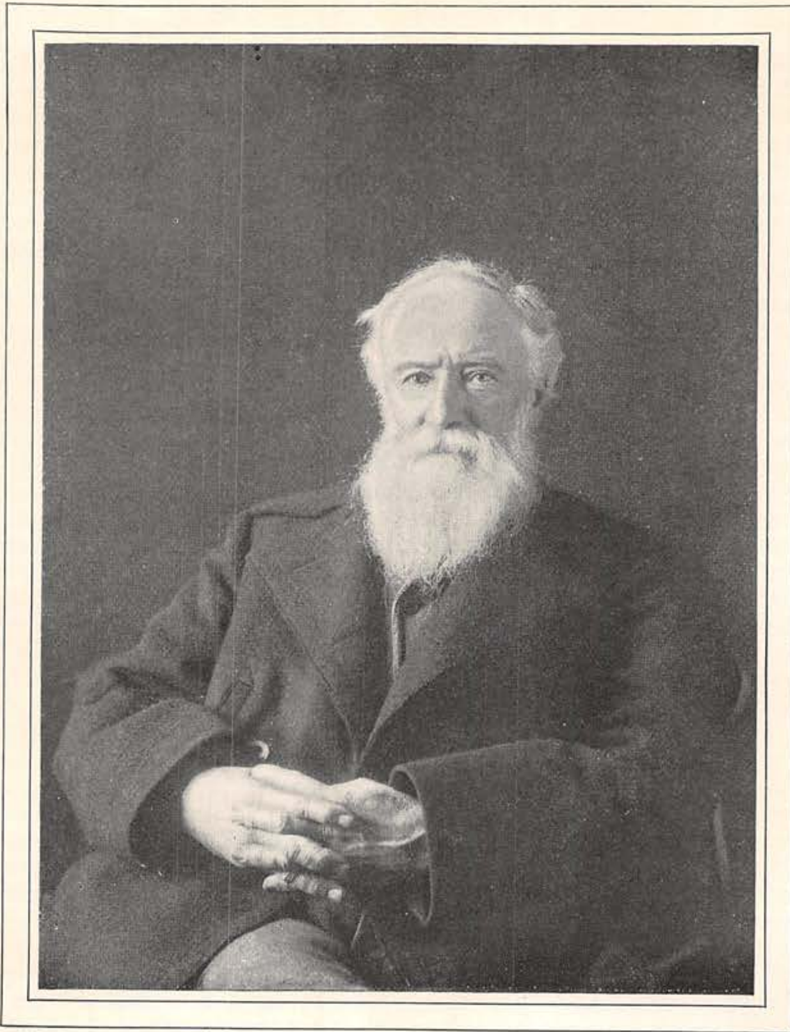

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JOHN BURROUGHS.

WHEN Dante pictured to himself the approach to the Inferno, he could think of nothing more oppressive to the imagination than the «forest savage, rough and stern,» into which the reader plunges at the very beginning of the first great modern poem. And yet Dante loved nature, and softened his somber visions again and again with simile, image, and figure from the world about him. Light from the sky, and sound from the sea, and the roar of the forest when the wind works its will, recall us at times from the appalling sights of the Inferno, or the pathetic scenes of the Purgatorio, to the smiling earth and the serene heavens. To the beauty of nature, nowhere more obvious and full of suggestion than in the country of his birth, Dante was as responsive as a man so intensely introspective and so deeply committed to the ethical and spiritual structure of things could be; but he was a man of his time as truly as he was a man of all time, and his time was well within the limits of medievalism. It is true, the Italian mind had gone a long way toward emancipating itself from the superstitious idea that nature is corrupt and sinful and given over to evil spirits; but even the Italian mind was not yet at home with the world, and probably very few men of the thirteenth century, in which the poet was born, or of the fourteenth century, in which he died, could cross the Alps without inward trepidation, or explore the recesses of the woods without an instinctive fear that some evil thing was there. And even after fear was banished there was little

appreciation of those aspects of the natural world which modern men feel most deeply.

In this feeling for nature, as in many other things, Petrarch was the first modern man—the first man, that is, who lived as freely and unconsciously in the outer as in the inner world; who possessed himself as completely of the resources and pleasures of the one as of the other; and who recognized the deep and marvelous kinship between the human soul and the fertility and organic beauty by which it is infolded. Medieval men recognized the familiar and obvious loveliness about them, but they shrank from solitude, sublimity, and grandeur in nature. Deep forests, shadowy defiles, lonely summits, and rocky coasts repelled them; they did not discern the kinship between these austere and awful aspects of the world and the deeper and sterner experiences of the soul. Petrarch was not the man to explore these darker recesses; but his active, inquisitive, and sunny nature led him far afield in that easy and natural relation in which modern men stand to the external world, and made him, in a sense, the rediscoverer of that world. «That part of my life that I have passed in Vaucluse,» he said in his later years, «I have passed in such tranquillity, in such sweetness, that, since I knew what human life is, I consider it as almost the only time in which I have lived, and all the rest as a punishment.» When we remember how solitary those years were, and how active and fruitful the poet's later life was, these words are very remarkable, and the impression on the mind of the old man is confirmed by letters written during this joyous exile from society:

