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Henry Thoreau in Our Time

Last July we celebrated the centennial of Henry David Thoreau's retirement to Walden Pond. Almost twice as many old ladies as usual made the pilgrimage to Concord, to see the shrine containing his furniture, and to Walden, where they had the privilege of adding a rock to the cairn where his hut once stood and opening a box lunch in the picnic ground that stands as his monument. The American Museum of Natural History staged a Walden Pond exhibit. The Saturday Evening Post ran an illustrated article. And to add the final mortuary touch, a professor of English published a slim volume called "Walden Revisited". All in all, it was a typical American literary centennial. Henry Thoreau would probably not have enjoyed it.

I would like to propose that this coming July we celebrate a more significant Thoreau centenary, the hundredth anniversary of his going to jail. Every reader of Walden knows the story. Thoreau had not paid a poll tax for several years, as a sign that he had renounced his allegiance to a government that protected slavery and made war on Mexico, and one day when he walked into Concord to get a mended shoe from the cobbler's he was seized and put into jail. That night the tax was paid for him, and the next morning he was freed, obtained his mended shoe, and went back to the woods to pick some berries for dinner. While he was in jail, placidly meditating on the nature of state coercion, Emerson is supposed to have come by and asked: "Henry, what are you doing in there?" to which Thoreau is supposed to have replied: "Waldo, what are you doing out there?"

It takes not much investigation into the story to discover that the actual details of Thoreau's first great political gesture were largely ridiculous. For one thing, the act itself was both safe and imitative, Bronson Alcott having given Thoreau the idea some years before by refusing to pay his taxes and going to jail, where he was treated quite well. For another, Thoreau in jail seems to have been not at all the philosophic muser he makes himself out to be, but, as the jailer later reported, "mad as the devil." For a third, Emerson certainly engaged in no such pat dialogue with him, for the jailer allowed no visitors, and Emerson's actual reaction to the event was to tell Alcott he thought it was "mean and skulking, and in bad taste." Finally, the person who "interfered" and paid his tax was Thoreau's old Aunt Maria, disguised with a shawl over her head so Henry would not be angry at her for spoiling his gesture.

Why, then, celebrate the centenary of this absurd event? For only one reason. As a political warrior, Thoreau was a comic little figure with a receding chin, and not enough high style to carry off a gesture. As a political writer, he was the most ringing and magnificent polemicist America has ever produced. Three years later he made an essay called "Civil Disobedience" out of his prison experience, fusing the soft coal of his night in jail into solid diamond. Civil Disobedience has all the power and dignity that Thoreau's political act so signally lacked. "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison," he writes in a line Debs later echoed, ". . . the only home in a slave state in which a free man can abide with honor." "I saw

that the State was half-witted, that it was timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it, and pitied it." He summarizes his position, coolly, reasonably, even humorously, but with utter finality:

I have never declined paying the highway tax, because I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject; and as for supporting schools, I am doing my part to educate my fellow-countrymen now. It is for no particular item in the tax-bill that I refuse to pay it. I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually. I do not care to trace the course of my dollar, if I could, till it buys a man or a musket to shoot with, - the dollar is innocent, - but I am concerned to trace the effects of my allegiance. In fact, I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion, though I will still make what use and get what advantage of her I can, as is usual in such cases.

Civil Disobedience has been tremendously influential. It powerfully marked the mind of Tolstoy, and changed the direction of his movement. It was the solitary source-book on which Gandhi based his campaign of Civil Resistance in India, and Thoreau's ideas multiplied by millions of Indians came fairly close to shattering the power of the British Empire. It has been the bible of countless thousands in totalitarian concentration camps and democratic jails, of partisans and fighters in resistance movements, of men wherever they have found no weapon but principle with which to oppose tyranny. In the relative futility of Thoreau's political act and the real importance of his political essay based on it, we have an allegory for our time on the artist as politician: the artist as strong and servicable in the earnest practice of his art as he is weak and faintly comic in direct political action. In a day when the pressure on the artist to forsake

his art for his duties as a citizen is almost irresistible, when every painter is making posters on nutrition, when every composer is founding a society devoted to doing something about the atom bomb, when every writer is spending more time on committees than on the typewriter, we can use Henry Thoreau's example.

