1. *Fall 1837: Commencement*

RETURNING TO CONCORD from Harvard College in the early fall of 1837, David H. Thoreau had just turned twenty. Of medium height, or a little below, with sloping shoulders and an out-of-doors complexion, he had about him the suggestion of a seafaring race. He walked with unusual energy and people remembered his open face and pleasant flexible mouth, and the strong Roman nose which some thought made him look like Caesar, while others were reminded of Emerson. He had fine light brown hair. He was not, on the whole, a striking or compelling figure except for one feature, his eyes, which were strong, serious, large, and deep set; bright blue in some lights, gray in others. As he walked around Concord people noticed that his eyes rarely left the ground. When he did look up, however, he swept in everything at a glance. His eyes had a startling earnestness, and they were alight with intelligence and humor.[1]

Harvard commencement had been held on the thirtieth of August, following rather than preceding the summer vacation as was common in those days. Within two weeks, Thoreau was not only back in Concord, living with his family in the Parkman house facing Main Street (on the site of the present Public Library) but he had a job teaching in the Concord Public Schools. Eighteen thirty-seven was a year of financial crisis for the United States and the start of a serious depression that lasted into the 1840s. Bank after bank had suspended payment, and Thoreau was lucky to have any job at all, let alone a good one. But before he had held the job for two full weeks, he had thrown up the position rather than administer the expected daily canings. A famous anecdote tells how one of the Concord school board members, Nehemiah Ball, went one day to observe Thoreau's teaching, called him into the hall, and reprimanded him for not using the cane. Stung and angered past self-possession, the impulsive twenty-year-old teacher

went back into the classroom, picked out six students at random—rather as one deals with mass mutiny in the army—and proceeded to beat them. He then quit the job. It was all terribly sudden. His entire career in the public schools was auspiciously launched and catastrophically concluded before a month had passed since commencement.[2]

But the fall was not all disappointment. A few days before his run-in with Ball, about the middle of September, he was out walking and searching for Indian relics with his brother John on a Sunday evening, "with our heads full of the past and its remains." Coming to the Sudbury River bank at the mouth of Swamp Bridge Brook, a spot overlooking Clamshell Hill with Nashawtuc Hill off to the right, Thoreau launched into "an extravagant eulogy on those savage times" when the Indians roamed the Concord woods before the white man came. Throwing himself into the part, he asked, "How often have they stood on this very spot, at this very hour? Here," he went on, "stood Tahatawan and there," pointing at random toward the ground, "is Tahatawan's arrowhead." It was a mere rhetorical flourish, the gesture of a boy playing Indians, but when he impulsively stooped—to complete the scene—and picked up the nearest bit of rock, it turned out to be "a most perfect arrowhead, as sharp as if just from the hands of the Indian fabricator." It was one of those small, lucky chances that happen to everyone, but to some more frequently than others. In later years, one visitor after another was to tell how Thoreau could find arrowheads almost at will. Partly, of course, he was looking for them and expecting to find them. But this one must have seemed like an omen, a sign that the young schoolteacher's imaginative sympathies, however extravagant and romantic, were at bottom neither foolish nor misplaced. He always insisted that his whole life had been one of extraordinary luck, and he could have said, as Picasso did of a similar life, "I do not seek, I find."[3]

This particular autumn was of good omen for Thoreau in other ways. For this was the time when he first became really close to Emerson, making a deep impression that the older man came back to again and again in later years. Emerson remembered Thoreau as a "strong healthy youth, fresh from college" that fall. Thoreau on his side had just read Emerson's *Nature* that spring. By the end of the third week in October, during that New England season which, Thoreau once remarked, would by itself "make the reputation of any climate,"

Emerson had persuaded Thoreau to start a journal and was encouraging him to think of writing as a career. Who could worry about being rejected by Nehemiah Ball when he had been accepted as a friend by Ralph Waldo Emerson?[4]

It was a busy, eventful fall. There were walks and river outings, there was the active family life at home with his mother, father, and brother, not to mention aunts and boarders. He also worked for his father, making pencils. After the first teaching fiasco, there was the anxious search for another job, and there was the tonic, life-changing friendship with Emerson. He was also doing a great deal of reading, writing, and thinking during this fall. As his habits became settled in later years, he found a daily walk of several hours' length a necessity. But he was from the start as much a writer as a walker, and a daily stint at his desk was always just as much a necessity to him. "I seek a garret," he wrote in the inaugural entry in his new journal. He traveled Concord in his walks and river outings. He traveled everywhere else via books in the garret, and in between trips, he wrote out his accounts of both kinds of excursion.[5]

Until this fall of 1837 Thoreau is an indistinct figure. There are some facts, some letters, various recollections of him as a boy or student, but everything is external, so to speak. We see him only as others saw him. Even his own letters and college themes seem written exclusively for others and almost all of this early material is curiously unrevealing. But when he begins, in October of 1837, to keep a journal, the quarry and substance of much of his best work, we begin to see the whole man as we follow the crowded, highly charged, and rapidly evolving inner life that accompanies the busy outer life and reveals the thoughts behind the eyes of the familiar photographs.

