WALDEN

Economy

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived

alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had

built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts,

and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two

years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life

again.

I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if

very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning

my mode of life, which some would call impertinent, though they do not

appear to me at all impertinent, but, considering the circumstances,

very natural and pertinent. Some have asked what I got to eat; if I did

not feel lonesome; if I was not afraid; and the like. Others have been

curious to learn what portion of my income I devoted to charitable

purposes; and some, who have large families, how many poor children I

maintained. I will therefore ask those of my readers who feel no

particular interest in me to pardon me if I undertake to answer some of

these questions in this book. In most books, the \_I\_, or first person,

is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism,

is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after

all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so

much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well.

Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my

experience. Moreover, I, on my side, require of every writer, first or

last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what

he has heard of other men’s lives; 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. Perhaps these pages are more

particularly addressed to poor students. As for the rest of my readers,

they will accept such portions as apply to them. I trust that none will

stretch the seams in putting on the coat, for it may do good service to

him whom it fits.

I would fain say something, not so much concerning the Chinese and

Sandwich Islanders as you who read these pages, who are said to live in

New England; something about your condition, especially your outward

condition or circumstances in this world, in this town, what it is,

whether it is necessary that it be as bad as it is, whether it cannot

be improved as well as not. I have travelled a good deal in Concord;

and everywhere, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have

appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways. What

I have heard of Brahmins sitting exposed to four fires and looking in

the face of the sun; or hanging suspended, with their heads downward,

over flames; or looking at the heavens over their shoulders “until it

becomes impossible for them to resume their natural position, while

from the twist of the neck nothing but liquids can pass into the

stomach;” or dwelling, chained for life, at the foot of a tree; or

measuring with their bodies, like caterpillars, the breadth of vast

empires; or standing on one leg on the tops of pillars,—even these

forms of conscious penance are hardly more incredible and astonishing

than the scenes which I daily witness. The twelve labors of Hercules

were trifling in comparison with those which my neighbors have

undertaken; for they were only twelve, and had an end; but I could

never see that these men slew or captured any monster or finished any

labor. They have no friend Iolas to burn with a hot iron the root of

the hydra’s head, but as soon as one head is crushed, two spring up.

I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited

farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more

easily acquired than got rid of. Better if they had been born in the

open pasture and suckled by a wolf, that they might have seen with

clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in. Who made them

serfs of the soil? Why should they eat their sixty acres, when man is

condemned to eat only his peck of dirt? Why should they begin digging

their graves as soon as they are born? They have got to live a man’s

life, pushing all these things before them, and get on as well as they

can. How many a poor immortal soul have I met well nigh crushed and

smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing

before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never

cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and

wood-lot! The portionless, who struggle with no such unnecessary

inherited encumbrances, find it labor enough to subdue and cultivate a

few cubic feet of flesh.

But men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon

plowed into the soil for compost. By a seeming fate, commonly called

necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up

treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through

and steal. It is a fool’s life, as they will find when they get to the

end of it, if not before. It is said that Deucalion and Pyrrha created

men by throwing stones over their heads behind them:—

Inde genus durum sumus, experiensque laborum,

Et documenta damus quâ simus origine nati.

Or, as Raleigh rhymes it in his sonorous way,—

“From thence our kind hard-hearted is, enduring pain and care,

Approving that our bodies of a stony nature are.”

So much for a blind obedience to a blundering oracle, throwing the

stones over their heads behind them, and not seeing where they fell.

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere

ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and

superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be

plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and

tremble too much for that. Actually, the laboring man has not leisure

for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the

manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the

market. He has no time to be anything but a machine. How can he

remember well his ignorance—which his growth requires—who has so often

to use his knowledge? We should feed and clothe him gratuitously

sometimes, and recruit him with our cordials, before we judge of him.

The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be

preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat

ourselves nor one another thus tenderly.

Some of you, we all know, are poor, find it hard to live, are

sometimes, as it were, gasping for breath. I have no doubt that some of

you who read this book are unable to pay for all the dinners which you

have actually eaten, or for the coats and shoes which are fast wearing

or are already worn out, and have come to this page to spend borrowed

or stolen time, robbing your creditors of an hour. It is very evident

what mean and sneaking lives many of you live, for my sight has been

whetted by experience; always on the limits, trying to get into

business and trying to get out of debt, a very ancient slough, called

by the Latins \_æs alienum\_, another’s brass, for some of their coins

were made of brass; still living, and dying, and buried by this other’s

brass; always promising to pay, promising to pay, tomorrow, and dying

today, insolvent; seeking to curry favor, to get custom, by how many

modes, only not state-prison offences; lying, flattering, voting,

contracting yourselves into a nutshell of civility or dilating into an

atmosphere of thin and vaporous generosity, that you may persuade your

neighbor to let you make his shoes, or his hat, or his coat, or his

carriage, or import his groceries for him; making yourselves sick, that

you may lay up something against a sick day, something to be tucked

away in an old chest, or in a stocking behind the plastering, or, more

safely, in the brick bank; no matter where, no matter how much or how

little.

I sometimes wonder that we can be so frivolous, I may almost say, as to

attend to the gross but somewhat foreign form of servitude called Negro

Slavery, there are so many keen and subtle masters that enslave both

north and south. It is hard to have a southern overseer; it is worse to

have a northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of

yourself. Talk of a divinity in man! Look at the teamster on the

highway, wending to market by day or night; does any divinity stir

within him? His highest duty to fodder and water his horses! What is

his destiny to him compared with the shipping interests? Does not he

drive for Squire Make-a-stir? How godlike, how immortal, is he? See how

he cowers and sneaks, how vaguely all the day he fears, not being

immortal nor divine, but the slave and prisoner of his own opinion of

himself, a fame won by his own deeds. Public opinion is a weak tyrant

compared with our own private opinion. What a man thinks of himself,

that it is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate.

Self-emancipation even in the West Indian provinces of the fancy and

imagination,—what Wilberforce is there to bring that about? Think,

also, of the ladies of the land weaving toilet cushions against the

last day, not to betray too green an interest in their fates! As if you

could kill time without injuring eternity.

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called

resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go

into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the

bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is

concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of

mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is

a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things.

When we consider what, to use the words of the catechism, is the chief

end of man, and what are the true necessaries and means of life, it

appears as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living

because they preferred it to any other. Yet they honestly think there

is no choice left. But alert and healthy natures remember that the sun

rose clear. It is never too late to give up our prejudices. No way of

thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof. What

everybody echoes or in silence passes by as true to-day may turn out to

be falsehood to-morrow, mere smoke of opinion, which some had trusted

for a cloud that would sprinkle fertilizing rain on their fields. What

old people say you cannot do you try and find that you can. Old deeds

for old people, and new deeds for new. Old people did not know enough

once, perchance, to fetch fresh fuel to keep the fire a-going; new

people put a little dry wood under a pot, and are whirled round the

globe with the speed of birds, in a way to kill old people, as the

phrase is. Age is no better, hardly so well, qualified for an

instructor as youth, for it has not profited so much as it has lost.

One may almost doubt if the wisest man has learned any thing of

absolute value by living. Practically, the old have no very important

advice to give the young, their own experience has been so partial, and

their lives have been such miserable failures, for private reasons, as

they must believe; and it may be that they have some faith left which

belies that experience, and they are only less young than they were. I

have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the

first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They

have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me any thing to the

purpose. Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me;

but it does not avail me that they have tried it. If I have any

experience which I think valuable, I am sure to reflect that this my

Mentors said nothing about.

One farmer says to me, “You cannot live on vegetable food solely, for

it furnishes nothing to make bones with;” and so he religiously devotes

a part of his day to supplying his system with the raw material of

bones; walking all the while he talks behind his oxen, which, with

vegetable-made bones, jerk him and his lumbering plough along in spite

of every obstacle. Some things are really necessaries of life in some

circles, the most helpless and diseased, which in others are luxuries

merely, and in others still are entirely unknown.

The whole ground of human life seems to some to have been gone over by

their predecessors, both the heights and the valleys, and all things to

have been cared for. According to Evelyn, “the wise Solomon prescribed

ordinances for the very distances of trees; and the Roman prætors have

decided how often you may go into your neighbor’s land to gather the

acorns which fall on it without trespass, and what share belongs to

that neighbor.” Hippocrates has even left directions how we should cut

our nails; that is, even with the ends of the fingers, neither shorter

nor longer. Undoubtedly the very tedium and ennui which presume to have

exhausted the variety and the joys of life are as old as Adam. But

man’s capacities have never been measured; nor are we to judge of what

he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried. Whatever have

been thy failures hitherto, “be not afflicted, my child, for who shall

assign to thee what thou hast left undone?”

We might try our lives by a thousand simple tests; as, for instance,

that the same sun which ripens my beans illumines at once a system of

earths like ours. If I had remembered this it would have prevented some

mistakes. This was not the light in which I hoed them. The stars are

the apexes of what wonderful triangles! What distant and different

beings in the various mansions of the universe are contemplating the

same one at the same moment! Nature and human life are as various as

our several constitutions. Who shall say what prospect life offers to

another? Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through

each other’s eyes for an instant? We should live in all the ages of the

world in an hour; ay, in all the worlds of the ages. History, Poetry,

Mythology!—I know of no reading of another’s experience so startling

and informing as this would be.

The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to

be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good

behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well? You may say

the wisest thing you can, old man,—you who have lived seventy years,

not without honor of a kind,—I hear an irresistible voice which invites

me away from all that. One generation abandons the enterprises of

another like stranded vessels.

I think that we may safely trust a good deal more than we do. We may

waive just so much care of ourselves as we honestly bestow elsewhere.

Nature is as well adapted to our weakness as to our strength. The

incessant anxiety and strain of some is a well nigh incurable form of

disease. We are made to exaggerate the importance of what work we do;

and yet how much is not done by us! or, what if we had been taken sick?

How vigilant we are! determined not to live by faith if we can avoid

it; all the day long on the alert, at night we unwillingly say our

prayers and commit ourselves to uncertainties. So thoroughly and

sincerely are we compelled to live, reverencing our life, and denying

the possibility of change. This is the only way, we say; but there are

as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one centre. All change is

a miracle to contemplate; but it is a miracle which is taking place

every instant. Confucius said, “To know that we know what we know, and

that we do not know what we do not know, that is true knowledge.” When

one man has reduced a fact of the imagination to be a fact to his

understanding, I foresee that all men at length establish their lives

on that basis.

Let us consider for a moment what most of the trouble and anxiety which

I have referred to is about, and how much it is necessary that we be

troubled, or, at least, careful. It would be some advantage to live a

primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward

civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessaries of life

and what methods have been taken to obtain them; or even to look over

the old day-books of the merchants, to see what it was that men most

commonly bought at the stores, what they stored, that is, what are the

grossest groceries. For the improvements of ages have had but little

influence on the essential laws of man’s existence; as our skeletons,

probably, are not to be distinguished from those of our ancestors.

By the words, \_necessary of life\_, I mean whatever, of all that man

obtains by his own exertions, has been from the first, or from long use

has become, so important to human life that few, if any, whether from

savageness, or poverty, or philosophy, ever attempt to do without it.

To many creatures there is in this sense but one necessary of life,

Food. To the bison of the prairie it is a few inches of palatable

grass, with water to drink; unless he seeks the Shelter of the forest

or the mountain’s shadow. None of the brute creation requires more than

Food and Shelter. The necessaries of life for man in this climate may,

accurately enough, be distributed under the several heads of Food,

Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel; for not till we have secured these are we

prepared to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a

prospect of success. Man has invented, not only houses, but clothes and

cooked food; and possibly from the accidental discovery of the warmth

of fire, and the consequent use of it, at first a luxury, arose the

present necessity to sit by it. We observe cats and dogs acquiring the

same second nature. By proper Shelter and Clothing we legitimately

retain our own internal heat; but with an excess of these, or of Fuel,

that is, with an external heat greater than our own internal, may not

cookery properly be said to begin? Darwin, the naturalist, says of the

inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, that while his own party, who were

well clothed and sitting close to a fire, were far from too warm, these

naked savages, who were farther off, were observed, to his great

surprise, “to be streaming with perspiration at undergoing such a

roasting.” So, we are told, the New Hollander goes naked with impunity,

while the European shivers in his clothes. Is it impossible to combine

the hardiness of these savages with the intellectualness of the

civilized man? According to Liebig, man’s body is a stove, and food the

fuel which keeps up the internal combustion in the lungs. In cold

weather we eat more, in warm less. The animal heat is the result of a

slow combustion, and disease and death take place when this is too

rapid; or for want of fuel, or from some defect in the draught, the

fire goes out. Of course the vital heat is not to be confounded with

fire; but so much for analogy. It appears, therefore, from the above

list, that the expression, \_animal life\_, is nearly synonymous with the

expression, \_animal heat\_; for while Food may be regarded as the Fuel

which keeps up the fire within us,—and Fuel serves only to prepare that

Food or to increase the warmth of our bodies by addition from

without,—Shelter and Clothing also serve only to retain the \_heat\_ thus

generated and absorbed.

The grand necessity, then, for our bodies, is to keep warm, to keep the

vital heat in us. What pains we accordingly take, not only with our

Food, and Clothing, and Shelter, but with our beds, which are our

night-clothes, robbing the nests and breasts of birds to prepare this

shelter within a shelter, as the mole has its bed of grass and leaves

at the end of its burrow! The poor man is wont to complain that this is

a cold world; and to cold, no less physical than social, we refer

directly a great part of our ails. The summer, in some climates, makes

possible to man a sort of Elysian life. Fuel, except to cook his Food,

is then unnecessary; the sun is his fire, and many of the fruits are

sufficiently cooked by its rays; while Food generally is more various,

and more easily obtained, and Clothing and Shelter are wholly or half

unnecessary. At the present day, and in this country, as I find by my

own experience, a few implements, a knife, an axe, a spade, a

wheelbarrow, &c., and for the studious, lamplight, stationery, and

access to a few books, rank next to necessaries, and can all be

obtained at a trifling cost. Yet some, not wise, go to the other side

of the globe, to barbarous and unhealthy regions, and devote themselves

to trade for ten or twenty years, in order that they may live,—that is,

keep comfortably warm,—and die in New England at last. The luxuriously

rich are not simply kept comfortably warm, but unnaturally hot; as I

implied before, they are cooked, of course \_à la mode\_.

Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are

not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of

mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever

lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor. The ancient

philosophers, Chinese, Hindoo, Persian, and Greek, were a class than

which none has been poorer in outward riches, none so rich in inward.

We know not much about them. It is remarkable that \_we\_ know so much of

them as we do. The same is true of the more modern reformers and

benefactors of their race. None can be an impartial or wise observer of

human life but from the vantage ground of what we should call voluntary

poverty. Of a life of luxury the fruit is luxury, whether in

agriculture, or commerce, or literature, or art. There are nowadays

professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to

profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is

not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so

to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of

simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some

of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically. The

success of great scholars and thinkers is commonly a courtier-like

success, not kingly, not manly. They make shift to live merely by

conformity, practically as their fathers did, and are in no sense the

progenitors of a nobler race of men. But why do men degenerate ever?

What makes families run out? What is the nature of the luxury which

enervates and destroys nations? Are we sure that there is none of it in

our own lives? The philosopher is in advance of his age even in the

outward form of his life. He is not fed, sheltered, clothed, warmed,

like his contemporaries. How can a man be a philosopher and not

maintain his vital heat by better methods than other men?

When a man is warmed by the several modes which I have described, what

does he want next? Surely not more warmth of the same kind, as more and

richer food, larger and more splendid houses, finer and more abundant

clothing, more numerous incessant and hotter fires, and the like. When

he has obtained those things which are necessary to life, there is

another alternative than to obtain the superfluities; and that is, to

adventure on life now, his vacation from humbler toil having commenced.

The soil, it appears, is suited to the seed, for it has sent its

radicle downward, and it may now send its shoot upward also with

confidence. Why has man rooted himself thus firmly in the earth, but

that he may rise in the same proportion into the heavens above?—for the

nobler plants are valued for the fruit they bear at last in the air and

light, far from the ground, and are not treated like the humbler

esculents, which, though they may be biennials, are cultivated only

till they have perfected their root, and often cut down at top for this

purpose, so that most would not know them in their flowering season.

I do not mean to prescribe rules to strong and valiant natures, who

will mind their own affairs whether in heaven or hell, and perchance

build more magnificently and spend more lavishly than the richest,

without ever impoverishing themselves, not knowing how they live,—if,

indeed, there are any such, as has been dreamed; nor to those who find

their encouragement and inspiration in precisely the present condition

of things, and cherish it with the fondness and enthusiasm of

lovers,—and, to some extent, I reckon myself in this number; I do not

speak to those who are well employed, in whatever circumstances, and

they know whether they are well employed or not;—but mainly to the mass

of men who are discontented, and idly complaining of the hardness of

their lot or of the times, when they might improve them. There are some

who complain most energetically and inconsolably of any, because they

are, as they say, doing their duty. I also have in my mind that

seemingly wealthy, but most terribly impoverished class of all, who

have accumulated dross, but know not how to use it, or get rid of it,

and thus have forged their own golden or silver fetters.

If I should attempt to tell how I have desired to spend my life in

years past, it would probably surprise those of my readers who are

somewhat acquainted with its actual history; it would certainly

astonish those who know nothing about it. I will only hint at some of

the enterprises which I have cherished.

In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to

improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the

meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the

present moment; to toe that line. You will pardon some obscurities, for

there are more secrets in my trade than in most men’s, and yet not

voluntarily kept, but inseparable from its very nature. I would gladly

tell all that I know about it, and never paint “No Admittance” on my

gate.

I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle-dove, and am still

on their trail. Many are the travellers I have spoken concerning them,

describing their tracks and what calls they answered to. I have met one

or two who had heard the hound, and the tramp of the horse, and even

seen the dove disappear behind a cloud, and they seemed as anxious to

recover them as if they had lost them themselves.

To anticipate, not the sunrise and the dawn merely, but, if possible,

Nature herself! How many mornings, summer and winter, before yet any

neighbor was stirring about his business, have I been about mine! No

doubt, many of my townsmen have met me returning from this enterprise,

farmers starting for Boston in the twilight, or woodchoppers going to

their work. It is true, I never assisted the sun materially in his

rising, but, doubt not, it was of the last importance only to be

present at it.

So many autumn, ay, and winter days, spent outside the town, trying to

hear what was in the wind, to hear and carry it express! I well-nigh

sunk all my capital in it, and lost my own breath into the bargain,

running in the face of it. If it had concerned either of the political

parties, depend upon it, it would have appeared in the Gazette with the

earliest intelligence. At other times watching from the observatory of

some cliff or tree, to telegraph any new arrival; or waiting at evening

on the hill-tops for the sky to fall, that I might catch something,

though I never caught much, and that, manna-wise, would dissolve again

in the sun.

For a long time I was reporter to a journal, of no very wide

circulation, whose editor has never yet seen fit to print the bulk of

my contributions, and, as is too common with writers, I got only my

labor for my pains. However, in this case my pains were their own

reward.

For many years I was self-appointed inspector of snow storms and rain

storms, and did my duty faithfully; surveyor, if not of highways, then

of forest paths and all across-lot routes, keeping them open, and

ravines bridged and passable at all seasons, where the public heel had

testified to their utility.

I have looked after the wild stock of the town, which give a faithful

herdsman a good deal of trouble by leaping fences; and I have had an

eye to the unfrequented nooks and corners of the farm; though I did not

always know whether Jonas or Solomon worked in a particular field

to-day; that was none of my business. I have watered the red

huckleberry, the sand cherry and the nettle tree, the red pine and the

black ash, the white grape and the yellow violet, which might have

withered else in dry seasons.

In short, I went on thus for a long time, I may say it without

boasting, faithfully minding my business, till it became more and more

evident that my townsmen would not after all admit me into the list of

town officers, nor make my place a sinecure with a moderate allowance.

My accounts, which I can swear to have kept faithfully, I have, indeed,

never got audited, still less accepted, still less paid and settled.

However, I have not set my heart on that.

Not long since, a strolling Indian went to sell baskets at the house of

a well-known lawyer in my neighborhood. “Do you wish to buy any

baskets?” he asked. “No, we do not want any,” was the reply. “What!”

exclaimed the Indian as he went out the gate, “do you mean to starve

us?” Having seen his industrious white neighbors so well off,—that the

lawyer had only to weave arguments, and by some magic, wealth and

standing followed, he had said to himself; I will go into business; I

will weave baskets; it is a thing which I can do. Thinking that when he

had made the baskets he would have done his part, and then it would be

the white man’s to buy them. He had not discovered that it was

necessary for him to make it worth the other’s while to buy them, or at

least make him think that it was so, or to make something else which it

would be worth his while to buy. I too had woven a kind of basket of a

delicate texture, but I had not made it worth any one’s while to buy

them. Yet not the less, in my case, did I think it worth my while to

weave them, and instead of studying how to make it worth men’s while to

buy my baskets, I studied rather how to avoid the necessity of selling

them. The life which men praise and regard as successful is but one

kind. Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of the

others?

Finding that my fellow-citizens were not likely to offer me any room in

the court house, or any curacy or living any where else, but I must

shift for myself, I turned my face more exclusively than ever to the

woods, where I was better known. I determined to go into business at

once, and not wait to acquire the usual capital, using such slender

means as I had already got. My purpose in going to Walden Pond was not

to live cheaply nor to live dearly there, but to transact some private

business with the fewest obstacles; to be hindered from accomplishing

which for want of a little common sense, a little enterprise and

business talent, appeared not so sad as foolish.

I have always endeavored to acquire strict business habits; they are

indispensable to every man. If your trade is with the Celestial Empire,

then some small counting house on the coast, in some Salem harbor, will

be fixture enough. You will export such articles as the country

affords, purely native products, much ice and pine timber and a little

granite, always in native bottoms. These will be good ventures. To

oversee all the details yourself in person; to be at once pilot and

captain, and owner and underwriter; to buy and sell and keep the

accounts; to read every letter received, and write or read every letter

sent; to superintend the discharge of imports night and day; to be upon

many parts of the coast almost at the same time;—often the richest

freight will be discharged upon a Jersey shore;—to be your own

telegraph, unweariedly sweeping the horizon, speaking all passing

vessels bound coastwise; to keep up a steady despatch of commodities,

for the supply of such a distant and exorbitant market; to keep

yourself informed of the state of the markets, prospects of war and

peace every where, and anticipate the tendencies of trade and

civilization,—taking advantage of the results of all exploring

expeditions, using new passages and all improvements in

navigation;—charts to be studied, the position of reefs and new lights

and buoys to be ascertained, and ever, and ever, the logarithmic tables

to be corrected, for by the error of some calculator the vessel often

splits upon a rock that should have reached a friendly pier,—there is

the untold fate of La Perouse;—universal science to be kept pace with,

studying the lives of all great discoverers and navigators, great

adventurers and merchants, from Hanno and the Phœnicians down to our

day; in fine, account of stock to be taken from time to time, to know

how you stand. It is a labor to task the faculties of a man,—such

problems of profit and loss, of interest, of tare and tret, and gauging

of all kinds in it, as demand a universal knowledge.

I have thought that Walden Pond would be a good place for business, not

solely on account of the railroad and the ice trade; it offers

advantages which it may not be good policy to divulge; it is a good

port and a good foundation. No Neva marshes to be filled; though you

must every where build on piles of your own driving. It is said that a

flood-tide, with a westerly wind, and ice in the Neva, would sweep St.

Petersburg from the face of the earth.

As this business was to be entered into without the usual capital, it

may not be easy to conjecture where those means, that will still be

indispensable to every such undertaking, were to be obtained. As for

Clothing, to come at once to the practical part of the question,

perhaps we are led oftener by the love of novelty, and a regard for the

opinions of men, in procuring it, than by a true utility. Let him who

has work to do recollect that the object of clothing is, first, to

retain the vital heat, and secondly, in this state of society, to cover

nakedness, and he may judge how much of any necessary or important work

may be accomplished without adding to his wardrobe. Kings and queens

who wear a suit but once, though made by some tailor or dressmaker to

their majesties, cannot know the comfort of wearing a suit that fits.

They are no better than wooden horses to hang the clean clothes on.

Every day our garments become more assimilated to ourselves, receiving

the impress of the wearer’s character, until we hesitate to lay them

aside, without such delay and medical appliances and some such

solemnity even as our bodies. No man ever stood the lower in my

estimation for having a patch in his clothes; yet I am sure that there

is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean

and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience. But even if the

rent is not mended, perhaps the worst vice betrayed is improvidence. I

sometimes try my acquaintances by such tests as this;—who could wear a

patch, or two extra seams only, over the knee? Most behave as if they

believed that their prospects for life would be ruined if they should

do it. It would be easier for them to hobble to town with a broken leg

than with a broken pantaloon. Often if an accident happens to a

gentleman’s legs, they can be mended; but if a similar accident happens

to the legs of his pantaloons, there is no help for it; for he

considers, not what is truly respectable, but what is respected. We

know but few men, a great many coats and breeches. Dress a scarecrow in

your last shift, you standing shiftless by, who would not soonest

salute the scarecrow? Passing a cornfield the other day, close by a hat

and coat on a stake, I recognized the owner of the farm. He was only a

little more weather-beaten than when I saw him last. I have heard of a

dog that barked at every stranger who approached his master’s premises

with clothes on, but was easily quieted by a naked thief. It is an

interesting question how far men would retain their relative rank if

they were divested of their clothes. Could you, in such a case, tell

surely of any company of civilized men, which belonged to the most

respected class? When Madam Pfeiffer, in her adventurous travels round

the world, from east to west, had got so near home as Asiatic Russia,

she says that she felt the necessity of wearing other than a travelling

dress, when she went to meet the authorities, for she “was now in a

civilized country, where —— — people are judged of by their clothes.”

Even in our democratic New England towns the accidental possession of

wealth, and its manifestation in dress and equipage alone, obtain for

the possessor almost universal respect. But they yield such respect,

numerous as they are, are so far heathen, and need to have a missionary

sent to them. Beside, clothes introduced sewing, a kind of work which

you may call endless; a woman’s dress, at least, is never done.

A man who has at length found something to do will not need to get a

new suit to do it in; for him the old will do, that has lain dusty in

the garret for an indeterminate period. Old shoes will serve a hero

longer than they have served his valet,—if a hero ever has a

valet,—bare feet are older than shoes, and he can make them do. Only

they who go to soirées and legislative halls must have new coats, coats

to change as often as the man changes in them. But if my jacket and

trousers, my hat and shoes, are fit to worship God in, they will do;

will they not? Who ever saw his old clothes,—his old coat, actually

worn out, resolved into its primitive elements, so that it was not a

deed of charity to bestow it on some poor boy, by him perchance to be

bestowed on some poorer still, or shall we say richer, who could do

with less? I say, beware of all enterprises that require new clothes,

and not rather a new wearer of clothes. If there is not a new man, how

can the new clothes be made to fit? If you have any enterprise before

you, try it in your old clothes. All men want, not something to \_do

with\_, but something to \_do\_, or rather something to \_be\_. Perhaps we

should never procure a new suit, however ragged or dirty the old, until

we have so conducted, so enterprised or sailed in some way, that we

feel like new men in the old, and that to retain it would be like

keeping new wine in old bottles. Our moulting season, like that of the

fowls, must be a crisis in our lives. The loon retires to solitary

ponds to spend it. Thus also the snake casts its slough, and the

caterpillar its wormy coat, by an internal industry and expansion; for

clothes are but our outmost cuticle and mortal coil. Otherwise we shall

be found sailing under false colors, and be inevitably cashiered at

last by our own opinion, as well as that of mankind.

We don garment after garment, as if we grew like exogenous plants by

addition without. Our outside and often thin and fanciful clothes are

our epidermis, or false skin, which partakes not of our life, and may

be stripped off here and there without fatal injury; our thicker

garments, constantly worn, are our cellular integument, or cortex; but

our shirts are our liber or true bark, which cannot be removed without

girdling and so destroying the man. I believe that all races at some

seasons wear something equivalent to the shirt. It is desirable that a

man be clad so simply that he can lay his hands on himself in the dark,

and that he live in all respects so compactly and preparedly, that, if

an enemy take the town, he can, like the old philosopher, walk out the

gate empty-handed without anxiety. While one thick garment is, for most

purposes, as good as three thin ones, and cheap clothing can be

obtained at prices really to suit customers; while a thick coat can be

bought for five dollars, which will last as many years, thick

pantaloons for two dollars, cowhide boots for a dollar and a half a

pair, a summer hat for a quarter of a dollar, and a winter cap for

sixty-two and a half cents, or a better be made at home at a nominal

cost, where is he so poor that, clad in such a suit, of \_his own

earning\_, there will not be found wise men to do him reverence?

When I ask for a garment of a particular form, my tailoress tells me

gravely, “They do not make them so now,” not emphasizing the “They” at

all, as if she quoted an authority as impersonal as the Fates, and I

find it difficult to get made what I want, simply because she cannot

believe that I mean what I say, that I am so rash. When I hear this

oracular sentence, I am for a moment absorbed in thought, emphasizing

to myself each word separately that I may come at the meaning of it,

that I may find out by what degree of consanguinity \_They\_ are related

to \_me\_, and what authority they may have in an affair which affects me

so nearly; and, finally, I am inclined to answer her with equal

mystery, and without any more emphasis of the “they,”—“It is true, they

did not make them so recently, but they do now.” Of what use this

measuring of me if she does not measure my character, but only the

breadth of my shoulders, as it were a peg to hang the coat on? We

worship not the Graces, nor the Parcæ, but Fashion. She spins and

weaves and cuts with full authority. The head monkey at Paris puts on a

traveller’s cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same. I

sometimes despair of getting anything quite simple and honest done in

this world by the help of men. They would have to be passed through a

powerful press first, to squeeze their old notions out of them, so that

they would not soon get upon their legs again, and then there would be

some one in the company with a maggot in his head, hatched from an egg

deposited there nobody knows when, for not even fire kills these

things, and you would have lost your labor. Nevertheless, we will not

forget that some Egyptian wheat was handed down to us by a mummy.

On the whole, I think that it cannot be maintained that dressing has in

this or any country risen to the dignity of an art. At present men make

shift to wear what they can get. Like shipwrecked sailors, they put on

what they can find on the beach, and at a little distance, whether of

space or time, laugh at each other’s masquerade. Every generation

laughs at the old fashions, but follows religiously the new. We are

amused at beholding the costume of Henry VIII., or Queen Elizabeth, as

much as if it was that of the King and Queen of the Cannibal Islands.

All costume off a man is pitiful or grotesque. It is only the serious

eye peering from and the sincere life passed within it, which restrain

laughter and consecrate the costume of any people. Let Harlequin be

taken with a fit of the colic and his trappings will have to serve that

mood too. When the soldier is hit by a cannon ball rags are as becoming

as purple.

The childish and savage taste of men and women for new patterns keeps

how many shaking and squinting through kaleidoscopes that they may

discover the particular figure which this generation requires today.

The manufacturers have learned that this taste is merely whimsical. Of

two patterns which differ only by a few threads more or less of a

particular color, the one will be sold readily, the other lie on the

shelf, though it frequently happens that after the lapse of a season

the latter becomes the most fashionable. Comparatively, tattooing is

not the hideous custom which it is called. It is not barbarous merely

because the printing is skin-deep and unalterable.

I cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men

may get clothing. The condition of the operatives is becoming every day

more like that of the English; and it cannot be wondered at, since, as

far as I have heard or observed, the principal object is, not that

mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that

corporations may be enriched. In the long run men hit only what they

aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better

aim at something high.

As for a Shelter, I will not deny that this is now a necessary of life,

though there are instances of men having done without it for long

periods in colder countries than this. Samuel Laing says that “the

Laplander in his skin dress, and in a skin bag which he puts over his

head and shoulders, will sleep night after night on the snow—in a

degree of cold which would extinguish the life of one exposed to it in

any woollen clothing.” He had seen them asleep thus. Yet he adds, “They

are not hardier than other people.” But, probably, man did not live

long on the earth without discovering the convenience which there is in

a house, the domestic comforts, which phrase may have originally

signified the satisfactions of the house more than of the family;

though these must be extremely partial and occasional in those climates

where the house is associated in our thoughts with winter or the rainy

season chiefly, and two thirds of the year, except for a parasol, is

unnecessary. In our climate, in the summer, it was formerly almost

solely a covering at night. In the Indian gazettes a wigwam was the

symbol of a day’s march, and a row of them cut or painted on the bark

of a tree signified that so many times they had camped. Man was not

made so large limbed and robust but that he must seek to narrow his

world, and wall in a space such as fitted him. He was at first bare and

out of doors; but though this was pleasant enough in serene and warm

weather, by daylight, the rainy season and the winter, to say nothing

of the torrid sun, would perhaps have nipped his race in the bud if he

had not made haste to clothe himself with the shelter of a house. Adam

and Eve, according to the fable, wore the bower before other clothes.

Man wanted a home, a place of warmth, or comfort, first of physical

warmth, then the warmth of the affections.

We may imagine a time when, in the infancy of the human race, some

enterprising mortal crept into a hollow in a rock for shelter. Every

child begins the world again, to some extent, and loves to stay out

doors, even in wet and cold. It plays house, as well as horse, having

an instinct for it. Who does not remember the interest with which when

young he looked at shelving rocks, or any approach to a cave? It was

the natural yearning of that portion of our most primitive ancestor

which still survived in us. From the cave we have advanced to roofs of

palm leaves, of bark and boughs, of linen woven and stretched, of grass

and straw, of boards and shingles, of stones and tiles. At last, we

know not what it is to live in the open air, and our lives are domestic

in more senses than we think. From the hearth to the field is a great

distance. It would be well perhaps if we were to spend more of our days

and nights without any obstruction between us and the celestial bodies,

if the poet did not speak so much from under a roof, or the saint dwell

there so long. Birds do not sing in caves, nor do doves cherish their

innocence in dovecots.

However, if one designs to construct a dwelling house, it behooves him

to exercise a little Yankee shrewdness, lest after all he find himself

in a workhouse, a labyrinth without a clue, a museum, an almshouse, a

prison, or a splendid mausoleum instead. Consider first how slight a

shelter is absolutely necessary. I have seen Penobscot Indians, in this

town, living in tents of thin cotton cloth, while the snow was nearly a

foot deep around them, and I thought that they would be glad to have it

deeper to keep out the wind. Formerly, when how to get my living

honestly, with freedom left for my proper pursuits, was a question

which vexed me even more than it does now, for unfortunately I am

become somewhat callous, I used to see a large box by the railroad, six

feet long by three wide, in which the laborers locked up their tools at

night, and it suggested to me that every man who was hard pushed might

get such a one for a dollar, and, having bored a few auger holes in it,

to admit the air at least, get into it when it rained and at night, and

hook down the lid, and so have freedom in his love, and in his soul be

free. This did not appear the worst, nor by any means a despicable

alternative. You could sit up as late as you pleased, and, whenever you

got up, go abroad without any landlord or house-lord dogging you for

rent. Many a man is harassed to death to pay the rent of a larger and

more luxurious box who would not have frozen to death in such a box as

this. I am far from jesting. Economy is a subject which admits of being

treated with levity, but it cannot so be disposed of. A comfortable

house for a rude and hardy race, that lived mostly out of doors, was

once made here almost entirely of such materials as Nature furnished

ready to their hands. Gookin, who was superintendent of the Indians

subject to the Massachusetts Colony, writing in 1674, says, “The best

of their houses are covered very neatly, tight and warm, with barks of

trees, slipped from their bodies at those seasons when the sap is up,

and made into great flakes, with pressure of weighty timber, when they

are green.... The meaner sort are covered with mats which they make of

a kind of bulrush, and are also indifferently tight and warm, but not

so good as the former.... Some I have seen, sixty or a hundred feet

long and thirty feet broad.... I have often lodged in their wigwams,

and found them as warm as the best English houses.” He adds, that they

were commonly carpeted and lined within with well-wrought embroidered

mats, and were furnished with various utensils. The Indians had

advanced so far as to regulate the effect of the wind by a mat

suspended over the hole in the roof and moved by a string. Such a lodge

was in the first instance constructed in a day or two at most, and

taken down and put up in a few hours; and every family owned one, or

its apartment in one.

In the savage state every family owns a shelter as good as the best,

and sufficient for its coarser and simpler wants; but I think that I

speak within bounds when I say that, though the birds of the air have

their nests, and the foxes their holes, and the savages their wigwams,

in modern civilized society not more than one half the families own a

shelter. In the large towns and cities, where civilization especially

prevails, the number of those who own a shelter is a very small

fraction of the whole. The rest pay an annual tax for this outside

garment of all, become indispensable summer and winter, which would buy

a village of Indian wigwams, but now helps to keep them poor as long as

they live. I do not mean to insist here on the disadvantage of hiring

compared with owning, but it is evident that the savage owns his

shelter because it costs so little, while the civilized man hires his

commonly because he cannot afford to own it; nor can he, in the long

run, any better afford to hire. But, answers one, by merely paying this

tax the poor civilized man secures an abode which is a palace compared

with the savage’s. An annual rent of from twenty-five to a hundred

dollars, these are the country rates, entitles him to the benefit of

the improvements of centuries, spacious apartments, clean paint and

paper, Rumford fireplace, back plastering, Venetian blinds, copper

pump, spring lock, a commodious cellar, and many other things. But how

happens it that he who is said to enjoy these things is so commonly a

\_poor\_ civilized man, while the savage, who has them not, is rich as a

savage? If it is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the

condition of man,—and I think that it is, though only the wise improve

their advantages,—it must be shown that it has produced better

dwellings without making them more costly; and the cost of a thing is

the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged

for it, immediately or in the long run. An average house in this

neighborhood costs perhaps eight hundred dollars, and to lay up this

sum will take from ten to fifteen years of the laborer’s life, even if

he is not encumbered with a family;—estimating the pecuniary value of

every man’s labor at one dollar a day, for if some receive more, others

receive less;—so that he must have spent more than half his life

commonly before \_his\_ wigwam will be earned. If we suppose him to pay a

rent instead, this is but a doubtful choice of evils. Would the savage

have been wise to exchange his wigwam for a palace on these terms?

It may be guessed that I reduce almost the whole advantage of holding

this superfluous property as a fund in store against the future, so far

as the individual is concerned, mainly to the defraying of funeral

expenses. But perhaps a man is not required to bury himself.

Nevertheless this points to an important distinction between the

civilized man and the savage; and, no doubt, they have designs on us

for our benefit, in making the life of a civilized people an

\_institution\_, in which the life of the individual is to a great extent

absorbed, in order to preserve and perfect that of the race. But I wish

to show at what a sacrifice this advantage is at present obtained, and

to suggest that we may possibly so live as to secure all the advantage

without suffering any of the disadvantage. What mean ye by saying that

the poor ye have always with you, or that the fathers have eaten sour

grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge?

“As I live, saith the Lord God, ye shall not have occasion any more to

use this proverb in Israel.”

“Behold all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul

of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.”

When I consider my neighbors, the farmers of Concord, who are at least

as well off as the other classes, I find that for the most part they

have been toiling twenty, thirty, or forty years, that they may become

the real owners of their farms, which commonly they have inherited with

encumbrances, or else bought with hired money,—and we may regard one

third of that toil as the cost of their houses,—but commonly they have

not paid for them yet. It is true, the encumbrances sometimes outweigh

the value of the farm, so that the farm itself becomes one great

encumbrance, and still a man is found to inherit it, being well

acquainted with it, as he says. On applying to the assessors, I am

surprised to learn that they cannot at once name a dozen in the town

who own their farms free and clear. If you would know the history of

these homesteads, inquire at the bank where they are mortgaged. The man

who has actually paid for his farm with labor on it is so rare that

every neighbor can point to him. I doubt if there are three such men in

Concord. What has been said of the merchants, that a very large

majority, even ninety-seven in a hundred, are sure to fail, is equally

true of the farmers. With regard to the merchants, however, one of them

says pertinently that a great part of their failures are not genuine

pecuniary failures, but merely failures to fulfil their engagements,

because it is inconvenient; that is, it is the moral character that

breaks down. But this puts an infinitely worse face on the matter, and

suggests, beside, that probably not even the other three succeed in

saving their souls, but are perchance bankrupt in a worse sense than

they who fail honestly. Bankruptcy and repudiation are the springboards

from which much of our civilization vaults and turns its somersets, but

the savage stands on the unelastic plank of famine. Yet the Middlesex

Cattle Show goes off here with \_éclat\_ annually, as if all the joints

of the agricultural machine were suent.

The farmer is endeavoring to solve the problem of a livelihood by a

formula more complicated than the problem itself. To get his

shoestrings he speculates in herds of cattle. With consummate skill he

has set his trap with a hair spring to catch comfort and independence,

and then, as he turned away, got his own leg into it. This is the

reason he is poor; and for a similar reason we are all poor in respect

to a thousand savage comforts, though surrounded by luxuries. As

Chapman sings,—

“The false society of men—

—for earthly greatness

All heavenly comforts rarefies to air.”

And when the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the

poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him. As I understand

it, that was a valid objection urged by Momus against the house which

Minerva made, that she “had not made it movable, by which means a bad

neighborhood might be avoided;” and it may still be urged, for our

houses are such unwieldy property that we are often imprisoned rather

than housed in them; and the bad neighborhood to be avoided is our own

scurvy selves. I know one or two families, at least, in this town, who,

for nearly a generation, have been wishing to sell their houses in the

outskirts and move into the village, but have not been able to

accomplish it, and only death will set them free.

Granted that the \_majority\_ are able at last either to own or hire the

modern house with all its improvements. While civilization has been

improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to

inhabit them. It has created palaces, but it was not so easy to create

noblemen and kings. And \_if the civilized man’s pursuits are no

worthier than the savage’s, if he is employed the greater part of his

life in obtaining gross necessaries and comforts merely, why should he

have a better dwelling than the former?\_

But how do the poor minority fare? Perhaps it will be found, that just

in proportion as some have been placed in outward circumstances above

the savage, others have been degraded below him. The luxury of one

class is counterbalanced by the indigence of another. On the one side

is the palace, on the other are the almshouse and “silent poor.” The

myriads who built the pyramids to be the tombs of the Pharaohs were fed

on garlic, and it may be were not decently buried themselves. The mason

who finishes the cornice of the palace returns at night perchance to a

hut not so good as a wigwam. It is a mistake to suppose that, in a

country where the usual evidences of civilization exist, the condition

of a very large body of the inhabitants may not be as degraded as that

of savages. I refer to the degraded poor, not now to the degraded rich.

To know this I should not need to look farther than to the shanties

which every where border our railroads, that last improvement in

civilization; where I see in my daily walks human beings living in

sties, and all winter with an open door, for the sake of light, without

any visible, often imaginable, wood pile, and the forms of both old and

young are permanently contracted by the long habit of shrinking from

cold and misery, and the development of all their limbs and faculties

is checked. It certainly is fair to look at that class by whose labor

the works which distinguish this generation are accomplished. Such too,

to a greater or less extent, is the condition of the operatives of

every denomination in England, which is the great workhouse of the

world. Or I could refer you to Ireland, which is marked as one of the

white or enlightened spots on the map. Contrast the physical condition

of the Irish with that of the North American Indian, or the South Sea

Islander, or any other savage race before it was degraded by contact

with the civilized man. Yet I have no doubt that that people’s rulers

are as wise as the average of civilized rulers. Their condition only

proves what squalidness may consist with civilization. I hardly need

refer now to the laborers in our Southern States who produce the staple

exports of this country, and are themselves a staple production of the

South. But to confine myself to those who are said to be in \_moderate\_

circumstances.

Most men appear never to have considered what a house is, and are

actually though needlessly poor all their lives because they think that

they must have such a one as their neighbors have. As if one were to

wear any sort of coat which the tailor might cut out for him, or,

gradually leaving off palmleaf hat or cap of woodchuck skin, complain

of hard times because he could not afford to buy him a crown! It is

possible to invent a house still more convenient and luxurious than we

have, which yet all would admit that man could not afford to pay for.

Shall we always study to obtain more of these things, and not sometimes

to be content with less? Shall the respectable citizen thus gravely

teach, by precept and example, the necessity of the young man’s

providing a certain number of superfluous glow-shoes, and umbrellas,

and empty guest chambers for empty guests, before he dies? Why should

not our furniture be as simple as the Arab’s or the Indian’s? When I

think of the benefactors of the race, whom we have apotheosized as

messengers from heaven, bearers of divine gifts to man, I do not see in

my mind any retinue at their heels, any car-load of fashionable

furniture. Or what if I were to allow—would it not be a singular

allowance?—that our furniture should be more complex than the Arab’s,

in proportion as we are morally and intellectually his superiors! At

present our houses are cluttered and defiled with it, and a good

housewife would sweep out the greater part into the dust hole, and not

leave her morning’s work undone. Morning work! By the blushes of Aurora

and the music of Memnon, what should be man’s \_morning work\_ in this

world? I had three pieces of limestone on my desk, but I was terrified

to find that they required to be dusted daily, when the furniture of my

mind was all undusted still, and I threw them out the window in

disgust. How, then, could I have a furnished house? I would rather sit

in the open air, for no dust gathers on the grass, unless where man has

broken ground.

It is the luxurious and dissipated who set the fashions which the herd

so diligently follow. The traveller who stops at the best houses, so

called, soon discovers this, for the publicans presume him to be a

Sardanapalus, and if he resigned himself to their tender mercies he

would soon be completely emasculated. I think that in the railroad car

we are inclined to spend more on luxury than on safety and convenience,

and it threatens without attaining these to become no better than a

modern drawing room, with its divans, and ottomans, and sun-shades, and

a hundred other oriental things, which we are taking west with us,

invented for the ladies of the harem and the effeminate natives of the

Celestial Empire, which Jonathan should be ashamed to know the names

of. I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself than be

crowded on a velvet cushion. I would rather ride on earth in an ox cart

with a free circulation, than go to heaven in the fancy car of an

excursion train and breathe a \_malaria\_ all the way.

The very simplicity and nakedness of man’s life in the primitive ages

imply this advantage at least, that they left him still but a sojourner

in nature. When he was refreshed with food and sleep he contemplated

his journey again. He dwelt, as it were, in a tent in this world, and

was either threading the valleys, or crossing the plains, or climbing

the mountain tops. But lo! men have become the tools of their tools.

The man who independently plucked the fruits when he was hungry is

become a farmer; and he who stood under a tree for shelter, a

housekeeper. We now no longer camp as for a night, but have settled

down on earth and forgotten heaven. We have adopted Christianity merely

as an improved method of \_agri\_-culture. We have built for this world a

family mansion, and for the next a family tomb. The best works of art

are the expression of man’s struggle to free himself from this

condition, but the effect of our art is merely to make this low state

comfortable and that higher state to be forgotten. There is actually no

place in this village for a work of \_fine\_ art, if any had come down to

us, to stand, for our lives, our houses and streets, furnish no proper

pedestal for it. There is not a nail to hang a picture on, nor a shelf

to receive the bust of a hero or a saint. When I consider how our

houses are built and paid for, or not paid for, and their internal

economy managed and sustained, I wonder that the floor does not give

way under the visitor while he is admiring the gewgaws upon the

mantel-piece, and let him through into the cellar, to some solid and

honest though earthy foundation. I cannot but perceive that this so

called rich and refined life is a thing jumped at, and I do not get on

in the enjoyment of the \_fine\_ arts which adorn it, my attention being

wholly occupied with the jump; for I remember that the greatest genuine

leap, due to human muscles alone, on record, is that of certain

wandering Arabs, who are said to have cleared twenty-five feet on level

ground. Without factitious support, man is sure to come to earth again

beyond that distance. The first question which I am tempted to put to

the proprietor of such great impropriety is, Who bolsters you? Are you

one of the ninety-seven who fail, or of the three who succeed? Answer

me these questions, and then perhaps I may look at your bawbles and

find them ornamental. The cart before the horse is neither beautiful

nor useful. Before we can adorn our houses with beautiful objects the

walls must be stripped, and our lives must be stripped, and beautiful

housekeeping and beautiful living be laid for a foundation: now, a

taste for the beautiful is most cultivated out of doors, where there is

no house and no housekeeper.

Old Johnson, in his “Wonder-Working Providence,” speaking of the first

settlers of this town, with whom he was contemporary, tells us that

“they burrow themselves in the earth for their first shelter under some

hillside, and, casting the soil aloft upon timber, they make a smoky

fire against the earth, at the highest side.” They did not “provide

them houses,” says he, “till the earth, by the Lord’s blessing, brought

forth bread to feed them,” and the first year’s crop was so light that

“they were forced to cut their bread very thin for a long season.” The

secretary of the Province of New Netherland, writing in Dutch, in 1650,

for the information of those who wished to take up land there, states

more particularly that “those in New Netherland, and especially in New

England, who have no means to build farmhouses at first according to

their wishes, dig a square pit in the ground, cellar fashion, six or

seven feet deep, as long and as broad as they think proper, case the

earth inside with wood all round the wall, and line the wood with the

bark of trees or something else to prevent the caving in of the earth;

floor this cellar with plank, and wainscot it overhead for a ceiling,

raise a roof of spars clear up, and cover the spars with bark or green

sods, so that they can live dry and warm in these houses with their

entire families for two, three, and four years, it being understood

that partitions are run through those cellars which are adapted to the

size of the family. The wealthy and principal men in New England, in

the beginning of the colonies, commenced their first dwelling houses in

this fashion for two reasons; firstly, in order not to waste time in

building, and not to want food the next season; secondly, in order not

to discourage poor laboring people whom they brought over in numbers

from Fatherland. In the course of three or four years, when the country

became adapted to agriculture, they built themselves handsome houses,

spending on them several thousands.”

In this course which our ancestors took there was a show of prudence at

least, as if their principle were to satisfy the more pressing wants

first. But are the more pressing wants satisfied now? When I think of

acquiring for myself one of our luxurious dwellings, I am deterred,

for, so to speak, the country is not yet adapted to \_human\_ culture,

and we are still forced to cut our \_spiritual\_ bread far thinner than

our forefathers did their wheaten. Not that all architectural ornament

is to be neglected even in the rudest periods; but let our houses first

be lined with beauty, where they come in contact with our lives, like

the tenement of the shellfish, and not overlaid with it. But, alas! I

have been inside one or two of them, and know what they are lined with.

Though we are not so degenerate but that we might possibly live in a

cave or a wigwam or wear skins today, it certainly is better to accept

the advantages, though so dearly bought, which the invention and

industry of mankind offer. In such a neighborhood as this, boards and

shingles, lime and bricks, are cheaper and more easily obtained than

suitable caves, or whole logs, or bark in sufficient quantities, or

even well-tempered clay or flat stones. I speak understandingly on this

subject, for I have made myself acquainted with it both theoretically

and practically. With a little more wit we might use these materials so

as to become richer than the richest now are, and make our civilization

a blessing. The civilized man is a more experienced and wiser savage.

But to make haste to my own experiment.

Near the end of March, 1845, I borrowed an axe and went down to the

woods by Walden Pond, nearest to where I intended to build my house,

and began to cut down some tall, arrowy white pines, still in their

youth, for timber. It is difficult to begin without borrowing, but

perhaps it is the most generous course thus to permit your fellow-men

to have an interest in your enterprise. The owner of the axe, as he

released his hold on it, said that it was the apple of his eye; but I

returned it sharper than I received it. It was a pleasant hillside

where I worked, covered with pine woods, through which I looked out on

the pond, and a small open field in the woods where pines and hickories

were springing up. The ice in the pond was not yet dissolved, though

there were some open spaces, and it was all dark colored and saturated

with water. There were some slight flurries of snow during the days

that I worked there; but for the most part when I came out on to the

railroad, on my way home, its yellow sand heap stretched away gleaming

in the hazy atmosphere, and the rails shone in the spring sun, and I

heard the lark and pewee and other birds already come to commence

another year with us. They were pleasant spring days, in which the

winter of man’s discontent was thawing as well as the earth, and the

life that had lain torpid began to stretch itself. One day, when my axe

had come off and I had cut a green hickory for a wedge, driving it with

a stone, and had placed the whole to soak in a pond hole in order to

swell the wood, I saw a striped snake run into the water, and he lay on

the bottom, apparently without inconvenience, as long as I stayed

there, or more than a quarter of an hour; perhaps because he had not

yet fairly come out of the torpid state. It appeared to me that for a

like reason men remain in their present low and primitive condition;

but if they should feel the influence of the spring of springs arousing

them, they would of necessity rise to a higher and more ethereal life.

I had previously seen the snakes in frosty mornings in my path with

portions of their bodies still numb and inflexible, waiting for the sun

to thaw them. On the 1st of April it rained and melted the ice, and in

the early part of the day, which was very foggy, I heard a stray goose

groping about over the pond and cackling as if lost, or like the spirit

of the fog.

So I went on for some days cutting and hewing timber, and also studs

and rafters, all with my narrow axe, not having many communicable or

scholar-like thoughts, singing to myself,—

Men say they know many things;

But lo! they have taken wings,—

The arts and sciences,

And a thousand appliances;

The wind that blows

Is all that any body knows.

I hewed the main timbers six inches square, most of the studs on two

sides only, and the rafters and floor timbers on one side, leaving the

rest of the bark on, so that they were just as straight and much

stronger than sawed ones. Each stick was carefully mortised or tenoned

by its stump, for I had borrowed other tools by this time. My days in

the woods were not very long ones; yet I usually carried my dinner of

bread and butter, and read the newspaper in which it was wrapped, at

noon, sitting amid the green pine boughs which I had cut off, and to my

bread was imparted some of their fragrance, for my hands were covered

with a thick coat of pitch. Before I had done I was more the friend

than the foe of the pine tree, though I had cut down some of them,

having become better acquainted with it. Sometimes a rambler in the

wood was attracted by the sound of my axe, and we chatted pleasantly

over the chips which I had made.

By the middle of April, for I made no haste in my work, but rather made

the most of it, my house was framed and ready for the raising. I had

already bought the shanty of James Collins, an Irishman who worked on

the Fitchburg Railroad, for boards. James Collins’ shanty was

considered an uncommonly fine one. When I called to see it he was not

at home. I walked about the outside, at first unobserved from within,

the window was so deep and high. It was of small dimensions, with a

peaked cottage roof, and not much else to be seen, the dirt being

raised five feet all around as if it were a compost heap. The roof was

the soundest part, though a good deal warped and made brittle by the

sun. Door-sill there was none, but a perennial passage for the hens

under the door board. Mrs. C. came to the door and asked me to view it

from the inside. The hens were driven in by my approach. It was dark,

and had a dirt floor for the most part, dank, clammy, and aguish, only

here a board and there a board which would not bear removal. She

lighted a lamp to show me the inside of the roof and the walls, and

also that the board floor extended under the bed, warning me not to

step into the cellar, a sort of dust hole two feet deep. In her own

words, they were “good boards overhead, good boards all around, and a

good window,”—of two whole squares originally, only the cat had passed

out that way lately. There was a stove, a bed, and a place to sit, an

infant in the house where it was born, a silk parasol, gilt-framed

looking-glass, and a patent new coffee mill nailed to an oak sapling,

all told. The bargain was soon concluded, for James had in the

meanwhile returned. I to pay four dollars and twenty-five cents

to-night, he to vacate at five to-morrow morning, selling to nobody

else meanwhile: I to take possession at six. It were well, he said, to

be there early, and anticipate certain indistinct but wholly unjust

claims on the score of ground rent and fuel. This he assured me was the

only encumbrance. At six I passed him and his family on the road. One

large bundle held their all,—bed, coffee-mill, looking-glass, hens,—all

but the cat, she took to the woods and became a wild cat, and, as I

learned afterward, trod in a trap set for woodchucks, and so became a

dead cat at last.

I took down this dwelling the same morning, drawing the nails, and

removed it to the pond side by small cartloads, spreading the boards on

the grass there to bleach and warp back again in the sun. One early

thrush gave me a note or two as I drove along the woodland path. I was

informed treacherously by a young Patrick that neighbor Seeley, an

Irishman, in the intervals of the carting, transferred the still

tolerable, straight, and drivable nails, staples, and spikes to his

pocket, and then stood when I came back to pass the time of day, and

look freshly up, unconcerned, with spring thoughts, at the devastation;

there being a dearth of work, as he said. He was there to represent

spectatordom, and help make this seemingly insignificant event one with

the removal of the gods of Troy.

I dug my cellar in the side of a hill sloping to the south, where a

woodchuck had formerly dug his burrow, down through sumach and

blackberry roots, and the lowest stain of vegetation, six feet square

by seven deep, to a fine sand where potatoes would not freeze in any

winter. The sides were left shelving, and not stoned; but the sun

having never shone on them, the sand still keeps its place. It was but

two hours’ work. I took particular pleasure in this breaking of ground,

for in almost all latitudes men dig into the earth for an equable

temperature. Under the most splendid house in the city is still to be

found the cellar where they store their roots as of old, and long after

the superstructure has disappeared posterity remark its dent in the

earth. The house is still but a sort of porch at the entrance of a

burrow.

At length, in the beginning of May, with the help of some of my

acquaintances, rather to improve so good an occasion for neighborliness

than from any necessity, I set up the frame of my house. No man was

ever more honored in the character of his raisers than I. They are

destined, I trust, to assist at the raising of loftier structures one

day. I began to occupy my house on the 4th of July, as soon as it was

boarded and roofed, for the boards were carefully feather-edged and

lapped, so that it was perfectly impervious to rain; but before

boarding I laid the foundation of a chimney at one end, bringing two

cartloads of stones up the hill from the pond in my arms. I built the

chimney after my hoeing in the fall, before a fire became necessary for

warmth, doing my cooking in the mean while out of doors on the ground,

early in the morning: which mode I still think is in some respects more

convenient and agreeable than the usual one. When it stormed before my

bread was baked, I fixed a few boards over the fire, and sat under them

to watch my loaf, and passed some pleasant hours in that way. In those

days, when my hands were much employed, I read but little, but the

least scraps of paper which lay on the ground, my holder, or

tablecloth, afforded me as much entertainment, in fact answered the

same purpose as the Iliad.

It would be worth the while to build still more deliberately than I

did, considering, for instance, what foundation a door, a window, a

cellar, a garret, have in the nature of man, and perchance never

raising any superstructure until we found a better reason for it than

our temporal necessities even. There is some of the same fitness in a

man’s building his own house that there is in a bird’s building its own

nest. Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own

hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and

honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as

birds universally sing when they are so engaged? But alas! we do like

cowbirds and cuckoos, which lay their eggs in nests which other birds

have built, and cheer no traveller with their chattering and unmusical

notes. Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the

carpenter? What does architecture amount to in the experience of the

mass of men? I never in all my walks came across a man engaged in so

simple and natural an occupation as building his house. We belong to

the community. It is not the tailor alone who is the ninth part of a

man; it is as much the preacher, and the merchant, and the farmer.

Where is this division of labor to end? and what object does it finally

serve? No doubt another \_may\_ also think for me; but it is not

therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my

thinking for myself.

True, there are architects so called in this country, and I have heard

of one at least possessed with the idea of making architectural

ornaments have a core of truth, a necessity, and hence a beauty, as if

it were a revelation to him. All very well perhaps from his point of

view, but only a little better than the common dilettantism. A

sentimental reformer in architecture, he began at the cornice, not at

the foundation. It was only how to put a core of truth within the

ornaments, that every sugar plum in fact might have an almond or

caraway seed in it,—though I hold that almonds are most wholesome

without the sugar,—and not how the inhabitant, the indweller, might

build truly within and without, and let the ornaments take care of

themselves. What reasonable man ever supposed that ornaments were

something outward and in the skin merely,—that the tortoise got his

spotted shell, or the shellfish its mother-o’-pearl tints, by such a

contract as the inhabitants of Broadway their Trinity Church? But a man

has no more to do with the style of architecture of his house than a

tortoise with that of its shell: nor need the soldier be so idle as to

try to paint the precise color of his virtue on his standard. The enemy

will find it out. He may turn pale when the trial comes. This man

seemed to me to lean over the cornice, and timidly whisper his half

truth to the rude occupants who really knew it better than he. What of

architectural beauty I now see, I know has gradually grown from within

outward, out of the necessities and character of the indweller, who is

the only builder,—out of some unconscious truthfulness, and nobleness,

without ever a thought for the appearance and whatever additional

beauty of this kind is destined to be produced will be preceded by a

like unconscious beauty of life. The most interesting dwellings in this

country, as the painter knows, are the most unpretending, humble log

huts and cottages of the poor commonly; it is the life of the

inhabitants whose shells they are, and not any peculiarity in their

surfaces merely, which makes them \_picturesque;\_ and equally

interesting will be the citizen’s suburban box, when his life shall be

as simple and as agreeable to the imagination, and there is as little

straining after effect in the style of his dwelling. A great proportion

of architectural ornaments are literally hollow, and a September gale

would strip them off, like borrowed plumes, without injury to the

substantials. They can do without \_architecture\_ who have no olives nor

wines in the cellar. What if an equal ado were made about the ornaments

of style in literature, and the architects of our bibles spent as much

time about their cornices as the architects of our churches do? So are

made the \_belles-lettres\_ and the \_beaux-arts\_ and their professors.