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Our first task in creating a Thoreau we can use is distinguishing the real man, or the part of him we want, from the various cardboard Thoreaus commentators have created to fit their wishes or fears. To Emerson, who should have known him better than anyone and certainly didn't, he was a bloodless character distinguished for his ascetic renunciations, a cross between Zeno the Stoic and a cigar store Indian. Emerson wrote:

He was bred to no profession; he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the State; he ate no flesh; he drank no wine; he never knew the use of tobacco; and, though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun.

To his poet-friend and biographer Ellery Channing, Thoreau was the Poet-Naturalist, a sweet singer of woodland beauty, and to his young Abolitionist friend and biographer Frank Sanborn, he was a Concord warrior, a later embattled farmer. To Lowell, an embattled Cambridge gentleman, he was a Transcendentalist crackpot and phony who insisted on going back to flint and steel when he had a match-box in his pocket, a fellow to the loonies who thought bran or swearing or the substitution of hooks and eyes for buttons would save the world. To Stevenson, full of Victorian vigor and beans, Thoreau was a simple skulker.

In our century Thoreau has fared little better. To Paul Elmer More he was one of Rousseau's wild men, but moving toward the higher self-restraint of neo-Humanism's "inner check." John Macy, one of our early Socialist critics, found him a powerful literary radical; but a little too selfish and aloof to be a good Socialist. To Lewis Mumford he was the Father of our National and State Parks, and to Leon Bazalgette, a French biographer, he was a savage, one of Chateaubriand's noble redmen in the virgin forest. Parrington makes him a researcher in economics, and Walden a handbook of economy to refute Adam Smith. To Constance Rourke he is the slick Yankee peddler out of vaudeville, who turns the tables on smart alecs, and to Gilbert Seldes he is an Antinomian.

Ludwig Lewisohn, an amateur sexologist and the Peeping Tom of our criticism, assures us that Thoreau was a clammy prig, the result of being hopelessly inhibited to the point of psychical impotence, or else hopelessly undersexed. The mechanical Marxists of the thirties are about as useful. V. F. Calverton conceded that he was "the best individual product of the petty bourgeois ideology" of his period, but hopelessly distorted by "Anarcho-individualism" and a probable sexual abnormality. Granville Hicks dismisses him with a cheap epigram: "Nothing in American literature is more admirable than Henry Thoreau's devotion to his principles, but the principles are, unfortunately, less significant than the devotion." Van Wyck Brooks, a prominent embalmer for the Book-of-the-Month Club, gives us Thoreau as a quirky, rather charming New England eccentric, his only vigorous feature an entirely fictitious hostility to the Irish, projected from Brooks' own senile

Xenophobia. To Edward Dahlberg, a philosophic anarchist and disciple of D. H. Lawrence, Thoreau is a philosophic anarchist and earlier Lawrence. And Henry Seidel Canby, who manages to be one of the best biographers in America and almost the worst critic, sums up his excellent, definitive biography with the revelation that Thoreau was a neurotic, sublimating his passions in a loving study of nature.

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From these cockeyed and contradictory extractions of Thoreau's "essence" we can reach two conclusions. One is that he is probably a subtler and more ambiguous character than anyone seems to have noticed. The other is that he must somehow still retain a powerful magic, or there would not be such a need to capture or destroy him, to canonize the shade or weight it down in the earth under a cairn of rocks. It seems obvious that we will have to create a Thoreau for ourselves, and it may be that we need one.

The first thing we should insist on is that Thoreau was a writer, not a man who lived in the woods or didn't pay taxes or went to jail. Other men did all these before him with more distinction. Alcott had gone to jail in Concord for refusing to pay his taxes in 1843, and had softened the jailer up for Henry three years later. "I believe it is nothing but principle," the jailer reported of Alcott, "for I never heard a man talk honest." Charles Lane, one of Alcott's admirers, had done the same thing the same year. Neither of them wrote Civil Disobedience. Channing had lived in a hut he built on the Illinois prairies. Stearns Wheeler had lived for a year in a cabin on the shore of Flint's Pond, and Thoreau had lived there with him for six

weeks. Neither of them, as Thoreau did, walked home to see their mothers every day. But neither of them wrote Walden.

