

Dear Mr. Guilfoill,

You have joined a notable company in denouncing Thoreau. James Russell Lowell, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Llewellyn Powys are all charter members of the "I Hate Thoreau" Club. But if you would cast your eyes across the peaks of literary criticism, you would find an even more notable company gathered around the banner of Thoreau. Mahatma Gandhi, H. H. Tomlinson, Sinclair Lewis, Henry Seidel Canby, Marcel Proust, James Norman Hall, and even Gene Tunney have all paid their respects to the Sage of Walden Pond. Indeed, if you would examine the Thoreau canon a little more closely rather than that of the pseudo-Thoreauvians, the neo-Waldenites (whose numbers are unfortunately all too legion), you might be surprised to find yourself much more in agreement than you suppose. Your "Allergy to Thoreau" is actually a good exposition of the Thoreauvian philosophy.

You condemn Thoreau for fleeing to the woods. Yet Thoreau spent less than one-twentieth of his life at Walden Pond and even then his cabin was only a few yards from a well-traveled road, only a mile from the village of Concord, and less than twenty miles from that very hub of the universe--Boston. There was probably not a day in the two years he spent at Walden that Thoreau did not either entertain guests or go on an expedition to the village. When he discovered a hermit living in the wilds of Maine's forests, he wondered how the man could stand his separation from humanity. In his famed declaration of reasons for going to Walden, you will find no hint of escape but rather a statement that he wanted to get close to life, to get down to the marrow of things. He did not move to Walden to flee from humanity but rather, as we might phrase it today, to get into the low-rent district. He also thought that woodchucks as well as human beings might make interesting neighbors. I do not mean by this to belittle Thoreau's deep appreciation of the values of solitude. Few have known and realized

super, arch-individualist among rugged individualists. But his individualism was not anti-social. He concentrated on himself because he thought it better to reform Henry David Thoreau before attempting to reform society. If I recall correctly, another great individualist once remarked about casting out the beam in one's own eye before seeking for the mote in a neighbor's. Reform like charity begins at home. I for one would agree with Thoreau that a hundred million citizens intent on self-reform would produce a better nation than a hundred million intent upon reforming their neighbor.

Thoreau's philosophy was a positive not a negative one. If you will turn to his writings, you will find one of the most beautiful literary styles that this country has produced. And imbedded in that prose you will find a philosophy of life that is far more applicable today than the day it was written. Unlike the rest of his contemporaries, Thoreau has not aged with the passing of a century. His prose lives-- and adequate proof of that is the fact that Walden has been reprinted more frequently than any other American book written before the Civil War and that it has had been translated into every major foreign language. I need hardly mention that Thoreau is probably the greatest nature writer of all times. But we must not forget that there is much more to his writing than an appreciation of the birds and the flowers.

No, Mr. Guilfoil, I think you are not only in the wrong pew, but also the wrong church. You have been led astray by the fulminations of the pseudo-Thoreavians who shout their praises of Walden and break its every precept. Come and be baptized into the Thoreau Society and I will personally extend to you the right hand of fellowship.

Sincerely,

Walter Harding, Secretary
The Thoreau Society

more fully the import of introspection and the mystical experience. But he realized too that this was only one phase of life. He had other lives to live too.

Neither did Thoreau condemn the conveniences of civilization as such. He used trains, the telegraph, and many other scientific instruments when they were convenient. Indeed he made some rather important contributions to the sciences of ecology and limnology himself. What he did object to was the tendency of the American citizen to sell his soul for scientific gimeracks. When he criticized scientific progress, it was not because it had advanced too far, but because it had not advanced widely enough. He asked that we aim for the well-rounded individual, the well-rounded civilization, not merely a scientific one.

As to Thoreau's fearing the future, may I suggest, Mr. Guilfoil, that you read the closing words of Walden:

There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star. If that is Miniver Cheevy-ism, like the New Yorker's "hungry critics" I'll eat the whole of Walden. Yea even, I will devour the whole twenty volumes of Thoreau's collected works with relish--or without.

Neither would Thoreau disagree with your statement that "spiritual values are not dependent upon physical needs." Indeed, that phrase seems to me a perfect summing up of the whole philosophy of Walden. It recalls Thoreau's tale of the "Englishman who went to India to make a fortune first, in order that he might return to England and live the life of a poet. He should have gone up garret at once." Unlike his neighbors, Thoreau did not dash across the Continent to make a fortune in greener pastures, but remained right in Concord to "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life." There are lines in Walden, perchance the thought, that the Concord Chamber of Commerce might have written.

You are treading on firmer ground when you term Thoreau an "individualist." He was an individualist among individualists, a real,