Much it concerns a man, forsooth, how a few sticks are slanted over him

or under him, and what colors are daubed upon his box. It would signify

somewhat, if, in any earnest sense, \_he\_ slanted them and daubed it;

but the spirit having departed out of the tenant, it is of a piece with

constructing his own coffin,—the architecture of the grave, and

“carpenter” is but another name for “coffin-maker.” One man says, in

his despair or indifference to life, take up a handful of the earth at

your feet, and paint your house that color. Is he thinking of his last

and narrow house? Toss up a copper for it as well. What an abundance of

leisure he must have! Why do you take up a handful of dirt? Better

paint your house your own complexion; let it turn pale or blush for

you. An enterprise to improve the style of cottage architecture! When

you have got my ornaments ready I will wear them.

Before winter I built a chimney, and shingled the sides of my house,

which were already impervious to rain, with imperfect and sappy

shingles made of the first slice of the log, whose edges I was obliged

to straighten with a plane.

I have thus a tight shingled and plastered house, ten feet wide by

fifteen long, and eight-feet posts, with a garret and a closet, a large

window on each side, two trap doors, one door at the end, and a brick

fireplace opposite. The exact cost of my house, paying the usual price

for such materials as I used, but not counting the work, all of which

was done by myself, was as follows; and I give the details because very

few are able to tell exactly what their houses cost, and fewer still,

if any, the separate cost of the various materials which compose them:—

Boards.......................... $ 8.03½, mostly shanty boards.

Refuse shingles for roof sides,.. 4.00

Laths,........................... 1.25

Two second-hand windows

with glass,................... 2.43

One thousand old brick,.......... 4.00

Two casks of lime,............... 2.40 That was high.

Hair,............................ 0.31 More than I needed.

Mantle-tree iron,................ 0.15

Nails,........................... 3.90

Hinges and screws,............... 0.14

Latch,........................... 0.10

Chalk,........................... 0.01

Transportation,.................. 1.40 I carried a good part

———— on my back.

In all,..................... $28.12½

These are all the materials excepting the timber stones and sand, which

I claimed by squatter’s right. I have also a small wood-shed adjoining,

made chiefly of the stuff which was left after building the house.

I intend to build me a house which will surpass any on the main street

in Concord in grandeur and luxury, as soon as it pleases me as much and

will cost me no more than my present one.

I thus found that the student who wishes for a shelter can obtain one

for a lifetime at an expense not greater than the rent which he now

pays annually. If I seem to boast more than is becoming, my excuse is

that I brag for humanity rather than for myself; and my shortcomings

and inconsistencies do not affect the truth of my statement.

Notwithstanding much cant and hypocrisy,—chaff which I find it

difficult to separate from my wheat, but for which I am as sorry as any

man,—I will breathe freely and stretch myself in this respect, it is

such a relief to both the moral and physical system; and I am resolved

that I will not through humility become the devil’s attorney. I will

endeavor to speak a good word for the truth. At Cambridge College the

mere rent of a student’s room, which is only a little larger than my

own, is thirty dollars each year, though the corporation had the

advantage of building thirty-two side by side and under one roof, and

the occupant suffers the inconvenience of many and noisy neighbors, and

perhaps a residence in the fourth story. I cannot but think that if we

had more true wisdom in these respects, not only less education would

be needed, because, forsooth, more would already have been acquired,

but the pecuniary expense of getting an education would in a great

measure vanish. Those conveniences which the student requires at

Cambridge or elsewhere cost him or somebody else ten times as great a

sacrifice of life as they would with proper management on both sides.

Those things for which the most money is demanded are never the things

which the student most wants. Tuition, for instance, is an important

item in the term bill, while for the far more valuable education which

he gets by associating with the most cultivated of his contemporaries

no charge is made. The mode of founding a college is, commonly, to get

up a subscription of dollars and cents, and then following blindly the

principles of a division of labor to its extreme, a principle which

should never be followed but with circumspection,—to call in a

contractor who makes this a subject of speculation, and he employs

Irishmen or other operatives actually to lay the foundations, while the

students that are to be are said to be fitting themselves for it; and

for these oversights successive generations have to pay. I think that

it would be \_better than this\_, for the students, or those who desire

to be benefited by it, even to lay the foundation themselves. The

student who secures his coveted leisure and retirement by

systematically shirking any labor necessary to man obtains but an

ignoble and unprofitable leisure, defrauding himself of the experience

which alone can make leisure fruitful. “But,” says one, “you do not

mean that the students should go to work with their hands instead of

their heads?” I do not mean that exactly, but I mean something which he

might think a good deal like that; I mean that they should not \_play\_

life, or \_study\_ it merely, while the community supports them at this

expensive game, but earnestly \_live\_ it from beginning to end. How

could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment

of living? Methinks this would exercise their minds as much as

mathematics. If I wished a boy to know something about the arts and

sciences, for instance, I would not pursue the common course, which is

merely to send him into the neighborhood of some professor, where any

thing is professed and practised but the art of life;—to survey the

world through a telescope or a microscope, and never with his natural

eye; to study chemistry, and not learn how his bread is made, or

mechanics, and not learn how it is earned; to discover new satellites

to Neptune, and not detect the motes in his eyes, or to what vagabond

he is a satellite himself; or to be devoured by the monsters that swarm

all around him, while contemplating the monsters in a drop of vinegar.

Which would have advanced the most at the end of a month,—the boy who

had made his own jackknife from the ore which he had dug and smelted,

reading as much as would be necessary for this,—or the boy who had

attended the lectures on metallurgy at the Institute in the mean while,

and had received a Rodgers’ penknife from his father? Which would be

most likely to cut his fingers?... To my astonishment I was informed on

leaving college that I had studied navigation!—why, if I had taken one

turn down the harbor I should have known more about it. Even the \_poor\_

student studies and is taught only \_political\_ economy, while that

economy of living which is synonymous with philosophy is not even

sincerely professed in our colleges. The consequence is, that while he

is reading Adam Smith, Ricardo, and Say, he runs his father in debt

irretrievably.

As with our colleges, so with a hundred “modern improvements”; there is

an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance. The

devil goes on exacting compound interest to the last for his early

share and numerous succeeding investments in them. Our inventions are

wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious

things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which

it was already but too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston

or New York. We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph

from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing

important to communicate. Either is in such a predicament as the man

who was earnest to be introduced to a distinguished deaf woman, but

when he was presented, and one end of her ear trumpet was put into his

hand, had nothing to say. As if the main object were to talk fast and

not to talk sensibly. We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and

bring the old world some weeks nearer to the new; but perchance the

first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear

will be that the Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough. After all,

the man whose horse trots a mile in a minute does not carry the most

important messages; he is not an evangelist, nor does he come round

eating locusts and wild honey. I doubt if Flying Childers ever carried

a peck of corn to mill.

One says to me, “I wonder that you do not lay up money; you love to

travel; you might take the cars and go to Fitchburg to-day and see the

country.” But I am wiser than that. I have learned that the swiftest

traveller is he that goes afoot. I say to my friend, Suppose we try who

will get there first. The distance is thirty miles; the fare ninety

cents. That is almost a day’s wages. I remember when wages were sixty

cents a day for laborers on this very road. Well, I start now on foot,

and get there before night; I have travelled at that rate by the week

together. You will in the mean while have earned your fare, and arrive

there some time to-morrow, or possibly this evening, if you are lucky

enough to get a job in season. Instead of going to Fitchburg, you will

be working here the greater part of the day. And so, if the railroad

reached round the world, I think that I should keep ahead of you; and

as for seeing the country and getting experience of that kind, I should

have to cut your acquaintance altogether.

Such is the universal law, which no man can ever outwit, and with

regard to the railroad even we may say it is as broad as it is long. To

make a railroad round the world available to all mankind is equivalent

to grading the whole surface of the planet. Men have an indistinct

notion that if they keep up this activity of joint stocks and spades

long enough all will at length ride somewhere, in next to no time, and

for nothing; but though a crowd rushes to the depot, and the conductor

shouts “All aboard!” when the smoke is blown away and the vapor

condensed, it will be perceived that a few are riding, but the rest are

run over,—and it will be called, and will be, “A melancholy accident.”

No doubt they can ride at last who shall have earned their fare, that

is, if they survive so long, but they will probably have lost their

elasticity and desire to travel by that time. This spending of the best

part of one’s life earning money in order to enjoy a questionable

liberty during the least valuable part of it, reminds me of the

Englishman who went to India to make a fortune first, in order that he

might return to England and live the life of a poet. He should have

gone up garret at once. “What!” exclaim a million Irishmen starting up

from all the shanties in the land, “is not this railroad which we have

built a good thing?” Yes, I answer, \_comparatively\_ good, that is, you

might have done worse; but I wish, as you are brothers of mine, that

you could have spent your time better than digging in this dirt.

Before I finished my house, wishing to earn ten or twelve dollars by

some honest and agreeable method, in order to meet my unusual expenses,

I planted about two acres and a half of light and sandy soil near it

chiefly with beans, but also a small part with potatoes, corn, peas,

and turnips. The whole lot contains eleven acres, mostly growing up to

pines and hickories, and was sold the preceding season for eight

dollars and eight cents an acre. One farmer said that it was “good for

nothing but to raise cheeping squirrels on.” I put no manure whatever

on this land, not being the owner, but merely a squatter, and not

expecting to cultivate so much again, and I did not quite hoe it all

once. I got out several cords of stumps in ploughing, which supplied me

with fuel for a long time, and left small circles of virgin mould,

easily distinguishable through the summer by the greater luxuriance of

the beans there. The dead and for the most part unmerchantable wood

behind my house, and the driftwood from the pond, have supplied the

remainder of my fuel. I was obliged to hire a team and a man for the

ploughing, though I held the plough myself. My farm outgoes for the

first season were, for implements, seed, work, &c., $14.72½. The seed

corn was given me. This never costs anything to speak of, unless you

plant more than enough. I got twelve bushels of beans, and eighteen

bushels of potatoes, beside some peas and sweet corn. The yellow corn

and turnips were too late to come to any thing. My whole income from

the farm was

$ 23.44

Deducting the outgoes,........... 14.72½

————

There are left,................. $ 8.71½,

beside produce consumed and on hand at the time this estimate was made

of the value of $4.50,—the amount on hand much more than balancing a

little grass which I did not raise. All things considered, that is,

considering the importance of a man’s soul and of to-day,

notwithstanding the short time occupied by my experiment, nay, partly

even because of its transient character, I believe that that was doing

better than any farmer in Concord did that year.

The next year I did better still, for I spaded up all the land which I

required, about a third of an acre, and I learned from the experience

of both years, not being in the least awed by many celebrated works on

husbandry, Arthur Young among the rest, that if one would live simply

and eat only the crop which he raised, and raise no more than he ate,

and not exchange it for an insufficient quantity of more luxurious and

expensive things, he would need to cultivate only a few rods of ground,

and that it would be cheaper to spade up that than to use oxen to

plough it, and to select a fresh spot from time to time than to manure

the old, and he could do all his necessary farm work as it were with

his left hand at odd hours in the summer; and thus he would not be tied

to an ox, or horse, or cow, or pig, as at present. I desire to speak

impartially on this point, and as one not interested in the success or

failure of the present economical and social arrangements. I was more

independent than any farmer in Concord, for I was not anchored to a

house or farm, but could follow the bent of my genius, which is a very

crooked one, every moment. Beside being better off than they already,

if my house had been burned or my crops had failed, I should have been

nearly as well off as before.

I am wont to think that men are not so much the keepers of herds as

herds are the keepers of men, the former are so much the freer. Men and

oxen exchange work; but if we consider necessary work only, the oxen

will be seen to have greatly the advantage, their farm is so much the

larger. Man does some of his part of the exchange work in his six weeks

of haying, and it is no boy’s play. Certainly no nation that lived

simply in all respects, that is, no nation of philosophers, would

commit so great a blunder as to use the labor of animals. True, there

never was and is not likely soon to be a nation of philosophers, nor am

I certain it is desirable that there should be. However, \_I\_ should

never have broken a horse or bull and taken him to board for any work

he might do for me, for fear I should become a horse-man or a herds-man

merely; and if society seems to be the gainer by so doing, are we

certain that what is one man’s gain is not another’s loss, and that the

stable-boy has equal cause with his master to be satisfied? Granted

that some public works would not have been constructed without this

aid, and let man share the glory of such with the ox and horse; does it

follow that he could not have accomplished works yet more worthy of

himself in that case? When men begin to do, not merely unnecessary or

artistic, but luxurious and idle work, with their assistance, it is

inevitable that a few do all the exchange work with the oxen, or, in

other words, become the slaves of the strongest. Man thus not only

works for the animal within him, but, for a symbol of this, he works

for the animal without him. Though we have many substantial houses of

brick or stone, the prosperity of the farmer is still measured by the

degree to which the barn overshadows the house. This town is said to

have the largest houses for oxen, cows, and horses hereabouts, and it

is not behindhand in its public buildings; but there are very few halls

for free worship or free speech in this county. It should not be by

their architecture, but why not even by their power of abstract

thought, that nations should seek to commemorate themselves? How much

more admirable the Bhagvat-Geeta than all the ruins of the East! Towers

and temples are the luxury of princes. A simple and independent mind

does not toil at the bidding of any prince. Genius is not a retainer to

any emperor, nor is its material silver, or gold, or marble, except to

a trifling extent. To what end, pray, is so much stone hammered? In

Arcadia, when I was there, I did not see any hammering stone. Nations

are possessed with an insane ambition to perpetuate the memory of

themselves by the amount of hammered stone they leave. What if equal

pains were taken to smooth and polish their manners? One piece of good

sense would be more memorable than a monument as high as the moon. I

love better to see stones in place. The grandeur of Thebes was a vulgar

grandeur. More sensible is a rod of stone wall that bounds an honest

man’s field than a hundred-gated Thebes that has wandered farther from

the true end of life. The religion and civilization which are barbaric

and heathenish build splendid temples; but what you might call

Christianity does not. Most of the stone a nation hammers goes toward

its tomb only. It buries itself alive. As for the Pyramids, there is

nothing to wonder at in them so much as the fact that so many men could

be found degraded enough to spend their lives constructing a tomb for

some ambitious booby, whom it would have been wiser and manlier to have

drowned in the Nile, and then given his body to the dogs. I might

possibly invent some excuse for them and him, but I have no time for

it. As for the religion and love of art of the builders, it is much the

same all the world over, whether the building be an Egyptian temple or

the United States Bank. It costs more than it comes to. The mainspring

is vanity, assisted by the love of garlic and bread and butter. Mr.

Balcom, a promising young architect, designs it on the back of his

Vitruvius, with hard pencil and ruler, and the job is let out to Dobson

& Sons, stonecutters. When the thirty centuries begin to look down on

it, mankind begin to look up at it. As for your high towers and

monuments, there was a crazy fellow once in this town who undertook to

dig through to China, and he got so far that, as he said, he heard the

Chinese pots and kettles rattle; but I think that I shall not go out of

my way to admire the hole which he made. Many are concerned about the

monuments of the West and the East,—to know who built them. For my

part, I should like to know who in those days did not build them,—who

were above such trifling. But to proceed with my statistics.

By surveying, carpentry, and day-labor of various other kinds in the

village in the mean while, for I have as many trades as fingers, I had

earned $13.34. The expense of food for eight months, namely, from July

4th to March 1st, the time when these estimates were made, though I

lived there more than two years,—not counting potatoes, a little green

corn, and some peas, which I had raised, nor considering the value of

what was on hand at the last date, was

Rice,................... $ 1.73½

Molasses,................ 1.73 Cheapest form of the

saccharine.

Rye meal,................ 1.04¾

Indian meal,............. 0.99¾ Cheaper than rye.

Pork,.................... 0.22

All experiments which failed:

Flour,................... 0.88 Costs more than Indian meal,

both money and trouble.

Sugar,................... 0.80

Lard,.................... 0.65

Apples,.................. 0.25

Dried apple,............. 0.22

Sweet potatoes,.......... 0.10

One pumpkin,............. 0.06

One watermelon,.......... 0.02

Salt,.................... 0.03

Yes, I did eat $8.74, all told; but I should not thus unblushingly

publish my guilt, if I did not know that most of my readers were

equally guilty with myself, and that their deeds would look no better

in print. The next year I sometimes caught a mess of fish for my

dinner, and once I went so far as to slaughter a woodchuck which

ravaged my bean-field,—effect his transmigration, as a Tartar would

say,—and devour him, partly for experiment’s sake; but though it

afforded me a momentary enjoyment, notwithstanding a musky flavor, I

saw that the longest use would not make that a good practice, however

it might seem to have your woodchucks ready dressed by the village

butcher.

Clothing and some incidental expenses within the same dates, though

little can be inferred from this item, amounted to

$8.40¾

Oil and some household utensils,....... 2.00

So that all the pecuniary outgoes, excepting for washing and mending,

which for the most part were done out of the house, and their bills

have not yet been received,—and these are all and more than all the

ways by which money necessarily goes out in this part of the

world,—were

House,................................ $ 28.12½

Farm one year,.......................... 14.72½

Food eight months,...................... 8.74

Clothing, etc., eight months,........... 8.40¾

Oil, &c., eight months,................. 2.00

——————

In all,........................... $ 61.99¾

I address myself now to those of my readers who have a living to get.

And to meet this I have for farm produce sold

$23.44

Earned by day-labor,................... 13.34

——————

In all,............................ $36.78,

which subtracted from the sum of the outgoes leaves a balance of

$25.21¾ on the one side,—this being very nearly the means with which I

started, and the measure of expenses to be incurred,—and on the other,

beside the leisure and independence and health thus secured, a

comfortable house for me as long as I choose to occupy it.

These statistics, however accidental and therefore uninstructive they

may appear, as they have a certain completeness, have a certain value

also. Nothing was given me of which I have not rendered some account.

It appears from the above estimate, that my food alone cost me in money

about twenty-seven cents a week. It was, for nearly two years after

this, rye and Indian meal without yeast, potatoes, rice, a very little

salt pork, molasses, and salt, and my drink water. It was fit that I

should live on rice, mainly, who loved so well the philosophy of India.

To meet the objections of some inveterate cavillers, I may as well

state, that if I dined out occasionally, as I always had done, and I

trust shall have opportunities to do again, it was frequently to the

detriment of my domestic arrangements. But the dining out, being, as I

have stated, a constant element, does not in the least affect a

comparative statement like this.

I learned from my two years’ experience that it would cost incredibly

little trouble to obtain one’s necessary food, even in this latitude;

that a man may use as simple a diet as the animals, and yet retain

health and strength. I have made a satisfactory dinner, satisfactory on

several accounts, simply off a dish of purslane (\_Portulaca oleracea\_)

which I gathered in my cornfield, boiled and salted. I give the Latin

on account of the savoriness of the trivial name. And pray what more

can a reasonable man desire, in peaceful times, in ordinary noons, than

a sufficient number of ears of green sweet-corn boiled, with the

addition of salt? Even the little variety which I used was a yielding

to the demands of appetite, and not of health. Yet men have come to

such a pass that they frequently starve, not for want of necessaries,

but for want of luxuries; and I know a good woman who thinks that her

son lost his life because he took to drinking water only.

The reader will perceive that I am treating the subject rather from an

economic than a dietetic point of view, and he will not venture to put

my abstemiousness to the test unless he has a well-stocked larder.

Bread I at first made of pure Indian meal and salt, genuine hoe-cakes,

which I baked before my fire out of doors on a shingle or the end of a

stick of timber sawed off in building my house; but it was wont to get

smoked and to have a piny flavor. I tried flour also; but have at last

found a mixture of rye and Indian meal most convenient and agreeable.

In cold weather it was no little amusement to bake several small loaves

of this in succession, tending and turning them as carefully as an

Egyptian his hatching eggs. They were a real cereal fruit which I

ripened, and they had to my senses a fragrance like that of other noble

fruits, which I kept in as long as possible by wrapping them in cloths.

I made a study of the ancient and indispensable art of bread-making,

consulting such authorities as offered, going back to the primitive

days and first invention of the unleavened kind, when from the wildness

of nuts and meats men first reached the mildness and refinement of this

diet, and travelling gradually down in my studies through that

accidental souring of the dough which, it is supposed, taught the

leavening process, and through the various fermentations thereafter,

till I came to “good, sweet, wholesome bread,” the staff of life.

Leaven, which some deem the soul of bread, the \_spiritus\_ which fills

its cellular tissue, which is religiously preserved like the vestal

fire,—some precious bottle-full, I suppose, first brought over in the

Mayflower, did the business for America, and its influence is still

rising, swelling, spreading, in cerealian billows over the land,—this

seed I regularly and faithfully procured from the village, till at

length one morning I forgot the rules, and scalded my yeast; by which

accident I discovered that even this was not indispensable,—for my

discoveries were not by the synthetic but analytic process,—and I have

gladly omitted it since, though most housewives earnestly assured me

that safe and wholesome bread without yeast might not be, and elderly

people prophesied a speedy decay of the vital forces. Yet I find it not

to be an essential ingredient, and after going without it for a year am

still in the land of the living; and I am glad to escape the

trivialness of carrying a bottle-full in my pocket, which would

sometimes pop and discharge its contents to my discomfiture. It is

simpler and more respectable to omit it. Man is an animal who more than

any other can adapt himself to all climates and circumstances. Neither

did I put any sal soda, or other acid or alkali, into my bread. It

would seem that I made it according to the recipe which Marcus Porcius

Cato gave about two centuries before Christ. “Panem depsticium sic

facito. Manus mortariumque bene lavato. Farinam in mortarium indito,

aquæ paulatim addito, subigitoque pulchre. Ubi bene subegeris,

defingito, coquitoque sub testu.” Which I take to mean—“Make kneaded

bread thus. Wash your hands and trough well. Put the meal into the

trough, add water gradually, and knead it thoroughly. When you have

kneaded it well, mould it, and bake it under a cover,” that is, in a

baking-kettle. Not a word about leaven. But I did not always use this

staff of life. At one time, owing to the emptiness of my purse, I saw

none of it for more than a month.

Every New Englander might easily raise all his own breadstuffs in this

land of rye and Indian corn, and not depend on distant and fluctuating

markets for them. Yet so far are we from simplicity and independence

that, in Concord, fresh and sweet meal is rarely sold in the shops, and

hominy and corn in a still coarser form are hardly used by any. For the

most part the farmer gives to his cattle and hogs the grain of his own

producing, and buys flour, which is at least no more wholesome, at a

greater cost, at the store. I saw that I could easily raise my bushel

or two of rye and Indian corn, for the former will grow on the poorest

land, and the latter does not require the best, and grind them in a

hand-mill, and so do without rice and pork; and if I must have some

concentrated sweet, I found by experiment that I could make a very good

molasses either of pumpkins or beets, and I knew that I needed only to

set out a few maples to obtain it more easily still, and while these

were growing I could use various substitutes beside those which I have

named. “For,” as the Forefathers sang,—

“we can make liquor to sweeten our lips

Of pumpkins and parsnips and walnut-tree chips.”

Finally, as for salt, that grossest of groceries, to obtain this might

be a fit occasion for a visit to the seashore, or, if I did without it

altogether, I should probably drink the less water. I do not learn that

the Indians ever troubled themselves to go after it.

Thus I could avoid all trade and barter, so far as my food was

concerned, and having a shelter already, it would only remain to get

clothing and fuel. The pantaloons which I now wear were woven in a

farmer’s family,—thank Heaven there is so much virtue still in man; for

I think the fall from the farmer to the operative as great and

memorable as that from the man to the farmer;—and in a new country,

fuel is an encumbrance. As for a habitat, if I were not permitted still

to squat, I might purchase one acre at the same price for which the

land I cultivated was sold—namely, eight dollars and eight cents. But

as it was, I considered that I enhanced the value of the land by

squatting on it.

There is a certain class of unbelievers who sometimes ask me such

questions as, if I think that I can live on vegetable food alone; and

to strike at the root of the matter at once,—for the root is faith,—I

am accustomed to answer such, that I can live on board nails. If they

cannot understand that, they cannot understand much that I have to say.

For my part, I am glad to hear of experiments of this kind being tried;

as that a young man tried for a fortnight to live on hard, raw corn on

the ear, using his teeth for all mortar. The squirrel tribe tried the

same and succeeded. The human race is interested in these experiments,

though a few old women who are incapacitated for them, or who own their

thirds in mills, may be alarmed.

My furniture, part of which I made myself, and the rest cost me nothing

of which I have not rendered an account, consisted of a bed, a table, a

desk, three chairs, a looking-glass three inches in diameter, a pair of

tongs and andirons, a kettle, a skillet, and a frying-pan, a dipper, a

wash-bowl, two knives and forks, three plates, one cup, one spoon, a

jug for oil, a jug for molasses, and a japanned lamp. None is so poor

that he need sit on a pumpkin. That is shiftlessness. There is a plenty

of such chairs as I like best in the village garrets to be had for

taking them away. Furniture! Thank God, I can sit and I can stand

without the aid of a furniture warehouse. What man but a philosopher

would not be ashamed to see his furniture packed in a cart and going up

country exposed to the light of heaven and the eyes of men, a beggarly

account of empty boxes? That is Spaulding’s furniture. I could never

tell from inspecting such a load whether it belonged to a so called

rich man or a poor one; the owner always seemed poverty-stricken.

Indeed, the more you have of such things the poorer you are. Each load

looks as if it contained the contents of a dozen shanties; and if one

shanty is poor, this is a dozen times as poor. Pray, for what do we

\_move\_ ever but to get rid of our furniture, our \_exuviæ\_; at last to

go from this world to another newly furnished, and leave this to be

burned? It is the same as if all these traps were buckled to a man’s

belt, and he could not move over the rough country where our lines are

cast without dragging them,—dragging his trap. He was a lucky fox that

left his tail in the trap. The muskrat will gnaw his third leg off to

be free. No wonder man has lost his elasticity. How often he is at a

dead set! “Sir, if I may be so bold, what do you mean by a dead set?”

If you are a seer, whenever you meet a man you will see all that he

owns, ay, and much that he pretends to disown, behind him, even to his

kitchen furniture and all the trumpery which he saves and will not

burn, and he will appear to be harnessed to it and making what headway

he can. I think that the man is at a dead set who has got through a

knot hole or gateway where his sledge load of furniture cannot follow

him. I cannot but feel compassion when I hear some trig,

compact-looking man, seemingly free, all girded and ready, speak of his

“furniture,” as whether it is insured or not. “But what shall I do with

my furniture?” My gay butterfly is entangled in a spider’s web then.

Even those who seem for a long while not to have any, if you inquire

more narrowly you will find have some stored in somebody’s barn. I look

upon England to-day as an old gentleman who is travelling with a great

deal of baggage, trumpery which has accumulated from long housekeeping,

which he has not the courage to burn; great trunk, little trunk,

bandbox and bundle. Throw away the first three at least. It would

surpass the powers of a well man nowadays to take up his bed and walk,

and I should certainly advise a sick one to lay down his bed and run.

When I have met an immigrant tottering under a bundle which contained

his all—looking like an enormous wen which had grown out of the nape of

his neck—I have pitied him, not because that was his all, but because

he had all \_that\_ to carry. If I have got to drag my trap, I will take

care that it be a light one and do not nip me in a vital part. But

perchance it would be wisest never to put one’s paw into it.

I would observe, by the way, that it costs me nothing for curtains, for

I have no gazers to shut out but the sun and moon, and I am willing

that they should look in. The moon will not sour milk nor taint meat of

mine, nor will the sun injure my furniture or fade my carpet, and if he

is sometimes too warm a friend, I find it still better economy to

retreat behind some curtain which nature has provided, than to add a

single item to the details of housekeeping. A lady once offered me a

mat, but as I had no room to spare within the house, nor time to spare

within or without to shake it, I declined it, preferring to wipe my

feet on the sod before my door. It is best to avoid the beginnings of

evil.

Not long since I was present at the auction of a deacon’s effects, for

his life had not been ineffectual:—

“The evil that men do lives after them.”

As usual, a great proportion was trumpery which had begun to accumulate

in his father’s day. Among the rest was a dried tapeworm. And now,

after lying half a century in his garret and other dust holes, these

things were not burned; instead of a \_bonfire\_, or purifying

destruction of them, there was an \_auction\_, or increasing of them. The

neighbors eagerly collected to view them, bought them all, and

carefully transported them to their garrets and dust holes, to lie

there till their estates are settled, when they will start again. When

a man dies he kicks the dust.

The customs of some savage nations might, perchance, be profitably

imitated by us, for they at least go through the semblance of casting

their slough annually; they have the idea of the thing, whether they

have the reality or not. Would it not be well if we were to celebrate

such a “busk,” or “feast of first fruits,” as Bartram describes to have

been the custom of the Mucclasse Indians? “When a town celebrates the

busk,” says he, “having previously provided themselves with new

clothes, new pots, pans, and other household utensils and furniture,

they collect all their worn out clothes and other despicable things,

sweep and cleanse their houses, squares, and the whole town of their

filth, which with all the remaining grain and other old provisions they

cast together into one common heap, and consume it with fire. After

having taken medicine, and fasted for three days, all the fire in the

town is extinguished. During this fast they abstain from the

gratification of every appetite and passion whatever. A general amnesty

is proclaimed; all malefactors may return to their town.—”

“On the fourth morning, the high priest, by rubbing dry wood together,

produces new fire in the public square, from whence every habitation in

the town is supplied with the new and pure flame.”

They then feast on the new corn and fruits, and dance and sing for

three days, “and the four following days they receive visits and

rejoice with their friends from neighboring towns who have in like

manner purified and prepared themselves.”

The Mexicans also practised a similar purification at the end of every

fifty-two years, in the belief that it was time for the world to come

to an end.

I have scarcely heard of a truer sacrament, that is, as the dictionary

defines it, “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual

grace,” than this, and I have no doubt that they were originally

inspired directly from Heaven to do thus, though they have no biblical

record of the revelation.

For more than five years I maintained myself thus solely by the labor

of my hands, and I found, that by working about six weeks in a year, I

could meet all the expenses of living. The whole of my winters, as well

as most of my summers, I had free and clear for study. I have

thoroughly tried school-keeping, and found that my expenses were in

proportion, or rather out of proportion, to my income, for I was

obliged to dress and train, not to say think and believe, accordingly,

and I lost my time into the bargain. As I did not teach for the good of

my fellow-men, but simply for a livelihood, this was a failure. I have

tried trade; but I found that it would take ten years to get under way

in that, and that then I should probably be on my way to the devil. I

was actually afraid that I might by that time be doing what is called a

good business. When formerly I was looking about to see what I could do

for a living, some sad experience in conforming to the wishes of

friends being fresh in my mind to tax my ingenuity, I thought often and

seriously of picking huckleberries; that surely I could do, and its

small profits might suffice,—for my greatest skill has been to want but

little,—so little capital it required, so little distraction from my

wonted moods, I foolishly thought. While my acquaintances went

unhesitatingly into trade or the professions, I contemplated this

occupation as most like theirs; ranging the hills all summer to pick

the berries which came in my way, and thereafter carelessly dispose of

them; so, to keep the flocks of Admetus. I also dreamed that I might

gather the wild herbs, or carry evergreens to such villagers as loved

to be reminded of the woods, even to the city, by hay-cart loads. But I

have since learned that trade curses everything it handles; and though

you trade in messages from heaven, the whole curse of trade attaches to

the business.

As I preferred some things to others, and especially valued my freedom,

as I could fare hard and yet succeed well, I did not wish to spend my

time in earning rich carpets or other fine furniture, or delicate

cookery, or a house in the Grecian or the Gothic style just yet. If

there are any to whom it is no interruption to acquire these things,

and who know how to use them when acquired, I relinquish to them the

pursuit. Some are “industrious,” and appear to love labor for its own

sake, or perhaps because it keeps them out of worse mischief; to such I

have at present nothing to say. Those who would not know what to do

with more leisure than they now enjoy, I might advise to work twice as

hard as they do,—work till they pay for themselves, and get their free

papers. For myself I found that the occupation of a day-laborer was the

most independent of any, especially as it required only thirty or forty

days in a year to support one. The laborer’s day ends with the going

down of the sun, and he is then free to devote himself to his chosen

pursuit, independent of his labor; but his employer, who speculates

from month to month, has no respite from one end of the year to the

other.

In short, I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to

maintain one’s self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if

we will live simply and wisely; as the pursuits of the simpler nations

are still the sports of the more artificial. It is not necessary that a

man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow, unless he sweats

easier than I do.

One young man of my acquaintance, who has inherited some acres, told me

that he thought he should live as I did, \_if he had the means\_. I would

not have any one adopt \_my\_ mode of living on any account; for, beside

that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for

myself, I desire that there may be as many different persons in the

world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find

out and pursue \_his own\_ way, and not his father’s or his mother’s or

his neighbor’s instead. The youth may build or plant or sail, only let

him not be hindered from doing that which he tells me he would like to

do. It is by a mathematical point only that we are wise, as the sailor

or the fugitive slave keeps the polestar in his eye; but that is

sufficient guidance for all our life. We may not arrive at our port

within a calculable period, but we would preserve the true course.

Undoubtedly, in this case, what is true for one is truer still for a

thousand, as a large house is not proportionally more expensive than a

small one, since one roof may cover, one cellar underlie, and one wall

separate several apartments. But for my part, I preferred the solitary

dwelling. Moreover, it will commonly be cheaper to build the whole

yourself than to convince another of the advantage of the common wall;

and when you have done this, the common partition, to be much cheaper,

must be a thin one, and that other may prove a bad neighbor, and also

not keep his side in repair. The only coöperation which is commonly

possible is exceedingly partial and superficial; and what little true

coöperation there is, is as if it were not, being a harmony inaudible

to men. If a man has faith, he will coöperate with equal faith

everywhere; if he has not faith, he will continue to live like the rest

of the world, whatever company he is joined to. To coöperate, in the

highest as well as the lowest sense, means \_to get our living

together\_. I heard it proposed lately that two young men should travel

together over the world, the one without money, earning his means as he

went, before the mast and behind the plow, the other carrying a bill of

exchange in his pocket. It was easy to see that they could not long be

companions or coöperate, since one would not \_operate\_ at all. They

would part at the first interesting crisis in their adventures. Above

all, as I have implied, the man who goes alone can start to-day; but he

who travels with another must wait till that other is ready, and it may

be a long time before they get off.

But all this is very selfish, I have heard some of my townsmen say. I

confess that I have hitherto indulged very little in philanthropic

enterprises. I have made some sacrifices to a sense of duty, and among

others have sacrificed this pleasure also. There are those who have

used all their arts to persuade me to undertake the support of some

poor family in the town; and if I had nothing to do,—for the devil

finds employment for the idle,—I might try my hand at some such pastime

as that. However, when I have thought to indulge myself in this

respect, and lay their Heaven under an obligation by maintaining

certain poor persons in all respects as comfortably as I maintain

myself, and have even ventured so far as to make them the offer, they

have one and all unhesitatingly preferred to remain poor. While my

townsmen and women are devoted in so many ways to the good of their

fellows, I trust that one at least may be spared to other and less

humane pursuits. You must have a genius for charity as well as for any

thing else. As for Doing-good, that is one of the professions which are

full. Moreover, I have tried it fairly, and, strange as it may seem, am

satisfied that it does not agree with my constitution. Probably I

should not consciously and deliberately forsake my particular calling

to do the good which society demands of me, to save the universe from

annihilation; and I believe that a like but infinitely greater

steadfastness elsewhere is all that now preserves it. But I would not

stand between any man and his genius; and to him who does this work,

which I decline, with his whole heart and soul and life, I would say,

Persevere, even if the world call it doing evil, as it is most likely

they will.

I am far from supposing that my case is a peculiar one; no doubt many

of my readers would make a similar defence. At doing something,—I will

not engage that my neighbors shall pronounce it good,—I do not hesitate

to say that I should be a capital fellow to hire; but what that is, it

is for my employer to find out. What \_good\_ I do, in the common sense

of that word, must be aside from my main path, and for the most part

wholly unintended. Men say, practically, Begin where you are and such

as you are, without aiming mainly to become of more worth, and with

kindness aforethought go about doing good. If I were to preach at all

in this strain, I should say rather, Set about being good. As if the

sun should stop when he had kindled his fires up to the splendor of a

moon or a star of the sixth magnitude, and go about like a Robin

Goodfellow, peeping in at every cottage window, inspiring lunatics, and

tainting meats, and making darkness visible, instead of steadily

increasing his genial heat and beneficence till he is of such

brightness that no mortal can look him in the face, and then, and in

the mean while too, going about the world in his own orbit, doing it

good, or rather, as a truer philosophy has discovered, the world going

about him getting good. When Phaeton, wishing to prove his heavenly

birth by his beneficence, had the sun’s chariot but one day, and drove

out of the beaten track, he burned several blocks of houses in the

lower streets of heaven, and scorched the surface of the earth, and

dried up every spring, and made the great desert of Sahara, till at

length Jupiter hurled him headlong to the earth with a thunderbolt, and

the sun, through grief at his death, did not shine for a year.

There is no odor so bad as that which arises from goodness tainted. It

is human, it is divine, carrion. If I knew for a certainty that a man

was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I

should run for my life, as from that dry and parching wind of the

African deserts called the simoom, which fills the mouth and nose and

ears and eyes with dust till you are suffocated, for fear that I should

get some of his good done to me,—some of its virus mingled with my

blood. No,—in this case I would rather suffer evil the natural way. A

man is not a good \_man\_ to me because he will feed me if I should be

starving, or warm me if I should be freezing, or pull me out of a ditch

if I should ever fall into one. I can find you a Newfoundland dog that

will do as much. Philanthropy is not love for one’s fellow-man in the

broadest sense. Howard was no doubt an exceedingly kind and worthy man

in his way, and has his reward; but, comparatively speaking, what are a

hundred Howards to \_us\_, if their philanthropy do not help \_us\_ in our

best estate, when we are most worthy to be helped? I never heard of a

philanthropic meeting in which it was sincerely proposed to do any good

to me, or the like of me.

The Jesuits were quite balked by those Indians who, being burned at the

stake, suggested new modes of torture to their tormentors. Being

superior to physical suffering, it sometimes chanced that they were

superior to any consolation which the missionaries could offer; and the

law to do as you would be done by fell with less persuasiveness on the

ears of those who, for their part, did not care how they were done by,

who loved their enemies after a new fashion, and came very near freely

forgiving them all they did.

Be sure that you give the poor the aid they most need, though it be

your example which leaves them far behind. If you give money, spend

yourself with it, and do not merely abandon it to them. We make curious

mistakes sometimes. Often the poor man is not so cold and hungry as he

is dirty and ragged and gross. It is partly his taste, and not merely

his misfortune. If you give him money, he will perhaps buy more rags

with it. I was wont to pity the clumsy Irish laborers who cut ice on

the pond, in such mean and ragged clothes, while I shivered in my more

tidy and somewhat more fashionable garments, till, one bitter cold day,

one who had slipped into the water came to my house to warm him, and I

saw him strip off three pairs of pants and two pairs of stockings ere

he got down to the skin, though they were dirty and ragged enough, it

is true, and that he could afford to refuse the \_extra\_ garments which

I offered him, he had so many \_intra\_ ones. This ducking was the very

thing he needed. Then I began to pity myself, and I saw that it would

be a greater charity to bestow on me a flannel shirt than a whole

slop-shop on him. There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil

to one who is striking at the root, and it may be that he who bestows

the largest amount of time and money on the needy is doing the most by

his mode of life to produce that misery which he strives in vain to

relieve. It is the pious slave-breeder devoting the proceeds of every

tenth slave to buy a Sunday’s liberty for the rest. Some show their

kindness to the poor by employing them in their kitchens. Would they

not be kinder if they employed themselves there? You boast of spending

a tenth part of your income in charity; maybe you should spend the nine

tenths so, and done with it. Society recovers only a tenth part of the

property then. Is this owing to the generosity of him in whose

possession it is found, or to the remissness of the officers of

justice?

Philanthropy is almost the only virtue which is sufficiently

appreciated by mankind. Nay, it is greatly overrated; and it is our

selfishness which overrates it. A robust poor man, one sunny day here

in Concord, praised a fellow-townsman to me, because, as he said, he

was kind to the poor; meaning himself. The kind uncles and aunts of the

race are more esteemed than its true spiritual fathers and mothers. I

once heard a reverend lecturer on England, a man of learning and

intelligence, after enumerating her scientific, literary, and political

worthies, Shakespeare, Bacon, Cromwell, Milton, Newton, and others,

speak next of her Christian heroes, whom, as if his profession required

it of him, he elevated to a place far above all the rest, as the

greatest of the great. They were Penn, Howard, and Mrs. Fry. Every one

must feel the falsehood and cant of this. The last were not England’s

best men and women; only, perhaps, her best philanthropists.

I would not subtract any thing from the praise that is due to

philanthropy, but merely demand justice for all who by their lives and

works are a blessing to mankind. I do not value chiefly a man’s

uprightness and benevolence, which are, as it were, his stem and

leaves. Those plants of whose greenness withered we make herb tea for

the sick, serve but a humble use, and are most employed by quacks. I

want the flower and fruit of a man; that some fragrance be wafted over

from him to me, and some ripeness flavor our intercourse. His goodness

must not be a partial and transitory act, but a constant superfluity,

which costs him nothing and of which he is unconscious. This is a

charity that hides a multitude of sins. The philanthropist too often

surrounds mankind with the remembrance of his own cast-off griefs as an

atmosphere, and calls it sympathy. We should impart our courage, and

not our despair, our health and ease, and not our disease, and take

care that this does not spread by contagion. From what southern plains

comes up the voice of wailing? Under what latitudes reside the heathen

to whom we would send light? Who is that intemperate and brutal man

whom we would redeem? If any thing ail a man, so that he does not

perform his functions, if he have a pain in his bowels even,—for that

is the seat of sympathy,—he forthwith sets about reforming—the world.

Being a microcosm himself, he discovers, and it is a true discovery,

and he is the man to make it,—that the world has been eating green

apples; to his eyes, in fact, the globe itself is a great green apple,

which there is danger awful to think of that the children of men will

nibble before it is ripe; and straightway his drastic philanthropy

seeks out the Esquimaux and the Patagonian, and embraces the populous

Indian and Chinese villages; and thus, by a few years of philanthropic

activity, the powers in the mean while using him for their own ends, no

doubt, he cures himself of his dyspepsia, the globe acquires a faint

blush on one or both of its cheeks, as if it were beginning to be ripe,

and life loses its crudity and is once more sweet and wholesome to

live. I never dreamed of any enormity greater than I have committed. I

never knew, and never shall know, a worse man than myself.

I believe that what so saddens the reformer is not his sympathy with

his fellows in distress, but, though he be the holiest son of God, is

his private ail. Let this be righted, let the spring come to him, the

morning rise over his couch, and he will forsake his generous

companions without apology. My excuse for not lecturing against the use

of tobacco is, that I never chewed it; that is a penalty which reformed

tobacco-chewers have to pay; though there are things enough I have

chewed, which I could lecture against. If you should ever be betrayed

into any of these philanthropies, do not let your left hand know what

your right hand does, for it is not worth knowing. Rescue the drowning

and tie your shoe-strings. Take your time, and set about some free

labor.

Our manners have been corrupted by communication with the saints. Our

hymn-books resound with a melodious cursing of God and enduring him

forever. One would say that even the prophets and redeemers had rather

consoled the fears than confirmed the hopes of man. There is nowhere

recorded a simple and irrepressible satisfaction with the gift of life,

any memorable praise of God. All health and success does me good,

however far off and withdrawn it may appear; all disease and failure

helps to make me sad and does me evil, however much sympathy it may

have with me or I with it. If, then, we would indeed restore mankind by

truly Indian, botanic, magnetic, or natural means, let us first be as

simple and well as Nature ourselves, dispel the clouds which hang over

our own brows, and take up a little life into our pores. Do not stay to

be an overseer of the poor, but endeavor to become one of the worthies

of the world.

I read in the Gulistan, or Flower Garden, of Sheik Sadi of Shiraz, that

“They asked a wise man, saying; Of the many celebrated trees which the

Most High God has created lofty and umbrageous, they call none azad, or

free, excepting the cypress, which bears no fruit; what mystery is

there in this? He replied; Each has its appropriate produce, and

appointed season, during the continuance of which it is fresh and

blooming, and during their absence dry and withered; to neither of

which states is the cypress exposed, being always flourishing; and of

this nature are the azads, or religious independents.—Fix not thy heart

on that which is transitory; for the Dijlah, or Tigris, will continue

to flow through Bagdad after the race of caliphs is extinct: if thy

hand has plenty, be liberal as the date tree; but if it affords nothing

to give away, be an azad, or free man, like the cypress.”

COMPLEMENTAL VERSES

The Pretensions of Poverty

“Thou dost presume too much, poor needy wretch,

To claim a station in the firmament

Because thy humble cottage, or thy tub,

Nurses some lazy or pedantic virtue

In the cheap sunshine or by shady springs,

With roots and pot-herbs; where thy right hand,

Tearing those humane passions from the mind,

Upon whose stocks fair blooming virtues flourish,

Degradeth nature, and benumbeth sense,

And, Gorgon-like, turns active men to stone.

We not require the dull society

Of your necessitated temperance,

Or that unnatural stupidity

That knows nor joy nor sorrow; nor your forc’d

Falsely exalted passive fortitude

Above the active. This low abject brood,

That fix their seats in mediocrity,

Become your servile minds; but we advance

Such virtues only as admit excess,

Brave, bounteous acts, regal magnificence,

All-seeing prudence, magnanimity

That knows no bound, and that heroic virtue

For which antiquity hath left no name,

But patterns only, such as Hercules,

Achilles, Theseus. Back to thy loath’d cell;

And when thou seest the new enlightened sphere,

Study to know but what those worthies were.”

T. CAREW

Where I Lived, and What I Lived For

At a certain season of our life we are accustomed to consider every

spot as the possible site of a house. I have thus surveyed the country

on every side within a dozen miles of where I live. In imagination I

have bought all the farms in succession, for all were to be bought, and

I knew their price. I walked over each farmer’s premises, tasted his

wild apples, discoursed on husbandry with him, took his farm at his

price, at any price, mortgaging it to him in my mind; even put a higher

price on it,—took everything but a deed of it,—took his word for his

deed, for I dearly love to talk,—cultivated it, and him too to some

extent, I trust, and withdrew when I had enjoyed it long enough,

leaving him to carry it on. This experience entitled me to be regarded

as a sort of real-estate broker by my friends. Wherever I sat, there I

might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly. What is a

house but a \_sedes\_, a seat?—better if a country seat. I discovered

many a site for a house not likely to be soon improved, which some

might have thought too far from the village, but to my eyes the village

was too far from it. Well, there I might live, I said; and there I did

live, for an hour, a summer and a winter life; saw how I could let the

years run off, buffet the winter through, and see the spring come in.

The future inhabitants of this region, wherever they may place their

houses, may be sure that they have been anticipated. An afternoon

sufficed to lay out the land into orchard, woodlot, and pasture, and to

decide what fine oaks or pines should be left to stand before the door,

and whence each blasted tree could be seen to the best advantage; and

then I let it lie, fallow perchance, for a man is rich in proportion to

the number of things which he can afford to let alone.

My imagination carried me so far that I even had the refusal of several

farms,—the refusal was all I wanted,—but I never got my fingers burned

by actual possession. The nearest that I came to actual possession was

when I bought the Hollowell place, and had begun to sort my seeds, and

collected materials with which to make a wheelbarrow to carry it on or

off with; but before the owner gave me a deed of it, his wife—every man

has such a wife—changed her mind and wished to keep it, and he offered

me ten dollars to release him. Now, to speak the truth, I had but ten

cents in the world, and it surpassed my arithmetic to tell, if I was

that man who had ten cents, or who had a farm, or ten dollars, or all

together. However, I let him keep the ten dollars and the farm too, for

I had carried it far enough; or rather, to be generous, I sold him the

farm for just what I gave for it, and, as he was not a rich man, made

him a present of ten dollars, and still had my ten cents, and seeds,

and materials for a wheelbarrow left. I found thus that I had been a

rich man without any damage to my poverty. But I retained the

landscape, and I have since annually carried off what it yielded

without a wheelbarrow. With respect to landscapes,—

“I am monarch of all I \_survey\_,

My right there is none to dispute.”

I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most

valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had

got a few wild apples only. Why, the owner does not know it for many

years when a poet has put his farm in rhyme, the most admirable kind of

invisible fence, has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and

got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk.

The real attractions of the Hollowell farm, to me, were; its complete

retirement, being, about two miles from the village, half a mile from

the nearest neighbor, and separated from the highway by a broad field;

its bounding on the river, which the owner said protected it by its

fogs from frosts in the spring, though that was nothing to me; the gray

color and ruinous state of the house and barn, and the dilapidated

fences, which put such an interval between me and the last occupant;

the hollow and lichen-covered apple trees, gnawed by rabbits, showing

what kind of neighbors I should have; but above all, the recollection I

had of it from my earliest voyages up the river, when the house was

concealed behind a dense grove of red maples, through which I heard the

house-dog bark. I was in haste to buy it, before the proprietor

finished getting out some rocks, cutting down the hollow apple trees,

and grubbing up some young birches which had sprung up in the pasture,

or, in short, had made any more of his improvements. To enjoy these

advantages I was ready to carry it on; like Atlas, to take the world on

my shoulders,—I never heard what compensation he received for that,—and

do all those things which had no other motive or excuse but that I

might pay for it and be unmolested in my possession of it; for I knew

all the while that it would yield the most abundant crop of the kind I

wanted if I could only afford to let it alone. But it turned out as I

have said.

All that I could say, then, with respect to farming on a large scale,

(I have always cultivated a garden,) was, that I had had my seeds

ready. Many think that seeds improve with age. I have no doubt that

time discriminates between the good and the bad; and when at last I

shall plant, I shall be less likely to be disappointed. But I would say

to my fellows, once for all, As long as possible live free and

uncommitted. It makes but little difference whether you are committed

to a farm or the county jail.

Old Cato, whose “De Re Rusticâ” is my “Cultivator,” says, and the only

translation I have seen makes sheer nonsense of the passage, “When you

think of getting a farm, turn it thus in your mind, not to buy

greedily; nor spare your pains to look at it, and do not think it

enough to go round it once. The oftener you go there the more it will

please you, if it is good.” I think I shall not buy greedily, but go

round and round it as long as I live, and be buried in it first, that

it may please me the more at last.

The present was my next experiment of this kind, which I purpose to

describe more at length; for convenience, putting the experience of two

years into one. As I have said, I do not propose to write an ode to

dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning,

standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.

When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my

nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence

Day, or the Fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter,

but was merely a defence against the rain, without plastering or

chimney, the walls being of rough, weather-stained boards, with wide

chinks, which made it cool at night. The upright white hewn studs and

freshly planed door and window casings gave it a clean and airy look,

especially in the morning, when its timbers were saturated with dew, so

that I fancied that by noon some sweet gum would exude from them. To my

imagination it retained throughout the day more or less of this auroral

character, reminding me of a certain house on a mountain which I had

visited the year before. This was an airy and unplastered cabin, fit to

entertain a travelling god, and where a goddess might trail her

garments. The winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep

over the ridges of mountains, bearing the broken strains, or celestial

parts only, of terrestrial music. The morning wind forever blows, the

poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it.

Olympus is but the outside of the earth every where.

The only house I had been the owner of before, if I except a boat, was

a tent, which I used occasionally when making excursions in the summer,

and this is still rolled up in my garret; but the boat, after passing

from hand to hand, has gone down the stream of time. With this more

substantial shelter about me, I had made some progress toward settling

in the world. This frame, so slightly clad, was a sort of

crystallization around me, and reacted on the builder. It was

suggestive somewhat as a picture in outlines. I did not need to go

outdoors to take the air, for the atmosphere within had lost none of

its freshness. It was not so much within doors as behind a door where I

sat, even in the rainiest weather. The Harivansa says, “An abode

without birds is like a meat without seasoning.” Such was not my abode,

for I found myself suddenly neighbor to the birds; not by having

imprisoned one, but having caged myself near them. I was not only

nearer to some of those which commonly frequent the garden and the

orchard, but to those wilder and more thrilling songsters of the forest

which never, or rarely, serenade a villager,—the wood-thrush, the

veery, the scarlet tanager, the field-sparrow, the whippoorwill, and

many others.

I was seated by the shore of a small pond, about a mile and a half

south of the village of Concord and somewhat higher than it, in the

midst of an extensive wood between that town and Lincoln, and about two

miles south of that our only field known to fame, Concord Battle

Ground; but I was so low in the woods that the opposite shore, half a

mile off, like the rest, covered with wood, was my most distant

horizon. For the first week, whenever I looked out on the pond it

impressed me like a tarn high up on the side of a mountain, its bottom

far above the surface of other lakes, and, as the sun arose, I saw it

throwing off its nightly clothing of mist, and here and there, by

degrees, its soft ripples or its smooth reflecting surface was

revealed, while the mists, like ghosts, were stealthily withdrawing in

every direction into the woods, as at the breaking up of some nocturnal

conventicle. The very dew seemed to hang upon the trees later into the

day than usual, as on the sides of mountains.

This small lake was of most value as a neighbor in the intervals of a

gentle rain storm in August, when, both air and water being perfectly

still, but the sky overcast, mid-afternoon had all the serenity of

evening, and the wood-thrush sang around, and was heard from shore to

shore. A lake like this is never smoother than at such a time; and the

clear portion of the air above it being shallow and darkened by clouds,

the water, full of light and reflections, becomes a lower heaven itself

so much the more important. From a hill top near by, where the wood had

been recently cut off, there was a pleasing vista southward across the

pond, through a wide indentation in the hills which form the shore

there, where their opposite sides sloping toward each other suggested a

stream flowing out in that direction through a wooded valley, but

stream there was none. That way I looked between and over the near

green hills to some distant and higher ones in the horizon, tinged with

blue. Indeed, by standing on tiptoe I could catch a glimpse of some of

the peaks of the still bluer and more distant mountain ranges in the

north-west, those true-blue coins from heaven’s own mint, and also of

some portion of the village. But in other directions, even from this

point, I could not see over or beyond the woods which surrounded me. It

is well to have some water in your neighborhood, to give buoyancy to

and float the earth. One value even of the smallest well is, that when

you look into it you see that earth is not continent but insular. This

is as important as that it keeps butter cool. When I looked across the

pond from this peak toward the Sudbury meadows, which in time of flood

I distinguished elevated perhaps by a mirage in their seething valley,

like a coin in a basin, all the earth beyond the pond appeared like a

thin crust insulated and floated even by this small sheet of

interverting water, and I was reminded that this on which I dwelt was

but \_dry land\_.

Though the view from my door was still more contracted, I did not feel

crowded or confined in the least. There was pasture enough for my

imagination. The low shrub-oak plateau to which the opposite shore

arose, stretched away toward the prairies of the West and the steppes

of Tartary, affording ample room for all the roving families of men.

“There are none happy in the world but beings who enjoy freely a vast

horizon,”—said Damodara, when his herds required new and larger

pastures.

Both place and time were changed, and I dwelt nearer to those parts of

the universe and to those eras in history which had most attracted me.

Where I lived was as far off as many a region viewed nightly by

astronomers. We are wont to imagine rare and delectable places in some

remote and more celestial corner of the system, behind the

constellation of Cassiopeia’s Chair, far from noise and disturbance. I

discovered that my house actually had its site in such a withdrawn, but

forever new and unprofaned, part of the universe. If it were worth the

while to settle in those parts near to the Pleiades or the Hyades, to

Aldebaran or Altair, then I was really there, or at an equal remoteness

from the life which I had left behind, dwindled and twinkling with as

fine a ray to my nearest neighbor, and to be seen only in moonless

nights by him. Such was that part of creation where I had squatted;—

“There was a shepherd that did live,

And held his thoughts as high

As were the mounts whereon his flocks

Did hourly feed him by.”

What should we think of the shepherd’s life if his flocks always

wandered to higher pastures than his thoughts?

Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal

simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been

as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and

bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best

things which I did. They say that characters were engraven on the

bathing tub of king Tching-thang to this effect: “Renew thyself

completely each day; do it again, and again, and forever again.” I can

understand that. Morning brings back the heroic ages. I was as much

affected by the faint hum of a mosquito making its invisible and

unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn, when I was

sitting with door and windows open, as I could be by any trumpet that

ever sang of fame. It was Homer’s requiem; itself an Iliad and Odyssey

in the air, singing its own wrath and wanderings. There was something

cosmical about it; a standing advertisement, till forbidden, of the

everlasting vigor and fertility of the world. The morning, which is the

most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour. Then there is

least somnolence in us; and for an hour, at least, some part of us

awakes which slumbers all the rest of the day and night. Little is to

be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not

awakened by our Genius, but by the mechanical nudgings of some

servitor, are not awakened by our own newly-acquired force and

aspirations from within, accompanied by the undulations of celestial

music, instead of factory bells, and a fragrance filling the air—to a

higher life than we fell asleep from; and thus the darkness bear its

fruit, and prove itself to be good, no less than the light. That man

who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred,

and auroral hour than he has yet profaned, has despaired of life, and

is pursuing a descending and darkening way. After a partial cessation

of his sensuous life, the soul of man, or its organs rather, are

reinvigorated each day, and his Genius tries again what noble life it

can make. All memorable events, I should say, transpire in morning time

and in a morning atmosphere. The Vedas say, “All intelligences awake

with the morning.” Poetry and art, and the fairest and most memorable

of the actions of men, date from such an hour. All poets and heroes,

like Memnon, are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at

sunrise. To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the

sun, the day is a perpetual morning. It matters not what the clocks say

or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and

there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep.

Why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have

not been slumbering? They are not such poor calculators. If they had

not been overcome with drowsiness, they would have performed something.

The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a

million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one

in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be

alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have

looked him in the face?

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical

aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not

forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact

than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a

conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular

picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful;

but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and

medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the

quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to

make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his

most elevated and critical hour. If we refused, or rather used up, such

paltry information as we get, the oracles would distinctly inform us

how this might be done.

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front

only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it

had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not

lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor

did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I

wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so

sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to

cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and

reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then

to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness

to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be

able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men,

it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is

of the devil or of God, and have \_somewhat hastily\_ concluded that it

is the chief end of man here to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were

long ago changed into men; like pygmies we fight with cranes; it is

error upon error, and clout upon clout, and our best virtue has for its

occasion a superfluous and evitable wretchedness. Our life is frittered

away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his

ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the

rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as

two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million

count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail. In the

midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and

storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for,

that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom

and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning, and he must be a great

calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify. Instead of three

meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred

dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion. Our life is like a

German Confederacy, made up of petty states, with its boundary forever

fluctuating, so that even a German cannot tell you how it is bounded at

any moment. The nation itself, with all its so called internal

improvements, which, by the way are all external and superficial, is

just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with

furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and

heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the

million households in the land; and the only cure for it as for them is

in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life

and elevation of purpose. It lives too fast. Men think that it is

essential that the \_Nation\_ have commerce, and export ice, and talk

through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt,

whether \_they\_ do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or

like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers, and

forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to

tinkering upon our \_lives\_ to improve \_them\_, who will build railroads?

And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season?

But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads?

We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think

what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man,

an Irish-man, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are

covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound

sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and

run over; so that, if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail,

others have the misfortune to be ridden upon. And when they run over a

man that is walking in his sleep, a supernumerary sleeper in the wrong

position, and wake him up, they suddenly stop the cars, and make a hue

and cry about it, as if this were an exception. I am glad to know that

it takes a gang of men for every five miles to keep the sleepers down

and level in their beds as it is, for this is a sign that they may

sometime get up again.

Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined

to be starved before we are hungry. Men say that a stitch in time saves

nine, and so they take a thousand stitches to-day to save nine

to-morrow. As for \_work\_, we haven’t any of any consequence. We have

the Saint Vitus’ dance, and cannot possibly keep our heads still. If I

should only give a few pulls at the parish bell-rope, as for a fire,

that is, without setting the bell, there is hardly a man on his farm in

the outskirts of Concord, notwithstanding that press of engagements

which was his excuse so many times this morning, nor a boy, nor a

woman, I might almost say, but would forsake all and follow that sound,

not mainly to save property from the flames, but, if we will confess

the truth, much more to see it burn, since burn it must, and we, be it

known, did not set it on fire,—or to see it put out, and have a hand in

it, if that is done as handsomely; yes, even if it were the parish

church itself. Hardly a man takes a half hour’s nap after dinner, but

when he wakes he holds up his head and asks, “What’s the news?” as if

the rest of mankind had stood his sentinels. Some give directions to be

waked every half hour, doubtless for no other purpose; and then, to pay

for it, they tell what they have dreamed. After a night’s sleep the

news is as indispensable as the breakfast. “Pray tell me any thing new

that has happened to a man any where on this globe,”—and he reads it

over his coffee and rolls, that a man has had his eyes gouged out this

morning on the Wachito River; never dreaming the while that he lives in

the dark unfathomed mammoth cave of this world, and has but the

rudiment of an eye himself.

For my part, I could easily do without the post-office. I think that

there are very few important communications made through it. To speak

critically, I never received more than one or two letters in my life—I

wrote this some years ago—that were worth the postage. The penny-post

is, commonly, an institution through which you seriously offer a man

that penny for his thoughts which is so often safely offered in jest.

And I am sure that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper. If

we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one

house burned, or one vessel wrecked, or one steamboat blown up, or one

cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one lot

of grasshoppers in the winter,—we never need read of another. One is

enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for

a myriad instances and applications? To a philosopher all \_news\_, as it

is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over

their tea. Yet not a few are greedy after this gossip. There was such a

rush, as I hear, the other day at one of the offices to learn the

foreign news by the last arrival, that several large squares of plate

glass belonging to the establishment were broken by the pressure,—news

which I seriously think a ready wit might write a twelve-month, or

twelve years, beforehand with sufficient accuracy. As for Spain, for

instance, if you know how to throw in Don Carlos and the Infanta, and

Don Pedro and Seville and Granada, from time to time in the right

proportions,—they may have changed the names a little since I saw the

papers,—and serve up a bull-fight when other entertainments fail, it

will be true to the letter, and give us as good an idea of the exact

state or ruin of things in Spain as the most succinct and lucid reports

under this head in the newspapers: and as for England, almost the last

significant scrap of news from that quarter was the revolution of 1649;

and if you have learned the history of her crops for an average year,

you never need attend to that thing again, unless your speculations are

of a merely pecuniary character. If one may judge who rarely looks into

the newspapers, nothing new does ever happen in foreign parts, a French

revolution not excepted.

What news! how much more important to know what that is which was never

old! “Kieou-he-yu (great dignitary of the state of Wei) sent a man to

Khoung-tseu to know his news. Khoung-tseu caused the messenger to be

seated near him, and questioned him in these terms: What is your master

doing? The messenger answered with respect: My master desires to

diminish the number of his faults, but he cannot come to the end of

them. The messenger being gone, the philosopher remarked: What a worthy

messenger! What a worthy messenger!” The preacher, instead of vexing

the ears of drowsy farmers on their day of rest at the end of the

week,—for Sunday is the fit conclusion of an ill-spent week, and not

the fresh and brave beginning of a new one,—with this one other

draggle-tail of a sermon, should shout with thundering voice, “Pause!

Avast! Why so seeming fast, but deadly slow?”

Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is

fabulous. If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow

themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we

know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights’

Entertainments. If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right

to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets. When we are

unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have

any permanent and absolute existence,—that petty fears and petty

pleasures are but the shadow of the reality. This is always

exhilarating and sublime. By closing the eyes and slumbering, and

consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their

daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which still is built on

purely illusory foundations. Children, who play life, discern its true

law and relations more clearly than men, who fail to live it worthily,

but who think that they are wiser by experience, that is, by failure. I

have read in a Hindoo book, that “there was a king’s son, who, being

expelled in infancy from his native city, was brought up by a forester,

and, growing up to maturity in that state, imagined himself to belong

to the barbarous race with which he lived. One of his father’s

ministers having discovered him, revealed to him what he was, and the

misconception of his character was removed, and he knew himself to be a

prince. So soul,” continues the Hindoo philosopher, “from the

circumstances in which it is placed, mistakes its own character, until

the truth is revealed to it by some holy teacher, and then it knows

itself to be \_Brahme\_.” I perceive that we inhabitants of New England

live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate

the surface of things. We think that that \_is\_ which \_appears\_ to be.

If a man should walk through this town and see only the reality, where,

think you, would the “Mill-dam” go to? If he should give us an account

of the realities he beheld there, we should not recognize the place in

his description. Look at a meeting-house, or a court-house, or a jail,

or a shop, or a dwelling-house, and say what that thing really is

before a true gaze, and they would all go to pieces in your account of

them. Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind

the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity

there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and

places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the

present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the

ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble

only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that

surrounds us. The universe constantly and obediently answers to our

conceptions; whether we travel fast or slow, the track is laid for us.

Let us spend our lives in conceiving then. The poet or the artist never

yet had so fair and noble a design but some of his posterity at least

could accomplish it.

Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off

the track by every nutshell and mosquito’s wing that falls on the

rails. Let us rise early and fast, or break fast, gently and without

perturbation; let company come and let company go, let the bells ring

and the children cry,—determined to make a day of it. Why should we

knock under and go with the stream? Let us not be upset and overwhelmed

in that terrible rapid and whirlpool called a dinner, situated in the

meridian shallows. Weather this danger and you are safe, for the rest

of the way is down hill. With unrelaxed nerves, with morning vigor,

sail by it, looking another way, tied to the mast like Ulysses. If the

engine whistles, let it whistle till it is hoarse for its pains. If the

bell rings, why should we run? We will consider what kind of music they

are like. Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward

through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and

delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through

Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through

church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we

come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call \_reality\_,

and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a \_point

d’appui\_, below freshet and frost and fire, a place where you might

found a wall or a state, or set a lamp-post safely, or perhaps a gauge,

not a Nilometer, but a Realometer, that future ages might know how deep

a freshet of shams and appearances had gathered from time to time. If

you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the

sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its

sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will

happily conclude your mortal career. Be it life or death, we crave only

reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats

and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our

business.

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I

drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin

current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish

in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I

know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been

regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. The intellect

is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things.

I do not wish to be any more busy with my hands than is necessary. My

head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in

it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as

some creatures use their snout and fore-paws, and with it I would mine

and burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is

somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining-rod and thin rising vapors I

judge; and here I will begin to mine.

Reading

With a little more deliberation in the choice of their pursuits, all

men would perhaps become essentially students and observers, for

certainly their nature and destiny are interesting to all alike. In

accumulating property for ourselves or our posterity, in founding a

family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in

dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor

accident. 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. No dust has settled on that robe; no time has elapsed since

that divinity was revealed. That time which we really improve, or which

is improvable, is neither past, present, nor future.

My residence was more favorable, not only to thought, but to serious

reading, than a university; and though I was beyond the range of the

ordinary circulating library, I had more than ever come within the

influence of those books which circulate round the world, whose

sentences were first written on bark, and are now merely copied from

time to time on to linen paper. Says the poet Mîr Camar Uddîn Mast,

“Being seated to run through the region of the spiritual world; I have

had this advantage in books. To be intoxicated by a single glass of

wine; I have experienced this pleasure when I have drunk the liquor of

the esoteric doctrines.” I kept Homer’s Iliad on my table through the

summer, though I looked at his page only now and then. Incessant labor

with my hands, at first, for I had my house to finish and my beans to

hoe at the same time, made more study impossible. Yet I sustained

myself by the prospect of such reading in future. I read one or two

shallow books of travel in the intervals of my work, till that

employment made me ashamed of myself, and I asked where it was then

that \_I\_ lived.

The student may read Homer or Æschylus in the Greek without danger of

dissipation or luxuriousness, for it implies that he in some measure

emulate their heroes, and consecrate morning hours to their pages. The

heroic books, even if printed in the character of our mother tongue,

will always be in a language dead to degenerate times; and we must

laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a

larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valor and

generosity we have. The modern cheap and fertile press, with all its

translations, has done little to bring us nearer to the heroic writers

of antiquity. They seem as solitary, and the letter in which they are

printed as rare and curious, as ever. It is worth the expense of

youthful days and costly hours, if you learn only some words of an

ancient language, which are raised out of the trivialness of the

street, to be perpetual suggestions and provocations. It is not in vain

that the farmer remembers and repeats the few Latin words which he has

heard. Men sometimes speak as if the study of the classics would at

length make way for more modern and practical studies; but the

adventurous student will always study classics, in whatever language

they may be written and however ancient they may be. For what are the

classics but the noblest recorded thoughts of man? They are the only

oracles which are not decayed, and there are such answers to the most

modern inquiry in them as Delphi and Dodona never gave. We might as

well omit to study Nature because she is old. To read well, that is, to

read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that

will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the

day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the

steady intention almost of the whole life to this object. Books must be

read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written. It is not

enough even to be able to speak the language of that nation by which

they are written, for there is a memorable interval between the spoken

and the written language, the language heard and the language read. The

one is commonly transitory, a sound, a tongue, a dialect merely, almost

brutish, and we learn it unconsciously, like the brutes, of our

mothers. The other is the maturity and experience of that; if that is

our mother tongue, this is our father tongue, a reserved and select

expression, too significant to be heard by the ear, which we must be

born again in order to speak. The crowds of men who merely \_spoke\_ the

Greek and Latin tongues in the middle ages were not entitled by the

accident of birth to \_read\_ the works of genius written in those

languages; for these were not written in that Greek or Latin which they

knew, but in the select language of literature. They had not learned

the nobler dialects of Greece and Rome, but the very materials on which

they were written were waste paper to them, and they prized instead a

cheap contemporary literature. But when the several nations of Europe

had acquired distinct though rude written languages of their own,

sufficient for the purposes of their rising literatures, then first

learning revived, and scholars were enabled to discern from that

remoteness the treasures of antiquity. What the Roman and Grecian

multitude could not \_hear\_, after the lapse of ages a few scholars

\_read\_, and a few scholars only are still reading it.

However much we may admire the orator’s occasional bursts of eloquence,

the noblest written words are commonly as far behind or above the

fleeting spoken language as the firmament with its stars is behind the

clouds. \_There\_ are the stars, and they who can may read them. The

astronomers forever comment on and observe them. They are not

exhalations like our daily colloquies and vaporous breath. What is

called eloquence in the forum is commonly found to be rhetoric in the

study. The orator yields to the inspiration of a transient occasion,

and speaks to the mob before him, to those who can \_hear\_ him; but the

writer, whose more equable life is his occasion, and who would be

distracted by the event and the crowd which inspire the orator, speaks

to the intellect and health of mankind, to all in any age who can

\_understand\_ him.

No wonder that Alexander carried the Iliad with him on his expeditions

in a precious casket. A written word is the choicest of relics. It is

something at once more intimate with us and more universal than any

other work of art. It is the work of art nearest to life itself. It may

be translated into every language, and not only be read but actually

breathed from all human lips;—not be represented on canvas or in marble

only, but be carved out of the breath of life itself. The symbol of an

ancient man’s thought becomes a modern man’s speech. Two thousand

summers have imparted to the monuments of Grecian literature, as to her

marbles, only a maturer golden and autumnal tint, for they have carried

their own serene and celestial atmosphere into all lands to protect

them against the corrosion of time. Books are the treasured wealth of

the world and the fit inheritance of generations and nations. Books,

the oldest and the best, stand naturally and rightfully on the shelves

of every cottage. They have no cause of their own to plead, but while

they enlighten and sustain the reader his common sense will not refuse

them. Their authors are a natural and irresistible aristocracy in every

society, and, more than kings or emperors, exert an influence on

mankind. When the illiterate and perhaps scornful trader has earned by

enterprise and industry his coveted leisure and independence, and is

admitted to the circles of wealth and fashion, he turns inevitably at

last to those still higher but yet inaccessible circles of intellect

and genius, and is sensible only of the imperfection of his culture and

the vanity and insufficiency of all his riches, and further proves his

good sense by the pains which he takes to secure for his children that

intellectual culture whose want he so keenly feels; and thus it is that

he becomes the founder of a family.

Those who have not learned to read the ancient classics in the language

in which they were written must have a very imperfect knowledge of the

history of the human race; for it is remarkable that no transcript of

them has ever been made into any modern tongue, unless our civilization

itself may be regarded as such a transcript. Homer has never yet been

printed in English, nor Æschylus, nor Virgil even—works as refined, as

solidly done, and as beautiful almost as the morning itself; for later

writers, say what we will of their genius, have rarely, if ever,

equalled the elaborate beauty and finish and the lifelong and heroic

literary labors of the ancients. They only talk of forgetting them who

never knew them. It will be soon enough to forget them when we have the

learning and the genius which will enable us to attend to and

appreciate them. That age will be rich indeed when those relics which

we call Classics, and the still older and more than classic but even

less known Scriptures of the nations, shall have still further

accumulated, when the Vaticans shall be filled with Vedas and

Zendavestas and Bibles, with Homers and Dantes and Shakespeares, and

all the centuries to come shall have successively deposited their

trophies in the forum of the world. By such a pile we may hope to scale

heaven at last.

The works of the great poets have never yet been read by mankind, for

only great poets can read them. They have only been read as the

multitude read the stars, at most astrologically, not astronomically.

Most men have learned to read to serve a paltry convenience, as they

have learned to cipher in order to keep accounts and not be cheated in

trade; but of reading as a noble intellectual exercise they know little

or nothing; yet this only is reading, in a high sense, not that which

lulls us as a luxury and suffers the nobler faculties to sleep the

while, but what we have to stand on tip-toe to read and devote our most

alert and wakeful hours to.

I think that having learned our letters we should read the best that is

in literature, and not be forever repeating our a b abs, and words of

one syllable, in the fourth or fifth classes, sitting on the lowest and

foremost form all our lives. Most men are satisfied if they read or

hear read, and perchance have been convicted by the wisdom of one good

book, the Bible, and for the rest of their lives vegetate and dissipate

their faculties in what is called easy reading. There is a work in

several volumes in our Circulating Library entitled Little Reading,

which I thought referred to a town of that name which I had not been

to. There are those who, like cormorants and ostriches, can digest all

sorts of this, even after the fullest dinner of meats and vegetables,

for they suffer nothing to be wasted. If others are the machines to

provide this provender, they are the machines to read it. They read the

nine thousandth tale about Zebulon and Sephronia, and how they loved as

none had ever loved before, and neither did the course of their true

love run smooth,—at any rate, how it did run and stumble, and get up

again and go on! how some poor unfortunate got up on to a steeple, who

had better never have gone up as far as the belfry; and then, having

needlessly got him up there, the happy novelist rings the bell for all

the world to come together and hear, O dear! how he did get down again!

For my part, I think that they had better metamorphose all such

aspiring heroes of universal noveldom into man weathercocks, as they

used to put heroes among the constellations, and let them swing round

there till they are rusty, and not come down at all to bother honest

men with their pranks. The next time the novelist rings the bell I will

not stir though the meeting-house burn down. “The Skip of the

Tip-Toe-Hop, a Romance of the Middle Ages, by the celebrated author of

‘Tittle-Tol-Tan,’ to appear in monthly parts; a great rush; don’t all

come together.” All this they read with saucer eyes, and erect and

primitive curiosity, and with unwearied gizzard, whose corrugations

even yet need no sharpening, just as some little four-year-old bencher

his two-cent gilt-covered edition of Cinderella,—without any

improvement, that I can see, in the pronunciation, or accent, or

emphasis, or any more skill in extracting or inserting the moral. The

result is dulness of sight, a stagnation of the vital circulations, and

a general deliquium and sloughing off of all the intellectual

faculties. This sort of gingerbread is baked daily and more sedulously

than pure wheat or rye-and-Indian in almost every oven, and finds a

surer market.

The best books are not read even by those who are called good readers.

What does our Concord culture amount to? There is in this town, with a

very few exceptions, no taste for the best or for very good books even

in English literature, whose words all can read and spell. Even the

college-bred and so called liberally educated men here and elsewhere

have really little or no acquaintance with the English classics; and as

for the recorded wisdom of mankind, the ancient classics and Bibles,

which are accessible to all who will know of them, there are the

feeblest efforts any where made to become acquainted with them. I know

a woodchopper, of middle age, who takes a French paper, not for news as

he says, for he is above that, but to “keep himself in practice,” he

being a Canadian by birth; and when I ask him what he considers the

best thing he can do in this world, he says, beside this, to keep up

and add to his English. This is about as much as the college bred

generally do or aspire to do, and they take an English paper for the

purpose. One who has just come from reading perhaps one of the best

English books will find how many with whom he can converse about it? Or

suppose he comes from reading a Greek or Latin classic in the original,

whose praises are familiar even to the so called illiterate; he will

find nobody at all to speak to, but must keep silence about it. Indeed,

there is hardly the professor in our colleges, who, if he has mastered

the difficulties of the language, has proportionally mastered the

difficulties of the wit and poetry of a Greek poet, and has any

sympathy to impart to the alert and heroic reader; and as for the

sacred Scriptures, or Bibles of mankind, who in this town can tell me

even their titles? Most men do not know that any nation but the Hebrews

have had a scripture. A man, any man, will go considerably out of his

way to pick up a silver dollar; but here are golden words, which the

wisest men of antiquity have uttered, and whose worth the wise of every

succeeding age have assured us of;—and yet we learn to read only as far

as Easy Reading, the primers and class-books, and when we leave school,

the “Little Reading,” and story books, which are for boys and

beginners; and our reading, our conversation and thinking, are all on a

very low level, worthy only of pygmies and manikins.

I aspire to be acquainted with wiser men than this our Concord soil has

produced, whose names are hardly known here. Or shall I hear the name

of Plato and never read his book? As if Plato were my townsman and I

never saw him,—my next neighbor and I never heard him speak or attended

to the wisdom of his words. But how actually is it? His Dialogues,

which contain what was immortal in him, lie on the next shelf, and yet

I never read them. We are underbred and low-lived and illiterate; and

in this respect I confess I do not make any very broad distinction

between the illiterateness of my townsman who cannot read at all, and

the illiterateness of him who has learned to read only what is for

children and feeble intellects. We should be as good as the worthies of

antiquity, but partly by first knowing how good they were. We are a

race of tit-men, and soar but little higher in our intellectual flights

than the columns of the daily paper.

It is not all books that are as dull as their readers. There are

probably words addressed to our condition exactly, which, if we could

really hear and understand, would be more salutary than the morning or

the spring to our lives, and possibly put a new aspect on the face of

things for us. How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the

reading of a book. The book exists for us perchance which will explain

our miracles and reveal new ones. The at present unutterable things we

may find somewhere uttered. These same questions that disturb and

puzzle and confound us have in their turn occurred to all the wise men;

not one has been omitted; and each has answered them, according to his

ability, by his words and his life. Moreover, with wisdom we shall

learn liberality. The solitary hired man on a farm in the outskirts of

Concord, who has had his second birth and peculiar religious

experience, and is driven as he believes into the silent gravity and

exclusiveness by his faith, may think it is not true; but Zoroaster,

thousands of years ago, travelled the same road and had the same

experience; but he, being wise, knew it to be universal, and treated

his neighbors accordingly, and is even said to have invented and

established worship among men. Let him humbly commune with Zoroaster

then, and through the liberalizing influence of all the worthies, with

Jesus Christ himself, and let “our church” go by the board.

We boast that we belong to the nineteenth century and are making the

most rapid strides of any nation. But consider how little this village

does for its own culture. I do not wish to flatter my townsmen, nor to

be flattered by them, for that will not advance either of us. We need

to be provoked,—goaded like oxen, as we are, into a trot. We have a

comparatively decent system of common schools, schools for infants

only; but excepting the half-starved Lyceum in the winter, and latterly

the puny beginning of a library suggested by the state, no school for

ourselves. We spend more on almost any article of bodily aliment or

ailment than on our mental aliment. It is time that we had uncommon

schools, that we did not leave off our education when we begin to be

men and women. It is time that villages were universities, and their

elder inhabitants the fellows of universities, with leisure—if they are

indeed so well off—to pursue liberal studies the rest of their lives.

Shall the world be confined to one Paris or one Oxford forever? Cannot

students be boarded here and get a liberal education under the skies of

Concord? Can we not hire some Abelard to lecture to us? Alas! what with

foddering the cattle and tending the store, we are kept from school too

long, and our education is sadly neglected. In this country, the

village should in some respects take the place of the nobleman of

Europe. It should be the patron of the fine arts. It is rich enough. It

wants only the magnanimity and refinement. It can spend money enough on

such things as farmers and traders value, but it is thought Utopian to

propose spending money for things which more intelligent men know to be

of far more worth. This town has spent seventeen thousand dollars on a

town-house, thank fortune or politics, but probably it will not spend

so much on living wit, the true meat to put into that shell, in a

hundred years. The one hundred and twenty-five dollars annually

subscribed for a Lyceum in the winter is better spent than any other

equal sum raised in the town. If we live in the nineteenth century, why

should we not enjoy the advantages which the nineteenth century offers?

Why should our life be in any respect provincial? If we will read

newspapers, why not skip the gossip of Boston and take the best

newspaper in the world at once?—not be sucking the pap of “neutral

family” papers, or browsing “Olive-Branches” here in New England. Let

the reports of all the learned societies come to us, and we will see if

they know any thing. Why should we leave it to Harper & Brothers and

Redding & Co. to select our reading? As the nobleman of cultivated

taste surrounds himself with whatever conduces to his

culture,—genius—learning—wit—books—paintings—statuary—music—

philosophical instruments, and the like; so let the village do,—not

stop short at a pedagogue, a parson, a sexton, a parish library, and

three selectmen, because our pilgrim forefathers got through a cold

winter once on a bleak rock with these. To act collectively is

according to the spirit of our institutions; and I am confident that,

as our circumstances are more flourishing, our means are greater than

the nobleman’s. New England can hire all the wise men in the world to

come and teach her, and board them round the while, and not be

provincial at all. That is the \_uncommon\_ school we want. Instead of

noblemen, let us have noble villages of men. If it is necessary, omit

one bridge over the river, go round a little there, and throw one arch

at least over the darker gulf of ignorance which surrounds us.

Sounds

But while we are confined to books, though the most select and classic,

and read only particular written languages, which are themselves but

dialects and provincial, we are in danger of forgetting the language

which all things and events speak without metaphor, which alone is

copious and standard. Much is published, but little printed. The rays

which stream through the shutter will be no longer remembered when the

shutter is wholly removed. No method nor discipline can supersede the

necessity of being forever on the alert. What is a course of history,

or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best

society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the

discipline of looking always at what is to be seen? Will you be a

reader, a student merely, or a seer? Read your fate, see what is before

you, and walk on into futurity.

I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans. Nay, I often did

better than this. There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice

the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or

hands. I love a broad margin to my life. Sometimes, in a summer

morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway

from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery, amidst the pines and

hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the

birds sing around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the

sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller’s

wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I

grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better

than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time

subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance.

I realized what the Orientals mean by contemplation and the forsaking

of works. For the most part, I minded not how the hours went. The day

advanced as if to light some work of mine; it was morning, and lo, now

it is evening, and nothing memorable is accomplished. Instead of

singing like the birds, I silently smiled at my incessant good fortune.

As the sparrow had its trill, sitting on the hickory before my door, so

had I my chuckle or suppressed warble which he might hear out of my

nest. My days were not days of the week, bearing the stamp of any

heathen deity, nor were they minced into hours and fretted by the

ticking of a clock; for I lived like the Puri Indians, of whom it is

said that “for yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow they have only one

word, and they express the variety of meaning by pointing backward for

yesterday, forward for to-morrow, and overhead for the passing day.”

This was sheer idleness to my fellow-townsmen, no doubt; but if the

birds and flowers had tried me by their standard, I should not have

been found wanting. A man must find his occasions in himself, it is

true. The natural day is very calm, and will hardly reprove his

indolence.

I had this advantage, at least, in my mode of life, over those who were

obliged to look abroad for amusement, to society and the theatre, that

my life itself was become my amusement and never ceased to be novel. It

was a drama of many scenes and without an end. If we were always indeed

getting our living, and regulating our lives according to the last and

best mode we had learned, we should never be troubled with ennui.

Follow your genius closely enough, and it will not fail to show you a

fresh prospect every hour. Housework was a pleasant pastime. When my

floor was dirty, I rose early, and, setting all my furniture out of

doors on the grass, bed and bedstead making but one budget, dashed

water on the floor, and sprinkled white sand from the pond on it, and

then with a broom scrubbed it clean and white; and by the time the

villagers had broken their fast the morning sun had dried my house

sufficiently to allow me to move in again, and my meditations were

almost uninterupted. It was pleasant to see my whole household effects

out on the grass, making a little pile like a gypsy’s pack, and my

three-legged table, from which I did not remove the books and pen and

ink, standing amid the pines and hickories. They seemed glad to get out

themselves, and as if unwilling to be brought in. I was sometimes

tempted to stretch an awning over them and take my seat there. It was

worth the while to see the sun shine on these things, and hear the free

wind blow on them; so much more interesting most familiar objects look

out of doors than in the house. A bird sits on the next bough,

life-everlasting grows under the table, and blackberry vines run round

its legs; pine cones, chestnut burs, and strawberry leaves are strewn

about. It looked as if this was the way these forms came to be

transferred to our furniture, to tables, chairs, and bedsteads,—because

they once stood in their midst.

My house was on the side of a hill, immediately on the edge of the

larger wood, in the midst of a young forest of pitch pines and

hickories, and half a dozen rods from the pond, to which a narrow

footpath led down the hill. In my front yard grew the strawberry,

blackberry, and life-everlasting, johnswort and goldenrod, shrub-oaks

and sand-cherry, blueberry and groundnut. Near the end of May, the

sand-cherry (\_Cerasus pumila\_,) adorned the sides of the path with its

delicate flowers arranged in umbels cylindrically about its short

stems, which last, in the fall, weighed down with good sized and

handsome cherries, fell over in wreaths like rays on every side. I

tasted them out of compliment to Nature, though they were scarcely

palatable. The sumach (\_Rhus glabra\_,) grew luxuriantly about the

house, pushing up through the embankment which I had made, and growing

five or six feet the first season. Its broad pinnate tropical leaf was

pleasant though strange to look on. The large buds, suddenly pushing

out late in the spring from dry sticks which had seemed to be dead,

developed themselves as by magic into graceful green and tender boughs,

an inch in diameter; and sometimes, as I sat at my window, so

heedlessly did they grow and tax their weak joints, I heard a fresh and

tender bough suddenly fall like a fan to the ground, when there was not

a breath of air stirring, broken off by its own weight. In August, the

large masses of berries, which, when in flower, had attracted many wild

bees, gradually assumed their bright velvety crimson hue, and by their

weight again bent down and broke the tender limbs.

As I sit at my window this summer afternoon, hawks are circling about

my clearing; the tantivy of wild pigeons, flying by twos and threes

athwart my view, or perching restless on the white-pine boughs behind

my house, gives a voice to the air; a fishhawk dimples the glassy

surface of the pond and brings up a fish; a mink steals out of the

marsh before my door and seizes a frog by the shore; the sedge is

bending under the weight of the reed-birds flitting hither and thither;

and for the last half hour I have heard the rattle of railroad cars,

now dying away and then reviving like the beat of a partridge,

conveying travellers from Boston to the country. For I did not live so

out of the world as that boy who, as I hear, was put out to a farmer in

the east part of the town, but ere long ran away and came home again,

quite down at the heel and homesick. He had never seen such a dull and

out-of-the-way place; the folks were all gone off; why, you couldn’t

even hear the whistle! I doubt if there is such a place in

Massachusetts now:—

“In truth, our village has become a butt

For one of those fleet railroad shafts, and o’er

Our peaceful plain its soothing sound is—Concord.”

The Fitchburg Railroad touches the pond about a hundred rods south of

where I dwell. I usually go to the village along its causeway, and am,

as it were, related to society by this link. The men on the freight

trains, who go over the whole length of the road, bow to me as to an

old acquaintance, they pass me so often, and apparently they take me

for an employee; and so I am. I too would fain be a track-repairer

somewhere in the orbit of the earth.

The whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter,

sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer’s yard,

informing me that many restless city merchants are arriving within the

circle of the town, or adventurous country traders from the other side.

As they come under one horizon, they shout their warning to get off the

track to the other, heard sometimes through the circles of two towns.

Here come your groceries, country; your rations, countrymen! Nor is

there any man so independent on his farm that he can say them nay. And

here’s your pay for them! screams the countryman’s whistle; timber like

long battering rams going twenty miles an hour against the city’s

walls, and chairs enough to seat all the weary and heavy laden that

dwell within them. With such huge and lumbering civility the country

hands a chair to the city. All the Indian huckleberry hills are

stripped, all the cranberry meadows are raked into the city. Up comes

the cotton, down goes the woven cloth; up comes the silk, down goes the

woollen; up come the books, but down goes the wit that writes them.

When I meet the engine with its train of cars moving off with planetary

motion,—or, rather, like a comet, for the beholder knows not if with

that velocity and with that direction it will ever revisit this system,

since its orbit does not look like a returning curve,—with its steam

cloud like a banner streaming behind in golden and silver wreaths, like

many a downy cloud which I have seen, high in the heavens, unfolding

its masses to the light,—as if this travelling demigod, this

cloud-compeller, would ere long take the sunset sky for the livery of

his train; when I hear the iron horse make the hills echo with his

snort like thunder, shaking the earth with his feet, and breathing fire

and smoke from his nostrils, (what kind of winged horse or fiery dragon

they will put into the new Mythology I don’t know), it seems as if the

earth had got a race now worthy to inhabit it. If all were as it seems,

and men made the elements their servants for noble ends! If the cloud

that hangs over the engine were the perspiration of heroic deeds, or as

beneficent as that which floats over the farmer’s fields, then the

elements and Nature herself would cheerfully accompany men on their

errands and be their escort.

I watch the passage of the morning cars with the same feeling that I do

the rising of the sun, which is hardly more regular. Their train of

clouds stretching far behind and rising higher and higher, going to

heaven while the cars are going to Boston, conceals the sun for a

minute and casts my distant field into the shade, a celestial train

beside which the petty train of cars which hugs the earth is but the

barb of the spear. The stabler of the iron horse was up early this

winter morning by the light of the stars amid the mountains, to fodder

and harness his steed. Fire, too, was awakened thus early to put the

vital heat in him and get him off. If the enterprise were as innocent

as it is early! If the snow lies deep, they strap on his snow-shoes,

and with the giant plow, plow a furrow from the mountains to the

seaboard, in which the cars, like a following drill-barrow, sprinkle

all the restless men and floating merchandise in the country for seed.

All day the fire-steed flies over the country, stopping only that his

master may rest, and I am awakened by his tramp and defiant snort at

midnight, when in some remote glen in the woods he fronts the elements

incased in ice and snow; and he will reach his stall only with the

morning star, to start once more on his travels without rest or

slumber. Or perchance, at evening, I hear him in his stable blowing off

the superfluous energy of the day, that he may calm his nerves and cool

his liver and brain for a few hours of iron slumber. If the enterprise

were as heroic and commanding as it is protracted and unwearied!

Far through unfrequented woods on the confines of towns, where once

only the hunter penetrated by day, in the darkest night dart these

bright saloons without the knowledge of their inhabitants; this moment

stopping at some brilliant station-house in town or city, where a

social crowd is gathered, the next in the Dismal Swamp, scaring the owl

and fox. The startings and arrivals of the cars are now the epochs in

the village day. They go and come with such regularity and precision,

and their whistle can be heard so far, that the farmers set their

clocks by them, and thus one well conducted institution regulates a

whole country. Have not men improved somewhat in punctuality since the

railroad was invented? Do they not talk and think faster in the depot

than they did in the stage-office? There is something electrifying in

the atmosphere of the former place. I have been astonished at the

miracles it has wrought; that some of my neighbors, who, I should have

prophesied, once for all, would never get to Boston by so prompt a

conveyance, are on hand when the bell rings. To do things “railroad

fashion” is now the by-word; and it is worth the while to be warned so

often and so sincerely by any power to get off its track. There is no

stopping to read the riot act, no firing over the heads of the mob, in

this case. We have constructed a fate, an \_Atropos\_, that never turns

aside. (Let that be the name of your engine.) Men are advertised that

at a certain hour and minute these bolts will be shot toward particular

points of the compass; yet it interferes with no man’s business, and

the children go to school on the other track. We live the steadier for

it. We are all educated thus to be sons of Tell. The air is full of

invisible bolts. Every path but your own is the path of fate. Keep on

your own track, then.

What recommends commerce to me is its enterprise and bravery. It does

not clasp its hands and pray to Jupiter. I see these men every day go

about their business with more or less courage and content, doing more

even than they suspect, and perchance better employed than they could

have consciously devised. I am less affected by their heroism who stood

up for half an hour in the front line at Buena Vista, than by the

steady and cheerful valor of the men who inhabit the snow-plough for

their winter quarters; who have not merely the three-o’-clock in the

morning courage, which Bonaparte thought was the rarest, but whose

courage does not go to rest so early, who go to sleep only when the

storm sleeps or the sinews of their iron steed are frozen. On this

morning of the Great Snow, perchance, which is still raging and

chilling men’s blood, I hear the muffled tone of their engine bell from

out the fog bank of their chilled breath, which announces that the cars

\_are coming\_, without long delay, notwithstanding the veto of a New

England north-east snow storm, and I behold the ploughmen covered with

snow and rime, their heads peering, above the mould-board which is

turning down other than daisies and the nests of field-mice, like

bowlders of the Sierra Nevada, that occupy an outside place in the

universe.

Commerce is unexpectedly confident and serene, alert, adventurous, and

unwearied. It is very natural in its methods withal, far more so than

many fantastic enterprises and sentimental experiments, and hence its

singular success. I am refreshed and expanded when the freight train

rattles past me, and I smell the stores which go dispensing their odors

all the way from Long Wharf to Lake Champlain, reminding me of foreign

parts, of coral reefs, and Indian oceans, and tropical climes, and the

extent of the globe. I feel more like a citizen of the world at the

sight of the palm-leaf which will cover so many flaxen New England

heads the next summer, the Manilla hemp and cocoa-nut husks, the old

junk, gunny bags, scrap iron, and rusty nails. This car-load of torn

sails is more legible and interesting now than if they should be

wrought into paper and printed books. Who can write so graphically the

history of the storms they have weathered as these rents have done?

They are proof-sheets which need no correction. Here goes lumber from

the Maine woods, which did not go out to sea in the last freshet, risen

four dollars on the thousand because of what did go out or was split

up; pine, spruce, cedar,—first, second, third, and fourth qualities, so

lately all of one quality, to wave over the bear, and moose, and

caribou. Next rolls Thomaston lime, a prime lot, which will get far

among the hills before it gets slacked. These rags in bales, of all

hues and qualities, the lowest condition to which cotton and linen

descend, the final result of dress,—of patterns which are now no longer

cried up, unless it be in Milwaukie, as those splendid articles,

English, French, or American prints, ginghams, muslins, &c., gathered

from all quarters both of fashion and poverty, going to become paper of

one color or a few shades only, on which forsooth will be written tales

of real life, high and low, and founded on fact! This closed car smells

of salt fish, the strong New England and commercial scent, reminding me

of the Grand Banks and the fisheries. Who has not seen a salt fish,

thoroughly cured for this world, so that nothing can spoil it, and

putting the perseverance of the saints to the blush? with which you may

sweep or pave the streets, and split your kindlings, and the teamster

shelter himself and his lading against sun wind and rain behind it,—and

the trader, as a Concord trader once did, hang it up by his door for a

sign when he commences business, until at last his oldest customer

cannot tell surely whether it be animal, vegetable, or mineral, and yet

it shall be as pure as a snowflake, and if it be put into a pot and

boiled, will come out an excellent dun fish for a Saturday’s dinner.

Next Spanish hides, with the tails still preserving their twist and the

angle of elevation they had when the oxen that wore them were careering

over the pampas of the Spanish main,—a type of all obstinacy, and

evincing how almost hopeless and incurable are all constitutional

vices. I confess, that practically speaking, when I have learned a

man’s real disposition, I have no hopes of changing it for the better

or worse in this state of existence. As the Orientals say, “A cur’s

tail may be warmed, and pressed, and bound round with ligatures, and

after a twelve years’ labor bestowed upon it, still it will retain its

natural form.” The only effectual cure for such inveteracies as these

tails exhibit is to make glue of them, which I believe is what is

usually done with them, and then they will stay put and stick. Here is

a hogshead of molasses or of brandy directed to John Smith,

Cuttingsville, Vermont, some trader among the Green Mountains, who

imports for the farmers near his clearing, and now perchance stands

over his bulk-head and thinks of the last arrivals on the coast, how

they may affect the price for him, telling his customers this moment,

as he has told them twenty times before this morning, that he expects

some by the next train of prime quality. It is advertised in the

Cuttingsville Times.

While these things go up other things come down. Warned by the whizzing

sound, I look up from my book and see some tall pine, hewn on far

northern hills, which has winged its way over the Green Mountains and

the Connecticut, shot like an arrow through the township within ten

minutes, and scarce another eye beholds it; going

“to be the mast

Of some great ammiral.”

And hark! here comes the cattle-train bearing the cattle of a thousand

hills, sheepcots, stables, and cow-yards in the air, drovers with their

sticks, and shepherd boys in the midst of their flocks, all but the

mountain pastures, whirled along like leaves blown from the mountains

by the September gales. The air is filled with the bleating of calves

and sheep, and the hustling of oxen, as if a pastoral valley were going

by. When the old bell-wether at the head rattles his bell, the

mountains do indeed skip like rams and the little hills like lambs. A

car-load of drovers, too, in the midst, on a level with their droves

now, their vocation gone, but still clinging to their useless sticks as

their badge of office. But their dogs, where are they? It is a stampede

to them; they are quite thrown out; they have lost the scent. Methinks

I hear them barking behind the Peterboro’ Hills, or panting up the

western slope of the Green Mountains. They will not be in at the death.

Their vocation, too, is gone. Their fidelity and sagacity are below par

now. They will slink back to their kennels in disgrace, or perchance

run wild and strike a league with the wolf and the fox. So is your

pastoral life whirled past and away. But the bell rings, and I must get

off the track and let the cars go by;—

What’s the railroad to me?

I never go to see

Where it ends.

It fills a few hollows,

And makes banks for the swallows,

It sets the sand a-blowing,

And the blackberries a-growing,

but I cross it like a cart-path in the woods. I will not have my eyes

put out and my ears spoiled by its smoke and steam and hissing.

Now that the cars are gone by and all the restless world with them, and

the fishes in the pond no longer feel their rumbling, I am more alone

than ever. For the rest of the long afternoon, perhaps, my meditations

are interrupted only by the faint rattle of a carriage or team along

the distant highway.

Sometimes, on Sundays, I heard the bells, the Lincoln, Acton, Bedford,

or Concord bell, when the wind was favorable, a faint, sweet, and, as

it were, natural melody, worth importing into the wilderness. At a

sufficient distance over the woods this sound acquires a certain

vibratory hum, as if the pine needles in the horizon were the strings

of a harp which it swept. All sound heard at the greatest possible

distance produces one and the same effect, a vibration of the universal

lyre, just as the intervening atmosphere makes a distant ridge of earth

interesting to our eyes by the azure tint it imparts to it. There came

to me in this case a melody which the air had strained, and which had

conversed with every leaf and needle of the wood, that portion of the

sound which the elements had taken up and modulated and echoed from

vale to vale. The echo is, to some extent, an original sound, and

therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of

what was worth repeating in the bell, but partly the voice of the wood;

the same trivial words and notes sung by a wood-nymph.

At evening, the distant lowing of some cow in the horizon beyond the

woods sounded sweet and melodious, and at first I would mistake it for

the voices of certain minstrels by whom I was sometimes serenaded, who

might be straying over hill and dale; but soon I was not unpleasantly

disappointed when it was prolonged into the cheap and natural music of

the cow. I do not mean to be satirical, but to express my appreciation

of those youths’ singing, when I state that I perceived clearly that it

was akin to the music of the cow, and they were at length one

articulation of Nature.

Regularly at half past seven, in one part of the summer, after the

evening train had gone by, the whippoorwills chanted their vespers for

half an hour, sitting on a stump by my door, or upon the ridge pole of

the house. They would begin to sing almost with as much precision as a

clock, within five minutes of a particular time, referred to the

setting of the sun, every evening. I had a rare opportunity to become

acquainted with their habits. Sometimes I heard four or five at once in

different parts of the wood, by accident one a bar behind another, and

so near me that I distinguished not only the cluck after each note, but

often that singular buzzing sound like a fly in a spider’s web, only

proportionally louder. Sometimes one would circle round and round me in

the woods a few feet distant as if tethered by a string, when probably

I was near its eggs. They sang at intervals throughout the night, and

were again as musical as ever just before and about dawn.

When other birds are still the screech owls take up the strain, like

mourning women their ancient u-lu-lu. Their dismal scream is truly Ben

Jonsonian. Wise midnight hags! It is no honest and blunt tu-whit tu-who

of the poets, but, without jesting, a most solemn graveyard ditty, the

mutual consolations of suicide lovers remembering the pangs and the

delights of supernal love in the infernal groves. Yet I love to hear

their wailing, their doleful responses, trilled along the wood-side;

reminding me sometimes of music and singing birds; as if it were the

dark and tearful side of music, the regrets and sighs that would fain

be sung. They are the spirits, the low spirits and melancholy

forebodings, of fallen souls that once in human shape night-walked the

earth and did the deeds of darkness, now expiating their sins with

their wailing hymns or threnodies in the scenery of their

transgressions. They give me a new sense of the variety and capacity of

that nature which is our common dwelling. \_Oh-o-o-o-o that I never had

been bor-r-r-r-n!\_ sighs one on this side of the pond, and circles with

the restlessness of despair to some new perch on the gray oaks.

Then—\_that I never had been bor-r-r-r-n!\_ echoes another on the farther

side with tremulous sincerity, and—\_bor-r-r-r-n!\_ comes faintly from

far in the Lincoln woods.

I was also serenaded by a hooting owl. Near at hand you could fancy it

the most melancholy sound in Nature, as if she meant by this to

stereotype and make permanent in her choir the dying moans of a human

being,—some poor weak relic of mortality who has left hope behind, and

howls like an animal, yet with human sobs, on entering the dark valley,

made more awful by a certain gurgling melodiousness,—I find myself

beginning with the letters gl when I try to imitate it,—expressive of a

mind which has reached the gelatinous mildewy stage in the

mortification of all healthy and courageous thought. It reminded me of

ghouls and idiots and insane howlings. But now one answers from far

woods in a strain made really melodious by distance,—\_Hoo hoo hoo,

hoorer hoo\_; and indeed for the most part it suggested only pleasing

associations, whether heard by day or night, summer or winter.

I rejoice that there are owls. Let them do the idiotic and maniacal

hooting for men. It is a sound admirably suited to swamps and twilight

woods which no day illustrates, suggesting a vast and undeveloped

nature which men have not recognized. They represent the stark twilight

and unsatisfied thoughts which all have. All day the sun has shone on

the surface of some savage swamp, where the single spruce stands hung

with usnea lichens, and small hawks circulate above, and the chickadee

lisps amid the evergreens, and the partridge and rabbit skulk beneath;

but now a more dismal and fitting day dawns, and a different race of

creatures awakes to express the meaning of Nature there.

Late in the evening I heard the distant rumbling of wagons over

bridges,—a sound heard farther than almost any other at night,—the

baying of dogs, and sometimes again the lowing of some disconsolate cow

in a distant barn-yard. In the mean while all the shore rang with the

trump of bullfrogs, the sturdy spirits of ancient wine-bibbers and

wassailers, still unrepentant, trying to sing a catch in their Stygian

lake,—if the Walden nymphs will pardon the comparison, for though there

are almost no weeds, there are frogs there,—who would fain keep up the

hilarious rules of their old festal tables, though their voices have

waxed hoarse and solemnly grave, mocking at mirth, and the wine has

lost its flavor, and become only liquor to distend their paunches, and

sweet intoxication never comes to drown the memory of the past, but

mere saturation and waterloggedness and distention. The most

aldermanic, with his chin upon a heart-leaf, which serves for a napkin

to his drooling chaps, under this northern shore quaffs a deep draught

of the once scorned water, and passes round the cup with the

ejaculation \_tr-r-r-oonk, tr-r-r-oonk, tr-r-r-oonk!\_ and straightway

comes over the water from some distant cove the same password repeated,

where the next in seniority and girth has gulped down to his mark; and

when this observance has made the circuit of the shores, then

ejaculates the master of ceremonies, with satisfaction, \_tr-r-r-oonk!\_

and each in his turn repeats the same down to the least distended,

leakiest, and flabbiest paunched, that there be no mistake; and then

the bowl goes round again and again, until the sun disperses the

morning mist, and only the patriarch is not under the pond, but vainly

bellowing \_troonk\_ from time to time, and pausing for a reply.

I am not sure that I ever heard the sound of cock-crowing from my

clearing, and I thought that it might be worth the while to keep a

cockerel for his music merely, as a singing bird. The note of this once

wild Indian pheasant is certainly the most remarkable of any bird’s,

and if they could be naturalized without being domesticated, it would

soon become the most famous sound in our woods, surpassing the clangor

of the goose and the hooting of the owl; and then imagine the cackling

of the hens to fill the pauses when their lords’ clarions rested! No

wonder that man added this bird to his tame stock,—to say nothing of

the eggs and drumsticks. To walk in a winter morning in a wood where

these birds abounded, their native woods, and hear the wild cockerels

crow on the trees, clear and shrill for miles over the resounding

earth, drowning the feebler notes of other birds,—think of it! It would

put nations on the alert. Who would not be early to rise, and rise

earlier and earlier every successive day of his life, till he became

unspeakably healthy, wealthy, and wise? This foreign bird’s note is

celebrated by the poets of all countries along with the notes of their

native songsters. All climates agree with brave Chanticleer. He is more

indigenous even than the natives. His health is ever good, his lungs

are sound, his spirits never flag. Even the sailor on the Atlantic and

Pacific is awakened by his voice; but its shrill sound never roused me

from my slumbers. I kept neither dog, cat, cow, pig, nor hens, so that

you would have said there was a deficiency of domestic sounds; neither

the churn, nor the spinning wheel, nor even the singing of the kettle,

nor the hissing of the urn, nor children crying, to comfort one. An

old-fashioned man would have lost his senses or died of ennui before

this. Not even rats in the wall, for they were starved out, or rather

were never baited in,—only squirrels on the roof and under the floor, a

whippoorwill on the ridge pole, a blue-jay screaming beneath the

window, a hare or woodchuck under the house, a screech-owl or a cat-owl

behind it, a flock of wild geese or a laughing loon on the pond, and a

fox to bark in the night. Not even a lark or an oriole, those mild

plantation birds, ever visited my clearing. No cockerels to crow nor

hens to cackle in the yard. No yard! but unfenced Nature reaching up to

your very sills. A young forest growing up under your meadows, and wild

sumachs and blackberry vines breaking through into your cellar; sturdy

pitch pines rubbing and creaking against the shingles for want of room,

their roots reaching quite under the house. Instead of a scuttle or a

blind blown off in the gale,—a pine tree snapped off or torn up by the

roots behind your house for fuel. Instead of no path to the front-yard

gate in the Great Snow,—no gate,—no front-yard,—and no path to the

civilized world!

Solitude

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and

imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange

liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore

of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy

and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements

are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the

night, and the note of the whippoorwill is borne on the rippling wind

from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar

leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is

rippled but not ruffled. These small waves raised by the evening wind

are as remote from storm as the smooth reflecting surface. Though it is

now dark, the wind still blows and roars in the wood, the waves still

dash, and some creatures lull the rest with their notes. The repose is

never complete. The wildest animals do not repose, but seek their prey

now; the fox, and skunk, and rabbit, now roam the fields and woods

without fear. They are Nature’s watchmen,—links which connect the days

of animated life.

When I return to my house I find that visitors have been there and left

their cards, either a bunch of flowers, or a wreath of evergreen, or a

name in pencil on a yellow walnut leaf or a chip. They who come rarely

to the woods take some little piece of the forest into their hands to

play with by the way, which they leave, either intentionally or

accidentally. One has peeled a willow wand, woven it into a ring, and

dropped it on my table. I could always tell if visitors had called in

my absence, either by the bended twigs or grass, or the print of their

shoes, and generally of what sex or age or quality they were by some

slight trace left, as a flower dropped, or a bunch of grass plucked and

thrown away, even as far off as the railroad, half a mile distant, or

by the lingering odor of a cigar or pipe. Nay, I was frequently

notified of the passage of a traveller along the highway sixty rods off

by the scent of his pipe.

There is commonly sufficient space about us. Our horizon is never quite

at our elbows. The thick wood is not just at our door, nor the pond,

but somewhat is always clearing, familiar and worn by us, appropriated

and fenced in some way, and reclaimed from Nature. For what reason have

I this vast range and circuit, some square miles of unfrequented

forest, for my privacy, abandoned to me by men? My nearest neighbor is

a mile distant, and no house is visible from any place but the

hill-tops within half a mile of my own. I have my horizon bounded by

woods all to myself; a distant view of the railroad where it touches

the pond on the one hand, and of the fence which skirts the woodland

road on the other. But for the most part it is as solitary where I live

as on the prairies. It is as much Asia or Africa as New England. I

have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all

to myself. At night there was never a traveller passed my house, or

knocked at my door, more than if I were the first or last man; unless

it were in the spring, when at long intervals some came from the

village to fish for pouts,—they plainly fished much more in the Walden

Pond of their own natures, and baited their hooks with darkness,—but

they soon retreated, usually with light baskets, and left “the world to

darkness and to me,” and the black kernel of the night was never

profaned by any human neighborhood. I believe that men are generally

still a little afraid of the dark, though the witches are all hung, and

Christianity and candles have been introduced.

Yet I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most

innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object,

even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man. There can be no

very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has

his senses still. There was never yet such a storm but it was Æolian

music to a healthy and innocent ear. Nothing can rightly compel a

simple and brave man to a vulgar sadness. While I enjoy the friendship

of the seasons I trust that nothing can make life a burden to me. The

gentle rain which waters my beans and keeps me in the house to-day is

not drear and melancholy, but good for me too. Though it prevents my

hoeing them, it is of far more worth than my hoeing. If it should

continue so long as to cause the seeds to rot in the ground and destroy

the potatoes in the low lands, it would still be good for the grass on

the uplands, and, being good for the grass, it would be good for me.

Sometimes, when I compare myself with other men, it seems as if I were

more favored by the gods than they, beyond any deserts that I am

conscious of; as if I had a warrant and surety at their hands which my

fellows have not, and were especially guided and guarded. I do not

flatter myself, but if it be possible they flatter me. I have never

felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but

once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an

hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a

serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant. But I

was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood, and

seemed to foresee my recovery. In the midst of a gentle rain while

these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and

beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and

in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable

friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the

fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have

never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and

swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware

of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are

accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood

to me and humanest was not a person nor a villager, that I thought no

place could ever be strange to me again.—

“Mourning untimely consumes the sad;

Few are their days in the land of the living,

Beautiful daughter of Toscar.”

Some of my pleasantest hours were during the long rain storms in the

spring or fall, which confined me to the house for the afternoon as

well as the forenoon, soothed by their ceaseless roar and pelting; when

an early twilight ushered in a long evening in which many thoughts had

time to take root and unfold themselves. In those driving north-east

rains which tried the village houses so, when the maids stood ready

with mop and pail in front entries to keep the deluge out, I sat behind

my door in my little house, which was all entry, and thoroughly enjoyed

its protection. In one heavy thunder shower the lightning struck a

large pitch-pine across the pond, making a very conspicuous and

perfectly regular spiral groove from top to bottom, an inch or more

deep, and four or five inches wide, as you would groove a

walking-stick. I passed it again the other day, and was struck with awe

on looking up and beholding that mark, now more distinct than ever,

where a terrific and resistless bolt came down out of the harmless sky

eight years ago. Men frequently say to me, “I should think you would

feel lonesome down there, and want to be nearer to folks, rainy and

snowy days and nights especially.” I am tempted to reply to such,—This

whole earth which we inhabit is but a point in space. How far apart,

think you, dwell the two most distant inhabitants of yonder star, the

breadth of whose disk cannot be appreciated by our instruments? Why

should I feel lonely? is not our planet in the Milky Way? This which

you put seems to me not to be the most important question. What sort of

space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him

solitary? I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds

much nearer to one another. What do we want most to dwell near to? Not

to many men surely, the depot, the post-office, the bar-room, the

meeting-house, the school-house, the grocery, Beacon Hill, or the Five

Points, where men most congregate, but to the perennial source of our

life, whence in all our experience we have found that to issue, as the

willow stands near the water and sends out its roots in that direction.

This will vary with different natures, but this is the place where a

wise man will dig his cellar.... I one evening overtook one of my

townsmen, who has accumulated what is called “a handsome

property,”—though I never got a \_fair\_ view of it,—on the Walden road,

driving a pair of cattle to market, who inquired of me how I could

bring my mind to give up so many of the comforts of life. I answered

that I was very sure I liked it passably well; I was not joking. And so

I went home to my bed, and left him to pick his way through the

darkness and the mud to Brighton,—or Bright-town,—which place he would

reach some time in the morning.

Any prospect of awakening or coming to life to a dead man makes

indifferent all times and places. The place where that may occur is

always the same, and indescribably pleasant to all our senses. For the

most part we allow only outlying and transient circumstances to make

our occasions. They are, in fact, the cause of our distraction. Nearest

to all things is that power which fashions their being. \_Next\_ to us

the grandest laws are continually being executed. \_Next\_ to us is not

the workman whom we have hired, with whom we love so well to talk, but

the workman whose work we are.

“How vast and profound is the influence of the subtile powers of Heaven

and of Earth!”

“We seek to perceive them, and we do not see them; we seek to hear

them, and we do not hear them; identified with the substance of things,

they cannot be separated from them.”

“They cause that in all the universe men purify and sanctify their

hearts, and clothe themselves in their holiday garments to offer

sacrifices and oblations to their ancestors. It is an ocean of subtile

intelligences. They are every where, above us, on our left, on our

right; they environ us on all sides.”

We are the subjects of an experiment which is not a little interesting

to me. Can we not do without the society of our gossips a little while

under these circumstances,—have our own thoughts to cheer us? Confucius

says truly, “Virtue does not remain as an abandoned orphan; it must of

necessity have neighbors.”

With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a

conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their

consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent. We

are not wholly involved in Nature. I may be either the drift-wood in

the stream, or Indra in the sky looking down on it. I \_may\_ be affected

by a theatrical exhibition; on the other hand, I \_may not\_ be affected

by an actual event which appears to concern me much more. I only know

myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and

affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can

stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my

experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of

me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no

experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is

you. When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the

spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the

imagination only, so far as he was concerned. This doubleness may

easily make us poor neighbors and friends sometimes.

I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in

company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love

to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as

solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among

men than when we stay in our chambers. A man thinking or working is

always alone, let him be where he will. Solitude is not measured by the

miles of space that intervene between a man and his fellows. The really

diligent student in one of the crowded hives of Cambridge College is as

solitary as a dervish in the desert. The farmer can work alone in the

field or the woods all day, hoeing or chopping, and not feel lonesome,

because he is employed; but when he comes home at night he cannot sit

down in a room alone, at the mercy of his thoughts, but must be where

he can “see the folks,” and recreate, and as he thinks remunerate

himself for his day’s solitude; and hence he wonders how the student

can sit alone in the house all night and most of the day without ennui

and “the blues;” but he does not realize that the student, though in

the house, is still at work in \_his\_ field, and chopping in \_his\_

woods, as the farmer in his, and in turn seeks the same recreation and

society that the latter does, though it may be a more condensed form of

it.

Society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not

having had time to acquire any new value for each other. We meet at

meals three times a day, and give each other a new taste of that old

musty cheese that we are. We have had to agree on a certain set of

rules, called etiquette and politeness, to make this frequent meeting

tolerable and that we need not come to open war. We meet at the

post-office, and at the sociable, and about the fireside every night;

we live thick and are in each other’s way, and stumble over one

another, and I think that we thus lose some respect for one another.

Certainly less frequency would suffice for all important and hearty

communications. Consider the girls in a factory,—never alone, hardly in

their dreams. It would be better if there were but one inhabitant to a

square mile, as where I live. The value of a man is not in his skin,

that we should touch him.

I have heard of a man lost in the woods and dying of famine and

exhaustion at the foot of a tree, whose loneliness was relieved by the

grotesque visions with which, owing to bodily weakness, his diseased

imagination surrounded him, and which he believed to be real. So also,

owing to bodily and mental health and strength, we may be continually

cheered by a like but more normal and natural society, and come to know

that we are never alone.

I have a great deal of company in my house; especially in the morning,

when nobody calls. Let me suggest a few comparisons, that some one may

convey an idea of my situation. I am no more lonely than the loon in

the pond that laughs so loud, or than Walden Pond itself. What company

has that lonely lake, I pray? And yet it has not the blue devils, but

the blue angels in it, in the azure tint of its waters. The sun is

alone, except in thick weather, when there sometimes appear to be two,

but one is a mock sun. God is alone,—but the devil, he is far from

being alone; he sees a great deal of company; he is legion. I am no

more lonely than a single mullein or dandelion in a pasture, or a bean

leaf, or sorrel, or a horse-fly, or a bumble-bee. I am no more lonely

than the Mill Brook, or a weathercock, or the north star, or the south

wind, or an April shower, or a January thaw, or the first spider in a

new house.

I have occasional visits in the long winter evenings, when the snow

falls fast and the wind howls in the wood, from an old settler and

original proprietor, who is reported to have dug Walden Pond, and

stoned it, and fringed it with pine woods; who tells me stories of old

time and of new eternity; and between us we manage to pass a cheerful

evening with social mirth and pleasant views of things, even without

apples or cider,—a most wise and humorous friend, whom I love much, who

keeps himself more secret than ever did Goffe or Whalley; and though he

is thought to be dead, none can show where he is buried. An elderly

dame, too, dwells in my neighborhood, invisible to most persons, in

whose odorous herb garden I love to stroll sometimes, gathering simples

and listening to her fables; for she has a genius of unequalled

fertility, and her memory runs back farther than mythology, and she can

tell me the original of every fable, and on what fact every one is

founded, for the incidents occurred when she was young. A ruddy and

lusty old dame, who delights in all weathers and seasons, and is likely

to outlive all her children yet.

The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature,—of sun and wind

and rain, of summer and winter,—such health, such cheer, they afford

forever! and such sympathy have they ever with our race, that all

Nature would be affected, and the sun’s brightness fade, and the winds

would sigh humanely, and the clouds rain tears, and the woods shed

their leaves and put on mourning in midsummer, if any man should ever

for a just cause grieve. Shall I not have intelligence with the earth?

Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?

What is the pill which will keep us well, serene, contented? Not my or

thy great-grandfather’s, but our great-grandmother Nature’s universal,

vegetable, botanic medicines, by which she has kept herself young

always, outlived so many old Parrs in her day, and fed her health with

their decaying fatness. For my panacea, instead of one of those quack

vials of a mixture dipped from Acheron and the Dead Sea, which come out

of those long shallow black-schooner looking wagons which we sometimes

see made to carry bottles, let me have a draught of undiluted morning

air. Morning air! If men will not drink of this at the fountain-head of

the day, why, then, we must even bottle up some and sell it in the

shops, for the benefit of those who have lost their subscription ticket

to morning time in this world. But remember, it will not keep quite

till noon-day even in the coolest cellar, but drive out the stopples

long ere that and follow westward the steps of Aurora. I am no

worshipper of Hygeia, who was the daughter of that old herb-doctor

Æsculapius, and who is represented on monuments holding a serpent in

one hand, and in the other a cup out of which the serpent sometimes

drinks; but rather of Hebe, cupbearer to Jupiter, who was the daughter

of Juno and wild lettuce, and who had the power of restoring gods and

men to the vigor of youth. She was probably the only thoroughly

sound-conditioned, healthy, and robust young lady that ever walked the

globe, and wherever she came it was spring.

