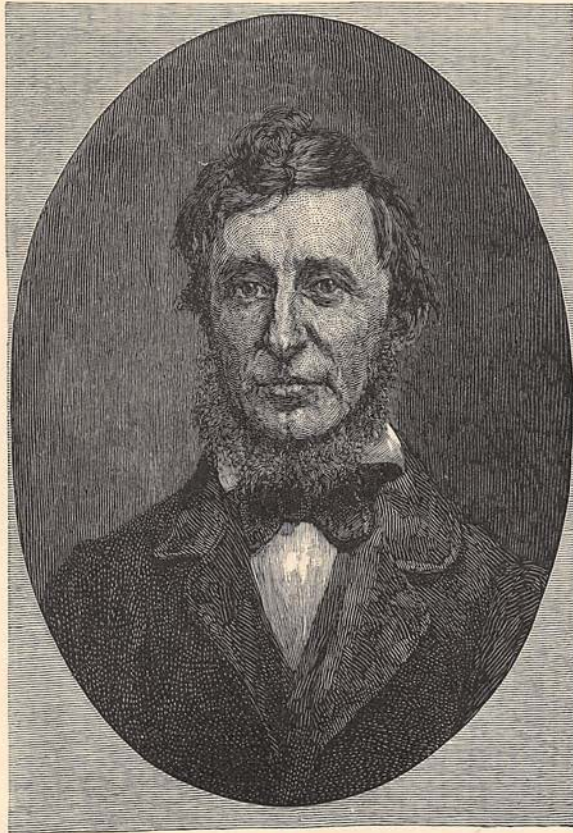


HENRY D. THOREAU.



HENRY D. THOREAU. (FROM HIS LAST PORTRAIT, A TINTYPE, TAKEN BY CRITCHELSON, OF WORCESTER, MASS., IN 1861; PRESENTED TO JOHN H. TREADWELL BY RALPH WALDO EMERSON.)

IN "Walden" Thoreau enumerates, in a serio-humorous vein, his various unpaid occupations, such as inspector of storms, surveyor of forest-paths and all across-lot routes, shepherd and herder to the wild stock of the town, etc., etc. Among the rest he says: "For a long time I was reporter to a journal of no very wide circulation, whose editor has never yet seen fit to print the bulk of my contributions, and, as is too common with writers, I got only my labor for my pains. However, in this case my pains were their own reward." The journal to which Thoreau so playfully alludes, consisting of many manuscript volumes, is now the property of Mr. H. G. O. Blake, an old friend and correspondent of his, and his rejected contributions to it, after a delay of nearly twenty years, are being put into print. "Early Spring in Massachusetts," lately published by Houghton, Mifflin

& Co., is made up of excerpts from this journal. A few of the passages have been in print before; I notice one in the "Week," one or more in his discourse on "Walking, or the Wild," and one in the essay called "Life without Principle."

Thoreau published but two volumes in his life-time,—“A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers”—which, by the way, is mainly a record of other and much longer voyages upon other and less tangible rivers than those named in the title—and “Walden, or Life in the Woods.” The other six volumes of his works, including Mr. Blake’s, have been collected and published since his death.

It is to be hoped that, in time, we shall have the rest of his journal in print—at least a series of year-books from it, one volume for each of the four seasons. His journal was probably written with an eye to its future

publication. It does not consist of mere scraps, hasty memoranda, and jottings-down, like Hawthorne's note-book, and like the blotter most literary men keep, but of finished work—blocks carefully quarried, and trimmed, and faced, at least with a plumb spot upon each, to be used or rejected in the construction of future works. When he wrote a book, or a lecture, or an essay, he probably went to his journal for the greater share of the material. The amount of this manuscript matter he left behind him at his death was, perhaps, equal to all the matter he had printed, and, though it had doubtless been sorted over more or less, yet a large per cent. of it seems to be quite as good as any of his work and quite as characteristic. He revised, and corrected, and supplemented his record from day to day and from year to year, till it reflects truly his life and mind. Every scrap he ever wrote carries his flavor and quality unmistakably, as much as a leaf or twig of a sassafras-tree carries its quality and flavor. He was a man so thoroughly devoted to principle and to his own aims in life that he seems never to have allowed himself one indifferent or careless moment. He was always making the highest demands upon himself and upon others.

In his private letters his bow is strung just as taut as in his printed works, and he uses arrows from the same quiver, and sends them just as high and far as he can. In his journal it is the same.

Thoreau's fame has steadily increased since his death, in 1862, as it was bound to do. It was little more than in the bud at that time, and its full leaf and flowering are not yet, perhaps not in many years yet. He improves with age; in fact, requires age to take off a little of his asperity and fully ripen him. The generation he lectured so sharply will not give the same heed to his words as will the next and the next. The first effect of the reading of his books, upon many minds, is irritation and disapproval; the perception of their beauty and wisdom comes later. He makes short work of our prejudices; he likes the wind in his teeth, and to put it in the teeth of his reader. He was a man devoid of compassion, devoid of sympathy, devoid of generosity, devoid of patriotism, as these words are usually understood, yet his life showed a devotion to principle such as one life in millions does not show; and matching this there runs through his works a vein of the purest and rarest poetry and the finest wisdom. For both these reasons time will enhance rather than lessen the value of his contributions. The world likes a good hater and refuser almost as well as it likes a good lover and acceptor, only it likes him farther off.

In writing of Thoreau, I am not conscious of having any criticism to make of him. I would fain accept him just as he was, and make the most of him, defining and discriminating him as I would a flower or a bird or any other product of nature—perhaps exaggerating some features the better to bring them out. I suppose there were greater men among his contemporaries, but I doubt if there were any more genuine and sincere, or more devoted to ideal ends. If he was not this, that, or the other great man, he was Thoreau, and he fills his own niche well, and has left a positive and distinct impression upon the literature of his country. He did his work thoroughly; he touched bottom; he made the most of his life. He was, perhaps, a little too near his friend and master, Emerson, and brought too directly under his influence. If he had lived farther from him, he would have felt his attraction less. But he was just as positive a fact as Emerson. The contour of his moral nature was just as firm and resisting. He was no more a soft-shelled egg, to be dented by every straw in the nest, than was his distinguished neighbor.

