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Charles G.D. Roberts's Introduction to *Walden*

In 1899, T.Y. Crowell and Company of New York published an edition of *Walden* with an introduction by Charles G.D. Roberts, an edition that has been ignored by Thoreau's bibliographers and unavailable to most of Roberts's critics. Today Roberts's introduction is of interest for two reasons: as a document in the story of Thoreau's slow rise to posthumous fame¹; and as an indication of the literary values and critical competence of Roberts.

Notwithstanding some diffidence, Roberts is generally appreciative. His point of departure is Robert Louis Stevenson's "Henry David Thoreau: His Character and Opinions," which appeared in the *Cornhill Magazine* for 1880 and was later collected in Stevenson's *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (1882). Because Roberts is more sympathetic to Thoreau, he revises Stevenson in several ways, one of which is apparent in the manner each critic tells the anecdote of Thoreau's career as a maker of pencils. For Stevenson, the decision to quit the craft after making a perfect pencil reveals Thoreau's priggish absorption in his own self-improvement. For Roberts, Thoreau's decision should be interpreted otherwise:

In a full survey of the man this does not appear like caprice, but rather as consistency; and it must be remembered that late in life, when his family needed his support, he resumed the occupation of making lead-pencils, and earned a living at it.

Stevenson's attack culminates in the notorious charge that Thoreau was a "skulker"; realizing his intemperance, Stevenson later issued a retraction in his "Preface, By Way of Criticism" to his *Familiar Studies*. Roberts is influenced by the "Preface" as much as by the essay. He is also, I think, influenced by Henry S. Salt's *Life of Henry David Thoreau* (1890), especially in his emphasis on the liberating effect of Thoreau's genius: "What his life and his writings chiefly do for others is

to arouse them, slap cold water in their faces, prod and hustle them on toward freedom." So Roberts's introduction is very much of its time, looking back at Stevenson and the low point of Thoreau's reputation from the contemporary perspective established by Salt.

Nonetheless there are limits to Roberts's admiration for Thoreau. In a fine essay on "Roberts as Critic" L.R. Early expresses his disappointment with the introduction to *Walden*: "One would like to have a richer meditation by the rising Canadian nature writer on the classic of American transcendentalism."² One problem inheres in Roberts's account of Thoreau as "very little of a poet" and "very much of a naturalist." The distinction is of course hierarchical, and Roberts assumes his reader's agreement in privileging the poet over the naturalist. For Roberts and his audience, poetry and nature writing are very different things, much as they are in Roberts's attitude towards his own work. Roberts senses that *Walden* might confound the distinctions between the poet and the naturalist, and between poetry and prose, but he finds it less exemplary than eccentric: "'Walden' is a book in which homely sense and heavenly insight jostle each other on the page." Bliss Carman felt similarly: for him Theodore Winthrop and Thoreau "will not let anything have its charm of distance, they must forever be diving into a lake before they speak of it."³ Another obstacle to Roberts's appreciation of *Walden* appears in the statement that "the mark of Emerson is on all Thoreau's best work." In 1920, Odell Shepard observed that "two things must be done for Thoreau before he can take his due place as one of the three or four most original men of letters America has produced": he must be removed from "the Emersonian shadow"; and he must no longer be regarded as a naturalist.⁴ For Roberts, Thoreau is both a naturalist and a lesser Emerson, while Emerson is "the most penetrating and insistent force . . . that American literature has produced."

The text of Roberts' introduction to *Walden or Life in the Woods* is presented as I found it in the copy held by the Roberts Library, University of Toronto. I am grateful to the Inter-Library Loan Department of the D.B. Weldon Library, University of Western Ontario; to Graham C. Adams and D.M.R. Bentley for their helpful advice; and to Lady Roberts for her gracious permission to reprint this work.

NOTES

1. For a good account of Thoreau's reputation in the late nineteenth century, see Wendell Glick, Preface to *The Recognition of Henry David Thoreau: Selected Criticism Since 1848*, ed. Glick (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), vii-xii.