Visitors

I think that I love society as much as most, and am ready enough to

fasten myself like a bloodsucker for the time to any full-blooded man

that comes in my way. I am naturally no hermit, but might possibly sit

out the sturdiest frequenter of the bar-room, if my business called me

thither.

I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship,

three for society. When visitors came in larger and unexpected numbers

there was but the third chair for them all, but they generally

economized the room by standing up. It is surprising how many great men

and women a small house will contain. I have had twenty-five or thirty

souls, with their bodies, at once under my roof, and yet we often

parted without being aware that we had come very near to one another.

Many of our houses, both public and private, with their almost

innumerable apartments, their huge halls and their cellars for the

storage of wines and other munitions of peace, appear to me

extravagantly large for their inhabitants. They are so vast and

magnificent that the latter seem to be only vermin which infest them. I

am surprised when the herald blows his summons before some Tremont or

Astor or Middlesex House, to see come creeping out over the piazza for

all inhabitants a ridiculous mouse, which soon again slinks into some

hole in the pavement.

One inconvenience I sometimes experienced in so small a house, the

difficulty of getting to a sufficient distance from my guest when we

began to utter the big thoughts in big words. You want room for your

thoughts to get into sailing trim and run a course or two before they

make their port. The bullet of your thought must have overcome its

lateral and ricochet motion and fallen into its last and steady course

before it reaches the ear of the hearer, else it may plough out again

through the side of his head. Also, our sentences wanted room to unfold

and form their columns in the interval. Individuals, like nations, must

have suitable broad and natural boundaries, even a considerable neutral

ground, between them. I have found it a singular luxury to talk across

the pond to a companion on the opposite side. In my house we were so

near that we could not begin to hear,—we could not speak low enough to

be heard; as when you throw two stones into calm water so near that

they break each other’s undulations. If we are merely loquacious and

loud talkers, then we can afford to stand very near together, cheek by

jowl, and feel each other’s breath; but if we speak reservedly and

thoughtfully, we want to be farther apart, that all animal heat and

moisture may have a chance to evaporate. If we would enjoy the most

intimate society with that in each of us which is without, or above,

being spoken to, we must not only be silent, but commonly so far apart

bodily that we cannot possibly hear each other’s voice in any case.

Referred to this standard, speech is for the convenience of those who

are hard of hearing; but there are many fine things which we cannot say

if we have to shout. As the conversation began to assume a loftier and

grander tone, we gradually shoved our chairs farther apart till they

touched the wall in opposite corners, and then commonly there was not

room enough.

My “best” room, however, my withdrawing room, always ready for company,

on whose carpet the sun rarely fell, was the pine wood behind my house.

Thither in summer days, when distinguished guests came, I took them,

and a priceless domestic swept the floor and dusted the furniture and

kept the things in order.

If one guest came he sometimes partook of my frugal meal, and it was no

interruption to conversation to be stirring a hasty-pudding, or

watching the rising and maturing of a loaf of bread in the ashes, in

the mean while. But if twenty came and sat in my house there was

nothing said about dinner, though there might be bread enough for two,

more than if eating were a forsaken habit; but we naturally practised

abstinence; and this was never felt to be an offence against

hospitality, but the most proper and considerate course. The waste and

decay of physical life, which so often needs repair, seemed

miraculously retarded in such a case, and the vital vigor stood its

ground. I could entertain thus a thousand as well as twenty; and if any

ever went away disappointed or hungry from my house when they found me

at home, they may depend upon it that I sympathized with them at least.

So easy is it, though many housekeepers doubt it, to establish new and

better customs in the place of the old. You need not rest your

reputation on the dinners you give. For my own part, I was never so

effectually deterred from frequenting a man’s house, by any kind of

Cerberus whatever, as by the parade one made about dining me, which I

took to be a very polite and roundabout hint never to trouble him so

again. I think I shall never revisit those scenes. I should be proud to

have for the motto of my cabin those lines of Spenser which one of my

visitors inscribed on a yellow walnut leaf for a card:—

“Arrivéd there, the little house they fill,

Ne looke for entertainment where none was;

Rest is their feast, and all things at their will:

The noblest mind the best contentment has.”

When Winslow, afterward governor of the Plymouth Colony, went with a

companion on a visit of ceremony to Massasoit on foot through the

woods, and arrived tired and hungry at his lodge, they were well

received by the king, but nothing was said about eating that day. When

the night arrived, to quote their own words,—“He laid us on the bed

with himself and his wife, they at the one end and we at the other, it

being only planks laid a foot from the ground, and a thin mat upon

them. Two more of his chief men, for want of room, pressed by and upon

us; so that we were worse weary of our lodging than of our journey.” At

one o’clock the next day Massasoit “brought two fishes that he had

shot,” about thrice as big as a bream; “these being boiled, there were

at least forty looked for a share in them. The most ate of them. This

meal only we had in two nights and a day; and had not one of us bought

a partridge, we had taken our journey fasting.” Fearing that they would

be light-headed for want of food and also sleep, owing to “the savages’

barbarous singing, (for they used to sing themselves asleep,)” and that

they might get home while they had strength to travel, they departed.

As for lodging, it is true they were but poorly entertained, though

what they found an inconvenience was no doubt intended for an honor;

but as far as eating was concerned, I do not see how the Indians could

have done better. They had nothing to eat themselves, and they were

wiser than to think that apologies could supply the place of food to

their guests; so they drew their belts tighter and said nothing about

it. Another time when Winslow visited them, it being a season of plenty

with them, there was no deficiency in this respect.

As for men, they will hardly fail one any where. I had more visitors

while I lived in the woods than at any other period in my life; I mean

that I had some. I met several there under more favorable circumstances

than I could any where else. But fewer came to see me on trivial

business. In this respect, my company was winnowed by my mere distance

from town. I had withdrawn so far within the great ocean of solitude,

into which the rivers of society empty, that for the most part, so far

as my needs were concerned, only the finest sediment was deposited

around me. Beside, there were wafted to me evidences of unexplored and

uncultivated continents on the other side.

Who should come to my lodge this morning but a true Homeric or

Paphlagonian man,—he had so suitable and poetic a name that I am sorry

I cannot print it here,—a Canadian, a woodchopper and post-maker, who

can hole fifty posts in a day, who made his last supper on a woodchuck

which his dog caught. He, too, has heard of Homer, and, “if it were not

for books,” would “not know what to do rainy days,” though perhaps he

has not read one wholly through for many rainy seasons. Some priest who

could pronounce the Greek itself taught him to read his verse in the

testament in his native parish far away; and now I must translate to

him, while he holds the book, Achilles’ reproof to Patroclus for his

sad countenance.—“Why are you in tears, Patroclus, like a young girl?”—

“Or have you alone heard some news from Phthia?

They say that Menœtius lives yet, son of Actor,

And Peleus lives, son of Æacus, among the Myrmidons,

Either of whom having died, we should greatly grieve.”

He says, “That’s good.” He has a great bundle of white-oak bark under

his arm for a sick man, gathered this Sunday morning. “I suppose

there’s no harm in going after such a thing to-day,” says he. To him

Homer was a great writer, though what his writing was about he did not

know. A more simple and natural man it would be hard to find. Vice and

disease, which cast such a sombre moral hue over the world, seemed to

have hardly any existence for him. He was about twenty-eight years old,

and had left Canada and his father’s house a dozen years before to work

in the States, and earn money to buy a farm with at last, perhaps in

his native country. He was cast in the coarsest mould; a stout but

sluggish body, yet gracefully carried, with a thick sunburnt neck, dark

bushy hair, and dull sleepy blue eyes, which were occasionally lit up

with expression. He wore a flat gray cloth cap, a dingy wool-colored

greatcoat, and cowhide boots. He was a great consumer of meat, usually

carrying his dinner to his work a couple of miles past my house,—for he

chopped all summer,—in a tin pail; cold meats, often cold woodchucks,

and coffee in a stone bottle which dangled by a string from his belt;

and sometimes he offered me a drink. He came along early, crossing my

bean-field, though without anxiety or haste to get to his work, such as

Yankees exhibit. He wasn’t a-going to hurt himself. He didn’t care if

he only earned his board. Frequently he would leave his dinner in the

bushes, when his dog had caught a woodchuck by the way, and go back a

mile and a half to dress it and leave it in the cellar of the house

where he boarded, after deliberating first for half an hour whether he

could not sink it in the pond safely till nightfall,—loving to dwell

long upon these themes. He would say, as he went by in the morning,

“How thick the pigeons are! If working every day were not my trade, I

could get all the meat I should want by hunting,—pigeons, woodchucks,

rabbits, partridges,—by gosh! I could get all I should want for a week

in one day.”

He was a skilful chopper, and indulged in some flourishes and ornaments

in his art. He cut his trees level and close to the ground, that the

sprouts which came up afterward might be more vigorous and a sled might

slide over the stumps; and instead of leaving a whole tree to support

his corded wood, he would pare it away to a slender stake or splinter

which you could break off with your hand at last.

He interested me because he was so quiet and solitary and so happy

withal; a well of good humor and contentment which overflowed at his

eyes. His mirth was without alloy. Sometimes I saw him at his work in

the woods, felling trees, and he would greet me with a laugh of

inexpressible satisfaction, and a salutation in Canadian French, though

he spoke English as well. When I approached him he would suspend his

work, and with half-suppressed mirth lie along the trunk of a pine

which he had felled, and, peeling off the inner bark, roll it up into a

ball and chew it while he laughed and talked. Such an exuberance of

animal spirits had he that he sometimes tumbled down and rolled on the

ground with laughter at any thing which made him think and tickled him.

Looking round upon the trees he would exclaim,—“By George! I can enjoy

myself well enough here chopping; I want no better sport.” Sometimes,

when at leisure, he amused himself all day in the woods with a pocket

pistol, firing salutes to himself at regular intervals as he walked. In

the winter he had a fire by which at noon he warmed his coffee in a

kettle; and as he sat on a log to eat his dinner the chickadees would

sometimes come round and alight on his arm and peck at the potato in

his fingers; and he said that he “liked to have the little \_fellers\_

about him.”

In him the animal man chiefly was developed. In physical endurance and

contentment he was cousin to the pine and the rock. I asked him once if

he was not sometimes tired at night, after working all day; and he

answered, with a sincere and serious look, “Gorrappit, I never was

tired in my life.” But the intellectual and what is called spiritual

man in him were slumbering as in an infant. He had been instructed only

in that innocent and ineffectual way in which the Catholic priests

teach the aborigines, by which the pupil is never educated to the

degree of consciousness, but only to the degree of trust and reverence,

and a child is not made a man, but kept a child. When Nature made him,

she gave him a strong body and contentment for his portion, and propped

him on every side with reverence and reliance, that he might live out

his threescore years and ten a child. He was so genuine and

unsophisticated that no introduction would serve to introduce him, more

than if you introduced a woodchuck to your neighbor. He had got to find

him out as you did. He would not play any part. Men paid him wages for

work, and so helped to feed and clothe him; but he never exchanged

opinions with them. He was so simply and naturally humble—if he can be

called humble who never aspires—that humility was no distinct quality

in him, nor could he conceive of it. Wiser men were demigods to him. If

you told him that such a one was coming, he did as if he thought that

any thing so grand would expect nothing of himself, but take all the

responsibility on itself, and let him be forgotten still. He never

heard the sound of praise. He particularly reverenced the writer and

the preacher. Their performances were miracles. When I told him that I

wrote considerably, he thought for a long time that it was merely the

handwriting which I meant, for he could write a remarkably good hand

himself. I sometimes found the name of his native parish handsomely

written in the snow by the highway, with the proper French accent, and

knew that he had passed. I asked him if he ever wished to write his

thoughts. He said that he had read and written letters for those who

could not, but he never tried to write thoughts,—no, he could not, he

could not tell what to put first, it would kill him, and then there was

spelling to be attended to at the same time!

I heard that a distinguished wise man and reformer asked him if he did

not want the world to be changed; but he answered with a chuckle of

surprise in his Canadian accent, not knowing that the question had ever

been entertained before, “No, I like it well enough.” It would have

suggested many things to a philosopher to have dealings with him. To a

stranger he appeared to know nothing of things in general; yet I

sometimes saw in him a man whom I had not seen before, and I did not

know whether he was as wise as Shakespeare or as simply ignorant as a

child, whether to suspect him of a fine poetic consciousness or of

stupidity. A townsman told me that when he met him sauntering through

the village in his small close-fitting cap, and whistling to himself,

he reminded him of a prince in disguise.

His only books were an almanac and an arithmetic, in which last he was

considerably expert. The former was a sort of cyclopædia to him, which

he supposed to contain an abstract of human knowledge, as indeed it

does to a considerable extent. I loved to sound him on the various

reforms of the day, and he never failed to look at them in the most

simple and practical light. He had never heard of such things before.

Could he do without factories? I asked. He had worn the home-made

Vermont gray, he said, and that was good. Could he dispense with tea

and coffee? Did this country afford any beverage beside water? He had

soaked hemlock leaves in water and drank it, and thought that was

better than water in warm weather. When I asked him if he could do

without money, he showed the convenience of money in such a way as to

suggest and coincide with the most philosophical accounts of the origin

of this institution, and the very derivation of the word \_pecunia\_. If

an ox were his property, and he wished to get needles and thread at the

store, he thought it would be inconvenient and impossible soon to go on

mortgaging some portion of the creature each time to that amount. He

could defend many institutions better than any philosopher, because, in

describing them as they concerned him, he gave the true reason for

their prevalence, and speculation had not suggested to him any other.

At another time, hearing Plato’s definition of a man,—a biped without

feathers,—and that one exhibited a cock plucked and called it Plato’s

man, he thought it an important difference that the \_knees\_ bent the

wrong way. He would sometimes exclaim, “How I love to talk! By George,

I could talk all day!” I asked him once, when I had not seen him for

many months, if he had got a new idea this summer. “Good Lord,” said

he, “a man that has to work as I do, if he does not forget the ideas he

has had, he will do well. May be the man you hoe with is inclined to

race; then, by gorry, your mind must be there; you think of weeds.” He

would sometimes ask me first on such occasions, if I had made any

improvement. One winter day I asked him if he was always satisfied with

himself, wishing to suggest a substitute within him for the priest

without, and some higher motive for living. “Satisfied!” said he; “some

men are satisfied with one thing, and some with another. One man,

perhaps, if he has got enough, will be satisfied to sit all day with

his back to the fire and his belly to the table, by George!” Yet I

never, by any manœuvring, could get him to take the spiritual view of

things; the highest that he appeared to conceive of was a simple

expediency, such as you might expect an animal to appreciate; and this,

practically, is true of most men. If I suggested any improvement in his

mode of life, he merely answered, without expressing any regret, that

it was too late. Yet he thoroughly believed in honesty and the like

virtues.

There was a certain positive originality, however slight, to be

detected in him, and I occasionally observed that he was thinking for

himself and expressing his own opinion, a phenomenon so rare that I

would any day walk ten miles to observe it, and it amounted to the

re-origination of many of the institutions of society. Though he

hesitated, and perhaps failed to express himself distinctly, he always

had a presentable thought behind. Yet his thinking was so primitive and

immersed in his animal life, that, though more promising than a merely

learned man’s, it rarely ripened to any thing which can be reported. He

suggested that there might be men of genius in the lowest grades of

life, however permanently humble and illiterate, who take their own

view always, or do not pretend to see at all; who are as bottomless

even as Walden Pond was thought to be, though they may be dark and

muddy.

Many a traveller came out of his way to see me and the inside of my

house, and, as an excuse for calling, asked for a glass of water. I

told them that I drank at the pond, and pointed thither, offering to

lend them a dipper. Far off as I lived, I was not exempted from the

annual visitation which occurs, methinks, about the first of April,

when every body is on the move; and I had my share of good luck, though

there were some curious specimens among my visitors. Half-witted men

from the almshouse and elsewhere came to see me; but I endeavored to

make them exercise all the wit they had, and make their confessions to

me; in such cases making wit the theme of our conversation; and so was

compensated. Indeed, I found some of them to be wiser than the so

called \_overseers\_ of the poor and selectmen of the town, and thought

it was time that the tables were turned. With respect to wit, I learned

that there was not much difference between the half and the whole. One

day, in particular, an inoffensive, simple-minded pauper, whom with

others I had often seen used as fencing stuff, standing or sitting on a

bushel in the fields to keep cattle and himself from straying, visited

me, and expressed a wish to live as I did. He told me, with the utmost

simplicity and truth, quite superior, or rather \_inferior\_, to any

thing that is called humility, that he was “deficient in intellect.”

These were his words. The Lord had made him so, yet he supposed the

Lord cared as much for him as for another. “I have always been so,”

said he, “from my childhood; I never had much mind; I was not like

other children; I am weak in the head. It was the Lord’s will, I

suppose.” And there he was to prove the truth of his words. He was a

metaphysical puzzle to me. I have rarely met a fellow-man on such

promising ground,—it was so simple and sincere and so true all that he

said. And, true enough, in proportion as he appeared to humble himself

was he exalted. I did not know at first but it was the result of a wise

policy. It seemed that from such a basis of truth and frankness as the

poor weak-headed pauper had laid, our intercourse might go forward to

something better than the intercourse of sages.

I had some guests from those not reckoned commonly among the town’s

poor, but who should be; who are among the world’s poor, at any rate;

guests who appeal, not to your hospitality, but to your

\_hospitalality\_; who earnestly wish to be helped, and preface their

appeal with the information that they are resolved, for one thing,

never to help themselves. I require of a visitor that he be not

actually starving, though he may have the very best appetite in the

world, however he got it. Objects of charity are not guests. Men who

did not know when their visit had terminated, though I went about my

business again, answering them from greater and greater remoteness. Men

of almost every degree of wit called on me in the migrating season.

Some who had more wits than they knew what to do with; runaway slaves

with plantation manners, who listened from time to time, like the fox

in the fable, as if they heard the hounds a-baying on their track, and

looked at me beseechingly, as much as to say,—

“O Christian, will you send me back?”

One real runaway slave, among the rest, whom I helped to forward toward

the northstar. Men of one idea, like a hen with one chicken, and that a

duckling; men of a thousand ideas, and unkempt heads, like those hens

which are made to take charge of a hundred chickens, all in pursuit of

one bug, a score of them lost in every morning’s dew,—and become

frizzled and mangy in consequence; men of ideas instead of legs, a sort

of intellectual centipede that made you crawl all over. One man

proposed a book in which visitors should write their names, as at the

White Mountains; but, alas! I have too good a memory to make that

necessary.

I could not but notice some of the peculiarities of my visitors. Girls

and boys and young women generally seemed glad to be in the woods. They

looked in the pond and at the flowers, and improved their time. Men of

business, even farmers, thought only of solitude and employment, and of

the great distance at which I dwelt from something or other; and though

they said that they loved a ramble in the woods occasionally, it was

obvious that they did not. Restless committed men, whose time was all

taken up in getting a living or keeping it; ministers who spoke of God

as if they enjoyed a monopoly of the subject, who could not bear all

kinds of opinions; doctors, lawyers, uneasy housekeepers who pried into

my cupboard and bed when I was out,—how came Mrs. —— to know that my

sheets were not as clean as hers?—young men who had ceased to be young,

and had concluded that it was safest to follow the beaten track of the

professions,—all these generally said that it was not possible to do so

much good in my position. Ay! there was the rub. The old and infirm and

the timid, of whatever age or sex, thought most of sickness, and sudden

accident and death; to them life seemed full of danger,—what danger is

there if you don’t think of any?—and they thought that a prudent man

would carefully select the safest position, where Dr. B. might be on

hand at a moment’s warning. To them the village was literally a

\_com-munity\_, a league for mutual defence, and you would suppose that

they would not go a-huckleberrying without a medicine chest. The amount

of it is, if a man is alive, there is always \_danger\_ that he may die,

though the danger must be allowed to be less in proportion as he is

dead-and-alive to begin with. A man sits as many risks as he runs.

Finally, there were the self-styled reformers, the greatest bores of

all, who thought that I was forever singing,—

This is the house that I built;

This is the man that lives in the house that I built;

but they did not know that the third line was,—

These are the folks that worry the man

That lives in the house that I built.

I did not fear the hen-harriers, for I kept no chickens; but I feared

the men-harriers rather.

I had more cheering visitors than the last. Children come a-berrying,

railroad men taking a Sunday morning walk in clean shirts, fishermen

and hunters, poets and philosophers; in short, all honest pilgrims, who

came out to the woods for freedom’s sake, and really left the village

behind, I was ready to greet with,—“Welcome, Englishmen! welcome,

Englishmen!” for I had had communication with that race.

The Bean-Field

Meanwhile my beans, the length of whose rows, added together, was seven

miles already planted, were impatient to be hoed, for the earliest had

grown considerably before the latest were in the ground; indeed they

were not easily to be put off. What was the meaning of this so steady

and self-respecting, this small Herculean labor, I knew not. I came to

love my rows, my beans, though so many more than I wanted. They

attached me to the earth, and so I got strength like Antæus. But why

should I raise them? Only Heaven knows. This was my curious labor all

summer,—to make this portion of the earth’s surface, which had yielded

only cinquefoil, blackberries, johnswort, and the like, before, sweet

wild fruits and pleasant flowers, produce instead this pulse. What

shall I learn of beans or beans of me? I cherish them, I hoe them,

early and late I have an eye to them; and this is my day’s work. It is

a fine broad leaf to look on. My auxiliaries are the dews and rains

which water this dry soil, and what fertility is in the soil itself,

which for the most part is lean and effete. My enemies are worms, cool

days, and most of all woodchucks. The last have nibbled for me a

quarter of an acre clean. But what right had I to oust johnswort and

the rest, and break up their ancient herb garden? Soon, however, the

remaining beans will be too tough for them, and go forward to meet new

foes.

When I was four years old, as I well remember, I was brought from

Boston to this my native town, through these very woods and this field,

to the pond. It is one of the oldest scenes stamped on my memory. And

now to-night my flute has waked the echoes over that very water. The

pines still stand here older than I; or, if some have fallen, I have

cooked my supper with their stumps, and a new growth is rising all

around, preparing another aspect for new infant eyes. Almost the same

johnswort springs from the same perennial root in this pasture, and

even I have at length helped to clothe that fabulous landscape of my

infant dreams, and one of the results of my presence and influence is

seen in these bean leaves, corn blades, and potato vines.

I planted about two acres and a half of upland; and as it was only

about fifteen years since the land was cleared, and I myself had got

out two or three cords of stumps, I did not give it any manure; but in

the course of the summer it appeared by the arrowheads which I turned

up in hoeing, that an extinct nation had anciently dwelt here and

planted corn and beans ere white men came to clear the land, and so, to

some extent, had exhausted the soil for this very crop.

Before yet any woodchuck or squirrel had run across the road, or the

sun had got above the shrub oaks, while all the dew was on, though the

farmers warned me against it,—I would advise you to do all your work if

possible while the dew is on,—I began to level the ranks of haughty

weeds in my bean-field and throw dust upon their heads. Early in the

morning I worked barefooted, dabbling like a plastic artist in the dewy

and crumbling sand, but later in the day the sun blistered my feet.

There the sun lighted me to hoe beans, pacing slowly backward and

forward over that yellow gravelly upland, between the long green rows,

fifteen rods, the one end terminating in a shrub oak copse where I

could rest in the shade, the other in a blackberry field where the

green berries deepened their tints by the time I had made another bout.

Removing the weeds, putting fresh soil about the bean stems, and

encouraging this weed which I had sown, making the yellow soil express

its summer thought in bean leaves and blossoms rather than in wormwood

and piper and millet grass, making the earth say beans instead of

grass,—this was my daily work. As I had little aid from horses or

cattle, or hired men or boys, or improved implements of husbandry, I

was much slower, and became much more intimate with my beans than

usual. But labor of the hands, even when pursued to the verge of

drudgery, is perhaps never the worst form of idleness. It has a

constant and imperishable moral, and to the scholar it yields a classic

result. A very \_agricola laboriosus\_ was I to travellers bound westward

through Lincoln and Wayland to nobody knows where; they sitting at

their ease in gigs, with elbows on knees, and reins loosely hanging in

festoons; I the home-staying, laborious native of the soil. But soon my

homestead was out of their sight and thought. It was the only open and

cultivated field for a great distance on either side of the road; so

they made the most of it; and sometimes the man in the field heard more

of travellers’ gossip and comment than was meant for his ear: “Beans so

late! peas so late!”—for I continued to plant when others had begun to

hoe,—the ministerial husbandman had not suspected it. “Corn, my boy,

for fodder; corn for fodder.” “Does he \_live\_ there?” asks the black

bonnet of the gray coat; and the hard-featured farmer reins up his

grateful dobbin to inquire what you are doing where he sees no manure

in the furrow, and recommends a little chip dirt, or any little waste

stuff, or it may be ashes or plaster. But here were two acres and a

half of furrows, and only a hoe for cart and two hands to draw

it,—there being an aversion to other carts and horses,—and chip dirt

far away. Fellow-travellers as they rattled by compared it aloud with

the fields which they had passed, so that I came to know how I stood in

the agricultural world. This was one field not in Mr. Coleman’s report.

And, by the way, who estimates the value of the crop which nature

yields in the still wilder fields unimproved by man? The crop of

\_English\_ hay is carefully weighed, the moisture calculated, the

silicates and the potash; but in all dells and pond holes in the woods

and pastures and swamps grows a rich and various crop only unreaped by

man. Mine was, as it were, the connecting link between wild and

cultivated fields; as some states are civilized, and others

half-civilized, and others savage or barbarous, so my field was, though

not in a bad sense, a half-cultivated field. They were beans cheerfully

returning to their wild and primitive state that I cultivated, and my

hoe played the \_Ranz des Vaches\_ for them.

Near at hand, upon the topmost spray of a birch, sings the

brown-thrasher—or red mavis, as some love to call him—all the morning,

glad of your society, that would find out another farmer’s field if

yours were not here. While you are planting the seed, he cries,—“Drop

it, drop it,—cover it up, cover it up,—pull it up, pull it up, pull it

up.” But this was not corn, and so it was safe from such enemies as he.

You may wonder what his rigmarole, his amateur Paganini performances on

one string or on twenty, have to do with your planting, and yet prefer

it to leached ashes or plaster. It was a cheap sort of top dressing in

which I had entire faith.

As I drew a still fresher soil about the rows with my hoe, I disturbed

the ashes of unchronicled nations who in primeval years lived under

these heavens, and their small implements of war and hunting were

brought to the light of this modern day. They lay mingled with other

natural stones, some of which bore the marks of having been burned by

Indian fires, and some by the sun, and also bits of pottery and glass

brought hither by the recent cultivators of the soil. When my hoe

tinkled against the stones, that music echoed to the woods and the sky,

and was an accompaniment to my labor which yielded an instant and

immeasurable crop. It was no longer beans that I hoed, nor I that hoed

beans; and I remembered with as much pity as pride, if I remembered at

all, my acquaintances who had gone to the city to attend the oratorios.

The night-hawk circled overhead in the sunny afternoons—for I sometimes

made a day of it—like a mote in the eye, or in heaven’s eye, falling

from time to time with a swoop and a sound as if the heavens were rent,

torn at last to very rags and tatters, and yet a seamless cope

remained; small imps that fill the air and lay their eggs on the ground

on bare sand or rocks on the tops of hills, where few have found them;

graceful and slender like ripples caught up from the pond, as leaves

are raised by the wind to float in the heavens; such kindredship is in

Nature. The hawk is aerial brother of the wave which he sails over and

surveys, those his perfect air-inflated wings answering to the

elemental unfledged pinions of the sea. Or sometimes I watched a pair

of hen-hawks circling high in the sky, alternately soaring and

descending, approaching, and leaving one another, as if they were the

embodiment of my own thoughts. Or I was attracted by the passage of

wild pigeons from this wood to that, with a slight quivering winnowing

sound and carrier haste; or from under a rotten stump my hoe turned up

a sluggish portentous and outlandish spotted salamander, a trace of

Egypt and the Nile, yet our contemporary. When I paused to lean on my

hoe, these sounds and sights I heard and saw anywhere in the row, a

part of the inexhaustible entertainment which the country offers.

On gala days the town fires its great guns, which echo like popguns to

these woods, and some waifs of martial music occasionally penetrate

thus far. To me, away there in my bean-field at the other end of the

town, the big guns sounded as if a puffball had burst; and when there

was a military turnout of which I was ignorant, I have sometimes had a

vague sense all the day of some sort of itching and disease in the

horizon, as if some eruption would break out there soon, either

scarlatina or canker-rash, until at length some more favorable puff of

wind, making haste over the fields and up the Wayland road, brought me

information of the “trainers.” It seemed by the distant hum as if

somebody’s bees had swarmed, and that the neighbors, according to

Virgil’s advice, by a faint \_tintinnabulum\_ upon the most sonorous of

their domestic utensils, were endeavoring to call them down into the

hive again. And when the sound died quite away, and the hum had ceased,

and the most favorable breezes told no tale, I knew that they had got

the last drone of them all safely into the Middlesex hive, and that now

their minds were bent on the honey with which it was smeared.

I felt proud to know that the liberties of Massachusetts and of our

fatherland were in such safe keeping; and as I turned to my hoeing

again I was filled with an inexpressible confidence, and pursued my

labor cheerfully with a calm trust in the future.

When there were several bands of musicians, it sounded as if all the

village was a vast bellows, and all the buildings expanded and

collapsed alternately with a din. But sometimes it was a really noble

and inspiring strain that reached these woods, and the trumpet that

sings of fame, and I felt as if I could spit a Mexican with a good

relish,—for why should we always stand for trifles?—and looked round

for a woodchuck or a skunk to exercise my chivalry upon. These martial

strains seemed as far away as Palestine, and reminded me of a march of

crusaders in the horizon, with a slight tantivy and tremulous motion of

the elm-tree tops which overhang the village. This was one of the

\_great\_ days; though the sky had from my clearing only the same

everlastingly great look that it wears daily, and I saw no difference

in it.

It was a singular experience that long acquaintance which I cultivated

with beans, what with planting, and hoeing, and harvesting, and

threshing, and picking over and selling them,—the last was the hardest

of all,—I might add eating, for I did taste. I was determined to know

beans. When they were growing, I used to hoe from five o’clock in the

morning till noon, and commonly spent the rest of the day about other

affairs. Consider the intimate and curious acquaintance one makes with

various kinds of weeds,—it will bear some iteration in the account, for

there was no little iteration in the labor,—disturbing their delicate

organizations so ruthlessly, and making such invidious distinctions

with his hoe, levelling whole ranks of one species, and sedulously

cultivating another. That’s Roman wormwood,—that’s pigweed,—that’s

sorrel,—that’s piper-grass,—have at him, chop him up, turn his roots

upward to the sun, don’t let him have a fibre in the shade, if you do

he’ll turn himself t’other side up and be as green as a leek in two

days. A long war, not with cranes, but with weeds, those Trojans who

had sun and rain and dews on their side. Daily the beans saw me come to

their rescue armed with a hoe, and thin the ranks of their enemies,

filling up the trenches with weedy dead. Many a lusty crest-waving

Hector, that towered a whole foot above his crowding comrades, fell

before my weapon and rolled in the dust.

Those summer days which some of my contemporaries devoted to the fine

arts in Boston or Rome, and others to contemplation in India, and

others to trade in London or New York, I thus, with the other farmers

of New England, devoted to husbandry. Not that I wanted beans to eat,

for I am by nature a Pythagorean, so far as beans are concerned,

whether they mean porridge or voting, and exchanged them for rice; but,

perchance, as some must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes

and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day. It was on the whole a

rare amusement, which, continued too long, might have become a

dissipation. Though I gave them no manure, and did not hoe them all

once, I hoed them unusually well as far as I went, and was paid for it

in the end, “there being in truth,” as Evelyn says, “no compost or

lætation whatsoever comparable to this continual motion, repastination,

and turning of the mould with the spade.” “The earth,” he adds

elsewhere, “especially if fresh, has a certain magnetism in it, by

which it attracts the salt, power, or virtue (call it either) which

gives it life, and is the logic of all the labor and stir we keep about

it, to sustain us; all dungings and other sordid temperings being but

the vicars succedaneous to this improvement.” Moreover, this being one

of those “worn-out and exhausted lay fields which enjoy their sabbath,”

had perchance, as Sir Kenelm Digby thinks likely, attracted “vital

spirits” from the air. I harvested twelve bushels of beans.

But to be more particular, for it is complained that Mr. Coleman has

reported chiefly the expensive experiments of gentlemen farmers, my

outgoes were,—

For a hoe,.................................. $ 0.54

Ploughing, harrowing, and furrowing,......... 7.50 Too much.

Beans for seed,.............................. 3.12½

Potatoes for seed,........................... 1.33

Peas for seed,............................... 0.40

Turnip seed,................................. 0.06

White line for crow fence,................... 0.02

Horse cultivator and boy three hours,........ 1.00

Horse and cart to get crop,.................. 0.75

————

In all,................................. $14.72½

My income was (patrem familias vendacem, non emacem esse oportet),

from

Nine bushels and twelve quarts of beans sold,. $16.94

Five " large potatoes,.................... 2.50

Nine " small,............................. 2.25

Grass,.......................................... 1.00

Stalks,......................................... 0.75

————

In all,................................... $23.44

Leaving a pecuniary profit,

as I have elsewhere said, of.............. $8.71½.

This is the result of my experience in raising beans. Plant the common

small white bush bean about the first of June, in rows three feet by

eighteen inches apart, being careful to select fresh round and unmixed

seed. First look out for worms, and supply vacancies by planting anew.

Then look out for woodchucks, if it is an exposed place, for they will

nibble off the earliest tender leaves almost clean as they go; and

again, when the young tendrils make their appearance, they have notice

of it, and will shear them off with both buds and young pods, sitting

erect like a squirrel. But above all harvest as early as possible, if

you would escape frosts and have a fair and salable crop; you may save

much loss by this means.

This further experience also I gained. I said to myself, I will not

plant beans and corn with so much industry another summer, but such

seeds, if the seed is not lost, as sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith,

innocence, and the like, and see if they will not grow in this soil,

even with less toil and manurance, and sustain me, for surely it has

not been exhausted for these crops. Alas! I said this to myself; but

now another summer is gone, and another, and another, and I am obliged

to say to you, Reader, that the seeds which I planted, if indeed they

\_were\_ the seeds of those virtues, were wormeaten or had lost their

vitality, and so did not come up. Commonly men will only be brave as

their fathers were brave, or timid. This generation is very sure to

plant corn and beans each new year precisely as the Indians did

centuries ago and taught the first settlers to do, as if there were a

fate in it. I saw an old man the other day, to my astonishment, making

the holes with a hoe for the seventieth time at least, and not for

himself to lie down in! But why should not the New Englander try new

adventures, and not lay so much stress on his grain, his potato and

grass crop, and his orchards,—raise other crops than these? Why concern

ourselves so much about our beans for seed, and not be concerned at all

about a new generation of men? We should really be fed and cheered if

when we met a man we were sure to see that some of the qualities which

I have named, which we all prize more than those other productions, but

which are for the most part broadcast and floating in the air, had

taken root and grown in him. Here comes such a subtile and ineffable

quality, for instance, as truth or justice, though the slightest amount

or new variety of it, along the road. Our ambassadors should be

instructed to send home such seeds as these, and Congress help to

distribute them over all the land. We should never stand upon ceremony

with sincerity. We should never cheat and insult and banish one another

by our meanness, if there were present the kernel of worth and

friendliness. We should not meet thus in haste. Most men I do not meet

at all, for they seem not to have time; they are busy about their

beans. We would not deal with a man thus plodding ever, leaning on a

hoe or a spade as a staff between his work, not as a mushroom, but

partially risen out of the earth, something more than erect, like

swallows alighted and walking on the ground:—

“And as he spake, his wings would now and then

Spread, as he meant to fly, then close again,”

so that we should suspect that we might be conversing with an angel.

Bread may not always nourish us; but it always does us good, it even

takes stiffness out of our joints, and makes us supple and buoyant,

when we knew not what ailed us, to recognize any generosity in man or

Nature, to share any unmixed and heroic joy.

Ancient poetry and mythology suggest, at least, that husbandry was once

a sacred art; but it is pursued with irreverent haste and heedlessness

by us, our object being to have large farms and large crops merely. We

have no festival, nor procession, nor ceremony, not excepting our

Cattle-shows and so called Thanksgivings, by which the farmer expresses

a sense of the sacredness of his calling, or is reminded of its sacred

origin. It is the premium and the feast which tempt him. He sacrifices

not to Ceres and the Terrestrial Jove, but to the infernal Plutus

rather. By avarice and selfishness, and a grovelling habit, from which

none of us is free, of regarding the soil as property, or the means of

acquiring property chiefly, the landscape is deformed, husbandry is

degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives. He knows

Nature but as a robber. Cato says that the profits of agriculture are

particularly pious or just, (\_maximeque pius quæstus\_), and according

to Varro the old Romans “called the same earth Mother and Ceres, and

thought that they who cultivated it led a pious and useful life, and

that they alone were left of the race of King Saturn.”

We are wont to forget that the sun looks on our cultivated fields and

on the prairies and forests without distinction. They all reflect and

absorb his rays alike, and the former make but a small part of the

glorious picture which he beholds in his daily course. In his view the

earth is all equally cultivated like a garden. Therefore we should

receive the benefit of his light and heat with a corresponding trust

and magnanimity. What though I value the seed of these beans, and

harvest that in the fall of the year? This broad field which I have

looked at so long looks not to me as the principal cultivator, but away

from me to influences more genial to it, which water and make it green.

These beans have results which are not harvested by me. Do they not

grow for woodchucks partly? The ear of wheat (in Latin \_spica\_,

obsoletely \_speca\_, from \_spe\_, hope) should not be the only hope of

the husbandman; its kernel or grain (\_granum\_ from \_gerendo\_, bearing)

is not all that it bears. How, then, can our harvest fail? Shall I not

rejoice also at the abundance of the weeds whose seeds are the granary

of the birds? It matters little comparatively whether the fields fill

the farmer’s barns. The true husbandman will cease from anxiety, as the

squirrels manifest no concern whether the woods will bear chestnuts

this year or not, and finish his labor with every day, relinquishing

all claim to the produce of his fields, and sacrificing in his mind not

only his first but his last fruits also.

The Village

After hoeing, or perhaps reading and writing, in the forenoon, I

usually bathed again in the pond, swimming across one of its coves for

a stint, and washed the dust of labor from my person, or smoothed out

the last wrinkle which study had made, and for the afternoon was

absolutely free. Every day or two I strolled to the village to hear

some of the gossip which is incessantly going on there, circulating

either from mouth to mouth, or from newspaper to newspaper, and which,

taken in homœopathic doses, was really as refreshing in its way as the

rustle of leaves and the peeping of frogs. As I walked in the woods to

see the birds and squirrels, so I walked in the village to see the men

and boys; instead of the wind among the pines I heard the carts rattle.

In one direction from my house there was a colony of muskrats in the

river meadows; under the grove of elms and buttonwoods in the other

horizon was a village of busy men, as curious to me as if they had been

prairie dogs, each sitting at the mouth of its burrow, or running over

to a neighbor’s to gossip. I went there frequently to observe their

habits. The village appeared to me a great news room; and on one side,

to support it, as once at Redding & Company’s on State Street, they

kept nuts and raisins, or salt and meal and other groceries. Some have

such a vast appetite for the former commodity, that is, the news, and

such sound digestive organs, that they can sit forever in public

avenues without stirring, and let it simmer and whisper through them

like the Etesian winds, or as if inhaling ether, it only producing

numbness and insensibility to pain,—otherwise it would often be painful

to hear,—without affecting the consciousness. I hardly ever failed,

when I rambled through the village, to see a row of such worthies,

either sitting on a ladder sunning themselves, with their bodies

inclined forward and their eyes glancing along the line this way and

that, from time to time, with a voluptuous expression, or else leaning

against a barn with their hands in their pockets, like caryatides, as

if to prop it up. They, being commonly out of doors, heard whatever was

in the wind. These are the coarsest mills, in which all gossip is first

rudely digested or cracked up before it is emptied into finer and more

delicate hoppers within doors. I observed that the vitals of the

village were the grocery, the bar-room, the post-office, and the bank;

and, as a necessary part of the machinery, they kept a bell, a big gun,

and a fire-engine, at convenient places; and the houses were so

arranged as to make the most of mankind, in lanes and fronting one

another, so that every traveller had to run the gantlet, and every man,

woman, and child might get a lick at him. Of course, those who were

stationed nearest to the head of the line, where they could most see

and be seen, and have the first blow at him, paid the highest prices

for their places; and the few straggling inhabitants in the outskirts,

where long gaps in the line began to occur, and the traveller could get

over walls or turn aside into cow paths, and so escape, paid a very

slight ground or window tax. Signs were hung out on all sides to allure

him; some to catch him by the appetite, as the tavern and victualling

cellar; some by the fancy, as the dry goods store and the jeweller’s;

and others by the hair or the feet or the skirts, as the barber, the

shoemaker, or the tailor. Besides, there was a still more terrible

standing invitation to call at every one of these houses, and company

expected about these times. For the most part I escaped wonderfully

from these dangers, either by proceeding at once boldly and without

deliberation to the goal, as is recommended to those who run the

gantlet, or by keeping my thoughts on high things, like Orpheus, who,

“loudly singing the praises of the gods to his lyre, drowned the voices

of the Sirens, and kept out of danger.” Sometimes I bolted suddenly,

and nobody could tell my whereabouts, for I did not stand much about

gracefulness, and never hesitated at a gap in a fence. I was even

accustomed to make an irruption into some houses, where I was well

entertained, and after learning the kernels and very last sieve-ful of

news, what had subsided, the prospects of war and peace, and whether

the world was likely to hold together much longer, I was let out

through the rear avenues, and so escaped to the woods again.

It was very pleasant, when I stayed late in town, to launch myself into

the night, especially if it was dark and tempestuous, and set sail from

some bright village parlor or lecture room, with a bag of rye or Indian

meal upon my shoulder, for my snug harbor in the woods, having made all

tight without and withdrawn under hatches with a merry crew of

thoughts, leaving only my outer man at the helm, or even tying up the

helm when it was plain sailing. I had many a genial thought by the

cabin fire “as I sailed.” I was never cast away nor distressed in any

weather, though I encountered some severe storms. It is darker in the

woods, even in common nights, than most suppose. I frequently had to

look up at the opening between the trees above the path in order to

learn my route, and, where there was no cart-path, to feel with my feet

the faint track which I had worn, or steer by the known relation of

particular trees which I felt with my hands, passing between two pines

for instance, not more than eighteen inches apart, in the midst of the

woods, invariably, in the darkest night. Sometimes, after coming home

thus late in a dark and muggy night, when my feet felt the path which

my eyes could not see, dreaming and absent-minded all the way, until I

was aroused by having to raise my hand to lift the latch, I have not

been able to recall a single step of my walk, and I have thought that

perhaps my body would find its way home if its master should forsake

it, as the hand finds its way to the mouth without assistance. Several

times, when a visitor chanced to stay into evening, and it proved a

dark night, I was obliged to conduct him to the cart-path in the rear

of the house, and then point out to him the direction he was to pursue,

and in keeping which he was to be guided rather by his feet than his

eyes. One very dark night I directed thus on their way two young men

who had been fishing in the pond. They lived about a mile off through

the woods, and were quite used to the route. A day or two after one of

them told me that they wandered about the greater part of the night,

close by their own premises, and did not get home till toward morning,

by which time, as there had been several heavy showers in the mean

while, and the leaves were very wet, they were drenched to their skins.

I have heard of many going astray even in the village streets, when the

darkness was so thick that you could cut it with a knife, as the saying

is. Some who live in the outskirts, having come to town a-shopping in

their wagons, have been obliged to put up for the night; and gentlemen

and ladies making a call have gone half a mile out of their way,

feeling the sidewalk only with their feet, and not knowing when they

turned. It is a surprising and memorable, as well as valuable

experience, to be lost in the woods any time. Often in a snow storm,

even by day, one will come out upon a well-known road and yet find it

impossible to tell which way leads to the village. Though he knows that

he has travelled it a thousand times, he cannot recognize a feature in

it, but it is as strange to him as if it were a road in Siberia. By

night, of course, the perplexity is infinitely greater. In our most

trivial walks, we are constantly, though unconsciously, steering like

pilots by certain well-known beacons and headlands, and if we go beyond

our usual course we still carry in our minds the bearing of some

neighboring cape; and not till we are completely lost, or turned

round,—for a man needs only to be turned round once with his eyes shut

in this world to be lost,—do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness

of Nature. Every man has to learn the points of compass again as often

as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction. Not till we are

lost, in other words not till we have lost the world, do we begin to

find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our

relations.

One afternoon, near the end of the first summer, when I went to the

village to get a shoe from the cobbler’s, I was seized and put into

jail, because, as I have elsewhere related, I did not pay a tax to, or

recognize the authority of, the state which buys and sells men, women,

and children, like cattle at the door of its senate-house. I had gone

down to the woods for other purposes. But, wherever a man goes, men

will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they

can, constrain him to belong to their desperate odd-fellow society. It

is true, I might have resisted forcibly with more or less effect, might

have run “amok” against society; but I preferred that society should

run “amok” against me, it being the desperate party. However, I was

released the next day, obtained my mended shoe, and returned to the

woods in season to get my dinner of huckleberries on Fair-Haven Hill. I

was never molested by any person but those who represented the state. I

had no lock nor bolt but for the desk which held my papers, not even a

nail to put over my latch or windows. I never fastened my door night or

day, though I was to be absent several days; not even when the next

fall I spent a fortnight in the woods of Maine. And yet my house was

more respected than if it had been surrounded by a file of soldiers.

The tired rambler could rest and warm himself by my fire, the literary

amuse himself with the few books on my table, or the curious, by

opening my closet door, see what was left of my dinner, and what

prospect I had of a supper. Yet, though many people of every class came

this way to the pond, I suffered no serious inconvenience from these

sources, and I never missed anything but one small book, a volume of

Homer, which perhaps was improperly gilded, and this I trust a soldier

of our camp has found by this time. I am convinced, that if all men

were to live as simply as I then did, thieving and robbery would be

unknown. These take place only in communities where some have got more

than is sufficient while others have not enough. The Pope’s Homers

would soon get properly distributed.—

“Nec bella fuerunt,

Faginus astabat dum scyphus ante dapes.”

“Nor wars did men molest,

When only beechen bowls were in request.”

“You who govern public affairs, what need have you to employ

punishments? Love virtue, and the people will be virtuous. The virtues

of a superior man are like the wind; the virtues of a common man are

like the grass; the grass, when the wind passes over it, bends.”

The Ponds

Sometimes, having had a surfeit of human society and gossip, and worn

out all my village friends, I rambled still farther westward than I

habitually dwell, into yet more unfrequented parts of the town, “to

fresh woods and pastures new,” or, while the sun was setting, made my

supper of huckleberries and blueberries on Fair Haven Hill, and laid up

a store for several days. The fruits do not yield their true flavor to

the purchaser of them, nor to him who raises them for the market. There

is but one way to obtain it, yet few take that way. If you would know

the flavor of huckleberries, ask the cow-boy or the partridge. It is a

vulgar error to suppose that you have tasted huckleberries who never

plucked them. A huckleberry never reaches Boston; they have not been

known there since they grew on her three hills. The ambrosial and

essential part of the fruit is lost with the bloom which is rubbed off

in the market cart, and they become mere provender. As long as Eternal

Justice reigns, not one innocent huckleberry can be transported thither

from the country’s hills.

Occasionally, after my hoeing was done for the day, I joined some

impatient companion who had been fishing on the pond since morning, as

silent and motionless as a duck or a floating leaf, and, after

practising various kinds of philosophy, had concluded commonly, by the

time I arrived, that he belonged to the ancient sect of Cœnobites.

There was one older man, an excellent fisher and skilled in all kinds

of woodcraft, who was pleased to look upon my house as a building

erected for the convenience of fishermen; and I was equally pleased

when he sat in my doorway to arrange his lines. Once in a while we sat

together on the pond, he at one end of the boat, and I at the other;

but not many words passed between us, for he had grown deaf in his

later years, but he occasionally hummed a psalm, which harmonized well

enough with my philosophy. Our intercourse was thus altogether one of

unbroken harmony, far more pleasing to remember than if it had been

carried on by speech. When, as was commonly the case, I had none to

commune with, I used to raise the echoes by striking with a paddle on

the side of my boat, filling the surrounding woods with circling and

dilating sound, stirring them up as the keeper of a menagerie his wild

beasts, until I elicited a growl from every wooded vale and hill-side.

In warm evenings I frequently sat in the boat playing the flute, and

saw the perch, which I seemed to have charmed, hovering around me, and

the moon travelling over the ribbed bottom, which was strewed with the

wrecks of the forest. Formerly I had come to this pond adventurously,

from time to time, in dark summer nights, with a companion, and making

a fire close to the water’s edge, which we thought attracted the

fishes, we caught pouts with a bunch of worms strung on a thread; and

when we had done, far in the night, threw the burning brands high into

the air like skyrockets, which, coming down into the pond, were

quenched with a loud hissing, and we were suddenly groping in total

darkness. Through this, whistling a tune, we took our way to the haunts

of men again. But now I had made my home by the shore.

Sometimes, after staying in a village parlor till the family had all

retired, I have returned to the woods, and, partly with a view to the

next day’s dinner, spent the hours of midnight fishing from a boat by

moonlight, serenaded by owls and foxes, and hearing, from time to time,

the creaking note of some unknown bird close at hand. These experiences

were very memorable and valuable to me,—anchored in forty feet of

water, and twenty or thirty rods from the shore, surrounded sometimes

by thousands of small perch and shiners, dimpling the surface with

their tails in the moonlight, and communicating by a long flaxen line

with mysterious nocturnal fishes which had their dwelling forty feet

below, or sometimes dragging sixty feet of line about the pond as I

drifted in the gentle night breeze, now and then feeling a slight

vibration along it, indicative of some life prowling about its

extremity, of dull uncertain blundering purpose there, and slow to make

up its mind. At length you slowly raise, pulling hand over hand, some

horned pout squeaking and squirming to the upper air. It was very

queer, especially in dark nights, when your thoughts had wandered to

vast and cosmogonal themes in other spheres, to feel this faint jerk,

which came to interrupt your dreams and link you to Nature again. It

seemed as if I might next cast my line upward into the air, as well as

downward into this element, which was scarcely more dense. Thus I

caught two fishes as it were with one hook.

The scenery of Walden is on a humble scale, and, though very beautiful,

does not approach to grandeur, nor can it much concern one who has not

long frequented it or lived by its shore; yet this pond is so

remarkable for its depth and purity as to merit a particular

description. It is a clear and deep green well, half a mile long and a

mile and three quarters in circumference, and contains about sixty-one

and a half acres; a perennial spring in the midst of pine and oak

woods, without any visible inlet or outlet except by the clouds and

evaporation. The surrounding hills rise abruptly from the water to the

height of forty to eighty feet, though on the south-east and east they

attain to about one hundred and one hundred and fifty feet

respectively, within a quarter and a third of a mile. They are

exclusively woodland. All our Concord waters have two colors at least;

one when viewed at a distance, and another, more proper, close at hand.

The first depends more on the light, and follows the sky. In clear

weather, in summer, they appear blue at a little distance, especially

if agitated, and at a great distance all appear alike. In stormy

weather they are sometimes of a dark slate color. The sea, however, is

said to be blue one day and green another without any perceptible

change in the atmosphere. I have seen our river, when, the landscape

being covered with snow, both water and ice were almost as green as

grass. Some consider blue “to be the color of pure water, whether

liquid or solid.” But, looking directly down into our waters from a

boat, they are seen to be of very different colors. Walden is blue at

one time and green at another, even from the same point of view. Lying

between the earth and the heavens, it partakes of the color of both.

Viewed from a hill-top it reflects the color of the sky; but near at

hand it is of a yellowish tint next the shore where you can see the

sand, then a light green, which gradually deepens to a uniform dark

green in the body of the pond. In some lights, viewed even from a

hill-top, it is of a vivid green next the shore. Some have referred

this to the reflection of the verdure; but it is equally green there

against the railroad sand-bank, and in the spring, before the leaves

are expanded, and it may be simply the result of the prevailing blue

mixed with the yellow of the sand. Such is the color of its iris. This

is that portion, also, where in the spring, the ice being warmed by the

heat of the sun reflected from the bottom, and also transmitted through

the earth, melts first and forms a narrow canal about the still frozen

middle. Like the rest of our waters, when much agitated, in clear

weather, so that the surface of the waves may reflect the sky at the

right angle, or because there is more light mixed with it, it appears

at a little distance of a darker blue than the sky itself; and at such

a time, being on its surface, and looking with divided vision, so as to

see the reflection, I have discerned a matchless and indescribable

light blue, such as watered or changeable silks and sword blades

suggest, more cerulean than the sky itself, alternating with the

original dark green on the opposite sides of the waves, which last

appeared but muddy in comparison. It is a vitreous greenish blue, as I

remember it, like those patches of the winter sky seen through cloud

vistas in the west before sundown. Yet a single glass of its water held

up to the light is as colorless as an equal quantity of air. It is well

known that a large plate of glass will have a green tint, owing, as the

makers say, to its “body,” but a small piece of the same will be

colorless. How large a body of Walden water would be required to

reflect a green tint I have never proved. The water of our river is

black or a very dark brown to one looking directly down on it, and,

like that of most ponds, imparts to the body of one bathing in it a

yellowish tinge; but this water is of such crystalline purity that the

body of the bather appears of an alabaster whiteness, still more

unnatural, which, as the limbs are magnified and distorted withal,

produces a monstrous effect, making fit studies for a Michael Angelo.

The water is so transparent that the bottom can easily be discerned at

the depth of twenty-five or thirty feet. Paddling over it, you may see,

many feet beneath the surface the schools of perch and shiners, perhaps

only an inch long, yet the former easily distinguished by their

transverse bars, and you think that they must be ascetic fish that find

a subsistence there. Once, in the winter, many years ago, when I had

been cutting holes through the ice in order to catch pickerel, as I

stepped ashore I tossed my axe back on to the ice, but, as if some evil

genius had directed it, it slid four or five rods directly into one of

the holes, where the water was twenty-five feet deep. Out of curiosity,

I lay down on the ice and looked through the hole, until I saw the axe

a little on one side, standing on its head, with its helve erect and

gently swaying to and fro with the pulse of the pond; and there it

might have stood erect and swaying till in the course of time the

handle rotted off, if I had not disturbed it. Making another hole

directly over it with an ice chisel which I had, and cutting down the

longest birch which I could find in the neighborhood with my knife, I

made a slip-noose, which I attached to its end, and, letting it down

carefully, passed it over the knob of the handle, and drew it by a line

along the birch, and so pulled the axe out again.

The shore is composed of a belt of smooth rounded white stones like

paving stones, excepting one or two short sand beaches, and is so steep

that in many places a single leap will carry you into water over your

head; and were it not for its remarkable transparency, that would be

the last to be seen of its bottom till it rose on the opposite side.

Some think it is bottomless. It is nowhere muddy, and a casual observer

would say that there were no weeds at all in it; and of noticeable

plants, except in the little meadows recently overflowed, which do not

properly belong to it, a closer scrutiny does not detect a flag nor a

bulrush, nor even a lily, yellow or white, but only a few small

heart-leaves and potamogetons, and perhaps a water-target or two; all

which however a bather might not perceive; and these plants are clean

and bright like the element they grow in. The stones extend a rod or

two into the water, and then the bottom is pure sand, except in the

deepest parts, where there is usually a little sediment, probably from

the decay of the leaves which have been wafted on to it so many

successive falls, and a bright green weed is brought up on anchors even

in midwinter.

We have one other pond just like this, White Pond, in Nine Acre Corner,

about two and a half miles westerly; but, though I am acquainted with

most of the ponds within a dozen miles of this centre I do not know a

third of this pure and well-like character. Successive nations

perchance have drank at, admired, and fathomed it, and passed away, and

still its water is green and pellucid as ever. Not an intermitting

spring! Perhaps on that spring morning when Adam and Eve were driven

out of Eden Walden Pond was already in existence, and even then

breaking up in a gentle spring rain accompanied with mist and a

southerly wind, and covered with myriads of ducks and geese, which had

not heard of the fall, when still such pure lakes sufficed them. Even

then it had commenced to rise and fall, and had clarified its waters

and colored them of the hue they now wear, and obtained a patent of

heaven to be the only Walden Pond in the world and distiller of

celestial dews. Who knows in how many unremembered nations’ literatures

this has been the Castalian Fountain? or what nymphs presided over it

in the Golden Age? It is a gem of the first water which Concord wears

in her coronet.

Yet perchance the first who came to this well have left some trace of

their footsteps. I have been surprised to detect encircling the pond,

even where a thick wood has just been cut down on the shore, a narrow

shelf-like path in the steep hill-side, alternately rising and falling,

approaching and receding from the water’s edge, as old probably as the

race of man here, worn by the feet of aboriginal hunters, and still

from time to time unwittingly trodden by the present occupants of the

land. This is particularly distinct to one standing on the middle of

the pond in winter, just after a light snow has fallen, appearing as a

clear undulating white line, unobscured by weeds and twigs, and very

obvious a quarter of a mile off in many places where in summer it is

hardly distinguishable close at hand. The snow reprints it, as it were,

in clear white type alto-relievo. The ornamented grounds of villas

which will one day be built here may still preserve some trace of this.

The pond rises and falls, but whether regularly or not, and within what

period, nobody knows, though, as usual, many pretend to know. It is

commonly higher in the winter and lower in the summer, though not

corresponding to the general wet and dryness. I can remember when it

was a foot or two lower, and also when it was at least five feet

higher, than when I lived by it. There is a narrow sand-bar running

into it, with very deep water on one side, on which I helped boil a

kettle of chowder, some six rods from the main shore, about the year

1824, which it has not been possible to do for twenty-five years; and

on the other hand, my friends used to listen with incredulity when I

told them, that a few years later I was accustomed to fish from a boat

in a secluded cove in the woods, fifteen rods from the only shore they

knew, which place was long since converted into a meadow. But the pond

has risen steadily for two years, and now, in the summer of ’52, is

just five feet higher than when I lived there, or as high as it was

thirty years ago, and fishing goes on again in the meadow. This makes a

difference of level, at the outside, of six or seven feet; and yet the

water shed by the surrounding hills is insignificant in amount, and

this overflow must be referred to causes which affect the deep springs.

This same summer the pond has begun to fall again. It is remarkable

that this fluctuation, whether periodical or not, appears thus to

require many years for its accomplishment. I have observed one rise and

a part of two falls, and I expect that a dozen or fifteen years hence

the water will again be as low as I have ever known it. Flint’s Pond, a

mile eastward, allowing for the disturbance occasioned by its inlets

and outlets, and the smaller intermediate ponds also, sympathize with

Walden, and recently attained their greatest height at the same time

with the latter. The same is true, as far as my observation goes, of

White Pond.

This rise and fall of Walden at long intervals serves this use at

least; the water standing at this great height for a year or more,

though it makes it difficult to walk round it, kills the shrubs and

trees which have sprung up about its edge since the last rise,

pitch-pines, birches, alders, aspens, and others, and, falling again,

leaves an unobstructed shore; for, unlike many ponds and all waters

which are subject to a daily tide, its shore is cleanest when the water

is lowest. On the side of the pond next my house, a row of pitch pines

fifteen feet high has been killed and tipped over as if by a lever, and

thus a stop put to their encroachments; and their size indicates how

many years have elapsed since the last rise to this height. By this

fluctuation the pond asserts its title to a shore, and thus the \_shore\_

is \_shorn\_, and the trees cannot hold it by right of possession. These

are the lips of the lake on which no beard grows. It licks its chaps

from time to time. When the water is at its height, the alders,

willows, and maples send forth a mass of fibrous red roots several feet

long from all sides of their stems in the water, and to the height of

three or four feet from the ground, in the effort to maintain

themselves; and I have known the high-blueberry bushes about the shore,

which commonly produce no fruit, bear an abundant crop under these

circumstances.

Some have been puzzled to tell how the shore became so regularly paved.

