

THOREAU THE POET,
TOGETHER WITH A
STUDY OF HIS IMAGERY

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INTRODUCTION

America's Transcendental Age, a time of vigorous intellectuality and literary fertility, although dominated by the philosophical serenity of Emerson, produced a man of unusual multiplicity: a caustic wit, a passionate pleader for truth and liberty, a first-rate classical scholar, a faithful, fierce lover of nature, a poet remembered for his rugged meter, mentality and surprise - Henry Thoreau. An unusually gifted man, Thoreau's mind and spirit were such that success would be his in almost any endeavor he attempted. He was a successful scholar at Harvard, loved and respected by his students, a solvent manufacturer, an outstanding naturalist. No one less than Emerson himself, at one time, stated in a letter written across the ocean to Thomas Carlyle that this young poet named Thoreau was writing the "truest verses." But where the star of some poets shone, even if weakly, through the centuries, until today it is brighter than ever, the name of Thoreau as a poet progressively declined. A century ago, great men - as they are now considered in American Literature - discussed his poetry. Although not always favorably held, the verses were by no means ignored. Bronson Alcott received them

appreciatively; Lowell criticized their rawness, Hawthorne gave them a mitigated nod. But by 1847 Thoreau's prose was beginning its quest for acknowledgement; and soon, in his own opinion, and in the minds of his circle Thoreau began to be viewed as a writer whose future was in the prose medium. When he died, the discerning realized that he was one of America's literary great men. And by the beginning of the next century, Thoreau author of Walden was internationally known; Thoreau the poet, was in oblivion. And today, outside of the loving interest of a few loyal scholars his poetic efforts are virtually unknown.

The aim of this study is to attempt to cast some light upon this poetic situation by a presentation of the criticism, poetic theory and imagery of Thoreau's poetry.

CRITICISM

William Sharp calls Thoreau's poetry dabbling, for "he had little ear for metrical music."¹ Joel Benton discovers the unconscious melody of the brook's ripple and the jocund spirit of the bird's song.² Emerson discards the question by saying that "...we do not seek in him 'lyric fineness'." However, Lowell looked for that quality and called Thoreau's poetry "versification" and said he never learned bad rhyming of the river and the sky and called him "more culpable, as he has shown that he can write poetry at once melodious and distinct, with rare delicacy of thought and feeling."³ Channing thought that "...in his verse he more than once attains to beauty, more often to quaintness."⁴ Again the statement is made

¹ C. W. Moulton, ed., Library of Literary Criticism of English and American Authors, p. 275.

² Joel Benton, "Poetry of Thoreau," Lippincott's, XXXVII, 1885, p. 491.

³ James R. Lowell, "Review of 'Week'," Massachusetts Quarterly Review, (December, 1849), 49-51.

⁴ William E. Channing, Thoreau, the Poet Naturalist, p. 220.

that much as he may have acted as a poet - which is of no importance at all - for the most part he did not so write. The best that this critic can say, after he has objected to the lack of organic construction in the poetry as a whole, is that in Summer Rain "...there is, at all events, no very obvious deficiency in the mechanism of the verse."⁵ For Louisa Alcott he produced "woodnotes ever sweet and strong,"⁶ but the Saturday Review announced "Thoreau was not a poet"⁷ and Salt and Sanborn qualify this judgement by saying, "If metrical skill be insisted on as an indispensable condition of poetry, he can hardly be ranked among the poets."⁸ Atkinson pursues this course when he states, "As a writer his spirit soared on the 'viewless

⁵S. M. Lane, "Review of Poems of Nature," Athenaeum, (October 17, 1896), 517-518.

⁶Louisa Alcott, "Thoreau's Flute," Atlantic, (September, 1863), p. 281.

⁷"Thoreau's Verses, Review of Poems of Nature," Saturday Review, (January 18, 1896), p. 55.

⁸Salt and Sanborn, Poems of Nature, by Thoreau, pref., xvi.

wings of Poesy' though he wrote scarcely a verse worth offering at the shrine of poets. Consider the gaunt, homely measures of his poetry, which actually repel the beauty of his thought. Indeed his prose gave spur to his poetical fancies with more translucence than his verse."⁹ He says furthermore, "His verse seems to me execrable; his prose is glorious."¹⁰ Atkinson also states that while "he was contributing strange verse and plain prose to the Dial....and he was winning, withal, quite as many guffaws as plaudits, Margaret Fuller....could not stifle a ribald smile or two."¹¹ Norman Foerster has this to say about Thoreau:

Post, at all events, he was not, for a man can scarcely be a poet without achieving a certain bulk of successful verse, and the total bulk of Thoreau's verse, most of it, unsuccessful, would fill less than an

⁹ J. B. Atkinson, Henry Thoreau, the Cosmic Yankee, p.30.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 73.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 72.

ordinary volume. That he wrote it at all is to be explained less in terms of his artistic powers, since he lived in a time of renaissance when the homespun of prose was disparaged in favor of purple singing robes, in a time when, it has been said, one could not throw a stone in the city of Boston without hitting a poet. So Thoreau versified; his prose works abound in interjected poems or poetic fragments, many of which have the odd effect of serving, not to lift the reader aloft on wings of sudden inspiration, but to make him halt in consternation before a veritable New England glacial boulder, shapeless and inert.¹²

He adds that

Thoreau had something of a Puritan distrust of art as "very dangerous." Thus with him it was always "my life," never the glory of divine poetry. His natural metrical skill was more deficient than Emerson's, most of his verses are benumbed and crawl, with an occasional spurt, like grass in the autumn. There is little lyricism present and although Thoreau was inspired, the mood was gone before he versified. His best poetry was never expressed, for he was so intent on understanding and appropriating his visions that when the time for singing arrived he was struck dumb by poetic delay. He was a great poet "in posse." His poetic feeling was worthily embalmed in prose.¹³

¹² Herman Foerster, "Thoreau as Artist," Sewanee Review, XXIX, 2-13.

