

Thoreau's Reading

I

Harvard College,

1833—1837

HENRY THOREAU "was fitted, or rather made unfit," as he later said, for college at Concord Academy under the tutelage of Phineas Allen. The academy, which Thoreau himself would later conduct with his brother John, had been founded as a college preparatory school in 1822, and its curriculum was explicitly designed to prepare its students for the Harvard entrance examinations. There were the "English Branches," where the scholars might study, depending upon the term and year, mathematics, composition and declamation, geography, history, and philosophy; but the primary emphasis was on languages: Latin, Greek, and French.¹ The entrance exams themselves, according to the Harvard catalogue for 1833, the year Thoreau matriculated, covered the "whole of Virgil, Cicero's Select Orations, and Sallust; Jacob's Greek Reader, and the four Gospels of the Greek Testament," in addition to Greek and Latin grammar, arithmetic and algebra, and geography.² Students were also expected to have some preparation in modern foreign languages. Thoreau's schoolmates at the academy remembered him as a quiet, somewhat standoffish boy who was both physically active and "very fond of reading," but he was an indifferent scholar at this age. In fact, he passed the entrance exams by the barest of margins and was "conditioned" (the rough equivalent of probationary status) in Greek, Latin, and mathematics, the three principal subjects. President Quincy told him bluntly, "You have barely got in" (EEM, 114).

Thoreau's parents, his mother especially, were eager for one of their sons to attend Harvard, and the family sacrificed to help put Henry

1. See Hubert H. Hoeltje, "Thoreau and the Concord Academy," *New England Quarterly* 21 (March 1948): 103-106; and Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Young Thoreau and the Classics* (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1975).

2. Christian P. Gruber, "The Education of Henry Thoreau, Harvard 1833-1837," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1953, pp. 17-18.

through, but he apparently did not feel any corresponding pressure or burning ambition to excel. Compared with the educational regimen a decade earlier of the Emerson boys, who were required from the age of three to recite to their parents before breakfast,³ the pedagogical atmosphere in the Thoreau household was relaxed. Nor did Thoreau possess the sort of single-minded doggedness of application that enabled his Concord Academy friend and Harvard roommate Charles Stearns Wheeler to rank second in the class of 1837. Nevertheless, after his somewhat unpropitious start, he ranked sixth in a class of about fifty by his sophomore year. Thereafter he slipped somewhat from this relative eminence. Illness caused him to miss a term during his junior year, and as an upperclassman Thoreau apparently shared the skepticism of many of his fellows about Harvard's system of evaluation and ranking. President Quincy, in a letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson about some exhibition money Thoreau had won, ascribed Thoreau's failure to rank higher in his class to his having "imbibed some notions concerning emulation & College rank which had a natural tendency to diminish his zeal, if not his exertions."⁴

Such notions would be difficult not to imbibe, given the system then in place. Class meetings, as well as class rank, were almost wholly based on recitation, which required mainly rote memorization and repetition of assignments. Class rank was determined by the accumulation of points assigned for everything from written themes to chapel attendance. The curriculum itself had remained essentially unchanged since the time of the Revolutionary War. During Thoreau's freshman year, members of all four classes petitioned to have the rank and recitation system changed, protesting with considerable justification that it "encouraged superficial scholarship," but as is usual in such cases the administration declined to consider their complaints.⁵ A few months later a more serious incident occurred: A student refused to translate in a Greek recitation class. When he withdrew from school rather than apologize to his tutor, the pent-up anger of his classmates erupted in the "Dunkin Rebellion," in which students destroyed the recitation room, attacked watchmen with rocks, and disrupted mandatory chapel services with "scraping, whistling, groaning and other disgraceful noises" such as anyone who has ever been in the company

3. Gay Wilson Allen, *Waldo Emerson: A Biography* (New York: Viking Press, 1981), p. 10.

4. Quoted in Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. 47.

5. *Ibid.* p. 33.

of adolescent boys can imagine.⁶ Several students were expelled, and the entire sophomore class was suspended for a term.

Nevertheless, despite this disorder and the narrowness of the system, Thoreau finished in the upper half of his class and won a place in commencement exercises. His generally good record suggests that he found Harvard to offer an unsophisticated New England village boy considerable impetus to intellectual growth. It had its share of inspiring teachers, the stimulation of gifted classmates, and a tradition of literary and debating societies that fostered independent learning in areas outside the formal curriculum. Most important of all its opportunities, perhaps, was the library, which, although small by modern standards (about forty thousand volumes), was at that time the best in the country. The library's stacks were open, too, so students could explore the collection as well as charge books required for class use. Nor was the preparation required for recitations so time consuming as to discourage independent reading. The published charging records of Thoreau and some of his classmates show that they all used the library extensively,⁷ and it may be presumed that Thoreau read a great deal more, informally and casually, than his charging record indicates. Additionally, the Institute of 1770, a literary and debating society to which he belonged, maintained its own library of some fourteen hundred volumes that Thoreau also patronized regularly. Since its members generated acquisitions, the institute's library tended to supplement the college library with better holdings in contemporary literature and periodicals. It was through this library, for example, that, during his senior year, Thoreau first became acquainted with the seminal work of American Transcendentalism, Emerson's *Nature*.⁸

The overall record of Thoreau's reading at Harvard suggests that his intellectual development during these years proceeded on two paths that were not always parallel but that were eventually convergent. On the one hand, the reading required by his formal program of studies gave him a foundation in subjects and modes of inquiry and discourse that would serve him all his life. On the other hand, the "more valuable education," as he was to term it in *Walden*, that he got by "associating with the most cultivated of his contemporaries" (WA, 50) included reading that would lead him away from the careful Unitarian ortho-

6. *Ibid.* p. 42.

7. See Kenneth Walter Cameron, "Books Thoreau Borrowed from Harvard College Library," in *Emerson the Essayist*, 2 vols. (Raleigh, N.C.: The Thistle Press, 1945), 2.191–208, and "Reading of Thoreau's College Friends," in *Emerson and Thoreau as Readers*, new ed. (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1972), pp. 90–129.