An English reviewer has summed up his estimate of Thoreau by calling him a "skulker," which is the pith of Dr. Johnson's smart epigram about Cowley, a man in whom Thoreau is distinctly foreshadowed: "If his activity was virtue, his retreat was cowardice." Thoreau was a skulker if it appears that he ran away from a noble part to perform an ignoble, or one less noble. The world has a right to the best there is in a man, both in word and deed: from the scholar, knowledge; from the soldier, courage; from the statesman, wisdom; from the farmer, good husbandry, etc.; and from all, virtue; but has it a right to say arbitrarily who shall be soldiers and who poets? Is there no virtue but virtue? no religion but in the creeds? no salt but what is crystallized? Who shall presume to say the world did not get the best there was in Thoreau—high and much needed service from him?—albeit there appear in the account more kicks than compliments. Would you have had him stick to his lead-pencils, or to school-teaching, and let Walden Pond and the rest go? We should have lost some of the raciest and most antiseptic books in English literature, and an example of devotion to principle that provokes and stimulates like a winter morning. I am not aware that Thoreau shirked any responsibility or dodged any duty proper to him, and he could look the world as square in the face as any man that ever lived.

The people of his native town remember at least one notable occasion on which Thoreau did not skulk, nor sulk either. I

refer to the 30th of October, 1859, when he made his plea for Captain John Brown, while the hero was on trial in Virginia. He was about the only Northern man who was not a skulker, or who did not hide behind some pretext or other. It was proposed to stop Thoreau's mouth, persuade him to keep still and lie low, but he was not to be stopped. He thought there were enough lying low—the ranks were all full there, the ground was covered; and in an address delivered in Concord he glorified the old hero in words that, at this day and in the light of subsequent events, it thrills the blood to read. This instant and unequivocal indorsement of Brown by Thoreau, in the face of the most overwhelming public opinion even among anti-slavery men, throws a flood of light upon him. It is the most significant act of his life. It clinches him; it makes the colors fast. We know he means what he says after that. It is of the same metal and has the same ring as Brown's act itself. It shows what thoughts he had fed his soul on, what school he had schooled himself in, what his devotion to the ideal meant. His hatred of slavery and injustice, and of the government that tolerated them, was pure, and it went clean through; it stopped at nothing. Iniquitous laws must be defied, and there is no previous question. "The fact that the politician falls," he says, referring to the repeal of the Fugitive Slave law, "is merely that there is less honor among thieves than was supposed, and not the fact that they are thieves." For the most part, Thoreau's political tracts and addresses seem a little petulant and willful, and fall just short of enlisting one's sympathies, and his carrying his opposition to the State to the point of allowing himself to be put in jail rather than pay a paltry tax, savors a little bit of the grotesque and the melodramatic. But his plea for John Brown when the whole country was disowning him, abolitionists and all, fully satisfies one's sense of the fitness of things. It does not overshoot the mark. The mark was high, and the attitude of the speaker was high and scornful, and uncompromising in the extreme. It was just the occasion required to show Thoreau's metal. "If this man's acts and words do not create a revival, it will be the severest possible satire on the acts and words that do. It is the best news that America has ever heard." "Think of him—of his rare qualities!—such a man as it takes ages to make, and ages to understand; no mock hero, nor the representative of any party. A man such as the sun may not rise upon again in this benighted land. To whose making went the costliest material, the finest adamant; sent

to be the redeemer of those in captivity; and the only use to which you can put him is to hang him at the end of a rope!" "Do yourselves the honor to recognize him; he needs none of your respect." It was just such radical qualities as John Brown exhibited, or their analogue and counterpart in other fields, that Thoreau coveted and pursued through life; in man, devotion to the severest ideal, friendship founded upon antagonism, or hate, as he preferred to call it; in nature the untamed and untamable, even verging on the savage and pitiless; in literature the heroic—"books, not which afford us a cowering enjoyment, but in which each thought is of unusual daring; such as an idle man cannot read, and a timid one would not be entertained by." Indeed, Thoreau was Brown's spiritual brother, the last and finer flowering of the same plant—the seed flowering; he was just as much of a zealot, was just as gritty and unflinching in his way; a man whose brow was set, whose mind was made up, and leading just as forlorn a hope, and as little quailed by the odds.

In the great army of Mammon, the great army of the fashionable, the complacent and church-going, Thoreau was a skulker, even a deserter, if you please—yea, a traitor fighting on the other side.

Emerson regrets the loss to the world of his rare powers of action, and thinks that, instead of being the captain of a huckleberry-party, he might have engineered for all America. But Thoreau, doubtless, knew himself better when he said, with his usual strength of metaphor, that he was as unfit for the coarse uses of this world as gossamer for ship-timber. A man who believes that "life should be lived as tenderly and daintily as one would pluck a flower," and actually and seriously aims to live his life so, is not a man to engineer for all America. If you want a columbiad you must have tons and tons of gross metal, and if you want an engineer for all America, leader and wielder of vast masses of men, you must have a certain breadth and coarseness of fiber in your hero; but if you want a trenchant blade like Thoreau, you must leave the pot-metal out and look for something bluer and finer.

Thoreau makes a frank confession upon this very point in his journal, written when he was but twenty-five. "I must confess I have felt mean enough when asked how I was to act on society, what errand I had to mankind. Undoubtedly I did not feel mean without a reason, and yet my loitering is not without a defense. I would fain communicate the wealth of my life to men, would really give them what is most precious in my gift. I

would secrete pearls with the shell-fish, and lay up honey with the bees for them. I will sift the sunbeams for the public good. I know no riches I would keep back." And his subsequent life made good these words. He gave the world the strongest and bravest there was in him, the pearls of his life,—not a fat oyster, not a reputation unctuous with benevolence and easy good-will, but a character crisp and pearl-like, full of hard, severe words, and stimulating taunts and demands. Thoreau was an extreme product, an extreme type of mind and character, and was naturally more or less isolated from his surroundings. He planted himself far beyond the coast-line that bounds most lives, and seems insular and solitary, but he believed he had the granite floor of principle beneath him, and without the customary intervening clay or quicksands.

