THOREAU'S ATTITUDE TOWARD NATURE.

"I WISH to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness." So Thoreau began an article in The Atlantic Monthly thirty-five years ago. He wished to make an extreme statement, he declared, in hope of making an emphatic one. Like idealists in general, — like Jesus in particular, — he believed in omitting qualifications and exceptions. Those were matters certain to be sufficiently insisted upon by the orthodox and the conservative, the minister and the school committee.

In an attempt at an extreme statement Thoreau was very unlikely to fail. Thanks to an inherited aptitude and years of practice, there have been few to excel him with the high lights. In his hands exaggeration becomes one of the fine arts. We will not call it the finest art; his own best work would teach us better than that; but such as it is, with him to hold the brush, it would be difficult to imagine anything more effective. When he praises a quaking swamp as the most desirable of dooryards, or has visions of a people so enlightened as to burn their fences and leave the forests to grow, who shall contend with him? And yet the sympathetic reader — the only real reader — knows what is meant, and what is not meant, and finds it good; as he finds it good when he is bidden to turn the other cheek to the smiter, or to distribute all his living among the poor.

Thoreau's love for the wild — not to be confounded with a liking for natural history or an appreciation of scenery — was as natural and unaffected as a child's love of sweets. It belonged to no one part of his life. It finds utterance in all his books, but is best expressed, most feelingly and simply, and therefore most convincingly, in his journal, especially in such an entry as that of January 7, 1857, a bitterly cold, windy day, with snow blowing, — one of the days when "all animate things are reduced to their lowest terms." Thoreau has been out, nevertheless, for his afternoon walk, "through the woods toward the cliffs along the side of the Well Meadow field." The contact with Nature, even in this her severest mood, has given a quickening yet restraining grace to his pen. Now, there is no question of "emphasis," no plotting for an "extreme statement," no thought of dull readers, for whom the truth must be shown large, as it were, by some magic-lantern process. How differently he speaks! "Might I aspire to praise the moderate nymph Nature," he says, "I must be like her, moderate."

The passage is too long to be quoted in full. "There is nothing so sanative, so poetic," he writes, "as a walk in the woods and fields even now, when I meet none abroad for pleasure. Nothing so inspires me, and excites such serene and profitable thought. . . . Alone in distant woods or fields, in unpretending sproutlands or pastures tracked by rabbits, even in a bleak and, to most, cheerless day like this, when a villager would be thinking of his inn, I come to myself, I once more feel myself grandly related. This cold and solitude are friends of mine. . . . I get away a mile or two from the town, into the stillness and solitude of nature, with rocks, trees, weeds, snow about me. I enter some glade in the woods, perchance, where a few weeds and dry leaves alone lift themselves above the surface of the snow, and it is as if I had come to an open window. I see out and around myself. . . . This stillness, solitude, wildness of nature is a kind of thoroughwort or boneset to my intellect. This is what I go out to seek. It is as if I always met in those places some grand, serene, immortal, infinitely

encouraging, though invisible companion, and walked with him."

Four days later, dwelling still upon his "success in solitary and distant woodland walking outside the town," he says: "I do not go there to get my dinner, but to get that sustenance which dinners only preserve me to enjoy, without which dinners are a vain repetition. . . . I never chanced to meet with any man so cheering and elevating and encouraging, so infinitely suggestive, as the stillness and solitude of the Well Meadow field."

Language like this, though all may perceive the beauty and feel the sincerity of it, is to be understood only by those who are of the speaker's kin. It describes a country which no man knows save him who has been there. It expresses life, not theory, and calls for life on the part of the hearer.

And if the appeal be made to this tribunal, the language used here and so often elsewhere, by Thoreau, touching the relative inferiority of human society will neither give offense nor seem in any wise exaggerated or morbid. Thoreau knew Emerson; he had lived in the same house with him; but even Emerson's companionship was less stimulating to him than Nature's own. Well, and how is it with ourselves, who have the best of Emerson in his books? Much as these may have done for us, have we never had seasons of communion with the life of the universe itself when even Emerson's words would have seemed an intrusion? Is not the voice of the world, when we can hear it, better than the voice of any man interpreting the world? Is it not better to hear for ourselves than to be told what another has heard? When the forest speaks things ineffable, and the soul hears what even to itself it can never utter, — for such an hour there is no book, there never will be. And if we wish not a book, no more do we wish the author of a book. We are in better company. In such hours, — too few, alas, — though we be the plainest of plain people, our own emotions are of more value than any talk. We know, in our measure, what Thoreau —

> "An early unconverted Saint" —

was seeking words for when he said, "I feel my Maker blessing me."

To him, as to many another man, experiences of this kind came oftenest in wild and solitary places. No wonder, then, that he loved to go thither. No wonder he found the pleasures of society unsatisfying in the comparison. There he communed, not with himself nor with his fellow, but with the Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe. And when it is objected that this ought not to have been true, that he ought to have found the presence of men more elevating and stimulating than the presence of "inanimate" nature, we must take the liberty to believe that the critic speaks of that whereof he knows nothing. To revert to our own figure, he has never lived in Thoreau's country.

