

THOREAU AND NATURE

AT THE beginning of the nineteenth century the religious revival as well as the romantic movement in literature in England as represented by Wordsworth and Coleridge, the new philosophy as set forth in Germany by Kant, and the social unrest in France all came at length to bear upon American culture. As a result of these influences, no doubt, or as a part of them, there was a movement among the writers of New England known as Transcendentalism. As was the romantic movement in England, so was the transcendental movement in America a breaking away from conventional ideas, seeking individual freedom of thought, an indulgence of man's spiritual instincts, and a "return to Nature," or as has been expressed, "a struggle for fresh-air." Emerson seems to have been the first to have expressed this transcendental philosophy when he published his essay on "Nature." In it he brings out his independence of tradition and declares that in communion with nature is the only true solitude. Whatever influence this essay may have had upon other minds of the time, the most outstanding is the fact that it struck a note of corresponding tone in Henry David Thoreau, at that time a student of Harvard University.

Perhaps no writer who was so little appreciated and so misunderstood in his own time and by his own friends now holds such a place of esteem and admiration. Critics, and especially Lowell and Stevenson, have misrepresented him in their unjust criticisms. Instead of knowing Thoreau in his many aspects they have stressed the fact that he spent his life, as they say, renouncing his fellow-men and giving up interest in human affairs. Others have said that he only practiced what Emerson preached or that he is merely the echo of Emerson's philosophy. In this respect we are inclined to think of Echo as Thoreau did when he said, "Echo is not a feeble imitation but

rather the original, as if some rural Orpheus played over the strain again to show how it should sound." If we know Thoreau the man, we can readily see that he was too independent, too much a transcendentalist to be governed by the ideas and authority or dictates of another. It is granted that he was influenced by Emerson to some extent in his views, but, to begin with, the love of Nature and the transcendental ideas were intuitive with Thoreau.

The story is told that as a little boy, when asked why he was awake so late in the night, he said, "I've been looking through the stars to see if I couldn't see God behind them." That expresses his very attitude toward Nature. Later, when he began to live with Nature, he expressed the same thought when he said, "My profession is to be always on the alert, to find God in nature, to know His lurking places, to attend all the oratorios and operas in Nature." Long before he had made this his profession, however, he loved the out-of-doors. We are told that while going to school he studied out of school-hours in the school of nature. After his graduation at Harvard he and his brother had a small school in which he introduced the study of nature by observation by taking the students on daily walks through the woods and fields around Concord. Then Thoreau went to live in the home of Emerson as general "handy-man," and from that association he came into contact with other persons who were full of courage, hope, and thoughts concerning a nobler relation with God. This stimulated the already awakened spirit within him. But Thoreau was Thoreau from beginning to the end as is shown by his thoughtfulness as a child, his independence as a young man when he refused to devote his life to making pencils, and his strong individuality in later life. His individuality or individualism indeed made him eccentric and often he emphasized the appearance of eccentricity merely "to mystify the gossiping

people of Concord." It was his love of Nature and his intimate relations with Nature that made them wonder most. On one occasion a very practical-minded person or at least a very critical one said, "Henry talks about Nature as if she had been born and brought up in Concord."

Thoreau tells us in his Journal that from youth he "led a life aloof from the society of men." He was happier when away from civilization and was much friendlier with the robin or the woodchuck. He read much and was thus "associated with men on other grounds." Homer was to him the greatest poet and his study of the classics no doubt helped to make him what he was, not only affecting his style of writing but also his relation to Nature. Other writers that influenced him were Goethe, Wordsworth, and Carlyle. We can not help but remember, though, that the initial impulse was already in Thoreau and all outside influences were merely reinforcement. He was a typical, natural transcendentalist, affected by the aspirations of the movement and "exemplifying more fully than anyone else its search for Truth in external nature."

At an early age Thoreau accustomed himself to observe all phenomena of the earth and sky in his walks around Concord. When only eighteen years of age he began keeping his Journal, recording observations and remarks. He was a great collector of flowers, rocks, bugs, or anything to which his interest was directed on his journeys. He soon conceived the idea of making a chart or calendar of the seasons in their order, noting the appearance of flowers and birds, and he accepted nothing except from actual experience. Emerson said of him that as a student of Nature "there was wonderful fitness of body and mind." This seemed to Thoreau his life work—to investigate Nature under the light of idealism and to report what he saw. He seemed to have more than the usual five senses, as Emerson also remarked, and all of the five highly developed. He not only saw the