8. Kenneth Walter Cameron, "Thoreau Discovers Emerson: A College Reading Record," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 57, no. 7 (June 1953): 319–334.

doxy of Harvard and prepare the way intellectually for his conversion—or development, really—to Transcendentalism, a process that was well advanced by the time he graduated. Other areas of his mature interest, however, most notably early American history and natural history, were relatively undeveloped in his Harvard years, and more than a decade would pass before he would return to the Harvard library and the library of the Boston Society of Natural History to begin to train himself systematically in these subjects.

Thoreau's formal studies at Harvard may be divided, according to the branches of the curriculum itself, into classical and modern languages, mathematics and science, rhetoric and oratory, and philosophy and religion. Literary studies, which in practice loomed large in the curriculum, were subsumed in the programs in languages and rhetoric. Likewise, history was not a major component of the curriculum (Thoreau studied history formally only in his freshman year), although a good deal of ancient and European history was included in the study of classical and modern languages.

Among these divisions, the study of languages was preeminent; classical languages prevailed, of course, but modern languages were offered as electives and Thoreau enrolled in them regularly. During his first three years, Thoreau took Greek and Latin every term, and usually one and sometimes two modern languages as well. During his senior year he continued his study of modern languages, so that by the time he graduated he had completed—in addition to the standard Greek and Latin curriculum—five terms of Italian, four of French, three of German, and two of Spanish.⁹ Of these, he was most fluent in French, which he had begun to study at the Concord Academy. Although he had the occasion to speak the language only briefly, on his visit to Montreal and Quebec in 1850, he read it fairly often and fairly easily, from French translations of Oriental scriptures to the accounts of early explorers and missionaries in North America.

Despite this extensive acquaintance with modern languages, Thoreau seems not to have developed a correspondingly strong interest in European literature. His courses did not include a great deal of reading of important contemporary literary works, and he supplemented his reading with only a few library withdrawals that were probably outside assignments for class work: Tasso, a volume of Chateaubriand, dramas by Racine and Metastasio. The one exception to this pattern was German. He studied German with Orestes Brownson while teaching school in Canton, Massachusetts, in 1836; and during the last term

9. Kenneth Walter Cameron, "Chronology of Thoreau's Harvard Years," *Emerson Society Quarterly* no. 15 (2 Qtr. 1959): 13-18.

of his senior year, prompted in all likelihood by the lectures of the newly installed Smith Professor of Modern Languages, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, he read Carlyle's translation of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*.¹⁰ This last work was *de rigueur* reading for literary-minded youths of Thoreau's generation, and both Goethe and Carlyle were to exert considerable influence on Thoreau during the early years of his career. Back in Concord the year after his graduation, reading Goethe in German was an interest he shared with Emerson and a marker of the growth of their friendship. In general, however, Thoreau's interest in languages would later tend to express itself chiefly in what might be termed philological concerns—especially etymology, plays on words and conventional expressions, and the origins of language. This interest, in turn, would manifest itself in the basic traits of his style rather than in any particular or longstanding preoccupation with foreign languages and literatures.

Classical languages and literature, on the other hand, were both the central core of the Harvard curriculum and, as Ethel Seybold has shown,¹¹ an integral part of Thoreau's literary imagination throughout his career. From a decidedly mediocre entering student he made himself into an able classicist—perhaps the best among the Transcendentalists, excepting Jones Very—who would count among his first literary ventures an essay on the Roman satirist Persius and translations of Aeschylus and Pindar. Freshman Latin and Greek classes began with Horace's *Odes* and selections from Livy, and Xenophon's *Anabasis* and the orations of Demosthenes and Aeschines. Each class studied grammar and composition as well, of course, and also the "antiquities" of Greece and Rome—that is, the culture, geography, and civilization of the classical world. Included in Thoreau's reading either in required texts or library withdrawals his first year, for example, are Cleveland's *Epitome of Grecian Antiquities*, Harwood's *Grecian Antiquities*, Adam's *Roman Antiquities*, and Rollin's *Ancient History*.¹² The long deserts of translation recital must have been at least occasionally interrupted by lectures, discussion, or allusion to contextual works such as these.

Sophomore Greek concentrated on the tragedies of Sophocles—*Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus Coloneus*, and *Antigone* and Euripides' *Alcestis*. Latin covered Cicero's *De Officiis*, Horace's *Satires* and *Epis-*

10. See Cameron, "Thoreau Discovers Emerson" and "Books Thoreau Borrowed from Harvard College Library."

11. *Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951).

12. Cameron, "Chronology of Thoreau's Harvard Years," pp. 13–14.

bles, and the *Medea* of Seneca. In his junior year Thoreau studied Juvenal in Latin (perhaps as a balance to the Horatian satires of the previous year) and the *Iliad* in Greek.¹³ Thoreau showed his enthusiastic response to Homer in a letter to a classmate (COR, 9), and the Greek epic made a powerful impression on him as an expression of the heroic potential in life. Ten years later, at Walden Pond, he would keep a copy of the *Iliad* on his desk to remind him of that potential, and he would take time from hoeing beans to translate from it in his Journal and read passages to Alek Therien, the woodchopper (WA, 144; PJ 2.160, 172–173). Reading Greek became the intellectual analogue of the physical struggles described in the *Iliad*: “The student may read Homer or Aeschylus in the Greek without danger of dissipation or luxuriousness,” he said, “for it implies that he in some measure emulate their heroes, and consecrate morning hours to their pages” (WA, 100). As a student himself, Thoreau devoted time to the classics beyond required hours, for in his senior year when he was no longer enrolled in Latin and Greek he wrote reviews, probably for the Institute of 1770, of H. N. Coleridge’s *Introductions to the Study of the Greek Classic Poets* and Adam Ferguson’s *History of the Progress and Termination of the Roman Republic* (EEM, 50–58, 63–66).

