THE PEOPLE OF CONCORD:

LT. JOSEPH HOSMER, THE CABINETMAKER OF CONCORD

AND JOSEPH HOSMER, HIS DESCENDANT

"Thoreau was an enigma to all of us.
No one could place him."
— Joseph Hosmer

Joseph Hosmer (1735-1821) was the son of Thomas and Prudence Hosmer, third cousins. The first Hosmer to come to Concord arrived with his brother-in-law, the founder. Major Simon Willard, with whom he had migrated from Kent. They were related to the Wheeler, Hartwell, and Wood families. Prudence Hosmer was known for her "command of language, taste for literature, and love of reading and poetry." While Joseph's father was not a high town officer, his uncle Stephen had served as company commander at Fort Edward, as clerk of the West Church, and as selectman in the 1750s, as well as holding membership on some Revolutionary committees. [Shattuck, History of Concord, 72, 77, 179, 321, 375; Josephine Hosmer, "Memoirs of Joseph Hosmer," in Social Circle, 114, 119; Potter, Genealogies of Concord, 12;] Joseph was born on his father's farm, and before he grew up his father had acquired another farm, so he was able to divide his farms between his two oldest sons when Joseph [George Leonard Hosmer, Hosmer Genealogy (2 vols., Cambridge: Technical Composition Co., 1928), I, 31,] reached twenty-one. He built a house and had apprentices living with him. He had learned the trade of cabinetmaker from a Frenchman who married his cousin, and became known for his fine cherry and mahogany desks throughout the county. When Hosmer married Lucy Barnes, the daughter of a high town officer of Marlborough in 1761, he continued making furniture and managing the farm and another his wife inherited, and fattening his cattle on pastures he owned in Rutland, Princeton, and Acton. [107 Hosmer, ibid., 115-16; Gross, Minutemen, 101.] In 1771 he paid 19s 4d on three polls rateable, a house and shop adjoining worth ?8;13:4 annually,

one horse, seven cows, six sheep, and two swine. He had only six acres of tillage from which he got a hundred bushels of grain. He got a ton of hay from each of his three English and upland mowing meadows, and nine tons from eleven acres of fresh meadows. [1081771 Concord Valuation List, MSA, 132:208.] Such prosperity was sufficient for a high town officer in normal times, but the Revolution would raise Joseph Hosmer even higher. Hosmer became hogreeve in 1760 and constable in 1767. Building up his farm and business left him little time for public office until the troubles with England needled him into action. He was one of those asking for a special town meeting in response to the Tea Act in 1773. Once he answered the argument of Tory Daniel Bliss at the Middlesex Convention by skillfully presenting British actions as threats to the lands and liberties of the townsmen, Joseph Hosmer was at the forefront of the town's revolutionary movement. Bliss called him "the most dangerous man in Concord, for he has all the young men at his back, and where he leads they will surely follow." He was on the first Committee of Correspondence the town chose in 1774 and on the Committee of Inspection to see to the observance of the Continental Association. [Gross, Minutemen, 46-47, 53, 64-65; Wheeler, Concord, 101; Hosmer, Hosmer Genealogy, 31; Hosmer, "Joseph Hosmer," 116-117; Shattuck, History of Concord, 91.] Six and a half barrels of powder were stored at his house in the spring of 1775. He was a lieutenant in charge of one of Concord's militia companies at the Bridge, and acted as Major John Buttrick's adjutant, lining up the men as they arrived from the surrounding towns. It was he who asked if they were going to let the British burn the town down. After the war began he was continually in public office, first as representative (1776-80, 1783-85) and then as state senator (1781, 1785-1793; and high sheriff (1794- 1808.[Shattuck, History of Concord, 98, 111; Records of Civil Commissions, 1789-1806, 28, MSA; Gross, Minutemen, 125, sees this as a challenge to the town's leadership, but as it was only one of many calls for action that morning, it most likely would not have been remembered as decisive if Hosmer had not used the Revolution as a political mounting block.] With the beginning of the war, Hosmer was offered a colonel's commission, but he refused it, believing "he could do the country more good by working at home for the army than by going to war." He became quartermaster and rode over the state to collect supplies, bringing news from the War Department, making speeches, and telling stories. He was mustermaster, paying bounties and collecting recruits. In 1777 he raised men for the northern or Canadian Department, distributing ?1723:8 in the process. In 1779, when he was collecting clothing for the army, Middlesex gave him 1,497 shirts, 1,546 pairs of shoes, and 1,344 pairs of hose. He would pick up State Lottery tickets in Boston to sell on his rounds through the towns, making the returns on his next stop in Boston. He filled the post of collector of public supplies without payment because "it was somebody's duty to do so, and he might

as well as another man." He sent his fifteen-year-old son off in the middle of the night to hurry the flow of supplies from the Connecticut River towns to the army. In addition he was agent of absentees' estates, though he had only Daniel Bliss's property to worry about. In 1780 he was captain of Concord's Light Infantry and later major. [Josephine Hosmer, "Joseph Hosmer," in Social Circle, 117-18; ADS, Oliver Wendell, Jan. 11, 1777, Revolutionary Manuscript, Boston Public Library, Boston, Mass.; State Lottery Ticket Receipt, Feb. 19, 1779, C. Davis papers, MHS; Shattuck, History of Concord, 227.]
Joseph Hosmer took Colonel James Barrett's place in the House of Representatives when the latter retired in 1776. He stayed in the General Court, moving to the Senate in 1781. When he failed to be returned to the Senate in 1782, he had a year out while James Barrett, Esq. was sent to the House with a strict set of instructions. Barrett voted for tight money policies and the town must have regretted its choice, for the next year they returned Hosmer with words of confidence, though they were but a preface to a similar strict list of instructions. After long service on the Committee of Correspondence, he was one of that group 1 1 2 which founded the Social Circle in 1782. [112Gross, Minutemen, 165; Social Circle, 8.] In 1786 Hosmer headed a committee writing other towns to suggest a meeting to discuss measures to meet the unrest associated with Shays' rebellion. The committee sought to have local leaders mediate between the government and the "opposition" to calm the people's minds. While the members disapproved the stopping of the courts in the western counties, they noted that the rioters had real grievances. They urged leniency towards the rioters, and efforts to get them to use legal and constitutional means to obtain redress. As a result, twenty-four towns sent representatives to Concord where they drew up an address and sent Duncan Ingraham to present it to the governor. Because of their efforts, the call for the militia was canceled and mediation attempted, though it failed. Another result was that the people took their advice to seek constitutional redress and turned out three-fourths of the representatives, including Joseph Hosmer, at the next election. [Joseph Hosmer to Selectmen of Cambridge, Sept. 9, 1786, Misc. Bound Mss., MHS; Shattuck, History of Concord, 132-33; Town Meeting Minutes, TRC 5:341.] That year, 1787, Hosmer was named a justice of the peace and of the Quorum. Re-appointed in 1794, he was named high sheriff of Middlesex County the same week, serving in that capacity until he was superseded in 1808. In 1788 Concord named him to the state convention with instructions to ratify the new federal constitution. He retained into his old age his power of attracting all ages and classes, and some of the courage he needed to oppose Bliss in 1774 remained with him to the end, for he defied Governor Hancock to his face on the floor of the Senate when he thought it was necessary to carry out the instructions of the town. He could also slip money into the hands of persons so poor that he had to preside over the sale of their property for debts. His

reputation for “natural, unaffected, but energetic eloquence” and a strong, active mind remained in his later years. He and the minister. Reverend Ezra Ripley, had an agreement with the innkeeper that he would call them whenever an interesting veteran stopped there, and the talk would continue far into the night. But his interest in public affairs and the claims of Concord did not cease with age. In 1814, when he was seventy-nine, he was one of the agents of the town who tried to get the Court of Sessions moved to Concord. He died in 1821, age eighty-five, the last of the Revolutionary leaders of Concord. [Records of Civil Commissions, 1775-1787, pt. 2, 14; 1787-1806, 28, MSA; Shattuck, History of Concord, 147, 237, 376; Gross, Minutemen, 164, 183.]

1774

August 30, Friday: Dr. Lemuel Shattuck has pointed out that although there were some historians who attempted to make out that the first American liberty convention was held not in Middlesex but in Suffolk, "this is undoubtedly erroneous ... Middlesex took the lead in these important proceedings."

Daniel Bliss, Esq. of Concord, a supporter of the Crown, insisted at this meeting of delegates that they were biting off more than they could chew, and would ultimately be humiliated through subjection to greater military force and harm, for "England is a mighty nation ... [and] open rebellion will lead inevitably to crushing defeat...." The Concord cabinetmaker, Joseph Hosmer, then rose and spoke in favor of revolution.

AMERICAN REVOLUTION

> In August frequent meetings were held in Concord to consult on the proper measures to be pursued in those gloomy times. A county convention was also recommended, and it was invited to meet here at Concord on the last of the month. This convention, consisting of 150 delegates from every town in the county, held a session in Concord on the 30th and 31st of August. Messrs. Ephraim Wood, jr., John Flint, and Nathan Meriam were delegates from Concord; Mr. Samuel Farrar, Capt. Abijah Pierce, and Capt. Eleazer Brooks, from Lincoln; Messrs. Francis Faulkner, John Hayward, and Ephraim Hapgood, from Acton; Messrs. Stephen Davis, John Reed, John Moore, and John Webber, from Bedford; and from other towns, an able delegation. The Hon. James Prescott of Groton was chairman, and Mr. Ebenezer Bridge, clerk. The objects of the convention were brought forward, and discussed with great energy, talent, an most ardent patriotism; and a committee of nine were chosen to take them into consideration. They reported as follows:
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>> It is evident to every attentive mind, that this Province is in a very dangerous and alarming situation. We are obliged to say, however painful it may be to us, that the question now is, whether by a submission to some late Acts of Parliament of Great Britain, we are contented to be the most abject slaves, and entail that slavery on posterity after us, or, by a manly, joint and virtuous opposition, assert and support our freedom. There is a mode of conduct, which, in our very critical circumstances, we would wish to adopt, - a conduct, on the one hand, never degenerating into rage, passion and confusion. This is a spirit which we revere, as we find it exhibited in former ages, and which will command applause to the latest posterity. The late Acts of Parliament pervade the whole system of jurisprudence, by which means we think the fountains of justice are fatally corrupted. Our defence must therefore be immediate in proportion to the danger. We must now exert ourselves, or all those efforts, which for ten years

past have brightened the annals of this country, will be totally frustrated. LIFE and DEATH, or what is more, FREEDOM and SLAVERY, are in a peculiar sense now before us; and the choice and success, under God, depend greatly on ourselves. We are therefore bound, as struggling not only for ourselves, but for future generations, to express our sentiments in the following resolves - sentiments, which we think are founded in truth and justice, and therefore sentiments we are determined to abide by.

Resolved, 1. That as true and loyal subjects of our gracious Sovereign, George the Third, King of Great Britain, etc., we by no means intend to withdraw our allegiance from him; but, while permitted the free exercise of our natural and charter rights, are resolved to expend life and treasure in his service.

2. That when our ancestors emigrated from Great Britain charters and resolves and solemn stipulations expressed the conditions, and what particular rights they yielded, what each party had to do and perform; and what each of the contracting parties were equally bound by.

3. That we know of no instance in which this province has transgressed the rules on their part, or any ways forfeited their natural and charter rights to any power on earth.

4. That the Parliament of Great Britain has exercised a power contrary to the abovementioned charter by passing acts, which hold up their absolute supremacy over the colonists; by another act blocking up the harbour of Boston, and by two late acts, the one entitled, "an Act for the better regulating the government of the province of Massachusetts Bay;" the other entitled "an Act for the more impartial administration of justice in said province;" and by enforcing all these iniquitous acts with a large armed force to dragoon and enslave us.

5. That the late act of Parliament, entitled, "an Act for the better regulating the government of the province of Massachusetts Bay," expressly acknowledges the authority of the charter granted by their Majesties, King William & Queen Mary, to said province; and that the only reasons, suggested In the preamble to said act, which is intended to deprive us of The privileges confirmed to us by said charter, are the inexpediency of continuing those privileges, and a charge of their having Been forfeited, to which charge the province has had no opportunity Of answering.

6. That a debtor may as justly refuse to pay his debts, because it is inexpedient for him, as the Parliament of Great Britain deprive us of our charter privileges, because it is inexpedient to a corrupt administration

for us to enjoy them.

7. That in all free states there must be an equilibrium in the legislative body, without which constitutional check they cannot be said to be a free people.

8. That the late act, which ordains a council to be appointed by his Majesty, his heirs and successors from time to time, by warrant under His or their signet or sign manual, and which ordains that the said Counselors shall hold their offices respectively during the pleasure Of his Majesty, effectually alters the constitutional equilibrium, renders The council absolute tools and creatures, and entirely destroys the importance of the representative body.

9. That no state can long exist free and happy, where the course of Justice is obstructed; and that when trials by juries, which are the grand bulwarks of life and property, are destroyed or weakened, a people fall immediately under arbitrary power.

10. That the late act, which gives the governor of this province a power of appointing judges of the superior and inferior courts, commissioners of oyer and terminer, the attorney general, provosts, marshals and justices of the peace, and to remove all of them (the judges of the superior court excepted) without consent of the council, entirely subverts a free administration of justice - as the fatal experience of mankind in all ages has testified, that there is no greater species of corruption, than when judicial and executive officers depend for their existence and support on a power independent of the people.

11. That by ordaining jurors to be summoned by the sheriff only, which sheriff is to be appointed by the governor without consent of council, that security which results from a trial by our peers is rendered altogether precarious; and is not only an evident infraction upon our charter, but a subversion of our common rights as Englishmen.

