

THOREAU

BY

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There are two of the many essays on Thoreau that are probably more read than all the others put together, and because of their authorship—Emerson and Lowell—have greater weight in the minds of readers than would any expression of opinion from any other source as to Thoreau as a man of letters or as a naturalist. But the world is not always wise in bowing down to greatness, for greatness is very sure, in the long run, to overestimate itself. Neither Emerson nor Lowell was fitted to the task he undertook, though he doubtless thought he was. It is true that Emerson's article prefacing Thoreau's "Excursions" is a biographical sketch merely, but in it are phrases that are open to criticism. As an instance, take Emerson's estimate of Thoreau's ambition, or what he calls a lack of it. Now, so great is the influence carried with every word of Emerson that probably not one reader in a hundred but regrets that Thoreau preferred to be "captain of a huckleberry party" to leader of a political one, and that he held "pounding beans" to be better than "the pounding of empires." There is the error. What we sadly need is an infusion of intellect into the lower strata of man's activities. There will always be brains and to spare in professional life,—great leaders who will reach the artificial element that crowds the cities, and happily leaves undisturbed the simple folk who live nearer to nature. Thoreau would have been lost, or at best would have been but one of many, had he overcome his repugnance to mere formality, and met his neighbors in a dress-suit. We cannot imagine him acting any one of the innumerable white lies of modern society. In such slavish toggery he would have excited as much of ridicule as he now commands

of admiration. In his lifelong battle for sincerity and simplicity, he knew the field upon which he was to fight; knew it better than any antagonist he met, and left it a conqueror.

As we glance over modern biography, we find there are countless examples of youth born in the ranks of the lowly who have aspired to better things, and seized knowledge as a cable by which to draw themselves upward, and spent their remaining days at a higher level and in an atmosphere that was but a source of wonderment to their ancestors. This sounds very noble; it is noble; but in Thoreau's case there was an inversion of this order, and the intellectuality that Emerson deplored as dissipated was put to the very highest of uses, that of making the lower or simpler things of life shine out in their proper light. By thoughtfully pursuing the occupations he chose, he raised them to the rank of professions, and clothed with dignity labor that before was drudgery. The quickest way to send the world to perdition would be to make all men lead professional lives, and the positive curse under which we now rest is that the absurdity is taught by parents to infants, and by teachers to scholars, that the true or best life is that of the preeminently learned, and that no dignity or honor or worthy reward of any kind comes to him who lives closest to Nature, and so most remote from the centers of civilization. Pounding beans, which Emerson sneers at, would not be degrading or belittling or unworthy a man of brains, if here and there a man of mental force would show that his brain and brawn need not come into conflict. If, over the land, Thoreaus would demonstrate that a day of toil in the fields can be followed by an evening of rational, intellectual enjoyment, the world would quickly advance beyond the present stage of agitation and

unrest, that needs a standing army to preserve even the semblance of order. If the philanthropists would attack the problem of intellectualizing work, the workman would be benefited indirectly more than any efforts directed at "the masses" will avail. No work that the world calls for should be looked upon by a favored few as beneath mankind. More mischief lurks in a sneer than about a cannon's mouth, Thoreau stands for two conditions which neither Emerson nor Lowell nor any great man of letters or of science or of political economy has ever dreamed of displaying upon his banner: Simplicity and sincerity. This was an ambition far higher, far better fitted to secure the welfare of man and the permanency of his own fame (if he ever thought of the latter), than anything that Emerson ever thought of. Of course we must always bear in mind that Thoreau died before the youth of old age had commenced, and it is obviously unfair to pass too critically upon his writings. But two of the eleven volumes that complete his works were issued in his lifetime, and what he might have done with the mass that has since been printed, what omitted and what elaborated, cannot even be conjectured. That the best results should be realized, Thoreau should be read first, and what his critics have to say be considered subsequently; and it is to be regretted that, laudatory as is the biographical sketch by Emerson, it should have contained a single stricture. That stricture was not called for.

Lowell's essay on Thoreau, in the former's volume entitled "My Study Windows," though he claims his "most fruitful studies" to have been "in the open air," is eminently unjust. There was not the slightest trace of sympathy between the two men. Lowell is the reporter of the flower-garden; Thoreau, of the forest. Lowell can ride in a well-appointed

boat down a safe stream, and report the graceful weeping willows that adorn its banks; Thoreau can sit cross-legged in a cranky canoe and tell in matchless language of the wild life that lives in dangerous rapids and lurks in the fastnesses of the untrodden wilderness. Lowell is tame; Thoreau is savage. The former tells us of a zoölogical garden; the latter of life in the haunts that Nature has provided. This being true, there lurked no cunning in Lowell's pen to tell the world who and what Thoreau really was. He simply gives us his own impressions, and they are erroneous. The well-known instance of Lowell, as editor, omitting from a manuscript of Thoreau's what he considered an objectionable passage, shows how widely apart these two men stood, and the act was an assumption on Lowell's part without excuse. What right, indeed, had he tacitly to assert that heaven lacked a feature Thoreau thought might be there? Neither of them knew, of course, one whit about the matter, but it is difficult to see why the bare-headed, sun-burnt, out-of-door Thoreau's opinion is not as worthy of consideration as that of his indoor, kid-gloved critic. It was a trivial matter, perhaps, but nevertheless a straw showing the direction of Lowell's thoughts, that Thoreau, because of his being a champion of simplicity and a foe to half that which Lowell cherished as making life worth living, could be snubbed successfully. But the world is growing wiser. There is more freedom of thought than there was forty years ago, and perhaps no better evidence of true advance than the increase in numbers of those who now ponder as seriously over Thoreau's suggestive pages as they were once entertained by the polished periods of Lowell.

