

ANALYSIS

THE STYLE OF HENRY DAVID THOREAU

(1817-1862)

“Thoreau’s first conviction about the artist was that his words should speak not to the mind alone but to the whole being. He made himself more explicit (1852) in this distinction between the thinker and the artist: ‘Poetry *implies* the whole truth. Philosophy *expresses* a part of it.’ He said in the *Week* that ‘a true account of the actual is the rarest poetry, for common sense always takes a hasty and superficial view’—a remark not far from the strictness upon which modern poets have again insisted.

While still at college Thoreau had noted the Greek poets’ ‘appetite for visible images’ in contrast to the tendency of the northern imagination to ‘the dark and mysterious’ and its consequent ‘neglect of the material.’ His admiration continued to develop for the type of writer who ‘was satisfied with giving an exact description of things as they appeared to him, and their effect upon him.’ He found this ability pre-eminently in Homer, in the way he could convey the physical sensation of action: ‘If his messengers repair but to the tent of Achilles, we do not wonder how they got there but accompany them step by step along the shore of the resounding sea.’

Thoreau’s emergence from the cloud-land of ‘The Service’ onto similar solid earth was due in large part to his having clung fast to his perception that both language and rhythm have a physical basis....He held that the origin of words is in nature (‘Is it not as language that all natural objects affect the poet?’) and that they are symbols of the spiritual....Thoreau knew that the farmer’s lingo surpassed the scholar’s labored sentences. He had a relish for old sayings and rural slang, and set down many fragments of conversation with his friends the woodchoppers and the farmers. He hated writers who did not speak out of a full experience but used ‘torpid’ words, wooden or lifeless words, such words as ‘humanitary,’ which have a paralysis in their tails.’ To those who think of him only as the extreme individualist it may come as a surprise to find that from the beginning of his career he asserted the social foundations of language....

Thoreau was not inclined to rate language as superior to other mediums of expression on the ground that it was produced solely by the mind and thence could share more directly in the ideal....What separates Thoreau most from Emerson is his interest in the varied play of all his senses, not merely of the eye, a rare enough attribute in New England and important to dwell on since it is the crucial factor in accounting for the greater density of Thoreau’s style....He held that scent ‘was a more primitive inquisition,’ ‘more oracular and trustworthy.’ It showed what was concealed from the other senses: by it he detected earthiness....He became ecstatic when he talked about touch....He gave his most rapt attention to sounds. These alone among his sense impressions were to have a chapter devoted to them in *Walden*....‘The contact of sound with a human ear whose hearing is pure and unimpaired is coincident with an ecstasy’....

He came near to defining his own ideal of style when he objected to DeQuincey’s as too diffuse and flowing in detail, not sufficiently ‘concentrated and nutty.’ What he wanted were ‘sentences which suggest far more than they say, which have an atmosphere about them, which do not merely report an old, but make a new, impression; sentences which suggest as many things and are as durable as a Roman aqueduct.’ These lines tend to soar beyond bounds, until their swaying looseness is fortunately given ballast by the concluding example. If Thoreau at his best achieved weight and permanence, it was because he was always being called back from thoughts to the miracle of surfaces, because he lived up to his resolve: ‘Whatever things I perceive with my entire man, those let me record, and it will be poetry. The sounds which I hear with the consent and coincidence of all my senses, there are significant and musical....’ His remarks about music all lead to this point. He is never really talking about the art of music, of which he knew next to nothing, but about his close co-ordination, which alone made him feel that his pulse was beating in unison with the pulse of nature and that he could therefore reproduce it in words. By this analogy of the pulses he also emphasized the fact that resilient rhythm comes only from restfulness. And so he preached a gospel of leisure to Yankees....

In spite of his keenness in scrutinizing the reports of his senses, Thoreau remained wholly the child of his age in regarding the material world as a symbol of the spiritual....Yet even in that affirmation of faith Thoreau does not disappear into the usual transcendental vapor. He gives us the sense that he is a man whose grip remains firm on this world as well, whose hand can manage both his knife and his pencil.... Thoreau was not specially equipped either for abstract theorizing or for strictly scientific observation. But when he could base theory on his own sturdy practice...The impact of his humanity was dynamic....The power to unite thought with sense impression, the immediate feeling with the reflection upon it, is what Eliot has discerned to be the distinguishing attribute of the English metaphysical poets, and has called—in a term now somewhat worn by his followers but still indispensable for its accuracy—their ‘unified sensibility’.”