12. That every people have an absolute right of meeting together to consult upon common grievances, and to petition, remonstrate, and use every legal method for their removal.

13. That the act which prohibits these constitutional meetings cuts away the scaffolding of English freedom, and reduces us to a most abject state of vassalage and slavery.

14. That it is our opinion these late acts, if quietly submitted to, will annihilate the last vestiges of liberty in this province, and, therefore, we must be justified by God and the world in never submitting to

them.

15. That it is the opinion of this body, that the present act, respecting the government of the province, is an artful, deep-laid plan of oppression and despotism, that it requires great skill and wisdom to counteract it. This wisdom we have endeavoured to collect from the united sentiments of the county. And although we are grieved that we are obliged to mention anything, that may be attended with such very important consequences as may now ensue, yet a sense of our duty as men, as freemen, as Christian freemen, united in the firmest bonds, obliges us to resolve, that every civil office now in commission in this province, and acting in conformity to the late act of Parliament, is not an officer agreeable to our Charter, therefore unconstitutional, and ought to be opposed in the manner hereafter recommended.

16. That we will obey all such civil officers now in commission, whose commissions were issued before the first day of July, 1774, and support them in the execution of their offices according to the manner usual before the late attempt to alter the constitution of this province; Nay, even although the Governor should attempt to revoke their commissions. But that if any Of the said officers shall accept a commission under the present plan of arbitrary government, Or, in any way or manner whatever, assist the Governor or administration in the assault now Making on our rights and liberties, we will consider them as having forfeited their commissions And yield them no obedience.

17. That whereas the Honorable Samuel Danforth and Joseph Lee, Esqrs., two of the judges of the Inferior Court of Common Pleas for this county, have accepted commissions under the new act by being sworn members of his Majesty's Council, appointed by said act: we therefore look upon them utterly incapable of holding any office whatever. And whereas a venire on the late act of Parliament has issued from the Court of Sessions, signed by the clerk, we think they come under a preceding resolve of acting in conformity to the new act: we therefore resolve that a sub-commission to courts thus acting and under these disqualifications, is a submission to the act itself, and of consequence, as we are resolved never to submit one iota to the act, we will not submit to courts thus constituted, and thus acting in conformity to said act.

18. That is, in consequence of the former resolve, all business at the Inferior Court of Common Pleas and Court of General Sessions of the Peace next to be holden at Concord must cease, to Prevent the many inconveniences

> that may arise therefrom: we resolve that all actions, writs, Suits, etc., brought to said court, ought to remain in the same condition as at present (unless Settled by consent of parties), till we know the result of a provincial and continental congress. And we resolve that no plaintiff, in any case, action, or writ aforesaid, ought to enter said action In said court thus declared to be unconstitutional. And we resolve, if the court shall sit in defiance to the voice of the county, and default actions, and issue executions accordingly, no Officer ought to serve such process. And we are also determined to support all constables, Jurors, and other officers, who from these constitutional principles shall refuse obedience to Courts which we have resolved are founded on the destruction of our charter.
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> 19. That it is the opinion of this body of delegates that a provincial congress is absolutely necessary in our present unhappy situation.
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> These are sentiments which we are obliged to express, as these acts are intended *immediately* to take place. We must now either oppose them, or tamely give up all we have been struggling for. It is this that has forced us so soon on these very important resolves. However, we do it with humble deference to the provincial and continental congress, by whose resolutions we are determined to abide; and to whom, and the world, we cheerfully appeal for the uprightness of our conduct. On the whole, these are 'great and profound questions.' We are grieved to find ourselves reduced to the necessity of entering into the discussion of them. But we deprecate a state of slavery. Our fathers left a fair inheritance to us, purchased by a waste of blood and treasure. This we Are resolved to transmit equally fair to our children after us. And if in support of our rights We are called to encounter even death, we are yet undaunted, sensible that he can never die too Soon, who lays down his life in support of the laws and liberties of his country.

The causes of the opposition to the mother country, and the then state of the controversy, are Clearly brought to view in these important proceedings. They were not mere paper resolves, To remain a dead letter, but were to be rules of *action*: and they were executed! The question On their acceptance, after being "maturely deliberated," was taken by yeas and nays; 146 were in favor, and 4 in opposition. An additional vote, recommending a "provincial meeting," to assemble in Concord, on the 1st Tuesday of October, was passed; and another, to transmit these proceedings to the several towns and to the Continental Congress. On the same day, a county convention was held in Worcester, and, nine days after, one in Suffolk, for similar objects.[1]

1. Lemuel Shattuck's 1835 A HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF CONCORD;.... Boston: Russell, Odiorne, and Company; Concord MA: John Stacy
   (On or about November 11, 1837 Henry Thoreau would indicate a familiarity with the contents of at least pages 2-3 and 6-9 of this historical study.)

1776

Colonel Charles Prescott would serve as the Lieutenant-Colonel of the 3d Regiment of militia under Colonel Elisha Jones, for 3 years during the Revolutionary War.

In Concord, Ephraim Wood, Nathan Merriam, and Nehemiah Hunt were Selectmen.

In Concord, Ephraim Wood was again Town Clerk.

In Concord, Abijah Bond was again Town Treasurer.

Joseph Hosmer and John Cuming were Concord's deputies and representatives to the General Court.

In Concord, Ephraim Wood was again Town Clerk.

In Concord, Abijah Bond was again Town Treasurer.

Colonel Roger Brown had purchased 4 acres of the old ironworks near Concord with water rights on the Assabet River and had founded a fulling mill, and in this year he hired a crew of workmen to extensively rebuild the old structure that would be his home.

OLD HOUSES

March: Private Charles Miles, the son of Captain Charles Miles and himself later a militia captain, served as a private in a Concord company stationed at Roxbury, blocking the British army's access to the mainland across Boston Neck.

Dr. John Cuming of Concord had evidently overcome his Royalist scruples — as he at this point became a member of the local Committee of Correspondence, Inspection and Safety.

> The committee of correspondence, etc., chosen March, 1776 [for Concord], were John Cuming, Esq., Ephraim Wood, Jr., Esq., Capt. Jonas Heywood, Capt. Joseph Hosmer, James Barrett, Esq., Capt. David Brown, and Capt. George Minot. In 1777, Colonel John Buttrick, Josiah Merriam, Isaac Hubbard, Capt. Abishai Brown, Capt. David Wheeler, Mr. Ephraim Potter, and Lieut. Nathan Stow. In 1778, John Cuming, Esq., Colonel John Buttrick, Ephraim Wood, Jr., Esq., Jonas Heywood, Esq., James Barrett, Esq., Capt. David Brown, and Mr. Josiah Merriam. These were re-elected in 1779, 1780, 1781 & 1782. In 1783, James Barrett, Esq., Jonas Heywood, Esq., Ephraim Wood, Jr., Esq., Capt. David Wood, and Lieut. Joseph Hayward. This committee was not chosen afterwards.[2]

AMERICAN REVOLUTION

2. Lemuel Shattuck's 1835 A HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF CONCORD;... Boston: Russell, Odiorne, and Company; Concord MA: John Stacy
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When Lord Howe's army evacuated Boston, the Rector of King's Chapel, Henry Caner, a Loyalist, needed to flee with the British troops (after the departure of his assistant a few months later, the Chapel would be closed for about a year). In addition, both the Lovells, loyalist father teacher of the Boston Latin School and patriot

son assistant teacher, would sail with the fleet to Halifax, Nova Scotia (the father as Howe's guest but the son as his prisoner). The son, the patriot James Lovell, would be exchanged and would become a delegate to the Continental Congress. The father, the loyalist John Lovell, would live out his life in Canada, dying at Halifax in 1778. Schoolmastering responsibilities were picked up by Samuel Hunt, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody's uncle, who would be Master there, with some difficulty, for 36 years. Out of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, five would have attended this school:

- John Hancock
- Samuel Adams
- Robert Treat Paine
- Benjamin Franklin
- William Hooper of North Carolina

1777

The records of the town of Lincoln, Massachusetts indicate that Jacob Lakin was born there during this year (this was presumably the cross-eyed man who would assist Henry Thoreau in his surveying, as a stake-driver, whom he mentions at several points in his journal).

Colonel Eleazer Brooks of Lincoln was appointed a Justice of the Peace.

Justices of the Peace of Lincoln[3]

Chambers Russell	Chambers Russell	William Hayden
James Russell	Samuel Hoar	Charles Wheeler
Charles Russell	Eleazer Brooks, Jr.	Elijah Fiske
Eleazer Brooks	Joshua Brooks	Stephen Patch
Joseph Adams	Grosvenor Tarbell	Joel Smith

3. Lemuel Shattuck's 1835 A HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF CONCORD;.... Boston: Russell, Odiorne, and Company; Concord MA: John Stacy
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In Concord, Ephraim Wood, Nathan Merriam, and Nehemiah Hunt were Selectmen.

In Concord, Ephraim Wood was again Town Clerk.

In Concord, Abijah Bond was again Town Treasurer.

Joseph Hosmer was Concord's deputy and representative to the General Court.

Amos Melvin (2) and others of Concord conveyed stores to the revolutionary forces in the vicinity of Boston, returning to Concord with the empty wagons.

THE MELVINS OF CONCORD
AMERICAN REVOLUTION

This was Concord's prison structure as depicted by John Wilson, Secretary to Sir Archibald Campbell:

Concord's revolutionary Committee of Correspondence, Inspection and Safety was renewed.

> The committee of correspondence, etc., chosen March, 1776 [for Concord], were John Cuming, Esq., Ephraim Wood, Jr., Esq., Capt. Jonas Heywood, Capt. Joseph Hosmer, James Barrett, Esq., Capt. David Brown, and Capt. George Minot. In 1777, Colonel John Buttrick, Josiah Merriam, Isaac Hubbard, Capt. Abishai Brown,

> Capt. David Wheeler, Mr. Ephraim Potter, and Lieut. Nathan Stow. In 1778, John Cuming, Esq., Colonel John Buttrick, Ephraim Wood, Jr., Esq., Jonas Heywood, Esq., James Barrett, Esq., Capt. David Brown, and Mr. Josiah Merriam. These were re-elected in 1779, 1780, 1781 & 1782. In 1783, James Barrett, Esq., Jonas Heywood, Esq., Ephraim Wood, Jr., Esq., Capt. David Wood, and Lieut. Joseph Hayward. This committee was not chosen afterwards.[4]

AMERICAN REVOLUTION

A committee also attempted to set prices:

> [A] committee, chosen by the town for the purpose, reported the prices of various kinds of "common labor, carpenters', cordwainers', blacksmiths' women's labor, firewood, charcoal, live swine, horse-hire, chaise-hire, upper leather, saddlery, entertainment at public houses, flax, spirits, milk, clothiers' work," etc. All who varied from the established prices were prosecuted and treated as enemies. Colonel John Buttrick was chosen to collect evidence against such as might be brought to trial. It does not appear, however, that any prosecutions took place in Concord.[5]

4. Lemuel Shattuck's 1835 A HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF CONCORD;.... Boston: Russell, Odiorne, and Company; Concord MA: John Stacy
(On or about November 11, 1837 Henry Thoreau would indicate a familiarity with the contents of at least pages 2-3 and 6-9 of this historical study.)

5. ibid

1778

March: Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Campbell, Member of the British Parliament, had sailed with his 400-man 71st Highland Regiment into Boston Harbor aboard 5 vessels, entirely unaware that the port had come under the control of the American rebels. He, his servants, and his staff had initially been quartered in Reading and allowed freedom of movement, but when news arrived that the captive Colonel Ethan Allen was being mistreated by the British, he was locked up in the wooden jail in Concord.

AMERICAN REVOLUTION

After a letter from General George Washington inquiring into conditions for this important prisoner, the Boston Council moved Campbell to a room in the jailer's tavern where he had a servant and was allowed to use the yard. Campbell had continued to protest that he needed to be in a pleasanter, better provisioned, more livable town than Concord. When he gave his word not to attempt to escape, he was allowed parole of Concord town limits. He was allowed to visit shops and homes, and was closely attended by Dr. Minot's daughter Mrs. Merrick. At the end of this month he was allowed to travel to New-York to be exchanged for Colonel Ethan Allen. He would regret that, by reason of the fortunes of war, his enforces residence at Concord had not been made less irksome.

> The town [Concord] voted, in March, 1778, to procure at an expense of 285 pounds, "shirts, shoes, and stockings, equal to the number of soldiers in the continental army, or the seventh part of the male inhabitants of the town [Concord] over 16 years of age:" 60 were assigned to Concord, 19 to Bedford, 28 to Acton, and 28 to Lincoln. Captain Joseph Hosmer was the receiver for the whole county.[6]

March 18, Wednesday: People were trying to kill each other at Quintan's Bridge, New Jersey.

AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Rufus Hosmer was born in Concord, son of the Hon. Joseph Hosmer.

6. Lemuel Shattuck's 1835 A HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF CONCORD;.... Boston: Russell, Odiorne, and Company; Concord MA: John Stacy
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1791

In Concord, Ephraim Wood, Asa Brooks, and Jacob Brown were Selectmen.

Joseph Hosmer of Concord was a Senator.

In Concord, Elnathan Jones was Town Treasurer.

Captain Duncan Ingraham had been Concord's deputy and representative to the General Court since 1788 but would at this point be succeeded by another.

John Merrick practiced law in Concord.

The town of Concord would no longer be appointing Wardens (these had been officers similar to Tythingmen).

A public stagecoach facility, that of John Vose & Company, began to operate out of Boston, passing through Concord.

