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1837–1861

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Edited by

DAMION SEARLS

Preface by

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PREFACE

“To Pine Hill for chestnuts.” And on the way an Irish-immigrant woman and her son, bent double under loads of firewood, Old World in appearance but doing “the squaw’s part in many respects,” encounter the solitary walker. Another day, “To owl’s nest. The young owls are gone.” Period. Fledglings flown. But the day after, a question recorded. “What if we feel a yearning to which no breast answers? I walk alone.” Then some thoughts about frivolity, society, and personal shallowness. On the last day of one September, a musing about the color of leaves: “The white ash has got its autumnal mulberry hue.” But then something more. “It is with leaves as with fruits and woods, and animals and men; when they are mature their different characters appear.” And the next day, something else, down by the railroad track. “Just put a fugitive slave, who has taken the name of Henry Williams, into the cars for Canada.”

Here find the private musings of a solitary seer, the odd man of Concord. “Hornets, hyenas, and baboons are not so great a curse to a country as men of a similar character,” Thoreau decided one early-autumn day. But then again, he knew he had circumscribed his life, focused his energy within the town bounds of Concord, walking the edges as a surveyor, pacing the whole as a self-appointed visionary. “It is a charmed circle which I have drawn around my abode, having walked not with God but with the devil. I am too well aware when I have crossed this line.”

What line? He knew the town boundary lines, knew enough to look beyond, to see “such near hills as Nobscot and Nashoba,” the far-off glimmerings of others in the sunlight. He knew the paths

and byways and shortcuts and railroad rights-of-way and the rivers along which he rowed and skated and swam. He knew the line dividing his private goals from “the mean and narrow-minded men” he scorned, as when one of sixty asked about buying a bearing orchard when he might have planted fruit trees thirty years earlier. Arrogant, supercilious, observant, but often doubting himself, he wrote for himself, averring that “most New England biographies and journals—John Adams’s not excepted—affect me like opening of the tombs.” And the tombs he meant lay in the Concord graveyard, not Luxor.

Winter prompted him to ponder journalizing. He moved about the house, from one sunny window to another. “My Journal is that of me which would else spill over and run to waste,” but then again, maybe not. Another winter day, another vision of the book. “To set down such choice experiences that my own writings may inspire me and at last I may make wholes of parts.” Journalizing is not journalism but “a distinct profession” rescuing details and truths from oblivion. “Contemplation of the unfinished picture may suggest its harmonious completion,” every thought “a nest egg” a long time from hatching. “Thoughts accidentally thrown together become a frame in which more may be developed and exhibited. Perhaps this is the main value of a habit of writing, of keeping a journal,—that so we remember our best hours and stimulate ourselves.” And in another January, years later, something similar but not the same: “In keeping a journal of one’s walks and thoughts it seems to be worth the while to record those phenomena which are most interesting to us at the time.” Indeed. “Such is the weather.” The weather. That which shapes the Concord-circumscribed world, the affairs of just farmers and vagrants, the turn of seasons, the color of everything, the fall of light and shadow: the weather. Here is much about weather, including weather beyond the windowpane but not beyond the manuscript book, and in all weather, much of the footprints of Henry David Thoreau, the man who “thus *tracks himself*” in journal pages, he who worried at how much “is out of my line.”

Faces bothered him. “In the evening went to a party. It is a bad

place to go to,—thirty or forty persons, mostly young women, in a small room, warm and noisy.” Women loud, women pretty. All jumbled, lost in the clacking roar. “I rarely look people in their faces,” he concluded, before recording a far more pleasant encounter with an old farmer in the woods, farmer and journal writer eating crackers and cheese together. But then, a few months later, faces and looking again. “When a man asks me a question, I look him in the face. If I do not see any inquiry there, I cannot answer it.” And will not. “His face expressed no more curiosity or relationship to me than a custard pudding.” From parties and public encounters and most other “machinery of modern society,” from what the Journal records as autumn melancholy, Thoreau fled to the woods, to solitude. “The society of young women is the most unprofitable I have ever tried. They are so light and flighty that you can never be sure whether they are there or not there.” Like the owls, they are very often gone. Faces float in the pages that follow: they swirl like leaves in the slow-flowing Concord. They float faster in the rain. “Here is a rainy day, which keeps me in the house.” Here is a Thoreau raw, colliding, recording, not the polished author of a book about life on the edge of Walden Pond.