2. In *The Sir Charles G. D. Roberts Symposium*, ed. and introd. Glenn Clever, Reappraisals: Canadian Writers, No. 10 (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1984), 176.
3. "To Louise Imogen Guiney," 1 September 1887, Letter 19, *Letters of Bliss Carman*, ed. and introd. H. Pearson Gundy (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's U. P., 1981), 18.
4. "The Paradox of Thoreau," rpt. from *Scribner's Magazine* in *Recognition of Thoreau*, 241-43.

An Introduction to *Walden*

by Charles G. D. Roberts

Of all Thoreau's works the one most perfectly infused with the essence of his genius is "Walden, or Life in the Woods." Thoreau has been called "The Poet-Naturalist," "The New England Stoic," "A Modern Jaques," and many other appellations which the coiner of phrases has sought to crystallize into an epithet this strange hybrid of Concord on Cathay. Though each has a germ of truth in it to keep it alive, the phrases ticket him falsely. They are misleading for two reasons. In the first place, they have the air of definition; and Thoreau, though in a sense narrow, has boundaries too wide for any epithet to contain his qualities. The bigger part of him is sure to lie outside the lines of any epigrammatic definition. In the second place, any catchword used, for convenience, to label a great man, should indicate the essential characteristic of his genius. It should show what he chiefly stands for. Now Thoreau is very little of a poet, though a thin ray of the true supernal fire does sometimes flash from an angle of his ragged verse. He is very much of a naturalist, of course,—a naturalist in the most vital sense: for he has "named all the birds without a gun"; he has fulfilled the requirements of Emerson, and discerned the souls as well as observed the bodies of Nature and her children. But it is incidentally, rather than primarily, that he is a naturalist. He is a naturalist, it seems to me, because through the intimacy of Nature lay the straightest road to his goal. He has the obvious ear-marks of the Stoic; but in the last analysis he comes out a far-sighted Epicurean, finding his happiness, his indulgence, in the ascetic practice of the Stoics. Least of all is he heir to the melancholic philosopher of Arden; for his melancholy is not a pose, but a deep, temperamental fact, perhaps never freely acknowledged to his own heart, and always lustily denied to the world. Moreover, Jaques knew his contemporaries, in and out; apprehended his own

times; knew his world; knew himself. But this modern Jaques did not know his own day and generation, — did not want to know them. It is pretty obvious that he had but a partial and distorted acquaintance with himself. He knew, however, the great works, the master minds, of old, whose message has come down to us so clarified by time that it breathes upon our souls like a pure spirit. He saw with a clear and kindred eye, he understood with his heart, the life of field and wood and water about him. The open sky, the solitudes of the windy hill-top, the sweep of the storm, the spacious changes of dark and dawn, these, it seems to me, spoke to him more clearly than to others.

Nevertheless, though the customary labels on Thoreau are thus misleading, it is certainly a convenience to have every man of genius in some handy way ticketed. If we call Thoreau the "Liberator," we remember him by what seems to me the prime function of his genius. What he chiefly sought for himself was freedom. What his life and his writings chiefly do for others is to arouse them, slap cold water in their faces, prod and hustle them on toward freedom. To Thoreau freedom meant escape from the bondage of petty and pinchbeck gods, the chance to live life fully, the leisure to think, and ripen, and enjoy. His best work is full of the suggestion of escape. It invites and urges the reader forth from his thralldom. It makes for emancipation,—spiritual, mental, moral, physical. In no other of his books is this liberating and arousing force so active as in "Walden," which carries on its title-page the brave announcement—"I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as Chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up."

In the pages of "Walden," therefore, we come into most direct contact with those currents of power which it is Thoreau's part to supply; we touch his personality with the most intimate privilege that he can afford.