> *Public Stages* were first run out of Boston into the country through Concord in 1791, by Messrs. John Vose & Co. There are now (1833), on an average, 40 stages which arrive and depart weekly, employing 60 horses between Boston and Groton, and carrying about 350 passengers; 150 have passed in one day.[7]
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> Since the Revolution new state-valuations have been taken, once in ten years, and that after the taking of the census. In these valuations various articles of personal property are required to be enumerated and described, not however uniformly alike. In

7. Lemuel Shattuck's 1835 A HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF CONCORD;.... Boston: Russell, Odiorne, and Company; Concord MA: John Stacy
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the following table some of the principal only are mentioned.[8]

Articles of Property.	In 1781.	In 1791.	In 1801.	In 1811.	In 1821.	In 1831.
Polls	326	340	390	390	435	489
Dwelling houses	193	188	227	224	235	253
Barns	174	142	184	183	203	225
Other buildings	——	——	64	79	265	125
Acres of tillage land	1188	1063	1112	1156	1137	1098
Acres of English Mowing	753	721	840	992	1205	1279
Acres of Meadow	2089	1827	2236	2131	2153	2111
Acres of Pasturing	3099	4398	3800	2982	3852	4059
Acres of Woodland	3878	4436	3635	3386	3262	2048
Acres Unimproved	——	——	1282	1732	1392	2833
Acres Unimproveable	——	——	384	——	395	612
Acres Used for roads	——	——	——	348	286	——
Acres of Water	——	——	——	515	695	——
Barrels of Cider	882	799	1376	1767	1079	——
Tons of English Hay	——	——	731	838	880	836
Tons of Meadow Hay	——	——	1434	1453	1270	1370
Bushels of Rye	——	——	4738	2942	3183	2327
Bushels of Corn	——	——	10505	10052	11375	11424
Bushels of Oats	——	——	1388	1463	2372	4129
Horses	137	146	182	179	145	177
Oxen	324	288	374	326	337	418
Cows	916	775	934	831	743	725
Swine	137	308	290	269	294	408
The total valuation, in 1801, was $20,322, in 1811, $24,554, in 1821, $25,860, and in 1831, $36,681·29.						

During this year, Concord's poor cost the town £185 to keep.

MAINTENANCE OF THE POOR.— This has long been an important item in

8. Ibid.

the expenses of the town. From the earliest town records it appears that they were supported by subscription, or by several individuals voluntarily agreeing to keep them, in rotation. The first poor-rate, £10, was raised in 1721. About 1753, a small alms-house was built, principally by subscription, where Dr. Bartlett now [1835] lives, and where part of the poor were kept for nearly 50 years. Five years prior to 1800 they were let out collectively by contract. They cost £185 in 1791, $936.50 in 1796, and $900 in 1801. In 1800, the selectmen were directed to put them out to the lowest bidder "either altogether, in lots, or singly." This auction usually took place immediately after the town meeting in May. This practice continued till 1821, when a contract was made to keep the poor together for $1,450; in 1824, for $1,200; and in 1827, for $1,150. Since then they have been supported in the pauper establishment belonging to the town.

The rent of the Cargill farm, after it came into possession of the town, was vested as a fund for the erection of an alms-house. In 1816, this fund amounted to $2,359 and the town raised the additional sum of $650 and commenced the erection of the proposed building. Just before it was completed, October 28, 1817 it was burnt. In 1827, the buildings on the farm were enlarged and repaired in their present [1835] form.

For all genuine objects of charity, the people of Concord have ever been ready to bestow their aid with generosity. In 1819 the town gave $200, and individuals $110 more, to the Lunatic Asylum, in connexion with the Massachusetts General Hospital.[9] This is one of many similar acts of benevolence, which might be mentioned.[10]

9. After acknowledging, in very complimentary terms, the receipt of this donation, James Prince, Esq., the treasurer, remarks, in a letter dated June 29, 1819;— "This act of liberality and compassion, the first which has been displayed towards the Asylum from our citizens in their corporate relation, affords additional pleasure from the circumstance, that it emanated from a town, whose citizens were enrolled in the front ranks of patriotism and valor, at a most interesting period of our national history; and the trustees cannot but hope, that the influence of their bright example will now, as it did then, stimulate to wise imitation other towns within the state, and thus essentially subserve those principles of philanthropy and charity which led to the establishment, and which must be continued to secure the continuance, of this interesting institution."

10. Ibid.

1794

March: From this point into 1808, Joseph Hosmer would be in Concord.

It had been 84 years since it had been supposed that St. Helena would be utterly ruined within a couple of decades if tree planting was unsuccessful. The trees had not been planted but the island was still in existence! — and the Court of Directors of the East India Company was still urging the Governor and Council to encourage tree planting as "of the utmost importance to the island." The Directors were encouraging tree planting to limit the effects of drought because, even in this early era, is was already understood that tree leaves attract moisture from the air which then drips to the ground.

1800

Sylvestre François Lacroix's *COMPLÉMENT DES ÉLÉMENS D'ALGÈBRE, A L'USAGE DE L'ÉCOLE CENTRALE DES QUATRE-NATIONS* (Paris: impr. Duprat) and *TRAITÉ DES DIFFÉRENCES ET DES SÉRIES; FAISANT SUITE AU TRAITÉ DU CALCUL DIFFÉRENTIEL ET DU CALCUL INTÉGRAL*.

It is possible that the Amos Baker who had married Ame Prescott in Concord in 1785 in this year remarried, with Eunice Dudley of Concord.

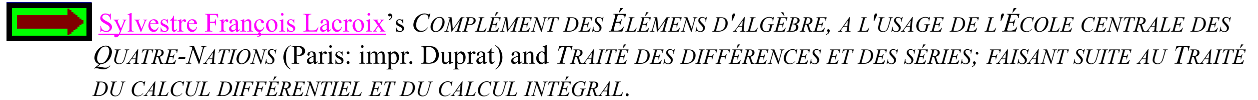
Nicholas Boylston, Esq. donated $23,200 to establish at Harvard College a professorship in Rhetoric and Oratory — with the condition that John Quincy Adams, son of the sitting President of the United States, be the first person appointed.

Timothy Flint graduated from Harvard. He would study to become a Reverend while teaching for one year at an academy in Cohasset, and delivering practice sermons at Marblehead, Massachusetts.

Washington Allston graduated from Harvard and moved to Charleston, South Carolina.

Rufus Hosmer of Concord, son of the Hon. Joseph Hosmer, graduated from Harvard.

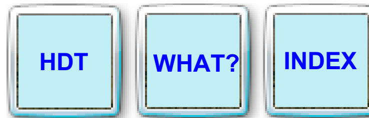
> Rufus Hosmer, son of the Hon. Joseph Hosmer, was born March 18, 1778 and grad. Harvard, 1800. He was admitted to the bar in Essex in 1803, and son after removed to Stow, where he resided as a counsellor at law.[11]



11. Lemuel Shattuck's 1835 A HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF CONCORD;.... Boston: Russell, Odiorne, and Company; Concord MA: John Stacy

Horace Rice Hosmer's eldest brother Joseph Hosmer, Jr., a schoolmate of the Thoreau brothers, was born. He would become a cordwainer (shoemaker).

"Thoreau was an enigma to all of us.
No one could place him."
— Joseph Hosmer



1845

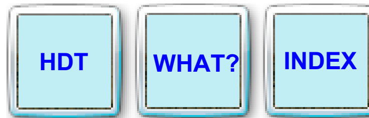
A Sunday in early September: Joseph Hosmer, Jr. related, long afterward, that “Early in September, 1845, (can it be so long,) on his [Henry Thoreau’s] invitation I spent a Sunday at his lake side retreat, as pure and delightful as with my mother. The building was not then finished, the chimney had no beginning — the sides were not battened, or the walls plastered.

EMERSON’S SHANTY
TIMELINE OF WALDEN

A 19th-Century Irish shanty in the Merrimack Valley

> *It stood in the open field, some thirty rods from the lake, and the "Devil's Bar," and in full view of it.... The entrance to the cellar was thro' a trap door in the center of the room. The king-post was an entire tree, extending from the bottom of the cellar to the ridge-pole, upon which we descended, as the sailors do into the hold of a vessel.... The cooking apparatus was primitive and consisted of a hole made in the earth and inlaid with stones, upon which the fire was made, after the manner at the sea-shore, when they have a clam-bake. When sufficiently hot remove the smoking embers and place on the fish, frog, etc. Our bill of fare included roasted horn pout, corn, beans, bread, salt, etc. Our viands were nature's own, "sparkling and bright." ... The beans had been previously cooked. The meal for our bread was mixed with lake water only, and when prepared it was spread upon the surface of a thin stone used for the purpose and baked, — (as illustrated.) ... When the bread had been sufficiently baked the stone was removed, then the fish placed over the hot stones and roasted — some in wet paper and some without- and when seasoned with salt, were delicious.*

George William Curtis and James Burrill Curtis were brothers who lived for a time on the Hosmer farm on Lincoln Road. They had helped Henry Thoreau build his shanty on Walden Pond and Thomas Blanding



suggests that they are likely candidates for the following tale from "The Village" in WALDEN:

WALDEN: Several times, when a visitor chanced to stay into the evening, and it proved a dark night, I was obliged to conduct him to the cart-path in the rear of the house, and then point out to him the direction he was to pursue, and in keeping which he was to be guided rather by his feet than his eyes. One very dark night I directed thus on their way two young men who had been fishing in the pond. They lived about a mile off through the woods, and were quite used to the route. A day or two after one of them told me that they wandered about the greater part of the night, close by their own premises, and did not get home till toward morning, by which time, as there had been several heavy showers in the mean while, and the leaves were very wet, they were drenched to their skins. I have heard of many going astray even in the village streets, when the darkness was so thick that you could cut it with a knife, as the saying is. Some who live in the outskirts, having come to town a-shopping in their wagons, have been obliged to put up for the night; and gentlemen and ladies making a call have gone half a mile out of their way, feeling the sidewalk only with their feet, and not knowing when they turned. It is a surprising and memorable, as well as valuable experience, to be lost in the woods any time.

PEOPLE OF WALDEN

JAMES BURRILL CURTIS
GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS

Since George William Curtis has related a similar incident, it seems likely that he was the companion mentioned in "The Ponds":

WALDEN: In warm evenings I frequently sat in the boat playing the flute, and saw the perch, which I seemed to have charmed, hovering around me, and the moon travelling over the ribbed bottom, which was strewed with the wrecks of the forest. Formerly I had come to this pond adventurously, from time to time, in dark summer nights, with a companion, and making a fire close to the water's edge, which we thought attracted the fishes, we caught pouts with a bunch of worms strung on a thread; and when we had done, far in the night, threw the burning brands high into the air like skyrockets, which, coming down into the pond, were quenched with a loud hissing, and we were suddenly groping in total darkness. Through this, whistling a tune, we took our way to the haunts of men again. But now I had made my home by the shore.

However, Thoreau's friend George would later remember this as having happened, not at the pond, but on the Concord River.

During a heavy thundershower either of the spring or of the fall (Thoreau does not specify which),

> WALDEN: In one heavy thunder shower the lightning struck a large pitch-pine across the pond, making a very conspicuous and perfectly regular spiral groove from top to bottom, an inch or more deep, and four or five inches wide, as you would groove a walking-stick. I passed it again the other day, and was struck with awe on looking up and beholding that mark, now more distinct than ever, where a terrific and resistless bolt came down out of the harmless sky eight years ago.

1880

June: Robert Louis Stevenson assailed WALDEN, and the character of Henry Thoreau, in the pages of the Cornhill Magazine (later, confronted in a polite manner by Thoreau biographer Alexander Hay Japp, he would entirely reappraise and withdraw his caustic comments, and attempt to apologize for the Fake News upon which his poorly researched article had unfortunately relied, Fake News his article would indefinitely perpetuate).

Thoreau's Worth, to Publishers

Cumulative sales of WALDEN	3,695
Cumulative sales of CAPE	3,525
Cumulative sales of WOODS	3,263

Henry David Thoreau: His Character and Opinions

I.