Thoreau was not only a writer but a very fine one. At his best he wrote the only really first-rate prose ever written by an American, with the possible exception of Abraham Lincoln. The Plea for Captain John Brown, his most sustained lyric work, rings like Areopagitica, and like Areopagitica is the product of passion combined with complete technical mastery. Here are two sentences:

The momentary charge at Balaklava, in obedience to a blundering command, proving what a perfect machine the soldier is, has, properly enough, been celebrated by a poet laureate; but the steady, and for the most part successful, charge of this man, for some years, against the legions of Slavery, in obedience to an infinitely higher command, is as much more memorable than that as an intelligent and conscientious man is superior to a machine. Do you think that that will go unsung?

Thoreau was not only a writer, but a writer in the great stream of the American tradition, the mythic and non-realist writers, Hawthorne and Melville, Twain and James, and, in our own day, as Malcolm Cowley has been most insistent in pointing out, Hemingway and Faulkner. In pointing out Hemingway's kinship, not to our relatively barren realists and naturalists, but to our "haunted and nocturnal writers, the men who dealt in images that were symbols of an inner world," Cowley demonstrates that the idyllic fishing landscape of such a story as "Big Two-Hearted River" is not a real landscape setting for a real fishing trip, but an enchanted landscape full of rituals and taboos, a metaphor or projection of an inner state. It would not be hard to demonstrate the same thing for the landscape in Walden. One defender of such a view would be Henry Thoreau, who writes in

his Journals, along with innumerable tributes to the power of mythology, that the richest function of nature is to symbolize human life, to become fable and myth for man's inward experience. F. O. Matthiessen, probably the best critic we have devoting himself to American literature, has claimed that Thoreau's power lies precisely in his recreation of basic myth, in his being the protagonist in a great cyclic ritual drama.

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Central to any interpretation of Thoreau is Walden, both the experience of living by the pond and the book that reported it. As he explains it in the book, it was an experiment in human ecology (and if Thoreau was a scientist in any field, it was ecology, though he preceded the term), an attempt to work out a satisfactory relationship between man and his environment. He writes:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

And of his leaving:

I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one.

At Walden, Thoreau reports the experience of awakening one morning with the sense that some question had been put to him, which

he had been endeavoring in vain to answer in his sleep. In his terms, that question would be the problem with which he begins Life Without Principle: "Let us consider the way in which we spend our lives." His obsessive image, running through everything he ever wrote, is the myth of Apollo, glorious god of the sun, forced to labor on earth tending the flocks of King Admetus. In one sense, of course, the picture of Henry Thoreau forced to tend anyone's flocks is ironic, and Stevenson is right when he notes sarcastically: "Admetus never got less work out of any servant since the world began." In another sense the myth has a basic rightness, and is, like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, an archetypal allegory of the artist in a society that gives him no worthy function and no commensurate reward.

The sun is Thoreau's key symbol, and all of Walden is a development in the ambiguities of sun imagery. The book begins with the theme: "But alert and healthy natures remember that the sun rose clear," and ends: "There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star." Thoreau's movement from an egocentric to a sociocentric view is the movement from: "I have, as it were, my own sun, and moon, and stars, and a little world all to myself" to: "The same sun which ripens my beans illumines at once a system of earths like ours." The sun is an old Platonist like Emerson that must set before Thoreau's true sun can rise, it is menaced by every variety of mist, haze, smoke, and darkness, it is Thoreau's brother, it is both his own cold affection and the threat of sensuality that would corrupt goodness as it taints meat, it is himself in a pun on s-o-n, s-u-n. When Abolitionism becomes a nagging demand Thoreau can no longer resist, a Negro woman

is a dusky orb rising on Concord, and when John Brown finally strikes his blow for Thoreau the sun shines on him, and he works "in the clearest light that shines on the land." The final announcement of Thoreau's triumphant rebirth at Walden is the sun breaking through mists. It is not to our purpose here to explore the deep and complex ambiguities of Thoreau's sun symbol, or in fact to do more than note a few of many contexts, but no one can study the sun references in Walden without realizing that Thoreau is a deeper and more complicated writer than we have been told, and that the book is essentially dynamic rather than static, a movement from something to something, rather than the simple reporting of an experience.