Of a profile we say the outlines are strong, or they are weak and broken. The outlines of Thoreau's moral nature are strong and noble, but the direct face-to-face expression of his character is not always pleasing, not always human. He appears best in profile, when looking away from you and not toward you—when looking at Nature and not at man. He combined a remarkable strength of will with a nature singularly sensitive and delicate—the most fair and fragile of wood-flowers on an iron stem. With more freedom and flexibility of character, greater capacity for self-surrender and self-abandonment, he would have been a great poet. But his principal aim in life was moral and intellectual, rather than artistic. He was an ascetic before he was a poet, and he cuts the deepest in the direction of character and conduct. He had no caution or prudence in the ordinary sense, no worldly temporizing qualities of any kind, was impatient of the dross and alloy of life—would have it pure flame, pure purpose and aspiration; and, so far as he could make it, his life was so. He was, by nature, of the Opposition; he had a constitutional No in him that could not be tortured into Yes. He was of the stuff that saints and martyrs and devotees, or, if you please, fanatics are made of, and, no doubt, in an earlier age, would have faced the rack or the stake with perfect composure. Such a man was bound to make an impression by contrast, if not by comparison, with the men of his country and time. He is, for the most part, a figure going the other way from that of the eager, money-getting, ambitious crowd, and he questions and admonishes and ridicules the passers-by sharply. We all see him and remember him, and feel his shafts. Especially was his attitude upon all social and political questions scornful and exasperating. His devotion to principle, to the ideal, was absolute;

it was like that of the Hindu to his idol. If it devoured him or crushed him—what business was that of his? There was no conceivable failure in adherence to principle.

Thoreau was, probably, the wildest civilized man this country has produced, adding to the shyness of the hermit and woodsman the wildness of the poet, and to the wildness of the poet the greater ferity and elusiveness of the mystic. An extreme product of civilization and of modern culture, he was yet as untouched by the worldly and commercial spirit of his age and country as any red man that ever haunted the shores of his native stream. He put the whole of Nature between himself and his fellows. A man of the strongest local attachments—not the least nomadic, seldom wandering beyond his native township, yet his spirit was as restless and as impatient of restraint as any nomad or Tartar that ever lived. He cultivated an extreme wildness, not only in his pursuits and tastes, but in his hopes and imaginings. He says to his friend, "Hold fast your most indefinite waking dream." Emerson says his life was an attempt to pluck the Swiss edelweiss from the all but inaccessible cliffs. The higher and the wilder, the more the fascination for him. Indeed, the loon, the moose, the beaver were but faint types and symbols of the wildness he coveted and would have re-appear in his life and books;—not the cosmical, the universal—he was not great enough for that—but simply the wild as distinguished from the domestic and the familiar, the remote and the surprising as contrasted with the hackneyed and the commonplace, arrow-heads as distinguished from whet-stones or jack-knives.

Thoreau was French on one side and Puritan on the other. It was the wild, untamable French core in him—a dash of the gray wolf that stalks through his ancestral folk-lore, as in Audubon and the Canadian *voyageurs*—that made him turn with such zest and such genius to aboriginal nature; and it was the Puritan element in him—strong, grim, uncompromising, almost heartless—that held him to such high, austere, moral and ideal ends. His genius was Saxon in its homeliness and sincerity, in its directness and scorn of rhetoric, but that wild revolutionary cry of his, and that sort of restrained ferocity and hirsuteness, are more French. He said in one of his letters, when he was but twenty-four: "I grow savager and savager every day, as if fed on raw meat, and my tameness is only the repose of untamableness." But his savageness took a mild form. He could not even eat meat; it was unclean and offended his imagination, and when he went to Maine he felt for weeks that his nature had been made the coarser because he had witnessed the killing of a moose. His boasted

savageness, the gray wolf in him, only gave a more decided grit or grain to his mental and moral nature,—made him shut his teeth the more firmly, sometimes even with an audible snap and growl, upon the poor lambs and ewes and superannuated wethers of the social, religious, political folds.

In his moral and intellectual growth and experience, Thoreau seems to have reacted strongly from a marked tendency to invalidism in his own body. He would be well in spirit at all hazards. What was this never-ending search of his for the wild but a search for health, for something tonic and antiseptic in nature? Health, health, give me health, is his cry. He went forth into nature as the boys go to the fields and woods in spring after wintergreens, black-birch, crinkle-root, and sweet-flag; he had an unappeasable hunger for the pungent, the aromatic, the bitter-sweet, for the very rind and salt of the globe. He fairly gnaws the ground and the trees in his walk, so craving is his appetite for the wild. He went to Walden to study, but it was as a deer goes to a deer-lick; the brine he was after did abound there. Any trait of wildness and freedom suddenly breaking out in any of the domestic animals, as when your cow leaped your fence like a deer and ate up your corn, or your horse forgot that he was not a mustang on the plains, and took the bit in his mouth, and left your buggy and family behind high and dry, etc., was eagerly snapped up by him. Ah, you have not tamed them, you have not broken them yet! He makes a most charming entry in his journal about a little boy he one day saw in the street, with a home-made cap on his head made of a woodchuck's skin. He seized upon it as a horse with the crib-bite seizes upon a post. It tasted good to him.

"The great gray-tipped hairs were all preserved, and stood out above the brown ones, only a little more loosely than in life. It was as if he had put his head into the belly of a woodchuck, having cut off his tail and legs, and substituted a visor for the head. The little fellow wore it innocently enough, not knowing what he had on forsooth, going about his small business pit-a-pat, and his black eyes sparkled beneath it when I remarked on its warmth, even as the woodchuck's might have done. Such should be the history of every piece of clothing that we wear."

He says how rarely are we encouraged by the sight of simple actions in the street, but when one day he saw an Irishman wheeling home from far a large, damp, and rotten pine-log for fuel, he felt encouraged. That looked like fuel; it warmed him to think of it. The piles of solid oak-wood which he saw in other yards did not interest him at all in comparison. It savored of the wild, and though water-soaked, his fancy kindled at the sight.