Thoreau's thin, penetrating, big-nosed face, even in a bad woodcut, conveys some hint of the limitations of his mind and character. With his almost acid sharpness of insight, with his almost animal dexterity in act, there went none of that large, unconscious geniality of the world's heroes. He was not easy, not ample, not urbane, not even kind; his enjoyment was hardly smiling, or the smile was not broad enough to be convincing; he had no waste lands nor kitchen-midden in his nature, but was all improved and sharpened to a point. "He was bred to no profession," says Emerson; "he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the State; he ate no flesh, he drank no wine, he never knew the use of tobacco and, though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun. When asked at dinner what dish he preferred, he answered, 'the nearest.'" So many negative superiorities begin to smack a little of the prig. From his later works he was in the habit of cutting out the humorous passages, under the impression that they were beneath the dignity of his moral muse; and there we see the prig stand public and confessed. It was "much easier," says Emerson acutely, much easier for Thoreau to say NO than YES; and that is a characteristic which depicts the man. It is a useful accomplishment to be able to say NO, but surely it is the essence of amiability to prefer to say YES where it is possible. There is something wanting in the man who does not hate himself whenever he is constrained to say no. And there was a great deal wanting in this born dissenter. He was almost shockingly devoid of weaknesses; he had not enough of them to be truly polar with humanity; whether you call him demi-god or demi-man, he was at least not altogether one of us, for he was not touched with a feeling of our infirmities. The world's

heroes have room for all positive qualities, even those which are disreputable, in the capacious theatre of their dispositions. Such can live many lives; while a Thoreau can live but one, and that only with perpetual foresight.
He was no ascetic, rather an Epicurean of the nobler sort; and he had this one great merit, that he succeeded so far as to be happy. "I love my fate to the core and rind," he wrote once; and even while he lay dying, here is what he dictated (for it seems he was already too feeble to control the pen): "You ask particularly after my health. I SUPPOSE that I have not many months to live, but of course know nothing about it. I may say that I am enjoying existence as much as ever, and regret nothing." It is not given to all to bear so clear a testimony to the sweetness of their fate, nor to any without courage and wisdom; for this world in itself is but a painful and uneasy place of residence, and lasting happiness, at least to the self-conscious, comes only from within. Now Thoreau's content and ecstasy in living was, we may say, like a plant that he had watered and tended with womanish solicitude; for there is apt to be something unmanly, something almost dastardly, in a life that does not move with dash and freedom, and that fears the bracing contact of the world. In one word, Thoreau was a skulker. He did not wish virtue to go out of him among his fellow-men, but slunk into a corner to hoard it for himself. He left all for the sake of certain virtuous self-indulgences. It is true that his tastes were noble; that his ruling passion was to keep himself unspotted from the world; and that his luxuries were all of the same healthy order as cold tubs and early rising. But a man may be both coldly cruel in the pursuit of goodness, and morbid even in the pursuit of health. I cannot lay my hands on the passage in which he explains his abstinence from tea and coffee, but I am sure I have the meaning correctly. It is this; He thought it bad economy and worthy of no true virtuoso to spoil the natural rapture of the morning with such muddy stimulants; let him but see the sun rise, and he was already sufficiently inspirited for the labours of the day. That may be reason good enough to abstain from tea; but when we go on to find the same man, on the same or similar grounds, abstain from nearly everything that his neighbours innocently and pleasurably use, and from the rubs and trials of human society itself into the bargain, we recognise that valetudinarian healthfulness which is more delicate than sickness itself. We need have no respect for a state of artificial training. True health is to be able to do without it. Shakespeare, we can imagine, might begin the day upon a quart of ale, and yet enjoy the sunrise to the full as much as Thoreau, and commemorate his enjoyment in vastly better verses. A man who must separate himself from his neighbours' habits in order to be happy, is in much the same case with one who requires to take opium for the same purpose. What we want to see is one who can breast into the world, do a man's work, and still preserve his first and pure enjoyment of existence.

Thoreau's faculties were of a piece with his moral shyness; for they were all delicacies. He could guide himself about the woods on the darkest night by the touch of his feet. He could pick up at once an exact dozen of pencils by the feeling, pace distances with accuracy, and gauge cubic contents by the eye. His smell was so dainty that he could perceive the foetor of dwelling-houses as he passed them by at night; his palate so unsophisticated that, like a child, he disliked the taste of wine - or perhaps, living in America, had never tasted any that was good; and his knowledge of nature was so complete and curious that he could have told the time of year, within a day or so, by the aspect of the plants. In his dealings with animals, he was the original of Hawthorne's Donatello. He pulled the woodchuck out of its hole by the tail; the hunted fox came to him for protection; wild squirrels have been seen to nestle in his waistcoat; he would thrust his arm into a pool and bring forth a bright, panting fish, lying undismayed in the palm of his hand. There were few things that he could not do. He could make a house, a boat, a pencil, or a book. He was a surveyor, a scholar, a natural historian. He could run, walk, climb, skate, swim, and manage a boat. The smallest occasion served to display his physical accomplishment; and a manufacturer, from merely observing his dexterity with the window of a railway carriage, offered him a situation on the spot. "The only fruit of much living," he observes, "is the ability to do some slight thing better." But such was the exactitude of his senses, so alive was he in every fibre, that it seems as if the maxim should be changed in his case, for he could do most things with unusual perfection. And perhaps he had an approving eye to himself when he wrote: "Though the youth at last grows indifferent, the laws of the universe are not indifferent, BUT ARE FOR EVER ON THE SIDE OF THE MOST SENSITIVE."

II.

Thoreau had decided, it would seem, from the very first to lead a life of self-improvement: the needle did not tremble as with richer natures, but pointed steadily north; and as he saw duty and inclination in one, he turned all his strength in that direction. He was met upon the threshold by a common difficulty. In this world, in spite of its many agreeable features, even the most sensitive must undergo some drudgery to live. It is not possible to devote your time to study and meditation without what are quaintly but happily denominated private means; these absent, a man must contrive to earn his bread by some service to the public such as the public cares to pay him for; or, as Thoreau loved to put it, Apollo must serve Admetus. This was to Thoreau even a sourer necessity than it is to most; there was a love of freedom, a strain of the wild man, in his nature, that rebelled with violence against the yoke of custom; and he was so eager to cultivate himself and to be happy in his own society, that he could consent with difficulty even to the interruptions of friendship. "SUCH ARE MY ENGAGEMENTS TO MYSELF that I dare

not promise," he once wrote in answer to an invitation; and the italics are his own. Marcus Aurelius found time to study virtue, and between whiles to conduct the imperial affairs of Rome; but Thoreau is so busy improving himself, that he must think twice about a morning call. And now imagine him condemned for eight hours a day to some uncongenial and unmeaning business! He shrank from the very look of the mechanical in life; all should, if possible, be sweetly spontaneous and swimmingly progressive. Thus he learned to make lead-pencils, and, when he had gained the best certificate and his friends began to congratulate him on his establishment in life, calmly announced that he should never make another. "Why should I?" said he "I would not do again what I have done once." For when a thing has once been done as well as it wants to be, it is of no further interest to the self-improver. Yet in after years, and when it became needful to support his family, he returned patiently to this mechanical art - a step more than worthy of himself.

The pencils seem to have been Apollo's first experiment in the service of Admetus; but others followed. "I have thoroughly tried school-keeping," he writes, "and found that my expenses were in proportion, or rather out of proportion, to my income; for I was obliged to dress and train, not to say think and believe, accordingly, and I lost my time into the bargain. As I did not teach for the benefit of my fellow-men, but simply for a livelihood, this was a failure. I have tried trade, but I found that it would take ten years to get under way in that, and that then I should probably be on my way to the devil." Nothing, indeed, can surpass his scorn for all so-called business. Upon that subject gall squirts from him at a touch. "The whole enterprise of this nation is not illustrated by a thought," he writes; "it is not warmed by a sentiment; there is nothing in it for which a man should lay down his life, nor even his gloves." And again: "If our merchants did not most of them fail, and the banks too, my faith in the old laws of this world would be staggered. The statement that ninety-six in a hundred doing such business surely break down is perhaps the sweetest fact that statistics have revealed." The wish was probably father to the figures; but there is something enlivening in a hatred of so genuine a brand, hot as Corsican revenge, and sneering like Voltaire.

Pencils, school-keeping, and trade being thus discarded one after another, Thoreau, with a stroke of strategy, turned the position. He saw his way to get his board and lodging for practically nothing; and Admetus never got less work out of any servant since the world began. It was his ambition to be an oriental philosopher; but he was always a very Yankee sort of oriental. Even in the peculiar attitude in which he stood to money, his system of personal economics, as we may call it, he displayed a vast amount of truly down-East calculation, and he adopted poverty like a piece of business. Yet his system is based on one or two ideas which, I believe, come naturally to all thoughtful youths, and are only pounded out of them by city

uncles. Indeed, something essentially youthful distinguishes all Thoreau's knock-down blows at current opinion. Like the posers of a child, they leave the orthodox in a kind of speechless agony. These know the thing is nonsense. They are sure there must be an answer, yet somehow cannot find it. So it is with his system of economy. He cuts through the subject on so new a plane that the accepted arguments apply no longer; he attacks it in a new dialect where there are no catchwords ready made for the defender; after you have been boxing for years on a polite, gladiatorial convention, here is an assailant who does not scruple to hit below the belt.

"The cost of a thing," says he, "is THE AMOUNT OF WHAT I WILL CALL LIFE which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run." I have been accustomed to put it to myself, perhaps more clearly, that the price we have to pay for money is paid in liberty. Between these two ways of it, at least, the reader will probably not fail to find a third definition of his own; and it follows, on one or other, that a man may pay too dearly for his livelihood, by giving, in Thoreau's terms, his whole life for it, or, in mine, bartering for it the whole of his available liberty, and becoming a slave till death. There are two questions to be considered - the quality of what we buy, and the price we have to pay for it. Do you want a thousand a year, a two thousand a year, or a ten thousand a year livelihood? and can you afford the one you want? It is a matter of taste; it is not in the least degree a question of duty, though commonly supposed so. But there is no authority for that view anywhere. It is nowhere in the Bible. It is true that we might do a vast amount of good if we were wealthy, but it is also highly improbable; not many do; and the art of growing rich is not only quite distinct from that of doing good, but the practice of the one does not at all train a man for practising the other. "Money might be of great service to me," writes Thoreau; "but the difficulty now is that I do not improve my opportunities, and therefore I am not prepared to have my opportunities increased." It is a mere illusion that, above a certain income, the personal desires will be satisfied and leave a wider margin for the generous impulse. It is as difficult to be generous, or anything else, except perhaps a member of Parliament, on thirty thousand as on two hundred a year.

Now Thoreau's tastes were well defined. He loved to be free, to be master of his times and seasons, to indulge the mind rather than the body; he preferred long rambles to rich dinners, his own reflections to the consideration of society, and an easy, calm, unfettered, active life among green trees to dull toiling at the counter of a bank. And such being his inclination he determined to gratify it. A poor man must save off something; he determined to save off his livelihood. "When a man has attained those things which are necessary to life," he writes, "there is another alternative than to obtain the superfluities; HE MAY ADVENTURE ON LIFE NOW, his vacation from humbler toil having commenced." Thoreau would get shelter, some kind of

covering for his body, and necessary daily bread; even these he should get as cheaply as possible; and then, his vacation from humbler toil having commenced, devote himself to oriental philosophers, the study of nature, and the work of self-improvement.

Prudence, which bids us all go to the ant for wisdom and hoard against the day of sickness, was not a favourite with Thoreau. He preferred that other, whose name is so much misappropriated: Faith. When he had secured the necessaries of the moment, he would not reckon up possible accidents or torment himself with trouble for the future. He had no toleration for the man "who ventures to live only by the aid of the mutual insurance company, which has promised to bury him decently." He would trust himself a little to the world. "We may safely trust a good deal more than we do," says he. "How much is not done by us! or what if we had been taken sick?" And then, with a stab of satire, he describes contemporary mankind in a phrase: "All the day long on the alert, at night we unwillingly say our prayers and commit ourselves to uncertainties." It is not likely that the public will be much affected by Thoreau, when they blink the direct injunctions of the religion they profess; and yet, whether we will or no, we make the same hazardous ventures; we back our own health and the honesty of our neighbours for all that we are worth; and it is chilling to think how many must lose their wager.

In 1845, twenty-eight years old, an age by which the liveliest have usually declined into some conformity with the world, Thoreau, with a capital of something less than five pounds and a borrowed axe, walked forth into the woods by Walden Pond, and began his new experiment in life. He built himself a dwelling, and returned the axe, he says with characteristic and workman-like pride, sharper than when he borrowed it; he reclaimed a patch, where he cultivated beans, peas, potatoes, and sweet corn; he had his bread to bake, his farm to dig, and for the matter of six weeks in the summer he worked at surveying, carpentry, or some other of his numerous dexterities, for hire. For more than five years, this was all that he required to do for his support, and he had the winter and most of the summer at his entire disposal. For six weeks of occupation, a little cooking and a little gentle hygienic gardening, the man, you may say, had as good as stolen his livelihood. Or we must rather allow that he had done far better; for the thief himself is continually and busily occupied; and even one born to inherit a million will have more calls upon his time than Thoreau. Well might he say, "What old people tell you you cannot do, you try and find you can." And how surprising is his conclusion: "I am convinced that TO MAINTAIN ONESELF ON THIS EARTH IS NOT A HARDSHIP, BUT A PASTIME, if we will live simply and wisely; AS THE PURSUITS OF SIMPLER NATIONS ARE STILL THE SPORTS OF THE MORE ARTIFICIAL."

When he had enough of that kind of life, he showed the same simplicity in giving it up as in beginning it. There are some

who could have done the one, but, vanity forbidding, not the other; and that is perhaps the story of the hermits; but Thoreau made no fetish of his own example, and did what he wanted squarely. And five years is long enough for an experiment and to prove the success of transcendental Yankeeism. It is not his frugality which is worthy of note; for, to begin with, that was inborn, and therefore inimitable by others who are differently constituted; and again, it was no new thing, but has often been equalled by poor Scotch students at the universities. The point is the sanity of his view of life, and the insight with which he recognised the position of money, and thought out for himself the problem of riches and a livelihood. Apart from his eccentricities, he had perceived, and was acting on, a truth of universal application. For money enters in two different characters into the scheme of life. A certain amount, varying with the number and empire of our desires, is a true necessary to each one of us in the present order of society; but beyond that amount, money is a commodity to be bought or not to be bought, a luxury in which we may either indulge or stint ourselves, like any other. And there are many luxuries that we may legitimately prefer to it, such as a grateful conscience, a country life, or the woman of our inclination. Trite, flat, and obvious as this conclusion may appear, we have only to look round us in society to see how scantily it has been recognised; and perhaps even ourselves, after a little reflection, may decide to spend a trifle less for money, and indulge ourselves a trifle more in the article of freedom.

III.

"To have done anything by which you earned money merely," says Thoreau, "is to be" (have been, he means) "idle and worse." There are two passages in his letters, both, oddly enough, relating to firewood, which must be brought together to be rightly understood. So taken, they contain between them the marrow of all good sense on the subject of work in its relation to something broader than mere livelihood. Here is the first: "I suppose I have burned up a good-sized tree to-night - and for what? I settled with Mr. Tarbell for it the other day; but that wasn't the final settlement. I got off cheaply from him. At last one will say: 'Let us see, how much wood did you burn, sir?' And I shall shudder to think that the next question will be, 'What did you do while you were warm?'" Even after we have settled with Admetus in the person of Mr. Tarbell, there comes, you see, a further question. It is not enough to have earned our livelihood. Either the earning itself should have been serviceable to mankind, or something else must follow. To live is sometimes very difficult, but it is never meritorious in itself; and we must have a reason to allege to our own conscience why we should continue to exist upon this crowded earth.