flowers and birds in their various colors, and color meant much to him; he not only heard the thrush's song and the telephone wires vibrating in the wind, which he calls his Æolian harp; but he tasted the many kinds and qualities of wines that are bottled up in skins of countless berries "that men may picnic with Nature"; he detected by smell the sassafras, new leaves, and hickory buds, and said that there were odors enough in Nature to remind one of everything if a person had lost every sense but smell; he felt the winter wind and the summer breezes. It would be interesting to note the sounds he heard and recorded. He said, "Nature always possesses a certain sonorousness, as in the hum of insects, the booming of ice, the crowing of cocks in the morning, and the barking of dogs at night." In contrast to the noises of civilization he said, "Nature makes no noise. The howling storm, the rustling leaf, the pattering rain are no disturbance; there is an essential harmony in them." We feel his exultant joy when he says, "My heart leaps out of my mouth at the sound of the wind in the woods." Again we might study colors as treated by Thoreau, who saw seasons and landscapes through colors. He "loves the few homely colors of Nature in winter—her strong, wholesome browns, her sober and primeval grays, her celestial blue, her vivacious green, her pure, cold, snowy white." He saw beautiful rainbow tints even in the shell of the clam "buried in mud at the bottom of the river." The five senses to him were not mere organs but "the gateways of the soul."

For two years Thoreau lived on the banks of Walden Pond in a cabin of his own making not entirely because he wanted to renounce his fellowmen and rid himself of public affairs, for he did not live a hermit's life, although he tells us he preferred the inhabitants of the wood, but that he might better study Nature by living in her midst. The one outstanding quality that made him different from other writers of

Nature was his ardent yearning for all wildness. The wild to him was living Nature. This wildness for which he longed was, as he expressed it, "a nature which I cannot put my foot through, woods where the wood-thrush forever sings, where the hours are early morning ones and the day is forever improved, where I might have a fertile unknown for a soil about me." And again he says, "I yearn for one of those old, meandering, dry, uninhabited roads, which lead away from towns, which conduct us to the outside of the earth—where your head is more in heaven than your feet are on the earth." Primitive nature, he thought, brought him nearer to God. Storms and swamps had a strong appeal for him. He liked to feel the storm and considered it a luxury to stand in a swamp, "scenting the sweet-fern and bilberry blows." Once upon the sight of a woodchuck he "felt a thrill of savage delight and was tempted to devour him raw for the wildness he represented." Thoreau admired the Indian on account of his primitive nature and ability to understand nature. "The charm of the Indian to me," he said, "is that he stands free and unconstrained in Nature, is her inhabitant and not her guest, and wears her easily and gracefully." One could almost say the same thing of Thoreau, for he was certainly at home in the woods and fields of Concord, free to come and go as he pleased.

Next to the study of nature, literature was his profession. The Walden experience produced the book by which he is best known, a book which deals with the plain facts of Nature, told so charmingly that it is almost like reading a picture-book. It is full of word pictures and "poetry of the open world." It was his intimacy with Nature that makes the charm. Because he was on the most intimate terms, we find her in most characteristic poses; because he was conversant with her, we find her speaking truths to him. His real neighbors, his real friends, were the things of Nature—the woods, the river, the pond. Of the com-

parison of his companionship of men with that of Nature he says that his thoughts were none the better for the company of men, as they almost always were for the company of the pine tree and the meadow. With them there was "no frivolity, no vulgarity, no changeableness, no prejudice, no misunderstanding, no meaningless disputes, no disappointments." It seemed that Nature in return for the love he had for her revealed secrets to him that others were deprived of. He was so completely a part of Nature that the inhabitants of the wood and meadow did not fear him or distrust him, but were his neighbors. From this book *Walden* we learn to know not only the pond, the road, and the woods, but we learn to know Thoreau himself. It reveals his character as well as the characteristics of Nature.

Although *Walden* is considered a natural history classic and although Thoreau wrote essays, "A Winter Walk," "Wild Apples," "Walking," and others that are classed as natural history essays, he was not a naturalist in a scientific way. He was averse to all science. He was not accurate as is a scientist, a fact for which he has been criticized, but accuracy was not his desire. He did not care for analysis of any fact of nature. It was merely what Nature suggested to him or was the symbol of that he cared for. Facts were nothing to him as mere facts. He sought rather to know the habitat of plants and animals, their habits, and the motives behind those habits. He knew when each flower bloomed, when certain birds made their appearance. He knew bird songs and on one occasion compared the note of a grosbeak to a "tanager which had gotten rid of its hoarseness." His interest in flowers and birds was connected with Nature, the meaning of which he did not try to explain. When asked for a memoir of his observations for the Natural History Society, he said, "Why should I? To detach the description from its connection in my mind would make it no longer

true or valuable to me." It was not the fact that was important to him but the impression on his mind. If he did make mistakes in his records, and the specialized naturalist of today would find many no doubt, he got real joy out of doing what he did and has given other people the inspiration to use their eyes as he did. He did not know the names of as many flowers and birds as one would expect after his many years of observation, and through his Journal we find such statements as, "I should like to know the birds better. I hear their various notes ringing through the woods. What musicians compose our woodland choir?" And still when he does not know their names he tells us that his good genius had withheld their names from him that he might better learn their character. He appears always as a naturalist who is learning rather than one who has mastered the facts of nature.