He loved wild men, not tame ones. Any half-wild Irishman, or fisherman, or hunter in his neighborhood he was sure to get a taste of sooner or later. He seems to have had a hankering for the Indian all his life; could eat him raw, one would think. In fact, he did try him when he went to Maine, and succeeded in extracting more nutriment out of him than any other man has done. He found him rather tough diet, and was, probably, a little disappointed in him, but he got something out of him akin to that which the red squirrel gets out of a pine-cone. In his books he casts many a longing and envious glance upon the Indian. Some old Concord sachem seems to have looked into his fount of life and left his image there. His annual spring search for arrow-heads was the visible outcropping of this aboriginal trace. How he prized these relics! One is surprised to see how much he gets out of them. They become arrow-root instead of arrow-stones. "They are sown, like a grain that is slow to germinate, broadcast over the earth. As the dragon's teeth bore a crop of soldiers, so these bear a crop of philosophers and poets, and the same seed is just as good to plant again. It is a stone-fruit. Each one yields me a thought. I come nearer to the maker of it than if I found his bones." "When I see these signs I know that the subtle spirits that made them are not far off, into whatever form transmuted." (Journal, pages 257-58.) Our poetry, he said, was white man's poetry, and he longed to hear what the Indian muse had to say. I think he liked the Indian's paint and feathers. Certainly he did his skins, and the claws and hooked beaks with which he adorned himself. He puts a threatening claw or beak into his paragraphs whenever he can, and feathers his shafts with the nicest art.

So wild a man and such a lover of the wild, and yet it does not appear that he ever sowed any wild oats. Though he somewhere exclaims impatiently: "What demon possesses me that I behave so well?" he took it all out in transcendentalism and arrow-heads. His only escapades were eloping with a mountain or coquetting with Walden Pond! His weakness was that he had no weakness—it was only unkindness. He had a deeper center-board than most men, and he carried less sail. The passions and emotions and ambitions of his fellows, which are sails that so often need to be close-reefed and double-reefed, he was quite free from. Thoreau's isolation, his avoidance of the world, was in self-defense, no doubt. His genius would not bear the contact of rough hands any more than would butterflies' wings. He says, in "Walden": "The finest qualities of our nature, like the

bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling." This bloom, this natural innocence, Thoreau was very jealous of and sought to keep unimpaired, and, perhaps, succeeded as few men ever have. He says you cannot even know evil without being a *particeps criminis*. He did not so much regret the condition of things in this country (in 1861) as that he had ever heard of it.

Yet Thoreau creates as much consternation among the saints as among the sinners. His delicacy and fineness were saved by a kind of cross-grain there was in him—a natural twist and stubbornness of fiber. He was not easily reduced to kindling-wood. His self-indulgences were other men's crosses. His attitude was always one of resistance and urge. He hated sloth and indolence and compliance as he hated rust. He thought nothing was so much to be feared as fear, and that atheism might, comparatively, be popular with God himself. Beware even the luxury of affection, he says—"There must be some nerve and heroism in our love, as in a winter morning." He tells his correspondent to make his failure tragical by the earnestness and steadfastness of his endeavor, and then it will not differ from success. His saintliness is a rock-crystal. He says in "Walden": "Probably I should not consciously and deliberately forsake my particular calling to do the good which society demands of me, to save the universe from annihilation; and I believe that a like but infinitely greater steadfastness elsewhere is all that now preserves it." Is this crystal a diamond? What will it not cut?

There is no grain of concession or compromise in this man. He asks no odds and he pays no boot. He will have his way, but his way is not down the stream with the current. He loves to warp up it against wind and tide, holding fast by his anchor at night. When he is chagrined or disgusted, it convinces him his health is better—that there is some vitality left. It is not compliments his friends get from him—rather taunts. The caress of the hand may be good, but the sting of its palm is good also. No is more bracing and tonic than Yes. He said: "I love to go through a patch of scrub-oaks in a bee-line—where you tear your clothes and put your eyes out." The spirit of antagonism never sleeps with Thoreau, and the love of paradox is one of his guiding stars. "The longer I have forgotten you, the more I remember you," he says to his correspondent. "My friend is cold and reserved, because his love for me is waxing and not waning," he says in his journal. The difficult and the disagreeable are in the line of his self-indulgence. Even lightning will choose the easiest way

out of the house—an open window or door. Thoreau would rather go through the solid wall, or mine out through the cellar.

When he is sad, his only regret is that he is not sadder. He says if his sadness was only sadder it would make him happier. In writing to his friend, he says it is not sad to him to hear she has sad hours: "I rather rejoice in the richness of your experience." In one of his letters, he charges his correspondent to "improve every opportunity to be melancholy," and accuses himself of being too easily contented with a slight and almost animal happiness. "My happiness is a good deal like that of the woodchucks." He says that "of acute sorrow I suppose that I know comparatively little. My saddest and most genuine sorrows are apt to be but transient regrets." Yet he had not long before lost by death his brother John, with whom he made his voyage on the Concord and Merrimack. Referring to John's death, he said: "I find these things more strange than sad to me. What right have I to grieve who have not ceased to wonder?" and says in effect, afterward, that any pure grief is its own reward. John, he said, he did not wish ever to see again—not the John that was dead (O Henry! Henry!), John as he was in the flesh, but the ideal, the nobler John, of whom the real was the imperfect representative. When the son of his friend died, he wasted no human regrets. It seemed very natural and proper that he should die. "Do not the flowers die every autumn?" "His fine organization demanded it [death], and nature gently yielded its request. It would have been strange if he had lived."

Thoreau was either destitute of pity and love (in the human sense), and of many other traits that are thought to be both human and divine, or else he studiously suppressed them and thought them unworthy of him. He writes and talks a great deal about love and friendship, and often with singular beauty and appreciation, yet he always says to his friend: "Stand off—keep away! Let there be an unfathomable gulf between us—let there be a wholesome hate." Indeed, love and hatred seem inseparable in his mind, and curiously identical. He writes in his journal that "words should pass between friends as the lightning passes from cloud to cloud." One of his poems begins:

"Let such pure hate still underprop  
Our love, that we may be  
Each other's conscience,  
And have our sympathy  
Mainly from thence."

"Surely, surely, thou wilt trust me  
When I say thou dost disgust me.

Oh, I hate thee with a hate  
That would fain annihilate;  
Yet, sometimes, against my will,  
My dear friend, I love thee still.  
It were treason to our love,  
And a sin to God above,  
One iota to abate  
Of a pure, impartial hate."

This is the salt with which he seasons and preserves his love—hatred. In this pickle it will keep. Without it, it would become stale and vulgar. This is characteristic of Thoreau; he must put in something sharp and bitter. You shall not have the nut without its bitter acrid rind or prickly sheath.

As a man, Thoreau appears to have been what is called a crusty person—a loaf with a hard bake, a good deal of crust, forbidding to tender gums, but sweet to those who had good teeth and unction enough to soften him.