> In the morning I wander over the fields, in the evening through the meadows, or in that other more rocky garden near the fountain, which Nature has made more beautiful than could the art of man. This little spot under the rocks, in the midst of the waters, is more suited than any other to inspire profound thoughts by which the most idle minds may feel themselves lifted to lofty contemplation. . . . How often has night found me still wandering in the fields! How often have I risen in the silence of a summer night to offer up my prayers and midnight orisons to Christ, and then to steal forth alone, without disturbing the servants, to wander by the light of the moon over the fields and mountains! How often at the same hour have I gone, without any companion, with mingled feelings of terror and delight, into that terrible cavern of the Sorgue, where even in daylight, and with company, one cannot enter without awe! Do you ask me how I came to be so bold? I have never been afraid of shadows.

In that last sentence lies the secret of the radical revolution of thought about nature which separates the modern man from the man who lived in Petrarch's time and before it.

That revolution has borne many kinds of fruit. It has emancipated the mind from those blighting superstitions which arbitrarily cut off a large share of the pleasures and resources of life; it has corrected the false perspective produced by exclusive and passionate study of the subjective, with almost complete indifference to the objective, world; and it has created a new kind of literature. There were naturalists before Gilbert White, and keen observers before Thoreau; but the attitude of these students of the world about them, and especially the manner and substance of their records, were essentially new. During the last century civilized men have probably lived out of doors to a greater extent than at any period since the days of the myth-makers; and even the myth-makers, who looked at nature through the imagination, and, despite numerous errors of fact, discovered many fundamental truths, were not so thoroughly at home in the world as modern men are fast becoming. Science has played a great part, not only in accurate observation and intelligent report of natural phenomena and life, but in effecting that extension of human knowledge and interest which puts men in equal possession of the world within and the world without. If nature has parted with some of the novel splendor which shone from her upon the young imagination of the race, she has parted also with the terrors of superstition and ignorance which long held men back from an intimacy made possible only after knowledge had held a torch in the darkest corners and dropped its sounding-line into the deepest seas.

Doubtless something has been lost by familiarity, but for most men there has been an immeasurable gain. The myth-makers—the men who see nature with the imagination as well as with the eye—are few in any generation, and for them the miracle does not grow stale by repetition. To the great mass of men devoid of poetic insight, on the other hand, life is immensely broadened and enriched by the inclusion of nature in thought, occupation, pleasure, and relaxation. It is not so much a rediscovery of the natural world which modern men have effected as the establishment of easy and normal relations with it—that intimacy which is bred by an intercourse so constant that it becomes a habit, and we cease to be specifically conscious of it, and which permits, therefore,

the natural play of thought, emotion, and imagination. Even observation, the first and, in a way, the elementary approach of man to nature, involves, for the highest fruitfulness, thorough familiarity with the object observed. «To be a good observer,» says Mr. Burroughs, «is not merely to see things: it is to see them in their relations and bearings; it is to separate one thing from another —the wheat from the chaff, the significant from the unimportant. The sagacity of the hound is in his scent; the skill of the musician seems in his hands and fingers; the mind of the observer is in his eye. To untrained perceptions the color of the clouds is this or that, gray or blue or drab; the artist picks out the primary tints, the separate colors of which this hue is composed.» Behind this higher power of observation there must be that familiarity with the object upon which the eye rests which separates it without effort, not only from other objects of its own class, but from all other things which are not necessary to its complete realization by the mind. It must not only reveal itself entirely, but it must disclose its significant relations to the order of which it is part.

The importance of this kind of observation lies in its perception of the fact of nature not only in its relations to the physical order, but also in its relations to the spiritual order of which man is part—a perception which makes it the inspiration of a literature distinct from scientific records and from the reports of the naturalists. For literature involves those elements of personality and of form which are in no way essential to the adequate and successful professional writing of the scientist and the naturalist. The scientist is concerned with facts as they lead to conclusions and reveal order and law; the naturalist studies the life of the field and of the woods that he may comprehend and classify it. Knowledge of some sort is the end which each of these observers sets before himself, and if the record of observation be correct, it matters not that it is formless; it belongs to the literature of knowledge, not to the literature of power. But the modern writers about nature who, like Thoreau, Jefferies, and John Burroughs, have created a new kind of literature, have approached their subjects as artists rather than as scientists. They are careful observers, but their observation is not impersonal; on the contrary, it is intensely individual, and it concerns itself with the facts of nature primarily as those facts appeal to or interpret the mind and heart of man.

