfect

---


alchemists," he added, "You have little more to do than throw up your cap for entertainment these American days." 34
In writing to Sophia about Emerson's voyage, he said, "In-
stead of a walk in Walden Wood, he will take a promenade on
deck, where the few trees are stripped of their bark." 35
In the late fall when no green leaves could be seen, when
not even a mosquito or cricket was heard, and when no ants
were at their mounds, Thoreau lamented, "They are all gone
surely, and have left me alone. Not even a man Friday re-
 mains." 36

Occasionally Thoreau chose a salient detail of a person
or object and there focused his attention, either humorously
describing the feature or comparing that detail with others
that were similar. For example, he wrote of his uncle Charles,
"Ever since I knew him, he could swallow his nose"; and he
called Sophia "Miss Bruin," 37 in advising her to pursue a
study or keep a journal during the winter. He wrote to Em-
erson about calling at the residence of Mrs. Black, and finding
there instead "a Mrs. Grey (quite an inferior color)." 38 In
writing of people, however, he never resorted to a humorous
tirade against either kinsman or associate.

34 Ibid., 2-4.
35 Thoreau, Familiar Letters, VI, 133.
36 Thoreau, Journal, IX, 313.
37 Thoreau, Familiar Letters, VI, 134.
38 Ibid., 82.
Sometimes Thoreau wrote in his journal an account of a ludicrous incident. Usually he related the occurrence with a pleasing informality that matched the tone of the real action; for instance, the hired girl's falling at Mrs. Brooks' home was only the beginning of accidents. Three others fell in their attempts to offer assistance, and Thoreau considered the household comedy material for his journal. Sometimes his story was about one of their cats. Concluding one detailed account of the return of a lost pet, he wrote, "She has already found her old place under the stove, and is preparing to make a stew of her brains there."40

He was so richly endowed with the ability to see misfortune as a cloud with a silver lining that he found amusement in his frustrated hopes of selling the Week. Having received seven hundred and six unsold copies of the book, he put them in his library, although that addition made his collection consist principally of his own writings. His sense of humor, however, mollified his disappointment, and he wrote, "Is it not well that the author should behold the fruits of his labor? My works are piled up on one side of my chamber half as high as my head, my opera omnia."41

Scattered throughout Thoreau's letters, books, and

40Ibid., 235.
41Thoreau, Journal, IX, 164.
journals are very clever uses of modifiers; stylistic uses of punctuation, especially the dash and the exclamation point; and the presentation of old ideas in novel ways. No other than a humorous person could make an art of the incongruous comparisons; few others than Thoreau would find sparkle and fun in nature and in days spent as quietly as he spent them. His sense of humor was evidently a primary instinct of his nature, and his puns, coined words, and comparisons show an agility in perception and an apprehension of the subtleties of nature. His witticisms were not accidents, not results of premeditation, but simply the involuntary expressions of a cheerful man. Hence, his little pleasantry were superior cleverness, not crude humor; dignified but mild jocoseness, not great, comical entertainment; pertinent notions, not meaningless absurdities. His wit was a release from tension, a removal of constraint, a detour from facts for both writer and reader; it still gives a feeling of ease, or sometimes even gaiety, but never of levity. His wit was wisdom at play, and, although it was not predominant, it laid a new basis for understanding Thoreau. We can feel assured that he appreciated the humor and originality of others, too, for he wrote in one of his letters to Emerson, "I find Channing's letters full of life, and I enjoy their wit highly."42

CHAPTER V

THE SOLITARIAN

Although Thoreau, in this chapter, is given the appellation of solitarian, it is not in the sense of his being a retired hermit, a lonely anchorite, or a dismal recluse. It simply implies that he liked being alone and for two years lived at Walden, apart from associates. Knowing that he would be content "to live and breathe and have his thoughts," he set about making arrangements to that end, and advanced confidently on his chosen course. Realizing the perfect correspondence of Nature to man, he wished to become so intimate with her that he could relate to others that existing correspondence. Hence, he withdrew from the hub-bub of business and society, but he was not desolate; he secluded himself, but he did not exclude all others; he sometimes lived alone, but was never lonely. In the days when psycho-analyses were unknown and when one was not greatly concerned about the plus quality of his personality, Thoreau had the insight to recognize himself, and the fortitude to adapt himself wholeheartedly and consistently to his own practical adjustment in life.

Probably the key to Thoreau's successful living alone was his sincerity, but in not quite the ordinary interpretation of the term. To be sure he was honest, frank, and
straightforward in his dealings with others; more than that, however, he was sincere with himself. He liked himself, and was no poseur about it. That honest liking, nevertheless, did not imply undue admiration and did not develop into a Narcissus complex. He simply discovered that he could live with himself and enjoy life; so he straightway removed himself from the social life which to others was apparently of vital importance. He was a good friend with himself; hence, he was not lonesome. Something hummed in his heart; his spirit soared; he lived.

Although a life of solitude brought him complete satisfaction, he was not concerned with his own interests and happiness to the exclusion of all else. He actually felt that he was worth more to himself and to others wherever he was most contented. His mode of living, then, was only the fulfillment of an aim that reached higher than immediate pleasures, and that eventually aroused in others a desire for the simple life and an understanding of the benefits and satisfaction of self-adjustment. Thoreau wanted to liberate himself from the bustle and trappings of society for more than a few days. He wished to do so all the time; hence, he welcomed life at Walden, with its freedom from drudgery, freedom from the money-hungry public, and freedom from all artificialities of life. He sought for himself "greater baldness in life";¹ he wanted the direct relation with the

¹Thoreau, Journal, VII, 346.
sun that the crest of a bare hill afforded.