But as I have said, Thoreau did not seem to know himself as thoroughly as he knew the wisdom of Meng or the ways of the chipmunks familiar to his door-sill. If we seek to know him merely through his work, we wrong him in many particulars, and get a picture of him which is sure to lessen his influence. He is not as unhuman as he likes to represent himself. He is not so perfectly self-sufficing. Above all, he is not always so robustiously jubilant over the drawing of his daily breath as he would have us believe. We wonder, now and then, if he does not protest upon this point just a shade too vehemently, as if willing to convince himself along with others. The first glance at his strong, narrow, deep-lined face, with its sensitive mouth, sympathetic

eyes, and brow troubled by remembrance, belies many a cold and confident paragraph. To be full open to his charm, to avoid being jarred into unreceptive antagonism by his extravagances, we must approach him through his life as well as through his work. We must allow fully for his personal equation.

Henry David Thoreau was born at Concord, Massachusetts, on July 12, 1817. His grandfather was a Frenchman, his grandmother, on the father's side, a Scotchwoman. In the fabric of his character, it seems to me, these two threads run a vivid pattern upon the austere web of his New Englandism. From the grandfather he inherited a Gallic fineness, a singular perception and mastery of the exact phrase, and perhaps, too, that manual dexterity which enabled him to do everything aptly and neatly that was to be done with the fingers. He could make a lead-pencil or a sentence, the one, like the other, very accurately adapted to its purpose. From his grandfather, assuredly, he derived the curious French accent which not even forty-five years of purest Concord English could quite eradicate. From the Scotch grandmother, we may guess, he drew that inimitable admixture of the far-leaping, illuminating imagination with the frugality that could weigh fractions of a farthing. But in the main he was true New England,—strong, somewhat limited, reticent, unconciliatory, yet liable to surprise one with sudden irradiations of tenderness and beauty. His charm is likely to appear as does the clump of harebell on the rock, or the flushing arbutus blossom on the rough-leaved hillock in the stump-lot.

Plain living, to the verge of deprivation, was the rule in the home of Thoreau's childhood; but the rich compensation of high thinking was not absent. The life of the intellect and spirit was perceived at its true value in that frugal household, and the family stinted itself with self-sacrificing rigor to provide for his education at Harvard. The home was a seeding-place of abolitionist sentiment. The first daring agitators gathered there to plan their assault upon the giant evil of their day; and thither came the fleeing slaves with their frightened faces set northward, to be hidden, and heartened, and passed on to the next refuge. It was a fit beginning, this, to Thoreau's work as a "liberator." This high enterprise of his people must have seemed to him symbolic of a larger emancipation which was afterwards to engage his efforts.

At Harvard (where he took his degree in 1837, and with characteristic frugality effected a saving of five dollars by refusing his diploma), he lived a life of rigid seclusion, shunning acquaintance, and absorbed in the classics. One friendship he made, however, and such a one as to

justify him in proclaiming himself rich in friends though he should know no other. He met Emerson, and won his comradeship. He was fourteen years younger than Emerson, and temperamentally fitted to receive the impress of his genius,—the most penetrating and insistent force, it seems to me, that American literature has produced. The mark of Emerson is on all Thoreau's best work.

After college Thoreau's life was uneventful, in the accepted sense of the word. He lectured a little. He taught in the Concord Academy for a time. He had a brief experience as private tutor in the family of Emerson's brother. He did some surveying for the farmers of his neighborhood. He could have earned his living by any trade which required skill of the hand, for in this direction his aptitude was marvellous. He was an efficient carpenter. He specialized, as we have seen, so far as to learn to make a lead-pencil; but as soon as he had achieved a perfect one he dropped the craft, to the astonishment of his friends, on the ground that when there was no further advance to be made he had no further interest in the effort. In a full survey of the man this does not appear like caprice, but rather as consistency; and it must be remembered that late in life, when his family needed his support, he resumed the occupation of making lead-pencils, and earned a living at it.