According to Christian Gruber’s study of Thoreau’s Harvard education, much of the credit for Thoreau’s enthusiasm for and devotion to the classics belongs to C. C. Felton, Eliot Professor of Greek Literature. Felton’s pedagogy stressed “that the students should widen their interest beyond the purely linguistic and become aware of ‘the whole life of the people whose language was studied.’”¹⁴ Felton also expressed the belief that “the study of antiquity has a noble power to elevate the mind above the low passions of the present, by fixing its contemplation on the great and immortal spirits of the past.”¹⁵ This sentiment suggests the role—as an antidote to the burgeoning material culture of nineteenth-century America—that the classics played in Thoreau’s Transcendentalism. Additionally, Homeric Greek was attractive, according to Transcendental literary theory, as a “primitive” language that was closer than modern tongues to the poetic and spiritual origins of language. (A confirmation of this view of the classics, as well as his first passing exposure to the significance of the classics of Oriental literature, was provided by Friedrich von Schlegel’s *Lectures on the History of Literature*, a key document of Romantic literary crit-

13. *Ibid.* pp. 14–16.

14. Gruber, “Education,” p. 121.

15. “Moore’s Lectures on the Greek Language and Literature,” *North American Review* 42 (January 1836): 101.

icism which Thoreau read during his junior year.) Felton would probably have been pained to find himself described as a conduit to Transcendentalism (he would later be critical of Emerson's *Essays* for threatening Christianity), but his emphasis on the elevating ideal of classical thought and culture was consonant with Thoreau's own response to the classics. It was Felton's edition of the *Iliad* that Thoreau used at Harvard, and he remained faithful to it, using it during the 1850s for the *Iliad* quotations in drafts of *Cape Cod*.

Yet Thoreau's classical education had considerable gaps, at least by modern standards. Despite his veneration of Homer's *Iliad*, for example, he mentions the *Odyssey* infrequently, and he seems not to have known it except through secondary sources and perhaps Pope's translation.¹⁶ Neither did Thoreau's studies in either philosophy or classics touch directly upon the great philosophical tradition of antiquity, so that he had in college little or no exposure to Platonic or Aristotelian philosophy, or to Roman Stoics such as Marcus Aurelius, whose views he might have found congenial. It should be noted, however, that Cicero's *De Officiis*, read in the sophomore year, does contain an exposition and defense of Stoic doctrines.

The curriculum in mathematics at Harvard was fairly stringent, but the formal study of science, with which it was most closely connected, was still in its infancy. The mathematics course sequence was a combination of pure and "mixed"—that is, applied—subjects, and since its bearing on Thoreau's later development is mainly confined to its usefulness to his work as a part-time surveyor, little needs to be said about his reading in this area. He studied in sequence geometry, algebra, trigonometry, and calculus, followed by the applied subjects of mechanics, optics, electricity, and astronomy. The last four areas were treated in a series of texts called the *Cambridge Natural Philosophy*, prepared for the Harvard course sequence by John Follen.

Thoreau's scientific study in college consisted of one term of natural history recitation and lecture, one term each of voluntary lectures on mineralogy and astronomy (which he may or may not have attended), and the scientific component of his "mixed" mathematics courses. (Had he not missed a term through illness during his junior year, he would also have taken a term of chemistry.) Thus his only formal course work bearing upon his later avocation as a naturalist was the single term of natural history taken at the end of his senior year. It was taught by Thaddeus William Harris, who later became a noted entomologist, but whose principal duties were as college librarian, a fact

16. He owned a copy of Pope's translation; see Bibliographical Catalogue, no. 719.

that may serve to suggest the importance that Harvard attached to instruction in science at this time.

Harris's course consisted of seventeen lectures on botany, based on Thomas Nuttall's introductory text, *Systematic and Physiological Botany*, and eighteen recitation periods based on William Smellie's *Philosophy of Natural History*.¹⁷ The latter was the principal—indeed the only—natural history text in the Harvard curriculum, and it was certainly chosen not for its scientific authority but because it harmonized with the instruction in theology and philosophy. It stressed what was called the “argument from design,” an eighteenth-century concept that the operations of the natural world provided evidence of a divine and benevolent plan for the cosmos. “Let him study the works of nature,” Smellie exhorted the student in the conclusion to his text, “and find in the contemplation of all that is beautiful, curious, and wonderful in them, proofs of the existence and attributes of his Creator.”¹⁸ Although the edition used at Harvard had been updated by John Ware, its basic doctrines remained the same as in the first edition of 1790. Its material was presented not as a subject for rigorous or experimental inquiry, but essentially as a harmless diversion and amusement, suitable perhaps for country clerics like Smellie to pursue in their spare time. According to the preface, the study of nature “is a source of interesting amusement, prevents idle or vicious propensities, and exalts the mind to a love of virtue and of rational entertainment.”¹⁹ For his part, Thoreau displayed few signs of special interest in natural history while in college. His notebooks record no observations of nature and little reading in the field, and his only related library withdrawal was an introduction to botany that was probably required for his class work for Harris.²⁰ To judge by his 1837 class book autobiography, which contained an apostrophe to the woods and streams of Concord (EEM, 113–114), Thoreau's appreciation of nature at this time was sentimentally rather than philosophically Romantic. Likewise, his only extended composition on a natural history topic, a review of William Howitt's *The Book of the Seasons* that he wrote toward the end of his junior year, is conventional in its enthusiastic praise of the pleasures of solitude and scenery, and approving of the fact that Howitt is “neither too scientific, nor too much abounding in technical terms” (EEM, 26).

17. Gruber, “Education,” pp. 154–158.

18. William Smellie, *The Philosophy of Natural History* (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard & Co., 1824), p. 318.

19. *Ibid.* p. iii.

20. Cameron, “Books Thoreau Borrowed from Harvard College Library,” p. 194; the volume was James Smith's *Introduction to Physiological and Systematical Botany*.

