



Ancient Literature in Thoresau

by

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## PREFACE

The purpose of this study is to investigate Henry David Thoreau's reading in the field of ancient literature. Most of the literatures studied are considered only in the period commonly known as ancient; viz., from the beginning to 476 A.D. The one exception to this division in the present study is the Persian literature, which includes Sadi and Hafiz, who belong chronologically to the medieval period. They are included here because it was unusual for an American scholar of Thoreau's time to have a knowledge of them, and a study of his Oriental reading seems incomplete without them.

All references to Thoreau's works are to the Riverside edition, published by Houghton Mifflin Company, Chicago, Illinois. References to Sanborn's Life of Thoreau are to the edition of 1917, unless otherwise stated.

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## INTRODUCTION

Most studies of Henry David Thoreau begin with a recital of the mere facts of his life - his parentage, his early experiences, his education and early occupations, his Walden Pond experience and his walking trips. Repetition of these facts is not necessary in the present study, since they constitute a familiar part of the literary history of New England in the Transcendental period. What is less well known is the intellectual and spiritual life of Channing's "poet-naturalist" and the influences that contributed to this life.

Influences upon the intellectual and spiritual life of Thoreau were his family and friends, his academy and college life, the New England Transcendental movement, and his own individual reading. The first four may be commented upon briefly, but only as they show their connection with the last influence - Thoreau's reading, with which this study is principally concerned.

According to F.B. Sanborn, the Thoreau family was a quiet, studious, superior one. He speaks of the earnest purpose that pervaded their participation in such a movement as the anti-slavery cause, and says, "By this time, too, - I speak of the years from 1836 onward till the outbreak of the civil war, the children of Mrs. Thoreau had reached an age and an education which made them noteworthy persons.....all of them, whatever their accidental position for the time, were superior persons. Living in a town where the ancient forms survived in daily collision or in friendly contact with

the new ideas that began to make headway in New England about 1830, the Thoreaus had peculiar opportunities, above their apparent fortunes, but not beyond their easy reach of capacity, for meeting on equal terms the advancing spirit of the period.<sup>1.</sup>

The family interested themselves in the education of the younger son, who was sent first to the Concord Academy and later to Harvard College, where his expenses were partly paid by his father, his aunts and the devoted elder sister, Helen. No doubt the encouragement which he received at home to educate himself encouraged Thoreau to improve himself intellectually as much as possible.

Among his friends Thoreau numbered such scholarly people as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Ellery Channing and Jones Very, who was Thoreau's Greek tutor at Harvard. Of these Emerson probably had the most influence upon his young friend's intellectual experiences. Emerson, who was an older man than Thoreau, was well read in the classics and the Oriental literatures and lent his own copies freely to his friends.

Concord Academy, a school famous for its instruction in the Greek classics, no doubt taught Thoreau first to read his Homer and his Aristotle. It also gave instruction in Latin and French, in both of which languages Thoreau later became proficient.

Opinions about Thoreau's college life vary, some biographers declaring that college gave him nothing but scholarship, that he was a recluse and had nothing to do with his college mates. Others say

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1. Sanborn, F.B., Henry D. Thoreau, American Men of Letters.

that he entered into some of the college social activities enough to partake in a few of his friends' pranks. H.S. Salt inclines to the opinion that Thoreau was a college grind. He says, "It seems that he passed for nothing among his companions, taking little share in their studies, and amusements, shunning their oyster suppers and wine parties, and mysteriously disappearing from the scene, when, as occasionally happened, the course of college discipline was temporarily interrupted by a rebellion."<sup>1.</sup>

To substantiate his claim Salt quotes an extract from a letter written by The Reverend John Weiss, who was one of Thoreau's classmates at Harvard. This letter was printed in The Christian Examiner, Boston, in July, 1865. The following is selected from the letter: "He was cold and unimpressible. The touch of his hand was moist and indifferent, as if he had taken up something when he saw your hand coming, and caught your grasp upon it..... He did not care for people; his classmates seemed very remote. This reverie hung always about him, and not so loosely as the odd garments which the pious household care furnished. Thought had not yet awakened his countenance; it was serene but rather dull, rather plodding..... He would smile to hear the word 'collegiate career' applied to the reserve and inaptness of his college life. He was not signalled by the plentiful distribution of the parts and honors, which fall to the successful student. Of his private tastes there is little of consequence to recall, except that he was devoted to the old English literature, and had a good many volumes of the poetry from Gower

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1. Salt, H.S., Life of Henry David Thoreau, pp. 24-25

and Chaucer down through the era of Elizabeth. In this mine he worked with quiet enthusiasm." <sup>1.</sup>

Sanborn quotes a letter from President Quincy of Harvard, which suggests that Thoreau may not always have been the faithful student that he is sometimes credited with being. A question concerning Thoreau's receiving a small sum from the college beneficiary fund, brought a letter from Emerson to President Quincy. The following is an extract from President Quincy's reply in which he suggests that Thoreau's conduct has not always been satisfactory to the faculty. "His general conduct has been very satisfactory, and I was willing and desirous that whatever falling off there had been in his scholarship, should be attributable to his sickness.....His instructors were impressed with the conviction that he was indifferent even to a degree that was faulty.....I have always entertained a respect for and an interest in him, and was willing to attribute any apparent neglect or indifference to his ill health rather than to his wilfulness." <sup>2.</sup>

In his later Life of Thoreau F.B. Sanborn includes many of the hitherto unpublished essays of Thoreau, written during his years at college, which throw considerable light upon his habits of thought and reading at this period of his life. His tendency toward retirement and a studious life is seen in an essay entitled The Literary Life, written as a college requirement in the autumn of 1835. He began by quoting Horace,

'Scriptorum chorus amat nemus, et fugit urbes.'  
(The whole band of poets loves the groves and shuns the cities.)

1. Salt, H.S. Life of Henry David Thoreau, pp.24-25

2. Sanborn, F.B. Life of Henry David Thoreau, American Men of Letters pp. 53-54.

This is as true of the literary man of the present day as it is descriptive of the same class a thousand years ago. This love of retiring from the hurry and bustle of the world has, in all ages, closely adhered to those minds most devoted to study and elevated by genius. Horace's passion for retirement and fondness for the country are well known; leaving the bustling streets of Rome he was wont to amuse himself at his retired villa in the Sabine territory, by commenting upon the manners and characters of the age. -----This is pure enjoyment. But this path can only be trodden by the enlightened and cultivated mind....It is knowledge that creates the difference between man and man - that raises one man above another. The mind that is filled with this valuable furniture is a magazine richly furnished, a storehouse of the wisdom of the ages; from which Reflection, who is doorkeeper, and has charge of the keys, draws forth from time to time, as the Mind, the proprietor has need of them. 1.

In this essay one can see the germs of that later tendency toward solitude and studious habits that sent him to Walden Pond. This experiment was in a way part of the Transcendental movement in New England. Transcendentalism made Thoreau a seeker after knowledge, in pursuit of which he searched not only his own environment and his own mind, but the best of the world's literature.

A definite study of the influences at work upon Thoreau during this early period can best be made by a search through his works to discover the extent and source of the fourth factor in his intellectual and spiritual development - his reading. In addition to his own quotations from writers and allusions to great literary works there are the statements of friends who knew his habits and, probably, had access to Thoreau's library, of which Sanborn has made a catalogue. This study must begin with an examination of the sources from which Thoreau drew his quotations and allusions.

Of the New England group of scholars of the Transcendental

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1. Sanborn, F.B. Life of Henry David Thoreau, p. 85

period, Thoreau was, perhaps, the one best known for his love and use of books. Because he had reduced life to its simplest terms, he had all the time he chose to read whatever he pleased. His choice fell upon three literary springs which left their traces all through his own writing - the ancient classics, the Oriental scriptures and the English poets. Only the first two are to be considered in this study.

