Zeteo: *The Journal of Interdisciplinary Writing*

"He looms up bigger and bigger"

By William Eaton

Review of *Thoreau in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates*, edited by Sandra Harbert Petrulionis (University of Iowa Press, 2012)

This volume put together by Professor Petrulionis, a Thoreau scholar, offers plenty of justification and anecdote for those who would continue the beatification of Thoreau, and for those who would revel in the wonders of what might have been (what some have wished for?) Thoreau's personality and approach to life. Focused as it is on the "what was" (or was claimed to have been) rather than on the "why," the book will also frustrate any who would increase their understanding of how Thoreau became such an extraordinary person and writer or why in the early nineteenth century in a little town in Massachusetts there flowered two of the greatest writers the United States has ever known (Thoreau and Emerson), along with several other literary talents (Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, Louisa May Alcott). *Thoreau in His Own Time* offers brief excerpts from letters, journal entries, reviews and recollections of almost 50 friends, acquaintances and writers, including Walt Whitman, Horace Greeley and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, along with Hawthorne, three Alcotts and Emerson.[*] But none of these excerpts offer social analysis or the sort of details that we, in our post-Freudian age, could use to explain what might well be considered a miracle. Or, if you prefer, it is not a miracle, but a confirmation of one of the core American (and Emersonian) faiths: that the son of a modest pencilmaker, in a village

[*] The title of this review comes from Whitman, from Horace Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 3; an entry from December 24, 1888. When asked "if it was quite certain that Emerson will size up in history ultimately bigger than Thoreau?" Whitman replied that his prejudices were all with Emerson, "but Thoreau was a surprising fellow—he is not easily grasped—is elusive: yet he is one of the native forces—stands for a fact, a movement, an upheaval. . . . [H]e looms up bigger and bigger: his dying does not seem to have hurt him a bit: every year has added to his fame."

"unknown and unnoticed" (in William Ellery Channing's phrase), could not only be of "superior genius" and "the undoubted King of all American lions" (Emerson), but have his writing continue down through the ages to be read and admired "for the philosophical truths enunciated, the poetic beauty of expression, and its pure naturalness" (Joseph Hosmer Jr., a friend of Thoreau's brother).[*]

One of Thoreau's oldest friends or acquaintances, Edward Sherman Hoar, writes that, in the end, when Thoreau was on his death bed, "he received a great deal of attention and people were constantly coming and sending him flowers. He came to feel very differently toward people, and said if he had known he wouldn't have been so offish. He had got into his head before that *people* didn't mean what they said". (Hoar's italics.) This is precisely the sort of thing that I, and at least a few others, I imagine, would like to explore: What were the seminal events in Thoreau's childhood or youth that put this (likely accurate) view of people and bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) in his head? We are told that Thoreau felt a great affinity for turtles. I, like Thoreau a person of great curiosity, would be interested in exploring what may have been the sources of this affinity.

Instead, what picture does Petrulionis's collage present of the phenomenon, Henry David Thoreau? Three features stood out in my reading. One is a feature of Thoreau that is also quite prominent in his own writings: the patient observer of nature. In another posting for *Zeteo* I have already quoted from one of my favorite passages in this regard.[†] Here I will quote from another, briefer description, from Emerson's journal entry of May 11, 1858, a day he walked to Walden Pond with Thoreau:

> The charm which Henry T. uses for bird & frog & mink, is patience. They will not come to him, or show him aught, until he becomes a log among the logs, sitting still for hours in the same place; then they come around him & to him, & show themselves to him.

Secondly, in Petrulionis's collage Thoreau is far from the anti-social, poorly socialized loner of images (or from the Thoreau suggested by the quotation from Hoar just above). He is loved and admired by his contemporaries, welcome in their homes and a great

[*] Of course, while the faith in American, there is nothing particularly American about the phenomenon. One might similarly describe Rousseau's background and the lasting appeal of his work. As regards other kinds of intellectuals, Kepler leaps to mind as someone who though from humble origins was able to become one of the leading scientists of his or of any time.