It is simply astonishing how many of his major themes appear in the record of this one autumn. He already takes a green interest in woods and fields. He was attracted to the river and its possibilities for travel and for metaphor. There is already in the midst of an increasingly busy life an unembarrassed interest in preserving some solitude for himself. There is a great deal this fall about poetry and poets—quotations from English poets, from Goethe and Virgil, and some of his best poems date from this year. Already he was preoccupied with the idea of a primitive, heroic life, distantly but attractively reflected in the early literature of northern Europe as well as in the ways of the

North American Indians. He is already interested in self-culture, what the Germans called *Bildung*, and already his jottings show that deepest, most constant characteristic of his encounter with the natural world, indeed with life: a passionate, ecstatic sense of joy.

All this fall Thoreau was reading Goethe and Virgil with an eagerness inspired by natural affinity. He divided his time between reading and translating Goethe's *Italian Journey* (*Italienische Reise*) from the German and walking about Concord. Just as Goethe recounts in that book his own discovery that the leaf is the law of plant morphology, so Thoreau began to perceive nature as infinite variations on certain underlying laws.

In Virgil he recognized something more important yet. Among his mid-November notes this sentence stands out: "I would read Virgil if only to be reminded of the identity of human nature in all ages." Plain, unoriginal, even flat-footed as this sounds, it is, together with its complementary idea of the identity of nature itself in all ages, the cornerstone of Thoreau's mature thought, the basis and starting point for his most deeply held, most characteristic convictions about history, nature, society, and the individual.

From the point of view of the newspapers, the great events of 1837 were the accession of Queen Victoria, the protest in Canada against English rule—a rebellion that broke into open warfare—and a serious financial panic in America which came right on the heels of the messy, unpopular, bitter, and inconclusive Seminole Indian War in Georgia and Florida. The chief events in young Thoreau's life that fall were his encounters with Emerson, Goethe, and Virgil. The fall itself had been his true commencement, and sometime before the year was out, as though to mark the new start, he changed the order of his given names so that he now first became Henry David.

2. Harvard under Quincy

From 1833 to 1837 Thoreau had been a student at Harvard College, and though he deprecated the college and the education it gave him, Harvard must be considered a major formative influence on his life. When he left Concord for Cambridge, he was only another coun-

try hopeful. Solitary, penniless, vaguely promising but overly headstrong, he was a marginal student with marginal prospects. When he returned from college, Harvard, with all its shortcomings, had taught him how to pass judgment on Harvard, and had in fact prepared him for a life of the mind. Acknowledgment would come later.

Harvard in 1833 was a small school, drawing most of its students from the nearby area and operating on a scale difficult to imagine today. In 1839–40, there were enrolled in all schools at Harvard just 432 students who, with a faculty of 25, occupied a handful of buildings in Cambridge, most of which had been built with public funds. With unpaved streets and pigs in sties behind University Hall, the place had a distinctly rural atmosphere, and Boston, across the river and eastward toward the bay, was still a city of only seventy-five thousand people.[1]

The college had a president, 11 professors, 7 instructors, 9 proctors (residential supervisor and teaching assistant combined), a bursar, a steward, and a librarian for its forty-one thousand books. There were no other administrators. Not even a dean was appointed until 1870. The president himself wrote letters of recommendation, computed grades, attended to breaches of discipline, and awarded scholarships. The college budget for 1840 came to just over $45,000 of which just over $28,000 was in salaries. The average professorial salary was $1,500 a year, which was three times as much as the highest paid schoolteacher in Concord. A village schoolteacher might start as low as $100 a year: a day laborer on the Erie canal made $.88 a day, and a carpenter made $1.25 a day.[2]

A year's tuition at the college was $55, and total costs for a student in the late 1830s ran to $188 a year. Textbooks were a major item, as was board, but fuel was larger than either. The average college room was heated only by an open fireplace and six cords of wood a year were required to heat it, at a total cost of $22.50, or more than 10 percent of the entire cost of going to college.

Harvard was a modest place in those days, and it was intensely local, drawing fewer students from Connecticut, for example, than Yale drew from Massachusetts. Harvard's graduating class of 39 students in 1836 falls well below Yale, Union, and Dartmouth with 81, 71, and 44 respectively. No college in the country had a graduating class over 100; college was still something reserved for only a very few. In

the 1840s there was, in New England, one college student for every 1,294 people in the general population. The figure for 1985 was one college student for every 19.