“A man hangs out innumerable signs by which we may know him.” Here stand signs, not all clear. “Bathing is an undescribed luxury. To feel the wind blow on your body, the water flow on you and lave you, is a rare physical enjoyment this hot day.” He swam, then stood at the confluence of cold brook and warm pond. “When I thrust my arm down where it was only two feet deep, my arm was in the warm water of the pond, but my hand in the cold water of the brook.” Another July, years later. “I find the water considerably colder at the bottom while I stand up to my chin, but the sandy bottom much warmer to my feet than the water. The heat passes *through* the water without being absorbed by it much.” Sensory experience produces the joy and even ecstasy for which he notes, once, the Journal exists. He smelled pennyroyal while walking along a hillside, backtracked, sniffed, and found a tiny, solitary plant, trodden. He examined guns. Precisely. “Looked at a Sharp’s rifle, a Colt’s revolver, a Maynard’s, and a Thurber’s revolver.” Some

have smoother actions than others. “The last fires fastest (by a steady pull), but not so smartly.” Not as nice in the hand, dry-fired or not. A warm day in December, “true Indian summer,” and “the walker perspires” and enjoys the perspiration: a November year later brings weather “finger-cold” and air “so bracing and wholesome” it makes him cast stones on the first ice. And by that November, the journal writer eats differently, once avoiding meat, tea, coffee, “etc., etc.,” because “it appeared more beautiful to live low and fare hard.” But change swept his palate and diet and table. “I find myself somewhat less particular,” and “grown more coarse and indifferent,” more a gourmand and less the hoer and eater of beans.

“All this you will see, and much more, if you are prepared to see it,—if you *look* for it,” he notes of a November rainy day when he walked out to Poplar Hill, what he asserts might be any hill. Look acutely, descry the “bright-red tops or crescents of the scarlet oaks,” and delight. “Otherwise, regular and universal as this phenomenon is, you will think for threescore years and ten that all the wood is at this season sere and brown.” So appears not the sign but the sign painter, the word colorist, the practical, frost-nipped-hands philosopher. “Objects are concealed from our view not so much because they are out of the course of our visual ray as because there is no intention of the mind and eye toward them.” So emerges one core of the Journal. “We do not realize how far and widely, or how near and narrowly, we are to look. The greater part of the phenomena of nature are for this reason concealed to us all our lives.” Journal becomes prism. “The actual objects which one person will see from a particular hilltop are just as different from those which another will see as the persons are different.” Transcendentalism slogs through mud, over hobble ice, uphill, outdoors, in bad weather. Transcendentalism grates, scrapes, works. “The scarlet oak must, in a sense, be in your eye when you go forth.” The mind is its own paint pot, its own discovery, its own creator of serendipitous finding of rare plants and the disguised slave catcher lurking near the railroad depot.

“The colors are now: light blue above (where is my cyanometer? Saussure invented one, and Humboldt used it in his travels); land-

scape russet and greenish, spotted with fawn-colored plowed lands, with green pine and gray or reddish oak woods intermixed, and dark-blue or slate-color water here and there." So one May 1st apparition, recorded, and enlivened by "a strong, invigorating scent" up from the fresh meadows. But Thoreau knew the limits of words, even the limits of the well-disciplined eye. "We are armed with language adequate to describe each leaf in the field, or at least to distinguish it from each other, but not to describe a human character." But the pages following at least sketch Thoreau, making a hazy-mirror self-portrait, including such long, involved, despairing passages as that beginning "I once set fire to the woods." Here find the color of Thoreau, then the color illuminated and shaded by the circumscribed landscape and society of Concord and by the telegraph tapping out the weather in New York and Portland, the telegraph line not out of his line, not in the end.

"I would fain make two reports in my Journal, first the incidents and observations of to-day; and by to-morrow I review the same and record what was omitted before, which will often be the most significant and poetic part." So he wrote after decades of keeping the Journal, still musing on what he experienced, what he recorded, and what the record became, aging like winter apples. "The men and things of to-day are wont to lie fairer and truer in to-morrow's memory." Journal-writing conjures hyper-reality, then, enduring sharpness of shape that slices deeply time and again. "Often I can give the truest and most interesting account of any adventure I have had after years have elapsed, for then I am not confused, only the most significant facts surviving in my memory." What follows here is not the memory of Thoreau but his memory mine, his private store of promptings, his paint-pot personal notes, and his record of making and writing that record. "I now begin to pluck wild apples," interrupts one September entry. And here follows his harvest.

—JOHN R. STILGOE