F. O. Matthiessen
American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman
(Oxford 1941) 84-98

“The first technical advance over the *Week* that one notices in the style of *Walden* is its freedom from literary self-consciousness. The poetic archaisms ‘o’er,’ ‘yon,’ ‘methinks,’ ‘ye,’ ‘e’re,’ ‘oft,’ make a negligible appearance now. *Walden* has, still, more quotations from poetry and Hindu scripture than may be evident at first, but their volume has been reduced considerably and they are less conspicuous in context. But these are evidences of a shift in attitude, which thus has its shaping effect of style.

Walden is addressed directly to the reader, as though Thoreau means simply to hold a conversation. It is a report which he intends to deliver in person. He must not be taken too much at his word, if he seems to ignore the technical problems of the literary artist and pursue only philosophy. Actually, he worked hard to develop his own personal style. This was vitiated in the *Week* by his poetizing, and the passages of ‘fine’ prose. They indicate an embarrassment in facing the facts of his subject matter, an inclination to decorate and ‘improve’ with literary and fanciful allusions. The style of *Walden* is purified of such literary gingerbread by Thoreau’s intention to speak in the first person as directly as he can.

This attitude of conversational informality implies a diction closer to common spoken language, and figures drawn from the commonplaces of experience rather than from literary models. The vocabulary of informal speech is heavily weighted with words that refer to common objects of use in household and trade. It is out of these that Thoreau constructs his metaphors. The *Week* revealed his love of memoirs, semi-illiterate histories written by soldiers and colonists who took part in the events they described, tales handed down by word of mouth, old sayings, myths, and legends. This is the folk literature and philosophy of the formally uneducated....*Walden* is his chief success in adapting formal literary style to the ‘homely’ expression of familiar and common experience, and it is a document which is related in spirit more closely to folk literature than to formal literary tradition.

One characteristic of the spoken language of common people is its reliance on proverbs, old saws, and catch phrases, with which stories are described and given their point. Thoreau in *Walden* not only investigates many such old saws to see how much truth there is in them, but gives them an ironic twist for his own purposes. A catalogue could very well be made of Thoreau’s ‘new saws,’ which have all the character of proverbs. Such as: ‘A man sits as many risks as he runs’ (II 170); ‘...speech is for the convenience of those who are hard of hearing’ (II 156); ‘Old deeds for old people, new deeds for new’ (II 9); ‘If you have any enterprise before you, try it in your old clothes’ (II 26).

Thoreau was especially fond of drawing out the opinions of the uneducated, judging the wisdom of the customs they adhered to, and the extent to which they relied on practices devised by their own learning. He speaks of the winter fishermen, ‘wild men, who instinctively follow other fashions and truth other authorities than their own townsmen...They never consulted with books...’ The education of the mass of men is by custom and practical experience, rather than by theory and school; Thoreau in *Walden* speaks as one reporting the results of his own practical education. He strikes at times the attitude of the wise old codger, though always ironically: ‘I have lived some thirty years on this planet...’ (II 10) When reporting information he has read or has been told, he generally qualifies it with ‘as they say,’ or ‘it is said,’ to indicate how useful knowledge or expressive myths circulate among mankind, he helping to pass them along; such lore being not unlike that of the fisherman who knows how to find worms in winter. Even the

Bible is no better qualified as an authority: 'They are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt...' (II 6)

On its surface level *Walden* is a record of practical experiments in building, cooking, planting, keeping warm, and measuring things out of sheer curiosity. The price of nails, the recipe for bread, the best bait for fishing, the exact dates of the pond's freezing and melting, represent the kind of detail he feels obliged to account for with exactness. *Walden* is, on this level, a compendium, or handbook on how to arrange economically the practical details of one's life. The curiosity that leads one beyond simply useful facts also has its folk character in Thoreau, in his reliance on first-hand information and his love of myth and hearsay. If Thoreau early came to the conclusion (1841) that the best thought was 'without somberness,' he clearly believes now that it should have the positive quality of humor. In the metaphors of *Walden* there is a deliberate amused extravagance... 'We meet at meals three times a day, and give each other a new taste of that old musty cheese that we are.' (II 151) When humor is not involved in metaphor, it exploits the shock of paradox and contradiction: 'I have a great deal of company in my house; especially in the morning, when nobody calls.' (II 151) Serious-minded people perhaps read *Walden* without realizing how humor qualified throughout Thoreau's personal extravagances and overstatement, since one aspect of his humor is the pose of dead seriousness [like southern tradition of deadpan humor leading to Twain].