Academically, Thoreau's Harvard was in a period of stagnation. Josiah Quincy was one of Harvard's poorer presidents, and the faculty, with a few shining exceptions, was not distinguished. The point of a college education was not liberal learning, but in President Quincy's words, a "thorough drilling." Even if professors wished to teach rather than drill, the teaching load was heavy, anywhere from twenty-five to nearly forty hours of classes a week, keeping Professor Felton in Greek, Professor Channing in rhetoric, and the other better-than-average instructors overburdened with mere schoolmastering. The curriculum was largely fixed and generally detested, consisting of three years of Greek, three of Latin, two of math, one of history, three of English, and two years of one modern language. Although a few electives had been allowed beginning in 1825, the college took care to discourage them by allowing them half the usual credit. Perhaps the worst aspect of the college was the hated marking system also begun in 1825, and refined to burdensome folly by Quincy. Under this system, every aspect of college life was graded and marked. Every student received a mark on a scale of eight every day for every recitation. Themes and other assignments counted for so many points each. The totals, which were used to determine class rank, upon which in turn rested the scholarship awards, were subject to all sorts of deductions, including disciplinary ones such as absence from chapel or class or curfew violation. A contemporaneous account tells how "at daily prayers a professor kept watch over the congregation from a sort of raised sentry box and noted down the names of any one guilty of a misdemeanor." All instructors and monitors sent up their marks weekly to "old Quin" who, more a headmaster than a college president, added up the scores himself. In Thoreau's case he made numerous undetected errors, which was probably inevitable in a scheme so complex that an average student would accumulate over fourteen thousand points before graduation. According to Quincy, young Thoreau had "imbibed some notions concerning emulation and college rank," which was his way of saying that Thoreau had expressed an unconcealed distaste for the system. He was not alone, and with a grading system that makes the modern grade point average calculated to three decimal places seem

simplicity and fairness itself, it is no wonder that Thoreau lost his respect for it and perhaps for the college that permitted it, or that the school was restive under Quincy.[3]

The three Rs at Harvard during Thoreau's time were rote learning, regimentation, and rowdyism. Boys commonly entered college at fifteen, sometimes younger. Dress, hours, and attendance were all prescribed. Meals were in commons, and the food was said—as all college food is always said—to have been dreadful. Breakfast consisted of hot coffee, hot rolls, and butter. Supper was tea, cold rolls "of the consistency of wool," and no butter. The midday meal was the only one that was plentiful, and students sometimes affixed a piece of the noon meat to the underside of the table, with a fork, in order to have meat for supper. The boys rose half an hour before sunrise in winter, crowding into a bitterly cold, unheated chapel for services before breakfast. They rose, did their lessons, and went to bed by the bell, and the general atmosphere was more that of a boarding school than what we now think of as a college. The habits of the students were rough; throwing food at meals was nothing compared with the habitual destruction of property, which was not confined to breaking up furniture. Public rooms in inhabited buildings were blown up with gunpowder "every year," according to some accounts.[4]

In the spring of 1834, toward the end of Thoreau's freshman year, occurred the most violent rebellion of Harvard's history. Unable to find who was responsible for rioting that had begun with a student being insolent to a teacher and ended with hundreds of dollars' worth of damage in smashed furniture and broken windows, Quincy expelled the entire sophomore class. He further outraged student opinion by turning to the civil authorities to press charges in the public courts, then sitting in Concord. Student grievances were so well articulated that the board of overseers found it useful to issue a forty-seven-page pamphlet in response.

3. *Thoreau at Harvard*

When Thoreau came to college in the fall of 1833, he had just turned sixteen. He shared room number 20 in Hollis Hall with a boy from

nearby Lincoln, Charles Stearns Wheeler. They lived in a plain room without carpets, with pine bedsteads, a washstand, desks, and chairs. Matches being unknown, they banked the fire carefully every night so it would start in the morning. Many rooms had a cannonball, useful when hot as a foot warmer, when cold to roll down the stairs in the middle of the night.

In his first year, Thoreau mostly took required courses, with what grace we do not know. He took mathematics, Greek, Latin, and history, to which he added Italian the second term. He did not take part in the Great Rebellion, and he ended the year high enough in his class to be awarded twenty-five dollars of what was called "exhibition money," which was the equivalent of a half-tuition scholarship. His sophomore year he took math, Greek, Latin, English, French, and again Italian. Junior year was more Greek, more Latin, more English, and more French, with short, one-term courses in theology, mental philosophy, and math. During the second term, he took a teaching leave to go tend school in Canton, Massachusetts, where he stayed with a fiery young intellectual, Orestes Brownson. A Unitarian minister whose association with the church would be short lived, Brownson's moral energy and reformist ideas strongly impressed young Thoreau. The two also studied German together. Thoreau's junior year was further broken up by absence and illness. Though he returned to college in March of 1836, he became ill and withdrew in May, before the end of the term.[1]

Back again in the fall of 1836, Thoreau took a three-term sequence in intellectual philosophy which examined Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*, Say's *Political Economy*, and Story's *Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States*. He also took more English, some natural history and natural philosophy, and he kept up his modern languages. He did not cut a commanding figure among his classmates, who remembered him later, if at all, as quiet, serious, and a bit countrified. He seems to have stayed out of major trouble. He did get crosswise with Quincy over the marking system, though he ended up high enough in his class to have a commencement part and to take some of the prize money.