In 1845 Thoreau built himself the famous "Hermitage" on the shore of Walden Pond. His two years in that congenial solitude resulted in this book called "Walden,"—which was not published till nine years later. In 1849 he published "A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers,"—many-colored beads of observation, description, suggestion, apt quotation, strung upon the slenderest thread of travel. Thoreau claimed to know the world thoroughly, for he had "travelled many years in Concord." As a matter of fact, he went somewhat further afield than that, venturing into the Maine woods, over the Canadian border, and even southward on a daring enterprise into the very recesses of Staten Island. In truth, however, few indeed of the famous world-adventurers travelled to such advantage as he. For the perfect knowledge of his own little world about Concord supplied him with a stable point of departure and secure homing for many a voyage into the infinite.

It was before the migration to Walden Pond that an episode occurred which needs to be well taken account of in any estimate of Thoreau's character. He loved a woman, fitted, it seems, to be his mate; and he gave her up to his brother, remaining single thenceforward for her sake. It is not quite clear what part the lady had in this outcome; but the fact that he was once honestly in love acquits him of

too great remoteness from the brotherhood of men, and explains in part that underlying melancholy, as from a sentiment repressed and feeding upon itself, which his face confesses and his writings too protestingly deny. Such an act of renunciation is in keeping with the rest of the man as we find him, though hardly, perhaps, with his most strenuously advocated theories. It is difficult to give this factor an exact value, because it is impossible to know which, in reality, Thoreau loved best,—the girl, or the fine ecstasy of self-sacrifice. Renunciation is to some temperaments a luxury too exquisite to be denied; and there is enough of the feminine in Thoreau's mixed make-up to let one suspect that it may have been so in his case. However that be, the experience scarred him deeply. It proves, moreover, that he was not so icily unresponsive, so coldly philosophical, so loftily aloof from the heart-beats of humanity, as he would have us believe. In the light of this knowledge, as Robert Louis Stevenson has well said, "these pages, seemingly so cold, are seen to be alive with feeling"; and again—"he was affecting the Spartanism he had not; and the old sentimental wound still bled, while he deceived himself with reasons." We may take it for granted, then, that when he brags, "I love my fate to the core and rind," though sincere in the main, he is sometimes like the little boy in the dark who whistles to keep up his courage.

On May 6, 1862, at the early age of forty-five, this devotee of out-doors, this abstemious liver, this avoider of flesh, wine, and tobacco, this intimate of sanity and cleanness, with Nature's own permit, it would seem, to live a hundred years, fell into an ambushade. The scourge of his New England inheritance came upon him, and he died of consumption. His grave is in Sleepy Hollow, at Concord.

In appearance Thoreau bore a striking resemblance to Emerson, but with less of mastery in his face, and more of that sensitive appeal which he was forever repudiating. Also there was a wildness, a suggestion of the untamed, quite contradictory to the repose of Emerson's features. He was of middle height, lean, long-armed, slant-shouldered, with the large, capable, nervous hands which know how to do things, and the long feet that come down noiselessly and flatly on the twig-strewn forest paths, like an Indian's. His mouth was full-lipped, sensitive, almost self-indulgent, his nose was large, enduringly forceful like his chin; his eyes, of a blue full of light and attractive in expression, were deep set under rugged brows; his forehead was lined, and bore creases of impatient protest between the brows. This very individual face was framed in a throat-whisker, of the unlovely pattern so prevalent at that day, and a dishevelled super-abundance of dark brown hair. He moved

swiftly and furtively. He was not too dignified to dart through a hedge or over a neighbor's back fence, to escape an encounter which meant boredom. He was an untiring writer, an exhaustive reader, and stooped from his devotion to book and desk. Altogether, in his appearance no less than in his mental cast, he was a blend of the scholar and the woodman, the faun and the savant. However scholastic his formula, there is always a free, fresh impulse behind it. He is never so chilled by his book-lore but that he knows how to coax the partridge to feed at his door, the shy wood-mice to scurry up his sleeve and share his bread. In this mingling of contradiction lies, I think, no small part of the magic which gives wings to Thoreau's message.