¹³ Ibid., 2-3

Raymond Adams notes that Thoreau may have lost interest in poetry by the time he returned to Cambridge, November 29, 1841. On that occasion he went to his old haunt, the alcove of English poetry, and complained that "poetry is cornered up in an alcove." Adams adds that Thoreau then wondered "if it would not be a shorter way to a complete volume to slip at once into field or wood." Perhaps, Adams continues, the transcendental saunterings in company with Emerson and Alcott and perhaps a rereading of Nature had convinced him, as he says, that poetry was mean "compared with the commonest nature," and had made the spot at Harvard that had been pleasant now musty and remote from the world. Poetry is as desirable as ever but embalming it in books impresses him as sacrilegious. Poetry received a new interpretation on the occasion of his return to the alcove. Adams further on pithily states that for Thoreau poetry was wisely abandoned in favor of prose.¹⁴

F. O. Matthiessen theorizes that Thoreau's subscription to the "Organic Principle," namely, that the inner

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R. A. Adams, "Thoreau's Literary Apprenticeship," Studies in Philology, XXIX, (October, 1932), p. 626, 629.

poetic force determines the appropriate expression, may be a root cause of the formlessness in his poetry.¹⁵ Canby contends that Thoreau realized that his poetry was poor compared to his prose, that he was guilty of excessively crude lines as well as unfinished poetry that ran into prose at the end.¹⁶ Carl Bode concedes the uneven quality of Thoreau's verse but maintains that the main body of his poetic work has a "dry, oblique power" and for its minimum recommendation has the "large, astringent force of young genius."¹⁷ It may be pointed out, however, in answer to this preponderance of critical hostility that Thoreau's independent being achieved his poetic end without concern for poetic fashion. In contrast to this generally unfavorable critical opinion the assertion may be made that Thoreau's artistic refinement may be noticed in the very multiplicity of his rhythms, in the flexibility of his vocabulary, and in the delicacy and number of his nuances.

¹⁵ F. O. Matthiessen, The American Renaissance, p. 134.

¹⁶ H. S. Canby, Thoreau, p. 318.

¹⁷ Carl Bode, Collected Poetry of Thoreau, pref. viii, xii.

THOREAU ON THE POET AND POETRY

Thoreau's early Journals abound with references to his theories concerning poetry and the poet. The later volumes show less concern with this subject. From this evidence it may be deduced that his youthful days were the more poetically absorbed.

Thoreau always views poetry on a grand scale. It is a companion of the universe's wheeling systems. So tremendous an impulse cannot be defined other than in its own terms. The most exact analysis by the best minds is not adequate to the task, for the poet will instantly disprove its validity by operating outside of its limitations: "You might as well think to go in pursuit of the rainbow, and embrace it on the next hill, as to embrace the whole of poetry ever, even in thought. The best book is only an advertisement of it, such as is sometimes served in with the cover."¹⁸

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H. D. Thoreau, The Writings of Thoreau, Journal, I, 114 f.

A loving nature to Thoreau, is the prime characteristic of the true poet, for love is the special concern of poetry. "All that a man has to say or do that can possibly concern mankind, is in some shape or other to tell the story of his love,....to sing; and if he is fortunate and keeps alive, he will be forever in love."¹⁹ Serenity and health of mind are additional qualifications for this being who has a message for his fellow-men. The bare wailing over man's misery cannot justify the poet's existence, he must be strong so as to sustain not only himself but also those who hear him. For he is "no slip of fairy stock, who requires peculiar institutions and edicts for his defense, but the toughest son of earth and Heaven, and by his greater strength and endurance his fainting companions will recognize the God in him."²⁰

The final essential note for⁷ the poet to possess is the appreciation of beauty, which is known partly by anticipation, for no beauty will appear where none is expected.

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H. D. Thoreau, op. cit., Journal, VI, 237.

²⁰

Ibid., Week, p. 362.

A poet will be able to see beauty everywhere, for "such is beauty ever, - neither here nor there, now nor then, - but wherever there is a soul to admire,"²¹ and to admire without speculation but in a spirit of reverent wonder, "without reference or inference."²²

The poet of our qualities has many
The poetic consequence flowing from an artist of such qualities is characterized by magnificence. The poet "conveys the least information, even the hour of the day with such magnificence and vast expanse of natural imagery as if it were a message from the Gods."²³

Poetry is not a loose, disorganized medium; it has logic "more severe than the logician's."²⁴ The humorous is excluded entirely from poetry, for "...genius is so serious as to be grave and sublime."²⁵ Good poetry is so

²¹
Ibid., Journal, I, 26.

²²
Ibid., p. 61.

