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The Journal: 1837-1861
by Henry David Thoreau || edited by Damion Searls

JOHN SUMMERS on HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Henry David Thoreau has never been more admired, but in his own time he was widely known as a minor writer, a disciple of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and a bit of a crank. His moralism (which never lacked for judicious detractors) drew posthumous suspicions that he had been a critic of the worst kind—one motivated by enmity. “His mind strikes us as cold and wintry in its purity,” James Russell Lowell wrote in the North American Review in 1865. Lowell, confident that history would remember his own legacy, was not alone in accusing Thoreau of misanthropy, nor in predicting that posterity would put him in his place, as history had put his spiritual ancestors, the Puritans, in theirs.

But it is Lowell, the once-influential Harvard professor, whom history has forgotten, and Thoreau has been promoted to the equal of Emerson, and the tutor of Leo Tolstoy, Mohandas Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr.,
and the perennial ally of the unemployed. The turning point in this latter respect came in the 1930s. Then, the portrait of democratic individualism drawn in *Walden* brought the imperative of re-valuing their impoverishment to all those alienated from market values. "Life Without Principle," a companion essay on materialism, had flattered the jobless with the thought that they had gained, not lost, a shot at spiritual regeneration. "Most men would feel insulted, if it were proposed to employ them in throwing stones over a wall, and then in throwing them back, merely that they might earn their wages," Thoreau wrote of the cultural pauperization entailed by industrial discipline. "But many are no more worthily employed now."

This new edition of Thoreau’s journal should remove any lingering doubt that he spent his own free time worthily. Over twenty-five years, he filled notebooks with observations drawn from his weekly excursions to Pine Hill, Fair Haven Pond, Baker Farm, Martial Miles Meadow, Nut Meadow Brook, and other locations surrounding Concord. Thereabouts, alone or with companions whom he sometimes neglected, he recorded the crickets chirruping, the sparrows sleeping, the shrub oaks shedding, the snow crusting over meadows, the ice cracking along the edge of rivers, the flies buzzing in the sun, and much more.

"I am like a feather floating in the atmosphere; on every side is depth unfathomable," Thoreau wrote, in a passage of ecstatic communion that disproves his reputation for romantic egotism. He braved a heavy fog with numbed hands and wet feet in order to visit a blueberry swamp, and rose at 3 a.m. to watch the lilies unfold. "My Journal should be the record of my love. I have no more distinctness or pointedness in my yearnings than an expanding bud, which does indeed point to flower and fruit, to summer and autumn, but is aware of the warm sun and spring influence only."
In the 1850s, as Thoreau failed in his aspirations for a career akin to his mentor, his journal grew into a wheelhouse of tropes, a stylized work of literary artistry. In his last year, he carpentered a yellow pine box to convey his thirty-nine notebooks to history, burying his literary remains in advance of himself.

Selections first reached the reading public as *Early Spring in Massachusetts* (1881), then as *Summer* (1884), *Winter* (1887), and *Autumn* (1892). These bowdlerized volumes, edited by a disciple, promoted Thoreau’s reputation by misdescribing him in the idiom of amateur science, somewhat like the thematic selections that make him into a writer of apothegms on water, education, dogs, and cats. The first comprehensive edition appeared from Houghton Mifflin in 1906, and it was seven thousand pages long. The second, from Princeton University Press, has been issued in eight volumes so far, spurred along by the unshakeable academic conviction that appreciating the artistic grandeur of the journal means leaving out nothing. “More than almost any comparable journal, Thoreau’s has to be read as a whole,” Perry Miller once argued. But who will read all two million words? Who can afford even one volume of Princeton’s edition, at $99.50 each?

Damion Searls, the editor of this volume, offers it as an abridgement. “I chose passages for inclusion not necessarily because of their importance to Thoreau’s biography, or to cultural or natural history,” he explains, “but because I liked them.” This makes good sense. Odell Shepard, the editor of the earliest (and still worthwhile) one-volume edition, *The Heart of Thoreau’s Journals* (1927), said something similar in explaining his method. As editors heed their consciences, so they heed the author’s self-injunction. “Good writing as well as good acting will be obedience to conscience,” Thoreau wrote on January 26, 1841. “If we can listen, we shall hear. By reverently listening to the inner voice, we may reinstate
ourselves on the pinnacle of humanity.” The intimacy in his voice resulted from his refusal to divorce aesthetic choices from moral ones. Thoreau wrote best when he wrote for himself. One reads him best when reading for oneself.