Thoreau was wedded to Nature not so much for her beauty as for delight in her high companionableness. There was more of Wordsworth than of Keats in him. He was more philosopher than poet, perhaps we may say. He loved spirit rather than form and color, though for these also his eye was better than most. Being a stoic, a born economist, a child of the North, he felt most at home with Nature in her dull seasons. His delight in a wintry day was typical. He loved his mistress best when she was most like himself; as he said of human friendships, "I love that one with whom I sympathize, be she 'beautiful' or otherwise, of excellent mind or not." The swamp, the desert, the wilderness, — these he especially celebrated. He began by thinking that nothing could be too wild for him; and even in his later years, notably in the Atlantic essay above quoted, he sometimes blew the same heroic strain. By this time, how-

ever, he knew and confessed, to himself at least, that there was another side to the story; that there was a dreariness beyond even his ready appreciation. More than once we find in his diary expressions like this, in late November: "Now a man will eat his heart, if ever, now while the earth is bare, barren, and cheerless, and we have the coldness of winter without the variety of ice and snow."

And what was true of seasons was equally true of places. Let them be wild, by all means, yet not too wild. When he returned from the Maine woods, he had had, for the time being, enough of the wilderness. It was a relief to get back to the smooth but still varied landscape of eastern Massachusetts. That, for a permanent residence, seemed to him incomparably better than an unbroken forest. The poet must live open to the sky and the wind; his road must be prepared for him; and yet, "not only for strength, but for beauty, the poet must, from time to time, travel the logger's path and the Indian's trail, to drink at some new and more bracing fountain of the Muses." In short, the poet should live in Concord, and only once in a while seek the inspirations of the outer wilderness.

What we have called Thoreau's stoicism (knowing very well that he was not a stoic, except in some partial sense of the word), his liking for plainness and low expense, is perhaps at the base of one of his rarest excellencies as a writer upon nature, — his reserve and moderation. In statement, it is true, he could extravagate like a master. He boasts, as well he may, of his prowess in that direction; but in tone and sentiment, when it came to dealing, not with ethics or philosophy, but with the mistress of his affections, he kept always decently within bounds. He had a very sprightly fancy, when he chose to give it play; but he had with it, and controlling it, a prevailing sobriety, the tempering grace of good sense. "The alder," he says, "is one of the prettiest trees and shrubs in the winter. It is evidently so full of life with its conspicuously pretty red catkins dangling from it on all sides. It seems to dread the winter less than other plants. It has a certain heyday and cheery look, less stiff than most, with more of the flexible grace of summer. With those dangling clusters of red catkins which it switches in the face of winter, it brags for all vegetation. It is not daunted by the cold, but still hangs gracefully over the frozen stream."

Most admirable, thrown in thus by the way, amid unaffected, matter-of-fact description and every-day sense, and with its homely "brags" and "switches" to hold it true, — to save it from a touch of foppery, a shade too much of prettiness. How differently some writers have dealt with similar themes: men so afraid of the commonplace as to be incapable of saying a thing in so many words, though it were only to mention the day of the week; men whose every other sentence must contain a "felicity;" whose pages are as full of floweriness and dainty conceits as a milliner's window; who surfeit you with confections, till you think of bread and water as a feast. Whether Thoreau's temperance is to be credited to the restraints of stoical philosophy or to plain good taste, it is a virtue to be thankful for.

With him the study of nature was not an amusement, nor even a serious occupation for his leisure hours, but the work of his life, — a work to which he gave himself from year's end to year's end, as faithfully and laboriously, and with as definite a purpose, as any Concord farmer gave himself to his farm. He was no amateur, no dilettant, no conscious hobbyist, laughing between times at his own absorption. His sense of a mission was as unquestioning as Wordsworth's, though happily there went with it a sense of humor that preserved it in good measure from over-emphasis and damaging iteration.

In degree, if not in kind, this whole-hearted, lifelong devotion was something new. It was one of Thoreau's originalities. To what a pitch he carried it, how serious and all-controlling it was, the pages of his journal bear continual witness. His was a Puritan conscience. He could never do his work well enough. After a eulogy of winter buds, "impregnable, vivacious willow catkins, but half asleep along the twigs" (there, again, is fancy of an uncloying type), he breaks out: "How healthy and vivacious must he be who would treat of these things. You must love the crust of the earth on which you dwell more than the sweet crust of any bread or cake; you must be able to extract nutriment out of a sand heap." "Must" was a great word with Thoreau. In hard times, especially, he braced himself with it. "The winter, cold and bound out, as it is, is thrown to us like a bone to a famishing dog, and we are expected to get the marrow out of it. While the milkmen in the outskirts are milking so many scores of cows before sunrise, these winter mornings, it is our task to milk the winter itself. It is true it is like a cow that is dry, and our fingers are numb, and there is none to wake us up. . . . But the winter was not given us for no purpose. We must thaw its cold with our genialness. We are tasked to find out and appropriate all the nutriment it yields. If it is a cold and hard season, its fruit no doubt is the more concentrated and nutty."