If Thoreau had simply dwelt in his house at Walden, a lover of trees, birds, and fishes, and the open air and virtue, a reader of wise books, an idle, selfish self-improver, he would have

managed to cheat Admetus, but, to cling to metaphor, the devil would have had him in the end. Those who can avoid toil altogether and dwell in the Arcadia of private means, and even those who can, by abstinence, reduce the necessary amount of it to some six weeks a year, having the more liberty, have only the higher moral obligation to be up and doing in the interest of man.

The second passage is this: "There is a far more important and warming heat, commonly lost, which precedes the burning of the wood. It is the smoke of industry, which is incense. I had been so thoroughly warmed in body and spirit, that when at length my fuel was housed, I came near selling it to the ashman, as if I had extracted all its heat." Industry is, in itself and when properly chosen, delightful and profitable to the worker; and when your toil has been a pleasure, you have not, as Thoreau says, "earned money merely," but money, health, delight, and moral profit, all in one. "We must heap up a great pile of doing for a small diameter of being," he says in another place; and then exclaims, "How admirably the artist is made to accomplish his self-culture by devotion to his art!" We may escape uncongenial toil, only to devote ourselves to that which is congenial. It is only to transact some higher business that even Apollo dare play the truant from Admetus. We must all work for the sake of work; we must all work, as Thoreau says again, in any "absorbing pursuit - it does not much matter what, so it be honest;" but the most profitable work is that which combines into one continued effort the largest proportion of the powers and desires of a man's nature; that into which he will plunge with ardour, and from which he will desist with reluctance; in which he will know the weariness of fatigue, but not that of satiety; and which will be ever fresh, pleasing, and stimulating to his taste. Such work holds a man together, braced at all points; it does not suffer him to doze or wander; it keeps him actively conscious of himself, yet raised among superior interests; it gives him the profit of industry with the pleasures of a pastime. This is what his art should be to the true artist, and that to a degree unknown in other and less intimate pursuits. For other professions stand apart from the human business of life; but an art has its seat at the centre of the artist's doings and sufferings, deals directly with his experiences, teaches him the lessons of his own fortunes and mishaps, and becomes a part of his biography. So says Goethe:

> "Spat erklingt was fruh erklang;
> Gluck und Ungluck wird Gesang."

Now Thoreau's art was literature; and it was one of which he had conceived most ambitiously. He loved and believed in good books. He said well, "Life is not habitually seen from any common platform so truly and unexaggerated as in the light of literature." But the literature he loved was of the heroic order. "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, which even make us dangerous to existing institutions - such I call good books." He did not think them easy to be read. "The heroic books," he says, "even if printed in the character of our mother-tongue, will always be in a language dead to degenerate times; and we must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valour and generosity we have." Nor does he suppose that such books are easily written. "Great prose, of equal elevation, commands our respect more than great verse," says he, "since it implies a more permanent and level height, a life more pervaded with the grandeur of the thought. The poet often only makes an irruption, like the Parthian, and is off again, shooting while he retreats; but the prose writer has conquered like a Roman and settled colonies." We may ask ourselves, almost with dismay, whether such works exist at all but in the imagination of the student. For the bulk of the best of books is apt to be made up with ballast; and those in which energy of thought is combined with any stateliness of utterance may be almost counted on the fingers. Looking round in English for a book that should answer Thoreau's two demands of a style like poetry and sense that shall be both original and inspiriting, I come to Milton's AREOPAGITICA, and can name no other instance for the moment. Two things at least are plain: that if a man will condescend to nothing more commonplace in the way of reading, he must not look to have a large library; and that if he proposes himself to write in a similar vein, he will find his work cut out for him.

Thoreau composed seemingly while he walked, or at least exercise and composition were with him intimately connected; for we are told that "the length of his walk uniformly made the length of his writing." He speaks in one place of "plainness and vigour, the ornaments of style," which is rather too paradoxical to be comprehensively, true.

In another he remarks: "As for style of writing, if one has anything to say it drops from him simply as a stone falls to the ground." We must conjecture a very large sense indeed for the phrase "if one has anything to say." When truth flows from a man, fittingly clothed in style and without conscious effort, it is because the effort has been made and the work practically completed before he sat down to write. It is only out of fulness of thinking that expression drops perfect like a ripe fruit; and when Thoreau wrote so nonchalantly at his desk, it was because he had been vigorously active during his walk. For neither clearness compression, nor beauty of language, come to any living creature till after a busy and a prolonged acquaintance with the subject on hand. Easy writers are those who, like Walter Scott, choose to remain contented with a less degree of perfection than is legitimately within the compass of their powers. We hear of Shakespeare and his clean manuscript; but in face of the evidence of the style itself and of the various

editions of HAMLET, this merely proves that Messrs. Hemming and Condell were unacquainted with the common enough phenomenon called a fair copy. He who would recast a tragedy already given to the world must frequently and earnestly have revised details in the study. Thoreau himself, and in spite of his protestations, is an instance of even extreme research in one direction; and his effort after heroic utterance is proved not only by the occasional finish, but by the determined exaggeration of his style. "I trust you realise what an exaggerator I am - that I lay myself out to exaggerate," he writes. And again, hinting at the explanation: "Who that has heard a strain of music feared lest he should speak extravagantly any more for ever?" And yet once more, in his essay on Carlyle, and this time with his meaning well in hand: "No truth, we think, was ever expressed but with this sort of emphasis, that for the time there seemed to be no other." Thus Thoreau was an exaggerative and a parabolical writer, not because he loved the literature of the East, but from a desire that people should understand and realise what he was writing. He was near the truth upon the general question; but in his own particular method, it appears to me, he wandered. Literature is not less a conventional art than painting or sculpture; and it is the least striking, as it is the most comprehensive of the three. To hear a strain of music to see a beautiful woman, a river, a great city, or a starry night, is to make a man despair of his Lilliputian arts in language. Now, to gain that emphasis which seems denied to us by the very nature of the medium, the proper method of literature is by selection, which is a kind of negative exaggeration. It is the right of the literary artist, as Thoreau was on the point of seeing, to leave out whatever does not suit his purpose. Thus we extract the pure gold; and thus the well-written story of a noble life becomes, by its very omissions, more thrilling to the reader. But to go beyond this, like Thoreau, and to exaggerate directly, is to leave the saner classical tradition, and to put the reader on his guard. And when you write the whole for the half, you do not express your thought more forcibly, but only express a different thought which is not yours.

Thoreau's true subject was the pursuit of self-improvement combined with an unfriendly criticism of life as it goes on in our societies; it is there that he best displays the freshness and surprising trenchancy of his intellect; it is there that his style becomes plain and vigorous, and therefore, according to his own formula, ornamental. Yet he did not care to follow this vein singly, but must drop into it by the way in books of a different purport. WALDEN, OR LIFE IN THE WOODS, A WEEK ON THE CONCORD AND MERRIMACK RIVERS, THE MAINE WOODS, - such are the titles he affects. He was probably reminded by his delicate critical perception that the true business of literature is with narrative; in reasoned narrative, and there alone, that art enjoys all its advantages, and suffers least from its defects. Dry precept and disembodied disquisition, as they can only be

read with an effort of abstraction, can never convey a perfectly complete or a perfectly natural impression. Truth, even in literature, must be clothed with flesh and blood, or it cannot tell its whole story to the reader. Hence the effect of anecdote on simple minds; and hence good biographies and works of high, imaginative art, are not only far more entertaining, but far more edifying, than books of theory or precept. Now Thoreau could not clothe his opinions in the garment of art, for that was not his talent; but he sought to gain the same elbow-room for himself, and to afford a similar relief to his readers, by mingling his thoughts with a record of experience.

Again, he was a lover of nature. The quality which we should call mystery in a painting, and which belongs so particularly to the aspect of the external world and to its influence upon our feelings, was one which he was never weary of attempting to reproduce in his books. The seeming significance of nature's appearances, their unchanging strangeness to the senses, and the thrilling response which they waken in the mind of man, continued to surprise and stimulate his spirits. It appeared to him, I think, that if we could only write near enough to the facts, and yet with no pedestrian calm, but ardently, we might transfer the glamour of reality direct upon our pages; and that, if it were once thus captured and expressed, a new and instructive relation might appear between men's thoughts and the phenomena of nature. This was the eagle that he pursued all his life long, like a schoolboy with a butterfly net. Hear him to a friend: "Let me suggest a theme for you — to state to yourself precisely and completely what that walk over the mountains amounted to for you, returning to this essay again and again until you are satisfied that all that was important in your experience is in it. Don't suppose that you can tell it precisely the first dozen times you try, but at 'em again; especially when, after a sufficient pause you suspect that you are touching the heart or summit of the matter, reiterate your blows there, and account for the mountain to yourself. Not that the story need be long, but it will take a long while to make it short." Such was the method, not consistent for a man whose meanings were to "drop from him as a stone falls to the ground." Perhaps the most successful work that Thoreau ever accomplished in this direction is to be found in the passages relating to fish in the WEEK. These are remarkable for a vivid truth of impression and a happy suitability of language, not frequently surpassed.

Whatever Thoreau tried to do was tried in fair, square prose, with sentences solidly built, and no help from bastard rhythms. Moreover, there is a progression - I cannot call it a progress - in his work towards a more and more strictly prosaic level, until at last he sinks into the bathos of the prosy. Emerson mentions having once remarked to Thoreau: "Who would not like to write something which all can read, like ROBINSON CRUSOE? and who does not see with regret that his page is not solid with a right materialistic treatment which delights everybody?" I must say in passing that it is not the right materialistic treatment

which delights the world in ROBINSON, but the romantic and philosophic interest of the fable. The same treatment does quite the reverse of delighting us when it is applied, in COLONEL JACK, to the management of a plantation. But I cannot help suspecting Thoreau to have been influenced either by this identical remark or by some other closely similar in meaning. He began to fall more and more into a detailed materialistic treatment; he went into the business doggedly, as one who should make a guide-book; he not only chronicled what had been important in his own experience, but whatever might have been important in the experience of anybody else; not only what had affected him, but all that he saw or heard. His ardour had grown less, or perhaps it was inconsistent with a right materialistic treatment to display such emotions as he felt; and, to complete the eventful change, he chose, from a sense of moral dignity, to gut these later works of the saving quality of humour. He was not one of those authors who have learned, in his own words, "to leave out their dulness." He inflicts his full quantity upon the reader in such books as CAPE COD, or THE YANKEE IN CANADA. Of the latter he confessed that he had not managed to get much of himself into it. Heaven knows he had not, nor yet much of Canada, we may hope. "Nothing," he says somewhere, "can shock a brave man but dulness." Well, there are few spots more shocking to the brave than the pages of YANKEE IN CANADA.

There are but three books of his that will be read with much pleasure: the WEEK, WALDEN, and the collected letters. As to his poetry, Emerson's word shall suffice for us, it is so accurate and so prettily said: "The thyme and majoram are not yet honey." In this, as in his prose, he relied greatly on the goodwill of the reader, and wrote throughout in faith. It was an exercise of faith to suppose that many would understand the sense of his best work, or that any could be exhilarated by the dreary chronicling of his worst. "But," as he says, "the gods do not hear any rude or discordant sound, as we learn from the echo; and I know that the nature towards which I launch these sounds is so rich that it will modulate anew and wonderfully improve my rudest strain."

IV.

"What means the fact," he cries, "that a soul which has lost all hope for itself can inspire in another listening soul such an infinite confidence in it, even while it is expressing its despair?" The question is an echo and an illustration of the words last quoted; and it forms the key- note of his thoughts on friendship. No one else, to my knowledge, has spoken in so high and just a spirit of the kindly relations; and I doubt whether it be a drawback that these lessons should come from one in many ways so unfitted to be a teacher in this branch. The very coldness and egoism of his own intercourse gave him a clearer insight into the intellectual basis of our warm, mutual tolerations; and testimony to their worth comes with added force from one who was solitary and obliging, and of whom a friend

remarked, with equal wit and wisdom, "I love Henry, but I cannot like him."

He can hardly be persuaded to make any distinction between love and friendship; in such rarefied and freezing air, upon the mountain-tops of meditation, had he taught himself to breathe. He was, indeed, too accurate an observer not to have remarked that "there exists already a natural disinterestedness and liberality" between men and women; yet, he thought, "friendship is no respecter of sex." Perhaps there is a sense in which the words are true; but they were spoken in ignorance; and perhaps we shall have put the matter most correctly, if we call love a foundation for a nearer and freer degree of friendship than can be possible without it. For there are delicacies, eternal between persons of the same sex, which are melted and disappear in the warmth of love.

To both, if they are to be right, he attributes the same nature and condition. "We are not what we are," says he, "nor do we treat or esteem each other for such, but for what we are capable of being." "A friend is one who incessantly pays us the compliment of expecting all the virtues from us, and who can appreciate them in us." "The friend asks no return but that his friend will religiously accept and wear and not disgrace his apotheosis of him." "It is the merit and preservation of friendship that it takes place on a level higher than the actual characters of the parties would seem to warrant." This is to put friendship on a pedestal indeed; and yet the root of the matter is there; and the last sentence, in particular, is like a light in a dark place, and makes many mysteries plain. We are different with different friends; yet if we look closely we shall find that every such relation reposes on some particular apotheosis of oneself; with each friend, although we could not distinguish it in words from any other, we have at least one special reputation to preserve: and it is thus that we run, when mortified, to our friend or the woman that we love, not to hear ourselves called better, but to be better men in point of fact. We seek this society to flatter ourselves with our own good conduct. And hence any falsehood in the relation, any incomplete or perverted understanding, will spoil even the pleasure of these visits. Thus says Thoreau again: "Only lovers know the value of truth." And yet again: "They ask for words and deeds, when a true relation is word and deed."