²³
Ibid., Week, p. 95 f.

²⁴
Ibid., Journal, I, 114 F.

²⁵
Ibid., p. 358

simple and natural that Thoreau calls it healthy speech and says "....that when we meet it we wonder that all men are not always poets."²⁶ Or otherwise expressed, "A true account of the actual is the rarest poetry."²⁷ The good poem then manifests the magnificence of simplicity and healthy speech while giving a veracious and logical account of reality's harmony with Nature.

Thoreau considered the relationship of poetry and the poet's life. The poet's observation must be subjective, otherwise interest or significance would be lacking, for "....the sum of what the writer of whatever class has to report is simply some human experience."²⁸ The melodic deposit of a poem is struck from the poet's being. The tides and drifts of his own life are his thematic material. "Whatever things I perceive with my entire man, those let me record, and it will be poetry."²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., p. 289.

²⁷ Ibid., Week, p. 347.

²⁸ Ibid., Journal, VI, p. 237.

²⁹ Ibid., II, p. 442.

The experiential residue of an individual is the poem's foundation; and the richness of experience and the worth of the poem have a one to one relationship. "The poet deals with his privatest experience,"³⁰ "sings how the blood flows in his veins,"³¹ "writes the history of his body."³² Expression of this experience is secondary to its acquisition,

....I, on my side, require for every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me.³³

Living and poetry are mutually inclusive; the poem is the experience. "The true poem is not that which the public read....It is what he (the poet) has become through his work."³⁴ Thus poetry is more than a mere verbal exercise to engender an attitude.

³⁰ Ibid., VI, 188.

³¹ Ibid., Week, p. 94.

³² Ibid., Journal, III, 36.

³³ Ibid., Walden, p. 6.

³⁴ Ibid., Journal, I, 157.

The uniqueness of this viewpoint is attested to by Thoreau's position on the relationship of poetry to Art, Science, Philosophy, and other media of man's mentally explorative equipment. The artist and the poet are not the same personality. "There are two classes of men called poets. The one cultivates life, the other art, - one satisfies hunger, the other gratifies the palate."³⁵ The artist lacks the unconsciousness of the poet and he sees this exemplified by Goethe.³⁶ The two types vary in their dependence on law,

The Man of Genius (poet) may at the same time be, indeed is commonly, an artist, but the two are not to be confounded. The Man of Genius, referred to mankind, is an originator...who produces a perfect work in obedience to laws yet unexplored. The artist is he who detects and applies the law from the observation of the works of genius, whether of man or Nature.³⁷

The poet, then, is the trail-blazer.

³⁵ Ibid., Week, p. 400.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 348.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 350.

Poetry, science, philosophy, etc., are closely allied; "....every poet has trembled on the verge of science." All are considered as branches of a common knowledge in his grouping of poets, philosophers, and statesmen as those apart from and of greater endurance than the "host of unoriginal men,"³⁸ and his prophecy is that "in the last stage of civilization, Poetry, Religion, and Philosophy will be one."³⁹

However, he is not unperceptive of a mutual antagonism - "Poetry cannot breathe in the scholar's atmosphere;"⁴⁰ and because the poet is not concerned with objective reality as such, "It is impossible for the same person to see things from the poet's point of view and that of the man of science."⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid., Excursions, p. 307.

³⁹ H. D. Thoreau, op. cit., Journal, I, 18.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 288.

⁴¹ Ibid., III, 311.

Thereau constantly stated the superiority of poetry over science and philosophy; "...the poet's second love may be science."⁴² Philosophy marches behind it,⁴³ History is only a prose narrative of poetic deeds,⁴⁴ the astronomer's vision is limited to the dome of his observatory while the poet's freely ranges from earth to heaven.⁴⁵ Scientists are confined to outline or pencil sketches while the wealth of color belongs to the poet.⁴⁶ All men now philosophers or scientists wished to be poets;⁴⁷ poetry, by implication, can express the whole of truth, while philosophy can only express a part of it,⁴⁸ and finally, "...the poet uses the

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid., Week, p. 61.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 93.

⁴⁵Ibid., Journal, IV, 471.

⁴⁶Ibid., III, 301.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 401

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 232

results of science and philosophy and generalizes their widest deductions."⁴⁹

Since the poet does not operate in a social vacuum, Thoreau was concerned with the poet's relation to his readers. "A great poet will write for his peers alone, and indite no line to an inferior."⁵⁰ This is so, without doubt, because to a great poet no men are his inferiors, for "...he speaks to the intellect and heart of mankind, to all in any age who can understand him."⁵¹ The emotional receptivity of the audience is directly proportional to the emotional drive of the poet;⁵² however, too often the melody of poetic song is "unheard by most men, whose ears

⁴⁹ Ibid., Week, p. 387.

⁵⁰ Ibid., Journal, I, 274.

⁵¹ Ibid., Walden, p. 111 f.

⁵² Ibid., Journal, I, 565.

are stepped with business"⁵³ or like "...the wings of a moth...come down to earth, while the poet whose adventurous flight they evidence has been snapped up by the ravenous vulture of this world."⁵⁴ Thoreau admonishes that for understanding of poetry, the poet's approach must be adopted, "I would warn my readers that they must not try my thought by a daylight standard, but endeavor to realize that I speak out of the night. All depends on your point of view."⁵⁵

The poet is one with the sympathies of other men but he is yet distinct and apart. Seclusion and solitude are basic components of his makeup.