In these winter journalizings, we not only have example and proof of the earnestness with which Thoreau pursued his outdoor studies, but are shown their method and their immediate object. He wished to see nature and to set it forth. He was to be a writer, and nature was to be his theme. That he had known from the beginning. For this work he required a considerable store of outward knowledge, — knowledge classified, for convenience, as botany, ornithology, entomology, and the like; but infinitely beyond this he needed a living, deepening intimacy with the life of the world itself. For observation of the ways of plants and animals, of the phases of earth and sky, he had endless patience and all necessary sharpness of sense; work of this kind was easy, — he could do it in some good degree to his satisfaction; the vexatious thing about it was that it readily became too absorbing; but his real work, his *hard* work, the work that was peculiarly his, that taxed his capacities to the full, and even so was never accomplished, this work was not an amassing of relative knowledge, an accumulation of facts, but a perfecting of sympathy, the organ or means of that absolute knowledge which alone he found indispensable, which alone he cared greatly to communicate. There, except at rare moments, he was to the last below his ideal. His "task" was never done. His union with nature was never complete.

The measure of this union was gauged, as we have seen already, by its spiritual and emotional effects, by the mental states it brought him into; as the religious mystic measures the success of his prayers. He walked in the old Carlisle road, as the saint goes to his knees, to "put off worldly thoughts." The words are his own. There, when the hour favored him, he "sauntered near to heaven's gate."

It must be only too evident that success of this transcendental sort is not to be counted upon as one counts upon finding specimens for a botanical box. There is no comparison between scientific pursuits and this kind of supernatural history. For this, as Thoreau says, "you must be in a different state from common." "If it were required to know the position of the fruit dots or the character of the indusium, nothing could be easier than to ascertain it; but if it is required that you be affected by ferns, that they amount to anything, signify anything, to you, that they be

another sacred scripture and revelation to you, helping to redeem your life, this end is not so easily accomplished."

This, then, it was for which Thoreau was ever on the alert; this was the prize set before him; this he required of ferns and clouds, of birds and swamps and deserted roads, — that they should affect him, that they should do something to redeem his life. For this he cultivated the "fellowship of the seasons," a fellowship on which no man ever made larger drafts. Even when nature seemed to be getting "thumbed like an old spelling book," even in the month that tempted him sometimes to "eat his heart," he still "sat the bench with perfect contentment, unwilling to exchange the familiar vision that was to be unrolled for any treasure or heaven that could be imagined." A new November was a novelty more tempting than any voyage to Europe or even to another world. "Young men have not learned the phases of nature:" so he comforted himself, when the fervors and inspirations of youth seemed at times to be waning. "I would know when in the year to expect certain thoughts and moods, as the sportsman knows when to look for plover."

Here, as everywhere with Thoreau, nature was nothing of itself. Everything is for man. This belief underlies all his writing upon natural themes, and, as well, all his personal dealings with the natural world. His idlest wanderings, whether in the Maine forests or in Well Meadow field, were made serious by it. To judge him by his own testimony, he seems to have known comparatively little of a careless, purposeless, childish delight in nature for its own sake. Nature was a better kind of book; and books were for improvement. In this respect he was sophisticated from his youth, like some model of "early piety." Nature was not his playground, but his study, his Bible, his closet, his means of grace. As we have said, and as Channing long ago implied, his was a Puritan conscience. He must get at the heart of things, sparing no pains nor time. His was the devotee's faith: "To him that knocketh it shall be opened." In this faith he waited upon nature and the motions of his own genius. Patience, solitude, stillness, and a quiet mind, — these were the instruments of his art. With them, not with prying sharp-sightedness, was the secret to be won. In his own phrase, characteristic in its homely expressiveness, if you would appreciate a phenomenon, though it be only a fern, you must "camp down beside it." And you must invent no distinctions of great and small. The humming of a gnat must be as significant as the music of the spheres.

Was he too serious for his own good, whether as man or as writer? And did he sometimes feel himself so? Was he whipping his own fault when he spoke against conscientious, duty-ridden people, and praised

> "simple laboring folk
> Who love their work,
> Whose virtue is a song"?

It is not impossible, of course. But he too loved his work, — loved it so well as perhaps to need no playtime. Some have said that he made too much of his "thoughts and moods," that he was unwholesomely beset with the idea of self-improvement. Others have thought that he would have written better books had he stuck closer to science, and paid less court to poetry and Buddhistic philosophy. Such objections and speculations are futile. He did his work, and with it enriched the world. In the strictest sense it was his *own* work. If his ideal escaped him, he did better than most in that he still pursued it.

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