Thoreau's temper toward his fellows was so cold that it seemed to have caught the elemental chill which one sometimes feels in deep and solitary ravines; but no man was ever more conscious of himself than the recluse of the Walden woods, and no man ever studied the world about him with more sophisticated eyes. Nature was not to Thoreau a succession of phenomena, to be dispassionately watched and reported; nature was a kind of private property which reflected everywhere the idiosyncrasies of its owner. He tramped through the woods with a complete philosophy in his knapsack, and while he waited to catch the earliest note of the bluebird he beguiled himself with thoughts which might have come to Plotinus, so highly speculative were they, or to Marcus Aurelius, so austere was their view of human conduct. A naturalist out of doors is all eyes; Thoreau was all brain. He carried into solitude the complete mental apparatus of a modern man. This unfitted him for the work of pure observation, but it made him one of the most original, pungent, and racy writers which this continent has produced.

With kindred intensity, though in a very different fashion, Jefferies's personality plays through his records of field and wood, and the pathos of his personal history lies on the landscape, sometimes like a mist which throws the objects in the foreground into striking relief, while it conceals the details of structure; sometimes like a rich atmosphere which obliterates the horizon-line so that earth and sky seem of a piece. Science is observation and generalization dealing exclusively with facts; literature, when it deals with nature, is nature plus the personality of the writer.

John Burroughs, like Thoreau, is strictly indigenous; he could not have grown in any other soil. Our literature betrays, in almost every notable work, the presence of foreign influences; but Thoreau and Burroughs have been fed by the soil, and have reproduced in flower and fruit something of its distinctive quality. Of the two, Thoreau had the more thorough formal education; but Burroughs shows keener susceptibility to formative influences of all kinds. Thoreau had the harder mind, the nature of greater resisting power; Burroughs is more sensitive to the atmosphere of his time, to the proximity of his fellows, and to the charms of art. Thoreau would have devoted more time to a woodchuck than to Carlyle, Arnold, or Whitman; Burroughs emphasized his indebtedness to Wordsworth, Arnold, Emer-

son, and Whitman. He has the more open mind, the quicker sympathies, the wider range. If he sometimes strikes us as less incisive and original than Thoreau, he is not less distinctively American, and there is a riper and saner quality in him. In Thoreau one is constantly aware of the element of wild life which still survives on this new continent. In Burroughs one feels the domesticity of nature; one is aware at all times of the simple, natural background of American life. In nothing is Burroughs's freedom from academic and literary tradition more evident than in the quality of homeliness which runs through his work. He writes in his shirt-sleeves, and is not ashamed of it; on the contrary, he believes that the only real writing is done by men who speak unaffectedly out of the conditions which form their natural environment. He can admire an academician who is an academician by nature; but he has no sympathy with the man who exchanges his native dialect for a speech which has greater precision and eloquence, but which is not a part of himself.

John Burroughs was born a countryman, and a countryman he remains. The horizon which he sees from his hillside farm of seventeen acres overlooking the Hudson includes within its intangible boundaries a world large enough to engage the closest observation, and important enough to justify the fullest record. He loves nature at large, but he is chiefly concerned with nature as a home-maker for man. Thoreau is so thoroughly detached from the society of his fellows that one point of observation is, for his purpose, as good as another, provided the point be remote from human settlement. Burroughs, on the other hand, delights not less in solitude and silence, but he keeps within sight of the thin line of smoke from the hearthstone. Thoreau wants the freedom of absolute detachment. «I would rather,» he says, «sit on a pumpkin, and have it all to myself, than be crowded on a velvet cushion. . . . The very simplicity and nakedness of man's life in the primitive ages imply this advantage, at least: that they left him still but a sojourner in Nature. When he was refreshed with food and sleep he contemplated his journey again. He dwelt, as it were, in a tent in this world, and was either treading the valleys, or crossing the plains, or climbing the mountain-tops. But lo! men have become the tools of their tools. The man who independently plucked the fruits when he was hungry is become a farmer, and he who stood under a tree for shelter a housekeeper.» Thoreau held to the ways of primitive man, and stings or shocks us out of our complacent civilization; but he pays the penalty of his isolation in a certain hardness of tone and a certain narrowness of sympathy. Burroughs not only plucks fruits, but produces them, for he is both a farmer and a housekeeper. He misses some insights and a kind of knowledge which are the exclusive possession of the primitive man; but he lives nearer the soil, in more intimate contact with it, and his report of nature, if less novel and surprising, is warmer and more persuasive in tone. He approaches nature, not with the stealthy step of the Indian, but with the easy air of the farm-bred boy who lays no claims to esoteric relations, but quietly takes possession of the world about him because he was born to it.