Walden is, in fact, a vast rebirth ritual, the purest and most complete in our literature. We know rebirth rituals to operate characteristically by means of fire, ice or decay, mountains and pits, but we are staggered by the amount and variety of these in the book. We see Thoreau build his shanty of boards he has first purified in the sun, record approvingly an Indian purification ritual of burning all the tribe's old belongings and provisions, and later go off into a description of the way he is cleansed and revived by his own fireplace. We see him note the magic purity of the ice on Walden Pond, the fact that frozen water never turns stale, and the rebirth involved when the ice breaks up, all sins are forgiven, and "Walden was dead and is alive again." We see him exploring every phase and type of decay: rotting ice, decaying trees, mouldy pitch pine and rotten wood, excrement, maggots, a vulture feeding on a dead horse, carrion, tainted meat and putrid water. The whole of Walden runs to symbols of graves and

coffins, with consequent rising from them, to wombs and emergence from them, and ends on the fable of a live insect resurrected from an egg long buried in wood. Each day at Walden Thoreau was reborn by his bath in the pond, a religious exercise he says he took for purification and renewal, and the whole two years and two months he compresses into the cycle of a year, to frame the book on the archetypal rebirth pattern of the death and renewal of vegetation, ending it with the magical emergence of spring.

On the thread of decay and rebirth Thoreau strings all his preoccupations. Meat is a symbol of evil, sensuality; its tainting symbolizes goodness and affection corrupted: the shame and defilement of chastity smells like carrion (in which he agreed with Shakespeare); the eating of meat causes slavery and unjust war. (Thoreau, who was a vegetarian, sometimes felt so wild he was tempted to seize and devour a woodchuck raw, or yearned like a savage for the raw marrow of kudu - those were the periods when he wanted to seize the world by the neck and hold it under water like a dog until it drowned). But even slavery and injustice are a decaying and death, and Thoreau concludes Slavery in Massachusetts: "We do not complain that they live, but that they do not get buried. Let the living bury them; even they are good for manure." Always, in Thoreau's imagery, what this rotting meat will fertilize is fruit, ripe fruit. It is his chief good. He wanted "the flower and fruit of man," the "ripeness." The perfect and glorious state he foresees will bear men as fruit, suffering them to drop off as they ripen; John Brown's heroism is a good seed that will bear good fruit, a future crop of heroes. Just as Brown, in one of the most terrifying puns ever

written, was "ripe" for the gallows, Thoreau reports after writing Civil Disobedience, as he dwells on action and wildness, that he feels ripe, fertile: "It is seedtime with me. I have lain fallow long enough." On the metaphor of the organic process of birth, growth, decay, and rebirth out of decay, Thoreau organizes his whole life and experience.

I have maintained that Walden is a dynamic process, a job of symbolic action, a moving from something to something. From what to what? On an abstract level, from individual isolation to collective identification, from, in Macaulay's terms, a Platonic philosophy of pure truth to a Baconian philosophy of use. It is interesting to note that the term Bacon used for the utilitarian ends of knowledge, for the relief of man's estate is "fruit." The Thoreau who went to Walden was a pure Platonist, a man who could review a Utopian book and announce that it was too practical, that its chief fault was aiming "to secure the greatest degree of gross comfort and pleasure merely." The man who left Walden was the man who thought it was less important for John Brown to right a Greek accent slanting the wrong way than to right a falling slave. Early in the book Thoreau gives us his famous Platonic myth of having long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle dove. Before he is through his symbolic quest is for a human being, and near the end of the book he reports of a hunter: "He had lost a dog but found a man." All through Walden he weighs Platonic and Baconian values: men keep chickens for the glorious sound of a crowing cock "to say nothing of the eggs and drumsticks;" a well reminds a man of the insignificance of his dry pursuits on a surface largely water, and also keeps the butter cool. By the end of the book he has brought Transcendentalism

down to earth, has taken Emerson's castles in the air, to use his own figure, and built foundations under them.