He was no fair-weather walker. He delighted in storms, and in frost and cold. They were congenial to him. They came home. "Yesterday's rain," he begins an entry in his journal, "in which I was glad to be drenched," etc. Again he says: "I sometimes feel that I need to sit in a far-away cave through a three weeks' storm, cold and wet, to give a tone to my system." Another time: "A long, soaking rain, the drops trickling down the stubble, while I lay drenched on a last year's bed of wild oats, by the side of some bare hill, ruminating." And this in March, too! He says "to get the value of a storm we must be out a long time and travel far in it, so that it may fairly penetrate our skin," etc. He rejoices greatly when, on an expedition to Monadnock, he gets soaked with rain and is made thoroughly uncomfortable. It tastes good. It made him appreciate a roof and a fire. The mountain gods were especially kind and thoughtful to get up the storm. When they saw himself and friend coming, they said: "There come two of our folks. Let us get ready for them—get up a serious storm that will send a-packing these holiday guests. Let us receive them with true mountain hospitality—kill the fatted cloud," etc. In his journal he says: "If the weather is thick and stormy enough, if there is a good chance to be cold, and wet, and uncomfortable—in other words, to feel weather-beaten, you may consume the afternoon to advantage, thus browsing along the edge of some near wood, which would scarcely detain you at all in fair weather," etc. "There is no better fence to put between you and the village than a storm into which the villagers do not venture forth." This passion for storms and these many drenchings no doubt helped shorten Thoreau's days.

This crustiness, this playful and willful per-

versity of Thoreau, is one source of his charm as a writer. It stands him instead of other qualities—of real unction and heartiness—is, perhaps, these qualities in a more seedy and desiccated state. Hearty, in the fullest sense, he was not, and unctuous he was not, yet it is only by comparison that we miss these qualities from his writings. Perhaps he would say that we should not expect the milk on the outside of the cocoa-nut, but I suspect there is an actual absence of milk here, though there is sweet meat, and a good, hard shell to protect it. Good-nature and conciliation were not among his accomplishments, and yet he puts his reader in a genial and happy frame of mind. He is the occasion of unction and heartiness in others, if he has not them in himself. He says of himself, with great penetration: "My only integral experience is in my vision. I see, perchance, with more integrity than I feel." His sympathies lead you into narrow quarters, but his vision takes you to the hill-tops. As regards humanity and all that goes with it, he was like an inverted cone, and grew broader and broader the farther he got from it. He approached things, or even men, but very little through his humanity or his manliness. How delightful his account of the Canadian wood-chopper in "Walden," and yet he sees him afar off, across an impassable gulf!—he is a kind of Homeric or Paphlagonian man to him. Very likely he would not have seen him at all had it not been for the classic models and ideals with which his mind was filled, and which saw for him.

Yet Thoreau doubtless liked the flavor of strong, racy men. He said he was naturally no hermit, but ready enough to fasten himself, like a blood-sucker for the time, to any full-blooded man that came in his way; and he gave proof of this when he saw and recognized the new poet, Walt Whitman. Here is the greatest democrat the world has seen, he said, and he found him exhilarating and encouraging, while yet he felt somewhat imposed upon by his heartiness and broad generalities. As a writer, Thoreau shows all he is, and more. Nothing is kept back; greater men have had far less power of statement. His thoughts do not merely crop out, but lie upon the surface of his pages. They are fragments; there is no more than you see. It is not the edge or crown of the native rock, but a drift boulder. He sees clearly, thinks swiftly, and the sharp emphasis and decision of his mind strew his pages with definite and striking images and ideas. His expression is never sod-bound, and you get its full force at once.

One of his chief weapons is a kind of restrained extravagance of statement, a compressed exaggeration of metaphor. The hyper-

bole is big, but it is gritty and is firmly held. Sometimes it takes the form of paradox, as when he tells his friend that he needs his hate as much as his love :

"Indeed, indeed, I cannot tell,  
Though I ponder on it well,  
Which were easier to state,  
All my love or all my hate."

Or when he says, in "Walden": "Our manners have been corrupted by communication with the saints," and the like. Sometimes it becomes downright brag, as when he says, emphasizing his own preoccupation and indifference to events: "I would not run around the corner to see the world blow up"; or again: "Methinks I would hear with indifference if a trustworthy messenger were to inform me that the sun drowned himself last night." Again it takes an impish, ironical form, as when he says: "In heaven I hope to bake my own bread and clean my own linen." Another time it assumes a half-quizzical, half-humorous turn, as when he tells one of his correspondents that he was so warmed up in getting his winter's wood that he considered, after he got it housed, whether he should not dispose of it to the ash-man, as if he had extracted all its heat. Often it gives only an added emphasis to his expression, as when he says: "A little thought is sexton to all the world"; or, "Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk"; but its best and most constant office is to act as a kind of fermenting, expanding gas that lightens, if it sometimes inflates, his page. His exaggeration is saved by its wit, its unexpectedness. It gives a wholesome jostle and shock to the mind.

Thoreau was not a racy writer, but a trenchant; not nourishing so much as stimulating; not convincing, but wholesomely exasperating and arousing, which, in some respects, is better. There is no heat in him, and yet in reading him one understands what he means when he says that, sitting by his stove at night, he sometimes had thoughts that kept the fire warm. I think the mind of his reader always reacts healthfully and vigorously from his most rash and extreme statements. The blood comes to the surface and to the extremities with a bound. He is the best of counter-irritants when he is nothing else. There is nothing to reduce the tone of your moral and intellectual systems in Thoreau. Such heat as there is in refrigeration, as he himself might say,—you are always sure of that in his books.

His literary art, like that of Emerson's, is in the unexpected turn of his sentences. Shakspeare says :

"It is the witness still of excellency  
To put a strange face on his own perfection."

This "strange face" Thoreau would have at all hazards, even if it was a false face. If he could not state a truth he would state a paradox, which, however, is not always a false face. He must make the commonest facts and occurrences wear a strange and unfamiliar look. The commonplace he would give a new dress, even if he set it masquerading. But the reader is always the gainer by this tendency in him. It gives a fresh and novel coloring to what in other writers would prove flat and wearisome. He made the whole world interested in his private experiment at Walden Pond by the strange and, on the whole, beaming face he put upon it. Of course, this is always more or less the art of genius, but it was preëminently the art of Thoreau. We are not buoyed up by great power, we do not swim lightly as in deep water, but we are amused and stimulated, and now and then positively electrified.