The classics, perhaps, made the deepest impression upon him because he found in them the element of permanency that he considered essential to a good book. His Greek and Roman allusions outnumber by far those which he made from other literatures. Thoreau had no use for books that afford "only a covering enjoyment". He said contemptuously that, "He who resorts to the easy novel, because he is languid, does no better than if he took a nap."<sup>1.</sup> Because he cared for the permanent in reading, he disliked newspapers and periodicals. He said, "Read not the Times; read the Eternities."<sup>2.</sup> In A Week he expressed the same contempt for the transient literature of his time:

It would be worth while to select our reading, for books are the society we keep, to read only the serenely true; never statistics, nor fiction, nor news, nor reports, nor periodicals, but only great poems, and when they failed read them again, or perchance write more.<sup>3.</sup>

In the same chapter he said, "Read the best books first or you may not have the chance to read them all."<sup>4.</sup>

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1. A Week On The Concord And Merrimac Rivers, p. 123.

2. Miscellanies, p. 279

3. A Week, p. 122

4. Ibid.

To Thoreau the best books meant the classics, and also, he tells us,....."the still older and more than classic, but even less known Scriptures of the nations."<sup>1.</sup> He looked forward to the time when the vaticans....."shall be filled with Vedas, Zend-Avestas and Bibles, with Homers and Dantes and Shakespeares."<sup>2.</sup>

It is singular that Thoreau, in his study of the ancient stories even wandered into the field of the pseudo-ancient, in his study of the Ossian poems of James Macpherson. He saw in those ancient Irish stories something of the peculiarity that marks the early classics of Greece and Rome. In fact, he spoke of them as if he believed their antiquity might be real. He said in A Week:

The genuine remains of Ossian, or those ancient poems which bear his name, though of less fame and extent, are in many respects, of the same stamp with the Iliad itself. He asserts the dignity of the bard no less than Homer, and in his era we hear of no other priest than he.....

Ossian reminds us of the most refined and rudest eras, of Homer, Pindar, Isaiah, and the American Indian. In his poetry, as in Homer's, only the simplest and most enduring features are seen, such essential parts of man as Stonehenge exhibits of a temple; we see the circles of stone and the upright shaft alone. Like all older and grander poetry it is distinguished by the few elements in the lives of its heroes. 3.

At Walden he came even more than before under the influence of the classics, because his residence there was more favorable to serious reading than his life in the university had been. Here, he said, he came more than ever — "within the influence of those books which circulate around the world, whose sentences were

1. Walden. p. 164

2. Ibid.

3. A Week. pp. 453-454

first written on bark and are now merely copied from time to time on linen paper."<sup>1.</sup> These are the classics, which are... "the noblest recorded thoughts of man. They are the only oracles that are not decayed, and there are such answers to the most modern inquiry in them such as Delphi and Dodona never gave."<sup>2.</sup>

Thoreau's autograph list of his self-assigned course of reading in the poetry, philosophy and history of the ancient classics was found by Sanborn among the papers of the Dial period. These assignments include Greek, and Latin and a few authors in other languages than English. The Greek authors include: Homer, Hesiod, Sappho, Pindar, Aeschylus, Anacreon, Simonides, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Callimachus, Bion, Moschus, Theocritus, Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Aeschines, and Archimedes. Under Latin are: Plautus, Terence, Cicero, Caesar, Nepos, Livy, Seneca, Epictetus, Lucretius, Catullus, Ovid, Virgil, Horace, Tibullus, Persius, Juvenal, Claudian, Pliny, Tacitus, Boethius, Augustine, Lucian and Plutarch. Of other authors he has listed Josephus and Confucius.<sup>3.</sup> Sanborn says that some of the Greek works were first read in copies which Mr. Alcott had brought from London in 1842 or those brought to Concord by Charles Lane from the Greaves Library at Alcott House in England.

The first mention of Thoreau's interest in Oriental literature is found in an essay which he wrote in March 1837, on Books and

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1. Walden. 157

2. Ibid. 159

3. Sanborn, F.B., Life of Henry David Thoreau, pp. 520-521

Their Titles. In this essay he mentioned several Persian writers, among them, Sadi, whom he quoted later, especially in Walden and A Week. Possibly he made the acquaintance of these writers through Emerson, whom he met this year, and who was much interested in the literature of the Orient. Mark Van Doren says that Thoreau's interest in Oriental literature probably came through Emerson, who owned, "one of the first copies of the Bhagavat Geeta, in America; he lent it freely; and he got it read much more widely than the Harvard Library copy was read."<sup>1</sup> Van Doren suggests also that this Oriental influence came through England, since both Emerson and Thoreau read translations of the Oriental classics by celebrated Orientalists -- Jones, Colébrooke, Mackintosh, Wilson, Wilkins, Lee, Wilford, Marshman, and Collie.

In a letter to Daniel Ricketson, written December 25, 1855, Thoreau mentioned Cholmondeley, the English scholar, who had recently visited the New England group and was then on his way to the Crimea, saying that,....." before going he busied himself in buying, and has caused to be forwarded to me by Chapman, a royal gift, in the shape of twenty-one distinct works (one in nine volumes) almost exclusively relating to Hindoo literature, and scarcely one of them to be bought in America. I am familiar with many of them and know how to prize them. I send you information of this as I might of the birth of a child."<sup>2</sup>

This "royal gift" has been listed by Sanborn in his Life of Thoreau, as including the following titles:

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1. Van Doren, M., Henry David Thoreau. A Critical Study, p. 53
  2. Familiar Letters, p. 320-321



the cream of the best literatures and made it his own.

An investigation of his works, including his letters and journals, reveals some interesting facts concerning the influence of his reading upon his thought and style, and some surprising information as to the ancient literatures which influenced him most. It is noticeable that Greek allusions far outnumber the others, while Roman literature is second in importance. The others in the order of their importance as to Thoreau's use of them are: The Bible, the Hindoo, the Chinese and the Persian. Compared in statistical terms the literatures are as follows:

Allusions to Greek literature - - - - -	387
Quotations from Greek writers - - - - -	53
Allusions to Roman literature - - - - -	118
Quotations from the Roman writers - - - - -	46
Allusions to the Bible - - - - -	75
Quotations from the Bible - - - - -	19
Allusions to Hindoo Literature - - - - -	31
Quotations from Hindoo Literature - - - - -	29
Allusions to Chinese Literature - - - - -	3
Quotations from Chinese Literature - - - - -	9
Allusions to Persian Literature - - - - -	5
Quotations from Persian Literature - - - - -	7
Allusions to Assyrian Literature - - - - -	1
Allusions to Arabian Literature - - - - -	1

The influence of these literatures upon Thoreau's thought and style will be treated in separate chapters or sections according to

their importance in this study.

## Chapter I.

Thoreau And The Greeks.

I thank the gods for Greece,  
 That permanent realm of peace;  
 For as the rising moon, far in the night,  
 Chequers the shade with her forerunning light,  
 So in my darkest hour my senses seem  
 To catch from her Acropolis a gleam.<sup>1.</sup>

Henry David Thoreau

The Greek is by far the greatest influence that the reader finds among the ancient literatures which Thoreau studied and admired. Comparison shows that out of six hundred and twenty-one allusions to ancient literature, compiled from the works of Thoreau, three hundred and eighty-seven are allusions to the Greek literature. Out of one hundred and sixty-three quotations from ancient writers, fifty-three are from Greek writers.