It was his good fortune to spend his childhood and youth in that very interesting region where the head waters of the Delaware have their rise: a country which has elevation, mass, and breadth to the eye, as well as that austere fertility which responds to hard work, but scorns the touch of the amateur or the indolent. In such a region there is room for the imagination as well as for quick observation and the ready hand. The conditions which the boy found about him were simple to the verge of bareness, but they were wholesome; they bred that sturdy independence which goes far to the making of an original man. The picture on which he looked had no unusual or striking features. There was the bald-top mountain in the lap of which the farm lay, and upon which the sheep grazed; on the slope of the hill was one of those clear springs so dear to childhood, and so indescribably refreshing in the memory of the mature man; in the distance stood the little red school-house; and through the meadows beyond it ran the brook, with its inexhaustible resources of swimming, fishing, and dam-building. «For thirty years or more,» he writes, «I have been afflicted with a sort of chronic homesickness—a longing for the old farm where I was born, yonder amid the hills.» This nostalgia of the soul for the surroundings amid which it came to a consciousness of its needs and powers and aims testifies to the imperishable influence of the things which are seen with the eyes of youth. It is doubtful if any later vision of things is clearer or so fruitful; and it is certain that every man's art is permanently affected by those earliest contacts with the world which stir the imagination out of its sleep. Mr.

Burroughs first looked upon nature from the door-step of the farm-house, and from that point of contact between the outer world of discovery and action and the inner world of rest and affection he still sees it. The early years were simple and homely, and the later years have been of a piece with them. «If a man is not born into the environment best suited to him,» he writes in «An Egotistical Chapter,» «he, as a rule, casts about him until he finds such an environment. My own surroundings and connections have been mainly of the unliterary kind. I was born of and among people who neither read books nor cared for them, and my closest associations have been with those whose minds have been alien to literature and art. My unliterary environment has doubtless been best suited to me. Probably what little freshness and primal sweetness my books contain is due to this circumstance.» Education in the deepest sense is so individual, so much a matter of assimilating what is essential to the clear and adequate expression of one's self, and of rejecting that which is alien or unrelated, that most men of force and gift secure the best training for themselves, whatever their opportunities offer or withhold. And that knowledge which is most vital to a man generally comes to him unawares. «As a farm boy,» writes Mr. Burroughs, «I had known all the common birds well, and had loved the woods passionately; but my attention was not seriously turned to natural history till I was a man grown. But no one starts in the study of natural history with such advantages as he whose youth was passed on the farm. He has already got a great deal of it in his blood and bones; he has grown up in right relations with man and beast; the study comes easy and natural to him. The main things are a love of nature and simple tastes; and who is so likely to have these as the boy from the farm?»

This love of nature is not a blind adoration; it is rather a superior and searching intelligence. It sees because it knows how to look, and it knows how to look because the imagination quickens the instinct. There is a deep truth in that maxim, known to all anglers, which says in effect, «If you would catch trout, bait your hook with your heart.» Knowledge without sympathy can do much, but sympathetic knowledge alone divines the secrets of nature and of men. In the woods things happen to a man of John Burroughs's quality which never befall the indifferent observer. «To see the life of the woods go on about you,» he sometimes says to his friends, «it is only necessary to keep still.» But this stillness which lures the shy, wild creatures from their hiding-places, and brings the bird to your shoulder and the trout to your hand, is a pregnant stillness; it has that quality of silence which Wordsworth had in mind when he wrote:

> The breath of this corporeal frame,
> And even the motion of our human blood,
> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul.

This subtle persuasiveness of attitude, which disarms the suspicions of the world of wild life, and secures for a man the privileges of citizenship in that world, is possible to those only whose knowledge of natural processes and phenomena is pervaded by love; and love of nature in the productive sense comes mainly to those who discover the outer world when the imagination has not yet been divorced from observation. So far as insight and the power to reproduce in art are concerned, we know best the persons and the landscapes we knew in childhood. To people who did not know the little hamlet of Coate in childhood it is but a half a dozen mean and decaying cottages; they could not identify it with that half-fairy place which Richard Jefferies described. «No one else,» he says, «seems to have seen the sparkle on the brook, or heard the music at the hatch, or to have felt back through the centuries; and when I try to describe these things to them they look at me with stolid incredulity. . . . There is no music now in the old hatch where we used to sit, in danger of our lives, happy as kings, on the narrow bar over the deep water. The barred pike that used to come up in such numbers are no more among the flags. The perch used to drift down the stream and then bring up again. The sun shone there for a very long time, and the water rippled and sang; and it always seemed to me that I could feel the rippling and the singing and the sparkling back through the centuries.»