[†] **Reading 4-10 November (ZiR)**.

entertainer of children (with stories, magic and music). He is not a "ladies man" in the romantic sense of these words, but he both had a feminine side and was tremendously handy and available, which led to a number of friendships with women, most notably with Emerson's wife. His talents as a naturalist—to include his enthusiasm for and ability at finding hard to find plants and animals—were among the traits that led men to want to go out on long walks with him. "He did not wish for a set of cheap friends," Channing, his closest companion, writes in *Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist*, the first biography, excerpted by Petrulionis. "In the best and most practical sense, no one had more friends or was better loved."

Thirdly, one gets the sense that Thoreau was a talker rather than a listener or conversationalist. Harriet Hanson Robinson, who with her husband rented a house from the Thoreaus, recalls:

> He was a great talker, sitting with his head bent over, and carrying on the "conversation" all by himself. On one occasion we had a visitor who had written several town histories, and was learned in Indian matters. Thoreau called while he was there; and, the conversation turning to Indian affairs, Thoreau talked our friend dumb in a very short time.

Readers of this review may have noted a contrast between the previous feature (sociability) and this latter one (a certain lack of social sense). Petrulionis's excerpts offer several such contrasts. Hawthorne, who kept himself a bit apart from Emerson and his Concord circle, describes Thoreau "as ugly as sin, long-nosed, queer-mouthed". But Waldo's son Edward describes Thoreau as having "strong features, light brown hair, an open-air complexion with suggestion of a seafaring race; the mouth pleasant and flexible when he spoke, aquiline nose, deep-set but very wide-open eyes of clear blue grey". My sense is that most all of the people Petrulionis quotes were admirers and friends of Thoreau and wished to defend him against criticisms that had been made of him and against what *they* perceived to be unflattering descriptions of him. So, for example, insofar as *Walden* and other writings and rumors had made Thoreau out to be a loner, and insofar as these admirers and friends took "loner" to be an unwanted, negative characteristic, they rummaged in their memories and imaginations for the means to suggest that Henry was not a loner at all. (Higginson criticizes those who had brought Thoreau's "eccentricities into undue prominence, and [placed] too little stress on the vigor, the good sense, the clear perceptions of the man.")

This would also seem the place to note that there are, in fact, two books smushed together in this one volume. The more vigorous, Thoreauvian book consists of direct observations: of extracts from journal entries and letters written by Thoreau's friends and acquaintances while he was alive and these people were getting to know and responding to him. The other book is a mixture of posthumous hagiography and of self-serving (and at times also insightful) recollections by people, often a generation or two younger than Thoreau, who had some tenuous connection to him, people who had heard stories, read books and formed opinions much as you or I might.[*] For example, this second, Thoreau-not-quite-in-his-own-time series of excerpts includes a review, by someone who never met Thoreau, of Channing's biography, and there are excerpts from *Memories of Concord*, published in 1926 by a writer who was 6 years old when Thoreau died and herself grew up in Detroit. Her connection was that one of her grandfathers was one of the people who helped build the Walden cabin. (The French have an expression: *L'homme qui a vu l'homme qui a vu l'ours*—the man who saw the man who saw the bear.)

More than one of the writers excerpted recalls a remark Thoreau supposedly made after reading a book about a trip to the Arctic: "most of the phenomena noted could have been observed in Concord". There is an unfortunate tincture of American provincialism, and fear of coming up short, in this remark; a certain "I may not have traveled far, but I'm sure I haven't missed much." And there is also here one aspect of Thoreau's genius, the power of his vision. This is well illustrated in a family story told by Mabel Loomis Todd (best known as the co-editor, with Higginson, of the first volume of Emily Dickinson's poems). Before she was born, her father and mother, friends of Henry's, went rowing on the Concord River with him.

> [A]s they were approaching a fine old oak on the river bank, Henry ceased rowing, stood up suddenly in the tiny skiff, looked up into the huge tree with something akin to adoration and said, as one inspired, "Why, there is enough in that tree alone to keep one man happily busy all his life!" His face was

[*] Greeley, who along with Emerson was the great champion of Thoreau's writing, wrote to Thoreau, "If any thing is calculated to make a scoundrel of an honest man, writing to sell is that very particular thing." One has a sense that many of the texts excerpted in Petrulionis's volume were written by people who were capitalizing on their connection, however tenuous, to Thoreau and on his posthumous reputation. One senses, too, that these writers' goal was rather less money than a kind of celebrity; by writing and publishing their reminiscences they were fortifying their connection to a great and famous person.