Proof of Thoreau's fondness for the Greek is found not only in his quotations from and allusions to the Greek literature, but also in the statements of his biographers. Sanborn says, "Of all the Concord authors Thoreau was the best versed in Greek. Mrs. Ripley alone exceeded him in the amount of her Greek reading; but she had more years at her disposal for this study."<sup>2.</sup>

1. Sanborn, F.B., Life of Thoreau, p. 257

2. Ibid. p. 174.

Thoreau not only quoted from the Greek writers and borrowed their imagery, but he also expressed his admiration for them. A suggestion of the reason for this admiration is found in his comparison of them with the other ancient peoples. He said, "The Greeks were boys in the sunshine; the Romans were men in the field; the Persians, women in the house; the Egyptians, old men in the dark."<sup>1.</sup> Thoreau, with his love of the spontaneous, the bright and the joyous, preferred the "boys in the sunshine." It may be that he still had a boyish love of a good story when he chose the Greek epic as his favorite type of reading.

The permanency of Greek literature appealed to Thoreau. In his chapter on Reading in Walden he accounted for the fact that Greek classics had survived the vicissitudes of two thousand years, when he said, "The symbol of an ancient man's thought becomes a modern man's speech. Two thousand summers have imparted to the monuments of Grecian literature, as to her marbles, a maturer golden and autumnal tint, for they have carried their own serene and celestial atmosphere into all lands to protect them against the corrosion of time."<sup>2.</sup>

While Thoreau admired the liveliness and the facility of the Greeks in expressing themselves, he admitted their limitations, in a discussion in his journal:

The Greeks like those of the south generally, expressed themselves with more facility than we, in distinct and lively images, and so far as relates to the grace and completeness with which they treated the subjects suited to their genius, they must be allowed to retain their ancient supremacy. But a rugged and uncouth array of thought, though never so modern, may rout them at any moment. It remains for

1. Summer. p. 355

2. Walden. p. 161

other than Greeks to write the literature of the next century.

Thoreau admired not only Greek literature but also the Greek language. In fact, he disapproved of reading only translations of the classics, because he felt that one who had not read them in the original lacked a necessary element in his knowledge of the human race. He believed that, "It is remarkable that no transcript of them [the classics] has ever been made into any modern tongue, unless our civilization itself may be regarded as such a transcript. Homer has never yet been printed in English, nor Aeschylus, nor Virgil even, works as refined, as solidly done, and as beautiful almost as the morning itself; for later writers, say what we will of their genius, have rarely, if ever, equalled the elaborate beauty and finish, and the lifelong and heroic literary labors of the ancients."<sup>2.</sup>

Thoreau found in the vigor and freshness of the language of western America a likeness to the ancient Greek. Sanborn, in his Life of Thoreau, 1917 edition, published a number of the hitherto unpublished essays of Thoreau. Among these is one on American Literature At The West, in which Thoreau rejoiced at having found "good Greekish words". He remarked that, "Already there is more language there than here which is the growth of the soil. Good Greekish words are there in abundance - good because necessary and expressive; 'diggings' for instance. If you analyze a Greek word you will not get anything simpler, truer, more poetical."<sup>3.</sup>

1. Winter. p. 278

2. Walden. p. 163

3. Sanborn, F.B., Life of Thoreau, p. 276

When the reader of Thoreau comes to the particular authors who influenced him it is easy to understand his epithet, "boys in the sunshine". It was Homer, prince of story tellers, who was his favorite. Of the three hundred and eighty-seven allusions to the Greeks fifty-six refer to Homer, and nineteen of the fifty-three quotations from Greek writers are from Homer. Mark Van Doren, in his study of Thoreau says, rather impatiently that...<sup>1.</sup> "he praised Homer like a wild boy." Homer's naturalness seems to have appealed to Thoreau, for he remarked, "It is enough if Homer but say the sun sets. He is as serene as nature, and we can hardly detect the enthusiasm of the bard. It is as if nature spoke. He presents to us the simplest pictures of human life so that childhood itself can understand them, and the man must not, think twice to appreciate his naturalness. Each reader discovers for himself that, with respect to the simpler features of nature, succeeding poets have done little else than copy his similes. His more memorable passages are as naturally bright as gleams of sunshine in misty weather. Nature furnishes him not only with words, but with stereotyped lines and sentences from her mint."<sup>2.</sup> This is strong praise, but a lover of Homer cannot agree with Van Doren that it is extravagant.

The Iliad was Thoreau's favorite not only of the Homeric and other Greek works but of all literature. All of his Homeric quotations were taken from the Iliad, and of his fifty-six Homeric allusions, twenty concerned the Iliad. His praise of Homer was chiefly praise

1. Van Doren, M., Henry David Thoreau, A Critical Study. p. 98

2. A Week. p. 117.

of the Iliad.

There are few books which are fit to be remembered in our wisest hours, but the Iliad is brightest in the serenest days, and embodies still all the sunlight that fell on Asia Minor. No joy or ecstasy of ours can lower its height, nor dim its luster, but there it lies in the east of literature, as it were the earliest and latest production of the mind.<sup>1.</sup>

Thoreau commented again on Homer in his journal for March 3, 1838; this passage is now included in the section of his journal called Spring. The significant thing about the allusions to Homer is that they are scattered through Thoreau's writings as though he kept the great Greek poet always in mind, or had so thoroughly imbibed his thought that he could not become separated from it.

Homer. Three thousand years and the world so little changed. The Iliad seems like a natural sound which has reverberated to our days. Whatever in it is still freshest in the memories of man was most childlike in the poet. It is the problem of old age, a second childhood exhibited in the life of the world.<sup>2.</sup>

Thoreau was so steeped in the language of the Iliad that he could not take a walk over Cape Cod without being reminded of his favorite. As he walked by the sea, he saw the sun setting and remembered, "And the bright light of the sun fell into the ocean."<sup>3.</sup> When he listened to the roaring of the breakers, Chryses came to his mind, and he quoted, "And the old man in bitter grief paced along the shore of the loud-roaring sea."<sup>4.</sup> Thoreau sat, "At the shore of the

1. A Week, p. 120

2. Spring, p.46

3. Iliad, Book I., Line 605

4. Ibid., Line 75

hoary sea looking over the wine-colored ocean." <sup>1.</sup> He said in explanation of his original Greek quotations that he....."put in a little Greek now and then, partly because it sounds so much like the ocean, though I doubt if Homer's Mediterranean Sea ever sounded so loud as this." <sup>2.</sup> Sometimes he used the characters of the Iliad to describe his fellow townsmen as he commented on the characters in the town meetings, "Then Agamemnon' darkly lowers on Calchas prophet of evil', such a fire-eyed Agamemnon as you may see at town meetings and elections, as well here as in Troy neighborhood." <sup>3.</sup> While he was taking a winter walk the snow began falling and he was reminded of Homer's description of a storm, which began, "The snowflakes fall thick and fast on a winter's day. The winds are lulled, and the snow falls incessantly, covering the tops of the mountains and the hills and plains where the lotus tree grows and the cultivated fields, and they are falling by the islets and shores of the foaming sea, but are silently dissolved by the waves." <sup>4.</sup>

What naturalist but Thoreau with his background of Homeric reading would have thought of describing the battle of the ants in Homeric terms, finding a warrior ant, who, perchance, ...."was some Achilles, who had nourished his wrath apart, and had now come to avenge or rescue his Patroclus." <sup>5.</sup>

Thoreau rejoiced when he found among his visitors...."a true

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1. Iliad, Line 350

2. Cape Cod, p. 77

3. Spring, p. 47

4. Iliad, Book XII, Line 279

5. Walden, p. 357

Homeric or Paphlagonian man.....he too, has heard of Homer." <sup>1.</sup>

Although the man had learned from a priest how to pronounce the Greek itself, evidently he could not translate it, for Thoreau said, "And now I must translate to him, while he holds the book, Achilles' re-  
proof to Patroclus for his sad countenance." <sup>2.</sup>

'Why are you in tears, Patroclus, like a young girl?  
Or have you heard the news from Phthia?  
They say that Menoetius lives, yet, son of Actor,  
And Peleus lives, son of Aecus, among the Myrmidons,  
Either of whom having died we should greatly grieve.' <sup>3.</sup>