Let him perambulate the bounds of Imagination's provinces, the realms of fairy, and not the insignificant boundaries of towns. The excursions of the imagination are so boundless, the limits of towns are so petty.⁵⁶

⁵³ Ibid., II, 308.

⁵⁴ Ibid., IV, 259.

⁵⁵ Ibid., Excursions, p. 325.

⁵⁶ Ibid., Journal, III, 5.

Since the poet accents the spiritual in his life his reward is sharper sensitivity. This too marks him apart from the ordinary person, as

the latter are unable to grasp and confront the thought which visits them....to faint for expression or even conscious impression. What merely quickens or retards the blood in their veins and fills their afternoons with pleasure, they know not whence, conveys a distinct assurance to the finer organization of the poet.⁵⁷

For Thoreau then, the poet serves a prismatic function - that of breaking up the white light of men's thoughts into many interpretative parts.

Nature can hold no secondary attraction, the poet must be intimately related to her. A strong interdependence must exist between them, as "Nature will not speak through but along with him. His voice will not proceed from her midst, but, breathing on her, will make her the expression of his thoughts....He is another Nature, - Nature's brother. Kindly offices do they perform for one another. Each publishes the other's truth."⁵⁸ Homer is given as an

⁵⁷ Ibid., Week, p. 364.

⁵⁸ Ibid., Journal, I, 74 f.

illustration of that perfection of intimacy that the eye is completely unaware of. "It is enough if Homer but say the sun sets. He is as serene as Nature, and we can hardly detect the enthusiasm of the bard. It is as if Nature spoke."⁵⁹

The poet is indebted to Nature for his subjects, and she furnishes him the expression, too often fruitlessly. "Each humble plant, or weed, as we call it, stands there to express some thought or mood of ours, and yet how long it stands in vain!"⁶⁰ Nature's offering of expression is not indefinite, "Nature furnishes him not only with words but with stereotyped lines and sentences from her mint."⁶¹

Thoreau specified simplicity as the prime requisite of the themes of poetry. No framework is too weak for him.

⁵⁹
Ibid., Week, p. 94.

⁶⁰
Ibid., Excursions, p. 257.

⁶¹
Ibid., Week, p. 95.

Nester's simple repast after the rescue of Machaon is a fit subject for poetry. The woodcutter may sit down to his cold victuals, the hero to soldier's fare, and the wild Arab to dried dates and figs, without offense; but not so a modern gentleman to his dinner.⁶²

And yet, "Many a man who should rather describe his dinner imposes on us with a history of the Grand Khan."⁶³ Thus the simplicity or elaborateness of the dinner controls the suitability of the theme.

The native should be the next note of thematic content. The savage and primeval aspect of Nature is a part of our heritage, and Thoreau would have us memorialize it - Indian chant has this desirable quality.⁶⁴ The remote, alien theme meets with his censure:

What right has a New England poet to sing of wine, who never saw a vineyard, who obtains his liquor who would not dare, if he could, tell him what it is composed of. A Yankee singing in praise of wine!⁶⁵

⁶² Ibid., Journal, I, 61.

⁶³ Ibid., X, 188.

⁶⁴ Ibid., Week, p. 56.

⁶⁵ Ibid., Journal, II, 433.

There should be no conscious pursuit of the poetic theme. "It is in vain to write on chosen themes. We must wait until they have kindled a flame in our minds. It is the theme that seeks me, not I it. The poet's relation to his theme is the relation of lovers."⁶⁶ The theme, in his final evaluation, he believes to be unimportant.

In his random comments, interspersed throughout his works he gives his ideas on what may be collected and organized as the elements of poetry. Atmosphere is considered.

A true poem is distinguished not so by a felicitous expression or any thought it suggest as by the atmosphere which surrounds it....true verses come toward us indistinctly, as the very breath of all friendliness, and envelop us in their spirit and fragrance. Much of our poetry has the very best manners, but no character.⁶⁷

Language is not to be couched in artistic majesty, it is not to "sit upon a golden bough and sing for the

⁶⁶ Ibid., III, 253.

⁶⁷ Ibid., Week, p. 400.

lords and ladies of Byzantium." Plain, homely speech is ever the quest. He finds simplicity exuberant, a plain sentence flowery,⁶⁸ and observes that men write floridly while striving to imitate this simplicity, preferring to be "misunderstood rather than to come short of its exuberance."⁶⁹ The epigrammatic brevity of Latin verse language is admired.⁷⁰ Thus, here, as well as in themes Thoreau speaks out for the unadorned.

The individual word has an importance in itself. "As all things are significant, so all words should be significant,"⁷¹ - and their most important quality is freshness, and, as always, conformity to experience. They must issue from the poet. A word that is expressively apt, also is fresh because it is emotionally sustained. "Shall I not

⁶⁸ Ibid., Journal, I, 343.

⁶⁹ Ibid., Week, p. 107.

⁷⁰ Ibid., Journal, II, 143.