For years after his graduation, Thoreau had little good to say about his college education. When Emerson once remarked in company that, after all, Harvard did teach all the branches of learning, Thoreau

replied, "yes, indeed, all the branches and none of the roots." *Walden* speaks tartly of Harvard's curriculum and argues that a more practical, less bookish approach would have been preferable. But his own reading at college was important, perhaps crucial, though his extracurricular reading rather than his required courses and themes best reflect what was actually on his mind. He belonged to one club, called the Institute of 1770, and he read a good deal from the club's library as well as the college library. As early as his first term in college he was reading Hall's *Travels in Canada*, Cox's *Adventures on the Columbia River*, and McKenney's *Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes*, already showing a predilection for travel literature he was never to lose. Before his freshman year was out he had read Irving's *Columbus* and *The Conquest of Granada*, Cochrane's *Travels in Columbia*, Bullock's *Travels in Mexico*, Mill's *History of the Crusades*, and Barrow's *A Voyage to Cochinchina* (now called Vietnam). He seems to have traveled widely in Cambridge.[2]

One thing Thoreau did acknowledge about his Harvard education was that three years of English with Professor Channing (brother of the famous Boston minister William Ellery Channing) had in fact taught him to express himself in writing. His college themes survive and they show him mastering a graceful, conventional, reasonably spare style. It is doubtful that Channing lit any literary fire in Thoreau, though some of Channing's students recalled wonderful evenings spent reading Chaucer in Channing's apartment. Channing was no Francis James Child, whose presence would first be felt at Harvard in the late forties and fifties, and the live literary center of the college was not, in Thoreau's day, in the English department, but in the Department of Modern Languages. This had been built up and championed by George Ticknor, who tried to bring to the little college in Cambridge some of the liveliness and reach of the great German universities. Ticknor emphasized a living knowledge of the language, laid great stress on modern literatures and cultures, and hired a group of native-speaking instructors from Europe. Thus it is not entirely unexpected that the most remarkable single thing about Thoreau's course work at Harvard is the amount of language study he did, especially in modern languages. In addition to eight terms of Greek and eight of Latin, Thoreau took five terms of Italian, four of French, four of German, and two of Spanish. Thoreau is always thought of as well educated and well read in the classics—and no one has ever written a

better defense of them—but it is not always recalled that he could read French, German, and Italian with ease, and, more important, that he was both inclined and prepared to think of literature in a broad, multicultural sense.

Thoreau's interest in modern literature, especially his interest in modern poetry, seems to have begun during the spring of his sophomore year. From April through June he went from Johnson's "Preface to Shakespeare" to modern, indeed contemporaneous writings, such as Longfellow's *Outre-Mer*, Cooper's *The Headsman*, and Irving's *Crayon Miscellany*. It is conceivable that the impetus came from Channing, and barely possible that it came from Emerson, by whom Thoreau had been examined on Whately's *Rhetoric* in late February 1835, but the most likely person to have sparked such an interest would have been Longfellow. For it was during the spring of 1835 that Longfellow, then twenty-eight, agreed to come to Harvard to succeed Ticknor as head of the Department of Modern Languages. His first book, *Outre-Mer*, subtitled *A Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea*, came out in late May. Harvard's appointment of the young American writer must have stirred excitement among those who found Cambridge dusty and rule ridden.

Thoreau's interest in poetry seems to have begun the spring of Longfellow's appointment, and to have grown steadily during Thoreau's last two years at college. When Longfellow finally appeared in Cambridge during the spring of 1837 to take up his professorial duties after a two-year preparation of travel and study in Europe, he was just thirty years old. He wore wine-colored waistcoats and light gloves. He was a living poet still at the start of what was already regarded as a remarkable career. His life was touched with romance, travel, and tragedy. The young man from Concord went to hear the new professor's lectures on Northern language and literature; they were not at all what his classical training had prepared him for. They had the excitement of discovery and the fascination of novelty.[3]

4. Concord

The Concord to which Henry Thoreau returned in 1837 has been called a village, but it was really a good-sized town of two thousand

inhabitants lying sixteen miles, or four hours by stage, west of Boston. Concord had been the first permanent European settlement above tidewater in Massachusetts, and it originally comprised an area of 36 square miles when Boston had occupied a mere 783 acres or just over one square mile. Bedford, Acton, Lincoln, and Carlisle were largely carved out of the original area of Concord. Thoreau's Concord still had 9 miles of river, the Concord, joined by the Assabet, flowing north first to a point in North Billerica where it provided the water for the Middlesex Canal between Lowell and Boston, then on to join the Merrimack, which in turn flowed to the sea up by Ipswich and Plum Island. Though boats loaded with wood and other cargoes from Maine frequently came to Concord from Boston via the canal and the river, the importance of the town was due not to its waterways but to its being a major crossroads. One road to Boston, the Lexington road, went past Emerson's house; the other, the Watertown road, went out past Walden Pond. Other roads spoked out to Sudbury and Southern New England, west to the Berkshire up-country, and north to New Hampshire. Concordians were proud of their town's past. Their grandparents had been conspicuous in the American Revolution, an event that lay just sixty years behind them, and the town was beginning to think about putting up monuments.[1]

Farming was still the principal occupation of Concord, but manufacturing was on the increase. In 1820, there were 262 men engaged in agriculture, 140 in manufacturing, 16 in commerce, and the balance was swinging toward the latter two. Concord had by 1837 been having its share of the booming national growth of the twenties and thirties. A lead pipe manufactory was set up in 1819, a shoe factory (actually just an ell tucked onto a house but employing between 10 and 20 people) was built in 1821. A group of entrepreneurs had set up the Milldam company in 1829, developing thereby a new commercial district in the center of town, and two new banks had been established, one in 1832 and the second in 1835. Concord had had a steam-driven smithy since 1832, and the town was also a center for the manufacture of pencils, clocks, hats, bellows, guns, bricks, barrels, and soap, all for the wholesale trade and all sold out of town. Wagons rumbled through town continually on roads that were both dusty and noisy. Concord was a busy transport hub and its numerous taverns were full of teamsters. It had six warehouses, a bindery, two

saw mills, two grist mills and, over on the west side of town, a large five-story cotton mill, whose work force included nine men, three boys and thirty girls. Far from being a quiet, conservative, backward-looking rural village, Concord was a budding mill town, hoping to improve its river link to the canal, waiting impatiently for the railroad, and only prevented by its lack of major water power from rivaling nearby Lowell or South Hadley in the decades just ahead.[2]