To look at nature with the inward as well as with the outward eye is the distinctive gift of the writer, who not only sees what other men fail to observe, but who gives his record of what he sees the quality of his personality. It is a significant fact in Mr. Burroughs's early history that he tapped the maple-trees, and secured the earliest market for his sugar, in order that he might buy text-books. Thus early did he lay nature under contribution for his education; and from the days when he whipped the brooks, as his grandfather had done before him, to

these days when he has come to hold the foremost place among living American writers about nature, that education has been uninterrupted and productive. He has not only steadily broadened his own vision, but he has shared his divinations and discoveries with an increasing number who find Thoreau a little too aboriginal and remote. For Thoreau often treats nature like a peasant proprietor whose love of the soil has a touch of fanatical exclusiveness, and sets up prohibitory notices and spring-guns at all approaches. He makes the conditions of acquaintance with nature so hard that we are constantly tempted to ask whether an entire surrender of civilization is not too great a price to pay, even for so great a privilege. There is something exclusive and divisive in the attitude of the recluse of Walden, which provokes the doubt as to whether a man cannot pay his taxes *and* learn all that nature has to impart for his discipline, instruction, and enrichment. We find ourselves asking what we shall gain if we make a new schism. Nature was long under the ban. Now that the two sides of life have been brought together, must civilization go to the wall in order that men may live again in complete and vital relation with nature? In Thoreau individualism runs to extremes, and he pays the penalty imposed upon puritanism in a partial and one-sided view of life. He is a schismatic, as his fathers were before him, because he divides the human activities and resources instead of conceiving of them as constituting an organic whole. Genuine fellowship with nature does not involve renunciation of the gains and resources of civilization; a man need not strip himself bare and revert to a savage type in order to get back to nature. It is natural to live the free, joyous life of the instincts and the senses, to seek silence and solitude, to love the smell of the earth and the sweep of the sky; but it is equally natural to live the life of thought, knowledge, taste, culture. It is natural to be born in « a state of nature »; but it is equally natural to grow out of that state into something fuller and higher, and civilization, in its essential quality, is nothing but growth. The seed and the blade are natural, and so also are the flower and the fruit.

This saner and deeper, if less striking, view of nature is presented by John Burroughs. He is not a schismatic; he is a harmonizer. He has no great love for cities, but he does not lose his poise and fall to cursing when he thinks of London or Boston or New York. He sees clearly enough the shams, the hypocrisies, the artificialities, which flourish among men organized into society; but he does not therefore leap to the conclusion that civilization is a sham or an artifice. He knows the supreme value in education of the solitude, the silence, the detachment of nature from all personal ties and all individual life; but he knows also that what one learns in the woods finds its closest readers in cities; that the spring of inspiration is hidden in the personality, but that it misses its great function of fertilization unless its current flows into organized human life; that man cannot be wholly sane and complete apart from nature, but that sanity and perfection are also conditional upon human relationship. Burroughs is less radical than Thoreau, but he is more fundamental; his point of view is less striking, but it is sounder.

Domesticity in the deeper sense involves the most intimate and continuous relation with one's surroundings. It means a good deal more than the most searching observation of those surroundings; it means living with them. And when a man lives deeply and adequately, his surroundings become so much a part of himself that his knowledge of them is a kind of extension of self-consciousness. This domesticity is not only the dominant note in Burroughs's attitude toward nature, but it is also the explanation of the wholesomeness of his view. One sometimes comes upon phrases in his work which seem strained and artificial, and remind us that in his youth he read Emerson with passionate ardor, and sometimes caught the manner and missed the inspiration; but the substance and texture of that work are sound and enduring. He escapes the fantastic, the idiosyncratic, the oracular; he addresses the understanding as well as the imagination; and in whatever ecstasy comes upon him in those hours when the hermit-thrush sings to that which is most solitary in the human soul, he does not lose his footing in the realities of life. His human sympathies are too warm and his human interests too deep for that isolation which, by severing a man in feeling from his kind, destroys his balance and makes him a prey to a distorted and partial vision of things. Moreover, the wild element in nature is, after all, not so alien to human life as it seems, and closer touch between the two reveals a deeper unity than could be suspected at the start. It is clear that we have not reached the ultimate truth with regard to the original relations of man and nature; but it is equally clear that every step which

science takes toward that truth binds man and nature with stronger and more mysterious bonds. The wild element is alien to us only so long as it is strange; domestication in nature destroys the impression of an inherent antagonism between the condition of the primitive man and the condition of the civilized man—between man isolated in nature and man in closest contact with his fellows. Throughout Burroughs's books runs this vein of domestication in nature; birds, beasts, woods, streams, the weather, are watched, studied, explored, recorded with a keen eye, with that passion for out-of-door life which leads the naturalist far and wide, and with that sense of hidden relationships, of secret unity, of pervading and infinite suggestion to the imagination, which is the distinctive possession of the man of letters. His inspirations and his authorities have been found afield, and the books he has written have grown up within him; the seeds of thought from which they have expanded have been, for the most part, deposited in his mind and heart in those unconsciously receptive hours when the world sinks deep into a man's imagination, to bear later the fruit of art.

