

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

It was in August and September, 1839, as the chronicle notes, that the voyage recorded in these pages was made. Thoreau was just past his twenty-second birthday; he had been two years out of college, and though he had thus far printed nothing, he had already, four years before, begun that practice of noting his experience, observation, and reflection in a diary which he continued through life, so that not only did his journal furnish him with the first draft of what he published in his lifetime, but it formed a magazine from which, after his death, friendly editors drew successive volumes.

The "Week" is much more than a mere reproduction of his journal during the period under consideration. It was not published as a book until 1849, ten years after the excursion which it commemorated; but in its final form were inclosed many verses and some prose passages which had already appeared in the short-lived historic "Dial." It will be remembered that Thoreau was not only a contributor to that periodical from the beginning, but for a while had editorial charge of it; the editing, indeed, seemed to be handed about from one to another of the circle most concerned in its issue. Thus in the first number, July, 1840, appeared the excursus on Aulus Persius Flaccus, printed in the "Week," pp. 327-333. So, also, his poems on Friendship saw the light first in the second number of "The

Dial," and there also appeared the poems "The Inward Morning," "The Poet's Delay," "Rumors from an Æolian Harp," and others, as well as the study of Anacreon, with examples in translation. It is easy for the reader to see that the "Week" is Thoreau's commonplace book as well as journal.

He was living in his hut on Walden Pond when he edited his manuscripts for publication in book form, and Alcott, visiting him one evening there, heard him read some passages from the work. It is interesting to observe how immediately this man of fine instincts perceived the worth of what had as yet struck his ear only, listening as a friend. "The book," he writes in his diary, "is purely American, fragrant with the life of New England woods and streams, and could have been written nowhere else. Especially am I touched by his sufficiency and soundness, his aboriginal vigor, — as if a man had once more come into Nature who knew what Nature meant him to do with her; Virgil and White of Selborne and Izaak Walton and Yankee settler all in one. I came home at midnight through the snowy woodpaths, and slept with the pleasing dream that presently the press would give me two books to be proud of, — Emerson's 'Poems' and Thoreau's 'Week.'" ¹

This was written in March, 1847, and Thoreau was probably just about to try the publishers, if his manuscript were not even now resting in his hut from one of its journeys. For in a letter to Emerson, at that time

¹ *A. Bronson Alcott; his Life and Philosophy.* By F. B. Sanborn and William T. Harris, p. 446.

in England, written November 14, 1847, Thoreau says, "I suppose you will like to hear of my book, though I have nothing worth writing about it. Indeed, for the last month or two I have forgotten it, but shall certainly remember it again. Wiley & Putnam, Munroe, the Harpers, and Crosby & Nichols have all declined printing it with the least risk to themselves; but Wiley & Putnam will print it in their series, and any of them anywhere, at *my* risk. If I liked the book well enough, I should not delay; but for the present I am indifferent. I believe this is, after all, the course you advised, — to let it lie." ¹ Apparently he used the opportunity of having it by him to touch it up now and then, for in a letter to Mr. J. Elliot Cabot, written in March, 1848, he says: "My book, fortunately, did not find a publisher ready to undertake it, and you can imagine the effect of delay on an author's estimate of his own work. However, I like it well enough to mend it, and shall look at it again directly when I have dispatched some other things." ² The essay on Friendship which precedes the poem "Friends, Romans, Countrymen, and Lovers," already referred to, appears to have been written at this time, for Mr. Alcott in his diary, under date of January 13, 1848, notes: "Henry Thoreau came in after my hours with the children, and we had a good deal of talk on the modes of popular influence. He read me a manuscript essay of his on Friendship, which he had just written, and which I thought superior to anything I had heard." ³

¹ *Familiar Letters.*

² *Ibid.*

³ *Henry D. Thoreau.* By F. B. Sanborn [American Men of Letters], p. 304.