These preferences, however, were not that he was insistent upon being alone, but that he wanted to soar, and "when we do soar, the company grows thinner and thinner till there is none at all." He had an intense longing for solitude, a longing that was almost morbid, but altogether sincere. "As some heads cannot carry much wine, so . . . I cannot bear so much society as you can." Feeling that he was his own defensive armor, he supported his belief in solitude by saying, "For an impenetrable shield, stand inside yourself." His isolation did protect him from numerous onslaughts, because his contentment made the bustle of daily living and the harsh criticisms of others seem mere trivialities. Taking time to live with himself, he interpreted everything in terms of living a life, and discovered many things that made the adventure both interesting and worthwhile.

While strolling on the beach near Wellfleet, he often found remnants of wrecks that told a sad story, or carcasses of fish that had been stripped of blubber, or shells that

---


3Ibid., 313.


5The Heart of Thoreau’s Journals, edited by Odell Shepard, p. 199.


7Ibid., 146.
inspired him to renewed study of geology. Even Thoreau's two years at Walden were not monotonous, but sometimes he created his own adventure. He would walk across frozen swamps to islets that were inaccessible in summer; sit in a loft of hay, with a storm raging outside and only the mice for company; explore a muskrat's den, the entrance, galleries, and nest; or dig into a woodchuck's burrow, which on one occasion proved to be twenty-one feet long.

He liked to see the night engulf him in an impenetrable darkness, but he also liked to see the full moon rise behind the tall pines and move majestically across a starry sky. He liked the solitude of the deserted beach at Wellfleet and the tumult of the angry waves; likewise, he enjoyed the quiet Musketaquid, with only the weeping willows for company. He liked the privacy and retirement which winter offered with her heavy snows and sharp winds, and the spring rain-storms were welcome, too, because confinement indoors meant a realization and an unfolding of the deep thoughts within him. He was fascinated by the raindrops racing down his windowpanes, lightning flashing down a pine, or thunder rumbling

---

8Ibid., 110. 9Ibid., 228.
10Ibid., 130.
13Thoreau, Walden, II, 147.
and reverberating overhead. The noisiness of nature was not detrimental to either his happiness or his work; on the other hand, it was conducive to fruitful thinking. He welcomed the change of seasons, for each season brought new adventures and new inspirations. Spring, with plentiful rains and warm sunlight, marked the return of birds, the sprouting of grass, and the budding of trees. Summer made possible longer rambles in the woods, perhaps in a slow, warm rain. The briskness of the autumnal tints offered a multiplicity of ideas for meditation and writing. When winter "looked like a precious gem," Thoreau was keenly sentient and profoundly thoughtful. The return of each season was the coming again of an old, compatible friend.

Thoreau became completely and sympathetically intimate with that little Walden world, which he had all to himself. He liked the surrounding wood, the near-by pond, and the distant view of familiar hills; but he liked, too, the solitude of his cabin: the long evenings without a knock on the door, and the opportunity to muse contented and undisturbed before his cheerful fire. He could not feel lonely with the luminous Milky Way stretching its path of innumerable stars across the heavens, or the pines whispering around the house. Yet that company never disturbed his

14Thoreau, Journal, IX, 416.
meditations and never interrupted his writing; they never demanded attention, nor solicited artificial courtesies and assumed affability. On the contrary, they made him aware of every part of himself: the observer, the recorder, the interpreter of nature and life.

He could not feel lonely on a long ramble in the woods, for he thoroughly enjoyed the society of a flock of little birds, a frisky squirrel, or an industrious muskrat. He understood the scream of the hen-hawk, the peep of the hy- lodes, and the dismal cry of the screech owl. While the interests of other people were being held by novelties of the world, Thoreau was enthralled by the novelties of the woods. While others in Concord sought the companionship of friends and neighbors at parties, in church, and at formal entertainments, Thoreau listened to the laugh of the loon on the pond, the chant of mosquitoes in their chapels beneath the trees, and the concert of frogs after a spring rain. The silence around him might be broken by the splash of a fish jumping from the placid water, but never by the raucous laughter of hilarious human associates. He considered companions no more important to himself than they were to a bee, a spider, or a cricket; to a dandelion, a pitcher plant, or goldenrod; to Walden Pond, the sun, or God. The wind

15Ibid., VII, 76.  
16Ibid., IX, 144.  
17Thoreau, Walden, II, 138.  
18Ibid., 152.
was his companion: the light breeze of summer, the sudden
gust of autumn, and the violent blast of winter. His friends
included the sassafras buds, expanding and swelling; pine
needles, rustling or falling at his feet; or catkins on a
drooping willow bough. He could be quite happy if he failed
completely to know some of the townspeople, or if he heard
only once a year the voices of others; but he welcomed the
nightly call of the hoot owl, the daily "thump" of the
hastily departing hare from her haunt beneath his floor, or
the honking of wild geese in spring and autumn.

Just as a person looks to an intimate friend for per-
fect understanding, Thoreau found harmony in association
with his "brute neighbors," or utmost satisfaction in his
solitude. In preference to association with Concord's busi-
ness men, he maintained that acquaintance with the bream in
Walden Pond made his life rich and eventful. This acquain-
tance, however, did not mean food to him nor money at the
fish market; it meant that he had a "little fishy friend in
the pond." Loitering on streets and joining in men's
idle talk were not worthwhile to him. He preferred, instead,
to watch a fox on his search for food: his careful smelling
for miles along favorable haunts, such as edges of rivers
and ponds; his following up the trail; his frequent turning

---

19 Ibid., 300.  
20 Ibid., 309.  
22 Ibid., 362.
and doubling; and his final seizing of a gallery of mice or other small prey. What use had he then for a companion?