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Thoreau's political value, for us, is largely in terms of this transition from philosophic aloofness. We see in him the honest artist struggling for terms on which he can adjust to society in his capacity as artist. As might be expected from such a process, Thoreau's social statements are full of contradictions, and quotations can be amputated from the context of his work to bolster any position from absolute anarchism to ultimate toryism, if indeed they are very far apart. At his worst, he is simply a nut reformer, one of the horde in his period, attempting to "improve" an Irish neighbor by lecturing to him on abstinence from tea, coffee, and meat as the solution to all his problems, and the passage in Walden describing his experience is the most condescending and offensive in a sometimes infuriating book. At his best, he is the clearest voice for social ethics that ever spoke out in America.

One of the inevitable consequences of Emersonian idealism was the ease with which it could be used to sugar-coat social injustice, as a later generation was to discover when it saw robber barons piling up fortunes while intoning Emersonian slogans of Self-Reliance and Compensation. If the Lowell factory owner was more enslaved than one of his child laborers, there was little point in seeking to improve the lot of the child laborer, and frequently Emerson seemed to be preaching a principle that would forbid both the rich and the poor to sleep under bridges. Thoreau begins Walden in these terms, remarking that it is frivolous to attend "to the gross but somewhat foreign form of servitude called Negro

Slavery when there are so many keen and subtle masters that enslave;" that the rich are a "seemingly wealthy, but most terribly impoverished class of all" since they are fettered by their gold and silver; that the day-laborer is more independent than his employer, since his day ends with sun-down, while his employer has no respite from one year to another; even that if you give a ragged man money he will perhaps buy more rags with it, since he is frequently gross, with a taste for rags.

Against this ingenious and certainly unintentioned social palliation, Walden works through to sharp social criticism: of the New England textile factory system, whose object is, "not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched;" of the degradation of the laboring class of his time, "living in sties," shrunken in mind and body; of the worse condition of the Southern slaves; of the lack of dignity and privacy allowed for factory girls, "never alone, hardly in their dreams;" of the human consequences of commerce and technology; of the greed and corruption of the money-mad New England of his day, seeing the whole world in the bright reflecting surface of a dollar.

As his bitterness and awareness increased, Thoreau's direct action became transmuted. He had always, like his friends and family, helped the Underground Railway run escaped slaves to Canada. He devotes a sentence to one such experience in Walden, and amplifies it in his Journal, turning a quiet and terrible irony on the man's attempt to buy his freedom from his master, who was his father, and exercised paternal love by holding out for more than the slave could pay. These actions, however, in a man who disliked Abolitionism, seem to have been simple

reflexes of common decency, against his principles, which would free the slave first by striking off his spiritual chains. From this view, Thoreau works tortuously through to his final identification of John Brown, the quintessence of direct social action, with all beauty, music, poetry, philosophy, and Christianity. Finally Brown becomes Christ, an indignant militant who cleansed the temple, preached radical doctrines, and was crucified by the slave-owners. In what amounts almost to worship of Brown, Thoreau both deifies the action he had tried to avoid and transcends it in passion. Brown died for him, thus he need free no more slaves.

At the same time, Thoreau fought his way through the Emersonian doctrine that a man might wash his hands of wrong, providing he did not himself commit it. He writes in Civil Disobedience:

It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support. If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders. I must get off him first, that he may pursue his contemplations too.

Here he has recognized the fallacy of the Greek philosopher, free because he is supported by the labor of slaves, and the logic of this realization was to drive him, through the superiority and smugness of "God does not sympathize with the popular movements," and "I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad," to the militant fury of "My thoughts are murder to the State, and involuntarily go plotting against her."

Thoreau's progress also involved transcending his economics.