Not only the Paphlagonian man but also Thoreau felt that "That's  
good." <sup>4.</sup>

Thoreau kept the Iliad on his table throughout the summer while he was raising beans at Walden, but he remarked that he looked at a page only now and then. He did not need to read the printed page when everything that came within his field of vision reminded him of his favorite story. While he hoed the weeds that were growing in his bean field he saw them not as weeds but as - - - "Those Trojans who had sun and rain and dews on their side. Many a lusty, crest-waving Hector, that towered a whole foot above his crowding comrades, fell before my weapon." <sup>5.</sup>

The Odyssey seemed to make less of an impression upon Thoreau than the Iliad. He often mentioned it in connection with the Iliad,

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1. Walden, p. 225

2. Ibid.

3. Iliad, Book XVI., Line 7.

4. Walden, p. 225

5. Ibid. p. 251

but he used only one figure from it, when he advised the reader not to turn aside from the important things of life for such a trivial thing as a dinner, but commanded him "with unrelaxed nerves, with morning vigor sail by it, looking another way, tied to the mast like Ulysses."<sup>1.</sup>

Thoreau, the lover of nature, resented anything that would seem to make an intrusion upon her; consequently he objected to the intrusion of the railroad into his Paradise. Again he chose his figure from the story of Troy, calling the railroad, "that devilish Iron Horse, whose ear-rending neigh is heard throughout the town, and who has muddied the Boiling Spring with his foot.....he it is that has browsed off all the woods on Walden shore; that Trojan horse, with a thousand men in his belly, introduced by mercenary Greeks."<sup>2.</sup> It seemed to Thoreau that anything so close to nature as the Iliad and the Odyssey belonged in the fields and the woods. He resented the fact that he must go to the alien city for the records of nature. He thought that, "Greece and Asia Minor should henceforth bear Iliads and Odysseys, as their trees, lichens."<sup>3.</sup>

Other Greek poets besides Homer, who influenced Thoreau were Anacreon, Pindar, Hesiod, Simonides and the Greek minor poets. Anacreon is the one whom he most frequently quoted, quoting and translating eleven of the short poems of Anacreon in A Week, two in the Natural History of Massachusetts from Excursions, and one in Spring. Thoreau's

1. Walden, p. 154

2. Walden, p. 301.

3. Winter, p. 319

admiration for Anacreon is mostly for the poet's universal characteristics. In speaking of Anacreon he said, "There is something strangely modern about him. He is very easily turned into English. Is it that our lyric poets have resounded only that lyre, which would sound only light subjects, and which Simonides tells us does not sleep in Hades? His odes are like gems of pure ivory. They possess an ethereal and evanescent beauty like summer evenings, which you must perceive with the flower of the mind, and show how slight a beauty could be expressed."<sup>1.</sup>

Thoreau quoted two more translated poems from Anacreon in Excursions. When he discussed entomology he was moved to translate Anacreon's Ode On The Cicada, commenting on the fact that there were ears in Greece long ago for natural phenomena. The beginning of spring reminded him of Anacreon's poem on The Return of Spring, of which he said, "Again does the old Teian poet sing as well for New England as for Greece."<sup>2.</sup> Thoreau found the common things of life in the old bard, "Even, the telegraph harp reminds me of Anacreon. That is the glory of Greece, that we are reminded of her only when in our best estate, our elysian days, when our senses are young and healthy again. I would find a name for every strain or intonation of the harp from one or the other of the Grecian bards."<sup>3.</sup>

The allusions to Pindar are short with the exception of a passage in A Week, in which Thoreau in describing an island that the two brothers passed, was reminded of Pindar's story of the origin of Thera.

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1. A Week, pp. 296-297

2. Excursions, p. 135

3. Spring, p. 1.

In a letter to his mother, dated August 6, 1843, Thoreau spoke of making some Greek translations. The next day he wrote to Emerson about these same translations of which he said, "I have made a very rude translation of the Seven Against Thebes, and Pindar, too, I have looked at and wish he were better worth translating. I believe even the best things are not equal to their fame. Perhaps it would be better to translate fame itself, or is not that what the poets themselves do? However I have not done with Pindar yet."<sup>1.</sup> Evidently Thoreau found something in Pindar worth translating, since twenty-nine selections from Pindar are among his translations from the Greek.

Thoreau included Hesiod in his catalogue of the great Greek poets, but he quoted only once from the poet's most important work, Works and Days.<sup>2.</sup> Probably he was not much influenced by his reading of either Hesiod or Simonides, whom he also quoted only once, and that in connection with a discussion of Anacreon.<sup>3.</sup> He mentioned an old volume from a London bookshop which had come into his possession, and which contained the Greek minor poets. Of these he named Orpheus,<sup>4.</sup> Linus, Minnermus, Ibycus, Alcaeus, Stesichorus and Menander.

When he came to the Greek dramatists Thoreau again made known his preference, which was decidedly for Aeschylus. He quoted from Sophocles only twice, but one of the quotations was quite a lengthy one from the play of Antigone, in which the two sisters discussed the decree of the king concerning the leaving of their brother's dead body

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1. Familiar Letters, p. 121

2. A Week, p. 79

3. Ibid, p. 295

4. A Week, p. 295

without burial. This quotation was used by Thoreau in a discussion on the power of conscience to determine whether or not man's laws are right.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps, Thoreau, who had dared to defy the law himself as a matter of conscience, found support and comfort in reading of the noble rebellion of Antigone. He made only one allusion to Euripides and that was from Orestes.

Thoreau was as outspoken and frank in praise of Aeschylus as he was in praise of Homer. Again he revealed the fact that the poet appealed to him from the standpoint of his universality and humanity. He noted in his journal, "Aeschylus. There was one man who lived his own healthy Attic life in those days. His words that have come down to us give evidence that their speaker was a seer in his day and generation.....The reader will be disappointed, however, who looks for traits of a rare wisdom or eloquence, and will have to console himself for the most part with the poet's humanity, and what it was in him to say. He will discover that, like every genius, he was a solitary liver and worker in his day."<sup>2</sup> Shortly after writing this comment Thoreau expressed his admiration for Aeschylus in more specific terms than before:

Aeschylus had a clear eye for the commonest things. His genius was only an enlarged common sense. He adverts with chaste severity to all natural facts. His sublimity is Greek sincerity and simpleness, naked wonder at what mythology had not helped to explain...Whatever the common eye sees at all and expresses as best it may, he sees uncommonly and expresses with rare completeness.<sup>3</sup>

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1. A Week, 173-174
  2. Autumn, p 216
  3. Winter, p. 279

Thoreau translated both The Seven Against Thebes and Prometheus Unbound from the Greek of Aeschylus, but it was the latter that he referred to frequently and admired most ardently. In his trip through the Maine woods he was reminded of Prometheus Unbound. Here was "travelling of the old heroic kind over the unaltered face of nature."<sup>1</sup> Climbing Mount Kataadn, Thoreau again remembered his Aeschylus, When he caught sight of the dark crag through the driving mist he was reminded, "of the creations of the old epic and dramatic poets, of Atlas, Vulcan, the Cyclops and Prometheus. Such was Caucasus and the rock where Prometheus was bound. Aeschylus, no doubt, had visited such scenery as this."<sup>2</sup>

Thoreau's preference in drama was for the writers of tragedy. He made allusion to only one writer of comedy---Aristophanes. When he heard the croaking of the frogs in the spring, he was reminded of Aristophanes' play. In speaking of the frogs he said, "Their note is somewhat in harmony with the rustling of the now drier leaves. It is more like the note of the classical frog as described by Aristophanes."<sup>3</sup>

Thoreau was interested in philosophy as well as in other types of Greek literature. In his allusions to the Greek philosophers he mentioned Plato most often. In his fourteen allusions Thoreau did not discuss the philosophy of Plato but usually merely mentioned him as a great philosopher. He did not express any great admiration for plato