It might be concluded that this rather dilettantish and casual introduction to natural science hampered Thoreau's development as a naturalist by leaving him untrained in scientific method—especially experimentation and laboratory work.²¹ He might be said to have been consigned by his education to amateur status as a naturalist all his life. And had Thoreau attended Harvard just about a decade later, after the arrival of Louis Agassiz and Asa Gray and the foundation of the Lawrence Scientific School, his orientation to natural science might well have been much more rigorous, methodical, and professional. But it should be remembered that scientific education was in its embryonic stage everywhere, and that most of the great nineteenth-century naturalists—Darwin included—were essentially self-taught. The outworn creed that Harvard preached in natural science sent Thoreau away with a vague endorsement of the subject that left him free, really, to explore the diversity of approaches to and theories of nature that were in competition before the triumph of the Darwinian paradigm during the second half of the century. His reading and work in natural science would accelerate in intensity and scope as he grew older, but he was not conditioned by his college training to a particular theoretical bias—there being, in truth, little he had to unlearn. Theory in the natural sciences was in such a state of flux that it was doubtless to his advantage later as a writer and naturalist to be relatively unencumbered by preconceptions. His own ideas would develop through reading in and reflection about diverse scientific and philosophical approaches in the years ahead, and throughout his life he would evince a catholic taste in natural history writing that would range from Aristotle and Pliny to Agassiz and Darwin, and sample approvingly many writers in between.

Thoreau's training in English composition and literature took place in the Department of Rhetoric and Oratory (that august institution the Department of English not yet having come into existence in American colleges). The basic texts for courses in this department, under Edward Tyrrel Channing, Boyleston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory, were Richard Whately's *Rhetoric* and *Logic*. Whately was an English cleric, Archbishop of Dublin, with Broad Church sympathies, and his views on logic and rhetoric were correspondingly rational and latitudinarian. His work stressed argumentation and proof, and, following George

21. This is essentially the conclusion that Gruber draws ("Education," chap. 6). James McIntosh's study *Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974) does not treat Thoreau's formal training as a naturalist, while Sherman Paul states forthrightly that "in spite of his gifts for nature study, Thoreau was not a good naturalist" because he never developed a scientific objectivity toward his subject; see *The Shores of America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958), p. 277.

Campbell's earlier *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, adopted what might be termed a modestly psychological approach to the subject of style. Employing eighteenth-century epistemological theories derived ultimately from Locke—that ideas are built up in the mind from sense impressions in combination or association—Whately advised the writer or speaker to employ rhetorical devices that served to make strong and clear impressions on the mind of the reader or auditor: perspicuity, concrete diction, and imagery derived from sensory experience, and figurative devices like synecdoche and metonymy.²² Channing himself had a rather measured conception of the role of rhetoric and, though he could be severe and even caustic in his criticism, strove to help students express their thoughts effectively and not to mold them to a particular way of thinking or writing. He defined rhetoric as

a body of rules derived from experience and observation, and extending to all communication by language and designed to make it efficient. It does not ask whether a man is to be a speaker or writer,—a poet, philosopher, or debater; but simply,—is it his wish to be put in the right way of communicating his mind with power to others, by words spoken or written. If so, rhetoric undertakes to show him rules or principles which will help to make the expression of his thoughts effective; and effective, not in any fashionable or arbitrary way but in the way that nature universally intends and which man universally feels. For all genuine art is but the helpmate of nature.²³

The principal work, however, in Channing's courses consisted of themes, forensics, and declamations for which various kinds of outside reading were necessary. He assigned topics requiring no uniform preparation by the class (e.g., "Titles of Books" or "Of Keeping a Journal") as well as topics that demanded detailed knowledge of particular works by classical authors such as Virgil and Horace, and moderns such as Shakespeare and Milton.²⁴ There were no formal courses in English literature, although Channing read a series of lectures entitled "Rhetoric and Criticism," dealing chiefly with literary issues, to the senior class.²⁵ More important, however, during Thoreau's junior year Channing also conducted a series of informal evening meetings in his

22. Richard H. Dillman, "Thoreau's Harvard Education in Rhetoric and Composition," *Thoreau Journal Quarterly* 13 (July–October 1981): 54.

23. Edward Tyrrel Channing, *Lectures Read to the Seniors in Harvard College* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1856), pp. 31–32.

24. See Kenneth Walter Cameron, "Thoreau, Edward Tyrrel Channing and College Themes," *Emerson Society Quarterly* 42 (4 Qtr. 1966): 15–34.

25. Cameron, "Chronology of Thoreau's Harvard Years," p. 18.

study devoted to readings and critical discussions of English poetry. Gruber suggests, quite plausibly, that through his lectures and these informal gatherings Channing greatly stimulated Thoreau's interest in English poetry.²⁶ At any rate, only after he began to study with Channing in his sophomore year did Thoreau begin to withdraw works of English poetry from the library.

Thoreau gradually widened and extended this interest, branching out during his senior year from standard authors such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton to the collections of Thomas Campbell and Alexander Chalmers (the latter a twenty-one-volume anthology that he read through "without skipping" during this period or, more likely, a few years later).²⁷ He also read Hazlitt's *Lectures on the English Poets*, the poems of Gray, Johnson's *Lives of the . . . English Poets*, the Robin Hood ballads, some Anglo-Saxon poetry, early Scottish poetry, Burns, and Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*.

A stimulus to this literary interest was undoubtedly provided by Longfellow's first course of Harvard lectures on German and Northern literatures during Thoreau's last term in the summer of 1837. These lectures did not begin until May 23, Longfellow missed at least a week in June because of illness, and the term ended on July 2, so Thoreau's acquaintance with the recently installed Smith Professor of Modern Languages was necessarily brief. Nevertheless, Longfellow may have helped significantly to mold Thoreau's taste in Germanic literature. In a "slight sketch of the Course" included in a letter to his father, Longfellow outlined the contents of his dozen lectures (after two introductory periods on the Romance languages):

3. History of the Northern, or Gothic Languages.
4. Anglo-Saxon Literature.
5. and 6. Swedish Literatures.
7. Sketch of German Literatures.
8. 9. 10. Life and Writings of Gothe [*sic*].
11. and 12. Life and Writings of Jean Paul Richter.

Correspondingly, during this term Thoreau withdrew books on Anglo-Saxon poetry and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (in Carlyle's translation), and, a few years later, read the saga of Frithiof—doubtless treated by Longfellow in the lectures on Swedish literature, since he praised it in an article in the *North American Review* that

26. "Education," pp. 223–226.

