

## CHAPTER XX

### Henry David Thoreau

THE SECRETARY of the Thoreau Society reports increasing interest in this famous "ne'er-do-well." It takes a long time for word-of-mouth advertising to get around, but because that kind of publicity attaches itself to first-class merchandise only, its effectiveness is irresistible. Recognition of Thoreau's contribution to the philosophy of individualism could not be put off forever. Several books and articles have, of course, cropped up to take advantage of the market created by this renewed interest in Thoreau, but unfortunately these "lives" and commentaries have come during an era when the dominating thought vogues are psychology and collectivism; so that these studies are somewhat overlaid with psychiatry and social theory.

Therefore, if you want to know Thoreau you had better pass up the diagnosticians and get down to reading Thoreau himself. You will find him an "open book"—quite willing to tell you frankly, and interestingly, what he thought and why he lived the way he did. He is quite companionable. Begin, then, with his essays: *Civil Disobedience*, *Slavery In Massachusetts*, *John Brown*, *Life Without Principle*. If you want more, and you will, go in for *Walden*—but you will have to read it slowly to get your money's worth out of it—

and then put in an evening or two with the revealing extracts from his journals, or diaries as we call them.

Maybe you too will decide that Thoreau was "maladjusted." But you might withhold judgment until you define this pathological mouthful. Before the war, the boy who ran away from home and joined the army was "maladjusted"; during the war the boy who refused to join the army on principle was similarly labelled. The word, therefore, as used, simply means that the person so described is either incapable or unwilling to submit to the going herd-cult. It connotes some emotional or mental weakness, and carries a bit of condescension and of pity with it; that the ability and willingness to stand the crowd off may indicate exceptional self-reliance is overlooked. Sometimes one cannot help suspecting that the perfectly "adjusted," those who are quick to fit themselves into any thought-pattern prepared by the neighbors, find the term "maladjusted" a convenient covering up of their own weakness. Maybe the word is plain name-calling, pulled up out of the gutter by "science." The suppressed rebel in us resents the courage of those who rebel openly.

In this connection I am reminded of a story told by Artemus Ward about Billson, his partner in the show business: "Billson," says I, "you hain't got a well-balanced mind." "Yes, I have, you old hoss-fly," he says (he was a low cuss), "yes I have. I've a mind that balances in any direction the public rekwires, and that's what I calls a well-balanced mind." Thoreau did not have that kind of mind, which makes him, it seems, a tid-bit for psychologists. Their scalpels might more usefully dig into the minds of conforming

## HENRY DAVID THOREAU

mediocrities; it might be socially beneficial to discover the consistency of mass putty.

A biography of Thoreau worth reading, because it concerns itself with revealing the man from his own point of view and not with the biographer's estimate of him, was done by a Frenchman, Leon Bazelgette. "The gods," says Bazelgette, "have made a Henry who is all of a piece, and they have placed him on earth among objects and souls that are different and queer." There you have it. What do we mean by "queer"? If all but one of us were color blind, that one would indeed seem queer to us; but how would our inability to distinguish colors appear to the gifted one? And so, as this country bumpkin went through Harvard in his stout green suit, while the fine young gentlemen were uniformed in traditional black, the incongruity which caused them to smile was as nothing to the oddity, as he saw it, of voluntarily squeezing one's personality into a convention. Even in his teens he displays that "militant devotion to various axioms that he identifies with himself." He could not be cast into a mold; he was not made of that stuff. Harvard had facilities which he could use to improve himself. It was a means; the end was a better Thoreau. It was not for the "old joke of a diploma" that he read enormously, far beyond the requirements of the curriculum, though outside of it. At nineteen he wrote: "Learning is art's creature, but it is not essential to the perfect man; it cannot educate."

When we reflect on Thoreau we must always consider the sanity of the world in juxtaposition to his. Take his first experience as a school-master. In his system of pedagogy he finds no place for the whipping rod; for this heresy the

headmaster calls him to account; being an honest man he must deliver what is expected of him for his wages; therefore, he lines up at random a half dozen of his pupils and thoroughly flogs them. He has done his duty by the headmaster. But, he must be honest with his axioms, too; therefore, he resigns. He could not afford to let Thoreau drift into false values. Was he or the pedagogic rule queer?

A professor of economics once told me that the last word on the subject was pronounced by Henry George. "Do you teach him?" I asked. "No, he is not in the curriculum, and if I tried to teach Henry George it would be worth my job." Thoreau could not understand that kind of thinking. If flogging were part of the curriculum he would cut himself off from it. He valued Thoreau more than his job.

We talk a lot about freedom these days. When you dig to the bottom of this talk you realize that, first, very few know what freedom is and, secondly, still fewer want it. The fact is that what is generally called freedom consists of increases in wages (or handouts), more profits (or subsidies) and a bottomless abundance of privileges. For such things we—particularly the more affluent among us—are ready to lay freedom on the line. The essence of freedom, which is an inflexible respect for oneself, is being bartered every day for such trifles.

Thoreau was not in that business. Once the dwindling fortunes of his father's pencil factory needed looking into. Henry undertook the job and by careful application produced the best pencil in America. He made only one; but that was enough. As an honest workman he satisfied himself; as a good son he put his father in the way of a competence. Why should he sell himself for pencils? Profits

## HENRY DAVID THOREAU

were not among the axioms that he identified with H. D. Thoreau. Luxuries came too high if the price was freedom. Imagine our "captains of industry" passing up a profit or a privilege for the chance to be men!