He did not match his wits with a neighbor's over the popular checker board, but took delight in playing a similar game with a solitary loon on his own Walden Pond. Neither did he care to engage in competitive games or contests, but he would become deeply absorbed in watching a battle between the black and the red ants in his woodpile. While merchants took inventory of their stock, Thoreau recorded most carefully the winter phenomena, listing such items as the temperature of a cold day;23 the depth of the snow;24 the dates of the ripening of various species of berries;25 and the appearance of lichens.26

Politics did not win his enthusiasm and interest.27 He much preferred knowing the number of fin-rays of a fish, or how many scales composed the lateral line.28 Likewise, he cared little about the powerful politicians who changed people's minds, but he said, "I want to know the name of every bush that changed its tints as regularly as autumn came."29

While the gayety of society claimed many of his friends,

23Ibid., X, 161. 24Ibid., 101.
25Ibid., 68-69. 26Ibid., 75.
27Thoreau, Cape Cod and Miscellanies, IV, 480.
28Thoreau, Excursions and Poems, V, 118.
Thoreau said, "I thrive best on solitude." Hence, he was satisfied in his small house where flickering shadows played among the rafters, sparks danced up the chimney, and the wind sang between the rough boards or whistled through a knot-hole. Such evenings could not be lonely. The house-warming at Walden was his own industrious labor to make his cabin more comfortable for approaching winter. Entertainment was shingling the outside and plastering the walls within; refreshments were the plain fare of his evening meal; and he was both host and guest. He needed no companion when he rowed on the river, for he was interested in the minutest details of his surroundings, even his own reflection in the bubbles which he made with his paddles. He liked following, unhindered, his own inclinations in measuring things: Walden Pond, a frozen hawk or a captured owl, a pine log recently cut, a flake of November snow, or sometimes his own happiness. Hours passed, and the day slipped by; but Thoreau was content without human companionship, communing quite happily with nature and himself.

30 Ibid., X, 49.
31 Thoreau, Walden, II, 262-81.
33 Thoreau, Walden, II, 315.
34 Thoreau, Journal, X, 165.
35 Ibid., 64.
36 Ibid., IX, 324.
Thoreau realized that his personal friends and acquaintances considered him cold and unfriendly; but analyzing it as a difference in dispositions and preferences, he said, "It is not that I am too cold, but that our warmth and coldness are not of the same nature."  

Contacts with people of diverse interests added nothing to the happiness or profitableness of his life, and he had the courage to avoid such associations. On one occasion it was necessary for him to ride twelve miles in the company of a man with whom he had nothing in common. Feeling that silence was the best solution to the difficult situation, Thoreau treated his companion as if he were the victim of bronchitis, insanity, or idiocy. Thoreau's thorough acquaintance with himself and his intimacy with nature made such a withdrawal both possible and more profitable than efforts at comradeship. "Silence," he maintained, "is forever the most natural and the best manners."

Friendships with inharmonious associates inflicted upon Thoreau injuries which could be completely healed only by his abandonment of such friends. "By myself I can live and thrive, but in the society of incompatible friends, I starve." The fact that he found complete happiness in solitude is revealed also in a letter to Emerson, in which he said, "I have lately

---

got back to that glorious society called Solitude."41 There his serenity was pleasantly rippled by the fluttering of leaves, the slumberous breathing of the crickets, or the murmuring of the snipes; but it was never ruffled, as it often was in the presence of people.

Although lack of a conversationalist never bothered him, he welcomed occasional opportunities to talk with persons whose interests he understood and respected. He liked association with naturalists, transcendentalists, lecturers, and writers; a keeper of a lighthouse, or the master of a fishing vessel; Indians, Canadians, or Irishmen; a neighboring farmer, or the landlord of an inn. Of one proprietor he said, "Talking with our host is next best and instructive to talking with one's self."42 The preference for such solitariness was no evidence of arrogance or disdain; it was simply a realization that his interests were not harmonious with those of the surrounding throngs. "My life must seem as if it were passing on a higher level than that which I occupy. It must possess a dignity which will not allow me to be familiar."43

He frequently invited his intimate friends to Concord; likewise, he was often a guest in their homes. Such men as Thomas Cholmondeley, Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson,

41Thoreau, Familiar Letters, VI, 354.
42Thoreau, Excursions and Poems, V, 160.
and Harrison Blake were always interesting and inspiring, and Thoreau welcomed opportunities for occasional visits or excursions with them. Between visits letters were infrequent, but purposeful and lengthy. Thoreau cultivated these cherished friendships and gave as freely as he received; but he always maintained in his relations absolute sincerity and candidness, traits which sometimes made barriers between himself and others. Such was the case with Daniel Ricketson, who complained of Thoreau's not writing for two years, although the former had written repeatedly. Finally after numerous pleas from Ricketson for a renewal of their friendship, Thoreau replied honestly, though not very courteously,

You know that I never promised to correspond with you, and so when I do, I do more than I promised . . . You must not regard me as regular diet. . . . We are pretty sure, if we write at all, to send those thoughts which we cherish, to that one which we believe, will most religiously attend to them.\textsuperscript{44}