27. See *Walden*, p. 259; also Harding, *Days*, p. 38.

summer.²⁸ Thoreau would maintain this interest in German and Scandinavian literature, particularly while working on *Cape Cod* during the 1850s when he became fascinated with the records of Norse exploration of the North American coast, but the personal example and stimulus of Longfellow were probably even more important than the content of his lectures. In contrast to the mind-numbing dullness of Greek and Latin recitation, here were warm, effusive, and appreciative lectures on contemporary literature from a dashing—by Cambridge standards—scholar-poet. Longfellow was far too much the Europeanized urban dandy for Thoreau ever to cultivate his society (or be cultivated by him, for that matter), but along with Channing Longfellow provided, by his lively engagement with literary studies, a notable exception to the prevailing pedagogical pattern of rote recitation.

At the same time, Thoreau began to keep a commonplace book in which he copied extracts from many of the poets he was reading.²⁹ This notebook is a link to his immediate post-Harvard reading, for he continued to fill it with poetry extracts after graduation, and he would fill several more blank books with selections from the English poets during the early 1840s, evidently working toward some literary project.³⁰ In any event, this interest in English poetry, especially from the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries, is the most marked taste that Thoreau seems to have developed as an undergraduate. His library withdrawals, his commonplace books, his membership in the Institute of 1770 and the role he played in it as a debater and a book reviewer suggest cumulatively that, however vague his career plans were, he was strongly drawn to a life in letters. The professors who seem to have influenced him most—Felton, Channing, and possibly Longfellow—were all men of letters who wrote on literary subjects for the reviews and did not confine their enthusiasm or their professional activity to the classroom. When Emerson delivered his rousing call for a new age in American letters and his glorification of the scholar's duties in the "American Scholar" address to Thoreau's graduating class in the summer of 1837, its effect on Thoreau must have been confirm-

28. See Cameron, "Books Thoreau Borrowed from Harvard College Library," pp. 193-194, and "Thoreau Discovers Emerson," pp. 326-328; for Longfellow's activities as a lecturer see *The Letters of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, vol. 2, 1837-1843, ed. Edward Hilen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 16-32.

29. Now in the collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library (MA 594); titled by Thoreau "Miscellaneous Extracts." See William L. Howarth, *The Literary Manuscripts of Henry D. Thoreau* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974), pp. 289-290, for a description.

30. Robert Sattelmeyer, "Thoreau's Projected Work on the English Poets," in *Studies in the American Renaissance: 1980*, ed. Joel Myerson (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), pp. 239-257.

ing and corroborative, for he was already preparing himself to carry out the duties of Emerson's scholar, especially "preserving and communicating . . . melodious verse."

Thoreau's reading in the remaining major area of the Harvard curriculum, religious studies and philosophy, is probably the most difficult to assess, not because the evidence is scant but because the effects of this reading are so difficult to gauge. The subjects involved inevitably raise questions of *how* as well as *what* one thinks, and, carried to their logical extensions, bear upon the ways in which Thoreau's fundamental world view may have been shaped by the philosophical and religious concepts that he came in contact with during these formative years. It can be said with a fair degree of confidence that Thoreau was acquainted with particular religious and philosophical developments of his day, but it can never be argued with equal confidence that he was influenced deeply by them. And there are of course infinite gradations of belief and influence. Nevertheless, the very things that make such judgments difficult also make it necessary to attempt them, for this area of his education was obviously of profound significance in shaping his mature intellectual orientation to the fundamental questions of life. It is possible to trace in some detail Thoreau's college reading in these subjects, and the record suggests that a progressive development of sorts did occur, that Thoreau gradually became familiar with thinkers and schools of thought that led him in fairly well-defined stages from Harvard's rational Unitarian orthodoxy to the radical and revolutionary propositions of Emerson's *Nature*.

During the 1830s, religious education—and indeed preparation for the ministry—was still a major mission of Harvard College. But during the preceding generation its religious orthodoxy had gradually changed from the Calvinism of the institution's founders to a rational and somewhat cerebral Unitarianism that continued to stress the authority of scripture but also emphasized man's capacity for good, the reasonableness of God's laws, and individual moral duty and responsibility. The Unitarians, however, were viewed with suspicion from both the theological left and right. Other established seminaries and colleges, such as those at Andover and Princeton, remained deeply tinctured with Calvinist thought and mistrusted Harvard as far too liberal and rationalistic. The conservatives suspected Unitarianism, with its emphasis on a single godhead, of having abandoned the fundamental Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus. A smaller but eventually more troublesome group of opponents came from within Unitarian ranks themselves, objecting to what they perceived to be the sterile and already tradition-bound character of the sect. This chorus of criticism would culminate in Emerson's famous

Divinity School Address (and its ensuing pamphlet war) in 1838, but in the hands of other Unitarian ministers of varying degrees of radicalism—such as W. H. Channing, Theodore Parker, Orestes Brownson, George Ripley, and Frederic Henry Hedge—the controversy had been building for several years.³¹

Thoreau had two terms of instruction in religious and theological studies: a recitation class in his junior year on William Paley's *Evidences of Christianity* and Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion*, and a course of lectures on the New Testament during his senior year.³² Paley's and Butler's texts were both orthodox, rational responses to deism and eighteenth-century skepticism that strove to prove that revealed religion, specifically Christianity, was compatible with the "natural religion" of the deists. Thoreau also had at least some familiarity with Paley's other and better-known religious treatise, *Natural Theology*, for he wrote a theme based upon a passage from it during his senior year (EEM, 101–104). *Natural Theology* contained the classic statement of the "argument from design," in which the existence and attributes of a creator are purportedly proved by the complexity and harmony of the creation. In Paley's famous analogy, a person who found a watch by itself in an uninhabited landscape could infer from an analysis of its construction and operation an intelligent watchmaker; the same conclusion would presumably follow from an analysis of the works of nature, which are infinitely more intricate and complex than a watch and which must therefore have an infinitely more powerful and intelligent creator. Thoreau was familiar enough with this argument to employ it himself a few years later to his own pupils at the Concord Academy.³³

Both Butler and Paley represent the rational apologist impulse to attempt to prove the truth of Christianity, revelation, and miracles by the very same sort of empirical evidence and inductive reasoning that had given rise to the abstractions of deism and the skepticism of the eighteenth century. In retrospect this impulse seems flawed from its inception, for no matter how skillfully argued and copiously furnished with evidence of the wonders of nature, a case for the authenticity of revelation and miracles based upon natural science and induction is ultimately a step toward the displacement of that religious certainty and scriptural authority by scientific and materialistic criteria for truth.