⁷¹ Ibid., III, 86.

have words as fresh as my thoughts? Shall I use any man's word? A genuine thought or feeling can find expression for itself if it have to invent hieroglyphics."⁷²

Thoreau was fascinated by names and has this to say about them, namely, that "there is all the poetry in the world in a name,"⁷³ and he calls "...the very names of the commodities....poetic, and as suggestive as if they had been inserted in a pleasing poem -- Lumber, Cotton, Sugar, Hides, Guano, Logwood...."⁷⁴ Thoreau then while he concentrated on thought content was not unaware of the importance of his medium of expression. Thus he states, "I want nothing better than a good word."⁷⁵

Thought content, however, must be conceded to be Thoreau's main consideration. He notes the value to poetry

⁷²
Ibid., II, 480.

⁷³
Ibid., Excursions, p. 20.

⁷⁴
L. Bazalgette, Henry Thoreau, Bachelor of Nature, p.279.

⁷⁵
H. D. Thoreau, op. cit., Excursions, p. 20.

of a church or some other meditative retreat to serve as a "thinking room."⁷⁶ Other poets are exhorted not to seek expressions, but thought to be expressed.⁷⁷ He warns of the dangerous procedure of concentrating on form to the exclusion of content -

When the poetic frenzy seizes us we run and scratch with our pen, delighting, like the cock, in the dust we make, but do not detect where the jewel lies, which perhaps we have in the meantime cast to a distance, or quite covered up again.⁷⁸

The province of literary criticism should be thought, not style. Great poetry is distinguished from its inferior imitation by its great weight of sense, not its words. Thought is the causative of style, and the stylistic homogeneity of many writers flows from their lack of original thought; if the poet carefully nurtures his thought, the style will automatically present itself; "For if I find any thought worth expressing, I do not wish to alter the

⁷⁶
Ibid., p. 14.

⁷⁷
Ibid., Journal, III, 157.

⁷⁸
Ibid., I, p. 73.

language. Then the author seems to have had all the graces of eloquence and poetry given him."⁷⁹

However, Thoreau is not unaware of the need for ornament in poetry and considers the measure more than mere ornament. He believes that good poetry makes its own music and the measure coincides with the sense, but that most so-called poetry has no inherent music. He terms the prosaic always a loose expression, and in contrasting it with the precision of poetry finds that the latter depends on a particular rhythm or measure for which no other could be substituted.⁸⁰ He affirms that a poet simply follows Nature's example in using the measure caused by rhyme. "It was summer, and now again it is winter. Nature loves this rhyme so well that she never tires of repeating it."⁸¹

Stevenson's "Sedulous Ape" is somewhat the model Thoreau has in mind when he concerns himself with how poets

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 344.

⁸⁰ Ibid., VI, 74.

⁸¹ W. E. Channing, op. cit., p. 97.

shall write. "Improve every opportunity to express yourself in writing, as if it were your last."⁸² He knew well the psychology behind writing when he expressed that, "We cannot write well or truly but what we write with gusto;"⁸³ he calls those birds true singers who "...amuse themselves with singing."⁸⁴

He continues his exhortation to the aspiring poet by instructing him to rely upon his instinct. "Be faithful to your genius. Write in the strain that interest you most. Consult not the popular taste."⁸⁵ To this end Thoreau encourages himself, and through himself others, to a life that is more alive. "I must walk more with free senses.... I must let my senses wander as my thoughts."⁸⁶ Nothing is

⁸² H. D. Thoreau, op. cit., Journal, III, 140.

⁸³ Ibid., II, 441.

⁸⁴ Ibid., IV, 190.

⁸⁵ Ibid., III, 144.

⁸⁶ Ibid., IV, 351.

more important than to be forever on the alert, and expectant.

"What is a course in history, or philosophy, or poetry.... compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen?"⁸⁷ For, "As you see, so at length will you say."⁸⁸

Thoreau maintained that expression should be contiguous to impression. "Write while the heat is in you....the writer who postpones the recording of his thoughts uses an iron which has cooled to burn a hole with."⁸⁹ However, he also advised returning to experience a second time, "...not too late but within a day or two, when there is some distance but enough of freshness."⁹⁰ For with the first impact of experience we may be unable to express our feelings, but later talent returns. Without the second view much would be lost.

⁸⁷ Ibid., Walden, p. 121.

⁸⁸ Ibid., Journal, III, 85.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 294.

⁹⁰ Ibid., IV, 29.

How little that occurs to us in any way are we prepared to appreciate! We discriminate at first only a few features, and we need to reconsider our experience from many points of view and in various moods to preserve the whole fruit of it.... I do not know at first what it is that charms me. The men and things of today are wont to be fairer and truer in tomorrow's memory.⁹¹

A monastic rule of life manifests itself when Thoreau asserts the value of manual labor for the poet. He will write the tougher truth for it, as it imparts force, precision, and homeliness to his style.⁹²

If he has worked hard from morning until night, though he may have grieved that he could not be watching the train of his thoughts during that time, yet, the few hasty lines which at evening record his day's experience will be more musical and true than his freest but idle fancy could have furnished.⁹³

In conclusion, it may be stated that Thoreau's theories of poetry and the poet are detailed and inclusive. They bear, in themselves, a valuable commentary on the poetic nature of Thoreau.

⁹¹ Ibid., IX, 301 ff.

⁹² Ibid., Week, p. 109 ff.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 108.