Sometimes an acquaintance insisted upon accompanying him on a ramble through the woods or on a voyage up the river, but Thoreau usually counted those hours practically lost. With only one or two exceptions, he found companions detrimental to his explorations and his contemplations, because their purpose in making such journeys was usually to satisfy their idle curiosity about him, to save themselves from boredom, or to pick up a few facts on which to base a feigned

\textsuperscript{44}Thoreau, \textit{Familiar Letters}, VI, 354.
knowledge or make an impression. Those people were neither instructive nor even helpful; so Thoreau preferred solitude and a stillness that encouraged profitable thinking. He admitted that sometimes it took him a week to recover completely from exposure to such companions.\footnote{45} Even after a reasonably pleasant association with his fellow-men, he invariably suspected that he would have counted the hours more profitably spent if he had been alone, exploring without hearing questions, and discovering without giving explanations. "I believe," he wrote, "there is no man with whom I can associate, who will not . . . spoil my afternoon."\footnote{46} Each week, in fact each day and hour, offered so many possibilities for new discoveries and so many opportunities for careful examination that he lamented an interruption or a loss of even one.

What if Thoreau did prefer taking long jaunts by himself? What if he did prefer green fields to silver teas? What if he did stay in his own important place and attend strictly to his own interesting business? His hours were filled to capacity with activity that materialized in his carefully kept journals. He was never weary by finding extra time at his disposal; neither did he resort to inconsequential things to pass that time away. He listened

\footnote{45}{Thoreau, \textit{Journal}, X, 49.}

\footnote{46}{\textit{Ibid.}, IX, 330.}
to the advice of an inner voice; lived exclusively, but found a contentment rich and rare; gave to the world ideas that were both alluring and estimable; and left in his wake admirers and followers whose numbers are steadily increasing. A solitary? Yes, but one whose life was his work, and who needed nothing else to make him happy.
CHAPTER VI

THE THINKER

Solitude served a more important purpose than merely making Thoreau happy; it prompted his deep thinking, which grew, perhaps, from an inherent curiosity about nature. Any subject or phase of nature that presented a challenge was from the first welcomed and eagerly pursued. It might be the ice on Walden Pond,¹ dead leaves,² or the trump of a bull frog, of which he said, "All questions take a new aspect from this sound."³ Because he loved the world of ideas as much as he did the world of natural things, his thoughts roamed from the fishes and pebbles in Walden Pond to the most serious thoughts of life and death, and in each field his clear, noble thinking brought him happiness. He wondered about all nature: water bugs, or great bream in the pond; rifts in the clouds, or starry nights; acorns and pine needles, or the songs of birds. But he also pondered long on the uselessness of the stir and worry of life, the accidents and circumstances that confused man, and the strangeness of death. Thus Thoreau was an example of his own idea of a

¹ Henry David Thoreau, Walden, II, 272.
² Thoreau, Excursions and Poems, V, 264-70.
³ Thoreau, Journal, VIII, 194.
philosopher, as expressed in his journal: "To a philosopher there is, in a sense, no great and no small."\(^4\)

Thoreau's study was the out-of-doors, a magnificent place with columns of tall pines and sturdy oaks, a frescoed ceiling of interlacing branches and glistening foliage, a deep carpet of dead leaves, light from the sun, and decorations of birds, flowers, great gray boulders, and glimpses of the bright blue sky or a rainbow. Great lessons surrounded him: sorrows symbolized by the thorns and brambles; new life prophesied by the new buds; stanch character in the deep-rooted oaks; ambition in the towering branches; visions and fancies in the floating clouds; affection in the clinging vines; difficulties in the massive rocks; but hope in each sunrise, in the brightness of the sky, and in the rainbow. Freedom was all around him. There, in the immanence of nature, was the foundation of his philosophy, for he saw principle running through all phenomena. He was a realist, in that he saw Nature as the manifestation of a real and profound substance.

He philosophized as he lived. Even if that philosophy was sometimes impractical, frequently Utopian, and usually unsocial, he practiced those principles in the conduct of his life and lived according to his own practical wisdom. Hence, because he searched into the reason and nature of

\(^4\)The Heart of Thoreau's Journals, edited by Odell Shepard, p. 274.
things, and because he found a rational solution there, he was able, too, to devise and follow his own code for living. He lived the life he imagined, and he lived the life he loved; moreover, that life was happy, because it was based on sound moral principles.

He wished to prove his doctrine that a man could live naturally, earn what he needed, and have leisure for study and culture. During his two years at Walden he did just that. He discovered how little he needed to eat, how much money was actually necessary, and how profitably he could spend his time in other ways than in merely making a living. Concerning this advocated simple life, he wrote, "In proportion as one simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex"; and again, "The problem of life becomes . . . more complicated as our material wealth is increased." His rigorously simplified living included a meagerly furnished little hut with rough walls and wide cracks; early risings and baths in the neighboring pond; the plainest of food and sometimes fewer than three meals a day; and clothes that showed neither neatness nor precision nor style, but a distinct appropriateness for rambles through undergrowth and over stones. His expenses were paid with the money that he earned occasionally in various trades and manners:

5 Thoreau, Walden, II, 356.

6 Thoreau, Familiar Letters, VI, 212.
surveying, carpentry, masonry, papering, and whitewashing, collecting specimens of fish for Agassiz, teaching, making pencils, and writing. Although these earnings were small, they were sufficient for his few expenditures. He was convinced that "there is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting a living," for "superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only." Wealth, in the sense of material riches, was nothing to him, for his fortune consisted of Nature's store of treasures: a newly discovered flower in a swamp, a fine specimen of fish in the pond, the friendliness of birds and small animals, and the rich colors of each season. "A man's El Dorado," he wrote to Harrison Blake, "is where he lives." Working so little, he was free to study nature and to keep his journal; he was free to live leisurely. He enjoyed the fruits of his growing brain and his vivid imagination, as well as the views captured by his sharp eyes and the sounds caught by his keen ears. He watched spring come in with gentle breezes and swelling buds, saw it change to summer with rustling reeds and thick foliage, kept an eye on the autumnal changes, and then buffeted winter with her sharp wind and flurry of snow.