« What I feel I can express,» he says, « and only what I feel. If I had run after the birds only to write about them, I never should have written anything that any one would care to read. I must write from sympathy and love, or not at all. I have in no measure the gift of the ready writer, who can turn his pen to all sorts of themes; or the dramatic, creative gift of the great poets, which enables them to get out of themselves and present vividly and powerfully things entirely beyond the circle of their own lives and experiences. I go to the woods to enjoy myself, and not to report them; and if I succeed, the expedition may by and by bear fruit at my pen.» Books produced in this way often lack formal arrangement, but they have vital unity, and, as a rule, they disclose growth. Burroughs has not made a systematic study of the world about him, but its various aspects have so long engrossed his attention that the record of them which he has kept is not only consistent with itself, but is fairly complete. Nothing is too homely or familiar to escape his eye, and he cares for things as nature disposes them, with apparent indifference to effects, a great deal more than for things as men arrange them. There is an elemental quality in him, born of his nearness to natural processes and products. He enjoys things in the rough, as a true lover of nature must, and feels the beauty of the solitary swamp, and of the burnt and desolate pine on the bare hillside, as keenly as the charm of a June morning when the whole world is abloom. He does not value things as they express culture, but as they express life; and the commonest and homeliest things are, for that reason, as significant and important, in his eyes, as those which are far-fetched and rare. The farmer on the fence, in his shirt-sleeves, is a much more impressive figure, to his thought, than many a man overlaid with the refinements and polish of society, simply because his is real, genuine, first-hand human nature. He means something as representative of the soil and the conditions about him. It is, therefore, a very plain, simple, hardy life which we find in John Burroughs's books, but it is a life full of flavor, health, reality. The natural man is not exploited in these books, but he is so quietly and faithfully reported that we begin to see how much more he means than any other kind of man. And from the same wholesome attitude toward the world we learn that the crow is quite as interesting as the thrush that makes the morning vocal, the cow-bird as well worth study as the eagle, and the woodchuck as important as the wild beast to which distance lends its traditional enchantment. Whatever is in nature, Burroughs seems to say, is there because it ought to be; and if we do not see its beauty, its worth, or its meaning, so much the worse for us. If he does not startle and sting us, as does Thoreau, he is not less an antiseptic in this end-of-the-century epoch of introspection, of straining of thought and of speech to compass and express abnormal experiences. His feet are always on the ground, and the open sky is over him; he is not afraid of hardship, because hardship is a part of nature; he fears only that sickness of the soul which makes men shrink from every rough wind, and that sickness of the imagination which confuses disease with health, and pieces words together, like bits of glass, to secure striking effects, instead of using language as the vital effluence of thought. He is not free from occasional touches of something very like affectation; but these forcings of the fancy are so rare that they emphasize the essential soundness and wholeness of his thought and style. He gets at the heart of the matter often with the directness of simple truth. Everything is subordinated to honest report of the fact. But it is not the bare fact which is recorded: it is the fact in its widest relations and in its deepest significance. He mixes human life with nature, and

sees nature with eyes that have imagination behind them. The elemental quality does not limit him to broad effects in style; he knows how to paint effectively on a small canvas, and he shows a thoroughly artistic appreciation of what a painter would call the «values» of his material. Such a piece of writing as «An Idyl of the Honey-Bee,» for instance, is a charming example of a harmonious disposition of a very few elements of interest. It is a bit of literature as well as a record of observation; it reveals the artist and the man of culture as well as the lover and student of nature.

And a man of culture Mr. Burroughs certainly is, if culture means not quantity but quality of knowledge, not acquirement but absorption of truth, not indefinite extension of intellectual interests, but ripeness, maturity, mastery. There is a flavor of literary association in almost everything he has written —the flavor, that is, of familiarity with books, as well as the gift of making books. If he has not read widely, he has read deeply and with the heart. He lived a year, he tells us, with the «Idler» and the «Rambler»; but it was only a question of time when he should fall under the spell of Emerson, that liberator of youth from traditional tastes, and from the painful indecision of aspirations working in the imagination, but vague and indistinct to the thought. He was confirmed in tendencies already well defined by reading Thoreau's «Walden»; but he was preserved from imitation by a radical difference of temperament, unconsciously suggested when he says: «I always envied him . . . his indifference to human beings.» Then came Whitman, with his «great humanizing power,» and Ruskin, Tennyson, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Arnold, and Carlyle. These were the formative influences in his education. There were other influences—Bryant, Longfellow, and Whittier—which were mainly confirmatory. There was something in Emerson which the boy felt rather than understood as native and indigenous, a new and vital force in thought and life. And it is significant both of his intellectual sensitiveness and of his hardy individuality, that in order to liberate himself from the overpowering spell of Emerson's searching thought and style, he took refuge in work; for self-expression is the sovereign remedy against that pressure from without which endangers the integrity of individuality. Instinct led him from the writing of essays on such Emersonian themes as «Expression» to the writing of out-of-door papers. «The woods, the soil, the waters,» he says, «helped to draw out the pungent Emersonian flavor, and restore me to my proper atmosphere.» In spite of certain unmistakable evidences of intimacy with Emerson, there was a fresh note in these earliest papers, and a fresh note involves an original power. Lowell spoke more than once of his delight in reading, as editor of the «Atlantic Monthly,» the first manuscript from John Burroughs that came into his hands; there was so much refreshment in the quiet, first-hand observation, and in the pungent, straightaway style. Those first ventures set the pace of a long, unhasting, but well-sustained activity, the fruits of which now fill ten volumes of moderate size. The very titles of these books suggest the fields where this knowledge and thought were gleaned. «Wake Robin,» «Locusts and Wild Honey,» «Winter Sunshine,» «Fresh Fields,» «Signs and Seasons,» «Birds and Poets,» hint at the presence of the imagination in this long record of observation, and suggest that the student of nature is also a man of letters. The literary gift is abundantly illustrated in all these books, and in two other of non-committal title—«Riverby» and «Pepacton»; and the literary interest and training are equally evident in «Indoor Studies,» and «Whitman.»