To make an extreme statement, and so be sure that he made an emphatic one, that was his aim. Exaggeration is less to be feared than dullness and tameness. The far-fetched is good if you fetch it swift enough; you must make its heels crack—jerk it out of its boots, in fact. Cushions are good provided they are well stuck with pins; you will be sure not to go to sleep in that case. Warm your benumbed hands in the snow; that is a more wholesome warmth than that of the kitchen stove. This is the way he underscored his teachings. Sometimes he racked his bones to say the unsayable. His mind had a strong gripe, and he often brings a great pressure to bear upon the most vague and subtle problems, or shadows of problems, but he never quite succeeds to my satisfaction in condensing bluing from the air or from the Indian summer haze, any more than he succeeded in extracting health and longevity from water-gruel and rye-meal.

He knew what an exaggeration he was, and he went about it deliberately. He says to one of his correspondents, a Mr. B—, whom he seems to have delighted to pummel with these huge boxing-gloves: "I trust that you realize what an exaggerator I am,—that I lay myself out to exaggerate whenever I have an opportunity,—pile Pelion upon Ossa to reach heaven so. Expect no trivial truth from me, unless I am on the witness-stand. I will come as near to lying as you can drive a coach-and-four."

We have every reason to be thankful that he was not always or commonly on the witness-stand. The record would have been



much duller. Eliminate from him all his exaggerations, all his magnifying of the little, all his inflation of bubbles, etc., and you make sad havoc in his pages—as you would, in fact, in any man's. Of course it is one thing to bring the distant near, and thus magnify as does the telescope, and it is quite another thing to inflate a pigmy to the stature of a giant with a gas-pipe. But Thoreau brings the stars as near as any writer I know of, and if he sometimes magnifies a will-o'-the-wisp, too, what matters it? He had a hard common-sense, as well as an uncommon sense, and he knows well when he is conducting you to the brink of one of his astonishing hyperboles, and inviting you to take the leap with him, and what is more, he knows that you know it. Nobody is deceived and the game is well played. Writing to a correspondent who had been doing some big mountain-climbing, he says:

"It is after we get home that we really go over the mountain if ever. What did the mountain say? What did the mountain do? I keep a mountain anchored off eastward a little way, which I ascend in my dreams, both awake and asleep. Its broad haze spreads over a village or two, which do not know it; neither does it know them, nor do I when I ascend it. I can see its general outline as plainly now in my mind as that of Wachusett. I do not invent in the least, but state exactly what I see. I find that I go up it when I am light-footed and earnest. I am not aware that a single villager frequents it or knows of it. I keep this mountain to ride instead of a horse."

What a saving clause is that last one, and what humor!

The bird Thoreau most admired was Chanticleer, crowing from his perch in the morning. He says the merit of that strain is its freedom from all plaintiveness. Unless our philosophy hears the cock-crow in the morning it is belated. "It is an expression of the health and soundness of Nature—a brag for all the world." "Who has not betrayed his Master many times since he last heard that note?" "The singer can easily move us to tears or to laughter, but where is he who can excite in us a pure morning joy? When in doleful dumps, breaking the awful stillness of our wooden sidewalk on a Sunday, or perchance a watcher in the house of mourning, I hear a cockerel crow, far or near, I think to myself, 'There is one of us well, at any rate,'—and with a sudden gush return to my senses."

Thoreau pitched his "Walden" in this key; he claps his wings and gives forth a clear, saucy, cheery, triumphant note—if only to wake his neighbors up. And the book is certainly the most delicious piece of brag in literature. There is nothing else like it; nothing so good, certainly. It is a challenge and a triumph, and has a morning freshness

and *élan*. Read the chapter on his "bean-field." One wants to go forthwith and plant a field with beans, and hoe them barefoot. It is a kind of celestial agriculture. "When my hoe tinkled against the stones, that music echoed to the woods and the sky, and was an accompaniment to my labor which yielded an instant and immeasurable crop. It was no longer beans that I hoed, nor I that hoed beans; and I remembered with as much pity as pride, if I remembered at all, my acquaintances who had gone to the city to attend the oratorios." "On gala days the town fires its great guns, which echo like pop-guns to these woods, and some waif of martial music occasionally penetrated thus far. To me, away there in my bean-field and the other end of the town, the big guns sounded as if a puff-ball had burst; and when there was a military turn-out of which I was ignorant, I have sometimes had a vague sense all day,—of some sort of itching and disease in the horizon, as if some eruption would break out there soon, either scarlatina or canker-rash,—until at length some more favorable puff of wind, making haste over the fields and up the Wayland road, brought me information of the 'trainers'!"

What visitors he had, too, in his little hut—what royal company!—"especially in the morning, when nobody called." "One inconvenience I sometimes experience in so small a house—the difficulty of getting to a sufficient distance from my guest, when we began to utter the big thoughts in big words." "The bullet of your thought must have overcome its lateral and ricochet motion and fallen into its last and steady course before it reaches the ear of the hearer, else it may plough out again through the side of his head." He bragged that Concord could show him nearly everything worth seeing in the world or in nature, and that he did not need to read Dr. Kane's "Arctic Voyages" for phenomena that he could observe at home. He declined all invitations to go abroad, because he should then lose so much of Concord. As much of Paris, or London, or Berlin as he got, so much of Concord should he lose. He says in his journal: "It would be a wretched bargain to accept the proudest Paris in exchange for my native village." "At best, Paris could only be a school in which to learn to live here—a stepping-stone to Concord, a school in which to fit for this university." "The sight of a marsh-hawk in Concord meadows is worth more to me than the entry of the Allies into Paris." This is very Parisian and Victor Hugoish, except for its self-consciousness and the playful twinkle in the author's eye.