31. See William R. Hutchison, *The Transcendentalist Ministers: Church Reform in the New England Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), esp. chap. 1, "Boston Unitarianism."

32. Cameron, "Chronology of Thoreau's Harvard Years," pp. 16, 18.

33. Harding, *Days*, p. 80, quoting Edward Emerson's notes on Thoreau.

In adopting the tests for truth of their adversaries and attempting to show that Christianity is logical and scientific, Paley's and Butler's works are fundamentally defensive and have about them the aura of a doomed enterprise. Moreover, in their effort to be scientific and logical, they tend to downplay or disregard entirely religious emotions and affections. It would not be surprising if they left unsatisfied such students as actually may have looked to them for spiritual guidance or certainty. Nor would it be surprising if their effect was the opposite of that intended. Benjamin Franklin recalled reading pamphlets against deism and finding himself more persuaded by the arguments that were to be refuted than by those of the Christian apologists.

Henry Ware's lecture course on the New Testament, along with Thoreau's reading of the New Testament for his Greek studies, also reflected indirectly Harvard's post-Calvinist theological orientation. Despite the fact that they deemphasized the divinity of Jesus, the Unitarians naturally reversed the priorities of their Calvinistic forebears and stressed the New Testament's mild laws, its ethics, and its emphasis on man's capacity for regeneration and salvation. They recoiled in distaste from the Old Testament's severe and seemingly arbitrary laws, and from its wrathful and punishing God. Thoreau knew the Bible well,³⁴ but especially during the early years of his career he drew his allusions and references preponderantly from the New Testament, reflecting perhaps the bias of his education. Generally, he tended to be interested in the Old Testament as primitive myth—comparable in certain ways to the mythology, culture, and religion of the ancient Greeks (PJ 2.183–184)—while he both shared and went beyond the emphasis of the Unitarians on the New Testament as an ethical document. As both *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden* make plain, Thoreau was far more willing than most of his nominally Christian contemporaries to take seriously and literally the New Testament injunctions to live by faith and to eschew accumulating worldly goods. His Harvard education, as well as his earlier religious training, gave him a command of scripture that served as a keen weapon against what he perceived to be the apologetic and compromised Christianity of his age.

Like his literary reading at Harvard, Thoreau's required philosophical reading provided him with a background and a bridge to independent study that would carry him a great distance beyond conventional ideas enshrined in the curriculum. The curriculum in philosophy was based upon a kind of uneasy truce between the two schools of

34. See John R. Burns, "Thoreau's Use of the Bible," Ph.D. diss., Notre Dame University, 1966.

thought that were dominant in America during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the empirical and sensationalist school of John Locke and his followers, and the Scottish "common sense" philosophy advanced to qualify Lockean empiricism by Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, and others. Virtually no attempt was made, however, to include in the curriculum European schools of thought that had arisen during the preceding half-century. For post-Kantian French, English, and especially German philosophy, the interested student had to depend on outside reading. And since editions and translations of contemporary European philosophy were scarce (the Reverend James Marsh's edition of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*, the first of Coleridge's prose writings to appear in this country, had been published in 1829), the student often had to rely on secondary sources, especially review essays in periodicals.

Thoreau's formal study of philosophy began in his junior year with William Paley's *Moral Philosophy* and Dugald Stewart's *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*.³⁵ These texts presented him, respectively and somewhat contradictorily, with a utilitarian ethical system and a common-sense epistemology. Following Locke, Paley denied the existence of innate ideas, including moral ones, and asserted that the general expediency of an action was one's only guide to moral choice.³⁶ A little more than a decade later, Thoreau would make explicit reference to Paley's doctrine in order to refute it and assert the primacy of a higher moral law in "Resistance to Civil Government" (RP, 67-68). Stewart's philosophy of the mind, on the other hand, like the Scottish philosophy in general, attempted to disprove the Lockean view of mind and thought as merely the product of accumulated sense impressions. Stewart and the other Scots (notably Thomas Reid and Thomas Brown) posited the existence of certain innate principles and ideas in the human mind, among which was the "moral sense," an intuitive guide to right and wrong shared by all men—hence the term "common sense" applied to the school. (It must be stressed that "common" means "shared" and not "ordinary" in this usage.) Such views were popular because they offered a convenient way out of the troublesome extension of Lockean positions represented by the radical skepticism of Hume. There was little appetite in America for abstruse systems of thought that contravened the practical experience of mankind.

All these thinkers, then, were more or less occupied in either extend-

35. Cameron, "Chronology of Thoreau's Harvard Years," p. 16.

36. See Edgley W. Todd, "Philosophical Ideas at Harvard College 1817-1837," *New England Quarterly* 16 (1943): 63-90.

ing or qualifying Locke. But the notion of a common sense that accounted for the intuitive perception of right and wrong represented not only a corrective to but a significant departure from the material and empirical bias of Lockean thought. In fact, by establishing the authority of a common inner sense or conscience, the moral sense, the Scottish school may be said to have prepared the way for Transcendentalism. It takes only a slight shift of emphasis to move from a conception of a common inner sense manifested by individual moral actions to an individual appeal to one's own inner sense. Certainly the moral sense was a familiar concept in Transcendental thought, becoming in Emerson's hands in the Divinity School Address, for example, a powerful weapon against stultified religious orthodoxy.

In any event, after this refutation of Locke during his junior year, Thoreau studied the source of the controversy, Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in the Intellectual Philosophy course during his senior year. Significantly, according to the Harvard catalogue for that year (1836–1837), students were required as a part of their assignment to submit a written critique of Locke's *Essay*, "exhibiting the opinions of other philosophers, on controverted questions."³⁷ Probably this exercise involved rehearsing the arguments of the Scottish school against Locke's concept of the mind as a *tabula rasa* on which experience inscribed data.