Around the town was open countryside. At this time, some two-thirds of New England (excluding Maine) was cleared land, and in Concord township woodland accounted by 1830 for only one-sixth of the land, the rest being either in meadow, pasture, or tillage. The return of the forests, still going on today, but already marked even by 1900 when only a quarter of New England was still open, had not yet begun. Concord's fields and meadows lay open to the sun; it was a neat green landscape of tilled fields, mown meadows, and pasture land kept cropped by sheep. Hundreds of cows, oxen, and horses were pastured in the township, keeping underbrush down. One could see great distances from any sort of rise in the ground, and the impression generally was of rolling open farmland, broken here and there by woodlots, small stands of trees of six to ten acres each.[3]

In addition to the active agricultural life of the town, there was another reason why there was so little woodland. This was the last era before the widespread use of coal for home heating and everyone burned wood. A thrifty farmer needed six cords for the winter stove, an average household twenty cords a year, and Concord's minister, Ezra Ripley, had thirty cords a year as part of his salary. Boston needed six hundred thousand cords annually, and it was already coming from as far away as Maine. Thoreau noted in his journal that it was impossible to go walking in the Concord woods in any season during daylight hours without hearing the sound of axes.[4]

Farmers grew winter rye, corn, and potatoes. Some raised garden seeds, others were experimenting with teasel and with silkworm culture. Recently there had been a tendency to plant more fruit trees and grape vines. Field work was done by draft animals. Concord in 1831 had 177 horses and 418 oxen. Oxen were favored by New England farmers and could pull astounding loads. It is said that a single team pulled a lumber raft a mile long and weighing 800 tons along part of the Middlesex Canal at the rate of a mile an hour.

Concord had been an Indian fishing village before the white man came, but by Thoreau's time the salmon, shad, and alewives were gone, leaving mainly pike, perch, the common eel, the ugly parasitic lamprey eel, and some pout in the slow-moving rivers. Then, as now, the water's surface was half-covered in summer with duckweed, looking like green confetti.

Early settlers had found Concord damp, poor, low, and mean; it was, they complained, unusually subject to storms and full of swamps and impenetrable undergrowth. All that had changed by 1837. There were still extensive lowlands and swamps, but Concord on the whole was a healthy place. Surrounded by open land, it was drier than it is now, and it seems to have been relatively free of insects. Life expectancy was around forty, but almost one person in four lived until seventy. One out of every five died from fevers of various sorts, while one out of every seven deaths was from "consumption." The disease was endemic in many families, including Thoreau's.[5]

That fall of 1837, there were a number of unusually rapid changes taking place in the country, the state, and the town itself. Massachusetts was growing rapidly; its population increased by 20 percent during the thirties, and it would expand almost 35 percent during the forties, most of the growth being centered in the cities and in the low-lying valleys, while the higher counties such as Berkshire County actually were losing population. The city of Boston was expanding by 50 percent every ten years throughout the period. It would reach its peak as a port in 1840, when the Cunard White Star line would choose it for its American terminus. But the railroads were already threatening canal and coastal shipping traffic, and while Massachusetts would continue to build railways, it did not do so quickly enough. By 1850 Boston would be in steep decline as a port, having already lost the race to develop rail communications to the West.

Of the most immediate concern this fall, however, was the economic crisis—the panic of 1837, as it was called. The boom years of economic expansion from 1825 on had created a large expansion of credit. From 1830 to 1837, for example, the supply of paper money had tripled, going from $51 million to $149 million. Then in 1836 the wheat crop failed, the price of cotton dropped by half, and overseas creditors, largely English, began demanding payment in gold. In May of 1837, most of the banks in the country stopped paying out specie.

A literal panic ensued. There were $100 million worth of mercantile failures in a single fortnight in New York City. Herman Melville's older brother Gansevoort was just one of those who went under that April. The magnitude of the $100 million collapse comes into focus when it is realized that the entire United States federal government expenditure for 1837 was just $37 million, Seminole Indian War and all.

The panic hit everywhere. Emerson's letters for this period show persistent, anxious, almost daily financial maneuvering designed to help his brother in New York meet his mounting obligations. The Thoreau family, never well off, watched as Henry got and then lost a solid well-paid teaching job. That was bad enough by itself, and none of them knew that they were only on the edge of what was to be a long depression reaching down into the mid-1840s. Little wonder that economics would be on everyone's mind, including Thoreau's.

5. *Emerson*

Until this fall, Thoreau's life can be seen as the unsurprising result of familiar and conventional shaping forces such as Concord, Harvard, and his immediate family. But through the extraordinary, catalytic, almost providential friendship of Emerson, Thoreau's life changed from the passive to the active mood. Emerson taught Thoreau that he could—indeed he must—shape his own life and pursue his own ends.