Thoreau had humor, but it had worked a little—it was not quite sweet; a vinous fermentation had taken place more or less in it. There was too much acid for the sugar. It shows itself especially when he speaks of men. How he disliked the average social and business man, and said his only resource was to get away from them. He was surprised to find what vulgar fellows they were. "They do a little business commonly each day, in order to pay their board, and then they congregate in sitting-rooms, and feebly fabulate and paddle in the social slush; and when I think that they have sufficiently relaxed, and am prepared to see them steal away to their shrines, they go unashamed to their beds, and take on a new layer of sloth." Methinks there is a drop of aquafortis in this liquor. Generally, however, there is only a pleasant acid or sub-acid flavor to his humor, as when he refers to a certain minister who spoke of God as if he enjoyed a monopoly of the subject; or when he says of the good church-people that "they show the whites of their eyes on the Sabbath, and the blacks all the rest of the week." He says the greatest bores who visited him in his hut by Walden Pond were the self-styled reformers, who thought that he was forever singing:

"This is the house that I built;  
This is the man that lives in the house that I built."

But they did not know that the third line was:

"These are the folks that worry the man  
That lives in the house that I built."

"I did not fear the hen-harriers, for I kept no chickens, but I feared the men-harriers rather."

What sweet and serious humor in that passage in "Walden" wherein he protests that he was not lonely in his hermitage:

"I have occasional visits in the long winter evenings, when the snow falls fast and the wind howls in the wood, from an old settler and original proprietor, who is reported to have dug Walden Pond and stoned it, and fringed it with pine-woods; who tells me stories of old time and of new eternity; and between us we manage to pass a cheerful evening with social mirth and pleasant views of things, even without apples or cider—a most wise and humorous friend, whom I love much, who keeps himself more secret than ever did Goffe or Whalley; and though he is thought to be dead, none can show where he is buried. An elderly dame, too, dwells in my neighborhood, invisible to most persons, in whose odorous herb-garden I love to stroll sometimes, gathering simples and listening to her fables; for she has a genius of unequalled fertility, and her memory runs back farther than mythology, and she can tell me the original of every fable, and on what fact every one is founded, for the incidents occurred when she was young. A ruddy and lusty old dame, who delights in all weathers and seasons, and is likely to outlive all her children yet."

Emerson says Thoreau's determination on natural history was organic, but it was his determination on supernatural history that was organic. Natural history was but one of the doors through which he sought to gain admittance to this inner and finer heaven of things. He hesitated to call himself a naturalist; probably even poet-naturalist would not have suited him. He says in his journal: "The truth is, I am a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot," and the least of these is the natural philosopher. He says: "Man cannot afford to be a naturalist, to look at Nature directly, but only with the side of his eye. He must look through and beyond her. To look at her is as fatal as to look at the head of Medusa. It turns the man of science to stone." It is not looking at Nature that turns the man of science to stone, but looking at his dried and labeled specimens, and his dried and labeled theories of her. Thoreau always sought to look through and beyond her, and he missed seeing much there was in her; the jealous goddess had her revenge. I do not make this remark as a criticism, but to account for his failure to make any new or valuable contribution to natural history. He did not love Nature for her own sake, or the bird and the flower for their own sakes, or with an unmixed and disinterested love, as Gilbert White did, for instance, but for what he could make out of them. He says (Journal, page 83): "The ultimate expression or fruit of any created thing is a fine effluence, which only the most ingenious worshiper perceives at a reverent distance from its surface even." This "fine effluence" he was always reaching after, and often grasping or inhaling. This is the mythical hound and horse and turtle-dove which he says in "Walden" he long ago lost, and has been on their trail ever since. He never abandons the search, and in every woodchuck-hole or musk-rat-den, in retreat of bird, or squirrel, or mouse, or fox that he pries into, in every walk and expedition to the fields or swamps, or to distant woods, in every spring note and call that he listens to so patiently, he hopes to get some clew to his lost treasures, to the effluence that so provokingly eludes him.

Hence, when we regard Thoreau simply as an observer or as a natural historian, there have been better, though few so industrious and persistent. He was up and out at all hours of the day and night, and in all seasons and weathers, year in and year out, and yet he saw and recorded nothing new. I cannot say that there was any felicitous and happy seeing; there was no inspiration of the eye, certainly not in the direction of natural history. He has added no new line or touch to

the portrait of bird or beast that I can recall—no important or significant fact to their lives. What he saw in this field everybody may see who looks; it is patent. He had not the detective eye of the great naturalist; he did not catch the clues and hints dropped here and there, the quick, flashing movements, the shy but significant gestures by which new facts are disclosed, mainly because he was not looking for them. His eye was not penetrating and interpretive. It was full of speculation; it was sophisticated with literature, sophisticated with Concord, sophisticated with himself. His mood was subjective rather than objective. He was more intent on the natural history of his own thought than on that of the bird. To the last his ornithology was not quite sure, not quite trustworthy. In his published journal he sometimes names the wrong bird, and what short work a naturalist would have made of his night-warbler, which Emerson reports Thoreau had been twelve years trying to identify. It was perhaps his long-lost turtle-dove, in some one of its disguises. From his journal it would seem that he was a long time puzzled to distinguish the fox-colored sparrow from the tree or Canadian sparrow—a very easy task to one who has an eye for the birds. But he was looking too intently for a bird behind the bird—for a mythology to shine through his ornithology. “The song-sparrow and the transient fox-colored sparrow—have they brought me no message this year? Is not the coming of the fox-colored sparrow something more earnest and significant than I have dreamed of? Have I heard what this tiny passenger has to say while it flits thus from tree to tree?” “I love the birds and beasts because they are mythologically in earnest.” (Journal, page 284.)

If he had had the same eye for natural history he possessed for arrow-heads, what new facts he would have disclosed! But he was looking for arrow-heads. He had them in his mind; he thought arrow-heads; he was an arrow-head himself, and these relics fairly kicked themselves free of the mold to catch his eye.

Thoreau was a man eminently “preoccupied of his own soul.” He had no self-abandonment, no self-forgetfulness; he could not give himself to the birds or animals: they must surrender to him. He says to one of his correspondents: “Whether he sleeps or wakes, whether he runs or walks, whether he uses a microscope or a telescope, or his naked eye, a man never discovers anything, never overtakes anything, or leaves anything behind, but himself.” This is half true of some; it is wholly true of others. It is wholly true of Thoreau. Nature was the glass in which he saw himself. He says the partridge loves

peas, but not those that go into the pot with her! All the peas Thoreau loved had been in the pot with him and were seasoned by him.