But it follows that since they are neither of them so good as the other hopes, and each is, in a very honest manner, playing a part above his powers, such an intercourse must often be disappointing to both. "We may bid farewell sooner than complain," says Thoreau, "for our complaint is too well grounded to be uttered." "We have not so good a right to hate any as our friend."

> "It were treason to our love
> And a sin to God above,
> One iota to abate

Of a pure, impartial hate."

Love is not blind, nor yet forgiving. "O yes, believe me," as the song says, "Love has eyes!" The nearer the intimacy, the more cuttingly do we feel the unworthiness of those we love; and because you love one, and would die for that love to-morrow, you have not forgiven, and you never will forgive, that friend's misconduct. If you want a person's faults, go to those who love him. They will not tell you, but they know. And herein lies the magnanimous courage of love, that it endures this knowledge without change.

It required a cold, distant personality like that of Thoreau, perhaps, to recognise and certainly to utter this truth; for a more human love makes it a point of honour not to acknowledge those faults of which it is most conscious. But his point of view is both high and dry. He has no illusions; he does not give way to love any more than to hatred, but preserves them both with care like valuable curiosities. A more bald-headed picture of life, if I may so express myself, has seldom been presented. He is an egoist; he does not remember, or does not think it worth while to remark, that, in these near intimacies, we are ninety-nine times disappointed in our beggarly selves for once that we are disappointed in our friend; that it is we who seem most frequently undeserving of the love that unites us; and that it is by our friend's conduct that we are continually rebuked and yet strengthened for a fresh endeavour. Thoreau is dry, priggish, and selfish. It is profit he is after in these intimacies; moral profit, certainly, but still profit to himself. If you will be the sort of friend I want, he remarks naively, "my education cannot dispense with your society." His education! as though a friend were a dictionary. And with all this, not one word about pleasure, or laughter, or kisses, or any quality of flesh and blood. It was not inappropriate, surely, that he had such close relations with the fish. We can understand the friend already quoted, when he cried: "As for taking his arm, I would as soon think of taking the arm of an elm-tree!"

As a matter of fact he experienced but a broken enjoyment in his intimacies. He says he has been perpetually on the brink of the sort of intercourse he wanted, and yet never completely attained it. And what else had he to expect when he would not, in a happy phrase of Carlyle's, "nestle down into it"? Truly, so it will be always if you only stroll in upon your friends as you might stroll in to see a cricket match; and even then not simply for the pleasure of the thing, but with some afterthought of self-improvement, as though you had come to the cricket match to bet. It was his theory that people saw each other too frequently, so that their curiosity was not properly whetted, nor had they anything fresh to communicate; but friendship must be something else than a society for mutual improvement - indeed, it must only be that by the way, and to some extent unconsciously; and if Thoreau had been a man instead of a manner of elm-tree, he

would have felt that he saw his friends too seldom, and have reaped benefits unknown to his philosophy from a more sustained and easy intercourse. We might remind him of his own words about love: "We should have no reserve; we should give the whole of ourselves to that business. But commonly men have not imagination enough to be thus employed about a human being, but must be coopering a barrel, forsooth." Ay, or reading oriental philosophers. It is not the nature of the rival occupation, it is the fact that you suffer it to be a rival, that renders loving intimacy impossible. Nothing is given for nothing in this world; there can be no true love, even on your own side, without devotion; devotion is the exercise of love, by which it grows; but if you will give enough of that, if you will pay the price in a sufficient "amount of what you call life," why then, indeed, whether with wife or comrade, you may have months and even years of such easy, natural, pleasurable, and yet improving intercourse as shall make time a moment and kindness a delight. The secret of his retirement lies not in misanthropy, of which he had no tincture, but part in his engrossing design of self-improvement and part in the real deficiencies of social intercourse. He was not so much difficult about his fellow human beings as he could not tolerate the terms of their association. He could take to a man for any genuine qualities, as we see by his admirable sketch of the Canadian woodcutter in WALDEN; but he would not consent, in his own words, to "feebly fabulate and paddle in the social slush." It seemed to him, I think, that society is precisely the reverse of friendship, in that it takes place on a lower level than the characters of any of the parties would warrant us to expect. The society talk of even the most brilliant man is of greatly less account than what you will get from him in (as the French say) a little committee. And Thoreau wanted geniality; he had not enough of the superficial, even at command; he could not swoop into a parlour and, in the naval phrase, "cut out" a human being from that dreary port; nor had he inclination for the task. I suspect he loved books and nature as well and near as warmly as he loved his fellow-creatures, - a melancholy, lean degeneration of the human character.

"As for the dispute about solitude and society," he thus sums up: "Any comparison is impertinent. It is an idling down on the plain at the base of the mountain instead of climbing steadily to its top. Of course you will be glad of all the society you can get to go up with? Will you go to glory with me? is the burden of the song. It is not that we love to be alone, but that we love to soar, and when we do soar the company grows thinner and thinner till there is none at all. It is either the tribune on the plain, a sermon on the mount, or a very private ecstasy still higher up. Use all the society that will abet you." But surely it is no very extravagant opinion that it is better to give than to receive, to serve than to use our companions; and above all, where there is no question of service upon either side, that it is good to enjoy their company like a natural man. It is curious and in some ways dispiriting that a writer may be

always best corrected out of his own mouth; and so, to conclude, here is another passage from Thoreau which seems aimed directly at himself: "Do not be too moral; you may cheat yourself out of much life so.... ALL FABLES, INDEED, HAVE THEIR MORALS; BUT THE INNOCENT ENJOY THE STORY."

V.

"The only obligation," says he, "which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right." "Why should we ever go abroad, even across the way, to ask a neighbour's advice?" "There is a nearer neighbour within, who is incessantly telling us how we should behave. BUT WE WAIT FOR THE NEIGHBOUR WITHOUT TO TELL US OF SOME FALSE, EASIER WAY." "The greater part of what my neighbours call good I believe in my soul to be bad." To be what we are, and to become what we are capable of becoming, is the only end of life. It is "when we fall behind ourselves" that "we are cursed with duties and the neglect of duties." "I love the wild," he says, "not less than the good." And again: "The life of a good man will hardly improve us more than the life of a freebooter, for the inevitable laws appear as plainly in the infringement as in the observance, and" (mark this) "OUR LIVES ARE SUSTAINED BY A NEARLY EQUAL EXPENSE OF VIRTUE OF SOME KIND." Even although he were a prig, it will be owned he could announce a startling doctrine. "As for doing good," he writes elsewhere, "that is one of the professions that are full. Moreover, I have tried it fairly, and, strange as it may seem, am satisfied that it does not agree with my constitution. Probably I should not conscientiously 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. If you should ever be betrayed into any of these philanthropies, do not let your left hand know what your right hand does, for it is not worth knowing." Elsewhere he returns upon the subject, and explains his meaning thus: "If I ever DID a man any good in their sense, of course it was something exceptional and insignificant compared with the good or evil I am constantly doing by being what I am."

There is a rude nobility, like that of a barbarian king, in this unshaken confidence in himself and indifference to the wants, thoughts, or sufferings of others. In his whole works I find no trace of pity. This was partly the result of theory, for he held the world too mysterious to be criticised, and asks conclusively: "What right have I to grieve who have not ceased to wonder?" But it sprang still more from constitutional indifference and superiority; and he grew up healthy, composed, and unconscious from among life's horrors, like a green bay-tree from a field of battle. It was from this lack in himself that he failed to do justice to the spirit of Christ; for while he could glean more meaning from individual precepts than any score of Christians, yet he conceived life in such a different hope, and viewed it with such contrary emotions, that the sense and

purport of the doctrine as a whole seems to have passed him by or left him unimpressed. He could understand the idealism of the Christian view, but he was himself so unaffectedly unhuman that he did not recognise the human intention and essence of that teaching. Hence he complained that Christ did not leave us a rule that was proper and sufficient for this world, not having conceived the nature of the rule that was laid down; for things of that character that are sufficiently unacceptable become positively non-existent to the mind. But perhaps we shall best appreciate the defect in Thoreau by seeing it supplied in the case of Whitman. For the one, I feel confident, is the disciple of the other; it is what Thoreau clearly whispered that Whitman so uproariously bawls; it is the same doctrine, but with how immense a difference! the same argument, but used to what a new conclusion! Thoreau had plenty of humour until he tutored himself out of it, and so forfeited that best birthright of a sensible man; Whitman, in that respect, seems to have been sent into the world naked and unashamed; and yet by a strange consummation, it is the theory of the former that is arid, abstract, and claustral. Of these two philosophies so nearly identical at bottom, the one pursues Self-improvement - a churlish, mangy dog; the other is up with the morning, in the best of health, and following the nymph Happiness, buxom, blithe, and debonair. Happiness, at least, is not solitary; it joys to communicate; it loves others, for it depends on them for its existence; it sanctions and encourages to all delights that are not unkind in themselves; if it lived to a thousand, it would not make excision of a single humorous passage; and while the self-improver dwindles towards the prig, and, if he be not of an excellent constitution may even grow deformed into an Obermann, the very name and appearance of a happy man breathe of good-nature, and help the rest of us to live.

In the case of Thoreau, so great a show of doctrine demands some outcome in the field of action. If nothing were to be done but build a shanty beside Walden Pond, we have heard altogether too much of these declarations of independence. That the man wrote some books is nothing to the purpose, for the same has been done in a suburban villa. That he kept himself happy is perhaps a sufficient excuse, but it is disappointing to the reader. We may be unjust, but when a man despises commerce and philanthropy alike, and has views of good so soaring that he must take himself apart from mankind for their cultivation, we will not be content without some striking act. It was not Thoreau's fault if he were not martyred; had the occasion come, he would have made a noble ending. As it is, he did once seek to interfere in the world's course; he made one practical appearance on the stage of affairs; and a strange one it was, and strangely characteristic of the nobility and the eccentricity of the man. It was forced on him by his calm but radical opposition to negro slavery. "Voting for the right is doing nothing for it," he saw; "it is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail." For his part, he would not "for an instant recognise

that political organisation for HIS government which is the SLAVE'S government also." "I do not hesitate to say," he adds, "that those who call themselves Abolitionists should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in person and property, from the government of Massachusetts." That is what he did: in 1843 he ceased to pay the poll-tax. The highway-tax he paid, for he said he was as desirous to be a good neighbour as to be a bad subject; but no more poll-tax to the State of Massachusetts. Thoreau had now seceded, and was a polity unto himself; or, as he explains it with admirable sense, "In fact, I quietly declare war with the State after my fashion, though I will still make what use and get what advantage of her I can, as is usual in such cases." He was put in prison; but that was a part of his design. "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name - ay, if ONE HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, CEASING TO HOLD SLAVES, were actually to withdraw from this copartnership, and be locked up in the county gaol therefor, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be; what is once well done is done for ever." Such was his theory of civil disobedience.

And the upshot? A friend paid the tax for him; continued year by year to pay it in the sequel; and Thoreau was free to walk the woods unmolested. It was a FIASCO, but to me it does not seem laughable; even those who joined in the laughter at the moment would be insensibly affected by this quaint instance of a good man's horror for injustice. We may compute the worth of that one night's imprisonment as outweighing half a hundred voters at some subsequent election: and if Thoreau had possessed as great a power of persuasion as (let us say) Falstaff, if he had counted a party however small, if his example had been followed by a hundred or by thirty of his fellows, I cannot but believe it would have greatly precipitated the era of freedom and justice. We feel the misdeeds of our country with so little fervour, for we are not witnesses to the suffering they cause; but when we see them wake an active horror in our fellow-man, when we see a neighbour prefer to lie in prison rather than be so much as passively implicated in their perpetration, even the dullest of us will begin to realise them with a quicker pulse.

Not far from twenty years later, when Captain John Brown was taken at Harper's Ferry, Thoreau was the first to come forward in his defence. The committees wrote to him unanimously that his action was premature. "I did not send to you for advice," said he, "but to announce that I was to speak." I have used the word "defence;" in truth he did not seek to defend him, even declared it would be better for the good cause that he should die; but he praised his action as I think Brown would have liked to hear it praised.

Thus this singularly eccentric and independent mind, wedded to a character of so much strength, singleness, and purity, pursued its own path of self-improvement for more than half a century,

> part gymnosophist, part backwoodsman; and thus did it come twice, though in a subaltern attitude, into the field of political history.
> Author's note: For many facts in the above essay, among which I may mention the incident of the squirrel, I am indebted to THOREAU: HIS LIFE AND AIMS, by J. A. Page, or, as is well known, Dr. Japp.