Emerson had ancestral roots and relations in Concord, but he himself had been born, brought up, and educated in the larger world of Boston. Indeed, Emerson had moved to Concord only quite recently, in 1834, when Thoreau was starting his sophomore year at college. Emerson was just thirty-one when he came to Concord. Behind him already was the tragic death of his young wife, Ellen, his resignation from the pulpit of his Boston church, and the nine-month European trip that had followed. He had met Wordsworth and Landor, and, best of all, at Craigenputtock in Scotland, the young Thomas Carlyle.[1]

Home from Europe in early October 1833, Emerson turned decisively from the religious, churchmanlike preoccupations in which he

had been raised to a new concern with the problems posed by science and natural history. He also turned to a new career in public lecturing. As he moved to Concord in the fall of 1834 he was working on a book he had been thinking about for some time, to be called simply *Nature*.

In February of 1835, Thoreau was among the college boys Emerson was asked to examine on rhetoric. Nothing in the letters or journals of either suggests that any spark was then struck, that either saw anything remarkable in the other. Emerson was always on the lookout for gifted young people, but that spring and summer his life was full with other things. In July he bought the Coolidge house, half a mile east of Concord Village on the Lexington road, and in September he married Lydia Jackson and they moved in. The house became at once an intellectual gathering place, and Concord began to attract the young and the gifted. Emerson himself was young, active, sought after, hospitable, and brilliantly articulate. He possessed, to a remarkable degree, the gift of being able to hearten and encourage others, particularly the young and untried. More by sheer energy and this ability to excite, than by his substantive achievements, Emerson was already at the center of most that was new, exciting, and disturbing in ideas and literature in America at the time.

During the winter of 1836, for example, he was coming to grips with Bronson Alcott. A peddler turned teacher, Alcott was a talker of shattering, almost apostolic brilliance, but he could never get those rare qualities satisfactorily set down on paper. He wrote inspired, ecstatic gospels announcing childhood as the Word made Flesh, Coleridgean in intent, Alexandrian in language. Alcott's writing is strange only by rigid Addisonian standards. Neoplatonism and both German and French Romanticism afford numerous parallels to the orphic speech of Bronson Alcott. Emerson agonized over the syntactically sprung prose of the manuscript of *Psyche*, and sent it back to Alcott with criticism so gentle and so honest that Alcott completely rewrote it, without any improvement at all, and they went through the whole cycle again, and even again a third time.

At this same time, the magazine publication of Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* was, through Emerson and others, making so great a stir in New England that it became possible to publish it in book form in Boston when no London publisher could yet be found. In April of 1836,

Emerson mailed Carlyle a copy of the first edition of *Sartor*. When America could recognize and support English genius before England itself, America's long day of dependence might indeed seem, finally, to be over. And despite the sudden and premature death of Emerson's brother Charles in May (another brother, Edward, had also died recently), Emerson was increasingly surrounded by people and their ideas and books and articles in a rush of intellectual life and activity that had the social cohesiveness of a club and the intellectual coherence of a movement.

That summer Margaret Fuller, then just twenty-six, made the first of her extended visits to Emerson's home. Bright and well read, she was yet another talker of transfixing brilliance. She also had ambitions as a writer, and since she had the whole Fuller family to support, she was determined to make a paying career out of her writing. She and Emerson talked about many things, including self-reliance, but most concentratedly about German literature. She, as well as Carlyle, was now absorbed in Goethe's writings and was working on a translation of Eckermann's great *Conversations with Goethe*. Emerson was working on his German, increasingly convinced, as were other friends such as Hedge from Bangor, and Parker and Ripley from Boston, that the most interesting intellectual and artistic currents, the really vital ideas seemed recently to have been coming out of Germany. No one, they thought, would be able to understand the nineteenth century without taking Kant, Herder, Hegel, and Goethe into account. Until one had read them, one's basic education was not complete.

During the fall of 1836, Emerson's first book, *Nature*, was published in September, and his first son, Waldo, was born in October. Buoyed up, particularly by the latter event, Emerson plunged energetically ahead, working up a series of lectures on "The Philosophy of History" to be given in Boston starting in December. They were successful, well attended, and as soon as he was finished, Emerson gave them all over again. Thoreau, nearing the end of his senior year across the river in Cambridge, must have heard something about them. In early April of 1837, Thoreau took Emerson's *Nature* out of the college library.