7 According to H. H. Hoeltje, records of his assistance in checking the boundaries of the township of Concord are in the town records.

8 Thoreau, Cape Cod and Miscellanies, IV, 461.

9 Thoreau, Walden, II, 362.

10 Thoreau, Familiar Letters, VI, 347.
No daily routine of business called him from his boat on the river; no duties at home made him hurry along in the late afternoon. His advocated simplicity was summed up in his advice, "Let your affairs be as two or three and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million, count half a dozen, or keep your accounts on your thumb-nail . . . instead of three meals a day, but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five."\textsuperscript{11}

This simple life led him to self-knowledge. According to his own philosophy of living, he lived by his beliefs and followed them to logical conclusions; but sometimes his seeking the good life was made difficult by the mechanical world about him. Of the increase in improvements in the factories, he said:

\begin{quote}
I cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men get clothing. The condition of the operatives is becoming every day more like that of the English; and it cannot be wondered at, since, as far as I have observed, the principal object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Of industry in his own life he wrote,

\begin{quote}
I have tried trade; but I found that it would take ten years to get under way in that, and that then I should probably be on my way to the devil. I was actually afraid that I might by that time be doing what is called a good business.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Following the same trend of thought, he later wrote, "Rather

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] Ibid., p. 29.
\item[13] Ibid., p. 77.
\end{footnotes}
than love, than money, than fame, give me truth."14 That
truth he found in nature, where he was kin to every tree,
became a friend to all wildlife, and identified his life
with universal life. He further emphasized his ideas of
the good life by writing: "To live like a philosopher is
to live, not foolishly like other men, but wisely and ac-
cording to universal laws";15 and again: "As long as pos-
sible live free and uncommitted. It matters but little
whether you are committed to a farm or a county jail."16

Thoreau's daily actions are evidence of his principles
for everyday living. Firmly believing that "the best way
to correct a mistake is to make it right,"17 he was always
sincere in his relations with others. In sending specimens
of fish to the naturalist, Agassiz, he named one wrong, but
in the next letter he corrected the error.18 He believed,
too, in keeping himself free from anything that was harmful
or injurious. He was morally free from guilt or sin, and
was convinced that "mere innocence will tame any ferocity."19

14Ibid., p. 364.
15Thoreau, Cape Cod and Miscellanies, IV, 348.
16Thoreau, Walden, II, 93.
17Thoreau, Familiar Letters, VI, 50.
18Ibid., p. 129.
19Thoreau, Journal, IX, 408.
Even Thoreau's withdrawal from society, and his preference for evenings spent alone can be accounted for in his principles for rich living. In nature he found a field where he was free to seek happiness in his own way, and he considered his simple life profitable. His creed for daily living did not include companions, and he justified himself in that seeming inhospitality by saying, "Is he not hospitable who entertains thoughts?" Observation of nature and constant meditation were more important to Thoreau than necessities of life. "Sell your clothes," he said, "and keep your thoughts." On another occasion he said, "My thoughts are my company." As stated in the preceding chapter, Thoreau found himself good company; he stood alone like a "denuded pine in a clearing." With silence and instructive nature all about him, he lived joyfully according to his own code, saying, "Woe to him who wants a companion, for he is unfit to be a companion even to himself."

Practically every detail of Thoreau's daily living revealed his policies or theories about the universe, the soul, or living. He even refrained from buying things until long after he began to want them, so that he would fully extract their sweetness or their utility. Nothing escaped

---

20 Ibid., VIII, 109. 21 Thoreau, Walden, II, 361.
22 Thoreau, Journal, X, 224. 23 Ibid., 77.
24 Ibid., VIII, 75.
his notice, and upon almost everything could he base an assumption or a meaning that made fruitful thinking. "Any reverence," he said, "even for a material thing, proceeds from an elevation of character."\(^{25}\)

When he was twenty-one years old, he wrote in his journal, "Have no affinity for what is shocking."\(^{26}\) To him avenues of impression and expression were always reflected on the face, and sometimes that face revealed that the body was master of the soul; for example, he wrote of man in general, "If his look curdles all hearts, let him not complain of a sour reception."\(^{27}\) Evidently he believed that a great heart made a grand face.

Thoreau reached his own conclusions about minor personal problems, too. He expressed preference for simple, original names instead of those that were either jaw-breaking or melodious, but said, "A name is at most a convenience, and carries no information with it."\(^{28}\) At another time he recorded the inference that "our only true names are our nicknames."\(^{29}\)

Although most of Thoreau's deep thinking\(^{30}\) concerned man, his daily living, his progress, and his successes,