As already indicated, both the message and the magic are nowhere so adequately presented as in "Walden." The circumstances which gave rise to this work form a vital portion of the work itself, and are minutely detailed throughout its pages. But they might as well be summarized here.

The bondage which proved hardest on Thoreau was the necessity of expending his time and his best forces in the mere struggle for food and shelter. When these were secured he found he had no leisure to be wise, no impulse left to carry on his growth. Looking about him he saw others in worse case than himself, in a more hopeless and grinding slavery to the mere cost of subsistence. He saw that for most others, as for himself, there was small chance of relief by a diminution of the cost of their seeming necessities. "The cost of a thing," he said, "is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run." His only alternative was to reduce the necessities of subsistence to their lowest terms. When, therefore, he fled from the world to Walden Pond, it was not solely from a selfish desire to read, write, and cultivate his powers unhindered. In winning freedom for himself he would point others the way to freedom. He would show how very small were those needs of the body which, too often, a man spends his whole life in supplying. He would prove that in every life there might be time to be wise, opportunity to tend the growth of the spirit. He writes, "I would fain improve every opportunity to wonder and worship."

On the shore of Walden Pond, on land which he got rent free because Emerson owned it, he built with his own hands "The Hermitage," at a cost, as he notes in an itemized memorandum, of \$28.12½. It was well built, shingled and plastered, with an honest, capacious chimney and cheerful open hearth. Here he lived for two years, chiefly on rice, Indian corn, rye meal, and molasses, at an average cost of

about twenty-seven cents a week for his food. On the land about his cottage he raised a crop of beans,—a crop which he found congenial exercise in cultivating. The beans yielded him a cash profit of \$8.71½, and a large return in philosophic meditations. Here he got close to the life of beasts, birds, and insects. He learned to discriminate all their notes. He kept a calendar of the flowers, and knew to a day when each would open. He kept voluminous “Fact-books,” recording minutely his ceaseless observations of himself and of Nature. When, after two years of health, growth, and effective work, he felt that he had exhausted what this kind of life had to give him,—that he had perfected it, as he had his lead-pencil,—and that he had proved his case, he frankly and without apology gave up the experiment and returned to the mitigated distractions of Concord village. As concerned his own personality, the experiment had been a success; but when a few years later (1854) the book which was its concrete product appeared in print, it was seen to have been a success also as far as humanity was concerned. He had expanded the lessons of his abolitionist childhood. He had made his cabin on Walden Pond, as Stevenson suggests, a station on man’s underground railway from slavery to freedom.

“Walden” is a book in which homely sense and heavenly insight jostle each other on the page. Most of its characteristics have been already conveyed, in diffusion, throughout the course of this note. It only remains to add a word as to its style, and as to the occasional extravagances of its statements. Its style is a kind of celestial homespun, plain, often harsh, but interwoven not seldom with the radiances of a white and soaring imagination. Its observations of the truths of Nature are as exact in their fidelity and beauty as its statements of higher and obscurer truths of the spirit are, sometimes at least, exaggerated. This extravagance, it must be remembered, is deliberate and for a purpose. He himself says, “No truth, we think, was ever expressed but with this sort of emphasis, that for the time there seemed to be no other.” Recognizing that men are dull to apprehend spiritual truths, he chose to make such truths more poignant and inescapable by presenting them without qualification, in such a manner that to the temperate mind they seem like one-sided statements. The reader of “Walden,” in particular, should bear in mind that Thoreau says: “I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be *extra-vagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced. . . . I desire to speak somewhere *without* bounds; like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments; for I am convinced that I cannot

exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression. Who that has heard a strain of music feared then lest he should speak extravagantly any more forever?"