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1. The Maine Woods, p. 22

2. Ibid. p. 85

3. Spring, p. 145.

and quoted from him only once directly. There is a passage in one of his letters to Emerson that may be a hint that he did not greatly admire Plato; he may even have been hostile to him. In the letter to Emerson, Thoreau was discussing the article on Emerson in a recent number of Blackwood's Magazine. He spoke of the writer as "far enough off, in every sense to speak with a certain authority. It is better judgment than the public had. It is singular how sure he is to be mystified by any uncommon sense. But it was generous to put Plato into the list of mystics."<sup>1</sup> Thoreau may or may not have intended his comment in another letter to be derogatory to Plato when he asked about Emerson's little daughter, "Can you tell to which school of philosophy she belongs—whether she will be a fair saint of some Christian order or a follower of Plato and the heathen?"<sup>2</sup> Channing says, "I never knew him to say a good word for Plato,"<sup>3</sup> yet Thoreau mentioned Plato more often than any other philosopher. He alluded to Aristotle seven times and quoted from him twice; to Pythagoras five times and quoted him once. Socrates is mentioned four times; Democritus, Leucippus and Jamblichus each twice; Hippocrates, Epicurus and Zeno each once.

While there is no evidence that Thoreau accepted any particular school of Greek philosophy as his own, probably he was influenced more or less by the individual Greek philosophers. He had something of the stoic in his attitude toward meeting life courageously and unemotionally.

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1. Familiar Letters, p. 180

2. Ibid., p. 135

3. Channing, W. E., Thoreau, Poet-Naturalist, p. 58

After mentioning a list of philosophers, among whom he included the great Greeks, Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras, he said, "It is the attitude of these men, more than any communication which they make, that attracts us. Between these and their commentators, it is true, there is endless dispute. But if it comes to this that you compare notes, then you are all wrong. As it is, each takes us up into the serene heavens, whither the smallest bubble rises as surely as the largest, and paints earth and sky for us."<sup>1</sup> The philosophers charmed Thoreau; he enjoyed the beauty of their thought and language. He thought of Pythagoras when he sailed up the river. "So we sailed this afternoon, thinking of the saying of Pythagoras, though we had no particular right to remember it,-----

'It is beautiful when prosperity is present with intellect, and when sailing as it were with a prosperous wind, actions are performed looking to virtuae; just as a pilot looks to the motions of the stars.'"<sup>2</sup> The beauty of the isolated passages in the work of the philosophers appealed to Thoreau but he did not accept any formal philosophy. He may have lived the stoicism of the Stoics and the platonism of the Platonists but he never formally accepted either as a settled philosophy of life.

"When is Grecian History?" asked Thoreau. "Is it when in the morning I recall the intimations of the night?"<sup>3</sup> There is plenty of evidence in Thoreau's work that he had read Grecian history. He alluded to such characters as Alexander and Mithridates several times; to battles such as Salamis and Thermopylae; and to various things of

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1. Summer, p. 222

2. A Week, p. 418

3. Summer, 341

interest such as the Parthenon, the Acropolis and the Olympian games, about which he could have had no intimate knowledge unless he had studied Greek history. He gave a discussion of the value of history in one of his journals.

The value of many traits in Grecian history depends, not so much on their importance as history, as on the readiness with which they accept a wide interpretation, and illustrate the poetry and ethics of mankind. When they announce no particular truth, they are yet central to all truth.....Even the isolated and unexplained facts are like the ruins of the temples which in imagination we restore, and ascribe to some Phidias or other master."<sup>1</sup>

In Thoreau's autograph copy of his reading list are Xenophon's Anabasis, Cycropedia and Hellenica; Herodotus' History and Thucydides' History. He left no trace of how much of this reading he accomplished except a few references to Herodotus. He made two allusions to Xenophon,—one to the Anabasis, and the other to the reading of one of Xenophon's books by Zeno, the Stoic. He did not mention Thucydides.

Thoreau read Herodotus until he was fairly familiar with his work, for he quoted off-hand in his journals certain information from Herodotus concerning the customs of the Greeks and other ancient peoples. For example, when he was discussing the fish that were caught and prepared for market on Cape Cod, he mentioned the fact that, "Herodotus says the inhabitants on Lake Prasias (living on piles) give fish for fodder to their horses and beasts of burden."<sup>2</sup> Again he mentioned that Herodotus speaks of apples. When he thought of the willow he was reminded that, "Herodotus says that the Scythians divided by the help of willow rods, I do not know any better twig for this purpose."<sup>3</sup>

1. Summer, 354

2. Cape Cod, p. 260

3. Spring, p. 275

Thoreau appreciated the genuine history which he found in Herodotus. He said, "You can't read any genuine history, as that of Herodotus or the Venerable Bede, without perceiving that our interest depends not on the subject, but on the man or the manner in which he treats the subject, and the importance he gives it."<sup>1</sup> He spoke of his neighbor, Minott, who "tells his stories with fidelity and gusto to the minutest detail, as Herodotus does in his histories."<sup>2</sup> Herodotus seems to have been his favorite historian, among the ancients; here again is evidence that Thoreau cared mostly for the manner in which a piece of literature was written. The story element in Herodotus appealed to him.

Other Greek writers mentioned by Thoreau are: Plutarch, four times; Aesop, twice, and Theophrastus twice; Strabo, once. He praised Plutarch when he was discussing the manner of expressing oneself. "How will you ever rivet them [your thoughts] together without leaving marks of the file? Yet Plutarch did not so."<sup>3</sup> He had read something of the laws of the great Athenian lawgivers, Lycurgus and Solon. He referred to Solon six times and once to Lycurgus. One wonders how he happened to read such rarely read writers as Aelian or Nearchus, the admiral of Alexander, who kept a journal.

Thoreau's Greek allusions included a large number of references to mythology, for which he had a great fondness. These allusions show that he had read both extensively and intensively in Greek mythology. Of one hundred and ninety-five allusions, seventy-six are to different

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1. Spring, p. 175

2. Autumn, p. 55

3. Winter, p. 265

myths or mythological characters. Mythology struck a responsive chord in Thoreau's nature because he found in it, more than in any other type of literature, a response to that unspeakable yearning for which he could not find any satisfaction. He expressed his views on the value of mythology, and especially Greek mythology, in his essay on Walking. He did not know, "where to find in any literature, ancient or modern, any account which contents me of that nature with which I am acquainted. You will perceive that I demand something which no Augustan nor Elizabethan age, which no culture in short can give. Mythology comes nearer to it than anything. How much more fertile a nature at least had Grecian mythology its root in than English literature? Mythology is the crop which the old world bore before its soil was exhausted, before the fancy and the imagination were affected with blight; and which it still bears, wherever its pristine vigor is unabated. All other literatures endure only as the elms which overshadow our houses; but this is like the great dragon-tree of the Western Isles, as old as mankind, and whether that does or not, will endure as long; for the decay of other literatures makes the soil in which it thrives."<sup>1</sup>

Thoreau had his favorite myths, as well as his favorite poets, story tellers and philosophers. He referred to the myth of Apollo serving the King Admetus, nine times. It is interesting to note that four of these allusions were in his personal letters to friends. Thoreau was rather impatient of any labor that held him from his favorite occupation of study and meditation. He used the myth of Admetus and Apollo at times to express his feeling that the best part of his nature was

1. Excursions, p. 285

serving the lesser. "We are all of us Apollos serving some Admetus"<sup>1</sup>, he said in a letter to a friend. In another letter to the same friend he made use of the same figure, saying, "I who am going to be a pencil maker tomorrow, can sympathize with God Apollo, who served King Admetus for a while on earth."<sup>2</sup> The necessity of helping his family gave him what he considered some very irksome affairs to attend to of which he said, impatiently, "This is the way I am serving King Admetus, confound him."<sup>3</sup> When he was obliged to work on a pleasant spring day he kept thinking, "What an elysian day it is and how I always seem to be keeping the flocks of Admetus."<sup>4</sup>

Hesperia and Hesperides were terms used by Thoreau as frequently as the flocks of Admetus. This myth is alluded to nine times also. Most of the allusions to the Hesperides also mention the Atlantis, to which Thoreau alluded six times. For example he said, "The island of Atlantis and the islands and gardens of Hesperides, a sort of terrestrial paradise appear to have been the Great West of the ancients, enveloped in mystery and poetry. Who has not seen in imagination, when looking into the sunset sky, the gardens of the Hesperides, and of the foundation of all those fables?"<sup>5</sup> To Thoreau "The end of the day is truly Hesperian."