\(^{25}\)Ibid., p. 76.  
\(^{26}\)Ibid., p. 206.  
\(^{27}\)Ibid., X, 212.  
\(^{28}\)Ibid., 406.  
\(^{29}\)Thoreau, Excursions and Poems, V, 236.  
\(^{30}\)Powys closes his scathing disparagement of Thoreau with the words: ". . . he was neither a profound thinker nor a great writer, and that is the truth."
there is proof that he followed some of the theories of the philosophers, both of the past and of his own time. He was, however, in no sense sponsor of a particular philosophical system; it is better to say that he critically examined some practices, showed interest in some, and followed some that seemed to have a peculiar relevancy to his major task of living. Evidently he was, in a sense, an animist; still there is nothing to make us think that he believed that inanimate objects and the phenomena of nature were endowed with personal life or a living soul. His journals hold no proof that he ascribed a soul or spirit to certain animals, trees, rivers, or mountains; he doubtless did not believe that storm-clouds or the sun, moon, and stars were ensouled or inspired. He did, however, believe in the existence of the soul or spirit apart from matter. He postulated the theory that the living, visible body had an unseen double, or spirit, which animated it during waking hours, which could leave at will during dreams, and which returned when it was so minded. He wrote during the fall of 1840,

A part of me, which has reposed in silence all day, goes abroad at night like an owl, and has its day. At night we recline and nestle, and infold ourselves in our being. Each night I go home to rest. Each night I am gathered to my fathers. The soul departs out of the body, and sleeps in God, a divine slumber. As she withdraws herself, the limbs droop and the eyelids fall, and Nature reclaims her clay again.\footnote{Thoreau, \textit{Journal}, IX, 69.}
In several of the doctrines included in Neoplatonism we find the beginning of later American thought. The belief that nature is "language" and that every natural object has a meaning which transcends the natural world is simply a step toward Transcendentalism, a philosophy which profoundly modified the literature and thought of New England. Although the precursors of Neoplatonism are philosophers, and of Transcendentalism poets and men of letters, the Neoplatonists furnished the background of the thought which, after several additions and variations, eventually became the American Transcendentalism which Thoreau helped promote. Neoplatonism also prepared his mind for the Oriental translations which later influenced his thinking; thus it was Neoplatonism which stood at the cross-roads where Eastern and Western thought met.

Probably the predominant phase of all Thoreau's philosophy was this belief in Transcendentalism. He actually sought true knowledge of all things, material and immaterial, human and divine. He tried to pierce the unseen, to explain existence, and to build a foundation of meaning under the passing phenomena of life. The Transcendentalists in America, however, extended the philosophy beyond its usual meaning, and Thoreau is an excellent example of those thinkers. He preferred to rely upon his own intuition rather than on the authority of anyone. His unfailing
assurance that whatever his intuition said was right was always right gave him courage to explore, to discover, and to philosophize for himself. He exalted individuality; therefore, he made himself a distinctive character, living as he pleased, ignoring laws that provoked him, and upholding whatever he thought was right. He frowned on imitation and repetition, and so he did not follow consistently either pencil-making or teaching. He even noticed the lack of repetition in nature, and remarked, "No two trees wear ice alike," because differences prevailed in such things as shapes of leaves and limbs, the irregularities of growth, and the gnarls. He broke with the past, saying, "My life as essentially belongs to the present as that of a willow tree to its spring." He insisted on the importance of plain, simple living and deep thinking, saying, in a letter to Harrison Blake, "Keep up the fires of thought, and all will go well." Above all, he loved isolation and solitude, a trait typical of Transcendentalists.

To Thoreau, as a Transcendentalist, nature was a part of divinity. Moreover, he so thoroughly believed in this idealistic conception of nature that he could converse with the Concord River, understand the trees "drooping in sympathy" during a drizzling rain, and be rejuvenated by the song of

33Ibid., 256.  
34Thoreau, Familiar Letters, VI, 356.
the wood thrush. He said of that song:

Whenever a man hears it, he is young, and Nature is in her spring. Whenever he hears it, it is a new world and a free country, and the gates of heaven are not shut against him. 35

At another time he wrote,

It is a fountain of youth to all my senses. It changes all hours to an eternal morning. It banishes all trivialness. It reinstates me in my dominion, makes me lord of creation, is chief musician of my court. This minstrel sings in a time, a heroic age, with which no event in the village can be contemporary. 36

One of the chief glories of such belief was the fuller recognition of the companionship that man bore with every phase of nature. Thoreau treated sympathetically all flowers, trees, birds, and animals. The felling of a giant pine was sad to him, and he realized that the hawks would mourn for its lofty limbs. He thought that it would be fitting for the village bell to sound a knell when a plant two centuries old had ceased to exist. On another occasion he was "the chief if not the only mourner" 37 at the cutting of a great elm. When he killed a tortoise for scientific purposes, he lost some of his self-respect, for he considered himself a murderer.

In a great deal of Thoreau's thinking were some of the principles of philosophy as conceived and practiced in the

35The Heart of Thoreau's Journal, edited by Odell Shepard, p. 140.

36Ibid., p. 178.

37Ibid., p. 230.
Orient. Even if interest in the East is evident in practically everything that he wrote, Orientalism seems only an influence in his thinking, rather than the source of his philosophy. 38 He was not interested in systems; hence, he was not a disciple of any particular leader, but said, "I do not prefer one religion or philosophy to another . . . To the philosopher all sects, all nations are alike. I like Brahma, Hari, Buddha, the Great Spirit, as well as God." 39

Nevertheless, he liked the Oriental philosophy to the extent that he frequently compared himself with the Hindus, and often interpreted his experiences and observations through Oriental imagery and associations. Cape Cod villages were strange to him, and he felt the strangeness "as if he were in a town in China." 40 In reply to one of Mrs. Emerson's letters, he said that her sadness reminded him of sadness in China, writing,

Only think of some sadness in Pekin--unseen and unknown there. What a mine it is! Would it not weigh down the Celestial Empire, with all its gay Chinese? Our sadness is not sad, but our cheap joys. 41

In musing on the practicalness of life, Thoreau wrote in

38 Of Oriental philosophy and Thoreau, Van Doren said, "He neither embraced it lightly as a cloisteral dream, nor sounded it studiously for its deepest meaning."

