

THOREAU'S WALDEN IN OUR TIME IN THE LIGHT OF TRANSCENDENTALISM

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Abstract

The Transcendentalists assumed a universe divided into two essential parts, the soul and nature. Emerson defined the soul by defining nature: "all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE." A belief in the reliability of the human conscience was a fundamental Transcendentalist principle, and this belief was based upon a conviction of the immanence, or indwelling, of God in the soul of the individual. "We see God around us, because he dwells within us," wrote William Ellery Channing in 1828; "the beauty and glory of God's works are revealed to the mind by a light beaming from itself."

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Introduction

Thoreau, himself an inventor and an engineer of sorts, was fascinated by technology, and the mid-nineteenth century saw a series of inventions that would radically change the world, such as power looms, railroads, and the telegraph. But these inventions were products of a larger movement, the industrial revolution, in which Thoreau saw the potential for the destruction of nature for the ends of commerce. In Thoreau's view, technology also provoked an excitement that was counterproductive because it served as a distraction from the important questions of life.

Thoreau was a dedicated, self-taught naturalist, who disciplined himself to observe the natural phenomena around Concord systematically and to record his observations almost daily in his Journal. The Journal contains initial formulations of ideas and descriptions that appear in Thoreau's lectures, essays, and books; early versions of passages that reached final form in *Walden* can be found in the Journal as early as 1846. Thoreau's observations of nature enrich all of his work, even his essays on political topics. Images and comparisons based on his studies of animal behavior, of the life cycles of plants, and of the features of the changing seasons illustrate and enliven the ideas he puts forth in *Walden*.

All day long the red squirrels came and went, and afforded me much entertainment by their manoeuvres. One would approach at first warily through the shrub-oaks, running over the snow crust

by fits and starts like a leaf blown by the wind, now a few paces this way, with wonderful speed and waste of energy, making inconceivable haste with his "trotters," as if it were for a wager, and now as many paces that way, but never getting on more than half a rod at a time; and then suddenly pausing with a ludicrous expression and a gratuitous somerset, as if all the eyes in the universe were fixed on him,--for all the motions of a squirrel, even in the most solitary recesses of the forest, imply spectators as much as those of a dancing girl,--wasting more time in delay and circumspection than would have sufficed to walk the whole distance,--I never saw one walk,--and then suddenly, before you could say Jack Robinson, he would be in the top of a young pitch-pine, winding up his clock and chiding all imaginary spectators, soliloquizing and talking to all the universe at the same time,--for no reason that I could ever detect, or he himself was aware of, I suspect. (*Walden*, 273-274)

BEFORE AND AFTER WALDEN

Walden is Thoreau's best-known book, but other works of his written both before and after *Walden* have met with favorable responses. All of his writing except his poetry is expository--he wrote no fiction--and much of it is built on the framework of the journey, short or long, external or interior. *A Week*, *The Maine Woods*, *Cape Cod*, and the essays "A Winter Walk," "A Walk to Wachusett," and "A Yankee in Canada," for example, are all structured as traditional travel narratives. The speaker--and it is useful to remember that almost all of Thoreau's published essays and books were first presented as lectures--sets out from home in each case, and the reader experiences the wonders of each new place with him, sharing the meditations it inspires, and finally returning with him to Concord with a deeper understanding of both native and foreign places and of the journeying self. Other essays take the reader on different kinds of journeys--through the foliage of autumn ("Autumnal Tints"), through the cultivated and wild orchards of history ("Wild Apples"), through the life-cycle of a plot of land as one species of tree gives way to another ("The Succession of Forest Trees").

Nature is Thoreau's first great subject; the question of how we should live is his second. One series of his essays deals with issues of personal exploration and renewal. In the 1830s and 1840s a wave of reform movements of all kinds swept New England. The issues involved ranged from women's rights to temperance, from education to religion, from diet to sex. In general, Thoreau did not support reform movements; after he was invited to join the model community at Brook Farm, he wrote in his Journal, "As for these communities--I think I had rather keep bachelor's hall in hell than go to board in heaven.--" The one movement with which he finally could not resist an alliance was abolitionism. Although he wrote in *Walden*,

I sometimes wonder that we can be so frivolous, I may almost say, as to attend to the gross but somewhat foreign form of servitude called Negro Slavery, there are so many keen and subtle

masters that enslave both north and south. It is hard to have a southern overseer; it is worse to have a northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself.

and was at first reluctant to speak at abolitionist rallies because he felt he was expected to follow certain formulas, he later gave several impassioned lectures in response to the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law and in support of the activities of John Brown. Considering his neighbors' dismissive responses to Brown at the news of his death, Thoreau wrote,

I hear another ask, Yankee-like, "What will he gain by it?" as if he expected to fill his pockets by this enterprise. Such a one has no idea of gain but in this worldly sense. If it does not lead to a "surprise" party, if he does not get a new pair of boots, or a vote of thanks, it must be a failure. "But he won't gain any thing by it." Well, no, I don't suppose he could get four-and-sixpence a day for being hung, take the year round; but then he stands a chance to save a considerable part of his soul--and *such* a soul!--when you do not. No doubt you can get more in your market for a quart of milk than for a quart of blood, but that is not the market that heroes carry their blood to. ("A Plea for Captain John Brown," *Reform Papers*, 119)

Thoreau's most famous essay is "Civil Disobedience," published in 1849 as "Resistance to Civil Government." The incident that provoked him to write it took place in July 1846, while he was living at Walden. Coming into town to have a pair of shoes repaired, he was arrested for non-payment of the poll tax assessed against every voter, and spent a night in jail. He was released the next day, after one of his relatives, probably an aunt, paid what was owed, but the event gave him the impetus to attack the government in a classic antiwar, antislavery piece that gave support to the passive resistance of Mohandas Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other twentieth-century conscientious objectors.

Some critics now consider Thoreau's Journal his most innovative and exciting work. In it he was able to show his thoughts in their natural relation to one another, not forced into a thematic arrangement, or stretched or lopped to fit the constraints of formal exposition. The natural alternation of observation and reflection provided a rhythm that suited his temperament and style. He usually walked in the mornings and, using field notes that were almost a shorthand to remind him of what he had observed, wrote in the afternoons, although he sometimes postponed the composition and wrote several days' entries at once.

Thoreau's careful observations of the cycles of growing plants, of water levels in the local rivers and ponds, of fluctuating temperatures, and of many other natural phenomena are recorded in his Journal. They became the basis for a series of lists and charts that provided precise information for several

essays in Transcendental natural history that remained unfinished at his death, and that show him developing another kind of writing--more scientific than his excursions but no less poetic.

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