Apparently Thoreau was convinced of the impossibility of persuading any publisher to take the book at his own risk, and was sufficiently confident of the worth of the volume to bear the expense of publication himself, although to do this he was obliged to borrow money, and, since the book did not meet its expenses, afterward to take up the occupation of surveying in order to cancel his obligation. The book was published by James Munroe & Co., Boston and Cambridge, apparently in the summer of 1849. Mr. George Ripley wrote a kindly notice of it in "The Tribune," and James Russell Lowell reviewed it in a dozen pages in the "Massachusetts Quarterly Review" for December of the same year. With his own cunning in literary art he quickly divined the interior structure of the "Week." "The great charm," he says, "of Mr. Thoreau's book seems to be that its being a book at all is a happy fortuity. The door of the portfolio cage has been left open, and the thoughts have flown out of themselves. The paper and types are only accidents. The page is confidential like a diary. . . . He begins honestly enough as the Boswell of Musketaquid and Merrimack. . . . As long as he continues an honest Boswell, his book is delightful, but sometimes he serves his two rivers as Hazlitt did Northcote, and makes them run Thoreau or Emerson or indeed anything but their own transparent element. . . . We have digressions on Boodh, on Anacreon (with translations hardly so good as Cowley), on Persius, on Friendship, and we know not what. We come upon them like snags, jolting us headforemost out of our places as we are rowing placidly up

stream, or drifting down. Mr. Thoreau becomes so absorbed in these discussions that he seems as it were to catch a crab and disappears uncomfortably from his seat at the bow oar. We could forgive them all, especially that on Books and that on Friendship (which is worthy of one who has so long communed with Nature and with Emerson), we could welcome them all were they put by themselves at the end of the book. But, as it is, they are out of proportion and out of place and mar our Merrimacking dreadfully. We were bid to a river-party, — not to be preached at." After distributing praise and blame over the poetical interludes, Lowell closes his review with the words: "Since we have found fault with what we may be allowed to call worsification, we should say that the prose work is done conscientiously and neatly. The style is compact, and the language has an antique purity like wine grown colorless with age."

In spite of the generous reception which the book had thus at the hands of men like Alcott, Ripley, and Lowell, the public was indifferent enough. Thoreau recounts the issue of the venture with grim humor in an entry in his diary, October 28, 1853, after the book had been in the bookstores for four years. "For a year or two past my *publisher*, falsely so called, has been writing from time to time to ask what disposition should be made of the copies of 'A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers' still on hand, and at last suggesting that he had use for the room they occupied in his cellar. So I had them all sent to me here, and they have arrived to-day by express, filling the man's wagon, —

706 copies out of an edition of 1000 which I bought of Munroe four years ago and have been ever since paying for, and have not quite paid for yet. The wares are sent to me at last, and I have an opportunity to examine my purchase. They are something more substantial than fame, as my back knows, which has borne them up two flights of stairs to a place similar to that to which they trace their origin. Of the remaining two hundred and ninety and odd, seventy-five were given away, the rest sold. I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself. Is it not well that the author should behold the fruits of his labor? My works are piled up on one side of my chamber half as high as my head, my *opera omnia*. This is authorship; these are the work of my brain. There was just one piece of good luck in the venture. The unbound were tied up by the printer four years ago in stout paper wrappers, and inscribed, —

H. D. Thoreau's

Concord River

50 cops.

So Munroe had only to cross out 'River' and write 'Mass.,' and deliver them to the expressman at once. I can see now what I write for, the result of my labors. Nevertheless, in spite of this result, sitting beside the inert mass of my works, I take up my pen to-night to record what thought or experience I may have had, with as much satisfaction as ever. Indeed, I believe that this result is more inspiring and better for me than if a thousand had bought my wares. It affects my privacy less and leaves me freer."

We have quoted from the judgments of Alcott and Lowell on the book because one is curious to know how the contemporaries of Thoreau regarded his work; later critics have the advantage and disadvantage of seeing such writing through an atmosphere charged with many men's breathing of criticism and appreciation. Lowell himself, when he returned to Thoreau sixteen years later, had in a measure re-formed his appreciation. But after all, no judgment of an author is quite so interesting as that which the author himself passes, even though one has to correct this estimate by other observations on the author and his work. At any rate, Thoreau shall be the last here to comment on this book: —

"I thought that one peculiarity of my 'Week' was its *hypæthral* character, to use an epithet applied to those Egyptian temples which are open to the heavens above, *under the ether*. I thought that it had little of the atmosphere of the house about it, but might wholly have been written, as in fact it was to a considerable extent, out-of-doors. It was only at a late period in writing it, as it happened, that I used any phrases implying that I lived in a house or led a *domestic* life. I trust it does not smell [so much] of the study and library, even of the poet's attic, as of the fields and woods; that it is a *hypæthral* or unroofed book, lying open under the ether and permeated by it, open to all weathers, not easy to be kept on a shelf."¹

¹ *Journal*, June 29, 1851.