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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

A SYMBOLIC WALK

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THESIS STATEMENT

Henry David Thoreau viewed life as a symbolic walk.

PREVIEW

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Our experience does not wear upon us. It is seen to be fabulous or symbolical, and the future is worth expecting. Encouraged, I set out once more to climb the mountain or the earth, for my steps are symbolic steps and in all my walking I have not reached the top of earth as yet.¹

Thus Henry David Thoreau, poet-naturalist, essayist, philosopher, and transcendentalist, expressed a thought that often occupied his mind as he took his solitary walks. He wrote the statement in his Journal when he was thirty-five, and from that time until his death nine years later, he became increasingly interested in expressing his belief that life is a symbolic walk. He believed that every part of nature is an emblem, a symbol, or an analogue of a spiritual and intellectual truth.²

As Thoreau recognized the many truths in nature, he continually sought the eternities of God, which seemed to elude his grasp. This search for his Creator is illustrated by a story from Edward Emerson of Thoreau's childhood. As a small boy Thoreau was unable to sleep in his trundle bed. When his mother asked the reason for his sleeplessness,

¹Henry David Thoreau, The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, editors, Vol. V. (New York, 1962), p. 35.

²Reginald Lancing Cook, The Concord Saunterer (Middlebury, Vermont, 1940), 18.

he replied, "I have been looking through the stars to see if I could find God behind them."³ Thoreau's Journal is largely a report of a search for things he never really found. John Burroughs, the naturalist, wrote that

Thoreau was not a naturalist, but a supernaturalist. . . . The natural history in his books is quite secondary. . . . He was more intent on the natural history of his own thought than on that of the bird . . . he was looking too intently for a bird behind a bird--for a mythology to shine through his ornithology.⁴

Thoreau was really searching, in the Platonic sense, for the true and ideal world of which the temporal world is but a reflection.

As Thoreau continued the study of the symbolism of life and searched for eternities, he based many of his writings on his transcendental ideas. It therefore seems necessary at this point to comment briefly on those concepts of New England Transcendentalism which influenced Thoreau's thinking and indeed were basic to his thoughts and attitudes. The creed or doctrine is very difficult to define precisely, as it is metaphysical and abstract. The Oxford Companion has this to say:

Transcendentalism, [was] a philosophic and literary movement that flourished in New England, particularly at Concord (c. 1836-60), as a reaction against 18th-century rationalism, the skeptical philosophy of Locke, and the confining religious orthodoxy of New England Calvinism. This romantic, idealistic, mystical, and individualistic belief was more a cast of thought than a systematic philosophy. It was eclectic in nature and had many sources. Its qualities may be discerned in Jonathan Edward's belief in "a Divine

³Edward Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau as Remembered by a Young Friend (Boston, 1927), 18.

⁴Henry David Thoreau, "Indoor Studies," n.p., cited by Ethel Seybold, Thoreau: the Quest and the Classics (New Haven, 1951), 9.

and Supernatural Light, immediately imparted to the soul by the spirit of God," and the idealism of Channing, whose Unitarianism was a religious predecessor of this belief in an indwelling God and intuitive thought. It was also a manifestation of the general humanitarian trend of 19th-century thought.⁵

Harold Goddard remarks that

Transcendentalism was a doctrine of the mind. Intuitionist belief in the Transcendentalists' eyes was not the abandoning of experience for theory, but rather a shifting of emphasis to another sort of experience, that of the inner as contrasted with the outer world. They did not use the facts of the external world for a basis of their belief.⁶

Concerning the beliefs of the most prominent Eighteenth Century Transcendentalists that influenced Thoreau, Goddard writes:

In its large outlines, all Transcendentalists (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker) held an identical philosophy, which teaches the unity of the world in God and the immanence of God in the world. Because of indwelling Divinity, every part of this world is a microcosm comprehending within itself all the laws and meanings of existence. The soul of each individual is identical with the soul of the world, and contains, latently, all which it contains.⁷

As to background, the facets of Transcendentalism are varied; however, three sources are discernible: neo-Platonism, German idealistic philosophy, and certain Oriental writings. The first is a belief in the importance of spirit over matter and in an ascending hierarchy of spiritual values. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the leading exponent of

⁵"Transcendentalism," The Oxford Companion to American Literature (First Edition), 772.

⁶Harold Clarke Goddard, Studies in New England Transcendentalism (New York, 1908), 127.

⁷Ibid., 4.

Transcendentalism in New England, wrote:

We learn the highest is present to the soul of man; that the dread universal essence, which is not wisdom, or love, or beauty, or power, but all in one, and each entirely, is that for which all things exist, and that by which they are; that spirit creates; that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present; one and not compound it does not act upon us from without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves: therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree, puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old. As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God; he is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws at his need inexhaustible power.⁸

The second facet is German idealistic philosophy, which places emphasis on intuition as opposed to intellectual processes as a means of penetrating to the real essence of things.⁹ A third facet is mysticism, which holds that knowledge is not acquaintance with the world of space and time or with the world of concepts, but that it is insight into the mind, self, God or entity which transcends the world of phenomena. The knowledge of God comes through direct insight and intuition rather than through effective thought.¹⁰

In summary, the Transcendentalists believed in three major doctrines: the infinite perfection of God, the adequacy of man in all his functions, and the sufficiency of absolute, natural religion. With

⁸Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," The Complete Essays and Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Brooks Atkinson, editor. (New York, 1930), 35.