I trust I do not in the least undervalue Thoreau's natural history notes; I only wish there were more of them. What makes them so valuable and charming is his rare descriptive powers. He could give the simple fact with the freshest and finest poetic bloom upon it. He says: “The note of the first blue-bird in the air answers to the purling rill of melted snow beneath. It is evidently soft and soothing, and, as surely as the thermometer, indicates a higher temperature. It is the accent of the south wind, its vernacular.” Of the return of the highhole, or pigeon woodpecker, he says: “The loud *peep!* of a pigeon woodpecker is heard, and, anon, the prolonged loud and shrill cackle calling the thin-wooded hill-sides and pastures to life. It is like the note of an alarm-clock set last fall so as to wake Nature up at exactly this date. *Up up up up up up up up!*”

Often a single word or epithet of his tells the whole story. Thus he says, speaking of the music of the black-bird, that it has a “split-whistle”; the note of the red-shouldered starling is “gurgle-ee.” Looking out of his window one March day, he says he cannot see the heel of a single snow-bank anywhere. He does not seem to have known that the shrike sang in the fall and winter as well as in the spring; and is he entirely sure he saw a musk-rat building its house in March (the fall is the time they build); or that he heard the whippoorwill singing in September; or that the woodchuck dines principally upon crickets? With what patience and industry he watched things for a sign! From his journal it would appear that Thoreau kept nature about Concord under a sort of police surveillance the year round. He shadowed every flower and bird and musquash that appeared. His vigilance was unceasing; not a mouse or a squirrel must leave its den without his knowledge. If the birds or frogs were not on hand promptly at his spring roll-call, he would know the reason; he would look them up; he would question his neighbors. He was up in the morning and off to some favorite haunt earlier than the day-laborers, and he chronicled his observations on the spot as if the case was to be tried in court the next day and he was the principal witness. He watched the approach of spring as a doctor watches the development of a critical case. He felt the pulse of the wind and the temperature of the day at all hours. He examined the plants growing under water, and noted the radical leaves of various weeds that keep green all winter under the snow. He

felt for them with benumbed fingers amid the wet and the snow. The first sight of bare ground and of the red earth excites him. The fresh meadow spring odor was to him like the fragrance of tea to an old tea-drinker. In early March he goes to the Corner Spring to see the tufts of green grass, or he inspects the minute lichens that spring from the bark of trees. "It is short commons," he says, "and innutritious." He brings home the first frog-spittle he finds in a ditch and studies it in a tumbler of water. The first water-beetle that appears he makes a note of, and the first skunk-cabbage that thrusts its spathe up through the mold is of more interest to him than the latest news from Paris or London. "I go to look for mud-turtles in Heywood's meadow," he says, March 23, 1853. The first water-fowl that came in the spring he stalked like a pot-hunter, crawling through the swamps and woods, or over a hill on his stomach, to have a good shot at them with his—journal. He is determined nature shall not get one day the start of him; and yet he is obliged to confess that "no mortal is alert enough to be present at the first dawn of spring"; still he will not give up trying. "Can you be sure," he says, "that you have heard the first frog in the township croak?" A lady offered him the life of Dr. Chalmers to read, but he would not promise. The next day she was heard through a partition shouting to some one who was deaf: "Think of it—he stood half an hour to-day to hear the frogs croak, and he wouldn't read the life of Chalmers!" He would go any number of miles to interview a musk-rat or a woodchuck, or to keep an "appointment with an oak-tree," but he records in his journal that he rode a dozen miles one day with his employer, keeping a profound silence almost all the way. "I treated him simply as if he had bronchitis and could not speak—just as I would a sick man, a crazy man, or an idiot."

Thoreau seems to have been aware of his defect on the human side. He says: "If I am too cold for human friendship, I trust I shall not soon be too cold for natural influences"; and then he goes on with this doubtful statement: "It appears to be a law that you cannot have a deep sympathy with both man and nature. Those qualities which bring you near to the one estrange you from the other." One day he met a skunk in the field, and he describes its peculiar gait exactly when he says: "It runs, even when undisturbed, with a singular teter or undulation, like the walking of a Chinese lady." He ran after the animal to observe it, keeping out of the reach of its formidable weapon, and when it took refuge in the wall he inter-

viewed it at his leisure. If it had been a man or a woman he had met, he would have run the other way. Thus he went through the season, Nature's reporter, taking down the words as they fell from her lips, and disressed if a sentence is missed.

The Yankee thrift and enterprise that he had so little patience with in his neighbors, he applied to his peculiar ends. He took the day and the season by the foretop. "How many mornings," he says in "Walden," "summer and winter, before yet any neighbor was stirring about his business, have I been about mine!" He had an eye to the main chance, to a good investment. He probed the swamps like a butter-buyer, he sampled the plants and the trees and lichens like a tea-taster. He made a burning-glass of a piece of ice; he made sugar from a pumpkin and from the red-maple, and wine from the sap of the black-birch, and boiled rock-tripe for an hour and tried it as food. If he missed any virtue or excellence in these things or in anything in his line, or any suggestion to his genius, he felt like a man who had missed a good bargain. Yet he sometimes paused in this peeping and prying into nature, and cast a regretful look backward. "Ah, those youthful days," he says in his journal, under date of March 30, 1853, "are they never to return?—when the worker does not too enviously observe particulars, but sees, hears, scents, tastes, and feels only himself—the phenomena that showed themselves in him, his expanding body, his intellect and heart. No worm or insect, quadruped or bird confined his view, but the unbounded universe was his. A bird has now become a mote in his eye." Then he proceeds to dig out a woodchuck.

In "Walden," Thoreau pretends to quote the following passage from the Gulistan, or Rose Garden of Sadi of Shiraz, with an eye to its application to his own case, but as he evidently found it not in, but under, Sadi's lines, it has an especial significance, and may fitly close this paper:

"They asked a wise man, saying: 'Of the many celebrated trees which the Most High God has created, lofty and umbrageous, they call none azad, or free, excepting the cypress, which bears no fruit; what mystery is there in this?' He replied: 'Each has its appropriate produce and appointed season, during the continuance of which it is fresh and blooming, and during their absence dry and withered; to neither of which states is the cypress exposed, being always flourishing; and of this nature are the azads, or religious independents.—Fix not thy heart on that which is transitory; for the Dijlah or Tigris will continue to flow through Bagdad after the race of caliphs is extinct: if thy hand has plenty, be liberal as the date-tree; but if it affords nothing to give away, be an azad, or free man, like the cypress.'"

*John Burroughs.*