

HENRY D. THOREAU, ORIENTAL

BY FRANCES FLETCHER

“I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive, rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good.”

There was none of the Calvinist in Thoreau. Though externally his life was one of negation and great austerity, Thoreau knew the simplicity of his manner of living to be not a virtue in itself, but the path leading towards spiritual self-knowledge and realization. In fact, he often called attention to the lack of sensual perception in mankind, and openly repudiated the religion of his countrymen. “Christianity,” he says repeatedly, “is a religion of philanthropy.” And where is the beauty of necessity of philanthropy in a philosophy which recognizes the true place of man in the natural scheme?

It is rather to the Vedas, the Zendavestas, Upanishads and Puranas that Thoreau gives his loyalty. “Idleness is the most productive industry,” he insists. Only meditation and study enrich the mind. Action in itself is devoid of sense, entirely without meaning. Man, far from being the son of God, or even close to the divine, is conceivably (often Thoreau says certainly) on a lower plane of existence than birds, trees and plants.

Consciousness is continually opposed by Thoreau to *action*. Being is a far cry from appearance. “Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured, however far away. It is not important that he should mature as soon as an apple-tree or an oak.”

And again: “Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts. God will see that you do not want society. If I were confined to a corner

of a garret all my days, like a spider, the world would be just as large to me while I had my thoughts about me."

This is the very essence of Hinduism. Like a spider, the East Indian holy man or saint spins the web of consciousness about him; and in the web he lives and dies. He has no other clothing, no other shelter. *Being* is nirvana. Conscious identity with the spirit of the universe is the goal and attainment of life. The holy man becomes nature itself.

The hatred and contempt with which Thoreau regarded the stupidity and commercialism of the average dweller in the town, is well known. The farmer, tilling his land and growing his beans for profit in the market, was no more worthy in his sight than the publicly exalted politicians and "great men" of the day. The naturalist found them all despicable and ridiculous.

Thoreau liked winter because in that season man seemed to live a "more inward life." He believed with Abu Musa that "sitting still at home is the heavenly way; the going out is the way of the world." He found pleasure in moonlight, and understood perfectly why it is that the Hindus compare the moon to a saintly being who has reached the "last stage of bodily existence." He perceived readily how religions might spring up around the moon as goddess and how the rites of worship might serve to stimulate and invigorate the participants. "The moon is a mediator . . . I am sobered by her light and bethink myself. It is like a cup of cold water to a thirsty man."

Astrology, Thoreau maintained, held within itself the germ of a higher truth than does modern astronomy. Discredited with official academicism though the ancient science was, Thoreau could find nothing to arrest his attention in the dry mathematics and cold deductions of the then current astronomy. "The naked eye," he said, "may see further than the armed. It depends on who looks through it."

Mankind is but a "phenomenon in the horizon." The life of man is mean and trivial. Only nature is "holy and heroic." Man's existence takes on beauty and significance only as it approximates the clarity and simplicity of nature.

"To be awake is to be alive," the New Englander writes again. Yet he confesses never to have met a single man who was quite awake. Only one in a million was capable of intellectual exercise, while only one in a hundred millions might be aroused to the point

of being able to live a poetic or divine life. As for himself, Thoreau wished to "suck all the marrow out of life." He wished not to discover, when he came to die, that he had never really lived. He deliberately sought then to "front only the essential facts of life."

In another civilization this ideal would have been less difficult of achievement. In the civilization into which Thoreau had, however, the accident to be born, to seek out the essential facts of existence implied an extreme individualism very rarely encountered. The birth of so unusual a man was for the age a felicitous anomaly: and for Thoreau himself, we are convinced, a misfortune not so deeply regretted as it might perhaps have been had there existed no Walden Pond, no Cape Cod, no Maine Woods, no adjacent Quebec nor virgin forests through which the seasons swept their changing harmonies of color, sound and animal life.

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{ Subscription price, \$4.00 a year; single copies, \$1.00. }
{ Canadian postage, 15 cents; foreign postage, 20 cents. }

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

Publishers: DAVID NUTT, London—G. E. STECHERT CO., New York—FELIX ALCAN,
Paris—Akad. Verlagsgesellschaft, Leipzig—NICOLA ZANICHELLI, Bologna—
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Published at the beginning of JANUARY, APRIL, JULY, OCTOBER

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