

One Night In the Concord Jail

PERRY MILLER

THE MAKING OF WALDEN, with the Text of the First Version, by J. Lyndon Shanley. University of Chicago. \$5.

In 1849, the year Henry Thoreau secured (at his own expense) publication of his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, he had already completed a draft of his second, *Walden*, on which he had actually commenced work in 1846. He had high hopes of getting it at once into print, but the failure of the *Week* prevented his finding a publisher until 1854. Literature was the gainer by his painful frustration. Through these years he labored intensively at revision, enlargement, rearrangement, tinkering, so that what might have been merely an eccentric production emerged as an intricate, complex, highly organized masterpiece.

Now that the Huntington Library has made available the manuscript pages that survived this spectacular operation, Mr. Shanley has studied in minute detail the progression from the first sustained manuscript of 1849 through the six succeeding recensions to the ultimate form, the eighth, which is the text we know.

Only the most infatuated Thoreauvians will have the patience to follow Mr. Shanley's unrelenting tabulation of what was added paragraph by paragraph, what was transported from here to there, what particles were spliced into passages. At some points even Mr. Shanley must confess that the intricacies of Thoreau's solitary chess game defy description. However, he spells out enough of them, and highlights the more dramatic, for us to be fully persuaded that *Walden*, far from being what for decades it was thought to be—the spontaneous warbling of a naturalist's wood-notes—is an articulated fabrication from one of the most self-conscious writers in our literature.

Most of Thoreau's contemporaries held him to be at best a

rustic parody of Emerson. If after Thoreau's death any memory of him survived such sneers as Lowell's advice that he cease stealing his neighbor's apples, it was because lovers of "Nature" took him over. With fragments of his *Journal* appearing in the 1880's, and then with the full fourteen volumes in 1906, the image of the "poet-naturalist" seemed irrevocably fixed. Thoreau was ticketed as a minor Transcendentalist.

BY DEGREES this image was displaced by, or subordinated to, that of the "critic of society." In such estimates as, for instance, Parrington's, "Civil Disobedience" and "Life Without Principle" loomed larger than *Walden*, except in so far



as the book seemed basically an attack on the business culture. Thoreau the fiery apologist for John Brown blotted out the Thoreau of verses like "Smoke" and "Sympathy."

No doubt Thoreau the anarchistic individualist who went (once) to jail (overnight) for refusing to pay his poll tax and who declared that a man could not without disgrace be associated with the American government of his day has been and remains a spiritual solace to many anguished by certain tendencies in our society.

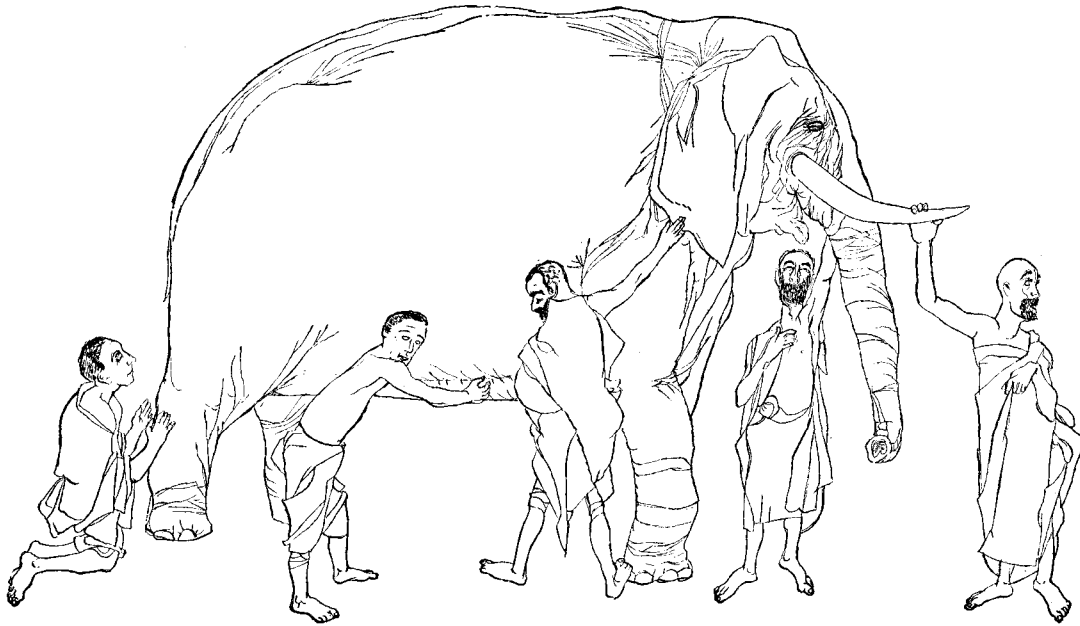
Some might murmur that, however stirring, "Civil Disobedience" offers no viable political program in an urbanized and industrial era, in a time of the draft and Federal taxation; these might also note that Thoreau had the privilege of being a squatter on Emerson's land beside Walden Pond and commenced his experiment by borrowing Alcott's ax. But these cavils were drowned out in the ecstatic self-gratification experienced by devotees who never

remotely contemplated removing to an unheated hut and who regularly filled out Form 1040.

It has taken much hard work, such as Mr. Shanley's, and much rigorous criticism to bring even partially into general recognition that Thoreau was no more primarily a political economist than he was a naturalist. For reasons that remain psychologically obscure, this peculiar Yankee, his personality somehow grievously warped—in some respects providentially mutilated—set himself very early in his single-minded career to a vindication of his ego through demonic determination to transform himself into a writer, and nothing but a writer.

"I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well." This sentence, in the opening of *Walden*, has been tediously cited as an instance of his arch humor, of his New England dryness concealing but only half concealing his humanity. What now we begin to realize is that it declares a deadly resolution never, under any circumstances, to let Henry Thoreau know anybody else at all—anybody, that is, who could detract from himself. Mr. Shanley sees in his own narrative evidence of Thoreau's "long and untiring pursuit of perfection," which in one sense it is; in another, however, it is an appalling history of egoistical concentration.

ONLY WHEN some glimmering of the savagery of the resolution dawns upon us do we grasp the true inwardness of Thoreau's lifelong struggle to bend nature to the contours of his grandiose conception of himself. Only then do we comprehend that his anarchism was the stance of an artist fanatically determined at all costs to preserve his immunities from life, love, and death. And only then can we appreciate with what intransigent persistence he transformed the first version of *Walden* from a record of experience beside an idyllic pond into, by the eighth telling, a work as imaginative, in fact as purely visionary, as any of William Blake's Prophetic Books. Only then, I suggest, do we get a real insight into what Thoreau the writer is beginning to signify to the tormented sensitivity of today.



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It's the same way with the news. You touch a part and you think "This is how it is"—*but you may be wrong*. Even when you understand one or more parts of the news perfectly, you may still put the parts together incorrectly, you may still base an inexact over-all picture on them. To get the whole truth, you have to get the whole story.

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