My townsmen have all heard the tradition, the oldest people tell me

that they heard it in their youth, that anciently the Indians were

holding a pow-wow upon a hill here, which rose as high into the heavens

as the pond now sinks deep into the earth, and they used much

profanity, as the story goes, though this vice is one of which the

Indians were never guilty, and while they were thus engaged the hill

shook and suddenly sank, and only one old squaw, named Walden, escaped,

and from her the pond was named. It has been conjectured that when the

hill shook these stones rolled down its side and became the present

shore. It is very certain, at any rate, that once there was no pond

here, and now there is one; and this Indian fable does not in any

respect conflict with the account of that ancient settler whom I have

mentioned, who remembers so well when he first came here with his

divining rod, saw a thin vapor rising from the sward, and the hazel

pointed steadily downward, and he concluded to dig a well here. As for

the stones, many still think that they are hardly to be accounted for

by the action of the waves on these hills; but I observe that the

surrounding hills are remarkably full of the same kind of stones, so

that they have been obliged to pile them up in walls on both sides of

the railroad cut nearest the pond; and, moreover, there are most stones

where the shore is most abrupt; so that, unfortunately, it is no longer

a mystery to me. I detect the paver. If the name was not derived from

that of some English locality,—Saffron Walden, for instance,—one might

suppose that it was called originally \_Walled-in\_ Pond.

The pond was my well ready dug. For four months in the year its water

is as cold as it is pure at all times; and I think that it is then as

good as any, if not the best, in the town. In the winter, all water

which is exposed to the air is colder than springs and wells which are

protected from it. The temperature of the pond water which had stood in

the room where I sat from five o’clock in the afternoon till noon the

next day, the sixth of March, 1846, the thermometer having been up to

65° or 70° some of the time, owing partly to the sun on the roof, was

42°, or one degree colder than the water of one of the coldest wells in

the village just drawn. The temperature of the Boiling Spring the same

day was 45°, or the warmest of any water tried, though it is the

coldest that I know of in summer, when, beside, shallow and stagnant

surface water is not mingled with it. Moreover, in summer, Walden never

becomes so warm as most water which is exposed to the sun, on account

of its depth. In the warmest weather I usually placed a pailful in my

cellar, where it became cool in the night, and remained so during the

day; though I also resorted to a spring in the neighborhood. It was as

good when a week old as the day it was dipped, and had no taste of the

pump. Whoever camps for a week in summer by the shore of a pond, needs

only bury a pail of water a few feet deep in the shade of his camp to

be independent of the luxury of ice.

There have been caught in Walden pickerel, one weighing seven pounds,

to say nothing of another which carried off a reel with great velocity,

which the fisherman safely set down at eight pounds because he did not

see him, perch and pouts, some of each weighing over two pounds,

shiners, chivins or roach (\_Leuciscus pulchellus\_), a very few breams,

and a couple of eels, one weighing four pounds,—I am thus particular

because the weight of a fish is commonly its only title to fame, and

these are the only eels I have heard of here;—also, I have a faint

recollection of a little fish some five inches long, with silvery sides

and a greenish back, somewhat dace-like in its character, which I

mention here chiefly to link my facts to fable. Nevertheless, this pond

is not very fertile in fish. Its pickerel, though not abundant, are its

chief boast. I have seen at one time lying on the ice pickerel of at

least three different kinds; a long and shallow one, steel-colored,

most like those caught in the river; a bright golden kind, with

greenish reflections and remarkably deep, which is the most common

here; and another, golden-colored, and shaped like the last, but

peppered on the sides with small dark brown or black spots, intermixed

with a few faint blood-red ones, very much like a trout. The specific

name \_reticulatus\_ would not apply to this; it should be \_guttatus\_

rather. These are all very firm fish, and weigh more than their size

promises. The shiners, pouts, and perch also, and indeed all the fishes

which inhabit this pond, are much cleaner, handsomer, and firmer

fleshed than those in the river and most other ponds, as the water is

purer, and they can easily be distinguished from them. Probably many

ichthyologists would make new varieties of some of them. There are also

a clean race of frogs and tortoises, and a few muscels in it; muskrats

and minks leave their traces about it, and occasionally a travelling

mud-turtle visits it. Sometimes, when I pushed off my boat in the

morning, I disturbed a great mud-turtle which had secreted himself

under the boat in the night. Ducks and geese frequent it in the spring

and fall, the white-bellied swallows (\_Hirundo bicolor\_) skim over it,

and the peetweets (\_Totanus macularius\_) “teter” along its stony shores

all summer. I have sometimes disturbed a fishhawk sitting on a

white-pine over the water; but I doubt if it is ever profaned by the

wing of a gull, like Fair Haven. At most, it tolerates one annual loon.

These are all the animals of consequence which frequent it now.

You may see from a boat, in calm weather, near the sandy eastern shore,

where the water is eight or ten feet deep, and also in some other parts

of the pond, some circular heaps half a dozen feet in diameter by a

foot in height, consisting of small stones less than a hen’s egg in

size, where all around is bare sand. At first you wonder if the Indians

could have formed them on the ice for any purpose, and so, when the ice

melted, they sank to the bottom; but they are too regular and some of

them plainly too fresh for that. They are similar to those found in

rivers; but as there are no suckers nor lampreys here, I know not by

what fish they could be made. Perhaps they are the nests of the chivin.

These lend a pleasing mystery to the bottom.

The shore is irregular enough not to be monotonous. I have in my mind’s

eye the western indented with deep bays, the bolder northern, and the

beautifully scalloped southern shore, where successive capes overlap

each other and suggest unexplored coves between. The forest has never

so good a setting, nor is so distinctly beautiful, as when seen from

the middle of a small lake amid hills which rise from the water’s edge;

for the water in which it is reflected not only makes the best

foreground in such a case, but, with its winding shore, the most

natural and agreeable boundary to it. There is no rawness nor

imperfection in its edge there, as where the axe has cleared a part, or

a cultivated field abuts on it. The trees have ample room to expand on

the water side, and each sends forth its most vigorous branch in that

direction. There Nature has woven a natural selvage, and the eye rises

by just gradations from the low shrubs of the shore to the highest

trees. There are few traces of man’s hand to be seen. The water laves

the shore as it did a thousand years ago.

A lake is the landscape’s most beautiful and expressive feature. It is

earth’s eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his

own nature. The fluviatile trees next the shore are the slender

eyelashes which fringe it, and the wooded hills and cliffs around are

its overhanging brows.

Standing on the smooth sandy beach at the east end of the pond, in a

calm September afternoon, when a slight haze makes the opposite shore

line indistinct, I have seen whence came the expression, “the glassy

surface of a lake.” When you invert your head, it looks like a thread

of finest gossamer stretched across the valley, and gleaming against

the distant pine woods, separating one stratum of the atmosphere from

another. You would think that you could walk dry under it to the

opposite hills, and that the swallows which skim over might perch on

it. Indeed, they sometimes dive below this line, as it were by mistake,

and are undeceived. As you look over the pond westward you are obliged

to employ both your hands to defend your eyes against the reflected as

well as the true sun, for they are equally bright; and if, between the

two, you survey its surface critically, it is literally as smooth as

glass, except where the skater insects, at equal intervals scattered

over its whole extent, by their motions in the sun produce the finest

imaginable sparkle on it, or, perchance, a duck plumes itself, or, as I

have said, a swallow skims so low as to touch it. It may be that in the

distance a fish describes an arc of three or four feet in the air, and

there is one bright flash where it emerges, and another where it

strikes the water; sometimes the whole silvery arc is revealed; or here

and there, perhaps, is a thistle-down floating on its surface, which

the fishes dart at and so dimple it again. It is like molten glass

cooled but not congealed, and the few motes in it are pure and

beautiful like the imperfections in glass. You may often detect a yet

smoother and darker water, separated from the rest as if by an

invisible cobweb, boom of the water nymphs, resting on it. From a

hill-top you can see a fish leap in almost any part; for not a pickerel

or shiner picks an insect from this smooth surface but it manifestly

disturbs the equilibrium of the whole lake. It is wonderful with what

elaborateness this simple fact is advertised,—this piscine murder will

out,—and from my distant perch I distinguish the circling undulations

when they are half a dozen rods in diameter. You can even detect a

water-bug (\_Gyrinus\_) ceaselessly progressing over the smooth surface a

quarter of a mile off; for they furrow the water slightly, making a

conspicuous ripple bounded by two diverging lines, but the skaters

glide over it without rippling it perceptibly. When the surface is

considerably agitated there are no skaters nor water-bugs on it, but

apparently, in calm days, they leave their havens and adventurously

glide forth from the shore by short impulses till they completely cover

it. It is a soothing employment, on one of those fine days in the fall

when all the warmth of the sun is fully appreciated, to sit on a stump

on such a height as this, overlooking the pond, and study the dimpling

circles which are incessantly inscribed on its otherwise invisible

surface amid the reflected skies and trees. Over this great expanse

there is no disturbance but it is thus at once gently smoothed away and

assuaged, as, when a vase of water is jarred, the trembling circles

seek the shore and all is smooth again. Not a fish can leap or an

insect fall on the pond but it is thus reported in circling dimples, in

lines of beauty, as it were the constant welling up of its fountain,

the gentle pulsing of its life, the heaving of its breast. The thrills

of joy and thrills of pain are undistinguishable. How peaceful the

phenomena of the lake! Again the works of man shine as in the spring.

Ay, every leaf and twig and stone and cobweb sparkles now at

mid-afternoon as when covered with dew in a spring morning. Every

motion of an oar or an insect produces a flash of light; and if an oar

falls, how sweet the echo!

In such a day, in September or October, Walden is a perfect forest

mirror, set round with stones as precious to my eye as if fewer or

rarer. Nothing so fair, so pure, and at the same time so large, as a

lake, perchance, lies on the surface of the earth. Sky water. It needs

no fence. Nations come and go without defiling it. It is a mirror which

no stone can crack, whose quicksilver will never wear off, whose

gilding Nature continually repairs; no storms, no dust, can dim its

surface ever fresh;—a mirror in which all impurity presented to it

sinks, swept and dusted by the sun’s hazy brush,—this the light

dust-cloth,—which retains no breath that is breathed on it, but sends

its own to float as clouds high above its surface, and be reflected in

its bosom still.

A field of water betrays the spirit that is in the air. It is

continually receiving new life and motion from above. It is

intermediate in its nature between land and sky. On land only the grass

and trees wave, but the water itself is rippled by the wind. I see

where the breeze dashes across it by the streaks or flakes of light. It

is remarkable that we can look down on its surface. We shall, perhaps,

look down thus on the surface of air at length, and mark where a still

subtler spirit sweeps over it.

The skaters and water-bugs finally disappear in the latter part of

October, when the severe frosts have come; and then and in November,

usually, in a calm day, there is absolutely nothing to ripple the

surface. One November afternoon, in the calm at the end of a rain storm

of several days’ duration, when the sky was still completely overcast

and the air was full of mist, I observed that the pond was remarkably

smooth, so that it was difficult to distinguish its surface; though it

no longer reflected the bright tints of October, but the sombre

November colors of the surrounding hills. Though I passed over it as

gently as possible, the slight undulations produced by my boat extended

almost as far as I could see, and gave a ribbed appearance to the

reflections. But, as I was looking over the surface, I saw here and

there at a distance a faint glimmer, as if some skater insects which

had escaped the frosts might be collected there, or, perchance, the

surface, being so smooth, betrayed where a spring welled up from the

bottom. Paddling gently to one of these places, I was surprised to find

myself surrounded by myriads of small perch, about five inches long, of

a rich bronze color in the green water, sporting there, and constantly

rising to the surface and dimpling it, sometimes leaving bubbles on it.

In such transparent and seemingly bottomless water, reflecting the

clouds, I seemed to be floating through the air as in a balloon, and

their swimming impressed me as a kind of flight or hovering, as if they

were a compact flock of birds passing just beneath my level on the

right or left, their fins, like sails, set all around them. There were

many such schools in the pond, apparently improving the short season

before winter would draw an icy shutter over their broad skylight,

sometimes giving to the surface an appearance as if a slight breeze

struck it, or a few rain-drops fell there. When I approached carelessly

and alarmed them, they made a sudden splash and rippling with their

tails, as if one had struck the water with a brushy bough, and

instantly took refuge in the depths. At length the wind rose, the mist

increased, and the waves began to run, and the perch leaped much higher

than before, half out of water, a hundred black points, three inches

long, at once above the surface. Even as late as the fifth of December,

one year, I saw some dimples on the surface, and thinking it was going

to rain hard immediately, the air being full of mist, I made haste to

take my place at the oars and row homeward; already the rain seemed

rapidly increasing, though I felt none on my cheek, and I anticipated a

thorough soaking. But suddenly the dimples ceased, for they were

produced by the perch, which the noise of my oars had seared into the

depths, and I saw their schools dimly disappearing; so I spent a dry

afternoon after all.

An old man who used to frequent this pond nearly sixty years ago, when

it was dark with surrounding forests, tells me that in those days he

sometimes saw it all alive with ducks and other water fowl, and that

there were many eagles about it. He came here a-fishing, and used an

old log canoe which he found on the shore. It was made of two

white-pine logs dug out and pinned together, and was cut off square at

the ends. It was very clumsy, but lasted a great many years before it

became water-logged and perhaps sank to the bottom. He did not know

whose it was; it belonged to the pond. He used to make a cable for his

anchor of strips of hickory bark tied together. An old man, a potter,

who lived by the pond before the Revolution, told him once that there

was an iron chest at the bottom, and that he had seen it. Sometimes it

would come floating up to the shore; but when you went toward it, it

would go back into deep water and disappear. I was pleased to hear of

the old log canoe, which took the place of an Indian one of the same

material but more graceful construction, which perchance had first been

a tree on the bank, and then, as it were, fell into the water, to float

there for a generation, the most proper vessel for the lake. I remember

that when I first looked into these depths there were many large trunks

to be seen indistinctly lying on the bottom, which had either been

blown over formerly, or left on the ice at the last cutting, when wood

was cheaper; but now they have mostly disappeared.

When I first paddled a boat on Walden, it was completely surrounded by

thick and lofty pine and oak woods, and in some of its coves grape

vines had run over the trees next the water and formed bowers under

which a boat could pass. The hills which form its shores are so steep,

and the woods on them were then so high, that, as you looked down from

the west end, it had the appearance of an amphitheatre for some kind of

sylvan spectacle. I have spent many an hour, when I was younger,

floating over its surface as the zephyr willed, having paddled my boat

to the middle, and lying on my back across the seats, in a summer

forenoon, dreaming awake, until I was aroused by the boat touching the

sand, and I arose to see what shore my fates had impelled me to; days

when idleness was the most attractive and productive industry. Many a

forenoon have I stolen away, preferring to spend thus the most valued

part of the day; for I was rich, if not in money, in sunny hours and

summer days, and spent them lavishly; nor do I regret that I did not

waste more of them in the workshop or the teacher’s desk. But since I

left those shores the woodchoppers have still further laid them waste,

and now for many a year there will be no more rambling through the

aisles of the wood, with occasional vistas through which you see the

water. My Muse may be excused if she is silent henceforth. How can you

expect the birds to sing when their groves are cut down?

Now the trunks of trees on the bottom, and the old log canoe, and the

dark surrounding woods, are gone, and the villagers, who scarcely know

where it lies, instead of going to the pond to bathe or drink, are

thinking to bring its water, which should be as sacred as the Ganges at

least, to the village in a pipe, to wash their dishes with!—to earn

their Walden by the turning of a cock or drawing of a plug! That

devilish Iron Horse, whose ear-rending neigh is heard throughout the

town, has muddied the Boiling Spring with his foot, and he it is that

has browsed off all the woods on Walden shore, that Trojan horse, with

a thousand men in his belly, introduced by mercenary Greeks! Where is

the country’s champion, the Moore of Moore Hill, to meet him at the

Deep Cut and thrust an avenging lance between the ribs of the bloated

pest?

Nevertheless, of all the characters I have known, perhaps Walden wears

best, and best preserves its purity. Many men have been likened to it,

but few deserve that honor. Though the woodchoppers have laid bare

first this shore and then that, and the Irish have built their sties by

it, and the railroad has infringed on its border, and the ice-men have

skimmed it once, it is itself unchanged, the same water which my

youthful eyes fell on; all the change is in me. It has not acquired one

permanent wrinkle after all its ripples. It is perennially young, and I

may stand and see a swallow dip apparently to pick an insect from its

surface as of yore. It struck me again tonight, as if I had not seen it

almost daily for more than twenty years,—Why, here is Walden, the same

woodland lake that I discovered so many years ago; where a forest was

cut down last winter another is springing up by its shore as lustily as

ever; the same thought is welling up to its surface that was then; it

is the same liquid joy and happiness to itself and its Maker, ay, and

it \_may\_ be to me. It is the work of a brave man surely, in whom there

was no guile! He rounded this water with his hand, deepened and

clarified it in his thought, and in his will bequeathed it to Concord.

I see by its face that it is visited by the same reflection; and I can

almost say, Walden, is it you?

It is no dream of mine,

To ornament a line;

I cannot come nearer to God and Heaven

Than I live to Walden even.

I am its stony shore,

And the breeze that passes o’er;

In the hollow of my hand

Are its water and its sand,

And its deepest resort

Lies high in my thought.

The cars never pause to look at it; yet I fancy that the engineers and

firemen and brakemen, and those passengers who have a season ticket and

see it often, are better men for the sight. The engineer does not

forget at night, or his nature does not, that he has beheld this vision

of serenity and purity once at least during the day. Though seen but

once, it helps to wash out State-street and the engine’s soot. One

proposes that it be called “God’s Drop.”

I have said that Walden has no visible inlet nor outlet, but it is on

the one hand distantly and indirectly related to Flint’s Pond, which is

more elevated, by a chain of small ponds coming from that quarter, and

on the other directly and manifestly to Concord River, which is lower,

by a similar chain of ponds through which in some other geological

period it may have flowed, and by a little digging, which God forbid,

it can be made to flow thither again. If by living thus reserved and

austere, like a hermit in the woods, so long, it has acquired such

wonderful purity, who would not regret that the comparatively impure

waters of Flint’s Pond should be mingled with it, or itself should ever

go to waste its sweetness in the ocean wave?

Flint’s, or Sandy Pond, in Lincoln, our greatest lake and inland sea,

lies about a mile east of Walden. It is much larger, being said to

contain one hundred and ninety-seven acres, and is more fertile in

fish; but it is comparatively shallow, and not remarkably pure. A walk

through the woods thither was often my recreation. It was worth the

while, if only to feel the wind blow on your cheek freely, and see the

waves run, and remember the life of mariners. I went a-chestnutting

there in the fall, on windy days, when the nuts were dropping into the

water and were washed to my feet; and one day, as I crept along its

sedgy shore, the fresh spray blowing in my face, I came upon the

mouldering wreck of a boat, the sides gone, and hardly more than the

impression of its flat bottom left amid the rushes; yet its model was

sharply defined, as if it were a large decayed pad, with its veins. It

was as impressive a wreck as one could imagine on the sea-shore, and

had as good a moral. It is by this time mere vegetable mould and

undistinguishable pond shore, through which rushes and flags have

pushed up. I used to admire the ripple marks on the sandy bottom, at

the north end of this pond, made firm and hard to the feet of the wader

by the pressure of the water, and the rushes which grew in Indian file,

in waving lines, corresponding to these marks, rank behind rank, as if

the waves had planted them. There also I have found, in considerable

quantities, curious balls, composed apparently of fine grass or roots,

of pipewort perhaps, from half an inch to four inches in diameter, and

perfectly spherical. These wash back and forth in shallow water on a

sandy bottom, and are sometimes cast on the shore. They are either

solid grass, or have a little sand in the middle. At first you would

say that they were formed by the action of the waves, like a pebble;

yet the smallest are made of equally coarse materials, half an inch

long, and they are produced only at one season of the year. Moreover,

the waves, I suspect, do not so much construct as wear down a material

which has already acquired consistency. They preserve their form when

dry for an indefinite period.

\_Flint’s Pond!\_ Such is the poverty of our nomenclature. What right had

the unclean and stupid farmer, whose farm abutted on this sky water,

whose shores he has ruthlessly laid bare, to give his name to it? Some

skin-flint, who loved better the reflecting surface of a dollar, or a

bright cent, in which he could see his own brazen face; who regarded

even the wild ducks which settled in it as trespassers; his fingers

grown into crooked and horny talons from the long habit of grasping

harpy-like;—so it is not named for me. I go not there to see him nor to

hear of him; who never \_saw\_ it, who never bathed in it, who never

loved it, who never protected it, who never spoke a good word for it,

nor thanked God that he had made it. Rather let it be named from the

fishes that swim in it, the wild fowl or quadrupeds which frequent it,

the wild flowers which grow by its shores, or some wild man or child

the thread of whose history is interwoven with its own; not from him

who could show no title to it but the deed which a like-minded neighbor

or legislature gave him,—him who thought only of its money value; whose

presence perchance cursed all the shore; who exhausted the land around

it, and would fain have exhausted the waters within it; who regretted

only that it was not English hay or cranberry meadow,—there was nothing

to redeem it, forsooth, in his eyes,—and would have drained and sold it

for the mud at its bottom. It did not turn his mill, and it was no

\_privilege\_ to him to behold it. I respect not his labors, his farm

where every thing has its price; who would carry the landscape, who

would carry his God, to market, if he could get any thing for him; who

goes to market \_for\_ his god as it is; on whose farm nothing grows

free, whose fields bear no crops, whose meadows no flowers, whose trees

no fruits, but dollars; who loves not the beauty of his fruits, whose

fruits are not ripe for him till they are turned to dollars. Give me

the poverty that enjoys true wealth. Farmers are respectable and

interesting to me in proportion as they are poor,—poor farmers. A model

farm! where the house stands like a fungus in a muck-heap, chambers for

men, horses, oxen, and swine, cleansed and uncleansed, all contiguous

to one another! Stocked with men! A great grease-spot, redolent of

manures and buttermilk! Under a high state of cultivation, being

manured with the hearts and brains of men! As if you were to raise your

potatoes in the church-yard! Such is a model farm.

No, no; if the fairest features of the landscape are to be named after

men, let them be the noblest and worthiest men alone. Let our lakes

receive as true names at least as the Icarian Sea, where “still the

shore” a “brave attempt resounds.”

Goose Pond, of small extent, is on my way to Flint’s; Fair-Haven, an

expansion of Concord River, said to contain some seventy acres, is a

mile south-west; and White Pond, of about forty acres, is a mile and a

half beyond Fair-Haven. This is my lake country. These, with Concord

River, are my water privileges; and night and day, year in year out,

they grind such grist as I carry to them.

Since the woodcutters, and the railroad, and I myself have profaned

Walden, perhaps the most attractive, if not the most beautiful, of all

our lakes, the gem of the woods, is White Pond;—a poor name from its

commonness, whether derived from the remarkable purity of its waters or

the color of its sands. In these as in other respects, however, it is a

lesser twin of Walden. They are so much alike that you would say they

must be connected under ground. It has the same stony shore, and its

waters are of the same hue. As at Walden, in sultry dog-day weather,

looking down through the woods on some of its bays which are not so

deep but that the reflection from the bottom tinges them, its waters

are of a misty bluish-green or glaucous color. Many years since I used

to go there to collect the sand by cart-loads, to make sand-paper with,

and I have continued to visit it ever since. One who frequents it

proposes to call it Virid Lake. Perhaps it might be called Yellow-Pine

Lake, from the following circumstance. About fifteen years ago you

could see the top of a pitch-pine, of the kind called yellow-pine

hereabouts, though it is not a distinct species, projecting above the

surface in deep water, many rods from the shore. It was even supposed

by some that the pond had sunk, and this was one of the primitive

forest that formerly stood there. I find that even so long ago as 1792,

in a “Topographical Description of the Town of Concord,” by one of its

citizens, in the Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society,

the author, after speaking of Walden and White Ponds, adds: “In the

middle of the latter may be seen, when the water is very low, a tree

which appears as if it grew in the place where it now stands, although

the roots are fifty feet below the surface of the water; the top of

this tree is broken off, and at that place measures fourteen inches in

diameter.” In the spring of ’49 I talked with the man who lives nearest

the pond in Sudbury, who told me that it was he who got out this tree

ten or fifteen years before. As near as he could remember, it stood

twelve or fifteen rods from the shore, where the water was thirty or

forty feet deep. It was in the winter, and he had been getting out ice

in the forenoon, and had resolved that in the afternoon, with the aid

of his neighbors, he would take out the old yellow-pine. He sawed a

channel in the ice toward the shore, and hauled it over and along and

out on to the ice with oxen; but, before he had gone far in his work,

he was surprised to find that it was wrong end upward, with the stumps

of the branches pointing down, and the small end firmly fastened in the

sandy bottom. It was about a foot in diameter at the big end, and he

had expected to get a good saw-log, but it was so rotten as to be fit

only for fuel, if for that. He had some of it in his shed then. There

were marks of an axe and of woodpeckers on the butt. He thought that it

might have been a dead tree on the shore, but was finally blown over

into the pond, and after the top had become waterlogged, while the

butt-end was still dry and light, had drifted out and sunk wrong end

up. His father, eighty years old, could not remember when it was not

there. Several pretty large logs may still be seen lying on the bottom,

where, owing to the undulation of the surface, they look like huge

water snakes in motion.

This pond has rarely been profaned by a boat, for there is little in it

to tempt a fisherman. Instead of the white lily, which requires mud, or

the common sweet flag, the blue flag (\_Iris versicolor\_) grows thinly

in the pure water, rising from the stony bottom all around the shore,

where it is visited by humming birds in June; and the color both of its

bluish blades and its flowers, and especially their reflections, are in

singular harmony with the glaucous water.

White Pond and Walden are great crystals on the surface of the earth,

Lakes of Light. If they were permanently congealed, and small enough to

be clutched, they would, perchance, be carried off by slaves, like

precious stones, to adorn the heads of emperors; but being liquid, and

ample, and secured to us and our successors forever, we disregard them,

and run after the diamond of Kohinoor. They are too pure to have a

market value; they contain no muck. How much more beautiful than our

lives, how much more transparent than our characters, are they! We

never learned meanness of them. How much fairer than the pool before

the farmer’s door, in which his ducks swim! Hither the clean wild ducks

come. Nature has no human inhabitant who appreciates her. The birds

with their plumage and their notes are in harmony with the flowers, but

what youth or maiden conspires with the wild luxuriant beauty of

Nature? She flourishes most alone, far from the towns where they

reside. Talk of heaven! ye disgrace earth.

Baker Farm

Sometimes I rambled to pine groves, standing like temples, or like

fleets at sea, full-rigged, with wavy boughs, and rippling with light,

so soft and green and shady that the Druids would have forsaken their

oaks to worship in them; or to the cedar wood beyond Flint’s Pond,

where the trees, covered with hoary blue berries, spiring higher and

higher, are fit to stand before Valhalla, and the creeping juniper

covers the ground with wreaths full of fruit; or to swamps where the

usnea lichen hangs in festoons from the white-spruce trees, and

toad-stools, round tables of the swamp gods, cover the ground, and more

beautiful fungi adorn the stumps, like butterflies or shells, vegetable

winkles; where the swamp-pink and dogwood grow, the red alder-berry

glows like eyes of imps, the waxwork grooves and crushes the hardest

woods in its folds, and the wild-holly berries make the beholder forget

his home with their beauty, and he is dazzled and tempted by nameless

other wild forbidden fruits, too fair for mortal taste. Instead of

calling on some scholar, I paid many a visit to particular trees, of

kinds which are rare in this neighborhood, standing far away in the

middle of some pasture, or in the depths of a wood or swamp, or on a

hill-top; such as the black-birch, of which we have some handsome

specimens two feet in diameter; its cousin, the yellow birch, with its

loose golden vest, perfumed like the first; the beech, which has so

neat a bole and beautifully lichen-painted, perfect in all its details,

of which, excepting scattered specimens, I know but one small grove of

sizable trees left in the township, supposed by some to have been

planted by the pigeons that were once baited with beech nuts near by;

it is worth the while to see the silver grain sparkle when you split

this wood; the bass; the hornbeam; the \_Celtis occidentalis\_, or false

elm, of which we have but one well-grown; some taller mast of a pine, a

shingle tree, or a more perfect hemlock than usual, standing like a

pagoda in the midst of the woods; and many others I could mention.

These were the shrines I visited both summer and winter.

Once it chanced that I stood in the very abutment of a rainbow’s arch,

which filled the lower stratum of the atmosphere, tinging the grass and

leaves around, and dazzling me as if I looked through colored crystal.

It was a lake of rainbow light, in which, for a short while, I lived

like a dolphin. If it had lasted longer it might have tinged my

employments and life. As I walked on the railroad causeway, I used to

wonder at the halo of light around my shadow, and would fain fancy

myself one of the elect. One who visited me declared that the shadows

of some Irishmen before him had no halo about them, that it was only

natives that were so distinguished. Benvenuto Cellini tells us in his

memoirs, that, after a certain terrible dream or vision which he had

during his confinement in the castle of St. Angelo, a resplendent light

appeared over the shadow of his head at morning and evening, whether he

was in Italy or France, and it was particularly conspicuous when the

grass was moist with dew. This was probably the same phenomenon to

which I have referred, which is especially observed in the morning, but

also at other times, and even by moonlight. Though a constant one, it

is not commonly noticed, and, in the case of an excitable imagination

like Cellini’s, it would be basis enough for superstition. Beside, he

tells us that he showed it to very few. But are they not indeed

distinguished who are conscious that they are regarded at all?

I set out one afternoon to go a-fishing to Fair-Haven, through the

woods, to eke out my scanty fare of vegetables. My way led through

Pleasant Meadow, an adjunct of the Baker Farm, that retreat of which a

poet has since sung, beginning,—

“Thy entry is a pleasant field,

Which some mossy fruit trees yield

Partly to a ruddy brook,

By gliding musquash undertook,

And mercurial trout,

Darting about.”

I thought of living there before I went to Walden. I “hooked” the

apples, leaped the brook, and scared the musquash and the trout. It was

one of those afternoons which seem indefinitely long before one, in

which many events may happen, a large portion of our natural life,

though it was already half spent when I started. By the way there came

up a shower, which compelled me to stand half an hour under a pine,

piling boughs over my head, and wearing my handkerchief for a shed; and

when at length I had made one cast over the pickerel-weed, standing up

to my middle in water, I found myself suddenly in the shadow of a

cloud, and the thunder began to rumble with such emphasis that I could

do no more than listen to it. The gods must be proud, thought I, with

such forked flashes to rout a poor unarmed fisherman. So I made haste

for shelter to the nearest hut, which stood half a mile from any road,

but so much the nearer to the pond, and had long been uninhabited:—

“And here a poet builded,

In the completed years,

For behold a trivial cabin

That to destruction steers.”

So the Muse fables. But therein, as I found, dwelt now John Field, an

Irishman, and his wife, and several children, from the broad-faced boy

who assisted his father at his work, and now came running by his side

from the bog to escape the rain, to the wrinkled, sibyl-like,

cone-headed infant that sat upon its father’s knee as in the palaces of

nobles, and looked out from its home in the midst of wet and hunger

inquisitively upon the stranger, with the privilege of infancy, not

knowing but it was the last of a noble line, and the hope and cynosure

of the world, instead of John Field’s poor starveling brat. There we

sat together under that part of the roof which leaked the least, while

it showered and thundered without. I had sat there many times of old

before the ship was built that floated his family to America. An

honest, hard-working, but shiftless man plainly was John Field; and his

wife, she too was brave to cook so many successive dinners in the

recesses of that lofty stove; with round greasy face and bare breast,

still thinking to improve her condition one day; with the never absent

mop in one hand, and yet no effects of it visible anywhere. The

chickens, which had also taken shelter here from the rain, stalked

about the room like members of the family, too humanized methought to

roast well. They stood and looked in my eye or pecked at my shoe

significantly. Meanwhile my host told me his story, how hard he worked

“bogging” for a neighboring farmer, turning up a meadow with a spade or

bog hoe at the rate of ten dollars an acre and the use of the land with

manure for one year, and his little broad-faced son worked cheerfully

at his father’s side the while, not knowing how poor a bargain the

latter had made. I tried to help him with my experience, telling him

that he was one of my nearest neighbors, and that I too, who came

a-fishing here, and looked like a loafer, was getting my living like

himself; that I lived in a tight, light, and clean house, which hardly

cost more than the annual rent of such a ruin as his commonly amounts

to; and how, if he chose, he might in a month or two build himself a

palace of his own; that I did not use tea, nor coffee, nor butter, nor

milk, nor fresh meat, and so did not have to work to get them; again,

as I did not work hard, I did not have to eat hard, and it cost me but

a trifle for my food; but as he began with tea, and coffee, and butter,

and milk, and beef, he had to work hard to pay for them, and when he

had worked hard he had to eat hard again to repair the waste of his

system,—and so it was as broad as it was long, indeed it was broader

than it was long, for he was discontented and wasted his life into the

bargain; and yet he had rated it as a gain in coming to America, that

here you could get tea, and coffee, and meat every day. But the only

true America is that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a

mode of life as may enable you to do without these, and where the state

does not endeavor to compel you to sustain the slavery and war and

other superfluous expenses which directly or indirectly result from the

use of such things. For I purposely talked to him as if he were a

philosopher, or desired to be one. I should be glad if all the meadows

on the earth were left in a wild state, if that were the consequence of

men’s beginning to redeem themselves. A man will not need to study

history to find out what is best for his own culture. But alas! the

culture of an Irishman is an enterprise to be undertaken with a sort of

moral bog hoe. I told him, that as he worked so hard at bogging, he

required thick boots and stout clothing, which yet were soon soiled and

worn out, but I wore light shoes and thin clothing, which cost not half

so much, though he might think that I was dressed like a gentleman,

(which, however, was not the case,) and in an hour or two, without

labor, but as a recreation, I could, if I wished, catch as many fish as

I should want for two days, or earn enough money to support me a week.

If he and his family would live simply, they might all go

a-huckleberrying in the summer for their amusement. John heaved a sigh

at this, and his wife stared with arms a-kimbo, and both appeared to be

wondering if they had capital enough to begin such a course with, or

arithmetic enough to carry it through. It was sailing by dead reckoning

to them, and they saw not clearly how to make their port so; therefore

I suppose they still take life bravely, after their fashion, face to

face, giving it tooth and nail, not having skill to split its massive

columns with any fine entering wedge, and rout it in detail;—thinking

to deal with it roughly, as one should handle a thistle. But they fight

at an overwhelming disadvantage,—living, John Field, alas! without

arithmetic, and failing so.

“Do you ever fish?” I asked. “Oh yes, I catch a mess now and then when

I am lying by; good perch I catch.” “What’s your bait?” “I catch

shiners with fish-worms, and bait the perch with them.” “You’d better

go now, John,” said his wife, with glistening and hopeful face; but

John demurred.

The shower was now over, and a rainbow above the eastern woods promised

a fair evening; so I took my departure. When I had got without I asked

for a drink, hoping to get a sight of the well bottom, to complete my

survey of the premises; but there, alas! are shallows and quicksands,

and rope broken withal, and bucket irrecoverable. Meanwhile the right

culinary vessel was selected, water was seemingly distilled, and after

consultation and long delay passed out to the thirsty one,—not yet

suffered to cool, not yet to settle. Such gruel sustains life here, I

thought; so, shutting my eyes, and excluding the motes by a skilfully

directed under-current, I drank to genuine hospitality the heartiest

draught I could. I am not squeamish in such cases when manners are

concerned.

As I was leaving the Irishman’s roof after the rain, bending my steps

again to the pond, my haste to catch pickerel, wading in retired

meadows, in sloughs and bog-holes, in forlorn and savage places,

appeared for an instant trivial to me who had been sent to school and

college; but as I ran down the hill toward the reddening west, with the

rainbow over my shoulder, and some faint tinkling sounds borne to my

ear through the cleansed air, from I know not what quarter, my Good

Genius seemed to say,—Go fish and hunt far and wide day by day,—farther

and wider,—and rest thee by many brooks and hearth-sides without

misgiving. Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth. Rise free

from care before the dawn, and seek adventures. Let the noon find thee

by other lakes, and the night overtake thee everywhere at home. There

are no larger fields than these, no worthier games than may here be

played. Grow wild according to thy nature, like these sedges and

brakes, which will never become English hay. Let the thunder rumble;

what if it threaten ruin to farmers’ crops? that is not its errand to

thee. Take shelter under the cloud, while they flee to carts and sheds.

Let not to get a living be thy trade, but thy sport. Enjoy the land,

but own it not. Through want of enterprise and faith men are where they

are, buying and selling, and spending their lives like serfs.

O Baker Farm!

“Landscape where the richest element

Is a little sunshine innocent.” \* \*

“No one runs to revel

On thy rail-fenced lea.” \* \*

“Debate with no man hast thou,

With questions art never perplexed,

As tame at the first sight as now,

In thy plain russet gabardine dressed.” \* \*

“Come ye who love,

And ye who hate,

Children of the Holy Dove,

And Guy Faux of the state,

And hang conspiracies

From the tough rafters of the trees!”

Men come tamely home at night only from the next field or street, where

their household echoes haunt, and their life pines because it breathes

its own breath over again; their shadows morning and evening reach

farther than their daily steps. We should come home from far, from

adventures, and perils, and discoveries every day, with new experience

and character.

Before I had reached the pond some fresh impulse had brought out John

Field, with altered mind, letting go “bogging” ere this sunset. But he,

poor man, disturbed only a couple of fins while I was catching a fair

string, and he said it was his luck; but when we changed seats in the

boat luck changed seats too. Poor John Field!—I trust he does not read

this, unless he will improve by it,—thinking to live by some derivative

old country mode in this primitive new country,—to catch perch with

shiners. It is good bait sometimes, I allow. With his horizon all his

own, yet he a poor man, born to be poor, with his inherited Irish

poverty or poor life, his Adam’s grandmother and boggy ways, not to

rise in this world, he nor his posterity, till their wading webbed

bog-trotting feet get \_talaria\_ to their heels.

Higher Laws

As I came home through the woods with my string of fish, trailing my

pole, it being now quite dark, I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck

stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight,

and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was

hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented. Once or

twice, however, while I lived at the pond, I found myself ranging the

woods, like a half-starved hound, with a strange abandonment, seeking

some kind of venison which I might devour, and no morsel could have

been too savage for me. The wildest scenes had become unaccountably

familiar. I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a

higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another

toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I

love the wild not less than the good. The wildness and adventure that

are in fishing still recommended it to me. I like sometimes to take

rank hold on life and spend my day more as the animals do. Perhaps I

have owed to this employment and to hunting, when quite young, my

closest acquaintance with Nature. They early introduce us to and detain

us in scenery with which otherwise, at that age, we should have little

acquaintance. Fishermen, hunters, woodchoppers, and others, spending

their lives in the fields and woods, in a peculiar sense a part of

Nature themselves, are often in a more favorable mood for observing

her, in the intervals of their pursuits, than philosophers or poets

even, who approach her with expectation. She is not afraid to exhibit

herself to them. The traveller on the prairie is naturally a hunter, on

the head waters of the Missouri and Columbia a trapper, and at the

Falls of St. Mary a fisherman. He who is only a traveller learns things

at second-hand and by the halves, and is poor authority. We are most

interested when science reports what those men already know practically

or instinctively, for that alone is a true \_humanity\_, or account of

human experience.

They mistake who assert that the Yankee has few amusements, because he

has not so many public holidays, and men and boys do not play so many

games as they do in England, for here the more primitive but solitary

amusements of hunting fishing and the like have not yet given place to

the former. Almost every New England boy among my contemporaries

shouldered a fowling piece between the ages of ten and fourteen; and

his hunting and fishing grounds were not limited, like the preserves of

an English nobleman, but were more boundless even than those of a

savage. No wonder, then, that he did not oftener stay to play on the

common. But already a change is taking place, owing, not to an

increased humanity, but to an increased scarcity of game, for perhaps

the hunter is the greatest friend of the animals hunted, not excepting

the Humane Society.

Moreover, when at the pond, I wished sometimes to add fish to my fare

for variety. I have actually fished from the same kind of necessity

that the first fishers did. Whatever humanity I might conjure up

against it was all factitious, and concerned my philosophy more than my

feelings. I speak of fishing only now, for I had long felt differently

about fowling, and sold my gun before I went to the woods. Not that I

am less humane than others, but I did not perceive that my feelings

were much affected. I did not pity the fishes nor the worms. This was

habit. As for fowling, during the last years that I carried a gun my

excuse was that I was studying ornithology, and sought only new or rare

birds. But I confess that I am now inclined to think that there is a

finer way of studying ornithology than this. It requires so much closer

attention to the habits of the birds, that, if for that reason only, I

have been willing to omit the gun. Yet notwithstanding the objection on

the score of humanity, I am compelled to doubt if equally valuable

sports are ever substituted for these; and when some of my friends have

asked me anxiously about their boys, whether they should let them hunt,

I have answered, yes,—remembering that it was one of the best parts of

my education,—\_make\_ them hunters, though sportsmen only at first, if

possible, mighty hunters at last, so that they shall not find game

large enough for them in this or any vegetable wilderness,—hunters as

well as fishers of men. Thus far I am of the opinion of Chaucer’s nun,

who

“yave not of the text a pulled hen

That saith that hunters ben not holy men.”

There is a period in the history of the individual, as of the race,

when the hunters are the “best men,” as the Algonquins called them. We

cannot but pity the boy who has never fired a gun; he is no more

humane, while his education has been sadly neglected. This was my

answer with respect to those youths who were bent on this pursuit,

trusting that they would soon outgrow it. No humane being, past the

thoughtless age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature which

holds its life by the same tenure that he does. The hare in its

extremity cries like a child. I warn you, mothers, that my sympathies

do not always make the usual phil-\_anthropic\_ distinctions.

Such is oftenest the young man’s introduction to the forest, and the

most original part of himself. He goes thither at first as a hunter and

fisher, until at last, if he has the seeds of a better life in him, he

distinguishes his proper objects, as a poet or naturalist it may be,

and leaves the gun and fish-pole behind. The mass of men are still and

always young in this respect. In some countries a hunting parson is no

uncommon sight. Such a one might make a good shepherd’s dog, but is far

from being the Good Shepherd. I have been surprised to consider that

the only obvious employment, except wood-chopping, ice-cutting, or the

like business, which ever to my knowledge detained at Walden Pond for a

whole half day any of my fellow-citizens, whether fathers or children

of the town, with just one exception, was fishing. Commonly they did

not think that they were lucky, or well paid for their time, unless

they got a long string of fish, though they had the opportunity of

seeing the pond all the while. They might go there a thousand times

before the sediment of fishing would sink to the bottom and leave their

purpose pure; but no doubt such a clarifying process would be going on

all the while. The governor and his council faintly remember the pond,

for they went a-fishing there when they were boys; but now they are too

old and dignified to go a-fishing, and so they know it no more forever.

Yet even they expect to go to heaven at last. If the legislature

regards it, it is chiefly to regulate the number of hooks to be used

there; but they know nothing about the hook of hooks with which to

angle for the pond itself, impaling the legislature for a bait. Thus,

even in civilized communities, the embryo man passes through the hunter

stage of development.

I have found repeatedly, of late years, that I cannot fish without

falling a little in self-respect. I have tried it again and again. I

have skill at it, and, like many of my fellows, a certain instinct for

it, which revives from time to time, but always when I have done I feel

that it would have been better if I had not fished. I think that I do

not mistake. It is a faint intimation, yet so are the first streaks of

morning. There is unquestionably this instinct in me which belongs to

the lower orders of creation; yet with every year I am less a

fisherman, though without more humanity or even wisdom; at present I am

no fisherman at all. But I see that if I were to live in a wilderness I

should again be tempted to become a fisher and hunter in earnest.

Beside, there is something essentially unclean about this diet and all

flesh, and I began to see where housework commences, and whence the

endeavor, which costs so much, to wear a tidy and respectable

appearance each day, to keep the house sweet and free from all ill

odors and sights. Having been my own butcher and scullion and cook, as

well as the gentleman for whom the dishes were served up, I can speak

from an unusually complete experience. The practical objection to

animal food in my case was its uncleanness; and, besides, when I had

caught and cleaned and cooked and eaten my fish, they seemed not to

have fed me essentially. It was insignificant and unnecessary, and cost

more than it came to. A little bread or a few potatoes would have done

as well, with less trouble and filth. Like many of my contemporaries, I

had rarely for many years used animal food, or tea, or coffee, &c.; not

so much because of any ill effects which I had traced to them, as

because they were not agreeable to my imagination. The repugnance to

animal food is not the effect of experience, but is an instinct. It

appeared more beautiful to live low and fare hard in many respects; and

though I never did so, I went far enough to please my imagination. I

believe that every man who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher

or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly

inclined to abstain from animal food, and from much food of any kind.

It is a significant fact, stated by entomologists, I find it in Kirby

and Spence, that “some insects in their perfect state, though furnished

with organs of feeding, make no use of them;” and they lay it down as

“a general rule, that almost all insects in this state eat much less

than in that of larvæ. The voracious caterpillar when transformed into

a butterfly,” . . “and the gluttonous maggot when become a fly,”

content themselves with a drop or two of honey or some other sweet

liquid. The abdomen under the wings of the butterfly still represents

the larva. This is the tid-bit which tempts his insectivorous fate. The

gross feeder is a man in the larva state; and there are whole nations

in that condition, nations without fancy or imagination, whose vast

abdomens betray them.

It is hard to provide and cook so simple and clean a diet as will not

offend the imagination; but this, I think, is to be fed when we feed

the body; they should both sit down at the same table. Yet perhaps this

may be done. The fruits eaten temperately need not make us ashamed of

our appetites, nor interrupt the worthiest pursuits. But put an extra

condiment into your dish, and it will poison you. It is not worth the

while to live by rich cookery. Most men would feel shame if caught

preparing with their own hands precisely such a dinner, whether of

animal or vegetable food, as is every day prepared for them by others.

Yet till this is otherwise we are not civilized, and, if gentlemen and

ladies, are not true men and women. This certainly suggests what change

is to be made. It may be vain to ask why the imagination will not be

reconciled to flesh and fat. I am satisfied that it is not. Is it not a

reproach that man is a carnivorous animal? True, he can and does live,

in a great measure, by preying on other animals; but this is a

miserable way,—as any one who will go to snaring rabbits, or

slaughtering lambs, may learn,—and he will be regarded as a benefactor

of his race who shall teach man to confine himself to a more innocent

and wholesome diet. Whatever my own practice may be, I have no doubt

that it is a part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual

improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage

tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with

the more civilized.

If one listens to the faintest but constant suggestions of his genius,

which are certainly true, he sees not to what extremes, or even

insanity, it may lead him; and yet that way, as he grows more resolute

and faithful, his road lies. The faintest assured objection which one

healthy man feels will at length prevail over the arguments and customs

of mankind. No man ever followed his genius till it misled him. Though

the result were bodily weakness, yet perhaps no one can say that the

consequences were to be regretted, for these were a life in conformity

to higher principles. If the day and the night are such that you greet

them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and

sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal,—that

is your success. All nature is your congratulation, and you have cause

momentarily to bless yourself. The greatest gains and values are

farthest from being appreciated. We easily come to doubt if they exist.

We soon forget them. They are the highest reality. Perhaps the facts

most astounding and most real are never communicated by man to man. The

true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and

indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little

star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched.

Yet, for my part, I was never unusually squeamish; I could sometimes

eat a fried rat with a good relish, if it were necessary. I am glad to

have drunk water so long, for the same reason that I prefer the natural

sky to an opium-eater’s heaven. I would fain keep sober always; and

there are infinite degrees of drunkenness. I believe that water is the

only drink for a wise man; wine is not so noble a liquor; and think of

dashing the hopes of a morning with a cup of warm coffee, or of an

evening with a dish of tea! Ah, how low I fall when I am tempted by

them! Even music may be intoxicating. Such apparently slight causes

destroyed Greece and Rome, and will destroy England and America. Of all

ebriosity, who does not prefer to be intoxicated by the air he

breathes? I have found it to be the most serious objection to coarse

labors long continued, that they compelled me to eat and drink coarsely

also. But to tell the truth, I find myself at present somewhat less

particular in these respects. I carry less religion to the table, ask

no blessing; not because I am wiser than I was, but, I am obliged to

confess, because, however much it is to be regretted, with years I have

grown more coarse and indifferent. Perhaps these questions are

entertained only in youth, as most believe of poetry. My practice is

“nowhere,” my opinion is here. Nevertheless I am far from regarding

myself as one of those privileged ones to whom the Ved refers when it

says, that “he who has true faith in the Omnipresent Supreme Being may

eat all that exists,” that is, is not bound to inquire what is his

food, or who prepares it; and even in their case it is to be observed,

as a Hindoo commentator has remarked, that the Vedant limits this

privilege to “the time of distress.”

Who has not sometimes derived an inexpressible satisfaction from his

food in which appetite had no share? I have been thrilled to think that

I owed a mental perception to the commonly gross sense of taste, that I

have been inspired through the palate, that some berries which I had

eaten on a hill-side had fed my genius. “The soul not being mistress of

herself,” says Thseng-tseu, “one looks, and one does not see; one

listens, and one does not hear; one eats, and one does not know the

savor of food.” He who distinguishes the true savor of his food can

never be a glutton; he who does not cannot be otherwise. A puritan may

go to his brown-bread crust with as gross an appetite as ever an

alderman to his turtle. Not that food which entereth into the mouth

defileth a man, but the appetite with which it is eaten. It is neither

the quality nor the quantity, but the devotion to sensual savors; when

that which is eaten is not a viand to sustain our animal, or inspire

our spiritual life, but food for the worms that possess us. If the

hunter has a taste for mud-turtles, muskrats, and other such savage

tid-bits, the fine lady indulges a taste for jelly made of a calf’s

foot, or for sardines from over the sea, and they are even. He goes to

the mill-pond, she to her preserve-pot. The wonder is how they, how you

and I, can live this slimy, beastly life, eating and drinking.

Our whole life is startlingly moral. There is never an instant’s truce

between virtue and vice. Goodness is the only investment that never

fails. In the music of the harp which trembles round the world it is

the insisting on this which thrills us. The harp is the travelling

patterer for the Universe’s Insurance Company, recommending its laws,

and our little goodness is all the assessment that we pay. Though the

youth at last grows indifferent, the laws of the universe are not

indifferent, but are forever on the side of the most sensitive. Listen

to every zephyr for some reproof, for it is surely there, and he is

unfortunate who does not hear it. We cannot touch a string or move a

stop but the charming moral transfixes us. Many an irksome noise, go a

long way off, is heard as music, a proud sweet satire on the meanness

of our lives.

We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our

higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot

be wholly expelled; like the worms which, even in life and health,

occupy our bodies. Possibly we may withdraw from it, but never change

its nature. I fear that it may enjoy a certain health of its own; that

we may be well, yet not pure. The other day I picked up the lower jaw

of a hog, with white and sound teeth and tusks, which suggested that

there was an animal health and vigor distinct from the spiritual. This

creature succeeded by other means than temperance and purity. “That in

which men differ from brute beasts,” says Mencius, “is a thing very

inconsiderable; the common herd lose it very soon; superior men

preserve it carefully.” Who knows what sort of life would result if we

had attained to purity? If I knew so wise a man as could teach me

purity I would go to seek him forthwith. “A command over our passions,

and over the external senses of the body, and good acts, are declared

by the Ved to be indispensable in the mind’s approximation to God.” Yet

the spirit can for the time pervade and control every member and

function of the body, and transmute what in form is the grossest

sensuality into purity and devotion. The generative energy, which, when

we are loose, dissipates and makes us unclean, when we are continent

invigorates and inspires us. Chastity is the flowering of man; and what

are called Genius, Heroism, Holiness, and the like, are but various

fruits which succeed it. Man flows at once to God when the channel of

purity is open. By turns our purity inspires and our impurity casts us

down. He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him

day by day, and the divine being established. Perhaps there is none but

has cause for shame on account of the inferior and brutish nature to

which he is allied. I fear that we are such gods or demigods only as

fauns and satyrs, the divine allied to beasts, the creatures of

appetite, and that, to some extent, our very life is our disgrace.—

“How happy’s he who hath due place assigned

To his beasts and disafforested his mind!

\* \* \* \* \*

Can use this horse, goat, wolf, and ev’ry beast,

And is not ass himself to all the rest!

Else man not only is the herd of swine,

But he’s those devils too which did incline

Them to a headlong rage, and made them worse.”

All sensuality is one, though it takes many forms; all purity is one.

It is the same whether a man eat, or drink, or cohabit, or sleep

sensually. They are but one appetite, and we only need to see a person

do any one of these things to know how great a sensualist he is. The

impure can neither stand nor sit with purity. When the reptile is

attacked at one mouth of his burrow, he shows himself at another. If

you would be chaste, you must be temperate. What is chastity? How shall

a man know if he is chaste? He shall not know it. We have heard of this

virtue, but we know not what it is. We speak conformably to the rumor

which we have heard. From exertion come wisdom and purity; from sloth

ignorance and sensuality. In the student sensuality is a sluggish habit

of mind. An unclean person is universally a slothful one, one who sits

by a stove, whom the sun shines on prostrate, who reposes without being

fatigued. If you would avoid uncleanness, and all the sins, work

earnestly, though it be at cleaning a stable. Nature is hard to be

overcome, but she must be overcome. What avails it that you are

Christian, if you are not purer than the heathen, if you deny yourself

no more, if you are not more religious? I know of many systems of

religion esteemed heathenish whose precepts fill the reader with shame,

and provoke him to new endeavors, though it be to the performance of

rites merely.

I hesitate to say these things, but it is not because of the subject,—I

care not how obscene my \_words\_ are,—but because I cannot speak of them

without betraying my impurity. We discourse freely without shame of one

form of sensuality, and are silent about another. We are so degraded

that we cannot speak simply of the necessary functions of human nature.

In earlier ages, in some countries, every function was reverently

spoken of and regulated by law. Nothing was too trivial for the Hindoo

lawgiver, however offensive it may be to modern taste. He teaches how

to eat, drink, cohabit, void excrement and urine, and the like,

elevating what is mean, and does not falsely excuse himself by calling

these things trifles.

Every man is the builder of a temple, called his body, to the god he

worships, after a style purely his own, nor can he get off by hammering

marble instead. We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is

our own flesh and blood and bones. Any nobleness begins at once to

refine a man’s features, any meanness or sensuality to imbrute them.

John Farmer sat at his door one September evening, after a hard day’s

work, his mind still running on his labor more or less. Having bathed,

he sat down to re-create his intellectual man. It was a rather cool

evening, and some of his neighbors were apprehending a frost. He had

not attended to the train of his thoughts long when he heard some one

playing on a flute, and that sound harmonized with his mood. Still he

thought of his work; but the burden of his thought was, that though

this kept running in his head, and he found himself planning and

contriving it against his will, yet it concerned him very little. It

was no more than the scurf of his skin, which was constantly shuffled

off. But the notes of the flute came home to his ears out of a

different sphere from that he worked in, and suggested work for certain

faculties which slumbered in him. They gently did away with the street,

and the village, and the state in which he lived. A voice said to

him,—Why do you stay here and live this mean moiling life, when a

glorious existence is possible for you? Those same stars twinkle over

other fields than these.—But how to come out of this condition and

actually migrate thither? All that he could think of was to practise

some new austerity, to let his mind descend into his body and redeem

it, and treat himself with ever increasing respect.

Brute Neighbors

Sometimes I had a companion in my fishing, who came through the village

to my house from the other side of the town, and the catching of the

dinner was as much a social exercise as the eating of it.

\_Hermit.\_ I wonder what the world is doing now. I have not heard so

much as a locust over the sweet-fern these three hours. The pigeons are

all asleep upon their roosts,—no flutter from them. Was that a farmer’s

noon horn which sounded from beyond the woods just now? The hands are

coming in to boiled salt beef and cider and Indian bread. Why will men

worry themselves so? He that does not eat need not work. I wonder how

much they have reaped. Who would live there where a body can never

think for the barking of Bose? And O, the housekeeping! to keep bright

the devil’s door-knobs, and scour his tubs this bright day! Better not

keep a house. Say, some hollow tree; and then for morning calls and

dinner-parties! Only a woodpecker tapping. O, they swarm; the sun is

too warm there; they are born too far into life for me. I have water

from the spring, and a loaf of brown bread on the shelf.—Hark! I hear a

rustling of the leaves. Is it some ill-fed village hound yielding to

the instinct of the chase? or the lost pig which is said to be in these

woods, whose tracks I saw after the rain? It comes on apace; my sumachs

and sweet-briers tremble.—Eh, Mr. Poet, is it you? How do you like the

world to-day?

\_Poet.\_ See those clouds; how they hang! That’s the greatest thing I

have seen to-day. There’s nothing like it in old paintings, nothing

like it in foreign lands,—unless when we were off the coast of Spain.

That’s a true Mediterranean sky. I thought, as I have my living to get,

and have not eaten to-day, that I might go a-fishing. That’s the true

industry for poets. It is the only trade I have learned. Come, let’s

along.

\_Hermit.\_ I cannot resist. My brown bread will soon be gone. I will go

with you gladly soon, but I am just concluding a serious meditation. I

think that I am near the end of it. Leave me alone, then, for a while.

But that we may not be delayed, you shall be digging the bait

meanwhile. Angle-worms are rarely to be met with in these parts, where

the soil was never fattened with manure; the race is nearly extinct.

The sport of digging the bait is nearly equal to that of catching the

fish, when one’s appetite is not too keen; and this you may have all to

yourself to-day. I would advise you to set in the spade down yonder

among the ground-nuts, where you see the johnswort waving. I think that

I may warrant you one worm to every three sods you turn up, if you look

well in among the roots of the grass, as if you were weeding. Or, if

you choose to go farther, it will not be unwise, for I have found the

increase of fair bait to be very nearly as the squares of the

distances.

\_Hermit alone.\_ Let me see; where was I? Methinks I was nearly in this

frame of mind; the world lay about at this angle. Shall I go to heaven

or a-fishing? If I should soon bring this meditation to an end, would

another so sweet occasion be likely to offer? I was as near being

resolved into the essence of things as ever I was in my life. I fear my

thoughts will not come back to me. If it would do any good, I would

whistle for them. When they make us an offer, is it wise to say, We

will think of it? My thoughts have left no track, and I cannot find the

path again. What was it that I was thinking of? It was a very hazy day.

I will just try these three sentences of Con-fut-see; they may fetch

that state about again. I know not whether it was the dumps or a

budding ecstasy. Mem. There never is but one opportunity of a kind.

\_Poet.\_ How now, Hermit, is it too soon? I have got just thirteen whole

ones, beside several which are imperfect or undersized; but they will

do for the smaller fry; they do not cover up the hook so much. Those

village worms are quite too large; a shiner may make a meal off one

without finding the skewer.

\_Hermit.\_ Well, then, let’s be off. Shall we to the Concord? There’s

good sport there if the water be not too high.

Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world? Why has

man just these species of animals for his neighbors; as if nothing but

a mouse could have filled this crevice? I suspect that Pilpay & Co.

have put animals to their best use, for they are all beasts of burden,

in a sense, made to carry some portion of our thoughts.

The mice which haunted my house were not the common ones, which are

said to have been introduced into the country, but a wild native kind

not found in the village. I sent one to a distinguished naturalist, and

it interested him much. When I was building, one of these had its nest

underneath the house, and before I had laid the second floor, and swept

out the shavings, would come out regularly at lunch time and pick up

the crumbs at my feet. It probably had never seen a man before; and it

soon became quite familiar, and would run over my shoes and up my

clothes. It could readily ascend the sides of the room by short

impulses, like a squirrel, which it resembled in its motions. At

length, as I leaned with my elbow on the bench one day, it ran up my

clothes, and along my sleeve, and round and round the paper which held

my dinner, while I kept the latter close, and dodged and played at

bopeep with it; and when at last I held still a piece of cheese between

my thumb and finger, it came and nibbled it, sitting in my hand, and

afterward cleaned its face and paws, like a fly, and walked away.