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1. Familiar Letters, p. 51

2. Ibid., p. 44

3. Ibid., p. 410

4. Ibid., p. 322

5. Excursions, p. 269

6. Winter, p. 157

The myth of Hesperia gave to him the fitting language to express the dreamy, intangible quality of the mystical land of day dream and fancy.

Next, in point of importance, as far as Thoreau's allusions are concerned are the two myths of the Golden Fleece and Titan. Thoreau mentioned each one of these myths eight times. Whenever he had occasion to speak of expeditions or narrow passages, he used the figure of the Argonautic expedition. When he was rowing on the Chesuncook he saw a "very primitive kind of harbor, where boats were drawn up,—such a one, methought, as the Argo might have been launched in."<sup>1</sup> In a difficult passage, "only a practiced eye could distinguish a safe course, or tell what deep water and what rocks, frequently gazing the latter on one or both sides, with a hundred as narrow escapes as ever the Argo had in passing the Symplades."<sup>2</sup> When his disgust with his native commonwealth found expression it was in the comparison of Massachusetts with some of the ancient dragons. He felt, "as for Massachusetts, that huge Briareus, Argus and Colchian dragon conjoined, set to watch the Heifer of the Constitution and the Golden Fleece, we would not warrant our respect for her, like some compositions to preserve its qualities through all weathers."<sup>3</sup>

Thoreau had the habit of taking one myth to express the same quality over and over again. To describe the greatness of strength or force he used the myth of the Titans. Discussing a tree struck by lightning he said, "There was displayed a Titanic force, some of that force which made and can unmake the world."<sup>4</sup> Speaking of the effect

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1. The Maine Woods, p. 167

2. Ibid., p. 41

3. A Week. p. 168

of vast scenery on the beholder, Thoreau pictured it thus, "Vast Titanic inhuman Nature has got him at a disadvantage."<sup>1</sup> When he discussed Carlyle he used his Titan figure once more, "Carlyle's humor is vigorous and Titanic."<sup>2</sup>

As a lover of music, Thoreau could not fail to care for the myth of Orpheus. He alluded to it six times, sometimes with reference to music and sometimes with another significance. Speaking of the echo of the village bell, he remarked that, "It is no feeble imitation, but rather its original, or as if some rural Orpheus played over the strain again to show how it should sound."<sup>3</sup> The music of the telegraph harp intoxicated him. He knew that, "Orpheus is still alive. All poetry and mythology revive. The spirits of all bards sweep the strings."<sup>4</sup> When Thoreau made excuse for resisting some of the laws of Massachusetts which he felt were wrong, he explained his distinction between resisting the human force and the brute force by use of his simile of Orpheus. "And above all there is this difference between resisting this, a purely brute or natural force, that I can resist this with some effect; but I cannot expect, like Orpheus, to change the nature of the rocks and trees and beasts."<sup>5</sup>

Olympus, Olympia and Olympian are the words which Thoreau took from the myth of the home of the Grecian gods, to which he made six allusions.

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1. The Maine Woods, p. 85

2. Miscellanies, p. 102

3. A Week, p. 62

4. Summer, p. 232

5. Miscellanies, p. 164.

Antaeus and Endymion share equally in the favor of Thoreau, each being mentioned five times. The Antaeus myth gave Thoreau an epithet to express his love of his mother earth and his belief in her efficacy to impart strength. Hand labor, viewed in the light of Greek mythology, became something more than drudgery. He amused himself by finding similes to describe his labor as he hoed. He said, "I came to love my rows, my beans, though so many more than I wanted. They attached me to the earth, and so I got strength like Antaeus."<sup>1</sup> In the spring, when Thoreau went arrow hunting he felt that, "So I help myself to live worthily, loving my life as I should. It is good collyrium to look on the bare earth, to pore over it so much, getting strength to all your senses like Antaeus."<sup>2</sup> Once the Antaeus figure was used rather humorously when Thoreau was exhorting himself to write. He urged, "Write often, write upon a thousand themes, rather than long at a time, not trying to turn too many feeble sunsets in the air and so come down upon your head at last. Antaeus-like be not long absent from the ground."<sup>3</sup>

The myths just discussed are those most frequently used by Thoreau. Other mythological references are as follows: Muses, five allusions; Atlas, Phaeton, Lethe, Aeolus, Parnassus and Apollo, four allusion each; Nemesis, Charon, the Graces, and Pan, three each; Nereids, Naiades, Pelion and Ossa, Pluto, Oreads, Dryads, Hyperborean, Tritons, Pegasus, Cerberus, Castalian Spring, Fates, Hygeia, and Lucifer, two each; The Furies, Stygian, Cimmerian, Pandora, Tyrtaeus, Medusa, Scylla and Charybdis, Satyrꝯ, Eumenides, Sirens,

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1. Walden, p. 241

2. Spring, p. 257

3. Autumn, p. 254

Euterpean, Pierian, Cassiopeia, Cynthia, Cenobites, Atrapos, Actaeon, Pleiades, Philyra, Hippocrene, Gorgon, Bacchus, Cyclops, Sisyphean, Narcissus, Deucalian and Pyrrha, Minotaur, Cocytus, Myrmidons, Hebe, Acheron, Argus and Phoebus, one each.

Thoreau's appreciation of the true value of the fabulous and the mythological is summed up in his discussion of the fable. This passage explains his free use of the mythological in much of his writing:

The fable, which is naturally and truly composed, so as to satisfy the imagination, ere it addresses the understanding, beautiful though strange as a wild flower, is to the wise man an apothegm, and admits of his most generous interpretation. When we read that Bacchus made the Tyrhennian mariners mad, so that they leaped into the sea, mistaking it for a meadow full of flowers, and so became dolphins, we are not concerned about the historical truth of this, but rather a higher poetical truth. We seem to hear the music of a thought, and care not if the understanding be not gratified. For their beauty we consider the fables of Narcissus, of Endymion, of Memnon, son of the Morning, the representative of all youths who have died a premature death, and whose memory is melodiously prolonged to the latest morning.<sup>1</sup>

What did the Greeks give to Thoreau? First of all, as has been shown, they gave him a store of classical allusions, which he used to make forceful figures. He had a wealth of figurative material in his mind which was stored with the best of the Greek myths. When he wished to express his contempt for intentional and officious philanthropy, he enforced his discussion by using the story of Phaeton's burning the houses in the lower streets of heaven by his mistaken zeal in driving his father's chariot out of the beaten track. The Phaeton myth is only one of several which he used in this manner to illustrate his point.