The first chapter of Walden, entitled "Economy," is an elaborate attempt to justify his life and views in the money terms of New England commerce. He speaks of going to the woods as "going into business" on "slender capital," of his "enterprise;" gives the reader his "accounts," even to the half-penny, of what he spends and what he takes in; talks of "buying dear" of "paying compound interest," etc. He accepts the ledger principle, though he sneaks into the Credit category such unusual profits on his investment as "leisure and independence and health." His money metaphor begins to break down when he writes of the Massachusetts citizens who read of the unjust war against Mexico as sleepily as they read the prices-current, and he cries out: "What is the price current of an honest man and patriot today?" By the time of the John Brown affair he has evolved two absolutely independent economies, a money economy and a moral economy. He writes:

"But he won't gain anything by it." Well, no, I don't suppose he could get four-and-sixpence a day for being hung, take the year round; but then he stands a chance to save a considerable part of his soul, - and such a soul! - when you do not. No doubt you can get more in your market for a quart of milk than for a quart of blood, but that is not the market that heroes carry their blood to.

What, then, can we make of this complicated social pattern to our purposes? Following Emerson's doctrine and example, Thoreau was frequently freely inconsistent. (He was able to write in Walden "I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself, than to be crowded on a velvet cushion," and a few pages later "None is so poor that he need sit on a pumpkin.") One of his chief contradictions was on the matter of reforming the world through his example. He could disclaim hoping to influence anyone with "I do not mean to prescribe rules

to strong and valiant natures" and then take it back immediately with "I foresee that all men will at length establish their lives on that basis." Certainly to us his hatred of technological progress, of the division of labor, even of farming with draft animals and fertilizer, is backward-looking and reactionary. Certainly he distrusted cooperative action and all organization. But the example of Jefferson reminds us that a man may be economically backward-looking and still be our noblest spokesman, just as Hamilton reminds us that a man may bring us reaction and injustice tied up in the bright issue of economic progress.

To the doctrine of naked expediency so tempting to our time, the worship of power and success for which the James Burnhams among us speak so plausibly, Thoreau opposes only one weapon - principle! Not policy or expediency must be the test, but justice and principle. "Read not the Times, read the Eternities." Walden has been a bible for the British labor movement since the days of William Morris. We might wonder what it, now that it is in power, or the rest of us, in and out of power, who claim to speak for principle, would make of Thoreau's doctrine: "If I have unjustly wrested a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself."

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All of this takes us far afield of what must be Thoreau's chief importance to us, his writing. The resources of his craft warrant our study. One of his most eloquent devices, typified by the crack about the Times and Eternities, is a roost use of words, resulting from his lifelong interest in language and etymology, fresh, shocking, and very close to the pun. We can see the etymological passion developing in the Journal notes that a "wild" man is actually a "willed" man, that our

"fields" are "felled" woods. His early writings keep reminding us that a "daunterer" is going to a "Sainte Terre," a Holy Land; that three roads can make a village "trivial;" that when our center is outside us we are "eccentric;" that a "landlord" is literally a "lord of the land;" that he has been "breaking" silence for years and has hardly made a "rent" in it. By the time he wrote Walden this habit had developed into one of his most characteristic ironic devices: the insistence that telling his townsmen about his life is not "impertinent" but "pertinent," that professors of philosophy are not philosophers, but people who "profess" it, that the "bent" of his genius is a very "crooked" one. In the Plea for Captain John Brown the device raises to a whiplash power. He says that Brown's "humanities" were the freeing of slaves, not the study of grammar; that a Board of Commissions is lumber of which he had only lately heard; of the Governor of Massachusetts: "He was no Governor of mine. He did not govern me." Sometimes these puns double and triple to permit him to pack a number of complex meanings into a single word, like the "dear" in "Living is so dear." The discord of goose-honk and owl-cry he hears by the pond becomes a "concord" that is at once musical harmony, his native town, and concord as "peace."

Closely related to these serious puns in Thoreau is a kind of serious epigrammatic humor, wry quotable lines which pack a good deal of meaning and tend to make their point by shifting linguistic levels. "Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk." To a man who threatened to plumb his depths: "I trust you will not strike your head against the bottom." "The partridge loves peas, but not those that go with her into the pot." On his habit of