A phœbe soon built in my shed, and a robin for protection in a pine

which grew against the house. In June the partridge (\_Tetrao

umbellus\_,) which is so shy a bird, led her brood past my windows, from

the woods in the rear to the front of my house, clucking and calling to

them like a hen, and in all her behavior proving herself the hen of the

woods. The young suddenly disperse on your approach, at a signal from

the mother, as if a whirlwind had swept them away, and they so exactly

resemble the dried leaves and twigs that many a traveler has placed his

foot in the midst of a brood, and heard the whir of the old bird as she

flew off, and her anxious calls and mewing, or seen her trail her wings

to attract his attention, without suspecting their neighborhood. The

parent will sometimes roll and spin round before you in such a

dishabille, that you cannot, for a few moments, detect what kind of

creature it is. The young squat still and flat, often running their

heads under a leaf, and mind only their mother’s directions given from

a distance, nor will your approach make them run again and betray

themselves. You may even tread on them, or have your eyes on them for a

minute, without discovering them. I have held them in my open hand at

such a time, and still their only care, obedient to their mother and

their instinct, was to squat there without fear or trembling. So

perfect is this instinct, that once, when I had laid them on the leaves

again, and one accidentally fell on its side, it was found with the

rest in exactly the same position ten minutes afterward. They are not

callow like the young of most birds, but more perfectly developed and

precocious even than chickens. The remarkably adult yet innocent

expression of their open and serene eyes is very memorable. All

intelligence seems reflected in them. They suggest not merely the

purity of infancy, but a wisdom clarified by experience. Such an eye

was not born when the bird was, but is coeval with the sky it reflects.

The woods do not yield another such a gem. The traveller does not often

look into such a limpid well. The ignorant or reckless sportsman often

shoots the parent at such a time, and leaves these innocents to fall a

prey to some prowling beast or bird, or gradually mingle with the

decaying leaves which they so much resemble. It is said that when

hatched by a hen they will directly disperse on some alarm, and so are

lost, for they never hear the mother’s call which gathers them again.

These were my hens and chickens.

It is remarkable how many creatures live wild and free though secret in

the woods, and still sustain themselves in the neighborhood of towns,

suspected by hunters only. How retired the otter manages to live here!

He grows to be four feet long, as big as a small boy, perhaps without

any human being getting a glimpse of him. I formerly saw the raccoon in

the woods behind where my house is built, and probably still heard

their whinnering at night. Commonly I rested an hour or two in the

shade at noon, after planting, and ate my lunch, and read a little by a

spring which was the source of a swamp and of a brook, oozing from

under Brister’s Hill, half a mile from my field. The approach to this

was through a succession of descending grassy hollows, full of young

pitch-pines, into a larger wood about the swamp. There, in a very

secluded and shaded spot, under a spreading white-pine, there was yet a

clean, firm sward to sit on. I had dug out the spring and made a well

of clear gray water, where I could dip up a pailful without roiling it,

and thither I went for this purpose almost every day in midsummer, when

the pond was warmest. Thither, too, the wood-cock led her brood, to

probe the mud for worms, flying but a foot above them down the bank,

while they ran in a troop beneath; but at last, spying me, she would

leave her young and circle round and round me, nearer and nearer till

within four or five feet, pretending broken wings and legs, to attract

my attention, and get off her young, who would already have taken up

their march, with faint wiry peep, single file through the swamp, as

she directed. Or I heard the peep of the young when I could not see the

parent bird. There too the turtle-doves sat over the spring, or

fluttered from bough to bough of the soft white-pines over my head; or

the red squirrel, coursing down the nearest bough, was particularly

familiar and inquisitive. You only need sit still long enough in some

attractive spot in the woods that all its inhabitants may exhibit

themselves to you by turns.

I was witness to events of a less peaceful character. One day when I

went out to my wood-pile, or rather my pile of stumps, I observed two

large ants, the one red, the other much larger, nearly half an inch

long, and black, fiercely contending with one another. Having once got

hold they never let go, but struggled and wrestled and rolled on the

chips incessantly. Looking farther, I was surprised to find that the

chips were covered with such combatants, that it was not a \_duellum\_,

but a \_bellum\_, a war between two races of ants, the red always pitted

against the black, and frequently two red ones to one black. The

legions of these Myrmidons covered all the hills and vales in my

wood-yard, and the ground was already strewn with the dead and dying,

both red and black. It was the only battle which I have ever witnessed,

the only battle-field I ever trod while the battle was raging;

internecine war; the red republicans on the one hand, and the black

imperialists on the other. On every side they were engaged in deadly

combat, yet without any noise that I could hear, and human soldiers

never fought so resolutely. I watched a couple that were fast locked in

each other’s embraces, in a little sunny valley amid the chips, now at

noon-day prepared to fight till the sun went down, or life went out.

The smaller red champion had fastened himself like a vice to his

adversary’s front, and through all the tumblings on that field never

for an instant ceased to gnaw at one of his feelers near the root,

having already caused the other to go by the board; while the stronger

black one dashed him from side to side, and, as I saw on looking

nearer, had already divested him of several of his members. They fought

with more pertinacity than bull-dogs. Neither manifested the least

disposition to retreat. It was evident that their battle-cry was

Conquer or die. In the mean while there came along a single red ant on

the hill-side of this valley, evidently full of excitement, who either

had despatched his foe, or had not yet taken part in the battle;

probably the latter, for he had lost none of his limbs; whose mother

had charged him to return with his shield or upon it. Or perchance he

was some Achilles, who had nourished his wrath apart, and had now come

to avenge or rescue his Patroclus. He saw this unequal combat from

afar,—for the blacks were nearly twice the size of the red,—he drew

near with rapid pace till he stood on his guard within half an inch of

the combatants; then, watching his opportunity, he sprang upon the

black warrior, and commenced his operations near the root of his right

fore-leg, leaving the foe to select among his own members; and so there

were three united for life, as if a new kind of attraction had been

invented which put all other locks and cements to shame. I should not

have wondered by this time to find that they had their respective

musical bands stationed on some eminent chip, and playing their

national airs the while, to excite the slow and cheer the dying

combatants. I was myself excited somewhat even as if they had been men.

The more you think of it, the less the difference. And certainly there

is not the fight recorded in Concord history, at least, if in the

history of America, that will bear a moment’s comparison with this,

whether for the numbers engaged in it, or for the patriotism and

heroism displayed. For numbers and for carnage it was an Austerlitz or

Dresden. Concord Fight! Two killed on the patriots’ side, and Luther

Blanchard wounded! Why here every ant was a Buttrick,—“Fire! for God’s

sake fire!”—and thousands shared the fate of Davis and Hosmer. There

was not one hireling there. I have no doubt that it was a principle

they fought for, as much as our ancestors, and not to avoid a

three-penny tax on their tea; and the results of this battle will be as

important and memorable to those whom it concerns as those of the

battle of Bunker Hill, at least.

I took up the chip on which the three I have particularly described

were struggling, carried it into my house, and placed it under a

tumbler on my window-sill, in order to see the issue. Holding a

microscope to the first-mentioned red ant, I saw that, though he was

assiduously gnawing at the near fore-leg of his enemy, having severed

his remaining feeler, his own breast was all torn away, exposing what

vitals he had there to the jaws of the black warrior, whose breastplate

was apparently too thick for him to pierce; and the dark carbuncles of

the sufferer’s eyes shone with ferocity such as war only could excite.

They struggled half an hour longer under the tumbler, and when I looked

again the black soldier had severed the heads of his foes from their

bodies, and the still living heads were hanging on either side of him

like ghastly trophies at his saddle-bow, still apparently as firmly

fastened as ever, and he was endeavoring with feeble struggles, being

without feelers and with only the remnant of a leg, and I know not how

many other wounds, to divest himself of them; which at length, after

half an hour more, he accomplished. I raised the glass, and he went off

over the window-sill in that crippled state. Whether he finally

survived that combat, and spent the remainder of his days in some Hotel

des Invalides, I do not know; but I thought that his industry would not

be worth much thereafter. I never learned which party was victorious,

nor the cause of the war; but I felt for the rest of that day as if I

had had my feelings excited and harrowed by witnessing the struggle,

the ferocity and carnage, of a human battle before my door.

Kirby and Spence tell us that the battles of ants have long been

celebrated and the date of them recorded, though they say that Huber is

the only modern author who appears to have witnessed them. “Æneas

Sylvius,” say they, “after giving a very circumstantial account of one

contested with great obstinacy by a great and small species on the

trunk of a pear tree,” adds that “‘This action was fought in the

pontificate of Eugenius the Fourth, in the presence of Nicholas

Pistoriensis, an eminent lawyer, who related the whole history of the

battle with the greatest fidelity.’ A similar engagement between great

and small ants is recorded by Olaus Magnus, in which the small ones,

being victorious, are said to have buried the bodies of their own

soldiers, but left those of their giant enemies a prey to the birds.

This event happened previous to the expulsion of the tyrant Christiern

the Second from Sweden.” The battle which I witnessed took place in the

Presidency of Polk, five years before the passage of Webster’s

Fugitive-Slave Bill.

Many a village Bose, fit only to course a mud-turtle in a victualling

cellar, sported his heavy quarters in the woods, without the knowledge

of his master, and ineffectually smelled at old fox burrows and

woodchucks’ holes; led perchance by some slight cur which nimbly

threaded the wood, and might still inspire a natural terror in its

denizens;—now far behind his guide, barking like a canine bull toward

some small squirrel which had treed itself for scrutiny, then,

cantering off, bending the bushes with his weight, imagining that he is

on the track of some stray member of the jerbilla family. Once I was

surprised to see a cat walking along the stony shore of the pond, for

they rarely wander so far from home. The surprise was mutual.

Nevertheless the most domestic cat, which has lain on a rug all her

days, appears quite at home in the woods, and, by her sly and stealthy

behavior, proves herself more native there than the regular

inhabitants. Once, when berrying, I met with a cat with young kittens

in the woods, quite wild, and they all, like their mother, had their

backs up and were fiercely spitting at me. A few years before I lived

in the woods there was what was called a “winged cat” in one of the

farm-houses in Lincoln nearest the pond, Mr. Gilian Baker’s. When I

called to see her in June, 1842, she was gone a-hunting in the woods,

as was her wont, (I am not sure whether it was a male or female, and so

use the more common pronoun,) but her mistress told me that she came

into the neighborhood a little more than a year before, in April, and

was finally taken into their house; that she was of a dark

brownish-gray color, with a white spot on her throat, and white feet,

and had a large bushy tail like a fox; that in the winter the fur grew

thick and flatted out along her sides, forming stripes ten or twelve

inches long by two and a half wide, and under her chin like a muff, the

upper side loose, the under matted like felt, and in the spring these

appendages dropped off. They gave me a pair of her “wings,” which I

keep still. There is no appearance of a membrane about them. Some

thought it was part flying-squirrel or some other wild animal, which is

not impossible, for, according to naturalists, prolific hybrids have

been produced by the union of the marten and domestic cat. This would

have been the right kind of cat for me to keep, if I had kept any; for

why should not a poet’s cat be winged as well as his horse?

In the fall the loon (\_Colymbus glacialis\_) came, as usual, to moult

and bathe in the pond, making the woods ring with his wild laughter

before I had risen. At rumor of his arrival all the Mill-dam sportsmen

are on the alert, in gigs and on foot, two by two and three by three,

with patent rifles and conical balls and spy-glasses. They come

rustling through the woods like autumn leaves, at least ten men to one

loon. Some station themselves on this side of the pond, some on that,

for the poor bird cannot be omnipresent; if he dive here he must come

up there. But now the kind October wind rises, rustling the leaves and

rippling the surface of the water, so that no loon can be heard or

seen, though his foes sweep the pond with spy-glasses, and make the

woods resound with their discharges. The waves generously rise and dash

angrily, taking sides with all water-fowl, and our sportsmen must beat

a retreat to town and shop and unfinished jobs. But they were too often

successful. When I went to get a pail of water early in the morning I

frequently saw this stately bird sailing out of my cove within a few

rods. If I endeavored to overtake him in a boat, in order to see how he

would manœuvre, he would dive and be completely lost, so that I did not

discover him again, sometimes, till the latter part of the day. But I

was more than a match for him on the surface. He commonly went off in a

rain.

As I was paddling along the north shore one very calm October

afternoon, for such days especially they settle on to the lakes, like

the milkweed down, having looked in vain over the pond for a loon,

suddenly one, sailing out from the shore toward the middle a few rods

in front of me, set up his wild laugh and betrayed himself. I pursued

with a paddle and he dived, but when he came up I was nearer than

before. He dived again, but I miscalculated the direction he would

take, and we were fifty rods apart when he came to the surface this

time, for I had helped to widen the interval; and again he laughed long

and loud, and with more reason than before. He manœuvred so cunningly

that I could not get within half a dozen rods of him. Each time, when

he came to the surface, turning his head this way and that, he cooly

surveyed the water and the land, and apparently chose his course so

that he might come up where there was the widest expanse of water and

at the greatest distance from the boat. It was surprising how quickly

he made up his mind and put his resolve into execution. He led me at

once to the widest part of the pond, and could not be driven from it.

While he was thinking one thing in his brain, I was endeavoring to

divine his thought in mine. It was a pretty game, played on the smooth

surface of the pond, a man against a loon. Suddenly your adversary’s

checker disappears beneath the board, and the problem is to place yours

nearest to where his will appear again. Sometimes he would come up

unexpectedly on the opposite side of me, having apparently passed

directly under the boat. So long-winded was he and so unweariable, that

when he had swum farthest he would immediately plunge again,

nevertheless; and then no wit could divine where in the deep pond,

beneath the smooth surface, he might be speeding his way like a fish,

for he had time and ability to visit the bottom of the pond in its

deepest part. It is said that loons have been caught in the New York

lakes eighty feet beneath the surface, with hooks set for trout,—though

Walden is deeper than that. How surprised must the fishes be to see

this ungainly visitor from another sphere speeding his way amid their

schools! Yet he appeared to know his course as surely under water as on

the surface, and swam much faster there. Once or twice I saw a ripple

where he approached the surface, just put his head out to reconnoitre,

and instantly dived again. I found that it was as well for me to rest

on my oars and wait his reappearing as to endeavor to calculate where

he would rise; for again and again, when I was straining my eyes over

the surface one way, I would suddenly be startled by his unearthly

laugh behind me. But why, after displaying so much cunning, did he

invariably betray himself the moment he came up by that loud laugh? Did

not his white breast enough betray him? He was indeed a silly loon, I

thought. I could commonly hear the splash of the water when he came up,

and so also detected him. But after an hour he seemed as fresh as ever,

dived as willingly and swam yet farther than at first. It was

surprising to see how serenely he sailed off with unruffled breast when

he came to the surface, doing all the work with his webbed feet

beneath. His usual note was this demoniac laughter, yet somewhat like

that of a water-fowl; but occasionally, when he had balked me most

successfully and come up a long way off, he uttered a long-drawn

unearthly howl, probably more like that of a wolf than any bird; as

when a beast puts his muzzle to the ground and deliberately howls. This

was his looning,—perhaps the wildest sound that is ever heard here,

making the woods ring far and wide. I concluded that he laughed in

derision of my efforts, confident of his own resources. Though the sky

was by this time overcast, the pond was so smooth that I could see

where he broke the surface when I did not hear him. His white breast,

the stillness of the air, and the smoothness of the water were all

against him. At length, having come up fifty rods off, he uttered one

of those prolonged howls, as if calling on the god of loons to aid him,

and immediately there came a wind from the east and rippled the

surface, and filled the whole air with misty rain, and I was impressed

as if it were the prayer of the loon answered, and his god was angry

with me; and so I left him disappearing far away on the tumultuous

surface.

For hours, in fall days, I watched the ducks cunningly tack and veer

and hold the middle of the pond, far from the sportsman; tricks which

they will have less need to practise in Louisiana bayous. When

compelled to rise they would sometimes circle round and round and over

the pond at a considerable height, from which they could easily see to

other ponds and the river, like black motes in the sky; and, when I

thought they had gone off thither long since, they would settle down by

a slanting flight of a quarter of a mile on to a distant part which was

left free; but what beside safety they got by sailing in the middle of

Walden I do not know, unless they love its water for the same reason

that I do.

House-Warming

In October I went a-graping to the river meadows, and loaded myself

with clusters more precious for their beauty and fragrance than for

food. There too I admired, though I did not gather, the cranberries,

small waxen gems, pendants of the meadow grass, pearly and red, which

the farmer plucks with an ugly rake, leaving the smooth meadow in a

snarl, heedlessly measuring them by the bushel and the dollar only, and

sells the spoils of the meads to Boston and New York; destined to be

\_jammed\_, to satisfy the tastes of lovers of Nature there. So butchers

rake the tongues of bison out of the prairie grass, regardless of the

torn and drooping plant. The barberry’s brilliant fruit was likewise

food for my eyes merely; but I collected a small store of wild apples

for coddling, which the proprietor and travellers had overlooked. When

chestnuts were ripe I laid up half a bushel for winter. It was very

exciting at that season to roam the then boundless chestnut woods of

Lincoln,—they now sleep their long sleep under the railroad,—with a bag

on my shoulder, and a stick to open burrs with in my hand, for I did

not always wait for the frost, amid the rustling of leaves and the loud

reproofs of the red-squirrels and the jays, whose half-consumed nuts I

sometimes stole, for the burrs which they had selected were sure to

contain sound ones. Occasionally I climbed and shook the trees. They

grew also behind my house, and one large tree, which almost

overshadowed it, was, when in flower, a bouquet which scented the whole

neighborhood, but the squirrels and the jays got most of its fruit; the

last coming in flocks early in the morning and picking the nuts out of

the burrs before they fell. I relinquished these trees to them and

visited the more distant woods composed wholly of chestnut. These nuts,

as far as they went, were a good substitute for bread. Many other

substitutes might, perhaps, be found. Digging one day for fish-worms, I

discovered the ground-nut (\_Apios tuberosa\_) on its string, the potato

of the aborigines, a sort of fabulous fruit, which I had begun to doubt

if I had ever dug and eaten in childhood, as I had told, and had not

dreamed it. I had often since seen its crimpled red velvety blossom

supported by the stems of other plants without knowing it to be the

same. Cultivation has well nigh exterminated it. It has a sweetish

taste, much like that of a frostbitten potato, and I found it better

boiled than roasted. This tuber seemed like a faint promise of Nature

to rear her own children and feed them simply here at some future

period. In these days of fatted cattle and waving grain-fields this

humble root, which was once the \_totem\_ of an Indian tribe, is quite

forgotten, or known only by its flowering vine; but let wild Nature

reign here once more, and the tender and luxurious English grains will

probably disappear before a myriad of foes, and without the care of man

the crow may carry back even the last seed of corn to the great

cornfield of the Indian’s God in the south-west, whence he is said to

have brought it; but the now almost exterminated ground-nut will

perhaps revive and flourish in spite of frosts and wildness, prove

itself indigenous, and resume its ancient importance and dignity as the

diet of the hunter tribe. Some Indian Ceres or Minerva must have been

the inventor and bestower of it; and when the reign of poetry commences

here, its leaves and string of nuts may be represented on our works of

art.

Already, by the first of September, I had seen two or three small

maples turned scarlet across the pond, beneath where the white stems of

three aspens diverged, at the point of a promontory, next the water.

Ah, many a tale their color told! And gradually from week to week the

character of each tree came out, and it admired itself reflected in the

smooth mirror of the lake. Each morning the manager of this gallery

substituted some new picture, distinguished by more brilliant or

harmonious coloring, for the old upon the walls.

The wasps came by thousands to my lodge in October, as to winter

quarters, and settled on my windows within and on the walls over-head,

sometimes deterring visitors from entering. Each morning, when they

were numbed with cold, I swept some of them out, but I did not trouble

myself much to get rid of them; I even felt complimented by their

regarding my house as a desirable shelter. They never molested me

seriously, though they bedded with me; and they gradually disappeared,

into what crevices I do not know, avoiding winter and unspeakable cold.

Like the wasps, before I finally went into winter quarters in November,

I used to resort to the north-east side of Walden, which the sun,

reflected from the pitch-pine woods and the stony shore, made the

fire-side of the pond; it is so much pleasanter and wholesomer to be

warmed by the sun while you can be, than by an artificial fire. I thus

warmed myself by the still glowing embers which the summer, like a

departed hunter, had left.

When I came to build my chimney I studied masonry. My bricks being

second-hand ones required to be cleaned with a trowel, so that I

learned more than usual of the qualities of bricks and trowels. The

mortar on them was fifty years old, and was said to be still growing

harder; but this is one of those sayings which men love to repeat

whether they are true or not. Such sayings themselves grow harder and

adhere more firmly with age, and it would take many blows with a trowel

to clean an old wiseacre of them. Many of the villages of Mesopotamia

are built of second-hand bricks of a very good quality, obtained from

the ruins of Babylon, and the cement on them is older and probably

harder still. However that may be, I was struck by the peculiar

toughness of the steel which bore so many violent blows without being

worn out. As my bricks had been in a chimney before, though I did not

read the name of Nebuchadnezzar on them, I picked out as many

fire-place bricks as I could find, to save work and waste, and I filled

the spaces between the bricks about the fire-place with stones from the

pond shore, and also made my mortar with the white sand from the same

place. I lingered most about the fireplace, as the most vital part of

the house. Indeed, I worked so deliberately, that though I commenced at

the ground in the morning, a course of bricks raised a few inches above

the floor served for my pillow at night; yet I did not get a stiff neck

for it that I remember; my stiff neck is of older date. I took a poet

to board for a fortnight about those times, which caused me to be put

to it for room. He brought his own knife, though I had two, and we used

to scour them by thrusting them into the earth. He shared with me the

labors of cooking. I was pleased to see my work rising so square and

solid by degrees, and reflected, that, if it proceeded slowly, it was

calculated to endure a long time. The chimney is to some extent an

independent structure, standing on the ground and rising through the

house to the heavens; even after the house is burned it still stands

sometimes, and its importance and independence are apparent. This was

toward the end of summer. It was now November.

The north wind had already begun to cool the pond, though it took many

weeks of steady blowing to accomplish it, it is so deep. When I began

to have a fire at evening, before I plastered my house, the chimney

carried smoke particularly well, because of the numerous chinks between

the boards. Yet I passed some cheerful evenings in that cool and airy

apartment, surrounded by the rough brown boards full of knots, and

rafters with the bark on high overhead. My house never pleased my eye

so much after it was plastered, though I was obliged to confess that it

was more comfortable. Should not every apartment in which man dwells be

lofty enough to create some obscurity over-head, where flickering

shadows may play at evening about the rafters? These forms are more

agreeable to the fancy and imagination than fresco paintings or other

the most expensive furniture. I now first began to inhabit my house, I

may say, when I began to use it for warmth as well as shelter. I had

got a couple of old fire-dogs to keep the wood from the hearth, and it

did me good to see the soot form on the back of the chimney which I had

built, and I poked the fire with more right and more satisfaction than

usual. My dwelling was small, and I could hardly entertain an echo in

it; but it seemed larger for being a single apartment and remote from

neighbors. All the attractions of a house were concentrated in one

room; it was kitchen, chamber, parlor, and keeping-room; and whatever

satisfaction parent or child, master or servant, derive from living in

a house, I enjoyed it all. Cato says, the master of a family

(\_patremfamilias\_) must have in his rustic villa “cellam oleariam,

vinariam, dolia multa, uti lubeat caritatem expectare, et rei, et

virtuti, et gloriæ erit,” that is, “an oil and wine cellar, many casks,

so that it may be pleasant to expect hard times; it will be for his

advantage, and virtue, and glory.” I had in my cellar a firkin of

potatoes, about two quarts of peas with the weevil in them, and on my

shelf a little rice, a jug of molasses, and of rye and Indian meal a

peck each.

I sometimes dream of a larger and more populous house, standing in a

golden age, of enduring materials, and without ginger-bread work, which

shall still consist of only one room, a vast, rude, substantial,

primitive hall, without ceiling or plastering, with bare rafters and

purlins supporting a sort of lower heaven over one’s head,—useful to

keep off rain and snow; where the king and queen posts stand out to

receive your homage, when you have done reverence to the prostrate

Saturn of an older dynasty on stepping over the sill; a cavernous

house, wherein you must reach up a torch upon a pole to see the roof;

where some may live in the fire-place, some in the recess of a window,

and some on settles, some at one end of the hall, some at another, and

some aloft on rafters with the spiders, if they choose; a house which

you have got into when you have opened the outside door, and the

ceremony is over; where the weary traveller may wash, and eat, and

converse, and sleep, without further journey; such a shelter as you

would be glad to reach in a tempestuous night, containing all the

essentials of a house, and nothing for house-keeping; where you can see

all the treasures of the house at one view, and every thing hangs upon

its peg, that a man should use; at once kitchen, pantry, parlor,

chamber, store-house, and garret; where you can see so necessary a

thing as a barrel or a ladder, so convenient a thing as a cupboard, and

hear the pot boil, and pay your respects to the fire that cooks your

dinner and the oven that bakes your bread, and the necessary furniture

and utensils are the chief ornaments; where the washing is not put out,

nor the fire, nor the mistress, and perhaps you are sometimes requested

to move from off the trap-door, when the cook would descend into the

cellar, and so learn whether the ground is solid or hollow beneath you

without stamping. A house whose inside is as open and manifest as a

bird’s nest, and you cannot go in at the front door and out at the back

without seeing some of its inhabitants; where to be a guest is to be

presented with the freedom of the house, and not to be carefully

excluded from seven eighths of it, shut up in a particular cell, and

told to make yourself at home there,—in solitary confinement. Nowadays

the host does not admit you to \_his\_ hearth, but has got the mason to

build one for yourself somewhere in his alley, and hospitality is the

art of \_keeping\_ you at the greatest distance. There is as much secrecy

about the cooking as if he had a design to poison you. I am aware that

I have been on many a man’s premises, and might have been legally

ordered off, but I am not aware that I have been in many men’s houses.

I might visit in my old clothes a king and queen who lived simply in

such a house as I have described, if I were going their way; but

backing out of a modern palace will be all that I shall desire to

learn, if ever I am caught in one.

It would seem as if the very language of our parlors would lose all its

nerve and degenerate into \_palaver\_ wholly, our lives pass at such

remoteness from its symbols, and its metaphors and tropes are

necessarily so far fetched, through slides and dumb-waiters, as it

were; in other words, the parlor is so far from the kitchen and

workshop. The dinner even is only the parable of a dinner, commonly. As

if only the savage dwelt near enough to Nature and Truth to borrow a

trope from them. How can the scholar, who dwells away in the North West

Territory or the Isle of Man, tell what is parliamentary in the

kitchen?

However, only one or two of my guests were ever bold enough to stay and

eat a hasty-pudding with me; but when they saw that crisis approaching

they beat a hasty retreat rather, as if it would shake the house to its

foundations. Nevertheless, it stood through a great many

hasty-puddings.

I did not plaster till it was freezing weather. I brought over some

whiter and cleaner sand for this purpose from the opposite shore of the

pond in a boat, a sort of conveyance which would have tempted me to go

much farther if necessary. My house had in the mean while been shingled

down to the ground on every side. In lathing I was pleased to be able

to send home each nail with a single blow of the hammer, and it was my

ambition to transfer the plaster from the board to the wall neatly and

rapidly. I remembered the story of a conceited fellow, who, in fine

clothes, was wont to lounge about the village once, giving advice to

workmen. Venturing one day to substitute deeds for words, he turned up

his cuffs, seized a plasterer’s board, and having loaded his trowel

without mishap, with a complacent look toward the lathing overhead,

made a bold gesture thitherward; and straightway, to his complete

discomfiture, received the whole contents in his ruffled bosom. I

admired anew the economy and convenience of plastering, which so

effectually shuts out the cold and takes a handsome finish, and I

learned the various casualties to which the plasterer is liable. I was

surprised to see how thirsty the bricks were which drank up all the

moisture in my plaster before I had smoothed it, and how many pailfuls

of water it takes to christen a new hearth. I had the previous winter

made a small quantity of lime by burning the shells of the \_Unio

fluviatilis\_, which our river affords, for the sake of the experiment;

so that I knew where my materials came from. I might have got good

limestone within a mile or two and burned it myself, if I had cared to

do so.

The pond had in the mean while skimmed over in the shadiest and

shallowest coves, some days or even weeks before the general freezing.

The first ice is especially interesting and perfect, being hard, dark,

and transparent, and affords the best opportunity that ever offers for

examining the bottom where it is shallow; for you can lie at your

length on ice only an inch thick, like a skater insect on the surface

of the water, and study the bottom at your leisure, only two or three

inches distant, like a picture behind a glass, and the water is

necessarily always smooth then. There are many furrows in the sand

where some creature has travelled about and doubled on its tracks; and,

for wrecks, it is strewn with the cases of cadis worms made of minute

grains of white quartz. Perhaps these have creased it, for you find

some of their cases in the furrows, though they are deep and broad for

them to make. But the ice itself is the object of most interest, though

you must improve the earliest opportunity to study it. If you examine

it closely the morning after it freezes, you find that the greater part

of the bubbles, which at first appeared to be within it, are against

its under surface, and that more are continually rising from the

bottom; while the ice is as yet comparatively solid and dark, that is,

you see the water through it. These bubbles are from an eightieth to an

eighth of an inch in diameter, very clear and beautiful, and you see

your face reflected in them through the ice. There may be thirty or

forty of them to a square inch. There are also already within the ice

narrow oblong perpendicular bubbles about half an inch long, sharp

cones with the apex upward; or oftener, if the ice is quite fresh,

minute spherical bubbles one directly above another, like a string of

beads. But these within the ice are not so numerous nor obvious as

those beneath. I sometimes used to cast on stones to try the strength

of the ice, and those which broke through carried in air with them,

which formed very large and conspicuous white bubbles beneath. One day

when I came to the same place forty-eight hours afterward, I found that

those large bubbles were still perfect, though an inch more of ice had

formed, as I could see distinctly by the seam in the edge of a cake.

But as the last two days had been very warm, like an Indian summer, the

ice was not now transparent, showing the dark green color of the water,

and the bottom, but opaque and whitish or gray, and though twice as

thick was hardly stronger than before, for the air bubbles had greatly

expanded under this heat and run together, and lost their regularity;

they were no longer one directly over another, but often like silvery

coins poured from a bag, one overlapping another, or in thin flakes, as

if occupying slight cleavages. The beauty of the ice was gone, and it

was too late to study the bottom. Being curious to know what position

my great bubbles occupied with regard to the new ice, I broke out a

cake containing a middling sized one, and turned it bottom upward. The

new ice had formed around and under the bubble, so that it was included

between the two ices. It was wholly in the lower ice, but close against

the upper, and was flattish, or perhaps slightly lenticular, with a

rounded edge, a quarter of an inch deep by four inches in diameter; and

I was surprised to find that directly under the bubble the ice was

melted with great regularity in the form of a saucer reversed, to the

height of five eighths of an inch in the middle, leaving a thin

partition there between the water and the bubble, hardly an eighth of

an inch thick; and in many places the small bubbles in this partition

had burst out downward, and probably there was no ice at all under the

largest bubbles, which were a foot in diameter. I inferred that the

infinite number of minute bubbles which I had first seen against the

under surface of the ice were now frozen in likewise, and that each, in

its degree, had operated like a burning glass on the ice beneath to

melt and rot it. These are the little air-guns which contribute to make

the ice crack and whoop.

At length the winter set in in good earnest, just as I had finished

plastering, and the wind began to howl around the house as if it had

not had permission to do so till then. Night after night the geese came

lumbering in in the dark with a clangor and a whistling of wings, even

after the ground was covered with snow, some to alight in Walden, and

some flying low over the woods toward Fair Haven, bound for Mexico.

Several times, when returning from the village at ten or eleven o’clock

at night, I heard the tread of a flock of geese, or else ducks, on the

dry leaves in the woods by a pond-hole behind my dwelling, where they

had come up to feed, and the faint honk or quack of their leader as

they hurried off. In 1845 Walden froze entirely over for the first time

on the night of the 22d of December, Flint’s and other shallower ponds

and the river having been frozen ten days or more; in ’46, the 16th; in

’49, about the 31st; and in ’50, about the 27th of December; in ’52,

the 5th of January; in ’53, the 31st of December. The snow had already

covered the ground since the 25th of November, and surrounded me

suddenly with the scenery of winter. I withdrew yet farther into my

shell, and endeavored to keep a bright fire both within my house and

within my breast. My employment out of doors now was to collect the

dead wood in the forest, bringing it in my hands or on my shoulders, or

sometimes trailing a dead pine tree under each arm to my shed. An old

forest fence which had seen its best days was a great haul for me. I

sacrificed it to Vulcan, for it was past serving the god Terminus. How

much more interesting an event is that man’s supper who has just been

forth in the snow to hunt, nay, you might say, steal, the fuel to cook

it with! His bread and meat are sweet. There are enough fagots and

waste wood of all kinds in the forests of most of our towns to support

many fires, but which at present warm none, and, some think, hinder the

growth of the young wood. There was also the drift-wood of the pond. In

the course of the summer I had discovered a raft of pitch-pine logs

with the bark on, pinned together by the Irish when the railroad was

built. This I hauled up partly on the shore. After soaking two years

and then lying high six months it was perfectly sound, though

waterlogged past drying. I amused myself one winter day with sliding

this piecemeal across the pond, nearly half a mile, skating behind with

one end of a log fifteen feet long on my shoulder, and the other on the

ice; or I tied several logs together with a birch withe, and then, with

a longer birch or alder which had a hook at the end, dragged them

across. Though completely waterlogged and almost as heavy as lead, they

not only burned long, but made a very hot fire; nay, I thought that

they burned better for the soaking, as if the pitch, being confined by

the water, burned longer, as in a lamp.

Gilpin, in his account of the forest borderers of England, says that

“the encroachments of trespassers, and the houses and fences thus

raised on the borders of the forest,” were “considered as great

nuisances by the old forest law, and were severely punished under the

name of \_purprestures\_, as tending \_ad terrorem ferarum—ad nocumentum

forestæ\_, &c.,” to the frightening of the game and the detriment of the

forest. But I was interested in the preservation of the venison and the

vert more than the hunters or woodchoppers, and as much as though I had

been the Lord Warden himself; and if any part was burned, though I

burned it myself by accident, I grieved with a grief that lasted longer

and was more inconsolable than that of the proprietors; nay, I grieved

when it was cut down by the proprietors themselves. I would that our

farmers when they cut down a forest felt some of that awe which the old

Romans did when they came to thin, or let in the light to, a

consecrated grove (\_lucum conlucare\_), that is, would believe that it

is sacred to some god. The Roman made an expiatory offering, and

prayed, Whatever god or goddess thou art to whom this grove is sacred,

be propitious to me, my family, and children, &c.

It is remarkable what a value is still put upon wood even in this age

and in this new country, a value more permanent and universal than that

of gold. After all our discoveries and inventions no man will go by a

pile of wood. It is as precious to us as it was to our Saxon and Norman

ancestors. If they made their bows of it, we make our gun-stocks of it.

Michaux, more than thirty years ago, says that the price of wood for

fuel in New York and Philadelphia “nearly equals, and sometimes

exceeds, that of the best wood in Paris, though this immense capital

annually requires more than three hundred thousand cords, and is

surrounded to the distance of three hundred miles by cultivated

plains.” In this town the price of wood rises almost steadily, and the

only question is, how much higher it is to be this year than it was the

last. Mechanics and tradesmen who come in person to the forest on no

other errand, are sure to attend the wood auction, and even pay a high

price for the privilege of gleaning after the woodchopper. It is now

many years that men have resorted to the forest for fuel and the

materials of the arts; the New Englander and the New Hollander, the

Parisian and the Celt, the farmer and Robinhood, Goody Blake and Harry

Gill, in most parts of the world the prince and the peasant, the

scholar and the savage, equally require still a few sticks from the

forest to warm them and cook their food. Neither could I do without

them.

Every man looks at his wood-pile with a kind of affection. I love to

have mine before my window, and the more chips the better to remind me

of my pleasing work. I had an old axe which nobody claimed, with which

by spells in winter days, on the sunny side of the house, I played

about the stumps which I had got out of my bean-field. As my driver

prophesied when I was ploughing, they warmed me twice, once while I was

splitting them, and again when they were on the fire, so that no fuel

could give out more heat. As for the axe, I was advised to get the

village blacksmith to “jump” it; but I jumped him, and, putting a

hickory helve from the woods into it, made it do. If it was dull, it

was at least hung true.

A few pieces of fat pine were a great treasure. It is interesting to

remember how much of this food for fire is still concealed in the

bowels of the earth. In previous years I had often gone “prospecting”

over some bare hill-side, where a pitch-pine wood had formerly stood,

and got out the fat pine roots. They are almost indestructible. Stumps

thirty or forty years old, at least, will still be sound at the core,

though the sapwood has all become vegetable mould, as appears by the

scales of the thick bark forming a ring level with the earth four or

five inches distant from the heart. With axe and shovel you explore

this mine, and follow the marrowy store, yellow as beef tallow, or as

if you had struck on a vein of gold, deep into the earth. But commonly

I kindled my fire with the dry leaves of the forest, which I had stored

up in my shed before the snow came. Green hickory finely split makes

the woodchopper’s kindlings, when he has a camp in the woods. Once in a

while I got a little of this. When the villagers were lighting their

fires beyond the horizon, I too gave notice to the various wild

inhabitants of Walden vale, by a smoky streamer from my chimney, that I

was awake.—

Light-winged Smoke, Icarian bird,

Melting thy pinions in thy upward flight,

Lark without song, and messenger of dawn,

Circling above the hamlets as thy nest;

Or else, departing dream, and shadowy form

Of midnight vision, gathering up thy skirts;

By night star-veiling, and by day

Darkening the light and blotting out the sun;

Go thou my incense upward from this hearth,

And ask the gods to pardon this clear flame.

Hard green wood just cut, though I used but little of that, answered my

purpose better than any other. I sometimes left a good fire when I went

to take a walk in a winter afternoon; and when I returned, three or

four hours afterward, it would be still alive and glowing. My house was

not empty though I was gone. It was as if I had left a cheerful

housekeeper behind. It was I and Fire that lived there; and commonly my

housekeeper proved trustworthy. One day, however, as I was splitting

wood, I thought that I would just look in at the window and see if the

house was not on fire; it was the only time I remember to have been

particularly anxious on this score; so I looked and saw that a spark

had caught my bed, and I went in and extinguished it when it had burned

a place as big as my hand. But my house occupied so sunny and sheltered

a position, and its roof was so low, that I could afford to let the

fire go out in the middle of almost any winter day.

The moles nested in my cellar, nibbling every third potato, and making

a snug bed even there of some hair left after plastering and of brown

paper; for even the wildest animals love comfort and warmth as well as

man, and they survive the winter only because they are so careful to

secure them. Some of my friends spoke as if I was coming to the woods

on purpose to freeze myself. The animal merely makes a bed, which he

warms with his body, in a sheltered place; but man, having discovered

fire, boxes up some air in a spacious apartment, and warms that,

instead of robbing himself, makes that his bed, in which he can move

about divested of more cumbrous clothing, maintain a kind of summer in

the midst of winter, and by means of windows even admit the light, and

with a lamp lengthen out the day. Thus he goes a step or two beyond

instinct, and saves a little time for the fine arts. Though, when I had

been exposed to the rudest blasts a long time, my whole body began to

grow torpid, when I reached the genial atmosphere of my house I soon

recovered my faculties and prolonged my life. But the most luxuriously

housed has little to boast of in this respect, nor need we trouble

ourselves to speculate how the human race may be at last destroyed. It

would be easy to cut their threads any time with a little sharper blast

from the north. We go on dating from Cold Fridays and Great Snows; but

a little colder Friday, or greater snow, would put a period to man’s

existence on the globe.

The next winter I used a small cooking-stove for economy, since I did

not own the forest; but it did not keep fire so well as the open

fire-place. Cooking was then, for the most part, no longer a poetic,

but merely a chemic process. It will soon be forgotten, in these days

of stoves, that we used to roast potatoes in the ashes, after the

Indian fashion. The stove not only took up room and scented the house,

but it concealed the fire, and I felt as if I had lost a companion. You

can always see a face in the fire. The laborer, looking into it at

evening, purifies his thoughts of the dross and earthiness which they

have accumulated during the day. But I could no longer sit and look

into the fire, and the pertinent words of a poet recurred to me with

new force.—

“Never, bright flame, may be denied to me

Thy dear, life imaging, close sympathy.

What but my hopes shot upward e’er so bright?

What but my fortunes sunk so low in night?

Why art thou banished from our hearth and hall,

Thou who art welcomed and beloved by all?

Was thy existence then too fanciful

For our life’s common light, who are so dull?

Did thy bright gleam mysterious converse hold

With our congenial souls? secrets too bold?

Well, we are safe and strong, for now we sit

Beside a hearth where no dim shadows flit,

Where nothing cheers nor saddens, but a fire

Warms feet and hands—nor does to more aspire;

By whose compact utilitarian heap

The present may sit down and go to sleep,

Nor fear the ghosts who from the dim past walked,

And with us by the unequal light of the old wood fire talked.”

Former Inhabitants and Winter Visitors

I weathered some merry snow storms, and spent some cheerful winter

evenings by my fire-side, while the snow whirled wildly without, and

even the hooting of the owl was hushed. For many weeks I met no one in

my walks but those who came occasionally to cut wood and sled it to the

village. The elements, however, abetted me in making a path through the

deepest snow in the woods, for when I had once gone through the wind

blew the oak leaves into my tracks, where they lodged, and by absorbing

the rays of the sun melted the snow, and so not only made a dry bed for

my feet, but in the night their dark line was my guide. For human

society I was obliged to conjure up the former occupants of these

woods. Within the memory of many of my townsmen the road near which my

house stands resounded with the laugh and gossip of inhabitants, and

the woods which border it were notched and dotted here and there with

their little gardens and dwellings, though it was then much more shut

in by the forest than now. In some places, within my own remembrance,

the pines would scrape both sides of a chaise at once, and women and

children who were compelled to go this way to Lincoln alone and on foot

did it with fear, and often ran a good part of the distance. Though

mainly but a humble route to neighboring villages, or for the woodman’s

team, it once amused the traveller more than now by its variety, and

lingered longer in his memory. Where now firm open fields stretch from

the village to the woods, it then ran through a maple swamp on a

foundation of logs, the remnants of which, doubtless, still underlie

the present dusty highway, from the Stratton, now the Alms House, Farm,

to Brister’s Hill.

East of my bean-field, across the road, lived Cato Ingraham, slave of

Duncan Ingraham, Esquire, gentleman, of Concord village, who built his

slave a house, and gave him permission to live in Walden Woods;—Cato,

not Uticensis, but Concordiensis. Some say that he was a Guinea Negro.

There are a few who remember his little patch among the walnuts, which

he let grow up till he should be old and need them; but a younger and

whiter speculator got them at last. He too, however, occupies an

equally narrow house at present. Cato’s half-obliterated cellar hole

still remains, though known to few, being concealed from the traveller

by a fringe of pines. It is now filled with the smooth sumach (\_Rhus

glabra\_,) and one of the earliest species of golden-rod (\_Solidago

stricta\_) grows there luxuriantly.

Here, by the very corner of my field, still nearer to town, Zilpha, a

colored woman, had her little house, where she spun linen for the

townsfolk, making the Walden Woods ring with her shrill singing, for

she had a loud and notable voice. At length, in the war of 1812, her

dwelling was set on fire by English soldiers, prisoners on parole, when

she was away, and her cat and dog and hens were all burned up together.

She led a hard life, and somewhat inhumane. One old frequenter of these

woods remembers, that as he passed her house one noon he heard her

muttering to herself over her gurgling pot,—“Ye are all bones, bones!”

I have seen bricks amid the oak copse there.

Down the road, on the right hand, on Brister’s Hill, lived Brister

Freeman, “a handy Negro,” slave of Squire Cummings once,—there where

grow still the apple-trees which Brister planted and tended; large old

trees now, but their fruit still wild and ciderish to my taste. Not

long since I read his epitaph in the old Lincoln burying-ground, a

little on one side, near the unmarked graves of some British grenadiers

who fell in the retreat from Concord,—where he is styled “Sippio

Brister,”—Scipio Africanus he had some title to be called,—“a man of

color,” as if he were discolored. It also told me, with staring

emphasis, when he died; which was but an indirect way of informing me

that he ever lived. With him dwelt Fenda, his hospitable wife, who told

fortunes, yet pleasantly,—large, round, and black, blacker than any of

the children of night, such a dusky orb as never rose on Concord before

or since.

Farther down the hill, on the left, on the old road in the woods, are

marks of some homestead of the Stratton family; whose orchard once

covered all the slope of Brister’s Hill, but was long since killed out

by pitch pines, excepting a few stumps, whose old roots furnish still

the wild stocks of many a thrifty village tree.

Nearer yet to town, you come to Breed’s location, on the other side of

the way, just on the edge of the wood; ground famous for the pranks of

a demon not distinctly named in old mythology, who has acted a

prominent and astounding part in our New England life, and deserves, as

much as any mythological character, to have his biography written one

day; who first comes in the guise of a friend or hired man, and then

robs and murders the whole family,—New-England Rum. But history must

not yet tell the tragedies enacted here; let time intervene in some

measure to assuage and lend an azure tint to them. Here the most

indistinct and dubious tradition says that once a tavern stood; the

well the same, which tempered the traveller’s beverage and refreshed

his steed. Here then men saluted one another, and heard and told the

news, and went their ways again.

Breed’s hut was standing only a dozen years ago, though it had long

been unoccupied. It was about the size of mine. It was set on fire by

mischievous boys, one Election night, if I do not mistake. I lived on

the edge of the village then, and had just lost myself over Davenant’s

Gondibert, that winter that I labored with a lethargy,—which, by the

way, I never knew whether to regard as a family complaint, having an

uncle who goes to sleep shaving himself, and is obliged to sprout

potatoes in a cellar Sundays, in order to keep awake and keep the

Sabbath, or as the consequence of my attempt to read Chalmers’

collection of English poetry without skipping. It fairly overcame my

Nervii. I had just sunk my head on this when the bells rung fire, and

in hot haste the engines rolled that way, led by a straggling troop of

men and boys, and I among the foremost, for I had leaped the brook. We

thought it was far south over the woods,—we who had run to fires

before,—barn, shop, or dwelling-house, or all together. “It’s Baker’s

barn,” cried one. “It is the Codman place,” affirmed another. And then

fresh sparks went up above the wood, as if the roof fell in, and we all

shouted “Concord to the rescue!” Wagons shot past with furious speed

and crushing loads, bearing, perchance, among the rest, the agent of

the Insurance Company, who was bound to go however far; and ever and

anon the engine bell tinkled behind, more slow and sure; and rearmost

of all, as it was afterward whispered, came they who set the fire and

gave the alarm. Thus we kept on like true idealists, rejecting the

evidence of our senses, until at a turn in the road we heard the

crackling and actually felt the heat of the fire from over the wall,

and realized, alas! that we were there. The very nearness of the fire

but cooled our ardor. At first we thought to throw a frog-pond on to

it; but concluded to let it burn, it was so far gone and so worthless.

So we stood round our engine, jostled one another, expressed our

sentiments through speaking-trumpets, or in lower tone referred to the

great conflagrations which the world has witnessed, including Bascom’s

shop, and, between ourselves, we thought that, were we there in season

with our “tub,” and a full frog-pond by, we could turn that threatened

last and universal one into another flood. We finally retreated without

doing any mischief,—returned to sleep and Gondibert. But as for

Gondibert, I would except that passage in the preface about wit being

the soul’s powder,—“but most of mankind are strangers to wit, as

Indians are to powder.”

It chanced that I walked that way across the fields the following

night, about the same hour, and hearing a low moaning at this spot, I

drew near in the dark, and discovered the only survivor of the family

that I know, the heir of both its virtues and its vices, who alone was

interested in this burning, lying on his stomach and looking over the

cellar wall at the still smouldering cinders beneath, muttering to

himself, as is his wont. He had been working far off in the river

meadows all day, and had improved the first moments that he could call

his own to visit the home of his fathers and his youth. He gazed into

the cellar from all sides and points of view by turns, always lying

down to it, as if there was some treasure, which he remembered,

concealed between the stones, where there was absolutely nothing but a

heap of bricks and ashes. The house being gone, he looked at what there

was left. He was soothed by the sympathy which my mere presence

implied, and showed me, as well as the darkness permitted, where the

well was covered up; which, thank Heaven, could never be burned; and he

groped long about the wall to find the well-sweep which his father had

cut and mounted, feeling for the iron hook or staple by which a burden

had been fastened to the heavy end,—all that he could now cling to,—to

convince me that it was no common “rider.” I felt it, and still remark

it almost daily in my walks, for by it hangs the history of a family.

Once more, on the left, where are seen the well and lilac bushes by the

wall, in the now open field, lived Nutting and Le Grosse. But to return

toward Lincoln.

Farther in the woods than any of these, where the road approaches

nearest to the pond, Wyman the potter squatted, and furnished his

townsmen with earthen ware, and left descendants to succeed him.

Neither were they rich in worldly goods, holding the land by sufferance

while they lived; and there often the sheriff came in vain to collect

the taxes, and “attached a chip,” for form’s sake, as I have read in

his accounts, there being nothing else that he could lay his hands on.

One day in midsummer, when I was hoeing, a man who was carrying a load

of pottery to market stopped his horse against my field and inquired

concerning Wyman the younger. He had long ago bought a potter’s wheel

of him, and wished to know what had become of him. I had read of the

potter’s clay and wheel in Scripture, but it had never occurred to me

that the pots we use were not such as had come down unbroken from those

days, or grown on trees like gourds somewhere, and I was pleased to

hear that so fictile an art was ever practiced in my neighborhood.

The last inhabitant of these woods before me was an Irishman, Hugh

Quoil (if I have spelt his name with coil enough,) who occupied Wyman’s

tenement,—Col. Quoil, he was called. Rumor said that he had been a

soldier at Waterloo. If he had lived I should have made him fight his

battles over again. His trade here was that of a ditcher. Napoleon went

to St. Helena; Quoil came to Walden Woods. All I know of him is tragic.

He was a man of manners, like one who had seen the world, and was

capable of more civil speech than you could well attend to. He wore a

great coat in mid-summer, being affected with the trembling delirium,

and his face was the color of carmine. He died in the road at the foot

of Brister’s Hill shortly after I came to the woods, so that I have not

remembered him as a neighbor. Before his house was pulled down, when

his comrades avoided it as “an unlucky castle,” I visited it. There lay

his old clothes curled up by use, as if they were himself, upon his

raised plank bed. His pipe lay broken on the hearth, instead of a bowl

broken at the fountain. The last could never have been the symbol of

his death, for he confessed to me that, though he had heard of

Brister’s Spring, he had never seen it; and soiled cards, kings of

diamonds spades and hearts, were scattered over the floor. One black

chicken which the administrator could not catch, black as night and as

silent, not even croaking, awaiting Reynard, still went to roost in the

next apartment. In the rear there was the dim outline of a garden,

which had been planted but had never received its first hoeing, owing

to those terrible shaking fits, though it was now harvest time. It was

over-run with Roman wormwood and beggar-ticks, which last stuck to my

clothes for all fruit. The skin of a woodchuck was freshly stretched

upon the back of the house, a trophy of his last Waterloo; but no warm

cap or mittens would he want more.

Now only a dent in the earth marks the site of these dwellings, with

buried cellar stones, and strawberries, raspberries, thimble-berries,

hazel-bushes, and sumachs growing in the sunny sward there; some

pitch-pine or gnarled oak occupies what was the chimney nook, and a

sweet-scented black-birch, perhaps, waves where the door-stone was.

Sometimes the well dent is visible, where once a spring oozed; now dry

and tearless grass; or it was covered deep,—not to be discovered till

some late day,—with a flat stone under the sod, when the last of the

race departed. What a sorrowful act must that be,—the covering up of

wells! coincident with the opening of wells of tears. These cellar

dents, like deserted fox burrows, old holes, are all that is left where

once were the stir and bustle of human life, and “fate, free-will,

foreknowledge absolute,” in some form and dialect or other were by

turns discussed. But all I can learn of their conclusions amounts to

just this, that “Cato and Brister pulled wool;” which is about as

edifying as the history of more famous schools of philosophy.

Still grows the vivacious lilac a generation after the door and lintel

and the sill are gone, unfolding its sweet-scented flowers each spring,

to be plucked by the musing traveller; planted and tended once by

children’s hands, in front-yard plots,—now standing by wall-sides in

retired pastures, and giving place to new-rising forests;—the last of

that stirp, sole survivor of that family. Little did the dusky children

think that the puny slip with its two eyes only, which they stuck in

the ground in the shadow of the house and daily watered, would root

itself so, and outlive them, and house itself in the rear that shaded

it, and grown man’s garden and orchard, and tell their story faintly to

the lone wanderer a half century after they had grown up and

died,—blossoming as fair, and smelling as sweet, as in that first

spring. I mark its still tender, civil, cheerful, lilac colors.

But this small village, germ of something more, why did it fail while

Concord keeps its ground? Were there no natural advantages,—no water

privileges, forsooth? Ay, the deep Walden Pond and cool Brister’s

Spring,—privilege to drink long and healthy draughts at these, all

unimproved by these men but to dilute their glass. They were

universally a thirsty race. Might not the basket, stable-broom,

mat-making, corn-parching, linen-spinning, and pottery business have

thrived here, making the wilderness to blossom like the rose, and a

numerous posterity have inherited the land of their fathers? The

sterile soil would at least have been proof against a low-land

degeneracy. Alas! how little does the memory of these human inhabitants

enhance the beauty of the landscape! Again, perhaps, Nature will try,

with me for a first settler, and my house raised last spring to be the

oldest in the hamlet.

I am not aware that any man has ever built on the spot which I occupy.

Deliver me from a city built on the site of a more ancient city, whose

materials are ruins, whose gardens cemeteries. The soil is blanched and

accursed there, and before that becomes necessary the earth itself will

be destroyed. With such reminiscences I repeopled the woods and lulled

myself asleep.

At this season I seldom had a visitor. When the snow lay deepest no

wanderer ventured near my house for a week or fortnight at a time, but

there I lived as snug as a meadow mouse, or as cattle and poultry which

are said to have survived for a long time buried in drifts, even

without food; or like that early settler’s family in the town of

Sutton, in this state, whose cottage was completely covered by the

great snow of 1717 when he was absent, and an Indian found it only by

the hole which the chimney’s breath made in the drift, and so relieved

the family. But no friendly Indian concerned himself about me; nor

needed he, for the master of the house was at home. The Great Snow! How

cheerful it is to hear of! When the farmers could not get to the woods

and swamps with their teams, and were obliged to cut down the shade

trees before their houses, and when the crust was harder, cut off the

trees in the swamps, ten feet from the ground, as it appeared the next

spring.

In the deepest snows, the path which I used from the highway to my

house, about half a mile long, might have been represented by a

meandering dotted line, with wide intervals between the dots. For a

week of even weather I took exactly the same number of steps, and of

the same length, coming and going, stepping deliberately and with the

precision of a pair of dividers in my own deep tracks,—to such routine

the winter reduces us,—yet often they were filled with heaven’s own

blue. But no weather interfered fatally with my walks, or rather my

going abroad, for I frequently tramped eight or ten miles through the

deepest snow to keep an appointment with a beech-tree, or a

yellow-birch, or an old acquaintance among the pines; when the ice and

snow causing their limbs to droop, and so sharpening their tops, had

changed the pines into fir-trees; wading to the tops of the highest

hills when the snow was nearly two feet deep on a level, and shaking

down another snow-storm on my head at every step; or sometimes creeping

and floundering thither on my hands and knees, when the hunters had

gone into winter quarters. One afternoon I amused myself by watching a

barred owl (\_Strix nebulosa\_) sitting on one of the lower dead limbs of

a white-pine, close to the trunk, in broad daylight, I standing within

a rod of him. He could hear me when I moved and cronched the snow with

my feet, but could not plainly see me. When I made most noise he would

stretch out his neck, and erect his neck feathers, and open his eyes

wide; but their lids soon fell again, and he began to nod. I too felt a

slumberous influence after watching him half an hour, as he sat thus

with his eyes half open, like a cat, winged brother of the cat. There

was only a narrow slit left between their lids, by which he preserved a

peninsular relation to me; thus, with half-shut eyes, looking out from

the land of dreams, and endeavoring to realize me, vague object or mote

that interrupted his visions. At length, on some louder noise or my

nearer approach, he would grow uneasy and sluggishly turn about on his

perch, as if impatient at having his dreams disturbed; and when he

launched himself off and flapped through the pines, spreading his wings

to unexpected breadth, I could not hear the slightest sound from them.

Thus, guided amid the pine boughs rather by a delicate sense of their

neighborhood than by sight, feeling his twilight way as it were with

his sensitive pinions, he found a new perch, where he might in peace

await the dawning of his day.

As I walked over the long causeway made for the railroad through the

meadows, I encountered many a blustering and nipping wind, for nowhere

has it freer play; and when the frost had smitten me on one cheek,

heathen as I was, I turned to it the other also. Nor was it much better

by the carriage road from Brister’s Hill. For I came to town still,

like a friendly Indian, when the contents of the broad open fields were

all piled up between the walls of the Walden road, and half an hour

sufficed to obliterate the tracks of the last traveller. And when I

returned new drifts would have formed, through which I floundered,

where the busy north-west wind had been depositing the powdery snow

round a sharp angle in the road, and not a rabbit’s track, nor even the

fine print, the small type, of a meadow mouse was to be seen. Yet I

rarely failed to find, even in mid-winter, some warm and springly swamp

where the grass and the skunk-cabbage still put forth with perennial

verdure, and some hardier bird occasionally awaited the return of

spring.

Sometimes, notwithstanding the snow, when I returned from my walk at

evening I crossed the deep tracks of a woodchopper leading from my

door, and found his pile of whittlings on the hearth, and my house

filled with the odor of his pipe. Or on a Sunday afternoon, if I

chanced to be at home, I heard the cronching of the snow made by the

step of a long-headed farmer, who from far through the woods sought my

house, to have a social “crack;” one of the few of his vocation who are

“men on their farms;” who donned a frock instead of a professor’s gown,

and is as ready to extract the moral out of church or state as to haul

a load of manure from his barn-yard. We talked of rude and simple

times, when men sat about large fires in cold bracing weather, with

clear heads; and when other dessert failed, we tried our teeth on many

a nut which wise squirrels have long since abandoned, for those which

have the thickest shells are commonly empty.

The one who came from farthest to my lodge, through deepest snows and

most dismal tempests, was a poet. A farmer, a hunter, a soldier, a

reporter, even a philosopher, may be daunted; but nothing can deter a

poet, for he is actuated by pure love. Who can predict his comings and

goings? His business calls him out at all hours, even when doctors

sleep. We made that small house ring with boisterous mirth and resound

with the murmur of much sober talk, making amends then to Walden vale

for the long silences. Broadway was still and deserted in comparison.

At suitable intervals there were regular salutes of laughter, which

might have been referred indifferently to the last uttered or the

forth-coming jest. We made many a “bran new” theory of life over a thin

dish of gruel, which combined the advantages of conviviality with the

clear-headedness which philosophy requires.

I should not forget that during my last winter at the pond there was

another welcome visitor, who at one time came through the village,

through snow and rain and darkness, till he saw my lamp through the

trees, and shared with me some long winter evenings. One of the last of

the philosophers,—Connecticut gave him to the world,—he peddled first

her wares, afterwards, as he declares, his brains. These he peddles

still, prompting God and disgracing man, bearing for fruit his brain

only, like the nut its kernel. I think that he must be the man of the

most faith of any alive. His words and attitude always suppose a better

state of things than other men are acquainted with, and he will be the

last man to be disappointed as the ages revolve. He has no venture in

the present. But though comparatively disregarded now, when his day

comes, laws unsuspected by most will take effect, and masters of

families and rulers will come to him for advice.—

“How blind that cannot see serenity!”

A true friend of man; almost the only friend of human progress. An Old

Mortality, say rather an Immortality, with unwearied patience and faith

making plain the image engraven in men’s bodies, the God of whom they

are but defaced and leaning monuments. With his hospitable intellect he

embraces children, beggars, insane, and scholars, and entertains the

thought of all, adding to it commonly some breadth and elegance. I

think that he should keep a caravansary on the world’s highway, where

philosophers of all nations might put up, and on his sign should be

printed, “Entertainment for man, but not for his beast. Enter ye that

have leisure and a quiet mind, who earnestly seek the right road.” He

is perhaps the sanest man and has the fewest crotchets of any I chance

to know; the same yesterday and tomorrow. Of yore we had sauntered and

talked, and effectually put the world behind us; for he was pledged to

no institution in it, freeborn, \_ingenuus\_. Whichever way we turned, it

seemed that the heavens and the earth had met together, since he

enhanced the beauty of the landscape. A blue-robed man, whose fittest

roof is the overarching sky which reflects his serenity. I do not see

how he can ever die; Nature cannot spare him.