Extremes are necessary to effect great changes. No man ever yet drove a nail home, using only the exact force needed. There will always be

an over-expenditure of enthusiasm. Thoreau always said more than he meant, knowing that, if he did not, his meaning would not reach home. He did not expect or wish a Walden hut to be built on the shore of every frog-pond. It was enough that his own experience should be an object-lesson for succeeding generations. We can carry a hermitage with us wherever we go, and meditate therein to our advantage. There are few men of culture but have or long to have their "den" where they are comparatively free from interruption. This is the meaning of Walden. He knew, well enough, that to be heard we must speak loudly to the deaf, and he shouted his best phrases where others have whispered and been unheeded. There is a roughness that is excusable on occasion. We do not ask the drowning man if his arm is sore when we firmly grasp it to save his life. If the reader is surprised at times at Thoreau's earnestness and plainness of speech, he must remember that he was a man with a purpose, and held his moments at their full value. There was no time to study what others had decided as the best methods of recording thought; and yet, who has given us better specimens of pure literature than he? There is no other writer of our country who leaves the mind in a more thoughtful state, when we close the volume, than he does. This is just the difference between Thoreau and his critic, Lowell. The latter keeps us in a pleasant frame of mind so long as we read, but Thoreau lingers long after we have laid aside his books.

A very recent and ludicrous evidence of misconception as to Thoreau runs as follows: "Thoreau is as one of the lower wild animals, occupied with woods and mountains because he had undertaken to get a living for body and soul out of them. Thoreau cannot be said to have loved, or sympathized with, any creature, neither the woodchuck whose

meat he was after, nor the farmer whom he delighted to puzzle with conundrums about the cost of living, nor the Indian whom, a century ago, he would have slain on sight." If we take this simple statement as it is, not reading between the lines, it is worse than an absurdity, for it is positively and inexcusably false. Thoreau was the very prince of lovers; but of late people have lost the proper conception of honest love; and when we reflect how greatly he preferred an Indian who was what he claimed to be to white men who were not what they wished to be considered, the idea of his slaying a red man is indeed remarkable. Then this critic claims that others who have a fancy for the outdoor world are "more humane," and enter the woods with "more civilized" souls; but we must remember that these "improved" outdoorists say we must not ogle a bird but shoot it, to determine its identity. This is the humanity so much admired of late. If the bird-butchers, weighed down with "humanity" and "civilization," were extinct, and Thoreaus dotted the landscape in every direction, the world would be better off.

A word more concerning Thoreau as a naturalist. He was busied with the wild life about Concord when "Science" was still occupied with the hunt for new species, and content with a mere description of form and color. Evolution was but little discussed, and in New England much disregarded, because of the efforts of Agassiz to make it appear untrue. Thoreau made no practice of haunting museums, objects in alcohol or stuffed with tow not appealing strongly to him; but he did care to know, and was successful in ascertaining, the habits of the animals he saw. It is true he was anxious to know the scientific name of a plant that he had found, and, learning it, felt his interest grow; but this does not seem to

have been a need as to animal life. It was enough to know that a given fish was a chub or a perch. The bream built a nest, scooping a hollow in the sand. That this New England "bream" was a percoid, and not a cyprinoid as is the English bream, and that it had a dozen Latin names given by as many authors from Linné down, did not interest him. He knew the birds as creatures to be met in various places, each with habits of its own, and its seasons of going and coming. This, rather than anatomy, was to him a matter of interest and importance. To-day such facts are found to have a bearing on philosophical zoölogy quite equal in importance to anatomical structure. Thoreau did not add greatly to our knowledge of wild life, but he did that which is of equal merit, showed how delightful was the pursuit of such knowledge, and, in a measure, how it might be attained.

For many readers, perhaps for most, there is too little natural history in his books, too much of other matter. As we read, we feel at times a wish that he would sooner reach his conclusions on philosophical or political questions, because we are sure they will be followed by some bright reference to a bird or beast, simply phrased, yet so cunningly that the creature stands before us. Anybody can say or write, "I see a fox," but in Thoreau's books these same words are so framed in other matter that the animal leaps into view, and we see it dart over the snow, daintily carrying its splendid brush, perhaps looking partly over its shoulder at us, and leaving footprints that dot the author's pages, though he is eloquent over Greek poets, addresses a mountain, or weaves into splendid imagery the smoke that at sunrise he sees curling from his neighbor's chimney.

Thoreau had no predecessor and can have no successor. He was the product of conditions that can never again arise, for to expect another

Concord with its galaxy of intellectual giants is utterly vain. He was one whose influence will last as long as our language shall remain.

- A Note on the Text: from Abbot, Charles Conrad. *Notes of the Night, and Other Outdoor Sketches* (London: Frederick Warne, 1906) pp. 215-223
- Website: www.walden.org/institute
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