There is no record of what Thoreau saw in the book, but he took it out again the third week in June. Perhaps this second look was partly

motivated by gratitude, since Emerson was, at that moment, writing to President Quincy to argue (successfully, as it would turn out) that Thoreau, despite lamentable irregularities, should be awarded a piece of the college prize money that June. However he got to the book, it had a profound impact on the young man about to graduate. Influence is an easy relation to claim. It makes writing easier to talk about, but it is also easy to claim too much for it. E. M. Forster has said sensibly that "the only books that influence us are those for which we are ready, and which have gone a little further down our particular path than we have yet gone ourselves." Thoreau was ready for Emerson's *Nature* for just that reason. Emerson was, at the moment, just a few steps farther along the path Thoreau himself had already taken.[2]

Emerson's *Nature* was no modest little exercise in nature writing. In ambition as well as title it rivals Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*. Though written in language that has not fully shaken off the pulpit and that can therefore mislead one into thinking Emerson a spokesman for Christian values and a Christian worldview, Emerson's real purpose in *Nature* is radicalism itself, and his argument, resting on a rejection of historical Christianity, is not far from that of Thomas Paine when the latter wrote "that which is now called natural philosophy, embracing the whole circle of science . . . is the true theology." *Nature* showed Emerson's remarkable openness to science. He and his friends recognized no "two culture" split between literature and science; they believed that to study nature and to know oneself came at last to the same thing, which it was the purpose of literature to express.[3]

Nature is also a manifesto of transcendentalism, the American version of German philosophical idealism which had as a pair of cornerstones the belief that ideas lay behind and corresponded to material objects and the belief that intuition was a valid mode of knowing and was necessary as a counterbalance to experience. Most interesting of all for Thoreau is Emerson's insistence in *Nature* on a line of thought as old as classical Stoicism: that the individual, in searching for a reliable ethical standpoint, for an answer to the question of how one should live one's life, had to turn not to God, not to the *polis* or state, and not to society, but to nature for a usable answer. Stoicism taught, and Emerson was teaching, that the laws of nature were the same as

the laws of human nature and that man could base a good life, a just life, on nature.

This was more than theory with Emerson. During the summer of 1837, for example, he felt closer to nature than he had in a long time. All that summer he took walks, visited Walden Pond, and worked in his garden, feeling contentedly close to nature as he weeded and watched the ripening corn and strawberries, while the Maryland Yellowthroat seemed, he said, to chant "Extacy, Extacy" to him all day long.[4]

At the end of August, Emerson gave the Phi Beta Kappa address at Thoreau's commencement. Thoreau may not have been there to hear Emerson say, in so many words, that the business of the American scholar would be to study nature and to know himself and that the two would be the same thing, but he would have read it even if he didn't hear it. Emerson, uncharacteristically, was pleased with the talk. It was printed, Carlyle praised it without reserve, and it quickly had a wide circulation.

As the fall wore on, Emerson was immersed in his forthcoming lecture series on "Human Culture" which was to carry further the ideas in the "Philosophy of History" series of the year before. Thus the ideas that were most engaging Emerson just at the time he really got to know Thoreau were his ideas about history. Carlyle had just sent over a copy of his new history of the French Revolution. Emerson read and admired it, and found that for him as for Carlyle, all his efforts to come to terms with his own times seemed to depend on how he viewed the past. He had already reached one major conclusion, and it seemed to hold. As he wrote in his journal toward the end of September 1837, "I get no further than my old doctrine that the Whole is in each man, and that a man may if he will as truly and fully illustrate the laws of Nature in his own experience as in the History of Rome or Palestine or England."[5]

Emerson's leading idea about history is that there is one mind, of which history is the record. Another way to put it is to say that human nature—the human mind—is and has been *essentially* the same in all ages and places. There are variations, of course, sometimes important and even blinding differences. But the similarities between people,

even those of widely different times and places, far outweigh, *in importance*, the differences. If the human mind has always been essentially the same, then it has neither progressed nor declined from age to age. Chronology, therefore, is not what is important in history. All ages are equal; the world exists for the writer today just as much as it did for Homer. This way of looking at history, which sets the present as high as any past era, is a direct response to what W. J. Bate has so brilliantly described as the burden of the past, it is the basis for most of Emerson's best work from 1835 to 1850, and it quickly became a deep and permanent conviction—and a liberating, enabling conviction for Henry Thoreau. In October of 1837, evidently at Emerson's urging, he began to keep the journal that would be his own history, and by the third week in November he was telling himself to read Virgil to be reminded of the essential uniformity of human nature, past and present, Roman and American.

Emerson recalled later that his close association with Thoreau had begun sometime after Henry's return from college that fall of 1837. Emerson was then thirty-four, fourteen years Thoreau's senior, enough older to be hero and model, a sort of intellectual older brother, yet still close enough by age, energetic youthfulness, and choice of friends for Thoreau to feel that they belonged to the same generation. The age difference makes it easy to think of them as father and son, or mentor and student, but both of them insisted from the outset that the real relationship between them was that of friendship, taking the word in its most serious meaning, with everything it implies about loyalty, companionship, and presumptive equality.

Fall turned into winter. Emerson's journals show him thinking about Greece, Germany, the French Revolution. Thoreau's journals run a parallel course. By February, Thoreau was being invited to "teachers' meetings" at Emerson's and they were taking long walks together. What Thoreau admired in Emerson was the way in which his ideas took on the tangibleness of natural objects. Emerson, on his side, was delighted with his young friend's mind, all keenness and edge. He noted how "everything that boy says makes merry with society," and he urged him to write out an account of his college life.[6]

6. *The Classics*

Writing about the life of a student could be done two ways. One could concentrate on the schooling; in Thoreau's case that would probably have produced satire. Or one could focus on learning; that would be compelling and exciting, and that was what Thoreau did during the fall of 1837. He did not produce the essay Emerson was looking for, but from his encounters with the classics and with modern Germany we can get some idea of what Thoreau was able to carry away from college.