An article about Thoreau by Joseph Hosmer appeared in a "Thoreau Annex" to the Concord Freeman (IV, 24, May 6, 1880):

> When a boy he manifested peculiar traits of character. He perfectly hated street parades and shows, with their band accompaniment, that so generally excites the youthful mind. Nothing could induce him to engage in any game or sport, — he preferred to be an indifferent spectator.
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> * * *
>
> Early in September, 1845, (can it be so long,) on his invitation I spent a Sunday at his lake side retreat, as pure and delightful as with my mother.
> The building was not then finished, the chimney had no beginning — the sides were not battened, or the walls plastered. It stood in the open field, some thirty rods from the lake, and the "Devil's Bar" and in full view of it.
> Upon its construction he had evidently bestowed much care, and the proportions of it, together with the work, were very much better than would have been expected of a novice, and he seemed well pleased with his effort.
> The entrance to the cellar was thro' a trap door in the center of the room. The king-post was an entire tree, extending from the bottom of the cellar to the ridge-pole, upon which we descended, as the sailors do into the hold of a vessel.
> His hospitality and manner of entertainment were unique, and peculiar to the time and place.
> The cooking apparatus was primitive and consisted of a hole made in the earth and inlaid with stones, upon which the fire was made, after the manner at the sea-shore, when they have a clam-bake.
> When sufficiently hot remove the smoking embers and place on the fish, frog, etc. Our bill of fare included roasted horn pout, corn, beans, bread, salt, etc. Our viands were nature's own, "sparkling and bright."
> I gave the bill of fare in English and Henry rendered it in French, Latin and Greek.
> The beans had been previously cooked. The meal for our bread was mixed with lake water only, and when prepared it was spread upon the surface of a thin stone used for that purpose and baked. It was according to the old Jewish law and custom of unleavened bread, and of course it was very, very primitive.
> When the bread had been sufficiently baked the stone was removed, then the fish placed over the hot stones and roasted —

some in wet paper and some without — and when seasoned with salt, were delicious.

He was very much disappointed in not being able to present to me one of his little companions — a mouse.

He described it to me by saying that it had come upon his back as he leaned against the wall of the building, ran down his arm to his hand, and ate the cheese while holding it in his fingers; also, when he played upon the flute, it would come and listen from its hiding place, and remain there while he continued to play the same tune, but when he changed the tune, the little visitor would immediately disappear.

Owing perhaps to some extra noise, and a stranger present, it did not put in an appearance, and I lost that interesting part of the show — but I had enough else to remember all my life.

The land where he raised his beans and other vegetables had been so continuously cropped with rye in the years preceding that the weeds had a stunted and sickly look: this however was favorable, as the crops needed but little cultivation.

Perhaps it was in this “field of glory,” strewn with the bones and fur of the wood-chucks and rabbits, that he took his first lessons in combativeness: as he had to contend with the woodchucks by day, and the owls (his faithful allies,) stood sentry by night to keep away the rabbits, (literal fact,) otherwise he would not have harvested a bean.

One of the axioms of his philosophy had been to take the life of nothing that breathed, if he could avoid it: but, it had now become a serious question with him, whether to allow the wood-chucks and rabbits to destroy his beans, or fight.

Having determined on the latter, he procured a steel trap, and soon caught a venerable old fellow to the “manor born,” and one who had held undisputed possession there for all time. After retaining the enemy of all beans in “durance vile” for a few hours, he pressed his foot on the spring of the trap and let him go — expecting and hoping never to see him more. Vain delusion!

In a few days after, on returning from the village post-office, on looking in the direction of the bean field, to his disgust and apprehension he saw the same old grey-back disappear behind some brush just outside the field.

On a reconnaissance he discovered that the enemy had taken up a strategic position covered by some brush near his beans, and had entrenched himself by digging a “rifle pit,” and otherwise made preparations for a determined siege. Accordingly he again set the trap and again caught the thief.

Now it so happened that those old knights of the shot gun, hook and line, Wesson, Pratt and Co., were on a piscatorial visit to the “devil’s bar,” equipped with all the necessary appliances to allure the finny tribe to destruction. A council of war was held at the “Bar,” to determine what should be done with the wood-chuck.

A decision was rendered immediately by that old and popular landlord of the Middlesex, in his terse and laconic manner

> "knock his brains out."
> This however was altogether too severe on the woodchuck, thought Henry; even woodchucks had some rights that "Squatter Sovereigns" should respect. Was he not the original occupant there? and had he not "jumped" the "wood-chucks claim" destroyed his home, and built his "hut" upon the ruins? After considering the question carefully he took the woodchuck in his arms and carried him some two miles away; and then with a severe admonition at the end of a good stick, he opened the trap, and again let him "depart in peace"; and he never saw him more.

Kathryn Schulz, who writes for The New Yorker, has glanced into the cold eyes of a "Pond Scum" Henry Thoreau, and has engaged in a deep reading of WALDEN, coming to the general conclusion that Robert Lewis Stevenson was right about Thoreau (possibly she had not become aware that Stevenson later withdrew these remarks, after having learned some more about his subject).

> Thoreau went to Walden, he tells us, "to learn what are the gross necessaries of life": whatever is so essential to survival "that few, if any, whether from savageness, or poverty, or philosophy, ever attempt to do without it." Put differently, he wanted to try what we would today call subsistence living, a condition attractive chiefly to those not obliged to endure it. It attracted Thoreau because he "wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life." Tucked into that sentence is a strange distinction; apparently, some of the things we experience while alive count as life while others do not. In "Walden," Thoreau made it his business to distinguish between them.
> As it turns out, very little counted as life for Thoreau. Food, drink, friends, family, community, tradition, most work, most education, most conversation: all this he dismissed as outside the real business of living. Although Thoreau also found no place in life for organized religion, the criteria by which he drew such distinctions were, at base, religious. A dualist all the way down, he divided himself into soul and body, and never could accept the latter. "I love any other piece of nature, almost, better," he confided to his journal. The physical realities of being human appalled him. "The wonder is how they, how you and I, can live this slimy, beastly life, eating and drinking," he wrote in "Walden." Only by denying such appetites could he feel that he was tending adequately to his soul.
> "Walden," in consequence, is not a paean to living simply; it is a paean to living purely, with all the moral judgment that the word implies. In its first chapter, "Economy," Thoreau lays out a program of abstinence so thoroughgoing as to make the Dalai Lama look like a Kardashian. (That chapter must be one of the highest barriers to entry in the Western canon: dry, sententious, condescending, more than eighty pages long.) Thoreau, who never wed, regarded "sensuality" as a dangerous contaminant, by which we "stain and pollute one another." He did not smoke and avoided eating meat. He shunned alcohol, although

with scarcely more horror than he shunned every beverage except water: "Think of dashing the hopes of a morning with a cup of warm coffee, or of an evening with a dish of tea! Ah, how low I fall when I am tempted by them!" Such temptations, along with the dangerous intoxicant that is music, had, he felt, caused the fall of Greece and Rome.

I cannot idolize anyone who opposes coffee (especially if the objection is that it erodes great civilizations; had the man not heard of the Enlightenment?), but Thoreau never met an appetite too innocuous to denounce. He condemned those who gathered cranberries for jam ("So butchers rake the tongues of bison out of the prairie grass") and regarded salt as "that grossest of groceries"; if he did without it, he boasted, he could also drink less water. He advised his readers to eat just one meal a day, partly to avoid having to earn additional money for food but also because the act of eating bordered, for him, on an ethical transgression. "The fruits eaten temperately need not make us ashamed of our appetites," he wrote, as if our appetites were otherwise disgraceful. No slouch at public shaming, Thoreau did his part to sustain that irrational equation, so robust in America, between eating habits and moral worth.

Food was bad, drink was bad, even shelter was suspect, and Thoreau advised keeping it to a minimum. "I used to see a large box by the railroad," he wrote in "Walden," "six feet long by three wide, in which the laborers locked up their tools at night": drill a few airholes, he argued, and one of these would make a fine home. ("I am far from jesting," he added, unnecessarily. Thoreau regarded humor as he regarded salt, and did without.) He chose to live in a somewhat larger box at Walden, but austerity prevailed there, too. He eschewed curtains and recoiled in dismay from the idea of a doormat: "As I had no room to spare within the house, nor time to spare within or without to shake it, I declined it, preferring to wipe my feet on the sod before my door. It is best to avoid the beginnings of evil."

I am not aware of any theology which holds that the road to Hell is paved with doormats, but Thoreau, in fine Puritan fashion, saw the beginnings of evil everywhere. He contemplated gathering the wild herbs around Walden to sell in Concord but concluded that "I should probably be on my way to the devil." He permitted himself to plant beans, but cautiously, calling it "a rare amusement, which, continued too long, might have become a dissipation." Only those with no sense of balance must live in so much fear of the slippery slope. Robert Louis Stevenson, writing about Thoreau in 1880, pointed out that when a man must "abstain from nearly everything that his neighbours innocently and pleasurably use, and from the rubs and trials of human society itself into the bargain, we recognise that valetudinarian healthfulness which is more delicate than sickness itself."

To abstain, Stevenson understood, is not necessarily to simplify; restrictions and repudiations can just as easily

complicate one's life. (Try going out to dinner with a vegan who is avoiding gluten.) But worse than Thoreau's radical self-denial is his denial of others. The most telling thing he purports to abstain from while at Walden is companionship, which he regards as at best a time-consuming annoyance, at worst a threat to his mortal soul. For Thoreau, in other words, his fellow-humans had the same moral status as doormats.

No feature of the natural landscape is more humble than a pond, but, on the evidence of Thoreau, the quality is not contagious. He despised his admirers, toward whom, Emerson wrote, he "was never affectionate, but superior, didactic, — scorning their petty ways." He disdained his ostensible friends, once responding to a social invitation with the words "such are my engagements to myself, that I dare not promise." (The italics are his.) And he looked down on his entire town. "What does our Concord culture amount to?" he asked in "Walden." "Our reading, our conversation and thinking, are all on a very low level, worthy only of pygmies and manikins."

This comprehensive arrogance is captured in one of Thoreau's most famous lines: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." It is a mystery to me how a claim so simultaneously insufferable and absurd ever entered the canon of popular quotations. Had Thoreau broadened it to include himself, it would be less obnoxious; had he broadened it to include everyone (à la Sartre), it would be more defensible. As it stands, however, Thoreau's declaration is at once off-putting and empirically dubious. By what method, one wonders, could a man so disinclined to get to know other people substantiate an allegation about the majority of humanity?

By none, of course; Thoreau could not have been less interested in how the mass of men actually lived. On the contrary, he was as parochial as he was egotistical. (He once claimed that Massachusetts contained almost all the important plants in America, and, after reading the explorer Elisha Kane's best-selling 1856 account of his Arctic journey, remarked that "most of the phenomena noted might be observed in Concord.") His attitude toward Europe "almost reached contempt," Emerson wrote, while "the other side of the globe" was, in Thoreau's words, "barbarous and unhealthy." Making a virtue of his incuriosity, he discouraged the reading of newspapers. "I am sure," he wrote in "Walden," "that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper," not least because "nothing new does ever happen in foreign parts." In that sweeping claim, he explicitly included the French Revolution.

Unsurprisingly, this thoroughgoing misanthrope did not care to help other people. "I confess that I have hitherto indulged very little in philanthropic enterprises," Thoreau wrote in "Walden." He had "tried it fairly" and was "satisfied that it does not agree with my constitution." Nor did spontaneous generosity: "I require of a visitor that he be not actually starving, though he may have the very best appetite in the world, however he got it. Objects of charity are not guests." In what is by now a grand

American tradition, Thoreau justified his own parsimony by impugning the needy. "Often the poor man is not so cold and hungry as he is dirty and ragged and gross. It is partly his taste, and not merely his misfortune. If you give him money, he will perhaps buy more rags with it." Thinking of that state of affairs, Thoreau writes, "I began to pity myself, and I saw that it would be a greater charity to bestow on me a flannel shirt than a whole slop-shop on him."

The poor, the rich, his neighbors, his admirers, strangers: Thoreau's antipathy toward humanity even encompassed the very idea of civilization. In his journals, he laments the archeological wealth of Great Britain and gives thanks that in New England "we have not to lay the foundation of our houses in the ashes of a former civilization." That is patently untrue, but it is also telling: for Thoreau, civilization was a contaminant. "Deliver me from a city built on the site of a more ancient city, whose materials are ruins, whose gardens cemeteries," he wrote in "Walden." "The soil is blanched and accursed there." Seen by these lights, Thoreau's retreat at Walden was a desperate compromise. What he really wanted was to be Adam, before Eve — to be the first human, unsullied, utterly alone in his Eden.

There is a striking exception to Thoreau's indifference to the rest of humanity, and he is rightly famous for it. An outspoken abolitionist, he condemned the Fugitive Slave Law, served as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, championed John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, and refused to pay the poll tax in Massachusetts, partly on the ground that it sustained the institution of slavery. (One wonders how he would have learned about the law, the raid, or any of the rest without a newspaper, but never mind.) That institution was and remains the central moral and political crisis of American history, and much of Thoreau's status stems from his absolute opposition to it.

But one may reach good ends by bad means, and Thoreau did. "Not a particle of respect had he to the opinions of any man or body of men, but homage solely to the truth itself," Emerson wrote of Thoreau. He meant it as praise, but the trouble with that position — and the deepest of all the troubles disturbing the waters of "Walden" — is that it assumes that Thoreau had some better way of discerning the truth than other people did.

Thoreau, for one, did assume that. Like his fellow-transcendentalists, he was suspicious of tradition and institutions, and regarded personal intuition and direct revelation as superior foundations for both spiritual and secular beliefs. Unlike his fellow-transcendentalists, he also regarded his own particular intuitions and revelations as superior to those of other people. "Sometimes, when I compare myself with other men," he wrote in "Walden," "it seems as if I were more favored by the gods than they, beyond any deserts that I am conscious of; as if I had a warrant and surety at their hands which my fellows have not, and were especially guided and guarded."

Claiming special guidance by the gods is the posture of the prophet: of one who believes himself in possession of revealed truth and therefore entitled –indeed, obliged– to enlighten others. Thoreau, comfortable with that posture, sneered at those who were not. ("They don't want to have any prophets born into their families — damn them!") But prophecy makes for poor political philosophy, for at least two reasons.