> alight with fervour as he went on to tell of the rich reward awaiting him who would take the oak-tree for his lifework. "The whole story of creation and all of natural history is in that one tree! Why does one want to take long journeys to study anything? It is all here."*

What Petrulionis's book cannot offer, however, is a glimpse of all that Thoreau, with his rare vision, found in his own studies of trees, animals, people and Concord. For that one would be well advised to return to Thoreau's works themselves. I have selected the following passage from *Walden* for the resonance it has with some of the points touched on above:

> 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.

Long after Thoreau had died, his childhood friend Edward Hoar noted, truthfully, I believe: "With Thoreau's life something went out of Concord woods and fields and river that will never return." This comment might tempt us to amend Thoreau's remark quoted earlier. After, say, a visit to the tidy suburb and tourist destination that Concord has become, might one conclude that many a phenomena could be observed in Concord *only so long as Thoreau lived there*? By way of a conclusion I will say, No. Through the example of his life, and through his writings above all, Thoreau has, at least in some measure, "taught hearing to those who before had only ears, and sight to those who had never seen" (Mary Hosmer Brown). As per the quote from Edward Emerson which are the very first words in Petrulionis's book: "Our woods will always be different because of this man." As Americans this is one of our greatest blessings: that such a man once thrived on our rocky soil and left his words and his example (however confused by recollection and by hagiographers) to teach and inspire future generations.

Afterword

* I previously quoted this passage in a short essay, "**The Bravest Grope a Little**."

This review follows on the heels of Ed Mooney's major essay (or amble) "Thoreau: Mourning Turtle Doves," published in the Fall 2012 issue of *Zeteo*. It cannot, however, be said that there is a Thoreau revival under way, because indeed, as Whitman noted long ago, every year seems to add to Thoreau's reputation. Nonetheless, it does seem that within academia there is a "surge of interest in things Thoreau," as Ed describes it. (And I would recommend the Afterword to his piece which calls attention to several of the new books coming out.)

My sense is that this aspect of Thoreau's ever-growing reputation responds to two feelings among American academic philosophers. One is a frustration with the dryness and narrowness of much of the analytic philosophy they have been channeled into studying and teaching.[*] Oh to be able to again write (or try to write) with the passion, breadth and moral engagement of Thoreau. E.g., from "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (along with the other members of his band): "These men, in teaching us how to die, have at the same time taught us how to live."

The second feeling (which may be traced back to Jesus and Socrates) is that philosophy should not be "just" words, talk, ideas and theories, but should be, and above all, a way of life—and no so much recommended to others as lived by the philosopher himself or herself.[†] The rightness (or wrongness) of one's ideas should be revealed in the relative rightness (however this might be evaluated!) of how own lived—either as regards one's daily activities and relations or as regards one's involvement in social and political causes. We have seen this point made negatively in rejections of the work of Heidegger and of Carl Schmitt because of their allegiance to the German Nazi party, and the point has been made positively as regards any number of modern French philosophers (Camus and Sartre perhaps first and foremost but hardly alone). From this perspective it is hard to find a better, more inspiring embodiment of the ideal than our very own Henry David Thoreau. I will again close, and now once and for all, with lines from him and from *Walden*:

---

[*] *Thoreau in His Own Time* includes a nice exchange, presumably recorded in Channing's biography, between Thoreau and a rather more orthodox person. In a discussion about transcendentalism, this other person said, "It seems to me we are going backward to Paganism." To which Thoreau responded, "Say rather *forward* to Paganism, madam."

[†] Among the current champions of this position is the Auburn philosopher Kelly Dean Jolley, and perhaps particularly in some postings on **his blog**. It was one such posting that led *Zeteo* to Ed Mooney.

> 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.

William Eaton writes on ethics and the limits of human understanding, and is the Editorial Adviser to Zeteo. *For another of his Thoreauvian pieces, see* ***What shall I learn of parenting, or parenting of me?***