From the time he was twenty Thoreau treated the Greek and Roman classics in a personal, familiar, often playful way, referring to them as though he himself had just written them. The new Herderian or Emersonian view of history allowed, indeed, virtually compelled Thoreau to regard the classics as the still-vital expression of the real world in a living language. The world of the *Iliad* was as much his as Homer's.

During his schoolboy years at Concord Academy, he had studied Virgil (along with Caesar, Sallust, Cicero, and Horace) with Phineas Allen, and in later years he would read Virgil less for discovery than recovery. At college, during his first year he read Xenophon and Demosthenes and Aeschines with the generally despised Christopher Dunkin, and Livy and Horace with Henry McKean and Charles Beck. During his sophomore and junior years, he read Sophocles, Euripedes, and Homer with Professor Felton, and Cicero, Seneca, and Juvenal with Beck. This sounds impressive, but it was, of course, required of all students and was taught in a less than promising atmosphere. Recitations were merely sessions in which a master heard the day's lessons of a dozen or so students, "without comment or collateral instruction," as a contemporary grimly noted. James Freeman Clarke, graduating a few years before Thoreau entered, observed that "the faculty were not there to teach, but to see that boys got their lessons; to explain difficulties or elucidate a text would have seemed improper." Thoreau's interest in classics thus grew almost in defiance of his formal schooling. But grow it did. By the time Thoreau left college, he had

an easy command of Greek and Latin, a wide acquaintance in classical literature, and some interest in the classical past as such. He had, for example, read several philosophical and historical romances about Greece and Rome, such as Thomas Gray's *The Vestal, A Tale of Pompeii* (1830) and Lydia Child's *Philothea* (1836) set in Plato's Greece. He was above all increasingly interested in classical thought, and he had already learned to think of the classics as having an unaging, perennial vitality. What he would later write in *Walden* he already felt to be true. "The heroic books, even if printed in the character of our mother tongue, will always be in a language dead to degenerate times." The real classics were heroic books, always alive to those who were themselves alive.[1]

This sense of the vitality of the classical past could only have been increased by Thoreau's reading during the fall of 1837 in Goethe's *Italian Journey*. The book records Goethe's unsuppressible excitement as he approaches Rome, heartland of the ancient world, its ability to touch him unweakened, its achievement undiminished by time.

Thoreau's sense of the nature of the classical achievement had, that fall, two main emphases. The first is the assertion of the importance and permanence of nature. In November, reading Virgil—characteristically it was the *Georgics*, not the *Aeneid*—Thoreau was struck by passages about the buds swelling on the vines and fruit scattered about under the trees. The point, he told himself, was that "it was the same world." His second observation followed naturally enough. If Virgil's was the same world as ours, then "the same men inhabited it." Neither nature nor human nature had changed, in essence, from Virgil's time to ours. Zeno and the Stoics taught the same thing. In early February 1838, Thoreau noted that "Zeno the stoic stood in precisely the same relation to the world that I do now." And reading Homer brought home the same point once more. In early March, Thoreau wrote in his journal, "Three thousand years and the world so little changed!—The *Iliad* seems like a natural sound which has reverberated to our days."[2]

Thoreau's conception of history, like Emerson's, would not concede any superiority to the Greeks and Romans. If nature was the same and if men were the same—two constants in a world of social change—then the modern writer stood in relation to his world in just the same

way Homer stood in relation to his, and modern achievements could indeed rival the ancients. As Thoreau put it later, in "Walking," "I walk out into a nature such as the old prophets and poets, Menu, Moses, Homer, Chaucer, walked in."[3]

Because he saw history as he did, the classics were not a burden, not the never-to-be equaled achievement of others, but a promise of what he might also achieve. Here too Emerson showed the way. "They who made England, Italy or Greece venerable in the imagination," he insisted in "Self-Reliance," did so not by traveling, but "by sticking fast where they were, like an axis of the Earth." One might write *Iliad*s in Concord, then.

In enunciating this belief in the permanence of nature and of human nature, and the equivalence of all eras—that any age is a heroic age to the heroic individual—we come to what is perhaps the single most important set of convictions for the young Thoreau. It was not a creed or a theoretical construct, but the core of his practical, daily, actual belief. In William James's phrase, it was the "habitual center of his personal energies." Since we are the same men and women as those Greeks and Romans we so much admire, we may achieve as well as they did if we only will. Nostalgic adulation of the past is misplaced sentiment. "This lament for a golden age," Thoreau once said, "is simply a lament for golden men." Once he grasped it, once he had seen it squarely in concrete relation to his own personal life, Thoreau never gave up this belief. In his most eloquent and moving tribute to the classics, the chapter on "Reading" in *Walden*, he tried again to explain:

> The oldest Egyptian or Hindoo philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity; and still the trembling robe remains raised, and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now reviews the vision.

If we can see as much and as well as they saw, we can also hope to write as well as they wrote. If, as Thoreau notes in his journal in mid-February of 1838, each of the sons of Greece "created a new heaven and a new earth for Greece," there was no compelling reason why each of the sons and daughters of Concord should not be able to do the same.[4]