Had Thoreau's philosophical education ended with his class work he would have had a safe grounding in conventional philosophical thought that harmonized with his training in religion and science. But the winds of change were blowing in New England, and in 1836 Thoreau chanced to meet one of the most indefatigable and charismatic spokesmen for reform, Orestes Brownson—a meeting that was to provide the principal catalyst in directing Thoreau's attention to thinkers who led him directly to the "new views" of Transcendentalism.

During his junior year Thoreau took advantage of a new policy that permitted students to leave school for a term to earn money to help pay their college expenses. He secured a teaching position in Canton, Massachusetts, and chanced to board with Brownson, who was at that time minister of the local Unitarian church and serving on the school committee that interviewed Thoreau for the job.³⁸ Brownson was just then busy on the manifesto of his Transcendental period (he later became a Roman Catholic), *New Views of Christianity, Society and the Church* (1836), a treatise that stressed man's inherent religious nature and argued that the present conditions of both the church and society

37. Cameron, "Chronology of Thoreau's Harvard Years," p. 17.

38. Harding, *Days*, pp. 45–46.

served to retard rather than to advance man's spiritual development.³⁹ Thoreau studied German with Brownson, probably for the specific purpose of reading and discussing German thought: German was the language of scholarship, philosophy, and the "higher criticism" of the Bible in the nineteenth century, and many important works in the language were still unavailable in English. In 1837, after he graduated, Thoreau wrote Brownson for a letter of reference, recalling his stay in Canton as "an era in my life—the morning of a new *Lebenstag*." In the same letter, in an apparent reference to their studies together, Thoreau cites his need to earn a living "and not be always keeping up a blaze upon the hearth within, with my German and metaphysical cat-sticks" (COR, 19).

In addition to fostering interest in German (an interest, it will be remembered, that would extend to German literature the next year under Longfellow), Brownson probably also set Thoreau to reading French thinkers whom he admired. During his senior year (1836–1837), after returning to Cambridge, Thoreau read Benjamin Constant de Rebecque's *De la Religion*, which Brownson had recommended in the preface to *New Views*.⁴⁰ Like Brownson's book, Constant's stressed the distinction between the universality of religious sentiment in mankind and the transitory form it happened to take in particular religious sects. This concept, complementary to the notion of the common moral sense, is one of the cornerstones of Transcendentalism, as well as the chief source of its quarrel with prevailing religious institutions, which it persisted, to their exasperation, in regarding as merely temporary and probably distorted manifestations of this vast underlying religious instinct.

More important, Thoreau also read Victor Cousin's *Introduction to the History of Philosophy*, which he borrowed from the library of the Institute of 1770 in June 1837 and renewed in July. Cousin was the leading figure of the French philosophic movement known as Eclecticism, and like Constant's, his work had been championed by Brownson. Thoreau had probably read about Cousin's work before reading the *Introduction*, for earlier in his senior year he had checked out issues of the *North American Review* and the *Edinburgh Review* that contained lengthy reviews of that work.⁴¹ French Eclecticism is not remembered today as an important movement in the development of

39. Gruber, "Education," p. 191; Thoreau owned a copy of *New Views* (see Bibliographical Catalogue, no. 209), probably acquired at this time. It is not known just when it came into his hands or if it came from Brownson himself.

40. *New Views of Christianity, Society and the Church* (Boston: J. Munroe, 1836), p. viii.

41. Cameron, "Thoreau Discovers Emerson," pp. 326–327.

philosophy, but its tenets were widely disseminated and quite influential in Europe and America during the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1838 George Ripley, for example, made up the first two volumes of his *Specimens of Foreign Standard Literature* with selections from Cousin, his pupil Théodore Jouffroy, and Constant; and he remarked of Cousin in the preface that “there is no living philosopher who has a greater number of readers in this country, and none whose works have met with a more genuine sympathy, a more cordial recognition.”⁴²

Cousin’s system of thought was not an original one. In fact, it consisted essentially of a methodology and an attitude toward truth implied by its title: Truth is not the special province of any particular sect or movement; rather, all systems contain truth, and the proper study of philosophy consists in the historical comparison of various schools in order to discover those truths that have been contributed by each or that are universally agreed upon. Cousin emphasized (and this makes him an important stepping stone to Transcendentalism) the ability of the individual to perceive this truth on his own, through an intuitive faculty quite close to if not indistinguishable from what the Transcendentalists, following Coleridge, called Reason.

Eclecticism was not simply an intellectual smorgasbord, however. Cousin had a dynamic and even dialectic theory of history. He believed that his mode of thought represented a productive synthesis of the mutually exclusive poles of previous systems: “After the subjective idealism of the school of Kant, and the empiricism and sensualism of that of Locke, have been developed and their last possible results exhausted, no new combination is in my opinion possible but the union of these two systems by centering them both in a vast and powerful eclecticism.”⁴³ Eclecticism thus furnished a bridge between the prevailing empiricism and German idealist philosophy by drawing on elements of both and by stressing the ability of the individual to recognize truth intuitively in its various appearances. Like the Scottish common-sense school, it was an attempt to temper the claim of the empiricists—that all information comes to us from without—by positing certain innate and intuitive powers in the mind.

Emerson was also reading Cousin in the 1830s (he owned several of Cousin’s works and referred to him frequently in his letters and Jour-

42. Quoted in Walter Leighton, *French Philosophers and American Transcendentalism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1908), p. 27.