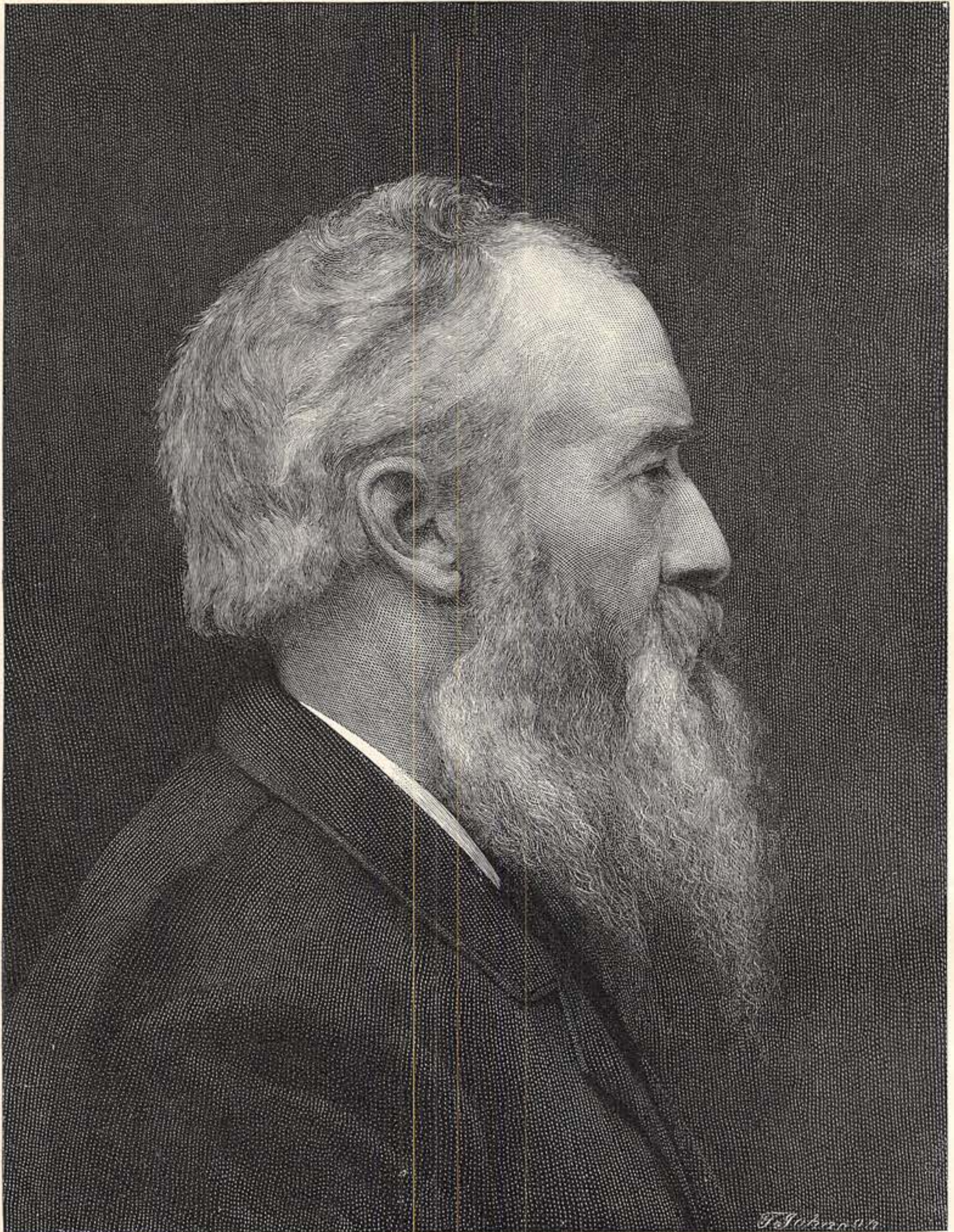
For Burroughs has studied and thought as well as observed. He has read Emerson, Carlyle, Arnold, and Whitman with the insight which never misses the fundamental truth that to be a great writer a man must first be an original force, and that no skill or grace can achieve that which lies only within the power of a strong and fresh personality. He is drawn, therefore, mainly to writers of elemental force and individual power; men in whose constant identification of ample knowledge and courageous insight, with perfection of form, one finds the supreme examples of that great but much abused word, culture. He responds to the appeal of men who speak fearlessly out of their own natures, and who have made the decisive discovery that art is not academic, but vital, and that to write freely out of one's soul is the supreme achievement in literature. He values those qualities in books to which his long familiarity with nature has given the highest authority—reality, sincerity, contact with concrete things. No man has written more wisely and intelligently of Carlyle, whose elemental energy and titanic fury of work appeal to him as something almost cosmical. «What Taine calls his barbarism,» he says in his interesting account