Having each some shingles of thought well dried, we sat and whittled

them, trying our knives, and admiring the clear yellowish grain of the

pumpkin pine. We waded so gently and reverently, or we pulled together

so smoothly, that the fishes of thought were not scared from the

stream, nor feared any angler on the bank, but came and went grandly,

like the clouds which float through the western sky, and the

mother-o’-pearl flocks which sometimes form and dissolve there. There

we worked, revising mythology, rounding a fable here and there, and

building castles in the air for which earth offered no worthy

foundation. Great Looker! Great Expecter! to converse with whom was a

New England Night’s Entertainment. Ah! such discourse we had, hermit

and philosopher, and the old settler I have spoken of,—we three,—it

expanded and racked my little house; I should not dare to say how many

pounds’ weight there was above the atmospheric pressure on every

circular inch; it opened its seams so that they had to be calked with

much dulness thereafter to stop the consequent leak;—but I had enough

of that kind of oakum already picked.

There was one other with whom I had “solid seasons,” long to be

remembered, at his house in the village, and who looked in upon me from

time to time; but I had no more for society there.

There too, as every where, I sometimes expected the Visitor who never

comes. The Vishnu Purana says, “The house-holder is to remain at

eventide in his court-yard as long as it takes to milk a cow, or longer

if he pleases, to await the arrival of a guest.” I often performed this

duty of hospitality, waited long enough to milk a whole herd of cows,

but did not see the man approaching from the town.

Winter Animals

When the ponds were firmly frozen, they afforded not only new and

shorter routes to many points, but new views from their surfaces of the

familiar landscape around them. When I crossed Flint’s Pond, after it

was covered with snow, though I had often paddled about and skated over

it, it was so unexpectedly wide and so strange that I could think of

nothing but Baffin’s Bay. The Lincoln hills rose up around me at the

extremity of a snowy plain, in which I did not remember to have stood

before; and the fishermen, at an indeterminable distance over the ice,

moving slowly about with their wolfish dogs, passed for sealers or

Esquimaux, or in misty weather loomed like fabulous creatures, and I

did not know whether they were giants or pygmies. I took this course

when I went to lecture in Lincoln in the evening, travelling in no road

and passing no house between my own hut and the lecture room. In Goose

Pond, which lay in my way, a colony of muskrats dwelt, and raised their

cabins high above the ice, though none could be seen abroad when I

crossed it. Walden, being like the rest usually bare of snow, or with

only shallow and interrupted drifts on it, was my yard, where I could

walk freely when the snow was nearly two feet deep on a level elsewhere

and the villagers were confined to their streets. There, far from the

village street, and except at very long intervals, from the jingle of

sleigh-bells, I slid and skated, as in a vast moose-yard well trodden,

overhung by oak woods and solemn pines bent down with snow or bristling

with icicles.

For sounds in winter nights, and often in winter days, I heard the

forlorn but melodious note of a hooting owl indefinitely far; such a

sound as the frozen earth would yield if struck with a suitable

plectrum, the very \_lingua vernacula\_ of Walden Wood, and quite

familiar to me at last, though I never saw the bird while it was making

it. I seldom opened my door in a winter evening without hearing it;

\_Hoo hoo hoo, hoorer, hoo,\_ sounded sonorously, and the first three

syllables accented somewhat like \_how der do\_; or sometimes \_hoo hoo\_

only. One night in the beginning of winter, before the pond froze over,

about nine o’clock, I was startled by the loud honking of a goose, and,

stepping to the door, heard the sound of their wings like a tempest in

the woods as they flew low over my house. They passed over the pond

toward Fair Haven, seemingly deterred from settling by my light, their

commodore honking all the while with a regular beat. Suddenly an

unmistakable cat-owl from very near me, with the most harsh and

tremendous voice I ever heard from any inhabitant of the woods,

responded at regular intervals to the goose, as if determined to expose

and disgrace this intruder from Hudson’s Bay by exhibiting a greater

compass and volume of voice in a native, and \_boo-hoo\_ him out of

Concord horizon. What do you mean by alarming the citadel at this time

of night consecrated to me? Do you think I am ever caught napping at

such an hour, and that I have not got lungs and a larynx as well as

yourself? \_Boo-hoo, boo-hoo, boo-hoo!\_ It was one of the most thrilling

discords I ever heard. And yet, if you had a discriminating ear, there

were in it the elements of a concord such as these plains never saw nor

heard.

I also heard the whooping of the ice in the pond, my great bed-fellow

in that part of Concord, as if it were restless in its bed and would

fain turn over, were troubled with flatulency and had dreams; or I was

waked by the cracking of the ground by the frost, as if some one had

driven a team against my door, and in the morning would find a crack in

the earth a quarter of a mile long and a third of an inch wide.

Sometimes I heard the foxes as they ranged over the snow crust, in

moonlight nights, in search of a partridge or other game, barking

raggedly and demoniacally like forest dogs, as if laboring with some

anxiety, or seeking expression, struggling for light and to be dogs

outright and run freely in the streets; for if we take the ages into

our account, may there not be a civilization going on among brutes as

well as men? They seemed to me to be rudimental, burrowing men, still

standing on their defence, awaiting their transformation. Sometimes one

came near to my window, attracted by my light, barked a vulpine curse

at me, and then retreated.

Usually the red squirrel (\_Sciurus Hudsonius\_) waked me in the dawn,

coursing over the roof and up and down the sides of the house, as if

sent out of the woods for this purpose. In the course of the winter I

threw out half a bushel of ears of sweet-corn, which had not got ripe,

on to the snow crust by my door, and was amused by watching the motions

of the various animals which were baited by it. In the twilight and the

night the rabbits came regularly and made a hearty meal. All day long

the red squirrels came and went, and afforded me much entertainment by

their manœuvres. One would approach at first warily through the

shrub-oaks, running over the snow crust by fits and starts like a leaf

blown by the wind, now a few paces this way, with wonderful speed and

waste of energy, making inconceivable haste with his “trotters,” as if

it were for a wager, and now as many paces that way, but never getting

on more than half a rod at a time; and then suddenly pausing with a

ludicrous expression and a gratuitous somerset, as if all the eyes in

the universe were fixed on him,—for all the motions of a squirrel, even

in the most solitary recesses of the forest, imply spectators as much

as those of a dancing girl,—wasting more time in delay and

circumspection than would have sufficed to walk the whole distance,—I

never saw one walk,—and then suddenly, before you could say Jack

Robinson, he would be in the top of a young pitch-pine, winding up his

clock and chiding all imaginary spectators, soliloquizing and talking

to all the universe at the same time,—for no reason that I could ever

detect, or he himself was aware of, I suspect. At length he would reach

the corn, and selecting a suitable ear, frisk about in the same

uncertain trigonometrical way to the top-most stick of my wood-pile,

before my window, where he looked me in the face, and there sit for

hours, supplying himself with a new ear from time to time, nibbling at

first voraciously and throwing the half-naked cobs about; till at

length he grew more dainty still and played with his food, tasting only

the inside of the kernel, and the ear, which was held balanced over the

stick by one paw, slipped from his careless grasp and fell to the

ground, when he would look over at it with a ludicrous expression of

uncertainty, as if suspecting that it had life, with a mind not made up

whether to get it again, or a new one, or be off; now thinking of corn,

then listening to hear what was in the wind. So the little impudent

fellow would waste many an ear in a forenoon; till at last, seizing

some longer and plumper one, considerably bigger than himself, and

skilfully balancing it, he would set out with it to the woods, like a

tiger with a buffalo, by the same zig-zag course and frequent pauses,

scratching along with it as if it were too heavy for him and falling

all the while, making its fall a diagonal between a perpendicular and

horizontal, being determined to put it through at any rate;—a

singularly frivolous and whimsical fellow;—and so he would get off with

it to where he lived, perhaps carry it to the top of a pine tree forty

or fifty rods distant, and I would afterwards find the cobs strewn

about the woods in various directions.

At length the jays arrive, whose discordant screams were heard long

before, as they were warily making their approach an eighth of a mile

off, and in a stealthy and sneaking manner they flit from tree to tree,

nearer and nearer, and pick up the kernels which the squirrels have

dropped. Then, sitting on a pitch-pine bough, they attempt to swallow

in their haste a kernel which is too big for their throats and chokes

them; and after great labor they disgorge it, and spend an hour in the

endeavor to crack it by repeated blows with their bills. They were

manifestly thieves, and I had not much respect for them; but the

squirrels, though at first shy, went to work as if they were taking

what was their own.

Meanwhile also came the chickadees in flocks, which, picking up the

crumbs the squirrels had dropped, flew to the nearest twig, and,

placing them under their claws, hammered away at them with their little

bills, as if it were an insect in the bark, till they were sufficiently

reduced for their slender throats. A little flock of these tit-mice

came daily to pick a dinner out of my wood-pile, or the crumbs at my

door, with faint flitting lisping notes, like the tinkling of icicles

in the grass, or else with sprightly \_day day day\_, or more rarely, in

spring-like days, a wiry summery \_phe-be\_ from the wood-side. They were

so familiar that at length one alighted on an armful of wood which I

was carrying in, and pecked at the sticks without fear. I once had a

sparrow alight upon my shoulder for a moment while I was hoeing in a

village garden, and I felt that I was more distinguished by that

circumstance than I should have been by any epaulet I could have worn.

The squirrels also grew at last to be quite familiar, and occasionally

stepped upon my shoe, when that was the nearest way.

When the ground was not yet quite covered, and again near the end of

winter, when the snow was melted on my south hill-side and about my

wood-pile, the partridges came out of the woods morning and evening to

feed there. Whichever side you walk in the woods the partridge bursts

away on whirring wings, jarring the snow from the dry leaves and twigs

on high, which comes sifting down in the sun-beams like golden dust;

for this brave bird is not to be scared by winter. It is frequently

covered up by drifts, and, it is said, “sometimes plunges from on wing

into the soft snow, where it remains concealed for a day or two.” I

used to start them in the open land also, where they had come out of

the woods at sunset to “bud” the wild apple-trees. They will come

regularly every evening to particular trees, where the cunning

sportsman lies in wait for them, and the distant orchards next the

woods suffer thus not a little. I am glad that the partridge gets fed,

at any rate. It is Nature’s own bird which lives on buds and

diet-drink.

In dark winter mornings, or in short winter afternoons, I sometimes

heard a pack of hounds threading all the woods with hounding cry and

yelp, unable to resist the instinct of the chase, and the note of the

hunting horn at intervals, proving that man was in the rear. The woods

ring again, and yet no fox bursts forth on to the open level of the

pond, nor following pack pursuing their Actæon. And perhaps at evening

I see the hunters returning with a single brush trailing from their

sleigh for a trophy, seeking their inn. They tell me that if the fox

would remain in the bosom of the frozen earth he would be safe, or if

he would run in a straight line away no fox-hound could overtake him;

but, having left his pursuers far behind, he stops to rest and listen

till they come up, and when he runs he circles round to his old haunts,

where the hunters await him. Sometimes, however, he will run upon a

wall many rods, and then leap off far to one side, and he appears to

know that water will not retain his scent. A hunter told me that he

once saw a fox pursued by hounds burst out on to Walden when the ice

was covered with shallow puddles, run part way across, and then return

to the same shore. Ere long the hounds arrived, but here they lost the

scent. Sometimes a pack hunting by themselves would pass my door, and

circle round my house, and yelp and hound without regarding me, as if

afflicted by a species of madness, so that nothing could divert them

from the pursuit. Thus they circle until they fall upon the recent

trail of a fox, for a wise hound will forsake every thing else for

this. One day a man came to my hut from Lexington to inquire after his

hound that made a large track, and had been hunting for a week by

himself. But I fear that he was not the wiser for all I told him, for

every time I attempted to answer his questions he interrupted me by

asking, “What do you do here?” He had lost a dog, but found a man.

One old hunter who has a dry tongue, who used to come to bathe in

Walden once every year when the water was warmest, and at such times

looked in upon me, told me that many years ago he took his gun one

afternoon and went out for a cruise in Walden Wood; and as he walked

the Wayland road he heard the cry of hounds approaching, and ere long a

fox leaped the wall into the road, and as quick as thought leaped the

other wall out of the road, and his swift bullet had not touched him.

Some way behind came an old hound and her three pups in full pursuit,

hunting on their own account, and disappeared again in the woods. Late

in the afternoon, as he was resting in the thick woods south of Walden,

he heard the voice of the hounds far over toward Fair Haven still

pursuing the fox; and on they came, their hounding cry which made all

the woods ring sounding nearer and nearer, now from Well-Meadow, now

from the Baker Farm. For a long time he stood still and listened to

their music, so sweet to a hunter’s ear, when suddenly the fox

appeared, threading the solemn aisles with an easy coursing pace, whose

sound was concealed by a sympathetic rustle of the leaves, swift and

still, keeping the ground, leaving his pursuers far behind; and,

leaping upon a rock amid the woods, he sat erect and listening, with

his back to the hunter. For a moment compassion restrained the latter’s

arm; but that was a short-lived mood, and as quick as thought can

follow thought his piece was levelled, and \_whang!\_—the fox rolling

over the rock lay dead on the ground. The hunter still kept his place

and listened to the hounds. Still on they came, and now the near woods

resounded through all their aisles with their demoniac cry. At length

the old hound burst into view with muzzle to the ground, and snapping

the air as if possessed, and ran directly to the rock; but spying the

dead fox she suddenly ceased her hounding as if struck dumb with

amazement, and walked round and round him in silence; and one by one

her pups arrived, and, like their mother, were sobered into silence by

the mystery. Then the hunter came forward and stood in their midst, and

the mystery was solved. They waited in silence while he skinned the

fox, then followed the brush a while, and at length turned off into the

woods again. That evening a Weston Squire came to the Concord hunter’s

cottage to inquire for his hounds, and told how for a week they had

been hunting on their own account from Weston woods. The Concord hunter

told him what he knew and offered him the skin; but the other declined

it and departed. He did not find his hounds that night, but the next

day learned that they had crossed the river and put up at a farm-house

for the night, whence, having been well fed, they took their departure

early in the morning.

The hunter who told me this could remember one Sam Nutting, who used to

hunt bears on Fair Haven Ledges, and exchange their skins for rum in

Concord village; who told him, even, that he had seen a moose there.

Nutting had a famous fox-hound named Burgoyne,—he pronounced it

Bugine,—which my informant used to borrow. In the “Wast Book” of an old

trader of this town, who was also a captain, town-clerk, and

representative, I find the following entry. Jan. 18th, 1742–3, “John

Melven Cr. by 1 Grey Fox 0—2—3;” they are not now found here; and in

his ledger, Feb. 7th, 1743, Hezekiah Stratton has credit “by ½ a Catt

skin 0—1—4½;” of course, a wild-cat, for Stratton was a sergeant in the

old French war, and would not have got credit for hunting less noble

game. Credit is given for deer skins also, and they were daily sold.

One man still preserves the horns of the last deer that was killed in

this vicinity, and another has told me the particulars of the hunt in

which his uncle was engaged. The hunters were formerly a numerous and

merry crew here. I remember well one gaunt Nimrod who would catch up a

leaf by the road-side and play a strain on it wilder and more

melodious, if my memory serves me, than any hunting-horn.

At midnight, when there was a moon, I sometimes met with hounds in my

path prowling about the woods, which would skulk out of my way, as if

afraid, and stand silent amid the bushes till I had passed.

Squirrels and wild mice disputed for my store of nuts. There were

scores of pitch-pines around my house, from one to four inches in

diameter, which had been gnawed by mice the previous winter,—a

Norwegian winter for them, for the snow lay long and deep, and they

were obliged to mix a large proportion of pine bark with their other

diet. These trees were alive and apparently flourishing at mid-summer,

and many of them had grown a foot, though completely girdled; but after

another winter such were without exception dead. It is remarkable that

a single mouse should thus be allowed a whole pine tree for its dinner,

gnawing round instead of up and down it; but perhaps it is necessary in

order to thin these trees, which are wont to grow up densely.

The hares (\_Lepus Americanus\_) were very familiar. One had her form

under my house all winter, separated from me only by the flooring, and

she startled me each morning by her hasty departure when I began to

stir,—thump, thump, thump, striking her head against the floor timbers

in her hurry. They used to come round my door at dusk to nibble the

potato parings which I had thrown out, and were so nearly the color of

the ground that they could hardly be distinguished when still.

Sometimes in the twilight I alternately lost and recovered sight of one

sitting motionless under my window. When I opened my door in the

evening, off they would go with a squeak and a bounce. Near at hand

they only excited my pity. One evening one sat by my door two paces

from me, at first trembling with fear, yet unwilling to move; a poor

wee thing, lean and bony, with ragged ears and sharp nose, scant tail

and slender paws. It looked as if Nature no longer contained the breed

of nobler bloods, but stood on her last toes. Its large eyes appeared

young and unhealthy, almost dropsical. I took a step, and lo, away it

scud with an elastic spring over the snow crust, straightening its body

and its limbs into graceful length, and soon put the forest between me

and itself,—the wild free venison, asserting its vigor and the dignity

of Nature. Not without reason was its slenderness. Such then was its

nature. (\_Lepus\_, \_levipes\_, light-foot, some think.)

What is a country without rabbits and partridges? They are among the

most simple and indigenous animal products; ancient and venerable

families known to antiquity as to modern times; of the very hue and

substance of Nature, nearest allied to leaves and to the ground,—and to

one another; it is either winged or it is legged. It is hardly as if

you had seen a wild creature when a rabbit or a partridge bursts away,

only a natural one, as much to be expected as rustling leaves. The

partridge and the rabbit are still sure to thrive, like true natives of

the soil, whatever revolutions occur. If the forest is cut off, the

sprouts and bushes which spring up afford them concealment, and they

become more numerous than ever. That must be a poor country indeed that

does not support a hare. Our woods teem with them both, and around

every swamp may be seen the partridge or rabbit walk, beset with twiggy

fences and horse-hair snares, which some cow-boy tends.

The Pond in Winter

After a still winter night I awoke with the impression that some

question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to

answer in my sleep, as what—how—when—where? But there was dawning

Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking in at my broad windows with

serene and satisfied face, and no question on \_her\_ lips. I awoke to an

answered question, to Nature and daylight. The snow lying deep on the

earth dotted with young pines, and the very slope of the hill on which

my house is placed, seemed to say, Forward! Nature puts no question and

answers none which we mortals ask. She has long ago taken her

resolution. “O Prince, our eyes contemplate with admiration and

transmit to the soul the wonderful and varied spectacle of this

universe. The night veils without doubt a part of this glorious

creation; but day comes to reveal to us this great work, which extends

from earth even into the plains of the ether.”

Then to my morning work. First I take an axe and pail and go in search

of water, if that be not a dream. After a cold and snowy night it

needed a divining rod to find it. Every winter the liquid and trembling

surface of the pond, which was so sensitive to every breath, and

reflected every light and shadow, becomes solid to the depth of a foot

or a foot and a half, so that it will support the heaviest teams, and

perchance the snow covers it to an equal depth, and it is not to be

distinguished from any level field. Like the marmots in the surrounding

hills, it closes its eye-lids and becomes dormant for three months or

more. Standing on the snow-covered plain, as if in a pasture amid the

hills, I cut my way first through a foot of snow, and then a foot of

ice, and open a window under my feet, where, kneeling to drink, I look

down into the quiet parlor of the fishes, pervaded by a softened light

as through a window of ground glass, with its bright sanded floor the

same as in summer; there a perennial waveless serenity reigns as in the

amber twilight sky, corresponding to the cool and even temperament of

the inhabitants. Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.

Early in the morning, while all things are crisp with frost, men come

with fishing reels and slender lunch, and let down their fine lines

through the snowy field to take pickerel and perch; wild men, who

instinctively follow other fashions and trust other authorities than

their townsmen, and by their goings and comings stitch towns together

in parts where else they would be ripped. They sit and eat their

luncheon in stout fear-naughts on the dry oak leaves on the shore, as

wise in natural lore as the citizen is in artificial. They never

consulted with books, and know and can tell much less than they have

done. The things which they practise are said not yet to be known. Here

is one fishing for pickerel with grown perch for bait. You look into

his pail with wonder as into a summer pond, as if he kept summer locked

up at home, or knew where she had retreated. How, pray, did he get

these in mid-winter? O, he got worms out of rotten logs since the

ground froze, and so he caught them. His life itself passes deeper in

Nature than the studies of the naturalist penetrate; himself a subject

for the naturalist. The latter raises the moss and bark gently with his

knife in search of insects; the former lays open logs to their core

with his axe, and moss and bark fly far and wide. He gets his living by

barking trees. Such a man has some right to fish, and I love to see

Nature carried out in him. The perch swallows the grub-worm, the

pickerel swallows the perch, and the fisher-man swallows the pickerel;

and so all the chinks in the scale of being are filled.

When I strolled around the pond in misty weather I was sometimes amused

by the primitive mode which some ruder fisherman had adopted. He would

perhaps have placed alder branches over the narrow holes in the ice,

which were four or five rods apart and an equal distance from the

shore, and having fastened the end of the line to a stick to prevent

its being pulled through, have passed the slack line over a twig of the

alder, a foot or more above the ice, and tied a dry oak leaf to it,

which, being pulled down, would show when he had a bite. These alders

loomed through the mist at regular intervals as you walked half way

round the pond.

Ah, the pickerel of Walden! when I see them lying on the ice, or in the

well which the fisherman cuts in the ice, making a little hole to admit

the water, I am always surprised by their rare beauty, as if they were

fabulous fishes, they are so foreign to the streets, even to the woods,

foreign as Arabia to our Concord life. They possess a quite dazzling

and transcendent beauty which separates them by a wide interval from

the cadaverous cod and haddock whose fame is trumpeted in our streets.

They are not green like the pines, nor gray like the stones, nor blue

like the sky; but they have, to my eyes, if possible, yet rarer colors,

like flowers and precious stones, as if they were the pearls, the

animalized \_nuclei\_ or crystals of the Walden water. They, of course,

are Walden all over and all through; are themselves small Waldens in

the animal kingdom, Waldenses. It is surprising that they are caught

here,—that in this deep and capacious spring, far beneath the rattling

teams and chaises and tinkling sleighs that travel the Walden road,

this great gold and emerald fish swims. I never chanced to see its kind

in any market; it would be the cynosure of all eyes there. Easily, with

a few convulsive quirks, they give up their watery ghosts, like a

mortal translated before his time to the thin air of heaven.

walden\_pond\_map

As I was desirous to recover the long lost bottom of Walden Pond, I

surveyed it carefully, before the ice broke up, early in ’46, with

compass and chain and sounding line. There have been many stories told

about the bottom, or rather no bottom, of this pond, which certainly

had no foundation for themselves. It is remarkable how long men will

believe in the bottomlessness of a pond without taking the trouble to

sound it. I have visited two such Bottomless Ponds in one walk in this

neighborhood. Many have believed that Walden reached quite through to

the other side of the globe. Some who have lain flat on the ice for a

long time, looking down through the illusive medium, perchance with

watery eyes into the bargain, and driven to hasty conclusions by the

fear of catching cold in their breasts, have seen vast holes “into

which a load of hay might be driven,” if there were any body to drive

it, the undoubted source of the Styx and entrance to the Infernal

Regions from these parts. Others have gone down from the village with a

“fifty-six” and a wagon load of inch rope, but yet have failed to find

any bottom; for while the “fifty-six” was resting by the way, they were

paying out the rope in the vain attempt to fathom their truly

immeasurable capacity for marvellousness. But I can assure my readers

that Walden has a reasonably tight bottom at a not unreasonable, though

at an unusual, depth. I fathomed it easily with a cod-line and a stone

weighing about a pound and a half, and could tell accurately when the

stone left the bottom, by having to pull so much harder before the

water got underneath to help me. The greatest depth was exactly one

hundred and two feet; to which may be added the five feet which it has

risen since, making one hundred and seven. This is a remarkable depth

for so small an area; yet not an inch of it can be spared by the

imagination. What if all ponds were shallow? Would it not react on the

minds of men? I am thankful that this pond was made deep and pure for a

symbol. While men believe in the infinite some ponds will be thought to

be bottomless.

A factory owner, hearing what depth I had found, thought that it could

not be true, for, judging from his acquaintance with dams, sand would

not lie at so steep an angle. But the deepest ponds are not so deep in

proportion to their area as most suppose, and, if drained, would not

leave very remarkable valleys. They are not like cups between the

hills; for this one, which is so unusually deep for its area, appears

in a vertical section through its centre not deeper than a shallow

plate. Most ponds, emptied, would leave a meadow no more hollow than we

frequently see. William Gilpin, who is so admirable in all that relates

to landscapes, and usually so correct, standing at the head of Loch

Fyne, in Scotland, which he describes as “a bay of salt water, sixty or

seventy fathoms deep, four miles in breadth,” and about fifty miles

long, surrounded by mountains, observes, “If we could have seen it

immediately after the diluvian crash, or whatever convulsion of Nature

occasioned it, before the waters gushed in, what a horrid chasm must it

have appeared!

So high as heaved the tumid hills, so low

Down sunk a hollow bottom broad and deep,

Capacious bed of waters—.”

But if, using the shortest diameter of Loch Fyne, we apply these

proportions to Walden, which, as we have seen, appears already in a

vertical section only like a shallow plate, it will appear four times

as shallow. So much for the \_increased\_ horrors of the chasm of Loch

Fyne when emptied. No doubt many a smiling valley with its stretching

cornfields occupies exactly such a “horrid chasm,” from which the

waters have receded, though it requires the insight and the far sight

of the geologist to convince the unsuspecting inhabitants of this fact.

Often an inquisitive eye may detect the shores of a primitive lake in

the low horizon hills, and no subsequent elevation of the plain has

been necessary to conceal their history. But it is easiest, as they who

work on the highways know, to find the hollows by the puddles after a

shower. The amount of it is, the imagination give it the least license,

dives deeper and soars higher than Nature goes. So, probably, the depth

of the ocean will be found to be very inconsiderable compared with its

breadth.

As I sounded through the ice I could determine the shape of the bottom

with greater accuracy than is possible in surveying harbors which do

not freeze over, and I was surprised at its general regularity. In the

deepest part there are several acres more level than almost any field

which is exposed to the sun wind and plough. In one instance, on a line

arbitrarily chosen, the depth did not vary more than one foot in thirty

rods; and generally, near the middle, I could calculate the variation

for each one hundred feet in any direction beforehand within three or

four inches. Some are accustomed to speak of deep and dangerous holes

even in quiet sandy ponds like this, but the effect of water under

these circumstances is to level all inequalities. The regularity of the

bottom and its conformity to the shores and the range of the

neighboring hills were so perfect that a distant promontory betrayed

itself in the soundings quite across the pond, and its direction could

be determined by observing the opposite shore. Cape becomes bar, and

plain shoal, and valley and gorge deep water and channel.

When I had mapped the pond by the scale of ten rods to an inch, and put

down the soundings, more than a hundred in all, I observed this

remarkable coincidence. Having noticed that the number indicating the

greatest depth was apparently in the centre of the map, I laid a rule

on the map lengthwise, and then breadthwise, and found, to my surprise,

that the line of greatest length intersected the line of greatest

breadth \_exactly\_ at the point of greatest depth, notwithstanding that

the middle is so nearly level, the outline of the pond far from

regular, and the extreme length and breadth were got by measuring into

the coves; and I said to myself, Who knows but this hint would conduct

to the deepest part of the ocean as well as of a pond or puddle? Is not

this the rule also for the height of mountains, regarded as the

opposite of valleys? We know that a hill is not highest at its

narrowest part.

Of five coves, three, or all which had been sounded, were observed to

have a bar quite across their mouths and deeper water within, so that

the bay tended to be an expansion of water within the land not only

horizontally but vertically, and to form a basin or independent pond,

the direction of the two capes showing the course of the bar. Every

harbor on the sea-coast, also, has its bar at its entrance. In

proportion as the mouth of the cove was wider compared with its length,

the water over the bar was deeper compared with that in the basin.

Given, then, the length and breadth of the cove, and the character of

the surrounding shore, and you have almost elements enough to make out

a formula for all cases.

In order to see how nearly I could guess, with this experience, at the

deepest point in a pond, by observing the outlines of its surface and

the character of its shores alone, I made a plan of White Pond, which

contains about forty-one acres, and, like this, has no island in it,

nor any visible inlet or outlet; and as the line of greatest breadth

fell very near the line of least breadth, where two opposite capes

approached each other and two opposite bays receded, I ventured to mark

a point a short distance from the latter line, but still on the line of

greatest length, as the deepest. The deepest part was found to be

within one hundred feet of this, still farther in the direction to

which I had inclined, and was only one foot deeper, namely, sixty feet.

Of course, a stream running through, or an island in the pond, would

make the problem much more complicated.

If we knew all the laws of Nature, we should need only one fact, or the

description of one actual phenomenon, to infer all the particular

results at that point. Now we know only a few laws, and our result is

vitiated, not, of course, by any confusion or irregularity in Nature,

but by our ignorance of essential elements in the calculation. Our

notions of law and harmony are commonly confined to those instances

which we detect; but the harmony which results from a far greater

number of seemingly conflicting, but really concurring, laws, which we

have not detected, is still more wonderful. The particular laws are as

our points of view, as, to the traveller, a mountain outline varies

with every step, and it has an infinite number of profiles, though

absolutely but one form. Even when cleft or bored through it is not

comprehended in its entireness.

What I have observed of the pond is no less true in ethics. It is the

law of average. Such a rule of the two diameters not only guides us

toward the sun in the system and the heart in man, but draw lines

through the length and breadth of the aggregate of a man’s particular

daily behaviors and waves of life into his coves and inlets, and where

they intersect will be the height or depth of his character. Perhaps we

need only to know how his shores trend and his adjacent country or

circumstances, to infer his depth and concealed bottom. If he is

surrounded by mountainous circumstances, an Achillean shore, whose

peaks overshadow and are reflected in his bosom, they suggest a

corresponding depth in him. But a low and smooth shore proves him

shallow on that side. In our bodies, a bold projecting brow falls off

to and indicates a corresponding depth of thought. Also there is a bar

across the entrance of our every cove, or particular inclination; each

is our harbor for a season, in which we are detained and partially

land-locked. These inclinations are not whimsical usually, but their

form, size, and direction are determined by the promontories of the

shore, the ancient axes of elevation. When this bar is gradually

increased by storms, tides, or currents, or there is a subsidence of

the waters, so that it reaches to the surface, that which was at first

but an inclination in the shore in which a thought was harbored becomes

an individual lake, cut off from the ocean, wherein the thought secures

its own conditions, changes, perhaps, from salt to fresh, becomes a

sweet sea, dead sea, or a marsh. At the advent of each individual into

this life, may we not suppose that such a bar has risen to the surface

somewhere? It is true, we are such poor navigators that our thoughts,

for the most part, stand off and on upon a harborless coast, are

conversant only with the bights of the bays of poesy, or steer for the

public ports of entry, and go into the dry docks of science, where they

merely refit for this world, and no natural currents concur to

individualize them.

As for the inlet or outlet of Walden, I have not discovered any but

rain and snow and evaporation, though perhaps, with a thermometer and a

line, such places may be found, for where the water flows into the pond

it will probably be coldest in summer and warmest in winter. When the

ice-men were at work here in ’46–7, the cakes sent to the shore were

one day rejected by those who were stacking them up there, not being

thick enough to lie side by side with the rest; and the cutters thus

discovered that the ice over a small space was two or three inches

thinner than elsewhere, which made them think that there was an inlet

there. They also showed me in another place what they thought was a

“leach hole,” through which the pond leaked out under a hill into a

neighboring meadow, pushing me out on a cake of ice to see it. It was a

small cavity under ten feet of water; but I think that I can warrant

the pond not to need soldering till they find a worse leak than that.

One has suggested, that if such a “leach hole” should be found, its

connection with the meadow, if any existed, might be proved by

conveying some colored powder or sawdust to the mouth of the hole, and

then putting a strainer over the spring in the meadow, which would

catch some of the particles carried through by the current.

While I was surveying, the ice, which was sixteen inches thick,

undulated under a slight wind like water. It is well known that a level

cannot be used on ice. At one rod from the shore its greatest

fluctuation, when observed by means of a level on land directed toward

a graduated staff on the ice, was three quarters of an inch, though the

ice appeared firmly attached to the shore. It was probably greater in

the middle. Who knows but if our instruments were delicate enough we

might detect an undulation in the crust of the earth? When two legs of

my level were on the shore and the third on the ice, and the sights

were directed over the latter, a rise or fall of the ice of an almost

infinitesimal amount made a difference of several feet on a tree across

the pond. When I began to cut holes for sounding, there were three or

four inches of water on the ice under a deep snow which had sunk it

thus far; but the water began immediately to run into these holes, and

continued to run for two days in deep streams, which wore away the ice

on every side, and contributed essentially, if not mainly, to dry the

surface of the pond; for, as the water ran in, it raised and floated

the ice. This was somewhat like cutting a hole in the bottom of a ship

to let the water out. When such holes freeze, and a rain succeeds, and

finally a new freezing forms a fresh smooth ice over all, it is

beautifully mottled internally by dark figures, shaped somewhat like a

spider’s web, what you may call ice rosettes, produced by the channels

worn by the water flowing from all sides to a centre. Sometimes, also,

when the ice was covered with shallow puddles, I saw a double shadow of

myself, one standing on the head of the other, one on the ice, the

other on the trees or hill-side.

While yet it is cold January, and snow and ice are thick and solid, the

prudent landlord comes from the village to get ice to cool his summer

drink; impressively, even pathetically wise, to foresee the heat and

thirst of July now in January,—wearing a thick coat and mittens! when

so many things are not provided for. It may be that he lays up no

treasures in this world which will cool his summer drink in the next.

He cuts and saws the solid pond, unroofs the house of fishes, and carts

off their very element and air, held fast by chains and stakes like

corded wood, through the favoring winter air, to wintry cellars, to

underlie the summer there. It looks like solidified azure, as, far off,

it is drawn through the streets. These ice-cutters are a merry race,

full of jest and sport, and when I went among them they were wont to

invite me to saw pit-fashion with them, I standing underneath.

In the winter of ’46–7 there came a hundred men of Hyperborean

extraction swoop down on to our pond one morning, with many car-loads

of ungainly-looking farming tools, sleds, ploughs, drill-barrows,

turf-knives, spades, saws, rakes, and each man was armed with a

double-pointed pike-staff, such as is not described in the New-England

Farmer or the Cultivator. I did not know whether they had come to sow a

crop of winter rye, or some other kind of grain recently introduced

from Iceland. As I saw no manure, I judged that they meant to skim the

land, as I had done, thinking the soil was deep and had lain fallow

long enough. They said that a gentleman farmer, who was behind the

scenes, wanted to double his money, which, as I understood, amounted to

half a million already; but in order to cover each one of his dollars

with another, he took off the only coat, ay, the skin itself, of Walden

Pond in the midst of a hard winter. They went to work at once,

ploughing, harrowing, rolling, furrowing, in admirable order, as if

they were bent on making this a model farm; but when I was looking

sharp to see what kind of seed they dropped into the furrow, a gang of

fellows by my side suddenly began to hook up the virgin mould itself,

with a peculiar jerk, clean down to the sand, or rather the water,—for

it was a very springy soil,—indeed all the \_terra firma\_ there was,—and

haul it away on sleds, and then I guessed that they must be cutting

peat in a bog. So they came and went every day, with a peculiar shriek

from the locomotive, from and to some point of the polar regions, as it

seemed to me, like a flock of arctic snow-birds. But sometimes Squaw

Walden had her revenge, and a hired man, walking behind his team,

slipped through a crack in the ground down toward Tartarus, and he who

was so brave before suddenly became but the ninth part of a man, almost

gave up his animal heat, and was glad to take refuge in my house, and

acknowledged that there was some virtue in a stove; or sometimes the

frozen soil took a piece of steel out of a ploughshare, or a plough got

set in the furrow and had to be cut out.

To speak literally, a hundred Irishmen, with Yankee overseers, came

from Cambridge every day to get out the ice. They divided it into cakes

by methods too well known to require description, and these, being

sledded to the shore, were rapidly hauled off on to an ice platform,

and raised by grappling irons and block and tackle, worked by horses,

on to a stack, as surely as so many barrels of flour, and there placed

evenly side by side, and row upon row, as if they formed the solid base

of an obelisk designed to pierce the clouds. They told me that in a

good day they could get out a thousand tons, which was the yield of

about one acre. Deep ruts and “cradle holes” were worn in the ice, as

on \_terra firma\_, by the passage of the sleds over the same track, and

the horses invariably ate their oats out of cakes of ice hollowed out

like buckets. They stacked up the cakes thus in the open air in a pile

thirty-five feet high on one side and six or seven rods square, putting

hay between the outside layers to exclude the air; for when the wind,

though never so cold, finds a passage through, it will wear large

cavities, leaving slight supports or studs only here and there, and

finally topple it down. At first it looked like a vast blue fort or

Valhalla; but when they began to tuck the coarse meadow hay into the

crevices, and this became covered with rime and icicles, it looked like

a venerable moss-grown and hoary ruin, built of azure-tinted marble,

the abode of Winter, that old man we see in the almanac,—his shanty, as

if he had a design to estivate with us. They calculated that not

twenty-five per cent of this would reach its destination, and that two

or three per cent would be wasted in the cars. However, a still greater

part of this heap had a different destiny from what was intended; for,

either because the ice was found not to keep so well as was expected,

containing more air than usual, or for some other reason, it never got

to market. This heap, made in the winter of ’46–7 and estimated to

contain ten thousand tons, was finally covered with hay and boards; and

though it was unroofed the following July, and a part of it carried

off, the rest remaining exposed to the sun, it stood over that summer

and the next winter, and was not quite melted till September 1848. Thus

the pond recovered the greater part.

Like the water, the Walden ice, seen near at hand, has a green tint,

but at a distance is beautifully blue, and you can easily tell it from

the white ice of the river, or the merely greenish ice of some ponds, a

quarter of a mile off. Sometimes one of those great cakes slips from

the ice-man’s sled into the village street, and lies there for a week

like a great emerald, an object of interest to all passers. I have

noticed that a portion of Walden which in the state of water was green

will often, when frozen, appear from the same point of view blue. So

the hollows about this pond will, sometimes, in the winter, be filled

with a greenish water somewhat like its own, but the next day will have

frozen blue. Perhaps the blue color of water and ice is due to the

light and air they contain, and the most transparent is the bluest. Ice

is an interesting subject for contemplation. They told me that they had

some in the ice-houses at Fresh Pond five years old which was as good

as ever. Why is it that a bucket of water soon becomes putrid, but

frozen remains sweet forever? It is commonly said that this is the

difference between the affections and the intellect.

Thus for sixteen days I saw from my window a hundred men at work like

busy husbandmen, with teams and horses and apparently all the

implements of farming, such a picture as we see on the first page of

the almanac; and as often as I looked out I was reminded of the fable

of the lark and the reapers, or the parable of the sower, and the like;

and now they are all gone, and in thirty days more, probably, I shall

look from the same window on the pure sea-green Walden water there,

reflecting the clouds and the trees, and sending up its evaporations in

solitude, and no traces will appear that a man has ever stood there.

Perhaps I shall hear a solitary loon laugh as he dives and plumes

himself, or shall see a lonely fisher in his boat, like a floating

leaf, beholding his form reflected in the waves, where lately a hundred

men securely labored.

Thus it appears that the sweltering inhabitants of Charleston and New

Orleans, of Madras and Bombay and Calcutta, drink at my well. In the

morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonal

philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta, since whose composition years of the

gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and

its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is

not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its

sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well

for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Bramin, priest of

Brahma and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges

reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and

water jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and

our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden

water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges. With favoring

winds it is wafted past the site of the fabulous islands of Atlantis

and the Hesperides, makes the periplus of Hanno, and, floating by

Ternate and Tidore and the mouth of the Persian Gulf, melts in the

tropic gales of the Indian seas, and is landed in ports of which

Alexander only heard the names.

Spring

The opening of large tracts by the ice-cutters commonly causes a pond

to break up earlier; for the water, agitated by the wind, even in cold

weather, wears away the surrounding ice. But such was not the effect on

Walden that year, for she had soon got a thick new garment to take the

place of the old. This pond never breaks up so soon as the others in

this neighborhood, on account both of its greater depth and its having

no stream passing through it to melt or wear away the ice. I never knew

it to open in the course of a winter, not excepting that of ’52–3,

which gave the ponds so severe a trial. It commonly opens about the

first of April, a week or ten days later than Flint’s Pond and

Fair-Haven, beginning to melt on the north side and in the shallower

parts where it began to freeze. It indicates better than any water

hereabouts the absolute progress of the season, being least affected by

transient changes of temperature. A severe cold of a few days’ duration

in March may very much retard the opening of the former ponds, while

the temperature of Walden increases almost uninterruptedly. A

thermometer thrust into the middle of Walden on the 6th of March, 1847,

stood at 32°, or freezing point; near the shore at 33°; in the middle

of Flint’s Pond, the same day, at 32½°; at a dozen rods from the shore,

in shallow water, under ice a foot thick, at 36°. This difference of

three and a half degrees between the temperature of the deep water and

the shallow in the latter pond, and the fact that a great proportion of

it is comparatively shallow, show why it should break up so much sooner

than Walden. The ice in the shallowest part was at this time several

inches thinner than in the middle. In mid-winter the middle had been

the warmest and the ice thinnest there. So, also, every one who has

waded about the shores of the pond in summer must have perceived how

much warmer the water is close to the shore, where only three or four

inches deep, than a little distance out, and on the surface where it is

deep, than near the bottom. In spring the sun not only exerts an

influence through the increased temperature of the air and earth, but

its heat passes through ice a foot or more thick, and is reflected from

the bottom in shallow water, and so also warms the water and melts the

under side of the ice, at the same time that it is melting it more

directly above, making it uneven, and causing the air bubbles which it

contains to extend themselves upward and downward until it is

completely honeycombed, and at last disappears suddenly in a single

spring rain. Ice has its grain as well as wood, and when a cake begins

to rot or “comb,” that is, assume the appearance of honey-comb,

whatever may be its position, the air cells are at right angles with

what was the water surface. Where there is a rock or a log rising near

to the surface the ice over it is much thinner, and is frequently quite

dissolved by this reflected heat; and I have been told that in the

experiment at Cambridge to freeze water in a shallow wooden pond,

though the cold air circulated underneath, and so had access to both

sides, the reflection of the sun from the bottom more than

counterbalanced this advantage. When a warm rain in the middle of the

winter melts off the snow-ice from Walden, and leaves a hard dark or

transparent ice on the middle, there will be a strip of rotten though

thicker white ice, a rod or more wide, about the shores, created by

this reflected heat. Also, as I have said, the bubbles themselves

within the ice operate as burning-glasses to melt the ice beneath.

The phenomena of the year take place every day in a pond on a small

scale. Every morning, generally speaking, the shallow water is being

warmed more rapidly than the deep, though it may not be made so warm

after all, and every evening it is being cooled more rapidly until the

morning. The day is an epitome of the year. The night is the winter,

the morning and evening are the spring and fall, and the noon is the

summer. The cracking and booming of the ice indicate a change of

temperature. One pleasant morning after a cold night, February 24th,

1850, having gone to Flint’s Pond to spend the day, I noticed with

surprise, that when I struck the ice with the head of my axe, it

resounded like a gong for many rods around, or as if I had struck on a

tight drum-head. The pond began to boom about an hour after sunrise,

when it felt the influence of the sun’s rays slanted upon it from over

the hills; it stretched itself and yawned like a waking man with a

gradually increasing tumult, which was kept up three or four hours. It

took a short siesta at noon, and boomed once more toward night, as the

sun was withdrawing his influence. In the right stage of the weather a

pond fires its evening gun with great regularity. But in the middle of

the day, being full of cracks, and the air also being less elastic, it

had completely lost its resonance, and probably fishes and muskrats

could not then have been stunned by a blow on it. The fishermen say

that the “thundering of the pond” scares the fishes and prevents their

biting. The pond does not thunder every evening, and I cannot tell

surely when to expect its thundering; but though I may perceive no

difference in the weather, it does. Who would have suspected so large

and cold and thick-skinned a thing to be so sensitive? Yet it has its

law to which it thunders obedience when it should as surely as the buds

expand in the spring. The earth is all alive and covered with papillæ.

The largest pond is as sensitive to atmospheric changes as the globule

of mercury in its tube.

One attraction in coming to the woods to live was that I should have

leisure and opportunity to see the spring come in. The ice in the pond

at length begins to be honey-combed, and I can set my heel in it as I

walk. Fogs and rains and warmer suns are gradually melting the snow;

the days have grown sensibly longer; and I see how I shall get through

the winter without adding to my wood-pile, for large fires are no

longer necessary. I am on the alert for the first signs of spring, to

hear the chance note of some arriving bird, or the striped squirrel’s

chirp, for his stores must be now nearly exhausted, or see the

woodchuck venture out of his winter quarters. On the 13th of March,

after I had heard the bluebird, song-sparrow, and red-wing, the ice was

still nearly a foot thick. As the weather grew warmer it was not

sensibly worn away by the water, nor broken up and floated off as in

rivers, but, though it was completely melted for half a rod in width

about the shore, the middle was merely honey-combed and saturated with

water, so that you could put your foot through it when six inches

thick; but by the next day evening, perhaps, after a warm rain followed

by fog, it would have wholly disappeared, all gone off with the fog,

spirited away. One year I went across the middle only five days before

it disappeared entirely. In 1845 Walden was first completely open on

the 1st of April; in ’46, the 25th of March; in ’47, the 8th of April;

in ’51, the 28th of March; in ’52, the 18th of April; in ’53, the 23d

of March; in ’54, about the 7th of April.

Every incident connected with the breaking up of the rivers and ponds

and the settling of the weather is particularly interesting to us who

live in a climate of so great extremes. When the warmer days come, they

who dwell near the river hear the ice crack at night with a startling

whoop as loud as artillery, as if its icy fetters were rent from end to

end, and within a few days see it rapidly going out. So the alligator

comes out of the mud with quakings of the earth. One old man, who has

been a close observer of Nature, and seems as thoroughly wise in regard

to all her operations as if she had been put upon the stocks when he

was a boy, and he had helped to lay her keel,—who has come to his

growth, and can hardly acquire more of natural lore if he should live

to the age of Methuselah,—told me, and I was surprised to hear him

express wonder at any of Nature’s operations, for I thought that there

were no secrets between them, that one spring day he took his gun and

boat, and thought that he would have a little sport with the ducks.

There was ice still on the meadows, but it was all gone out of the

river, and he dropped down without obstruction from Sudbury, where he

lived, to Fair-Haven Pond, which he found, unexpectedly, covered for

the most part with a firm field of ice. It was a warm day, and he was

surprised to see so great a body of ice remaining. Not seeing any

ducks, he hid his boat on the north or back side of an island in the

pond, and then concealed himself in the bushes on the south side, to

await them. The ice was melted for three or four rods from the shore,

and there was a smooth and warm sheet of water, with a muddy bottom,

such as the ducks love, within, and he thought it likely that some

would be along pretty soon. After he had lain still there about an hour

he heard a low and seemingly very distant sound, but singularly grand

and impressive, unlike any thing he had ever heard, gradually swelling

and increasing as if it would have a universal and memorable ending, a

sullen rush and roar, which seemed to him all at once like the sound of

a vast body of fowl coming in to settle there, and, seizing his gun, he

started up in haste and excited; but he found, to his surprise, that

the whole body of the ice had started while he lay there, and drifted

in to the shore, and the sound he had heard was made by its edge

grating on the shore,—at first gently nibbled and crumbled off, but at

length heaving up and scattering its wrecks along the island to a

considerable height before it came to a stand still.

At length the sun’s rays have attained the right angle, and warm winds

blow up mist and rain and melt the snow banks, and the sun dispersing

the mist smiles on a checkered landscape of russet and white smoking

with incense, through which the traveller picks his way from islet to

islet, cheered by the music of a thousand tinkling rills and rivulets

whose veins are filled with the blood of winter which they are bearing

off.

Few phenomena gave me more delight than to observe the forms which

thawing sand and clay assume in flowing down the sides of a deep cut on

the railroad through which I passed on my way to the village, a

phenomenon not very common on so large a scale, though the number of

freshly exposed banks of the right material must have been greatly

multiplied since railroads were invented. The material was sand of

every degree of fineness and of various rich colors, commonly mixed

with a little clay. When the frost comes out in the spring, and even in

a thawing day in the winter, the sand begins to flow down the slopes

like lava, sometimes bursting out through the snow and overflowing it

where no sand was to be seen before. Innumerable little streams overlap

and interlace one with another, exhibiting a sort of hybrid product,

which obeys half way the law of currents, and half way that of

vegetation. As it flows it takes the forms of sappy leaves or vines,

making heaps of pulpy sprays a foot or more in depth, and resembling,

as you look down on them, the laciniated, lobed, and imbricated

thalluses of some lichens; or you are reminded of coral, of leopard’s

paws or birds’ feet, of brains or lungs or bowels, and excrements of

all kinds. It is a truly \_grotesque\_ vegetation, whose forms and color

we see imitated in bronze, a sort of architectural foliage more ancient

and typical than acanthus, chiccory, ivy, vine, or any vegetable

leaves; destined perhaps, under some circumstances, to become a puzzle

to future geologists. The whole cut impressed me as if it were a cave

with its stalactites laid open to the light. The various shades of the

sand are singularly rich and agreeable, embracing the different iron

colors, brown, gray, yellowish, and reddish. When the flowing mass

reaches the drain at the foot of the bank it spreads out flatter into

\_strands\_, the separate streams losing their semi-cylindrical form and

gradually becoming more flat and broad, running together as they are

more moist, till they form an almost flat \_sand\_, still variously and

beautifully shaded, but in which you can trace the original forms of

vegetation; till at length, in the water itself, they are converted

into \_banks\_, like those formed off the mouths of rivers, and the forms

of vegetation are lost in the ripple marks on the bottom.

The whole bank, which is from twenty to forty feet high, is sometimes

overlaid with a mass of this kind of foliage, or sandy rupture, for a

quarter of a mile on one or both sides, the produce of one spring day.

What makes this sand foliage remarkable is its springing into existence

thus suddenly. When I see on the one side the inert bank,—for the sun

acts on one side first,—and on the other this luxuriant foliage, the

creation of an hour, I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in

the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me,—had come to

where he was still at work, sporting on this bank, and with excess of

energy strewing his fresh designs about. I feel as if I were nearer to

the vitals of the globe, for this sandy overflow is something such a

foliaceous mass as the vitals of the animal body. You find thus in the

very sands an anticipation of the vegetable leaf. No wonder that the

earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea

inwardly. The atoms have already learned this law, and are pregnant by

it. The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype. \_Internally\_, whether

in the globe or animal body, it is a moist thick \_lobe\_, a word

especially applicable to the liver and lungs and the \_leaves\_ of fat,

(?e?ß?, \_labor\_, \_lapsus\_, to flow or slip downward, a lapsing; ??ß??,

\_globus\_, lobe, globe; also lap, flap, and many other words,)

\_externally\_ a dry thin \_leaf\_, even as the \_f\_ and \_v\_ are a pressed

and dried \_b\_. The radicals of \_lobe\_ are \_lb\_, the soft mass of the

\_b\_ (single lobed, or B, double lobed,) with the liquid \_l\_ behind it

pressing it forward. In globe, \_glb\_, the guttural \_g\_ adds to the

meaning the capacity of the throat. The feathers and wings of birds are

still drier and thinner leaves. Thus, also, you pass from the lumpish

grub in the earth to the airy and fluttering butterfly. The very globe

continually transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its

orbit. Even ice begins with delicate crystal leaves, as if it had

flowed into moulds which the fronds of water plants have impressed on

the watery mirror. The whole tree itself is but one leaf, and rivers

are still vaster leaves whose pulp is intervening earth, and towns and

cities are the ova of insects in their axils.

When the sun withdraws the sand ceases to flow, but in the morning the

streams will start once more and branch and branch again into a myriad

of others. You here see perchance how blood vessels are formed. If you

look closely you observe that first there pushes forward from the

thawing mass a stream of softened sand with a drop-like point, like the

ball of the finger, feeling its way slowly and blindly downward, until

at last with more heat and moisture, as the sun gets higher, the most

fluid portion, in its effort to obey the law to which the most inert

also yields, separates from the latter and forms for itself a

meandering channel or artery within that, in which is seen a little

silvery stream glancing like lightning from one stage of pulpy leaves

or branches to another, and ever and anon swallowed up in the sand. It

is wonderful how rapidly yet perfectly the sand organizes itself as it

flows, using the best material its mass affords to form the sharp edges

of its channel. Such are the sources of rivers. In the silicious matter

which the water deposits is perhaps the bony system, and in the still

finer soil and organic matter the fleshy fibre or cellular tissue. What

is man but a mass of thawing clay? The ball of the human finger is but

a drop congealed. The fingers and toes flow to their extent from the

thawing mass of the body. Who knows what the human body would expand

and flow out to under a more genial heaven? Is not the hand a spreading

\_palm\_ leaf with its lobes and veins? The ear may be regarded,

fancifully, as a lichen, \_umbilicaria\_, on the side of the head, with

its lobe or drop. The lip—\_labium\_, from \_labor\_ (?)—laps or lapses

from the sides of the cavernous mouth. The nose is a manifest congealed

drop or stalactite. The chin is a still larger drop, the confluent

dripping of the face. The cheeks are a slide from the brows into the

valley of the face, opposed and diffused by the cheek bones. Each

rounded lobe of the vegetable leaf, too, is a thick and now loitering

drop, larger or smaller; the lobes are the fingers of the leaf; and as

many lobes as it has, in so many directions it tends to flow, and more

heat or other genial influences would have caused it to flow yet

farther.

Thus it seemed that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all

the operations of Nature. The Maker of this earth but patented a leaf.

What Champollion will decipher this hieroglyphic for us, that we may

turn over a new leaf at last? This phenomenon is more exhilarating to

me than the luxuriance and fertility of vineyards. True, it is somewhat

excrementitious in its character, and there is no end to the heaps of

liver lights and bowels, as if the globe were turned wrong side

outward; but this suggests at least that Nature has some bowels, and

there again is mother of humanity. This is the frost coming out of the

ground; this is Spring. It precedes the green and flowery spring, as

mythology precedes regular poetry. I know of nothing more purgative of

winter fumes and indigestions. It convinces me that Earth is still in

her swaddling clothes, and stretches forth baby fingers on every side.

Fresh curls spring from the baldest brow. There is nothing inorganic.

These foliaceous heaps lie along the bank like the slag of a furnace,

showing that Nature is “in full blast” within. The earth is not a mere

fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a

book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living

poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit,—not

a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central

life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic. Its throes will

heave our exuviæ from their graves. You may melt your metals and cast

them into the most beautiful moulds you can; they will never excite me

like the forms which this molten earth flows out into. And not only it,

but the institutions upon it, are plastic like clay in the hands of the

potter.

Ere long, not only on these banks, but on every hill and plain and in

every hollow, the frost comes out of the ground like a dormant

quadruped from its burrow, and seeks the sea with music, or migrates to

other climes in clouds. Thaw with his gentle persuasion is more

powerful than Thor with his hammer. The one melts, the other but breaks

in pieces.

When the ground was partially bare of snow, and a few warm days had

dried its surface somewhat, it was pleasant to compare the first tender

signs of the infant year just peeping forth with the stately beauty of

the withered vegetation which had withstood the

winter,—life-everlasting, golden-rods, pinweeds, and graceful wild

grasses, more obvious and interesting frequently than in summer even,

as if their beauty was not ripe till then; even cotton-grass,

cat-tails, mulleins, johnswort, hard-hack, meadow-sweet, and other

strong stemmed plants, those unexhausted granaries which entertain the

earliest birds,—decent weeds, at least, which widowed Nature wears. I

am particularly attracted by the arching and sheaf-like top of the

wool-grass; it brings back the summer to our winter memories, and is

among the forms which art loves to copy, and which, in the vegetable

kingdom, have the same relation to types already in the mind of man

that astronomy has. It is an antique style older than Greek or

Egyptian. Many of the phenomena of Winter are suggestive of an

inexpressible tenderness and fragile delicacy. We are accustomed to

hear this king described as a rude and boisterous tyrant; but with the

gentleness of a lover he adorns the tresses of Summer.

At the approach of spring the red-squirrels got under my house, two at

a time, directly under my feet as I sat reading or writing, and kept up

the queerest chuckling and chirruping and vocal pirouetting and

gurgling sounds that ever were heard; and when I stamped they only

chirruped the louder, as if past all fear and respect in their mad

pranks, defying humanity to stop them. No you

don’t—chickaree—chickaree. They were wholly deaf to my arguments, or

failed to perceive their force, and fell into a strain of invective

that was irresistible.

The first sparrow of spring! The year beginning with younger hope than

ever! The faint silvery warblings heard over the partially bare and

moist fields from the blue-bird, the song-sparrow, and the red-wing, as

if the last flakes of winter tinkled as they fell! What at such a time

are histories, chronologies, traditions, and all written revelations?

The brooks sing carols and glees to the spring. The marsh-hawk sailing

low over the meadow is already seeking the first slimy life that

awakes. The sinking sound of melting snow is heard in all dells, and

the ice dissolves apace in the ponds. The grass flames up on the

hillsides like a spring fire,—“et primitus oritur herba imbribus

primoribus evocata,”—as if the earth sent forth an inward heat to greet

the returning sun; not yellow but green is the color of its flame;—the

symbol of perpetual youth, the grass-blade, like a long green ribbon,

streams from the sod into the summer, checked indeed by the frost, but

anon pushing on again, lifting its spear of last year’s hay with the

fresh life below. It grows as steadily as the rill oozes out of the

ground. It is almost identical with that, for in the growing days of

June, when the rills are dry, the grass blades are their channels, and

from year to year the herds drink at this perennial green stream, and

the mower draws from it betimes their winter supply. So our human life

but dies down to its root, and still puts forth its green blade to

eternity.

Walden is melting apace. There is a canal two rods wide along the

northerly and westerly sides, and wider still at the east end. A great

field of ice has cracked off from the main body. I hear a song-sparrow

singing from the bushes on the shore,—\_olit\_, \_olit\_, \_olit,\_—\_chip\_,

\_chip\_, \_chip\_, \_che char\_,—\_che wiss\_, \_wiss\_, \_wiss\_. He too is

helping to crack it. How handsome the great sweeping curves in the edge

of the ice, answering somewhat to those of the shore, but more regular!

It is unusually hard, owing to the recent severe but transient cold,

and all watered or waved like a palace floor. But the wind slides

eastward over its opaque surface in vain, till it reaches the living

surface beyond. It is glorious to behold this ribbon of water sparkling

in the sun, the bare face of the pond full of glee and youth, as if it

spoke the joy of the fishes within it, and of the sands on its shore,—a

silvery sheen as from the scales of a \_leuciscus\_, as it were all one

active fish. Such is the contrast between winter and spring. Walden was

dead and is alive again. But this spring it broke up more steadily, as

I have said.

The change from storm and winter to serene and mild weather, from dark

and sluggish hours to bright and elastic ones, is a memorable crisis

which all things proclaim. It is seemingly instantaneous at last.

Suddenly an influx of light filled my house, though the evening was at

hand, and the clouds of winter still overhung it, and the eaves were

dripping with sleety rain. I looked out the window, and lo! where

yesterday was cold gray ice there lay the transparent pond already calm

and full of hope as in a summer evening, reflecting a summer evening

sky in its bosom, though none was visible overhead, as if it had

intelligence with some remote horizon. I heard a robin in the distance,

the first I had heard for many a thousand years, methought, whose note

I shall not forget for many a thousand more,—the same sweet and

powerful song as of yore. O the evening robin, at the end of a New

England summer day! If I could ever find the twig he sits upon! I mean

\_he\_; I mean \_the twig\_. This at least is not the \_Turdus migratorius\_.

The pitch-pines and shrub-oaks about my house, which had so long

drooped, suddenly resumed their several characters, looked brighter,

greener, and more erect and alive, as if effectually cleansed and

restored by the rain. I knew that it would not rain any more. You may

tell by looking at any twig of the forest, ay, at your very wood-pile,

whether its winter is past or not. As it grew darker, I was startled by

the \_honking\_ of geese flying low over the woods, like weary travellers

getting in late from southern lakes, and indulging at last in

unrestrained complaint and mutual consolation. Standing at my door, I

could hear the rush of their wings; when, driving toward my house, they

suddenly spied my light, and with hushed clamor wheeled and settled in

the pond. So I came in, and shut the door, and passed my first spring

night in the woods.