⁹Rod W. Horton and Herbert W. Edwards, Backgrounds of American Literary Thought (New York, 1952), 11.

¹⁰George Thomas White Patrick, Introduction to Philosophy (Boston, 1955), 216.

confidence in these doctrines, this group followed a path of spiritual reality. Vernon L. Parrington said of the Transcendentalists:

As to spiritual reality, they could only see God in their thinking. He had filled their minds. The evil in their lives was gone and God remained; and in this new world the sons of God were to be henceforth heirs of the kingdom, free to fulfill that good which is the final reality.¹¹

As this doctrine, which dealt with the "spirit" or "oversoul," gave a person much freedom in his religious beliefs, it appealed to Thoreau as he observed nature and pursued his spiritual quest. It was a creed that allowed Thoreau to use his imagination and individualism in formulating his transcendental ideas as a doctrine of the mind. Very possibly his belief in the idea, so aptly expressed by Emerson, that the spirit behind nature is the Supreme Being and that this Being puts forth nature through the individual man, encouraged Thoreau seriously to continue his symbolic walk, seeking reality in the spiritual and the spiritual nature of man.

As Thoreau sought reality in all things in life, he pursued his symbolic walk with three purposes in mind. First, his intention was to study nature in all its facets of material and spiritual content. He did this regularly on his many and varied walks. Second, he observed many aspects of life in which he found symbolism, made new discoveries in humanity, and searched the inmost feelings of his own life. Third, he viewed life as a spiritual quest.

¹¹Vernon Louis Parrington, The Romantic Revolution in America, 1800-1860 (Vol. II of Main Currents of American Thought. 3 vols.; New York, 1927-30), 381.

Thoreau in facing the last years of his life remained busy with his writings and optimistic in his attitude. In one of his essays entitled "Walking," he said that the physical act is not the important thing, but that the pursuing of the walk in a spiritual sense in the presence of nature and its Creator is the sought-for goal. He also said in his Journal, "we would fain take that walk, never yet taken by us through this actual world, which is perfectly symbolical of the path we love to travel in the interior and ideal world. . . ." ¹² Thoreau's walking was the material manifestation of his journey through life, his quest for the "other world." ¹³

¹²Thoreau, Journal, V, 216-17.

¹³Ethel Seybold, Thoreau: the Quest and the Classics, 13.

CHAPTER II

HENRY DAVID THOREAU WALKED WITH A PURPOSE IN MIND

To Thoreau, walking was a serious business. Far more than mere exercise to him, walking was to provide both the occasion and the stimuli for much of the thought reflected in his Journal. Yet his walks also had their physical aspects; he would not consider going for a walk without being properly attired and without taking the necessary tools for observation. His primary purpose, however, was not merely to observe physical areas of nature, but rather to observe man's relationship with the eternities of nature as he sought his Creator.

More than any of his contemporaries, Thoreau revealed a great love of and appreciation for the art of walking. He stated in Walden:

Sometimes after coming home in the dark muggy night, when my feet felt the path which my eyes could not see, dreaming and absent-minded, all the way, I have not been able to recall a single step of my walk, and 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.¹

In his study of Thoreau's Journal, Harding makes this explanation of Thoreau's obsession with walking:

But by and large the Journal is the attempt to shape into words the wisdom he took back from his walks, a testing ground for his art, and a commentary on the Journal itself--that is on the necessities of his character. What he sought from those walks he very

¹Walden, Life in the Woods, 188, cited by Henry Beetle Hough, Thoreau of Walden (New York, 1956), 137.

consciously defined to himself in 1857, after twenty years of the Journal, in one of those sentences which are so heartbreaking in their truthfulness, for when you read it you realize not only that he has said everything he means, but that he has put his whole life into that sentence, "I come to my solitary woodland walk as the homesick go home."²

From all indications, his walks became an integral part of his life along new paths as he made interesting discoveries. He would record these discoveries, and usually the length of the walk determined the length of the article or manuscript. He felt that if he remained indoors he could not write. The strolls in nature were "holy hours" to him, and "he lost all interest in surroundings if he could not be out-of-doors."³ As he continued to live out-of-doors much of the time, in and around Concord, he surveyed the area in detail. Thoreau said that after a three-hour walk, one finds a type of harmony between the capabilities of viewing a landscape within the radius of a ten-mile circle, or the limits of an afternoon, in comparison with the three score years and ten of human life.⁴ Whether in a so small an area as Concord or in so large an area as New England, Thoreau missed very little in his observations.

His habit of observing every detail perhaps had a certain kinship with his efforts always to choose the precise term which would best apply

²Walter Harding, Thoreau: A Century of Criticism (Dallas, Texas, 1954), 190.

³Ibid., 67.

⁴Henry Seidel Canby, The Works of Thoreau (Boston, 1937), 664, citing "Walking," Excursions, 169.