exaggeration: "You must speak loud to those who are hard of hearing." He reported that the question he feared was not "How much wood did you burn?" but "What did you do while you were warm?" Dying, to someone who wanted to talk about the next world: "One world at a time;" and to another, who asked whether he had made his peace with God: "We have never quarrelled." When Emerson remarked that they taught all branches of learning at Harvard: "All of the branches and none of the roots." Refusing to pay a dollar for his Harvard diploma: "Let every sheep keep but his own skin." Asked to write for The Ladies' Companion: "I could not write anything companionable." Many of these are variants of the same joke, and in a few cases, the humor is sour and forced, like the definition of a pearl as "the hardened tear of a diseased clam, murdered in its old age," or a soldier as "a fool made conspicuous by a painted coat." But these are the penalties any man who works for humor must occasionally pay, and Thoreau believed this "indispensable pledge of sanity" to be so important that without some leaven of it "the abstruse thinker may justly be suspected of mysticism, fanaticism or insanity." "Especially the transcendental philosophy needs the leaven of humor," he wrote, in what must go down as an understatement.

Thoreau was perhaps more precise about his own style and more preoccupied generally with literary craft than any American writer except Henry James. He rewrote endlessly, not only, like James, for greater precision, but unlike James, for greater simplicity. "Simplify, Simplify, Simplify," he gave as the three cardinal principles of both life and art. Emerson had said of Montaigne: "Cut those words and they would bleed" and Thoreau's is perhaps the only American style in his

century of which this is true. Criticizing DeQuincey, he stated his own prose aesthetic, "the art of writing," demanding sentences that are concentrated and nutty, that suggest far more than they say, that are kinked and knotted into something hard and significant, to be swallowed like a diamond without digesting. "Sentences which are expensive, towards which so many volumes, so much life, went; which lie like boulders on the page, up and down or across; which contain the seed of other sentences, not mere repetition, but creation; which a man might sell his grounds and castles to build." In another place he notes that writing must be done with gusto, must be vascular. A sense of Thoreau's pre-occupation with craft comes with noting that when he lists "My faults" in the Journal, all seven of them turn out to be of his prose style. Writing for Thoreau was so obsessive, so vital a physical process, that at various times he describes it in the imagery of eating, procreation, excretion, mystic trance, and even his old favorite, the tree bearing ripe fruit. An anthology of Thoreau's passages on the art of writing would be as worth compiling as Henry James' Prefaces, and certainly as useful to both the writer and the reader.

Thoreau's somewhat granite pride and aloofness are at their most appealing, and very like James Joyce's, when he is defending his manuscripts against editorial bowdlerizing, when he stands as the unbattled writer against the phalanx of cowardice and stupidity. He fought Emerson and Margaret Fuller on a line in one of his poems they printed in The Dial, and won. When the editor of Putnam's Monthly cut passages from an article, Thoreau wrote to a friend: "The editor requires the liberty to omit the heresies without consulting me, a privilege California

is not rich enough to bid for" and withdrew the series. His letter to Lowell, the editor of The Atlantic, when Lowell cut a "pantheistic" sentence out of cowardice, is a masterpiece of bitter fury, withering Lowell like a premature bud in a blast.

Henry Thoreau's and John Brown's personalities were as different as any two personalities can be; one the gentle, rather shy scholar who took children huckleberrying, the other the harsh military Puritan who could murder the children of slavers in cold blood on the Potawatonic, with the fearful statement "Nits grow to be lice." Almost the only things they had in common, that made Thoreau perceive that Brown was his man, his ideas in action, almost his Redeemer, were principle and literary style. Just as writers in our own day were drawn to Sacco and Vanzetti perhaps as much for the majesty of Vanzetti's untutored prose as for the obvious justice of their case, Thoreau somehow found the most convincing thing about Brown to be his speech to the court. At the end of his Plea he quotes Brown's "sweet and noble strain":

I pity the poor in bondage that have none to help them; that is why I am here; not to gratify any personal animosity, revenge, or vindictive spirit. It is my sympathy with the oppressed and the wronged, that are as good as you, and as precious as the sight of God.

adding only: "You don't know your testament when you see it."

"This unlettered man's speaking and writing are standard English" he writes in another paper on Brown. "It suggests that the one great rule of composition - and if I were a professor of rhetoric I should insist on this - is, to speak the truth." It was certainly Thoreau's great rule of composition. "He was a speaker and actor of

the truth," Emerson said in his obituary of Thoreau. We have never had too many of those. He was also, perhaps as a consequence, a very great writer. We have never had too many of those, either.

Stanley Hyman

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