THOREAU'S POETIC IMAGERY

The poetic image is an artful product of the poet's skill and generally, he is unaware of the revelations which flow from a study of not only its content, but also from a study of the multiplicity of others that he creates. The poet's imagery is one of the most striking and revelatory aspects of his poetry.

Thoreau, like all poets, employed much imagery and one of the first questions that can be answered from a study of his imagery is whether or not he generally imitated the great poets of the past or present. Thoreau was known as a voracious reader and the same study can reveal what books if any he was indebted to as the sources of his imagery. The influences of his reading appear to show themselves at times when his motive for writing paralleled that of his source.

But a detailed study of Thoreau's poetic imagery shows small influence of past or contemporary books or writers. The preponderant majority of his images are drawn from nature directly. The fusion of images from this source with his imagination gives it a distinctive pattern, and the recurrence of this nature imagery indicates that it has a special relationship to his attitudes.

Thoreau's primary imagery may, for convenience, be classified as meteorological, astronomical, physiographical, and natural historical.

His secondary imagery may be grouped as Eastern, Medieval, Metaphysical, and Warlike.

Meteorological phenomena are a frequent source of his nature imagery. Air, fog, clouds, sky, haze and mist, sun, wind, snow, winter, summer and autumn he uses in an original manner.

An honest character is likened to "on every side he open was as day." The wind can be a "laboring gale" or it can be spoken of as having "amid the shrouds / sighed plaintively." Boreas is at one time the tyrant who "came blustering down from the north" and at another time one of the mystic "quill drivers (who) first dipped their pens in mist" in the beginning of the world. Fog he calls the "night thoughts of the earth/dream drapery/dew cloth and/ fairy napkin/Wind blown meadow of the air." Its likeness to a meadow is repeated in "Low Anchored Cloud" as a "drifting meadow of the air."

The sky is equated with the virtue of patience when he mentions that "It waits as waits the sky,/until the clouds go by." A "far blue eye" is a "remnant of the sky." At another time, "Thy indelible mild eye/is my sky." Clouds

~~or as a result of the continued pressure from the "Station~~
can drop tears into the sea; they can "hang e'er in damask
feld;" be "Time's team" and serve as a mark of the evanescent
in "cloud-like shores." ~~of the same type of imagery as~~

He advances the idea of tenuousness in connection with
haze when he mentions that "he forayed like the subtle haze
of summer;" or describes the "weaving gorgeous fancies at my o
will/In subtler webs than finest summer haze." Mist is the o
expression for self generation when he ^u writes that the flow of
of mind from "Walden" is "wafted as is the morning mist up
from thy surface." He personifies mist as "still slumbered
on the heights."

The sun at times is equivalent to the quality of bright-
ness, "Their swords flashed a thousand suns," "Their banner
cleaved Byzantium's dust,/And like the sun it shone," and
"In vain observe the western blaze." However, the meaning
of the sun image is changed when he refers to, "The rich
receive in our gross air his birth,/as from low suns are
slanted golden gleams." Also, the sun is used as a sign of
intuitive apprehension when he is writing of "The Inward
Morning" and how he hears within "such cheerful morning news"
as "in the eastern skies are seen,/The harbingers of summer
heats/Which from afar he bears."

Summer is redolent of "sweets," pleasure, and serenity;
"should surfeit on the summer's sweets," "Every hour was a

summer's day,/So pleasantly lived we," "serene Summer paints the southern fields." Autumn in "The Fall of the Leaf" is meant to bring to mind maturity and restraint, "And to its (summer) early freshness brought/Late ripened fruits, and andautumnal sky. October airs merit "such fineness." But in "I am the Autumnal Sun" the season is played up with an evertone of winter's grief.

Winter has a "stormy brew" and is stern as it "reigns upon northern hills." Autumn has "winter lurking within my moods." Man will "pine upon winter's crudity." Generally Thoreau's use of the winter image is consistent with the universally prevailing notion of its harshness. Snow is "summer's canopy," "Earth's tears," her mantle of purest white, "fantastic wreath."

Thoreau's astronomical imagery concerns itself with stars, meteors and planets. The stars like the sun in Thoreau's imagery stand for the brightly beautiful aspects of life. When he wishes to celebrate the virtue of poverty he likens the advent of the poor man to the "stars (that) drop down the sky...." The Muse becomes "the star that guides our mortal course." Strict behavior is the moral procedure that "could elicit back the brightest star." When Thoreau uses a love motif as in "Let Such Pure Hate Still Underprep," "two solitary stars" become the expression of

the principals. Auroral phenomena is as the love of Thoreau's that lives in the east and is as a "steady light..../Pales the sunset, makes the day abide."

Meteors are equated with freedom of action when they "drop down the sky without chagrin." The poet's life does not "drop freely but a red/By its resistless course/As Meteors do." The comet as well as the meteor in "Nature" is the highest ranging work of nature in pride of splendor and is superior to the "zephyr that may blew/Among the reeds by the river low." Thus in his apostrophe to "Thou dusky spirit of the wood,/Bird of an ancient brood," he calls it "a meteor in the summer's day."

Planets, loneliness and solitude are as one when we read "Now like a lonely planet there it floats" so when in "Love" "We two that planets erst had been/Are now a double star" the implication of loneliness and solitude is buttressed by the conclusion "Into new space we enter,/And evermore with spheral song/Revelve about one center." Again, when he uses planetary imagery, "opaque mass," "bidireal time" in "I Have Rolled Near Some Other Spirits Path" the implication of the meeting of lonely, solitary spirits is felt.