of «Carlyle's Country,» «was his strong mason sire cropping out. He was his father's son to the last drop of his blood, a master builder working with might and main. . . . I know of no man in literature with whom the sense of labor is so tangible and terrible. That vast, grim, struggling, silent, inarticulate array of ancestral force that lay in him, when the burden of written speech was laid upon it, half rebelled, and would not cease to struggle and be inarticulate. There was a plethora of power; a channel, as through rocks, had to be made for it; and there was an incipient cataclysm whenever a book was to be written.»

Burroughs is drawn also to a mind of very different temper, but of kindred integrity of fiber and distinctness of personal note. His essay on Matthew Arnold is not only an admirable piece of criticism, but it is a prime illustration of his catholic love for sound work, and of his power to recognize reality and downrightness of soul even in a writer of academic affinities. For Arnold bears unmistakable witness on every page to that quality of training which is imparted by the university, and by the university alone. But there was something hard and unyielding under that fine polish; indeed, the perfection of the finish was due in no small measure to the stubborn fiber of a material which responded slowly to the hand of art, and retained every impression which it received. In his way, Arnold had as great a power of resisting contemporary influences as Carlyle had, and was of a nature quite as strenuous and fearless. The same qualities Burroughs finds in a writer whose artistic methods were antipodal to those of Arnold, and whose view of modern life Carlyle would have detested. For many years Burroughs has urged the claims of Walt Whitman as a poet of original quality and insight. His advocacy has been loyal and generous, and if at times its claims have been too inclusive, there has been the justification of an atmosphere of exasperating indifference, if not of downright antagonism. The country has not accepted these claims for Whitman in their entirety; but to their persistent advocacy has been due in no small degree that change which has brought American opinion much nearer foreign opinion concerning a poet who has suffered almost equally at the hands of enemies and friends, and whose great qualities and marked defects need, above all things, dispassionate judgment. The elementary character of Whitman's ideas, the breadth of base which his human interests subtend, the uncompromising democracy of his spirit, found a quick response in Burroughs; but there was something in the feeling and rhythm of the poet which had for the lover of nature a charm almost novel in English poetry. Burroughs has said that Whitman can be understood only out of doors; that he has caught the gait of nature, and that his apparent formlessness, when one feels its quality, has the primitive power and spell of woods and fields. This quality eludes those who look at literature from what may be called the literary standpoint; but it is felt by those who go to books for contact with the elemental forces of life, and who discern in the apparent formlessness of nature the hints and suggestions of a form more vital and capacious than the great literary artists have yet mastered. In Burroughs's judgment, this change of method does not involve revolt against the great traditions of poetry, but marks that general advance of thought and feeling which tends more and more to bring men together on a basis of natural equality or inequality, and to infuse into all the arts not only a closer, but a more inclusive, human interest and impulse.

These opinions find their value not only in the contribution they make to the general comprehension of some of the most significant men of the century, but in the revelation they make of John Burroughs's intellectual and spiritual character. They disclose his affinities, his interests, and his point of view. And in these comments on literature, as in the comments on nature, one finds a search for simplicity, directness, absence of any kind of formalism, love of everything that concerns or contains life, a broad, sane, homely conception of man and his surroundings. There is very little historical background in Burroughs's thought; he rarely suggests that vast, rich world of finished achievement from which so many men unconsciously pilfer for the enrichment of their meager stores. We miss in these books that quality of atmosphere which gives Lowell's work, for instance, a charm distilled out of the best life of many centuries; but we find in them something which is of supreme value in literature: the simple, frank utterance of a strong, unaffected human soul in close and normal relations with nature and life. Such an utterance may lack completeness, but it cannot lack that deep reality which is born of personal contact with that about which it speaks; and such an utterance always brings us back to nature by reminding us that art is but a mask for nature.

Hamilton Wright Mabie.



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Sincerely Yours
John Burroughs