Greece enhanced Thoreau's power to read poetical truth and beauty into common things. Commenting on the telegraph harp, he said, "When I hear the telegraph harp, I think I must read the Greek poets. This sound is like a

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1. A Week, p. 72

brighter color, red or blue or green, where all was dull white or black. It prophesies finer senses, a finer life, a golden age. It is the poetry of the railroad."<sup>1</sup> Even the mosquito that hummed through his hut at dawn reminded him of the heroic ages, because, "It was Homer's requiem; itself an Iliad and an Odyssey in the air, singing its own wrath and wanderings."<sup>2</sup> The young duck reminded him of one of his favorite myths. "A perfect Antaeus is a young duck in this respect, deriving a steady stream of health and strength from the earth, for he rarely gets off it, ready either for land or water."<sup>3</sup>

The influence of Grecian literature on Thoreau's vocabulary is very noticeable. Some of his favorite adjectives were those derived from the Greek. He seems to have had favorite words as well as favorite stories, one of these favorites being elysian, which he used sixteen times. Occasionally he used the original form, Elysium, but he seemed to consider the two interchangeable in meaning, both being derived from the mythical name of the abode of the dead. Other words of Grecian origin used by Thoreau are: Achillean, aeolian, Olympian, Lethean, Promethean, Tyrtean, Cimmerian, Stygian, triton, Hyperborean, Titanic, Pandean, Parnassian, Mithridatic, Hesperian and Platonist.

The influence of Greek thought upon Thoreau's philosophy of life is rather hard to trace. His admiration for the Greeks seems to have been appreciation of their language, the beauty of their style and imagery, and their choice of subject matter from the common and universal things of life. He did not express any admiration or approval, at least openly, for any school of Greek philosophy. His constant reading of the Greek masterpieces, however, could not fail to influence him in thought, as well as in language. The Greeks' courage in trying circumstances, their loyalty to friends and ideals, their

1. Spring, p. 94

2. Walden, p. 140

3. Summer, p. 338.

love of beauty and strength—all inspired and confirmed Thoreau in his program of "plain living and high thinking." From the great Greek story tellers he learned the beauty of the fundamental relationships of life,—man's relation to his country, his family and his gods.

## Chapter II

### Roman Influence On Thoreau

Roman literature is second in importance to Greek in its influence upon Thoreau. The investigator finds only one hundred and eighteen allusions to Roman literature and forty-six quotations from Roman writers as compared with three hundred and eighty-seven Greek allusions and fifty-three quotations from Greek writers. Moreover, Thoreau did not praise the Roman writers as out-spokenly as he did the Greeks. He included Virgil in his discussion of the great classics in the chapter on Reading in Walden, but he did not choose any particular work of Virgil to discuss at length as he did Homer's Iliad. Neither did he praise particular types of Roman literature, as he did Greek epic, history, poetry and drama.

A student of Thoreau finds a number of evidences that he was a Latin scholar. He quoted from fifteen different Latin writers, sometimes in the original and sometimes in translation. Sanborn, one of his biographers, tells of Thoreau's Latin scholarship that, "When I first knew him, at seven-and-thirty, he read Latin and French as readily as English".<sup>1</sup> There were copies of the Latin masters in Thoreau's library according to the catalogue which he left. It is not likely that any one except a Latin scholar would acquire a Latin library.

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1. Sanborn, F. B. Life of Thoreau, p. 260.

Thoreau's preferences as to types in Latin literature are rather peculiar. He preferred the great stories of the Greeks, but eclogues and treatises on farming seem to have been his favorites in Roman literature, so far as one can judge from his reading. Most of his quotations from Roman literature are descriptions of places or comments upon something in nature.

Virgil was Thoreau's favorite among Roman writers, and the only one whom he praised in any way. Even his praise of the greatest Roman poet is qualified somewhat by being included at times in his praise of the Greeks -- Homer and Aeschylus. Fourteen of the forty-six Roman quotations are from Virgil.

The Aeneid was not Thoreau's favorite among Virgil's works. Only four of the fourteen quotations are from the Aeneid, the remaining ten being from the Eclogues and the Georgics. Of six allusions to Virgil, only one concerns the Aeneid and does not suggest any particular admiration on Thoreau's part for the story of ancient Rome. He only noted that, "Piety derives its origin still from that exploit of pius Aeneas,<sup>1</sup> who bore his father, Anchises, on his shoulders from the ruins of Troy".

Knowing Thoreau's love for a good story, which he showed by his praise of the Iliad, the reader wonders why he failed to be impressed by the great stories of the Aeneid; why he did not enjoy the battles and combats that remind one of Achilles and Hector for whom Thoreau had so great an admiration, but the only story that seems to have impressed him is that of Aeneas and Anchises. The quotation from the Aeneid which he seemed to admire particularly is a descriptive passage which he quoted twice. "Here

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1. A Week, p. 169.

a more copious air invests the fields, and clothes with purple light;  
and they know their own sun and their own stars."<sup>1</sup>

Thoreau read the Aeneid on his walk to Wachusett, which he described in Excursions. In this paper he gave his reason for reading Virgil. "We could get no further into the Aeneid than, --- 'atque altae moenia Romae' --- [and the wall of high Rome] before we were constrained to reflect by what myriad tests a work of genius has to be tried; that Virgil away in Rome, two thousand years off, should have to unfold his meaning, the inspiration of Italian vales to the pilgrims on New England hills. This life so raw and modern, that so civil and ancient; and yet we read Virgil mainly to be reminded of the identity of human nature in all ages, and by the poet's account, we are both children of a late age and live equally under the reign of Jupiter!"<sup>2</sup> The one other quotation from the Aeneid was made during Thoreau's college days in one of his college essays, The Qualities of The Recruit. It is "Spe sibi quisque!"<sup>3</sup> [Each one his own hope]

It is interesting to note that the pastoral poems, the Eclogues and the Georgics of Virgil, were more pleasing to Thoreau than the great epic masterpiece. Of the remaining five allusions to Virgil, three concern his work in general, and two the Eclogues and the Georgics. Perhaps Thoreau was most interested in the pastoral because he was living a pastoral life himself, when he made the only allusion to Virgil in Walden a mention of the great poet's advice about swarming bees. Hearing distant sounds he said, "It seems by the sound as if someone's bees had swarmed, and that the neighbors, according to Virgil's advice, by a faint tintinabulum

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1. Aeneid, Book VI. Line 640.

2. Excursions, p. 169.

3. Aeneid, Book XI. Line 309.

upon the most sonorous of their domestic utensils were endeavoring to call them down into the hive again."<sup>1</sup>

Thoreau had a habit of carrying some book with him on his walking trips. In A Walk to Wachusett he remarked, "We read Virgil and Wordsworth in our tent with new pleasure there."<sup>2</sup> Although he had stated, shortly before this that he had been reading the Aeneid, he quoted from his favorite, Virgil's Eclogues, when he looked upon the valley below him.

And now the tops of the villas smoke afar off           3  
And the shadows fall longer from the high mountains

He felt that Virgil had done a great thing in making husbandry famous, because, "Our Golden Age must after all be a pastoral one; we would be simple men in ignorance, and not accomplished in wisdom. We want great peasants more than great heroes. The sun would shine along the highway to some purpose if we would unlearn our wisdom and practice illiterate truth henceforth. Let us grow to the full stature of our humbleness ere we aspire to be greater. It is great praise in the poet (Virgil) to have made husbandry famous."<sup>4</sup> After this comment Thoreau made three quotations from the Georgics. The third one concerns the end of the Golden Age and the beginning of the reign of Jupiter:

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1. Walden, p. 249.
  2. Excursions, p. 176.
  3. Virgil, Eclogues, I. Lines 82-83.
  4. Winter, p. 61.

He shook the honey from the leaves, and removed fire,  
 And stayed the wine everywhere flowing in rivers,  
 That experience, by meditating might invent various arts  
 By degrees, and seek the blade of corn in furrows,  
 And strike out hidden fires from the veins of the flint.<sup>1</sup>

Next to Virgil, Ovid was the poet from whom Thoreau quoted most. The quotations were taken from Ovid's Metamorphoses. Again Thoreau showed that his interest in the old Latin writers was in their allusions to nature or to the pastoral life. Spring reminded him of Ovid

Eurus ad Auroram, Nabathaque regna recessit  
 Perisdaque et radiis juga subdita matutinis.<sup>2</sup>

(The East-Wind withdrew to Aurora and the Nabathæan kingdom  
 And the Persian, and the ridges placed under the morning rays.)