Thoreau's physiographical imagery, geologically speaking is consistent with traditional metaphoric use. Strength is "like the rock." The abundance of life is "Life's valley."

His unattainable idealism is the "mountain (that) sinks by day." Abandoned carelessness is "like torrents of the mountain." Acts of friendship are as "cliffs to me/And I hid beneath their lee;" The mark of enduring remembrance is made with "lasting stone."

The shore is ever synonymous with permanence and the fixed, "Thou seemed the only permanent shore," "I am its stoney shore." Time is transitory; thus the image of "the shoreless seas of time."

Thoreau's hydrological imagery concerns itself with seas, rivers and waves. The sea is the vehicle of the mysterious, "Island us ever, like the sea,/In an Atlantic mystery;" it is a fit companion to the stars, "Towards that bright heavenly sea." But it can be cruel, "The sea can scarcely brag more wrecked than I," and ominous, "Pathless the gulf of feeling yawns;" yet it is the inspiration for ceaseless moral activity, "as ocean feeds the babbling founts/Which find in it their grave."

Thoreau's love of the river is reflected by his citation of the river and its components. The blood of man reminds him of a river. The subdued manifestations of love are "smothered streams....which flow/More bright than Ohlegethon." Heated air appears as a river above. The "downhill" of life should be a gentle stream. The mystic flow of thought is "noiseless as the lapse of thy own waters."

Waves are not neglected. Waves have a variety of imagistic use. Their form is the "easy pillow" of the sun's rays; "winter's curls," "White wreaths." Waves can be gentle and "slowly beat/just to keep the moon sweet;" powerful, "Ere other influences my waves has quelled."

Consonant with the hydrological area of Thoreau's imagery is the use of images with a nautical overtone. He writes of "an idea becalmed in eternity's deep;" of an echo that "seems acaiking the sky;" of fog as a "low anchored cloud." A comet is a "celestial privateer" and it is "soul-ling thy way without a sail." Small birds migrate by "in fleets" and "they tack and veer on high." The issue of slavery has "ballasted with hate...the vessel of love, the vessel of state." The rugged perpetuity of hills is "like some vast fleet,/sailing through rain and sleet." The immobility of mountains and trees is "as the "patient quietude of vessels in a haven/Await the morning breeze." He uses the image of a bark to express the solitary pursuit of the ends of life, "some solitary bark stand out to sea," and "the sad experience of his fate/Since his bark struck on that unlucky rock."

The imagery from Natural History is, in the main, arboreal and avicular. Trees are courageous when "thread-bare, so poor and thin/They rear their boughs to the October

sky." Leaves serve many purposes: "crisped and yellow leaves" can be the "hue and textures of my mood;" "the rustling of a withered leaf" is the "constant music of my grief;" they play poignant music, "with delicate touch the prelude of the Fall;" they serve as a marker of time, "the aged year turns on its couch of leaves;" they vivify the wind, "For Zephyr rustled past with leafy tread."

Eagles, in the avicular category are consistent representatives of the free and strong. His love "must be as free/ As is the eagles wing;" The lover must be idealistic, one who never "trained his eye to look/Beneath the sun." The pursuit of truth must know no cease, for the eagle "resteth him not/A moment in his flight, the air is not his perch." Though Thoreau's eye is continually on high he does not neglect the lowly mouse and as a contrast to the soaring but restless grandeur of the eagle he mentions that Summer is "like the meadow-mouse snug in nest." The turtle "dull and slow" is celebrated not for its speed and power but for its degged resistance. The sparrow's flight is derogatory of uninquiring curiosity. Swifts bring to mind carelessness. Time itself "doth plume its wings." Snake is "light-winged, Icarian bird." The crow and owl deceive themselves when they think that they are soaring to the heights when in reality

they are dipping their way beneath the clouds. Haze is the "Bird of the sun, transparent winged/Owlet of noon." In "My Love Must Be As Free" the "fowler's net " is the society of the saloon that would stay his eagle flight.

A small portion of imagery is selected from farming. The trite image of making hay while the sun shines is given a freshness by Thoreau's observation that "the most unsocial made new friends that day/As when the sun shines husbandmen make hay." He compares the roaming of flocks to the wandering surveillance of his eyes, "My eyes my flocks are," and the heights of speculation are his crops. "Mountains my crops are." The abiding repose of a mountain is likened to that of "solid stacks of hay." When he wishes to extol the potential richness of the world of thought despite all the work done in it he recalls "fields e'er which the reaper's hand has passed," and states that "there after harvest could I glean my life."

The imagery classified as Eastern, Medieval, Metaphysical and Warlike may, to a great extent, be derived from his verified reading in these areas, ~~of intellectual concentration~~. The bells of the East even if simulated by tongs or a shovel hitting a kettle, "out of this hovel,/It makes an eastern temple by the sound." A particularly ominous note transpires when a "wakeful host" is conjured "far in the

east (when) their larum rings." Stars shining through clouds "seem like Parthian arrows shot." Day ends at its "funeral pyre" and "when the sun puts out its lamp." The blue of the firmament is called its "cepe." Life is like a "long westering caravan." Godlike progress moves swiftly "with an Assyra^{id} pace." The sun is "the god of day" and "rolls his car up the slopes." The just, serene and with "gleaming brows" are as "the temples of the Day." Faith, virtue and truth would be in life if "We'll one another treat like gods." The fragrance of inspiration can be "more rich than are Arabian drugs."