39 The Heart of Thoreau's Journals, edited by Odell Shepard, p. 50.

40 Thoreau, Familiar Letters, VI, 246.

41 Ibid., p. 89.
the Week, "The Brahman never proposes courageously to assault evil, but patiently to starve it out . . . The Brahman’s virtue consists in doing, not right, but arbitrary things."42 Likewise, he wrote of success in life in terms of the Orientals, quoting, "Greatness doth not approach him who is forever looking down; and all who are looking high are growing poor."43 He frequently recorded and described his observations in nature from an Oriental point of view. The grace of a weeping willow on the banks of the Merrimac brought to Thoreau, not an appreciation of New England’s beauty, but a reminder of the enchantment of the Orient, for he recorded in the Week, "It had not a New England but an Oriental character, reminding us of trim Persian gardens, of Haroun Alraschid, and the artificial lakes of the East."44 Finding pollen on the pond, rocks, and rotten wood, Thoreau was once reminded of the "sulphur showers" in Oriental literature. He wrote, "Even in Calida’s drama of Sacontala, we read of ‘rills dyed yellow with the golden dust of the lotus.’"45 Toadstools attracted his attention, but to him

42Thoreau, Week, I, 146.

43Thoreau, Cape Cod and Miscellanies, IV, 462. Van Doren said that Oriental sentences stayed in Thoreau’s mind, and that he often annoyed the neighbors by repeating bits of Oriental philosophy.

44Thoreau, A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers, I, p. 44.

45Thoreau, Walden, II, 351.
they were "parasols of Chinese mandarins."\textsuperscript{46} The fish that he observed during his week's voyage on the neighboring rivers suggested the natural history of China;\textsuperscript{47} the whitened bones of a hog reminded him of his reading in Confucian books;\textsuperscript{48} his baths in Walden Pond made him think of Chinese customs;\textsuperscript{49} and he likened his own food to that of a Hindu.\textsuperscript{50}

Prior to his receipt in 1855 of twenty handsome volumes of Oriental literature from Thomas Cholmondeley, of England, Thoreau was familiar enough with the religions of Asia to compare the Oriental beliefs with those of the Occident. In praise of the Hindu Scriptures, he heartily recommended to all readers that they read the Bhagvat Gita,\textsuperscript{51} saying, "The New Testament is remarkable for its pure morality; the best of the Hindu Scripture for its pure intellectual. The reader is nowhere raised and sustained in a higher, purer, or rarer region of thought than in the Bhagvat Gita."\textsuperscript{52} Moreover, he was certain that Europeans and Americans had never done justice to the philosophers of

\textsuperscript{46}Thoreau, \textit{Excursions and Poems}, V, 14.

\textsuperscript{47}Thoreau, \textit{Week}, I, 23.


\textsuperscript{49}Ibid., p. 98. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{50}Ibid., p. 240.

\textsuperscript{51}Canby thought that the sale of the \textit{Week} was seriously affected by Thoreau's praise of the works of the Orientals, and by his comparison of their scriptures to our Bible.

\textsuperscript{52}Thoreau, \textit{Week}, I, 142.
either Persia or India.

It is true that Thoreau was never an ardent follower of any particular phase of Orientalism; however, in a letter to Harrison Blake in 1849 he wrote, "To some extent, and at rare intervals even I am a yogi." There was much in Thoreau's daily living which conformed to the Yoga discipline, and which confirms the author's statement about himself. His living alone at Walden fulfilled the injunction that an ascetic should live alone, and his deep contemplation was like the reverie of the Hindus. In Walden he wrote:

Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories, and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiselessly through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveler's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. I realized what the Orientals meant by contemplation and the forsaking of words.

His mental discipline corresponded to the practice of the yogi, for he believed that fixed attention upon an object, either abstract or concrete, brought conscious identification with

53Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*, VI, 175.
54MacMahan calls Thoreau a "natural ascetic."
it. "I seem to be more constantly merged in nature," he said. Upon hearing the crow's call, he wrote, "It is not merely crow calling to crow, for it speaks to me, too. I am part of one great creature with him." Once while watching some geese overhead and thinking exclusively of them, he found himself "flapping his sides with his elbows, as with wings, and uttering something like the syllables mow-ack, with a nasal twang and twist of the head." He so closely identified himself with nature that in his Journal of October 26, 1857, he wrote the following:

These regular phenomena of the seasons get at last to be ... simply and plainly phenomena or phases of my life. The seasons and all their changes are in me. I see not a dead eel or floating snake, or a gull, but it rounds my life ... Almost I believe the Concord would not rise and overflow its banks, were I not here.

It was, however, on occasions of that "undisturbed solitude and stillness" that Thoreau probed the deep recesses of his own mind, and reached conclusions that had no connection with the Orient. During such hours he mused on man's daily conduct, his habits, and his ambition. In daily behavior he believed that "we are double-edged blades, and every time we whet our virtues, the return stroke straps our vice." He decided that "it is not easy to make our lives

56 The Heart of Thoreau's Journals, edited by Odell Shepard, p. 94.
57 Ibid., 213.
58 Ibid., 214.
59 Ibid., 283.
60 Thoreau, Week, I, 236.
respectable by any course of activity . . . we must repeatedly withdraw into our shells of thought." Likewise, he believed that the mind could be permanently profaned by the habit of attending to trivial things, because soon all thoughts would be tinged with triviality. On the other hand, all earnest effort seemed commendable, because that endeavor was elevating, whether the purpose was fully accomplished or not. In a letter to Harrison Blake he said, "Each reaching and aspiration is an instinct with which all nature consists and cooperates, and therefore it is not in vain."  