43. Victor Cousin, *Introduction to the History of Philosophy* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, Little, and Wilkins, 1832), p. 414.

nal),⁴⁴ so that when Thoreau moved back to Concord and began to cultivate his friendship with the older man in 1837 they shared this intellectual interest. They continued to read the works of the Eclectic historians of philosophy during the ensuing years, especially in G erando's *Histoire Compar ee des Syst emes de Philosophie*. The influence of French Eclecticism on Transcendentalism has never been thoroughly explored or assessed,⁴⁵ but it seems quite clear that it provided Thoreau and others of his generation with much of the intellectual underpinning of the movement and offered a stepping stone to the bolder pronouncements of the Germans and their chief proponents in English, Coleridge and Carlyle. Emerson R. Marks has cogently summarized Cousin's significance to Transcendentalism as "a purveyor of German transcendental philosophy, in lucid and simplifying French, to Americans put off by . . . the dialectical intricacies of the original texts."⁴⁶

With his interest in the new thought, his acquaintance with Brownson, and his reading in French Eclectic philosophy, Thoreau was well prepared to read the manifesto of American Transcendentalism, Emerson's *Nature*, during his senior year in college, and circumstantial evidence at least suggests that it impressed him deeply. He withdrew it from the library of the Institute of 1770 in April 1837 and again in June. He may have acquired his own copy at this time, and later in the summer he bought a copy as a graduation gift for a friend.⁴⁷ More significant, ideas from this new vein of reading begin to appear in his college writing. The theme of May 5, 1837, "Common Reasons," for example, begins with a quotation from Turgot that Emerson had used in *Nature*: "He that has never doubted the existence of matter, may be assured he has no aptitude for metaphysical studies." In the same essay, Thoreau makes the Emersonian distinction between Nature and Spirit, and paraphrases the famous injunction in the last paragraph of *Nature*—"Build, therefore, your own world"—by saying of the philos-

44. See, for example, Walter Harding, *Emerson's Library* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967), pp. 70-71, and *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman et al., 16 vols. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960-81), 5:458-459, 459-460; 6:355. (Further citations of Emerson's Journals are to this edition and are abbreviated as JMN with volume and page number.)

45. But see Leighton, *French Philosophers and American Transcendentalism*; Georges Joyaux, "Victor Cousin and American Transcendentalism," 1955, rpt. in Brian Barbour, ed., *American Transcendentalism: An Anthology of Criticism* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), pp. 125-138; and Emerson R. Marks, "Victor Cousin and Emerson," in Myron Simon and Thornton H. Parks, eds., *Transcendentalism and Its Legacy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), pp. 63-86.

46. Marks, "Victor Cousin and Emerson," p. 65.

47. Cameron, "Thoreau Discovers Emerson," p. 328; Harding, *Days*, p. 60.

opher that “he builds for himself, in fact, a new world” (EEM, 101–103).

In early June, in the essay “Barbarities of Civilized States,” Thoreau adopts Emerson’s definition of art (as the mixture of man’s will with nature) in saying of art that man “mingles his will with the unchanged essences around him.” In the same essay he employs the expression “Not Me” to stand for nature as opposed to mind or self-consciousness, following both Emerson and Cousin (EEM, 105–110). Thoreau’s commencement address, “The Commercial Spirit of the Times,” may serve as a final example of the shift in both his vocabulary and his views of man’s nature and destiny. In it he sounds a note anticipatory of *Walden*, suggesting that men might reverse the biblical ratio and labor one day out of seven, reserving the other six for “the sabbath of the affections and the soul,” during which they would “drink in the soft influences and sublime revelations of Nature” (EEM, 117). These ideas, that man is destined to some higher end than appears in his everyday world and that the way to realize this end lies through the contemplation of nature, show how rapidly and deeply Emersonian thought took root in Thoreau. Still, as Gruber points out, the faith expressed in the address about man’s ability to harmonize his material and spiritual needs reflects at the same time Thoreau’s debt to Orestes Brownson’s *New Views*.⁴⁸ If Thoreau was not confirmed in his Transcendental views by the time he left Harvard, his conversion would be complete within a relatively short time. He moved back to Concord after graduation, took up schoolteaching, and began to cultivate his friendship with Emerson. Soon, under the older man’s influence, Thoreau would be reading more regularly in the traditional sources of inspiration for Transcendentalists: lyric poetry, ancient and modern idealistic philosophical thought, and Oriental scriptures.

Thoreau’s Harvard reading had helped to define and sharpen interests that he would continue to pursue, some of them for the rest of his life. Three of his principal areas of concentration, in fact—classical literature, English poetry, and the new views of contemporary thinkers—would furnish the basis for his first attempts to write for publication during the years following his graduation. At the same time, other of his mature interests had not yet germinated by the time he left college. The most important of these are natural history, the history of early American discovery and exploration, and North American Indians, although he did read a good many travel books—as indeed he would throughout his life—that touched upon these subjects peripherally. Additionally, and somewhat surprisingly, considering his later

48. Gruber, “Education,” pp. 193–194.

distaste for fiction, he read a fair amount of it in college too, though here again his taste was toward the historical and the native: Irving, Cooper, Timothy Flint, and Lydia Maria Child.⁴⁹

Perhaps of equal importance to the works that Thoreau read at Harvard were the habits of reading, note taking, and conceptualizing that he developed there. The surviving charging records of the libraries of the college and of his literary society reveal him to have been a regular and frequent borrower of books (withdrawing over eighty volumes during his senior year, for example).⁵⁰ Moreover, he developed the habit in college of keeping notebooks of his reading, copying out extracts from works that interested him and brief passages that he might quote in his own writings. One of these college notebooks, which he called the "Index rerum," was indexed alphabetically by subject and also contained a catalogue of his personal library, to which he added titles as he acquired new books. He would continue (albeit with some interruptions) this practice of keeping extracts from his reading for the rest of his life, until he had accumulated more than sixteen manuscript volumes of such notes. The changing contents of these notebooks over the course of his career provide a kind of shorthand notation of shifts in his reading patterns and intellectual interests. The notebooks of the Harvard years, however, are conventional commonplace books, mostly filled with quotable bits of prose and verse from eminent writers, and give little hint of Thoreau's mature style or the interests he would develop over the years. His training and his tastes, in fact, so far as they can be inferred from the record of his reading, fitted him rather well for his first professional pursuits in the years to come as a school-teacher with high but unfocused ambitions to become a literary man.

49. Cameron, "Books Thoreau Borrowed from Harvard College Library" and "Thoreau Discovers Emerson."

50. *Ibid.*