In the morning I watched the geese from the door through the mist,

sailing in the middle of the pond, fifty rods off, so large and

tumultuous that Walden appeared like an artificial pond for their

amusement. But when I stood on the shore they at once rose up with a

great flapping of wings at the signal of their commander, and when they

had got into rank circled about over my head, twenty-nine of them, and

then steered straight to Canada, with a regular \_honk\_ from the leader

at intervals, trusting to break their fast in muddier pools. A “plump”

of ducks rose at the same time and took the route to the north in the

wake of their noisier cousins.

For a week I heard the circling, groping clangor of some solitary goose

in the foggy mornings, seeking its companion, and still peopling the

woods with the sound of a larger life than they could sustain. In April

the pigeons were seen again flying express in small flocks, and in due

time I heard the martins twittering over my clearing, though it had not

seemed that the township contained so many that it could afford me any,

and I fancied that they were peculiarly of the ancient race that dwelt

in hollow trees ere white men came. In almost all climes the tortoise

and the frog are among the precursors and heralds of this season, and

birds fly with song and glancing plumage, and plants spring and bloom,

and winds blow, to correct this slight oscillation of the poles and

preserve the equilibrium of Nature.

As every season seems best to us in its turn, so the coming in of

spring is like the creation of Cosmos out of Chaos and the realization

of the Golden Age.—

“Eurus ad Auroram Nabathæaque regna recessit,

Persidaque, et radiis juga subdita matutinis.”

“The East-Wind withdrew to Aurora and the Nabathæan kingdom,

And the Persian, and the ridges placed under the morning rays

\* \* \* \*

Man was born. Whether that Artificer of things,

The origin of a better world, made him from the divine seed;

Or the earth, being recent and lately sundered from the high

Ether, retained some seeds of cognate heaven.”

A single gentle rain makes the grass many shades greener. So our

prospects brighten on the influx of better thoughts. We should be

blessed if we lived in the present always, and took advantage of every

accident that befell us, like the grass which confesses the influence

of the slightest dew that falls on it; and did not spend our time in

atoning for the neglect of past opportunities, which we call doing our

duty. We loiter in winter while it is already spring. In a pleasant

spring morning all men’s sins are forgiven. Such a day is a truce to

vice. While such a sun holds out to burn, the vilest sinner may return.

Through our own recovered innocence we discern the innocence of our

neighbors. You may have known your neighbor yesterday for a thief, a

drunkard, or a sensualist, and merely pitied or despised him, and

despaired of the world; but the sun shines bright and warm this first

spring morning, re-creating the world, and you meet him at some serene

work, and see how his exhausted and debauched veins expand with still

joy and bless the new day, feel the spring influence with the innocence

of infancy, and all his faults are forgotten. There is not only an

atmosphere of good will about him, but even a savor of holiness groping

for expression, blindly and ineffectually perhaps, like a new-born

instinct, and for a short hour the south hill-side echoes to no vulgar

jest. You see some innocent fair shoots preparing to burst from his

gnarled rind and try another year’s life, tender and fresh as the

youngest plant. Even he has entered into the joy of his Lord. Why the

jailer does not leave open his prison doors,—why the judge does not

dismis his case,—why the preacher does not dismiss his congregation! It

is because they do not obey the hint which God gives them, nor accept

the pardon which he freely offers to all.

“A return to goodness produced each day in the tranquil and beneficent

breath of the morning, causes that in respect to the love of virtue and

the hatred of vice, one approaches a little the primitive nature of

man, as the sprouts of the forest which has been felled. In like manner

the evil which one does in the interval of a day prevents the germs of

virtues which began to spring up again from developing themselves and

destroys them.

“After the germs of virtue have thus been prevented many times from

developing themselves, then the beneficent breath of evening does not

suffice to preserve them. As soon as the breath of evening does not

suffice longer to preserve them, then the nature of man does not differ

much from that of the brute. Men seeing the nature of this man like

that of the brute, think that he has never possessed the innate faculty

of reason. Are those the true and natural sentiments of man?”

“The Golden Age was first created, which without any avenger

Spontaneously without law cherished fidelity and rectitude.

Punishment and fear were not; nor were threatening words read

On suspended brass; nor did the suppliant crowd fear

The words of their judge; but were safe without an avenger.

Not yet the pine felled on its mountains had descended

To the liquid waves that it might see a foreign world,

And mortals knew no shores but their own.

\* \* \* \*

There was eternal spring, and placid zephyrs with warm

Blasts soothed the flowers born without seed.”

On the 29th of April, as I was fishing from the bank of the river near

the Nine-Acre-Corner bridge, standing on the quaking grass and willow

roots, where the muskrats lurk, I heard a singular rattling sound,

somewhat like that of the sticks which boys play with their fingers,

when, looking up, I observed a very slight and graceful hawk, like a

night-hawk, alternately soaring like a ripple and tumbling a rod or two

over and over, showing the underside of its wings, which gleamed like a

satin ribbon in the sun, or like the pearly inside of a shell. This

sight reminded me of falconry and what nobleness and poetry are

associated with that sport. The Merlin it seemed to me it might be

called: but I care not for its name. It was the most ethereal flight I

had ever witnessed. It did not simply flutter like a butterfly, nor

soar like the larger hawks, but it sported with proud reliance in the

fields of air; mounting again and again with its strange chuckle, it

repeated its free and beautiful fall, turning over and over like a

kite, and then recovering from its lofty tumbling, as if it had never

set its foot on \_terra firma\_. It appeared to have no companion in the

universe,—sporting there alone,—and to need none but the morning and

the ether with which it played. It was not lonely, but made all the

earth lonely beneath it. Where was the parent which hatched it, its

kindred, and its father in the heavens? The tenant of the air, it

seemed related to the earth but by an egg hatched some time in the

crevice of a crag;—or was its native nest made in the angle of a cloud,

woven of the rainbow’s trimmings and the sunset sky, and lined with

some soft midsummer haze caught up from earth? Its eyry now some cliffy

cloud.

Beside this I got a rare mess of golden and silver and bright cupreous

fishes, which looked like a string of jewels. Ah! I have penetrated to

those meadows on the morning of many a first spring day, jumping from

hummock to hummock, from willow root to willow root, when the wild

river valley and the woods were bathed in so pure and bright a light as

would have waked the dead, if they had been slumbering in their graves,

as some suppose. There needs no stronger proof of immortality. All

things must live in such a light. O Death, where was thy sting? O

Grave, where was thy victory, then?

Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored

forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of

wildness,—to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the

meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the

whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds

her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. At

the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we

require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and

sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because

unfathomable. We can never have enough of Nature. We must be refreshed

by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and Titanic features, the

sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its

decaying trees, the thunder cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks

and produces freshets. We need to witness our own limits transgressed,

and some life pasturing freely where we never wander. We are cheered

when we observe the vulture feeding on the carrion which disgusts and

disheartens us and deriving health and strength from the repast. There

was a dead horse in the hollow by the path to my house, which compelled

me sometimes to go out of my way, especially in the night when the air

was heavy, but the assurance it gave me of the strong appetite and

inviolable health of Nature was my compensation for this. I love to see

that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be

sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender

organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like

pulp,—tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises and toads run over

in the road; and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood! With the

liability to accident, we must see how little account is to be made of

it. The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence.

Poison is not poisonous after all, nor are any wounds fatal. Compassion

is a very untenable ground. It must be expeditious. Its pleadings will

not bear to be stereotyped.

Early in May, the oaks, hickories, maples, and other trees, just

putting out amidst the pine woods around the pond, imparted a

brightness like sunshine to the landscape, especially in cloudy days,

as if the sun were breaking through mists and shining faintly on the

hill-sides here and there. On the third or fourth of May I saw a loon

in the pond, and during the first week of the month I heard the

whippoorwill, the brown-thrasher, the veery, the wood-pewee, the

chewink, and other birds. I had heard the wood-thrush long before. The

phœbe had already come once more and looked in at my door and window,

to see if my house was cavern-like enough for her, sustaining herself

on humming wings with clinched talons, as if she held by the air, while

she surveyed the premises. The sulphur-like pollen of the pitch-pine

soon covered the pond and the stones and rotten wood along the shore,

so that you could have collected a barrel-ful. This is the “sulphur

showers” we hear of. Even in Calidas’ drama of Sacontala, we read of

“rills dyed yellow with the golden dust of the lotus.” And so the

seasons went rolling on into summer, as one rambles into higher and

higher grass.

Thus was my first year’s life in the woods completed; and the second

year was similar to it. I finally left Walden September 6th, 1847.

Conclusion

To the sick the doctors wisely recommend a change of air and scenery.

Thank Heaven, here is not all the world. The buck-eye does not grow in

New England, and the mocking-bird is rarely heard here. The wild-goose

is more of a cosmopolite than we; he breaks his fast in Canada, takes a

luncheon in the Ohio, and plumes himself for the night in a southern

bayou. Even the bison, to some extent, keeps pace with the seasons,

cropping the pastures of the Colorado only till a greener and sweeter

grass awaits him by the Yellowstone. Yet we think that if rail-fences

are pulled down, and stone-walls piled up on our farms, bounds are

henceforth set to our lives and our fates decided. If you are chosen

town-clerk, forsooth, you cannot go to Tierra del Fuego this summer:

but you may go to the land of infernal fire nevertheless. The universe

is wider than our views of it.

Yet we should oftener look over the tafferel of our craft, like curious

passengers, and not make the voyage like stupid sailors picking oakum.

The other side of the globe is but the home of our correspondent. Our

voyaging is only great-circle sailing, and the doctors prescribe for

diseases of the skin merely. One hastens to Southern Africa to chase

the giraffe; but surely that is not the game he would be after. How

long, pray, would a man hunt giraffes if he could? Snipes and woodcocks

also may afford rare sport; but I trust it would be nobler game to

shoot one’s self.—

“Direct your eye right inward, and you’ll find

A thousand regions in your mind

Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be

Expert in home-cosmography.”

What does Africa,—what does the West stand for? Is not our own interior

white on the chart? black though it may prove, like the coast, when

discovered. Is it the source of the Nile, or the Niger, or the

Mississippi, or a North-West Passage around this continent, that we

would find? Are these the problems which most concern mankind? Is

Franklin the only man who is lost, that his wife should be so earnest

to find him? Does Mr. Grinnell know where he himself is? Be rather the

Mungo Park, the Lewis and Clarke and Frobisher, of your own streams and

oceans; explore your own higher latitudes,—with shiploads of preserved

meats to support you, if they be necessary; and pile the empty cans

sky-high for a sign. Were preserved meats invented to preserve meat

merely? Nay, be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within

you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought. Every man is

the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but

a petty state, a hummock left by the ice. Yet some can be patriotic who

have no \_self\_-respect, and sacrifice the greater to the less. They

love the soil which makes their graves, but have no sympathy with the

spirit which may still animate their clay. Patriotism is a maggot in

their heads. What was the meaning of that South-Sea Exploring

Expedition, with all its parade and expense, but an indirect

recognition of the fact, that there are continents and seas in the

moral world to which every man is an isthmus or an inlet, yet

unexplored by him, but that it is easier to sail many thousand miles

through cold and storm and cannibals, in a government ship, with five

hundred men and boys to assist one, than it is to explore the private

sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one’s being alone.—

“Erret, et extremos alter scrutetur Iberos.

Plus habet hic vitæ, plus habet ille viæ.”

Let them wander and scrutinize the outlandish Australians.

I have more of God, they more of the road.

It is not worth the while to go round the world to count the cats in

Zanzibar. Yet do this even till you can do better, and you may perhaps

find some “Symmes’ Hole” by which to get at the inside at last. England

and France, Spain and Portugal, Gold Coast and Slave Coast, all front

on this private sea; but no bark from them has ventured out of sight of

land, though it is without doubt the direct way to India. If you would

learn to speak all tongues and conform to the customs of all nations,

if you would travel farther than all travellers, be naturalized in all

climes, and cause the Sphinx to dash her head against a stone, even

obey the precept of the old philosopher, and Explore thyself. Herein

are demanded the eye and the nerve. Only the defeated and deserters go

to the wars, cowards that run away and enlist. Start now on that

farthest western way, which does not pause at the Mississippi or the

Pacific, nor conduct toward a worn-out China or Japan, but leads on

direct a tangent to this sphere, summer and winter, day and night, sun

down, moon down, and at last earth down too.

It is said that Mirabeau took to highway robbery “to ascertain what

degree of resolution was necessary in order to place one’s self in

formal opposition to the most sacred laws of society.” He declared that

“a soldier who fights in the ranks does not require half so much

courage as a foot-pad,”—“that honor and religion have never stood in

the way of a well-considered and a firm resolve.” This was manly, as

the world goes; and yet it was idle, if not desperate. A saner man

would have found himself often enough “in formal opposition” to what

are deemed “the most sacred laws of society,” through obedience to yet

more sacred laws, and so have tested his resolution without going out

of his way. It is not for a man to put himself in such an attitude to

society, but to maintain himself in whatever attitude he find himself

through obedience to the laws of his being, which will never be one of

opposition to a just government, if he should chance to meet with such.

I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it

seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare

any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly

we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves.

I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to

the pond-side; and though it is five or six years since I trod it, it

is still quite distinct. It is true, I fear that others may have fallen

into it, and so helped to keep it open. The surface of the earth is

soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which

the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the

world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity! I did not wish to

take a cabin passage, but rather to go before the mast and on the deck

of the world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the

mountains. I do not wish to go below now.

I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances

confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the

life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in

common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible

boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish

themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and

interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with

the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies

his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and

solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness

weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be

lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

It is a ridiculous demand which England and America make, that you

shall speak so that they can understand you. Neither men nor

toad-stools grow so. As if that were important, and there were not

enough to understand you without them. As if Nature could support but

one order of understandings, could not sustain birds as well as

quadrupeds, flying as well as creeping things, and \_hush\_ and \_who\_,

which Bright can understand, were the best English. As if there were

safety in stupidity alone. I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be

\_extra-vagant\_ enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow

limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of

which I have been convinced. \_Extra vagance!\_ it depends on how you are

yarded. The migrating buffalo, which seeks new pastures in another

latitude, is not extravagant like the cow which kicks over the pail,

leaps the cow-yard fence, and runs after her calf, in milking time. I

desire to speak somewhere \_without\_ bounds; like a man in a waking

moment, to men in their waking moments; for I am convinced that I

cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true

expression. Who that has heard a strain of music feared then lest he

should speak extravagantly any more forever? In view of the future or

possible, we should live quite laxly and undefined in front, our

outlines dim and misty on that side; as our shadows reveal an

insensible perspiration toward the sun. The volatile truth of our words

should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement.

Their truth is instantly \_translated\_; its literal monument alone

remains. The words which express our faith and piety are not definite;

yet they are significant and fragrant like frankincense to superior

natures.

Why level downward to our dullest perception always, and praise that as

common sense? The commonest sense is the sense of men asleep, which

they express by snoring. Sometimes we are inclined to class those who

are once-and-a-half-witted with the half-witted, because we appreciate

only a third part of their wit. Some would find fault with the

morning-red, if they ever got up early enough. “They pretend,” as I

hear, “that the verses of Kabir have four different senses; illusion,

spirit, intellect, and the exoteric doctrine of the Vedas;” but in this

part of the world it is considered a ground for complaint if a man’s

writings admit of more than one interpretation. While England endeavors

to cure the potato-rot, will not any endeavor to cure the brain-rot,

which prevails so much more widely and fatally?

I do not suppose that I have attained to obscurity, but I should be

proud if no more fatal fault were found with my pages on this score

than was found with the Walden ice. Southern customers objected to its

blue color, which is the evidence of its purity, as if it were muddy,

and preferred the Cambridge ice, which is white, but tastes of weeds.

The purity men love is like the mists which envelop the earth, and not

like the azure ether beyond.

Some are dinning in our ears that we Americans, and moderns generally,

are intellectual dwarfs compared with the ancients, or even the

Elizabethan men. But what is that to the purpose? A living dog is

better than a dead lion. Shall a man go and hang himself because he

belongs to the race of pygmies, and not be the biggest pygmy that he

can? Let every one mind his own business, and endeavor to be what he

was made.

Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such

desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions,

perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the

music which he hears, however measured or far away. It is not important

that he should mature as soon as an apple-tree or an oak. Shall he turn

his spring into summer? If the condition of things which we were made

for is not yet, what were any reality which we can substitute? We will

not be shipwrecked on a vain reality. Shall we with pains erect a

heaven of blue glass over ourselves, though when it is done we shall be

sure to gaze still at the true ethereal heaven far above, as if the

former were not?

There was an artist in the city of Kouroo who was disposed to strive

after perfection. One day it came into his mind to make a staff. Having

considered that in an imperfect work time is an ingredient, but into a

perfect work time does not enter, he said to himself, It shall be

perfect in all respects, though I should do nothing else in my life. He

proceeded instantly to the forest for wood, being resolved that it

should not be made of unsuitable material; and as he searched for and

rejected stick after stick, his friends gradually deserted him, for

they grew old in their works and died, but he grew not older by a

moment. His singleness of purpose and resolution, and his elevated

piety, endowed him, without his knowledge, with perennial youth. As he

made no compromise with Time, Time kept out of his way, and only sighed

at a distance because he could not overcome him. Before he had found a

stock in all respects suitable the city of Kouroo was a hoary ruin, and

he sat on one of its mounds to peel the stick. Before he had given it

the proper shape the dynasty of the Candahars was at an end, and with

the point of the stick he wrote the name of the last of that race in

the sand, and then resumed his work. By the time he had smoothed and

polished the staff Kalpa was no longer the pole-star; and ere he had

put on the ferrule and the head adorned with precious stones, Brahma

had awoke and slumbered many times. But why do I stay to mention these

things? When the finishing stroke was put to his work, it suddenly

expanded before the eyes of the astonished artist into the fairest of

all the creations of Brahma. He had made a new system in making a

staff, a world with full and fair proportions; in which, though the old

cities and dynasties had passed away, fairer and more glorious ones had

taken their places. And now he saw by the heap of shavings still fresh

at his feet, that, for him and his work, the former lapse of time had

been an illusion, and that no more time had elapsed than is required

for a single scintillation from the brain of Brahma to fall on and

inflame the tinder of a mortal brain. The material was pure, and his

art was pure; how could the result be other than wonderful?

No face which we can give to a matter will stead us so well at last as

the truth. This alone wears well. For the most part, we are not where

we are, but in a false position. Through an infinity of our natures, we

suppose a case, and put ourselves into it, and hence are in two cases

at the same time, and it is doubly difficult to get out. In sane

moments we regard only the facts, the case that is. Say what you have

to say, not what you ought. Any truth is better than make-believe. Tom

Hyde, the tinker, standing on the gallows, was asked if he had anything

to say. “Tell the tailors,” said he, “to remember to make a knot in

their thread before they take the first stitch.” His companion’s prayer

is forgotten.

However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call

it hard names. It is not so bad as you are. It looks poorest when you

are richest. The fault-finder will find faults even in paradise. Love

your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have some pleasant,

thrilling, glorious hours, even in a poor-house. The setting sun is

reflected from the windows of the alms-house as brightly as from the

rich man’s abode; the snow melts before its door as early in the

spring. I do not see but a quiet mind may live as contentedly there,

and have as cheering thoughts, as in a palace. The town’s poor seem to

me often to live the most independent lives of any. May be they are

simply great enough to receive without misgiving. Most think that they

are above being supported by the town; but it oftener happens that they

are not above supporting themselves by dishonest means, which should be

more disreputable. Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage. Do

not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or

friends. Turn the old; return to them. Things do not change; we change.

Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts. God will see that you do not

want society. If I were confined to a corner of a garret all my days,

like a spider, the world would be just as large to me while I had my

thoughts about me. The philosopher said: “From an army of three

divisions one can take away its general, and put it in disorder; from

the man the most abject and vulgar one cannot take away his thought.”

Do not seek so anxiously to be developed, to subject yourself to many

influences to be played on; it is all dissipation. Humility like

darkness reveals the heavenly lights. The shadows of poverty and

meanness gather around us, “and lo! creation widens to our view.” We

are often reminded that if there were bestowed on us the wealth of

Crœsus, our aims must still be the same, and our means essentially the

same. Moreover, if you are restricted in your range by poverty, if you

cannot buy books and newspapers, for instance, you are but confined to

the most significant and vital experiences; you are compelled to deal

with the material which yields the most sugar and the most starch. It

is life near the bone where it is sweetest. You are defended from being

a trifler. No man loses ever on a lower level by magnanimity on a

higher. Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not

required to buy one necessary of the soul.

I live in the angle of a leaden wall, into whose composition was poured

a little alloy of bell metal. Often, in the repose of my mid-day, there

reaches my ears a confused \_tintinnabulum\_ from without. It is the

noise of my contemporaries. My neighbors tell me of their adventures

with famous gentlemen and ladies, what notabilities they met at the

dinner-table; but I am no more interested in such things than in the

contents of the Daily Times. The interest and the conversation are

about costume and manners chiefly; but a goose is a goose still, dress

it as you will. They tell me of California and Texas, of England and

the Indies, of the Hon. Mr. —— of Georgia or of Massachusetts, all

transient and fleeting phenomena, till I am ready to leap from their

court-yard like the Mameluke bey. I delight to come to my bearings,—not

walk in procession with pomp and parade, in a conspicuous place, but to

walk even with the Builder of the universe, if I may,—not to live in

this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century, but stand

or sit thoughtfully while it goes by. What are men celebrating? They

are all on a committee of arrangements, and hourly expect a speech from

somebody. God is only the president of the day, and Webster is his

orator. I love to weigh, to settle, to gravitate toward that which most

strongly and rightfully attracts me;—not hang by the beam of the scale

and try to weigh less,—not suppose a case, but take the case that is;

to travel the only path I can, and that on which no power can resist

me. It affords me no satisfaction to commence to spring an arch before

I have got a solid foundation. Let us not play at kittly-benders. There

is a solid bottom every where. We read that the traveller asked the boy

if the swamp before him had a hard bottom. The boy replied that it had.

But presently the traveller’s horse sank in up to the girths, and he

observed to the boy, “I thought you said that this bog had a hard

bottom.” “So it has,” answered the latter, “but you have not got half

way to it yet.” So it is with the bogs and quicksands of society; but

he is an old boy that knows it. Only what is thought, said, or done at a

certain rare coincidence is good. I would not be one of those who will

foolishly drive a nail into mere lath and plastering; such a deed would

keep me awake nights. Give me a hammer, and let me feel for the

furring. Do not depend on the putty. Drive a nail home and clinch it so

faithfully that you can wake up in the night and think of your work

with satisfaction,—a work at which you would not be ashamed to invoke

the Muse. So will help you God, and so only. Every nail driven should

be as another rivet in the machine of the universe, you carrying on the

work.

Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a

table where were rich food and wine in abundance, and obsequious

attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry

from the inhospitable board. The hospitality was as cold as the ices. I

thought that there was no need of ice to freeze them. They talked to me

of the age of the wine and the fame of the vintage; but I thought of an

older, a newer, and purer wine, of a more glorious vintage, which they

had not got, and could not buy. The style, the house and grounds and

“entertainment” pass for nothing with me. I called on the king, but he

made me wait in his hall, and conducted like a man incapacitated for

hospitality. There was a man in my neighborhood who lived in a hollow

tree. His manners were truly regal. I should have done better had I

called on him.

How long shall we sit in our porticoes practising idle and musty

virtues, which any work would make impertinent? As if one were to begin

the day with long-suffering, and hire a man to hoe his potatoes; and in

the afternoon go forth to practise Christian meekness and charity with

goodness aforethought! Consider the China pride and stagnant

self-complacency of mankind. This generation inclines a little to

congratulate itself on being the last of an illustrious line; and in

Boston and London and Paris and Rome, thinking of its long descent, it

speaks of its progress in art and science and literature with

satisfaction. There are the Records of the Philosophical Societies, and

the public Eulogies of \_Great Men!\_ It is the good Adam contemplating

his own virtue. “Yes, we have done great deeds, and sung divine songs,

which shall never die,”—that is, as long as \_we\_ can remember them. The

learned societies and great men of Assyria,—where are they? What

youthful philosophers and experimentalists we are! There is not one of

my readers who has yet lived a whole human life. These may be but the

spring months in the life of the race. If we have had the seven-years’

itch, we have not seen the seventeen-year locust yet in Concord. We are

acquainted with a mere pellicle of the globe on which we live. Most

have not delved six feet beneath the surface, nor leaped as many above

it. We know not where we are. Beside, we are sound asleep nearly half

our time. Yet we esteem ourselves wise, and have an established order

on the surface. Truly, we are deep thinkers, we are ambitious spirits!

As I stand over the insect crawling amid the pine needles on the forest

floor, and endeavoring to conceal itself from my sight, and ask myself

why it will cherish those humble thoughts, and hide its head from me

who might, perhaps, be its benefactor, and impart to its race some

cheering information, I am reminded of the greater Benefactor and

Intelligence that stands over me the human insect.

There is an incessant influx of novelty into the world, and yet we

tolerate incredible dulness. I need only suggest what kind of sermons

are still listened to in the most enlightened countries. There are such

words as joy and sorrow, but they are only the burden of a psalm, sung

with a nasal twang, while we believe in the ordinary and mean. We think

that we can change our clothes only. It is said that the British Empire

is very large and respectable, and that the United States are a

first-rate power. We do not believe that a tide rises and falls behind

every man which can float the British Empire like a chip, if he should

ever harbor it in his mind. Who knows what sort of seventeen-year

locust will next come out of the ground? The government of the world I

live in was not framed, like that of Britain, in after-dinner

conversations over the wine.

The life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year

higher than man has ever known it, and flood the parched uplands; even

this may be the eventful year, which will drown out all our muskrats.

It was not always dry land where we dwell. I see far inland the banks

which the stream anciently washed, before science began to record its

freshets. Every one has heard the story which has gone the rounds of

New England, of a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry

leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer’s

kitchen for sixty years, first in Connecticut, and afterward in

Massachusetts,—from an egg deposited in the living tree many years

earlier still, as appeared by counting the annual layers beyond it;

which was heard gnawing out for several weeks, hatched perchance by the

heat of an urn. Who does not feel his faith in a resurrection and

immortality strengthened by hearing of this? Who knows what beautiful

and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many

concentric layers of woodenness in the dead dry life of society,

deposited at first in the alburnum of the green and living tree, which

has been gradually converted into the semblance of its well-seasoned

tomb,—heard perchance gnawing out now for years by the astonished

family of man, as they sat round the festive board,—may unexpectedly

come forth from amidst society’s most trivial and handselled furniture,

to enjoy its perfect summer life at last!

I do not say that John or Jonathan will realize all this; but such is

the character of that morrow which mere lapse of time can never make to

dawn. The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that

day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is

but a morning star.

THE END

ON THE DUTY OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

I heartily accept the motto,—“That government is best which governs

least;” and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and

systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I

believe—“That government is best which governs not at all;” and when

men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they

will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments

are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. The

objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they

are many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be

brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm

of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the

mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally

liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it.

Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few

individuals using the standing government as their tool; for, in the

outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.

This American government,—what is it but a tradition, though a recent

one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each

instant losing some of its integrity? It has not the vitality and force

of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will. It is

a sort of wooden gun to the people themselves; and, if ever they should

use it in earnest as a real one against each other, it will surely

split. But it is not the less necessary for this; for the people must

have some complicated machinery or other, and hear its din, to satisfy

that idea of government which they have. Governments show thus how

successfully men can be imposed on, even impose on themselves, for

their own advantage. It is excellent, we must all allow; yet this

government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the

alacrity with which it got out of its way. \_It\_ does not keep the

country free. \_It\_ does not settle the West. \_It\_ does not educate. The

character inherent in the American people has done all that has been

accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government

had not sometimes got in its way. For government is an expedient, by

which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone; and, as has

been said, when it is most expedient, the governed are most let alone

by it. Trade and commerce, if they were not made of India rubber, would

never manage to bounce over obstacles which legislators are continually

putting in their way; and, if one were to judge these men wholly by the

effects of their actions, and not partly by their intentions, they

would deserve to be classed and punished with those mischievous persons

who put obstructions on the railroads.

But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call

themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but

\_at once\_ a better government. Let every man make known what kind of

government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward

obtaining it.

After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the

hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period

continue, to rule, is not because they are most likely to be in the

right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they

are physically the strongest. But a government in which the majority

rule in all cases can not be based on justice, even as far as men

understand it. Can there not be a government in which the majorities do

not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?—in which

majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency

is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least

degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a

conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects

afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so

much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to

assume, is to do at any time what I think right. It is truly enough

said that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of

conscientious men is a corporation \_with\_ a conscience. Law never made

men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the

well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice. A common and

natural result of an undue respect for the law is, that you may see a

file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys

and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars,

against their wills, aye, against their common sense and consciences,

which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation

of the heart. They have no doubt that it is a damnable business in

which they are concerned; they are all peaceably inclined. Now, what

are they? Men at all? or small movable forts and magazines, at the

service of some unscrupulous man in power? Visit the Navy Yard, and

behold a marine, such a man as an American government can make, or such

as it can make a man with its black arts, a mere shadow and

reminiscence of humanity, a man laid out alive and standing, and

already, as one may say, buried under arms with funeral accompaniment,

though it may be

“Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,

As his corpse to the ramparts we hurried;

Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot

O’er the grave where our hero we buried.”

The mass of men serve the State thus, not as men mainly, but as

machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the

militia, jailers, constables, \_posse comitatus\_, &c. In most cases

there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral

sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and

stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the

purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw, or a

lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs.

Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens. Others, as

most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and office-holders,

serve the state chiefly with their heads; and, as they rarely make any

moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve the devil, without

\_intending\_ it, as God. A very few, as heroes, patriots, martyrs,

reformers in the great sense, and \_men\_, serve the State with their

consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and

they are commonly treated by it as enemies. A wise man will only be

useful as a man, and will not submit to be “clay,” and “stop a hole to

keep the wind away,” but leave that office to his dust at least:

“I am too high-born to be propertied,

To be a secondary at control,

Or useful serving-man and instrument

To any sovereign state throughout the world.”

He who gives himself entirely to his fellow-men appears to them useless

and selfish; but he who gives himself partially to them is pronounced a

benefactor and philanthropist.

How does it become a man to behave toward the American government

today? I answer that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it.

I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as \_my\_

government which is the \_slave’s\_ government also.

All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse

allegiance to and to resist the government, when its tyranny or its

inefficiency are great and unendurable. But almost all say that such is

not the case now. But such was the case, they think, in the Revolution

of ’75. If one were to tell me that this was a bad government because

it taxed certain foreign commodities brought to its ports, it is most

probable that I should not make an ado about it, for I can do without

them: all machines have their friction; and possibly this does enough

good to counter-balance the evil. At any rate, it is a great evil to

make a stir about it. But when the friction comes to have its machine,

and oppression and robbery are organized, I say, let us not have such a

machine any longer. In other words, when a sixth of the population of a

nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and

a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army,

and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for

honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more

urgent is that fact, that the country so overrun is not our own, but

ours is the invading army.

Paley, a common authority with many on moral questions, in his chapter

on the “Duty of Submission to Civil Government,” resolves all civil

obligation into expediency; and he proceeds to say, “that so long as

the interest of the whole society requires it, that is, so long as the

established government cannot be resisted or changed without public

inconveniency, it is the will of God that the established government be

obeyed, and no longer.”—“This principle being admitted, the justice of

every particular case of resistance is reduced to a computation of the

quantity of the danger and grievance on the one side, and of the

probability and expense of redressing it on the other.” Of this, he

says, every man shall judge for himself. But Paley appears never to

have contemplated those cases to which the rule of expediency does not

apply, in which a people, as well as an individual, must do justice,

cost what it may. If I have unjustly wrested a plank from a drowning

man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself. This, according to

Paley, would be inconvenient. But he that would save his life, in such

a case, shall lose it. This people must cease to hold slaves, and to

make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people.

In their practice, nations agree with Paley; but does anyone think that

Massachusetts does exactly what is right at the present crisis?

“A drab of state, a cloth-o’-silver slut,

To have her train borne up, and her soul trail in the dirt.”

Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are

not a hundred thousand politicians at the South, but a hundred thousand

merchants and farmers here, who are more interested in commerce and

agriculture than they are in humanity, and are not prepared to do

justice to the slave and to Mexico, \_cost what it may\_. I quarrel not

with far-off foes, but with those who, near at home, co-operate with,

and do the bidding of those far away, and without whom the latter would

be harmless. We are accustomed to say, that the mass of men are

unprepared; but improvement is slow, because the few are not materially

wiser or better than the many. It is not so important that many should

be as good as you, as that there be some absolute goodness somewhere;

for that will leaven the whole lump. There are thousands who are \_in

opinion\_ opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do

nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of

Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets,

and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing; who even

postpone the question of freedom to the question of free-trade, and

quietly read the prices-current along with the latest advices from

Mexico, after dinner, and, it may be, fall asleep over them both. What

is the price-current of an honest man and patriot today? They hesitate,

and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in

earnest and with effect. They will wait, well disposed, for others to

remedy the evil, that they may no longer have it to regret. At most,

they give only a cheap vote, and a feeble countenance and Godspeed, to

the right, as it goes by them. There are nine hundred and ninety-nine

patrons of virtue to one virtuous man; but it is easier to deal with

the real possessor of a thing than with the temporary guardian of it.

All voting is a sort of gaming, like chequers or backgammon, with a

slight moral tinge to it, a playing with right and wrong, with moral

questions; and betting naturally accompanies it. The character of the

voters is not staked. I cast my vote, perchance, as I think right; but

I am not vitally concerned that that right should prevail. I am willing

to leave it to the majority. Its obligation, therefore, never exceeds

that of expediency. Even voting \_for the right\_ is \_doing\_ nothing for

it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should

prevail. A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance,

nor wish it to prevail through the power of the majority. There is but

little virtue in the action of masses of men. When the majority shall

at length vote for the abolition of slavery, it will be because they

are indifferent to slavery, or because there is but little slavery left

to be abolished by their vote. \_They\_ will then be the only slaves.

Only \_his\_ vote can hasten the abolition of slavery who asserts his own

freedom by his vote.

I hear of a convention to be held at Baltimore, or elsewhere, for the

selection of a candidate for the Presidency, made up chiefly of

editors, and men who are politicians by profession; but I think, what

is it to any independent, intelligent, and respectable man what

decision they may come to, shall we not have the advantage of his

wisdom and honesty, nevertheless? Can we not count upon some

independent votes? Are there not many individuals in the country who do

not attend conventions? But no: I find that the respectable man, so

called, has immediately drifted from his position, and despairs of his

country, when his country has more reasons to despair of him. He

forthwith adopts one of the candidates thus selected as the only

\_available\_ one, thus proving that he is himself \_available\_ for any

purposes of the demagogue. His vote is of no more worth than that of

any unprincipled foreigner or hireling native, who may have been

bought. Oh for a man who is a \_man\_, and, as my neighbor says, has a

bone in his back which you cannot pass your hand through! Our

statistics are at fault: the population has been returned too large.

How many \_men\_ are there to a square thousand miles in the country?

Hardly one. Does not America offer any inducement for men to settle

here? The American has dwindled into an Odd Fellow,—one who may be

known by the development of his organ of gregariousness, and a manifest

lack of intellect and cheerful self-reliance; whose first and chief

concern, on coming into the world, is to see that the alms-houses are

in good repair; and, before yet he has lawfully donned the virile garb,

to collect a fund for the support of the widows and orphans that may

be; who, in short, ventures to live only by the aid of the Mutual

Insurance company, which has promised to bury him decently.

It is not a man’s duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the

eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly

have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to

wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to

give it practically his support. If I devote myself to other pursuits

and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue

them sitting upon another man’s shoulders. I must get off him first,

that he may pursue his contemplations too. See what gross inconsistency

is tolerated. I have heard some of my townsmen say, “I should like to

have them order me out to help put down an insurrection of the slaves,

or to march to Mexico,—see if I would go;” and yet these very men have

each, directly by their allegiance, and so indirectly, at least, by

their money, furnished a substitute. The soldier is applauded who

refuses to serve in an unjust war by those who do not refuse to sustain

the unjust government which makes the war; is applauded by those whose

own act and authority he disregards and sets at naught; as if the State

were penitent to that degree that it hired one to scourge it while it

sinned, but not to that degree that it left off sinning for a moment.

Thus, under the name of Order and Civil Government, we are all made at

last to pay homage to and support our own meanness. After the first

blush of sin, comes its indifference; and from immoral it becomes, as

it were, \_un\_moral, and not quite unnecessary to that life which we

have made.

The broadest and most prevalent error requires the most disinterested

virtue to sustain it. The slight reproach to which the virtue of

patriotism is commonly liable, the noble are most likely to incur.

Those who, while they disapprove of the character and measures of a

government, yield to it their allegiance and support, are undoubtedly

its most conscientious supporters, and so frequently the most serious

obstacles to reform. Some are petitioning the State to dissolve the

Union, to disregard the requisitions of the President. Why do they not

dissolve it themselves,—the union between themselves and the State,—and

refuse to pay their quota into its treasury? Do not they stand in same

relation to the State, that the State does to the Union? And have not

the same reasons prevented the State from resisting the Union, which

have prevented them from resisting the State?

How can a man be satisfied to entertain an opinion merely, and enjoy

\_it?\_ Is there any enjoyment in it, if his opinion is that he is

aggrieved? If you are cheated out of a single dollar by your neighbor,

you do not rest satisfied with knowing you are cheated, or with saying

that you are cheated, or even with petitioning him to pay you your due;

but you take effectual steps at once to obtain the full amount, and see

that you are never cheated again. Action from principle,—the perception

and the performance of right,—changes things and relations; it is

essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything

which was. It not only divided states and churches, it divides

families; aye, it divides the \_individual\_, separating the diabolical

in him from the divine.

Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we

endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall

we transgress them at once? Men generally, under such a government as

this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the

majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the

remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the

government itself that the remedy \_is\_ worse than the evil. \_It\_ makes

it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform?

Why does it not cherish its wise minority? Why does it cry and resist

before it is hurt? Why does it not encourage its citizens to be on the

alert to point out its faults, and \_do\_ better than it would have them?

Why does it always crucify Christ, and excommunicate Copernicus and

Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?

One would think, that a deliberate and practical denial of its

authority was the only offence never contemplated by government; else,

why has it not assigned its definite, its suitable and proportionate

penalty? If a man who has no property refuses but once to earn nine

shillings for the State, he is put in prison for a period unlimited by

any law that I know, and determined only by the discretion of those who

placed him there; but if he should steal ninety times nine shillings

from the State, he is soon permitted to go at large again.

If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of

government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear

smooth,—certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a

spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself,

then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than

the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the

agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your

life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to

see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I

condemn.

As for adopting the ways which the State has provided for remedying the

evil, I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man’s

life will be gone. I have other affairs to attend to. I came into this

world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in

it, be it good or bad. A man has not every thing to do, but something;

and because he cannot do \_every thing\_, it is not necessary that he

should do \_something\_ wrong. It is not my business to be petitioning

the Governor or the Legislature any more than it is theirs to petition

me; and, if they should not hear my petition, what should I do then?

But in this case the State has provided no way: its very Constitution

is the evil. This may seem to be harsh and stubborn and

unconcilliatory; but it is to treat with the utmost kindness and

consideration the only spirit that can appreciate or deserves it. So is

all change for the better, like birth and death which convulse the

body.

I do not hesitate to say, that those who call themselves abolitionists

should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in person and

property, from the government of Massachusetts, and not wait till they

constitute a majority of one, before they suffer the right to prevail

through them. I think that it is enough if they have God on their side,

without waiting for that other one. Moreover, any man more right than

his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already.

I meet this American government, or its representative, the State

government, directly, and face to face, once a year, no more, in the

person of its tax-gatherer; this is the only mode in which a man

situated as I am necessarily meets it; and it then says distinctly,

Recognize me; and the simplest, the most effectual, and, in the present

posture of affairs, the indispensablest mode of treating with it on

this head, of expressing your little satisfaction with and love for it,

is to deny it then. My civil neighbor, the tax-gatherer, is the very

man I have to deal with,—for it is, after all, with men and not with

parchment that I quarrel,—and he has voluntarily chosen to be an agent

of the government. How shall he ever know well what he is and does as

an officer of the government, or as a man, until he is obliged to

consider whether he shall treat me, his neighbor, for whom he has

respect, as a neighbor and well-disposed man, or as a maniac and

disturber of the peace, and see if he can get over this obstruction to

his neighborliness without a ruder and more impetuous thought or speech

corresponding with his action? I know this well, that if one thousand,

if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name,—if ten \_honest\_ men

only,—aye, if \_one\_ HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts,

\_ceasing to hold slaves\_, were actually to withdraw from this

copartnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefor, it would

be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small

the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done for ever.

But we love better to talk about it: that we say is our mission. Reform

keeps many scores of newspapers in its service, but not one man. If my

esteemed neighbor, the State’s ambassador, who will devote his days to

the settlement of the question of human rights in the Council Chamber,

instead of being threatened with the prisons of Carolina, were to sit

down the prisoner of Massachusetts, that State which is so anxious to

foist the sin of slavery upon her sister,—though at present she can

discover only an act of inhospitality to be the ground of a quarrel

with her,—the Legislature would not wholly waive the subject of the

following winter.

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a

just man is also a prison. The proper place today, the only place which

Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less desponding spirits,

is in her prisons, to be put out and locked out of the State by her own

act, as they have already put themselves out by their principles. It is

there that the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and

the Indian come to plead the wrongs of his race, should find them; on

that separate, but more free and honorable ground, where the State

places those who are not \_with\_ her but \_against\_ her,—the only house

in a slave-state in which a free man can abide with honor. If any think

that their influence would be lost there, and their voices no longer

afflict the ear of the State, that they would not be as an enemy within

its walls, they do not know by how much truth is stronger than error,

nor how much more eloquently and effectively he can combat injustice

who has experienced a little in his own person. Cast your whole vote,

not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is

powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority

then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. If the

alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and

slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men

were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent

and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to

commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the

definition of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible. If the

tax-gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me, as one has done,

“But what shall I do?” my answer is, “If you really wish to do any

thing, resign your office.” When the subject has refused allegiance,

and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is

accomplished. But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort

of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a

man’s real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an

everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now.

I have contemplated the imprisonment of the offender, rather than the

seizure of his goods,—though both will serve the same purpose,—because

they who assert the purest right, and consequently are most dangerous

to a corrupt State, commonly have not spent much time in accumulating

property. To such the State renders comparatively small service, and a

slight tax is wont to appear exorbitant, particularly if they are

obliged to earn it by special labor with their hands. If there were one

who lived wholly without the use of money, the State itself would

hesitate to demand it of him. But the rich man—not to make any

invidious comparison—is always sold to the institution which makes him

rich. Absolutely speaking, the more money, the less virtue; for money

comes between a man and his objects, and obtains them for him; it was

certainly no great virtue to obtain it. It puts to rest many questions

which he would otherwise be taxed to answer; while the only new

question which it puts is the hard but superfluous one, how to spend

it. Thus his moral ground is taken from under his feet. The

opportunities of living are diminished in proportion as what are called

the “means” are increased. The best thing a man can do for his culture

when he is rich is to endeavor to carry out those schemes which he

entertained when he was poor. Christ answered the Herodians according

to their condition. “Show me the tribute-money,” said he;—and one took

a penny out of his pocket;—if you use money which has the image of

Cæsar on it, and which he has made current and valuable, that is, \_if

you are men of the State\_, and gladly enjoy the advantages of Cæsar’s

government, then pay him back some of his own when he demands it;

“Render therefore to Cæsar that which is Cæsar’s and to God those

things which are God’s,”—leaving them no wiser than before as to which

was which; for they did not wish to know.

When I converse with the freest of my neighbors, I perceive that,

whatever they may say about the magnitude and seriousness of the

question, and their regard for the public tranquillity, the long and

the short of the matter is, that they cannot spare the protection of

the existing government, and they dread the consequences of

disobedience to it to their property and families. For my own part, I

should not like to think that I ever rely on the protection of the

State. But, if I deny the authority of the State when it presents its

tax-bill, it will soon take and waste all my property, and so harass me

and my children without end. This is hard. This makes it impossible for

a man to live honestly and at the same time comfortably in outward

respects. It will not be worth the while to accumulate property; that

would be sure to go again. You must hire or squat somewhere, and raise

but a small crop, and eat that soon. You must live within yourself, and

depend upon yourself, always tucked up and ready for a start, and not

have many affairs. A man may grow rich in Turkey even, if he will be in

all respects a good subject of the Turkish government. Confucius

said,—“If a State is governed by the principles of reason, poverty and

misery are subjects of shame; if a State is not governed by the

principles of reason, riches and honors are the subjects of shame.” No:

until I want the protection of Massachusetts to be extended to me in

some distant southern port, where my liberty is endangered, or until I

am bent solely on building up an estate at home by peaceful enterprise,

I can afford to refuse allegiance to Massachusetts, and her right to my

property and life. It costs me less in every sense to incur the penalty

of disobedience to the State, than it would to obey. I should feel as

if I were worth less in that case.

Some years ago, the State met me in behalf of the church, and commanded

me to pay a certain sum toward the support of a clergyman whose

preaching my father attended, but never I myself. “Pay it,” it said,

“or be locked up in the jail.” I declined to pay. But, unfortunately,

another man saw fit to pay it. I did not see why the schoolmaster

should be taxed to support the priest, and not the priest the

schoolmaster; for I was not the State’s schoolmaster, but I supported

myself by voluntary subscription. I did not see why the lyceum should

not present its tax-bill, and have the State to back its demand, as

well as the church. However, at the request of the selectmen, I

condescended to make some such statement as this in writing:—“Know all

men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be

regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not

joined.” This I gave to the town-clerk; and he has it. The State,

having thus learned that I did not wish to be regarded as a member of

that church, has never made a like demand on me since; though it said

that it must adhere to its original presumption that time. If I had

known how to name them, I should then have signed off in detail from

all the societies which I never signed on to; but I did not know where

to find such a complete list.

I have paid no poll-tax for six years. I was put into a jail once on

this account, for one night; and, as I stood considering the walls of

solid stone, two or three feet thick, the door of wood and iron, a foot

thick, and the iron grating which strained the light, I could not help

being struck with the foolishness of that institution which treated me

as if I were mere flesh and blood and bones, to be locked up. I

wondered that it should have concluded at length that this was the best

use it could put me to, and had never thought to avail itself of my

services in some way. I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between

me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or

break through, before they could get to be as free as I was. I did nor

for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone

and mortar. I felt as if I alone of all my townsmen had paid my tax.

They plainly did not know how to treat me, but behaved like persons who

are underbred. In every threat and in every compliment there was a

blunder; for they thought that my chief desire was to stand the other

side of that stone wall. I could not but smile to see how industriously

they locked the door on my meditations, which followed them out again

without let or hindrance, and \_they\_ were really all that was

dangerous. As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my

body; just as boys, if they cannot come at some person against whom

they have a spite, will abuse his dog. I saw that the State was

half-witted, that it was timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons,

and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my

remaining respect for it, and pitied it.

Thus the state never intentionally confronts a man’s sense,

intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses. It is not armed

with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical strength. I

was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us

see who is the strongest. What force has a multitude? They only can

force me who obey a higher law than I. They force me to become like

themselves. I do not hear of \_men\_ being \_forced\_ to live this way or

that by masses of men. What sort of life were that to live? When I meet

a government which says to me, “Your money or your life,” why should I

be in haste to give it my money? It may be in a great strait, and not

know what to do: I cannot help that. It must help itself; do as I do.

It is not worth the while to snivel about it. I am not responsible for

the successful working of the machinery of society. I am not the son of

the engineer. I perceive that, when an acorn and a chestnut fall side

by side, the one does not remain inert to make way for the other, but

both obey their own laws, and spring and grow and flourish as best they

can, till one, perchance, overshadows and destroys the other. If a

plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man.

The night in prison was novel and interesting enough. The prisoners in

their shirt-sleeves were enjoying a chat and the evening air in the

door-way, when I entered. But the jailer said, “Come, boys, it is time

to lock up;” and so they dispersed, and I heard the sound of their

steps returning into the hollow apartments. My room-mate was introduced

to me by the jailer as “a first-rate fellow and a clever man.” When the

door was locked, he showed me where to hang my hat, and how he managed

matters there. The rooms were whitewashed once a month; and this one,

at least, was the whitest, most simply furnished, and probably the

neatest apartment in town. He naturally wanted to know where I came

from, and what brought me there; and, when I had told him, I asked him

in my turn how he came there, presuming him to be an honest man, of

course; and, as the world goes, I believe he was. “Why,” said he, “they

accuse me of burning a barn; but I never did it.” As near as I could

discover, he had probably gone to bed in a barn when drunk, and smoked

his pipe there; and so a barn was burnt. He had the reputation of being

a clever man, had been there some three months waiting for his trial to

come on, and would have to wait as much longer; but he was quite

domesticated and contented, since he got his board for nothing, and

thought that he was well treated.

He occupied one window, and I the other; and I saw, that, if one stayed

there long, his principal business would be to look out the window. I

had soon read all the tracts that were left there, and examined where

former prisoners had broken out, and where a grate had been sawed off,

and heard the history of the various occupants of that room; for I

found that even here there was a history and a gossip which never

circulated beyond the walls of the jail. Probably this is the only

house in the town where verses are composed, which are afterward

printed in a circular form, but not published. I was shown quite a long

list of verses which were composed by some young men who had been

detected in an attempt to escape, who avenged themselves by singing

them.

I pumped my fellow-prisoner as dry as I could, for fear I should never

see him again; but at length he showed me which was my bed, and left me

to blow out the lamp.

It was like travelling into a far country, such as I had never expected

to behold, to lie there for one night. It seemed to me that I never had

heard the town-clock strike before, nor the evening sounds of the

village; for we slept with the windows open, which were inside the

grating. It was to see my native village in the light of the Middle

Ages, and our Concord was turned into a Rhine stream, and visions of

knights and castles passed before me. They were the voices of old

burghers that I heard in the streets. I was an involuntary spectator

and auditor of whatever was done and said in the kitchen of the

adjacent village-inn—a wholly new and rare experience to me. It was a

closer view of my native town. I was fairly inside of it. I never had

seen its institutions before. This is one of its peculiar institutions;

for it is a shire town. I began to comprehend what its inhabitants were

about.

In the morning, our breakfasts were put through the hole in the door,

in small oblong-square tin pans, made to fit, and holding a pint of

chocolate, with brown bread, and an iron spoon. When they called for

the vessels again, I was green enough to return what bread I had left;

but my comrade seized it, and said that I should lay that up for lunch

or dinner. Soon after, he was let out to work at haying in a

neighboring field, whither he went every day, and would not be back

till noon; so he bade me good-day, saying that he doubted if he should

see me again.

When I came out of prison,—for some one interfered, and paid the tax,—I

did not perceive that great changes had taken place on the common, such

as he observed who went in a youth, and emerged a gray-headed man; and

yet a change had to my eyes come over the scene,—the town, and State,

and country,—greater than any that mere time could effect. I saw yet

more distinctly the State in which I lived. I saw to what extent the

people among whom I lived could be trusted as good neighbors and

friends; that their friendship was for summer weather only; that they

did not greatly purpose to do right; that they were a distinct race

from me by their prejudices and superstitions, as the Chinamen and

Malays are; that, in their sacrifices to humanity they ran no risks,

not even to their property; that, after all, they were not so noble but

they treated the thief as he had treated them, and hoped, by a certain

outward observance and a few prayers, and by walking in a particular

straight though useless path from time to time, to save their souls.

This may be to judge my neighbors harshly; for I believe that most of

them are not aware that they have such an institution as the jail in

their village.

It was formerly the custom in our village, when a poor debtor came out

of jail, for his acquaintances to salute him, looking through their

fingers, which were crossed to represent the grating of a jail window,

“How do ye do?” My neighbors did not thus salute me, but first looked

at me, and then at one another, as if I had returned from a long

journey. I was put into jail as I was going to the shoemaker’s to get a

shoe which was mended. When I was let out the next morning, I proceeded

to finish my errand, and, having put on my mended shoe, joined a

huckleberry party, who were impatient to put themselves under my

conduct; and in half an hour,—for the horse was soon tackled,—was in

the midst of a huckleberry field, on one of our highest hills, two

miles off; and then the State was nowhere to be seen.

This is the whole history of “My Prisons.”

I have never declined paying the highway tax, because I am as desirous

of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject; and, as for

supporting schools, I am doing my part to educate my fellow-countrymen

now. It is for no particular item in the tax-bill that I refuse to pay

it. I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and

stand aloof from it effectually. I do not care to trace the course of

my dollar, if I could, till it buys a man, or a musket to shoot one

with,—the dollar is innocent,—but I am concerned to trace the effects

of my allegiance. In fact, I quietly declare war with the State, after

my fashion, though I will still make use and get what advantages of her

I can, as is usual in such cases.

If others pay the tax which is demanded of me, from a sympathy with the

State, they do but what they have already done in their own case, or

rather they abet injustice to a greater extent than the State requires.

If they pay the tax from a mistaken interest in the individual taxed,

to save his property or prevent his going to jail, it is because they

have not considered wisely how far they let their private feelings

interfere with the public good.

This, then, is my position at present. But one cannot be too much on

his guard in such a case, lest his actions be biassed by obstinacy, or

an undue regard for the opinions of men. Let him see that he does only

what belongs to himself and to the hour.

I think sometimes, Why, this people mean well; they are only ignorant;

they would do better if they knew how: why give your neighbors this

pain to treat you as they are not inclined to? But I think, again, this

is no reason why I should do as they do, or permit others to suffer

much greater pain of a different kind. Again, I sometimes say to

myself, When many millions of men, without heat, without ill-will,

without personal feeling of any kind, demand of you a few shillings

only, without the possibility, such is their constitution, of

retracting or altering their present demand, and without the

possibility, on your side, of appeal to any other millions, why expose

yourself to this overwhelming brute force? You do not resist cold and

hunger, the winds and the waves, thus obstinately; you quietly submit

to a thousand similar necessities. You do not put your head into the

fire. But just in proportion as I regard this as not wholly a brute

force, but partly a human force, and consider that I have relations to

those millions as to so many millions of men, and not of mere brute or

inanimate things, I see that appeal is possible, first and

instantaneously, from them to the Maker of them, and, secondly, from

them to themselves. But, if I put my head deliberately into the fire,

there is no appeal to fire or to the Maker of fire, and I have only

myself to blame. If I could convince myself that I have any right to be

satisfied with men as they are, and to treat them accordingly, and not

according, in some respects, to my requisitions and expectations of

what they and I ought to be, then, like a good Mussulman and fatalist,

I should endeavor to be satisfied with things as they are, and say it

is the will of God. And, above all, there is this difference between

resisting this and a purely brute or natural force, that I can resist

this with some effect; but I cannot expect, like Orpheus, to change the

nature of the rocks and trees and beasts.

I do not wish to quarrel with any man or nation. I do not wish to split

hairs, to make fine distinctions, or set myself up as better than my

neighbors. I seek rather, I may say, even an excuse for conforming to

the laws of the land. I am but too ready to conform to them. Indeed I

have reason to suspect myself on this head; and each year, as the

tax-gatherer comes round, I find myself disposed to review the acts and

position of the general and state governments, and the spirit of the

people to discover a pretext for conformity.

“We must affect our country as our parents,

And if at any time we alienate

Out love of industry from doing it honor,

We must respect effects and teach the soul

Matter of conscience and religion,

And not desire of rule or benefit.”

I believe that the State will soon be able to take all my work of this

sort out of my hands, and then I shall be no better patriot than my

fellow-countrymen. Seen from a lower point of view, the Constitution,

with all its faults, is very good; the law and the courts are very

respectable; even this State and this American government are, in many

respects, very admirable, and rare things, to be thankful for, such as

a great many have described them; seen from a higher still, and the

highest, who shall say what they are, or that they are worth looking at

or thinking of at all?

However, the government does not concern me much, and I shall bestow

the fewest possible thoughts on it. It is not many moments that I live

under a government, even in this world. If a man is thought-free,

fancy-free, imagination-free, that which \_is not\_ never for a long time

appearing \_to be\_ to him, unwise rulers or reformers cannot fatally

interrupt him.

I know that most men think differently from myself; but those whose

lives are by profession devoted to the study of these or kindred

subjects content me as little as any. Statesmen and legislators,

standing so completely within the institution, never distinctly and

nakedly behold it. They speak of moving society, but have no

resting-place without it. They may be men of a certain experience and

discrimination, and have no doubt invented ingenious and even useful

systems, for which we sincerely thank them; but all their wit and

usefulness lie within certain not very wide limits. They are wont to

forget that the world is not governed by policy and expediency. Webster

never goes behind government, and so cannot speak with authority about

it. His words are wisdom to those legislators who contemplate no

essential reform in the existing government; but for thinkers, and

those who legislate for all time, he never once glances at the subject.

I know of those whose serene and wise speculations on this theme would

soon reveal the limits of his mind’s range and hospitality. Yet,

compared with the cheap professions of most reformers, and the still

cheaper wisdom and eloquence of politicians in general, his are almost

the only sensible and valuable words, and we thank Heaven for him.

Comparatively, he is always strong, original, and, above all,

practical. Still his quality is not wisdom, but prudence. The lawyer’s

truth is not Truth, but consistency or a consistent expediency. Truth

is always in harmony with herself, and is not concerned chiefly to

reveal the justice that may consist with wrong-doing. He well deserves

to be called, as he has been called, the Defender of the Constitution.

There are really no blows to be given by him but defensive ones. He is

not a leader, but a follower. His leaders are the men of ’87. “I have

never made an effort,” he says, “and never propose to make an effort; I

have never countenanced an effort, and never mean to countenance an

effort, to disturb the arrangement as originally made, by which the

various States came into the Union.” Still thinking of the sanction

which the Constitution gives to slavery, he says, “Because it was part

of the original compact,—let it stand.” Notwithstanding his special

acuteness and ability, he is unable to take a fact out of its merely

political relations, and behold it as it lies absolutely to be disposed

of by the intellect,—what, for instance, it behoves a man to do here in

America today with regard to slavery, but ventures, or is driven, to

make some such desperate answer as the following, while professing to

speak absolutely, and as a private man,—from which what new and

singular code of social duties might be inferred?—“The manner,” says

he, “in which the governments of those States where slavery exists are

to regulate it, is for their own consideration, under the

responsibility to their constituents, to the general laws of propriety,

humanity, and justice, and to God. Associations formed elsewhere,

springing from a feeling of humanity, or any other cause, have nothing

whatever to do with it. They have never received any encouragement from

me and they never will.”

They who know of no purer sources of truth, who have traced up its

stream no higher, stand, and wisely stand, by the Bible and the

Constitution, and drink at it there with reverence and humanity; but

they who behold where it comes trickling into this lake or that pool,

gird up their loins once more, and continue their pilgrimage toward its

fountain-head.

No man with a genius for legislation has appeared in America. They are

rare in the history of the world. There are orators, politicians, and

eloquent men, by the thousand; but the speaker has not yet opened his

mouth to speak who is capable of settling the much-vexed questions of

the day. We love eloquence for its own sake, and not for any truth

which it may utter, or any heroism it may inspire. Our legislators have

not yet learned the comparative value of free-trade and of freedom, of

union, and of rectitude, to a nation. They have no genius or talent for

comparatively humble questions of taxation and finance, commerce and

manufactures and agriculture. If we were left solely to the wordy wit

of legislators in Congress for our guidance, uncorrected by the

seasonable experience and the effectual complaints of the people,

America would not long retain her rank among the nations. For eighteen

hundred years, though perchance I have no right to say it, the New

Testament has been written; yet where is the legislator who has wisdom

and practical talent enough to avail himself of the light which it

sheds on the science of legislation.

The authority of government, even such as I am willing to submit

to,—for I will cheerfully obey those who know and can do better than I,

and in many things even those who neither know nor can do so well,—is

still an impure one: to be strictly just, it must have the sanction and

consent of the governed. It can have no pure right over my person and

property but what I concede to it. The progress from an absolute to a

limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress

toward a true respect for the individual. Even the Chinese philosopher

was wise enough to regard the individual as the basis of the empire. Is

a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in

government? Is it not possible to take a step further towards

recognizing and organizing the rights of man? There will never be a

really free and enlightened State, until the State comes to recognize

the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its

own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. I

please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be

just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a

neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own

repose, if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor

embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and

fellow-men. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to

drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more

perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet

anywhere seen.