

Articles

Preface

Thoreau as philosopher: Why does this theme still seem a bit strange, a bit forced - like an attempt to fob something ungentle off on us? Well, one problem is that most of us met Thoreau too early. We met him in adolescence, and we thought of him then as a quirky nature prose-poet; or, as a rustic rebel whose name connected up vaguely with peaceful political protest. Did we think of Thoreau as a philosopher? - No; we poeticized him; we rusticated him. How, then to reclaim him?

At a time when philosophy is increasingly professionalized, Thoreau is worth reading because he reminds us of the distinction - and of the relationship - between philosophy professed and philosophy lived. Like the Greeks, Thoreau heard philosophy's call, heard philosophy call for a life, heard philosophy call for professing - in Thoreau's case, for writing. What Thoreau understood was that the authority of philosophical writing must always be won anew, word by word, inkling by inkling. The authority of philosophical writing is won anew not by displays of virtuosity, whether literary or argumentative, but by displays of vitality, by finding words that incorporate, and are incorporated by, a well-lived life. Philosophically authoritative words are words that stand face-to-face with a well-lived life; such words and such a life reciprocally implicate one another. Thoreau demonstrates his understanding of this by writing in the first-person and by providing what he demands from others - "a simple and sincere account of his own life." Clearly, this understanding of philosophical authority is dangerous - by that I mean, has its dangers: empty self-obsession, stultifying idiosyncrasy, blank unintelligibility. But perhaps worse than these dangers is the danger that such an understanding of philosophical writing renders philosophy written in its service unavailable to contemporary professional philosophy. Put crudely, the danger is that philosophy written in the service of such an understanding and contemporary professional philosophy will end up out of even spitting distance of one another. To contemporary professional philosophy, Thoreau's writing is writing *ad hominem*, or worse, writing *ad personam*: philosophical writing conceived in a matrix of fallacies, not to be borne. If philosophy as Thoreau writes it and contemporary professional philosophy continue to recoil from each other, philosophy will lose much of what has made it admirable - its stubborn attempts to make ends meet, to keep body and soul together. Philosophy will then exist only as a zombie, or as a ghost, of its former self, demanding either voodoo or exorcism.

Thoreau's philosophical writing alternately provokes and pacifies. It knots together paradox and platitude. Thoreau does not write books to be held at arm's length; he writes books to be either pitched angrily or clutched greedily; or, maybe, both. Thoreau gives and requires a live response, the response of a life. Call this Thoreau's Concordian Revolution: Copernicus taught us that our sun with all its furies is at the center of the galaxy; Kant taught us that our mind with all its categories is at the center of space and time; Thoreau teaches us that our life with all its forms is at the center of things. Kant set reason after reason, because reason is fated to ask itself questions that it cannot answer. Thoreau set life after life, because life is fated to ask itself questions it cannot answer.

Reason and life are alike antinomian: both require transcendental responses. Thoreau requires that we read him against our lives, and through our lives.

Before clearing the way for the essays that follow, I acknowledge the overwhelming debt this collection owes to the pioneering work of Stanley Cavell. I also record my sadness, and the sadness of others, at the death of David L. Norton. Had David lived, he would have contributed an essay to this collection. If time is, as Thoreau said, "a stream we go a-fishing in," David was the Compleat Angler.

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