The force of his metaphors is frequently due to the empathetic shock of an extravagant and ironic image: 'If the legislature regards it [the pond], it is chiefly to regulate the number of hooks to be used there; but they know nothing about the hook of hooks with which to angle for the pond itself, impaling the legislature for a bait'.... (II 156) The metaphor in *Walden* rarely draws on literature, formal learning, or iconographic symbols for its point; a practice that may be contrasted, for example, with contemporary 'metaphysical' poetry. Its image is ordinarily not visual, but...empathic, involving physical action-weight, force, movement....The metaphor thus reflects also Thoreau's aim to relay not merely intellectual, but total experience, and it affords him the opportunity to exploit the common objects and actions that he can observe as he looks about him.

Walden occasionally even shifts to the present tense, though its first chapter looks back at a distance of several years. In all these ways, it maintains without interruption a reference to present time and present experience, on as concrete a level as is ever established in any piece of fiction. An empirical foundation is laid for ideas."

William Drake
"A Formal Study of H. D. Thoreau"
M.A. thesis (U Iowa 1948)
reprinted in *Thoreau: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Sherman Paul
(Twentieth-Century Views/Prentice-Hall 1962) 74-78

"It is important for the reader to recognize the fact that Thoreau in his writings is often crowing loudly to wake his neighbors up. As he once wrote to his friend Blake, 'I trust you realize what a great exaggerator I am.' He quite consciously makes bold overstatements to shock us into energy of thought. We must not always take what he says literally. When he states that he 'could spit a Mexican' or 'could live on board nails,' he is being ironic, using attention-getting statements to force us to think through our own ideas on slavery or on diet.

Thoreau's writing is vivid with wit and satire. James Russell Lowell's charge that Thoreau had no humor reflects on Lowell rather than Thoreau. With the possible exception of some of his political essays, there is hardly a page that is not lighted up with a variety of humorous touches. Sometimes they are puns (such as his description of the unsuccessful fishermen as members of the ancient sect of Cenobites—that is, 'See, no bites'), sometimes slapstick as in the passage in *Cape Cod* where he describes the efforts of the driver to close the door of the overloaded stagecoach while the passengers 'timed our inspirations and expirations so as to assist him.' But most frequently his is a critical humor akin to that of Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*: satire to help us see the foibles of our age and civilization.

The difficulty is, of course, that Thoreau's standards of value are so different from those of the man in the street that they seem topsy-turvy and the whole point of his humor is sometimes missed. Instead of

poking fun at the town drunkard or idiot, he laughs at the successful merchant or the hardworking farmer. Instead of congratulating the man of means, he offers him condolence. He laughs at the man of fashion and praised the worker in rough clothing. But he is not being perverse. Rather he is seriously questioning popular standards and suggesting by implication (and often explicit statement) that there are higher, more valid standards to follow. His humor is, in other words, not an end in itself, but a means of social criticism. It is an effective element in his style of writing.

As a literary artist, Thoreau is as interested in how he says something as in what he says—although not for any ‘art for art’s sake’ reason, but for the purely practical reason that to communicate effectively one must write well. His way of writing well was very different from that of his great contemporaries. The result of his conscientious discipline was perhaps the first really modern prose. One has only to compare his writing with that of most of his contemporaries to see how much their writing has dated, how modern he is.

Concreteness is a basic characteristic of Thoreau’s prose. Although many of the other transcendentalists, whatever their felicities, were commonly vague, diffuse, and abstract, Thoreau is down to earth and practical. Even when discussing abstract ideas (as, for example, in the famous ‘Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in’ passage in *Walden*), he conveys his meaning concretely. While his language is often highly figurative, his images are familiar to the general reader (as, for example, the cock-crowing simile...).

Thoreau’s vocabulary is large. He will send a conscientious reader to the dictionary frequently. His unusual words emerge naturally from his search for the precise word to suit his needs. On those rare occasions when it may appear that he has misused a word, a check with the dictionary will usually reveal that he is using the word in its basic sense. In *Walden*, for example, when he speaks of his ‘withdrawing room,’ he is not coining a phrase but returning to the original form of ‘drawing room’ for the sake of a pun.

Thoreau had a warm interest in form. Although many of his early critics belabored him for what they termed the ‘formlessness’ of his writings, a careful examination of his works should have convinced them that each sentence, each paragraph, each chapter stands in its particular niche for a particular reason and that any attempt to remove it will do damage to the structure of the whole. Thoreau’s feeling for form is most obvious in the structure of the two books he had completed before his early death—*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden*. The former is based on the pattern of the week with one chapter for each of the seven days. *Walden* condenses the experiences of two years into one...in order to emphasize the seasonal pattern of life.”

Walter Harding
Eight American Writers: An Anthology of American Literature
(Norton 1963) 415-16

Michael Hollister (2015)