Thoreau’s “inner voice” did not sound anything like John Winthrop, Cotton Mather, or Samuel Sewell. “It is a certain faeryland where we live,” he recorded along a walk one June afternoon. “I wonder that I ever get five miles on my way, the walk is so crowded with events and phenomena.” Like the Puritans, Thoreau envisioned New England as an enchanted world; but unlike their journals and diaries, he did not suggest an unconscious conversing intimately with God, and he broke decisively from their Augustinian style of self-accusation.

Thoreau's method turned up disassociations, juxtapositions, and inversions from the ordinary phenomena of nature. Thoreau took his notebook into the woods deliberately to inhabit the zone between consciousness and unconsciousness. “How can a man write the same thoughts by the light of the moon, resting his book on a rail by the side of a remote potato-field, that he does by the light of the sun, on his study table? The light is but a luminousness. My pencil seems to move through a creamy, mystic medium. The moonlight is rich and somewhat opaque, like cream, but the daylight is thin and blue, like skimmed milk.” By afternoon everything appeared in “a mirage.”

Thoreau discovered the poetic significance of the unconscious in his first book, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. There he observed that “Our truest life is when we are in dreams awake...[I]n dreams we never deceive ourselves, nor are deceived.” Dreams—plus visions, trances, hallucinations, somnambulist experiences, and liminal states—animated the
best of this period’s literature. Think of Melville’s *Mardi*, Hawthorne’s “The Celestial Railroad,” or surrealistic poems such as Poe’s “A Dream Within a Dream” and Whitman’s “The Sleepers.” Although the phrase, “the American Dream,” did not enter our political vocabulary until the 1920s, antebellum reformers were already appropriating it for a metaphysics of radicalism. When Frederick Douglass was a boy, he later recalled, he recognized the resistance within him “as an inborn dream of my human nature—a constant menace to slavery—and one which all the powers of slavery were unable to silence or extinguish.” It was in a “fever dream” that the plot of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was introduced to Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Emerson, imagining himself an American Adam, dreamed of eating the apple. In his own journal he honored the daemonic power of dreams. “They make me feel that every act, every thought, every cause, is bipolar, and in the act is contained the counteract. If I strike, I am struck. If I chase, I am pursued. If I push, I am resisted.” The genre of the journal—with its fragmentary, discontinuous character, so closely mirroring the memory of dreaming—was the perfect medium for idealizing the unconscious. “I do not know how to distinguish between our waking life and a dream,” Thoreau wrote in one his many blissed-out moments. “Are we not always living the life that we imagine we are?” He dreamed of a mountain that did not exist, returned often to “that peculiar dreaming sound of the frogs which belongs to the summer,” and recorded a long and hilarious staring contest with a woodchuck in Hubbard’s Grove. “We sat looking at one another about half an hour, till we began to feel mesmeric influences.” Such passages anticipated Darwin’s suggestion in *The Descent of Man* that man may feel his ancestral animal nature in the fact that his dog dreams also.
In *Walden*, “Life Without Principle,” “Resistance to Civil Government,” and other writings, Thoreau presents himself as the one supremely sane man. By the shadowy lights of his journal, though, his life seemed to him “more allegorical than actual.” When he was thirty-nine, he began to doubt his capacity for telling fantasy from reality. Describing himself as bipolar (as Emerson had described dreams), he said he was bothered by a recurring dream from his youth. Naming it “Rough and Smooth,” he concluded “my waking experience always has been and is such an alternate Rough and Smooth. In other words it is Insanity and Sanity.”

But anyone reading these lines should check the impulse to feel superior. If Thoreau paid for his industrial exemption with disorientation, then the regularity and benignity of nature, the turn of the seasons, saved his equilibrium in the end, and warded off the self-estrangement so prominent in modern confessional writing. Today, private life is history, and day and night a distinction without a difference. For ages, the act of writing has seemed to authors like the experience of dreaming. But we are not likely to read anything like Thoreau’s journal again.

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