Although Thoreau gave little credence to the Hindu theory of Fate, he did write in his Journal, "Men are born to succeed, not to fail." That success lay in man's adjustment and its difficulties, and Thoreau was both believer and follower of his own maxim, "If you cannot travel the upper road, then go the lower . . . they equally lead to Heaven."  

Concerning life and death, Thoreau expounded the idea that the body and soul were one, by saying, "Our life is but the soul made known by its fruits, the body." Man's duty, then, lay in one channel: to make a perfect body.

61 Thoreau, Familiar Letters, VI, 186.  
62 Ibid., 361.  
64 Ibid., VIII, 193.  
65 Ibid., 198.
He believed that the visible appearance was but an outward actualization of the inner life, and that the soul, therefore, was the guardian or dictator over its own physical realm. The body held the tragedies and comedies of life. Some of his thoughts about death were based on nature's changes; for example, he said, "Dead leaves teach us how to die."\textsuperscript{66} It is in the journals that he kept during the winters that we find more of his ideas of death than in any other record. Revealing again his love for music, as discussed in Chapter I, he defined death as "that expressive pause in the music of the blast."\textsuperscript{67} In 1859, when his father died and his own health was declining, he made the following entries: "We partially die ourselves, through sympathy, at the death of each of our friends or near relatives";\textsuperscript{68} and two days later, "When we have experienced many disappointments, such as the loss of friends, the notes of birds cease to affect us as they did."\textsuperscript{69} Despite the sadness of death, Thoreau always realized an elevating influence in the experience, as is shown in two journal entries: "The death of friends should inspire us as much as their lives;"\textsuperscript{70} and, "Friends are as often brought nearer together as separated by death."\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{66}Thoreau, \textit{Excursions and Poems}, IV, 269.
\textsuperscript{67}Thoreau, \textit{Journal}, X, 51. \textsuperscript{68}Ibid., p. 333.
\textsuperscript{69}Ibid., p. 342. \textsuperscript{70}Ibid., p. 414.
\textsuperscript{71}Ibid., p. 14.
Thus we find that Thoreau spent most of his years living happily, according to his own principles. Sometimes those principles involved minor issues, everyday practices, and personal problems; sometimes they concerned moral, social, or political questions. But all terminated in his philosophy for desirable living. Transcendentalism and Orientalism modified his views; yet they strengthened his individualism, his love of solitude, and his convictions about the aim in life. His philosophy made the laws of the universe simple, made poverty a blessing, and made life rich and full. He summed up his practical wisdom by saying,

I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in the common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of things.\(^2\)

In conclusion, I think that I have, in a measure, realized my original aim: to point out overlooked but unmistakable traits of Thoreau's character more as a person than as an author, more as an individual thinker than as an accepted

philosopher, more as a friend than as a leader. I have not maintained that he is a great writer or a distinguished philosopher. I have not contended that his humor is noteworthy, or that his poetic ability is unexcelled. I have not claimed that Thoreau deserves a place among the great men of letters. But I do hold the opinion that he is of superior importance in his knowledge about, his perfect harmony with, and his poetic appreciation of the wildness and beauty of nature. I do affirm that he was far more than a sober-faced rebel who spent much time in seclusion; that he displayed real affection for his fellowman and his family; and that he knew God, perhaps even more intimately than his Christian neighbors who were caught in the bustle of the work-a-day world.

He proclaimed the joy of life; he pointed the way to those who would live simply, leisurely, and richly; but he never, in poem, letter, journal, or book, demanded that others imitate him in devoting their lives to the study of nature. He made no protest against society. He merely withdrew quietly and inconspicuously, and followed his own philosophical advice, "that everyone mind his own business, and endeavor to be what he was made." \[73\] Although that withdrawal took him only two miles from Concord, he lived in another world and was popular in his own social set, which consisted

of sparrows, snowbirds, muskrats, bream, and other well-known inhabitants of Walden.

His journals are neither brilliant nor inspiring; his poems are not exquisitely beautiful; his letters are not gems of literature. But in all his writings are a genuine love and appreciation of nature, a pleasing originality and wit, and the home-spun philosophy of a friendly sage. He recognized all natural phenomena, searched beyond outward appearances, and maintained that the facts of nature were as sacred as moral principles. His accounts are, without doubt, true conceptions of nature; his philosophy is a wise conception of life.

Because he was always simply himself, and because it is true that "the author's character is read from title-page to end,"74 we need read only what Thoreau has actually written to realize his humor, his affection for home and close friends, his religion, and his practical wisdom. He proved his wisdom by living the way he wanted to live; he proved his courage by renouncing social conventions and upholding whatever he felt was right; and he proved his importance as an artist with his pen by leaving such sympathetic accounts of Nature that every reader's eyes and ears may be sharpened for her delights.

74 Thoreau, Journal, VII, 22.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Texts

Thoreau, Henry D., "From Walden Pond" (an unpublished letter), Saturday Review of Literature, XXI (1929), 9.


Biography

Atkinson, J. Brooks, Henry Thoreau, the Cosmic Yankee, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1927.


Criticism


---------, "The Strange Genius, Thoreau: Viewed as a Freak and a Bum in Early Concord Days," News Week, XIV(1939), 42.