The first concerns the problem of fallibility. In "Resistance to Civil Government" (better known today as "Civil Disobedience"), Thoreau argued that his only political obligation was "to do at any time what I think right." When constrained by its context, that line is compelling; it reads as a call to obey one's conscience over and above unjust laws. But as a broader theory of governance, which it was, it is troubling. People routinely perpetrate wrongs out of obedience to their conscience, even in situations when the law mandates better behavior. (Consider the Kentucky county clerk currently refusing to issue marriage licenses to gay couples.) Like public institutions, private moral compasses can err, and different ones frequently point in different directions. And, as the scholar Vincent Buranelli noted in a 1957 critique of Thoreau, "antagonism is never worse than when it involves two men each of whom is convinced that he speaks for goodness and rectitude." It is the point of democracy to adjudicate among such conflicting claims through some means other than fiat or force, but Thoreau was not interested in that process.

Nor was he interested in subjecting his claims to logical scrutiny. And that is the second problem with basing one's beliefs on personal intuition and direct revelation: it justifies the substitution of anecdote and authority for evidence and reason. The result, in "Walden," is an unnavigable thicket of contradiction and caprice. At one moment, Thoreau fulminates against the railroad, "that devilish Iron Horse, whose ear-rending neigh is heard throughout the town"; in the next, he claims that he is "refreshed and expanded when the freight train rattles past me." At one moment, he argues that earlier civilizations are worthless; in the next, he combines a kids-today crankiness with nostalgia for the imagined superiority of the past. ("Husbandry was once a sacred art; but it is pursued with irreverent haste and heedlessness by us.") On the subject of employment, "Walden" reads sometimes like "The 4-Hour Workweek" and sometimes like the collected sermons of John Calvin. Thoreau denigrates labor, praises leisure, and claims that he can earn his living for the month in a matter of days, only to turn around and write that "from exertion come wisdom and purity; from sloth ignorance and sensuality." So incoherent is his treatment of economics that E. B. White, otherwise a fan, wrote that Thoreau "rides into the subject at top speed, shooting in all directions." No one and nothing emerges unscathed, least of all the author.

Emerson famously counselled against maintaining a foolish consistency, but Thoreau managed to get it wrong in both

directions. His behavioral prescriptions are so foolishly inconsistent as to defy all attempts at reconciliation, while his moral sensibility is so foolishly consistent as to be naïve and cruel. (For one thing, Thoreau never understood that life itself is not consistent — that what worked for a well-off Harvard-educated man without dependents or obligations might not make an ideal universal code.) Those failings are ethical and intellectual, but they are also political. To reject all certainties but one's own is the behavior of a zealot; to issue contradictory decrees based on private whim is that of a despot. This is not the stuff of a democratic hero. Nor were Thoreau's actual politics, which were libertarian verging on anarchist. Like today's preppers, he valued self-sufficiency for reasons that were simultaneously self-aggrandizing and suspicious: he did not believe that he needed anything from other people, and he did not trust other people to provide it. "That government is best which governs least," Jefferson supposedly said. Thoreau, revising him, wrote, "That government is best which governs not at all."

Yet for a man who believed in governance solely by conscience, his own was frighteningly narrow. Thoreau had no understanding whatsoever of poverty and consistently romanticized it. ("Farmers are respectable and interesting to me in proportion as they are poor.") His moral clarity about abolition stemmed less from compassion or a commitment to equality than from the fact that slavery so blatantly violated his belief in self-governance. Indeed, when abolition was pitted against rugged individualism, the latter proved his higher priority. "I sometimes wonder that we can be so frivolous, I may almost say," he writes in "Walden," "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."

A nation composed entirely of rugged individualists -so stinting that they had almost no needs, so solitary that those needs never conflicted with those of their compatriots- would not, it is true, need much governance. But such a nation has never existed, and even if nothing else militated against Thoreau's political vision its impossibility alone would suffice. As the philosopher Avishai Margalit once put it (not apropos of Thoreau, though apropos of the similarly unachievable position of absolute stoicism), "I consider not being an option as being, in a way, enough of an argument." So perhaps a sufficient argument against Thoreau is that, although he never admitted it, the life he prescribed was not an option even for him.

Only by elastic measures can "Walden" be regarded as nonfiction. Read charitably, it is a kind of semi-fictional extended meditation featuring a character named Henry David Thoreau. Read less charitably, it is akin to those recent best-selling memoirs whose authors turn out to have fabricated large portions of

their stories. It is widely acknowledged that, to craft a tidier narrative, Thoreau condensed his twenty-six months at the cabin into a single calendar year. But that is the least of the liberties he takes with the facts, and the most forgivable of his manipulations of our experience as readers. The book is subtitled "Life in the Woods," and, from those words onward, Thoreau insists that we read it as the story of a voluntary exile from society, an extended confrontation with wilderness and solitude.

In reality, Walden Pond in 1845 was scarcely more off the grid, relative to contemporaneous society, than Prospect Park is today. The commuter train to Boston ran along its southwest side; in summer the place swarmed with picnickers and swimmers, while in winter it was frequented by ice cutters and skaters. Thoreau could stroll from his cabin to his family home, in Concord, in twenty minutes, about as long as it takes to walk the fifteen blocks from Carnegie Hall to Grand Central Terminal. He made that walk several times a week, lured by his mother's cookies or the chance to dine with friends. These facts he glosses over in "Walden," despite detailing with otherwise skinflint precision his eating habits and expenditures. He also fails to mention weekly visits from his mother and sisters (who brought along more undocumented food) and downplays the fact that he routinely hosted other guests as well — sometimes as many as thirty at a time. This is the situation Thoreau summed up by saying, "For the most part it is as solitary where I live as on the prairies. It is as much Asia or Africa as New England. . . . At night there was never a traveller passed my house, or knocked at my door, more than if I were the first or last man."

Does this disingenuousness matter? Countless Thoreau fans have argued that it is does not, quoting by way of defense his own claim that "solitude is not measured by the miles of space that intervene between a man and his fellows." But, as the science writer David Quammen pointed out in a 1988 essay on Thoreau (before going on to pardon him), many kinds of solitude are measured in miles. Only someone who had never experienced true remoteness could mistake Walden for the wilderness or compare life on the bustling pond to that on the mid-nineteenth-century prairies. Indeed, an excellent corrective to "Walden" is the work of Laura Ingalls Wilder, who grew up on those prairies, and in a genuine little house in the big woods. Wilder lived what Thoreau merely played at, and her books are not only more joyful and interesting than "Walden" but also, when reread, a thousand times more harrowing. Real isolation presents real risks, both emotional and mortal, and, had Thoreau truly lived at a remove from other people, he might have valued them more. Instead, his case against community rested on an ersatz experience of doing without it.

Begin with false premises and you risk reaching false conclusions. Begin with falsified premises and you forfeit your authority. Apologists for Thoreau often claim that he merely distorted some trivial facts in the service of a deeper truth.

But how deep can a truth be –indeed, how true can it be– if it is not built from facts? Thoreau contends that he went to Walden to construct a life on the basis of ethical and existential first principles, and that what he achieved as a result was simple and worth emulating. (His claim that he doesn't want others to imitate him can't be taken seriously. For one thing, "Walden" is a guide to doing just that, down to the number of chairs a man should own. For another, having dismissed all other life styles as morally and spiritually desperate, he doesn't leave his readers much choice.)

But Thoreau did not live as he described, and no ethical principle is emptier than one that does not apply to its author. The hypocrisy is not that Thoreau aspired to solitude and self-sufficiency but kept going home for cookies and company. That's just the gap between aspiration and execution, plus the variability in our needs and moods from one moment to the next — eminently human experiences, which, had Thoreau engaged with them, would have made for a far more interesting and useful book. The hypocrisy is that Thoreau lived a complicated life but pretended to live a simple one. Worse, he preached at others to live as he did not, while berating them for their own compromises and complexities.

Why, given Thoreau's hypocrisy, his sanctimony, his dour asceticism, and his scorn, do we continue to cherish "Walden"? One answer is that we read him early. "Walden" is a staple of the high-school curriculum, and you could scarcely write a book more appealing to teen-agers: Thoreau endorses rebellion against societal norms, champions idleness over work, and gives his readers permission to ignore their elders. ("Practically, the old have no very important advice to give the young, their own experience has been so partial, and their lives have been such miserable failures.") "Walden" is also fundamentally adolescent in tone: Thoreau shares the conviction, far more developmentally appropriate and forgivable in teens, that everyone else's certainties are wrong while one's own are unassailable. Moreover, he presents adulthood not as it is but as kids wishfully imagine it: an idyll of autonomy, unfettered by any civic or familial responsibilities.

Another reason we cherish "Walden" is that we read it selectively. Although Thoreau is insufferable when fancying himself a seer, he is wonderful at actually seeing, and the passages he devotes to describing the natural world have an acuity and serenity that nothing else in the book approaches. It is a pleasure to read him on a battle between black and red ants; on the layers of ice that form as the pond freezes over in winter; on the breeze, birds, fish, waterbugs, and dust motes that differently disturb the surface of Walden. At one point, out in his boat, Thoreau paddles after a loon when it submerges, to try to be nearby when it resurfaces. "It was a pretty game, played on the smooth surface of the pond, a man against a loon," he writes. "Suddenly your adversary's checker disappears beneath the board, and the problem is to place yours nearest to where

his will appear again.” That is first-rate nature writing. Thoreau, too, emerges in a surprising place –in a game of checkers, where a lesser writer would have reached for hide-and-seek– and captures not only the behavior of the loon but a very human pleasure in being outdoors.

It is also in contemplating the land that Thoreau got the big picture right. “We can never have enough of nature,” he wrote. “We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander.” However sham his own retreat was, however pinched and selfish his motives in undertaking it, he understood why the wilderness matters, and he was right that there is something salutary, liberating, and exhilarating about living in it with as little as necessary.

But any reading of Thoreau that casts him as a champion of nature is guilty of cherry-picking his most admirable work while turning a blind eye on all the rest. The other and more damning answer to the question of why we admire him is not that we read him incompletely and inaccurately but that we read him exactly right. Although Thoreau is often regarded as a kind of cross between Emerson, John Muir, and William Lloyd Garrison, the man who emerges in “Walden” is far closer in spirit to Ayn Rand: suspicious of government, fanatical about individualism, egotistical, élitist, convinced that other people lead pathetic lives yet categorically opposed to helping them. It is not despite but because of these qualities that Thoreau makes such a convenient national hero.

Perhaps the strangest, saddest thing about “Walden” is that it is a book about how to live that says next to nothing about how to live with other people. Socrates, too, examined his life — in the middle of the agora. Montaigne obsessed over himself down to the corns on his toes, but he did so with camaraderie and mirth. Whitman, Thoreau’s contemporary and fellow-transcendentalist, joined him in singing a song of himself, striving to be untamed, encouraging us to resist much and obey little. But he was generous (“Give alms to everyone that asks”), empathetic (“Whoever degrades another degrades me”), and comfortable with multitudes, his and otherwise. He would have responded to a shipwreck as he did to the Civil War, tending the wounded and sitting with the grieving and the dying.

Poor Thoreau. He, too, was the victim of a kind of shipwreck — for reasons of his own psychology, a castaway from the rest of humanity. Ultimately, it is impossible not to feel sorry for the author of “Walden,” who dedicated himself to establishing the bare necessities of life without ever realizing that the necessary is a low, dull bar; whose account of how to live reads less like an existential reckoning than like a poor man’s budget, with its calculations of how much to eat and sleep crowding out questions of why we are here and how we should treat one another; who lived alongside a pond, chronicled a trip down the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, and wrote about Cape Cod, all without recognizing that it is on watering holes and rivers and coastlines that human societies are built.

Granted, it is sometimes difficult to deal with society. Few things will thwart your plans to live deliberately faster than those messy, confounding surprises known as other people. Likewise, few things will thwart your absolute autonomy faster than governance, and not only when the government is unjust; every law is a parameter, a constraint on what we might otherwise do. Teen-agers, too, strain and squirm against any checks on their liberty. But the mature position, and the one at the heart of the American democracy, seeks a balance between the individual and the society. Thoreau lived out that complicated balance; the pity is that he forsook it, together with all fellow-feeling, in "Walden." And yet we made a classic of the book, and a moral paragon of its author — a man whose deepest desire and signature act was to turn his back on the rest of us.

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> "It's all now you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."
>
> – Remark by character "Garin Stevens" in William Faulkner's INTRUDER IN THE DUST

Prepared: January 16, 2018

ARRGH AUTOMATED RESEARCH REPORT

GENERATION HOTLINE

This stuff presumably looks to you as if it were generated by a human. Such is not the case. Instead, someone has requested that we pull it out of the hat of a pirate who has grown out of the shoulder of our pet parrot "Laura" (as above). What these chronological lists are: they are research reports compiled by ARRGH algorithms out of a database of modules which we term the Kouroo Contexture (this is data mining). To respond to such a request for information we merely push a button.

Commonly, the first output of the algorithm has obvious deficiencies and we need to go back into the modules stored in the contexture and do a minor amount of tweaking, and then we need to punch that button again and recompile the chronology — but there is nothing here that remotely resembles the ordinary “writerly” process you know and love. As the contents of this originating contexture improve, and as the programming improves, and as funding becomes available (to date no funding whatever has been needed in the creation of this facility, the entire operation being run out of pocket change) we expect a diminished need to do such tweaking and recompiling, and we fully expect to achieve a simulation of a generous and untiring robotic research librarian. Onward and upward in this brave new world.

First come first serve. There is no charge.
Place requests with <Kouroo@kouroo.info>. Arrgh.