In all of Thoreau's accounts of Nature we find personification such as we find in the stories of Greek mythology. He loved Nature as a child to whom the moon, sun, flowers, and birds were people. He treated them as people, reverencing their secrets. His description of the battle of the three ants on his wood-pile is no less important than that of Achilles avenging the death of Patroclus. Flowers, personified to him, planted themselves along the woodland road, they too seeking "freedom to worship God" in their way. In early June, when woods are putting forth leaves, he compares summer to a camper who "is pitching his tent."

This seeing beyond the external aspects of Nature makes us realize that Thoreau saw not only with the outward eye and ear, but with an inward eye and ear of a poet and felt, with the soul of a poet, a kinship with the inhabitants of the wild. His depth of perception is his most outstanding characteristic, and for that he can be considered more as a poet than as a naturalist. As it has been said, his study of Nature was not for the advancement of science; his desire

was to find the symbolic meaning hidden in every form of Nature. To him every flower had some thought. He said that the poet is he who can write pure mythology today and that "one poetizes when he takes a fact out of Nature into spirit." "Nature and poet publish each other's truths." Although Thoreau's poetry is not good as poetry, he had the spirit of poetry within him and this spirit is manifested at the very best in his prose.

In his book, *A Week on Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and, indeed, all through his Journals, disorderly as they are, there is a gallery of beautiful word-pictures of Nature in her many aspects. He shows man's dependence on Nature by the fact that even their boat in which the trip was made was fashioned from the pattern given by the bird and fish—the bird as to sails and prow, and the fish as to breadth of beam, setting of oars, and form and position of rudder. As they set off on their sail for a week, he says, "The flags and bulrushes courtesied a God-speed," and "Nature seemed to have adorned herself for our departure with a profusion of fringes and curls, mingled with the bright tint of flowers." On Sunday of that week he says, "The landscape was clothed in a mild and quiet light, in which the woods and fences checkered and partitioned it with new regularity, and rough and uneven fields stretched away with lawn-like smoothness to the horizon, and the clouds, finely distinct and picturesque, seemed a fit drapery to hang over fairyland." His figures are well-chosen and impressive. Who, after reading him, will not always remember the bluebird as carrying the sky on its back or soaring hawks as "kites without strings." He creates pictures in the reader's mind by such expressions as these: "The song sparrow is heard in fields and pastures, setting the midsummer day to music," or when he speaks of dragon-flies, "How lavishly they are painted! How cheap was the paint! How free was the fancy of their Creator!"

But not only to study birds, beasts, and flowers, did Thoreau spend his life in wandering over his familiar country-side, not only to look upon the landscape as a poet, but it was his hope of finding God in Nature that led him on and on. Foerster says, "His life was not a getting-on, or a service, or a duty, but a quest of the Holy Grail, undertaken in all purity of mind and body and soul, and in the fulness of faith and devotion." Thoreau thought that he could best carry on this quest if he reduced living to bare necessities and alienated himself from men. That led to the Walden experiment. He has said that he yearned for the wildness of Nature, and yet at another time he said that he liked best of all "the still but varied landscape" of Concord. The wildness after all served only as a background, for he says, "What is Nature unless there is human life passing within it? Many joys and many sorrows are the lights and shadows in which she shines most beautiful." We are inclined to think upon him as one intent upon the external nature and the quest of her hidden meanings; but his writings show that he was as much absorbed with the inner spiritual nature of man. He says, "It is vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves," and again, "Man is all in all; Nature is nothing but as she draws him out and reflects him." What he finds in Nature then is his own relation to it. The earth is but the "lining of (his) inmost soul exposed." We learn this religion of his from such expressions as these: "The seasons and all their changes are in me," and "Each humblest plant or weed stands there to express some thought or mood of ours." He believed in the perfect correspondence of Nature to man. To him this correspondence meant that in order for one to see the beauties in Nature or her real meaning, he must make his life "more moral, more pure, and innocent."

It is his attitude toward man's relation to Nature that is most difficult for us to understand, and still it was of great concern

to Thoreau. We prefer to think of him as a lover of Nature, in whose works it seems, as Lowell says, "as if all outdoors had kept a diary and become its own Montaigne." In his treatment of Nature there is a deep feeling of appreciation, sentiment, the truest sincerity, and a poet's spirit, so that he well deserves the name of Poet-Naturalist.

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USEFUL BULLETIN FOR ENGLISH TEACHERS

The January issue of *The English Leaflet*, published by the New England Association of Teachers of English, contains an article rich in suggestions to teachers who must supervise school newspapers. "Advantages to the Student and the School of a High-School Page" is the title under which Millie A. Severance, tells of training pupils to prepare material for a school page in a local newspaper.