Medieval knighthood evidently fascinated Thoreau. While he is "on the alert for some wonderful Thing," he is "straightway a hero in coat of mail." He entreats the skies to be his "corselet blue." His desire for a life of solitary power is a life "like a stately warrior horse,/That walks with fluent pace along the way." The earth is his "faithful charger." "Threadbare trees" are "Poor knights...which bravely wait/the charge of Winter's cavalry." He brings the reader to "tented fields with cloth of gold" and in his fight with an angel he selects "clashing bucklers" for the arms of their "tourneying." He adds neither words or boldness "can leap the moat that girds/The sincere man."

There is some of the Metaphysical strain in Thoreau's imagery as attested to by his picturization of the advent of Autumn as the time when "Some grains of night tincture the noontide air." The last, lengthened boom of bells are "as solemn and load as the crack of doom." The sound coming from rocks in a stream are smothered "as it were a youthful sin." The sea when continually looked at becomes "like a watery humor on the eye." The swelling of a river hides her "very current.../as deepest souls do calmest rest."

Thoreau, for a solitary soul, uses an unusual number of images that may be clustered about the term Warlike... Spears and arrows are repeated with practically the same meaning when in "Away! Away! Away! Away!" stars are his "spear-heads in the sky,/My arrow tips ye are," and in "Within the Circuit of This Pledging Life", freezing twigs and rails are "icy spears...adding to their length/Against the arrows of the coming sun." Shadows of trees are "like sentries" protecting them. Life is a "slow march." The night wind rustles like "as if a force of men there staid," and "E'en the remotest stars have come in troops;" again, "The forest flows as if/An enemy's campfire shone. The phenomena of nature are "heavy ordnance."

Indians, scouts and pioneers interested Thoreau. Smoke is a "scout." He wonders if a comet is "some great general's scout." The wild aspect of mountains is like that of the "Indian scout/Who lingers in the purlieus of the towns. "The quiet of the Sauhegan River is like "an Indian's stealthy tread." The Wachusett is "Thou western pioneer."

The indoor life did not appeal to Thoreau and only two of his images have that connotation. He calls the surface of Walden Pond a "narrow skylight." And paradoxically, his escape to the outdoors is when he is "by venturesome spirit driven/Under the eaves of heaven." In isolated instances Thoreau uses foreign locales for his comparisons, as when he envisions the fen of his village as a "Rural Venice" and his neighbor's corn field as the "Golden Horn." Reference to family or religious affiliation is remarkable for its notable absence except in an instance for each: the sea is "like a silent godfather" and the Marlborough Road is a "living way, as Christians say." Perhaps this independent singleness is studiously explained when he remembers the Wachusett River as one "who like me/Standest alone without society."

Generally speaking, Thoreau's use of imagery even though it is mixed is handled with logical and artistic success.

But there are instances when his use of the imagery is maladroit. In "The Just Made Perfect" he describes the stately progress of the souls of the just toward heaven; he says that "they have caught the pace of Heaven," and that "the sky before them is cast up/Into an arched road." Then after having encouraged the growth of a note of majestic spaciousness in the consideration of the environment of these exalted and expanded beings, he compares the road to the "gallery of the small mouse that bores the meadow's turf."

In "Life," he compares his life first to a stately warrior horse, then to a solitary bark, finally to an eagle. The final lines, however, give the logical impression because of poor poetic transition that the life that has "unwearied wings" still "can breast the waves with an unsanded bow." The movement from the horse, to the eagle and to the bark is obscure. The images, per se, give the desired intent of solitary, tireless strength but their use is such that the final overall image is confused.

Throughout the foregoing descriptive classification of Thoreau's imagery it may be seen that the poet's use of his images was generally traditional. The images have not been selected qualitatively in order to support this assertion; they have been extracted from Thoreau's poetry in the manner

and order in which they showed themselves. And it appears rather clear that Thoreau used the traditional connotations of his poetic imagery to tell the world of his unconventional life. His heavy use of nature imagery heralded his final development as the prose master of the gospel of the simple, natural life. His knightly and war-like imagery precluded his heroic fight for his ideals. His Eastern images, since they are from those regions of the world where the inward takes precedence over the outward life, signified his concern for the primacy of the spiritual.

The virtual absence of any of Thoreau's imagery that related to organization of society, civil, communal or religious served as a caveat that from the being of such a man unusual doctrines would issue forth.

Thoreau the mature man realized the promise seen in his verses by being true to one of the basic tenets of his philosophy, that is, he was true to his inner self. He wrote his poetry when he felt it during his younger years; when he no longer felt the versifying compulsion he turned to prose. We have seen that critical opinion agrees that although Thoreau's poetry was promising, his prose was greater. His concern for theories about poetry and the poet reveal his intense and abiding interest in the poetic impulse.

in and beyond the years of his own poetic productivity.

And a study of his poetic imagery as to its nature and use reveals the character of an independent personality destined to use the materials of life in a highly personalized manner.

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