THOREAU'S WINTER JOURNAL.*

A POTENT individuality, which more and more confronts the student of American literature and thought, and which will not down at the command of any matter-of-fact critic who will have only universals and no exceptions — the spirit of a man who dared not only to think, but to act for himself in defiance of current conventionalities, shows forth to the full in these selections from the winter journals of Thoreau, so admirably selected and arranged by Mr. Blake. To those already familiar with Thoreau's writings they will be received with a sincere joy; to the many still ignorant of the real purport of his life they can be, if properly regarded, little less than a revelation. As Mr. Brown points out in his sympathetic introduction, it is Thoreau's attitude toward the world that gives him his significance. Here was one who dared to be unique, to search for his own primal instincts, and to follow them in calm indifference to the stereotyped ideals of the mass of humanity. Whatever view we may take of the wisdom of his course on ethical or social grounds, his character remains as something demanding investigation. Seen from the outside it is indeed forbidding, a veritable chestnut burr sure to prick the fingers of the unwary, but there is enticing meat within if only one knows how to get at it. The fact is, to understand Thoreau we must take him for the time being at his own valuation. Perhaps he was, in the common acceptation of the phrase, a selfish recluse, but if we cast aside superficial judgments and look deeper we find that he was something more. There is surely a healthy, sane side to this outwardly repellent nature! The example of one who cared only that his life should be the resultant of innate tendencies and who scorned material prosperity and social custom is certainly in these days deserving of attention.

The key to Thoreau's nature, as we now understand it, is this: each should seek to discover the capacities and limitations of his own individuality and then develop what powers he has in the direction of "simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust." Thoreau, in the pursuit of his ideal, found that isolation was indispensable. He was irresistibly drawn to the study of natural phenomena; he had an ideal of friendship wholly incapable of realization; he shrank from contact with unsympathetic minds; he found that the forms of commerce, of political controversy, of church organization, cramped and fettered his spirit. But isolation was a condition, not a cause. The main thing, as Thoreau thought, is the normal growth of the individual. In different men the conditions might differ. As Marcus Aurelius observes: "It is possible to live well in a palace." One may live, in the fields or in a palace, as destiny may order, and still be himself. Thoreau went to the woods and fields and found himself there. "In the street and in society," he says, "I am almost invariably cheap and dissipated; my life is unspeakably mean. But alone in distant woods and fields, in unpretending sproutlands or pastures tracked by rabbits, even in a bleak and, to most, cheerless day, when a villager would be thinking of his inn, I come to myself; I once more feel myself grandly related. This cold and solitude are friends of mine. I suppose that this value, in my case, is equivalent to what others get by church-going and prayer. I come to my solitary woodland walk as the homesick go home. I thus dispose of the superfluous, and see things as they are, grand and beautiful."

Yet Thoreau could see the other side and sincerely celebrate its importance. "Go not so far out of your way for a truer life; keep strictly onward in that path alone which your genius points out, do the things which lie nearest to you, but which are difficult to do, live a purer, a more thoughtful and laborious life, more true to your friends and neighbors, more noble and magnanimous, and that will be better than a wild walk."

Throughout the volume from which we have been quoting, Thoreau is constantly expressing his attitude toward the world. True wealth, he argues, is only to be had by renunciation. "It is impossible to have more property than we dispense." "If you wish to give a man a sense of poverty, give him a thousand dollars." "I am not in haste to help men more than God is." "Man's noblest gift to man is his sincerity." In view of these and similar utterances we must hold to the proposition previously expressed, and if we would understand Thoreau aright or derive any value from the study of his career, take him at his own valuation. Underneath his transcendent egotism, his obvious selfishness, and in spite of the narrowness of his outlook, he was one who sought to see things as they are, and he caught at times visions of supernal radiance. The final word with regard to Thoreau is "sincerity." He dared to be himself.

*Winter: From the Journal of Henry D. Thoreau. Edited by H. G. O. Blake. Houghton, Mifflin & Co. $1.50.