Freedom is an individual experience. If you have it, its objective expression will find many forms; but if you don't have it you will get along all right, like any four-footed animal or "sound" citizen, and you may even go to Heaven, but you can never be free. Chattel-slavery was the issue in Thoreau's time, just as state-slavery now is. A lot of people talked about the iniquity of the system. What did Thoreau *do*? He refused to pay the poll-tax on the ground that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts would use the funds to capture and return fugitive slaves. Now, when you refuse to pay taxes you are indeed a dangerous man, for you undermine the institution whereby some men live by the labor of others; therefore, you must be clapped into jail until you see the error of your ways and make your proper adjustment. Of his one night spent behind bars Thoreau writes: "I did not for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar . . . I could not but smile to see how industriously they locked the door on my meditations. As they could not reach me they resolved to punish my body; just as boys, as they cannot come against some person against whom they have a spite, will abuse his dog. I saw that the State was half-witted, that it was as timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons . . . I lost all my remaining respect for it, and pitied it." Such a man cannot be enslaved.

It need hardly be said that Thoreau would have no truck with institutions, organizations or "movements." When free-

dom submits to a formula it rids itself of responsibility, the responsibility to one's own axioms. To check one's thought and behavior against the dictates of one's conscience may prove unflattering; to chart one's course by such a check-up requires a powerful will; it is to avoid such revelation and responsibility that people are prone to hide behind rituals, committees, flags and by-laws. But, flight from individual responsibility amounts to abandonment of freedom. You are not free when you refuse to make choices in your own name. You enslave yourself when you take refuge from the consequences of your decisions in an organization, a nation or any collective fiction. To Thoreau such "escapism" was unthinkable, queer. So, he writes: "As a snow-drift is formed where there is a lull in the wind, so, one would say, where there is a lull of truth, an organization grows up." For him there never was a lull of truth.

The value you put on freedom is, like all objective value, the price you are willing to pay for it. Thoreau's price came high, and the difference between him and his contemporaries is not to be found in the lingo of psychology but in the greater worth he put on his self-esteem. He rejected the mob because mingling with it called for a sacrifice of that self-esteem at the altars of convention and hypocrisy. That he was not unsocial is evidenced by his friendship with people of similar timber and by devotion to his family. Whether it was with Emerson or the wood-cutter, with Channing or an Indian guide, his social contacts had to be on an above-board basis, unencumbered with trivialities; any other terms did not interest him. If being social at any cost of self-esteem is the mark of balance, then Thoreau was decidedly unbalanced. But, the evidence points rather to

## HENRY DAVID THOREAU

his having a higher sense of values than the ordinary run of men. He was determined to be free of rubbish. Once he was asked to sign a pledge, to which the names of the "best" people of Concord were attached, that he would treat all people as brothers. He declined to do so until he found out how other people would treat him. He was not going to be sociable for the sake of sociability; he demanded as much as he gave. He would neither accept nor bestow condescension.

But the real price he paid for freedom was not in ridding himself of the strictures of society but in curtailing his desires. He conquered his appetites in order to be free; he was not going to be a slave to things. His venture into the pencil business shows that he had the makings of a successful industrialist. With a brother he operated a school that was the envy and chagrin of rival schoolmasters, not only because of its success but more so because of some advanced ideas of pedagogy which the brothers introduced. As a surveyor he was in demand and highly respected, both for his accuracy (he made his own instruments) and for his integrity. Those who hired him for any kind of job, whether farm work or painting a fence, were sure to get their money's worth because Thoreau would not cheat himself by doing poor work. He might have made money also as a lecturer and a writer had he been willing to compromise his standards, for he was proficient in both fields. But, he was not willing to give up what the making of money costs: freedom. For that reason he refused regular occupation of any kind—although he was never idle—and got himself the reputation of being a ne'er-do-well. From his own point of view he was doing far better than his detractors, for while

they got respectability for their industry and pains, he had self-respect.

The rock on which every attempt to rid man of his shackles is ultimately wrecked is man's unwillingness to pay the price of freedom—the price which Thoreau cheerfully paid. Every "cause" must crash on it. For, when the theorizing is done, the books are all written, the debates have been resolved into a formula for action, there remains always this irremovable obstacle: one must live. By this dodge the lipservers simply admit that the worth they put on their ideal is less than that they put on their accustomed way of living or the prospect of improving it. The ideal is something nice to talk about, to use as a tonic for one's sluggish intellectual liver, but when it comes to giving up something for it, that is a different matter. It is more pleasant to make one's peace with the going order, right or wrong. And if someone pricks your conscience, you get rid of him by declaring that "the time is not ripe," or by saying, "wait until I make my pile."

Thoreau said that if he saw a reformer coming his way he would run for his life. He had no need for reform. The man who identifies axioms with himself wants no preacher, while the preacher will have no influence with those who are constitutionally incapable of axioms. If the reformer justifies his calling on the ground that through education moral values that are lacking may be instilled, the answer is that all experience denies that possibility. Education can present choices; it cannot make decisions. No pedagogical system has ever succeeded in eliciting values which do not exist in the person.

Improving on Jefferson, Thoreau says: "That government



HENRY DAVID THOREAU

is best which governs not at all;" then he wisely adds: "and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have." Will they ever be prepared for it?