In another passage in his chapter on Spring in Walden he quoted Ovid's lines on eternal spring.

There was eternal spring, and placid zephyrs with warm  
 Blasts, soothed the flours born without seed.<sup>3</sup>

Sanborn says that by the beginning of Thoreau's junior year in college that, "he had read much of the witty wisdom of Horace". In Thoreau's essay, written at this time on the subject of The Literary Life he quoted Horace as saying, "Scriptorum chorus omnis amat nemus, et fugit urbes".<sup>4</sup> (The whole band of poets loves the groves and shuns the cities. In this choice of quotation Thoreau again showed his interest in the pastoral element in the Latin poets. He commented upon Horace thus, "Horace's passion for retirement and fondness for the country are well known; leaving the bustling streets of Rome, he was wont to amuse himself at his retired villa in

1. Virgil, Georgics I. Line 131 ff.

2. Ovid, Metamorphoses, I. Line 61.

3. Ibid. Line 89.

4. Horace, Epistles, II., 77.

the Sabine territory, by commenting upon the manners and characters of the age."<sup>1</sup>

In discussing the works of a minor writer, Persius, Thoreau commented upon the contrast between this writer's style and the elegance and vivacity of Horace. In the same passage in discussing satire he said of Horace,

Horace would not have written satire so well if he had not been inspired by it, and by a passion, and fondly cherished his vein. In his odes the love always exceeds the hate, so that the severest satire still sings itself, and the poet is satisfied, though the folly be not corrected."<sup>2</sup>

It is singular that a minor writer like Persius should have claimed more attention from Thoreau than the great writers, Ovid and Horace. Thoreau gave four pages and a half to a criticism of this poet. To be sure he did not approve of Persius, but it seems unnecessary to mention so minor a writer at all, Thoreau told his readers that a hard, dry book in a dead language is best to carry on a journey. Such a book, which he had found it impossible to read at home is the work of Persius. He commented at length upon it.

Here is none of the interior dignity of Virgil, nor the elegance and vivacity of Horace, nor will any sibyl be needed to remind you, that from those older Greek poets there is a sad descent to Persius. You can scarcely distinguish one harmonious sound amid this unmusical bickering with the follies of men.

The great satirist, Juvenal, did not particularly attract the attention of Thoreau. He mentioned Juvenal once in connection with other poets, and once in a personal discussion of him. He decided that, "A Juvenal or Persius do not marry music to their verse,"

1. Sanborn, F. B. Life of Thoreau, p. 85
2. A Week, p. 407
3. Ibid. p. 405



making bread and buying a farm. In his journal he explained that apparently he read "Cato and Varro from the same motives that Virgil did, and as I read the almanac, the N. E. Farmer, or Cultivator or Howitt's Seasons"<sup>1</sup>

Thoreau made allusion to Varro four times and quoted him six times. Most of these quotations and allusions are from the section of Thoreau's journal called Spring. To Thoreau there was a poetic charm in the old Roman beliefs and customs concerning agriculture. He felt that "We have not much that is poetic in the accompaniments of the farmer's life. Varro speaks of the swine-herd as accustoming the swine or boars to come at the sound of a horn when he fed them with acorns."<sup>2</sup> The quotations from Varro all concern farming in some way. Thoreau quoted the old Roman writer on the location of bee-hives, the origin of the name of the grain and the old Roman's attitude toward farming. In his trip up the Concord and Merrimac rivers he saw a farm which reminded him of Varro's description of an old Roman farm:

Caesar Vopiscus Aedilicinus, when he pleaded before the sensors, said that the grounds of the Rosea were the gardens (sumen, the tidbit) of Italy, in which a pole being left would not be visible the next day, on account of the growth of herbage.<sup>3</sup>

The quotations from Cato are of the same type as those from Varro. All mention some phase of farm life from the bedding of the

1. Winter, p. 370

2. Ibid., p. 336

3. Varro, Rerum Rusticarum Libri Tres, Book 1., Chap. 7

cattle to the storing of the cellar with wine and oil. Thoreau, with his Yankee thrift appreciated Cato's admonition that, "The father of a family should be a seller and not a buyer."<sup>1</sup> He quoted Cato on bread making and on the treatment of sick oxen; he noted that Cato had certain methods for caring for a sacred grove, and charms to cure diseases. The Massachusetts farmer depended upon The Boston Cultivator, an agricultural journal founded in 1838, for his information concerning farming matters, but Thoreau said, that old Cato's De Re Rustica was his Cultivator.

Two other Roman writers on rural life quoted by Thoreau are Columella and Palladius, obscure, but interesting to Thoreau on account of their subject matter. He was pleased to find Columella giving, "the names of about fifty authors, who had treated de rusticis rebus before him."<sup>2</sup> When Thoreau had talked with his neighbor Hosmer, a pessimistic person, who asked what life is for, he found comfort in the writing of Columella who described the spring. He said, "But I have just come from reading Collumella, who describes the same kind of spring look in that, to him, new spring of the world with hope, and I suggest to be brave and hopeful with nature."<sup>3</sup>

Thoreau made five allusions to Pliny and quoted three times from his works. These quotations and allusions refer mostly to observations made by Pliny in his Letters. True to his interest in the nature element of the Latin writers, Thoreau referred to Pliny's opinion on poplar wood and apples. He quoted Pliny as an authority

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1. Cato, De Re Rustica

2. Winter, p. 397

3. Spring, p. 312

on the use of fish for fodder by certain ancient peoples. He became interested in this subject while he was on his trip to Cape Cod and was reminded of his reading of Pliny.

Other prose writers quoted by Thoreau are: Cicero, twice, and Nepos, twice. Neither author was quoted by Thoreau after his college days; all of his quotations from them were in his college essays.

Thoreau made a long quotation from Tacitus' Agricola in his address after the death of John Brown. This address is included in the volume of Thoreau's works collected as Miscellanies. The quotation, which Thoreau translated himself, lamented the death of Agricola, and seemed to Thoreau particularly applicable to the death of the martyr of Harper's Ferry.

Sixty-two of the one hundred and eighteen allusions to Roman literature are to Roman myths. In this number there are allusions to twenty different myths or mythological characters. A comparison of these figures with statistics on Greek mythology shows that Thoreau drew almost twice as many of his mythological allusions from the Greeks as he did from the Romans. The allusions to Greek myths numbered one hundred and ninety-five with reference to seventy-six different myths or mythological characters.

Thoreau had his favorite Roman myths as he had Greek. The myth which he used most frequently was that of Hercules, to which he alluded seven times. It is noticeable that Thoreau's allusions to Greek or Roman myths were always made definitely to either the one or the other; he did not use both the Greek and Roman names for a mythological character. For example, he always spoke of Hercules, never of the Greek, Heracles; of Minerva, never of Pallas Athene;

of Ceres; never of Demeter. As he did in the Greek Thoreau used his Roman mythology to illustrate his point figuratively. From Hercules he took one of his favorite adjectives Herculean. In speaking of the pursuit of knowledge, he said, "The celestial fruits, the golden apples of Hesperides, are ever guarded by a hundred headed dragon which never sleeps, so that it is an Herculean labor to pluck them."<sup>1</sup> Thoreau pitied his neighbors who were tied to their farms. "How many a poor mortal soul have I met well-nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn, seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing and wood-lot."<sup>2</sup> Next to Hercules, Aurora, Minerva and Ceres were his favorites; he alluded to each six times. From the myth of Aurora he derived his adjective auroral, which he was fond of using in such expressions as "auroral hour". He liked to use this myth to suggest spiritual awakening as in this sentence, "He certainly must be a son of Aurora to whom the sun looms, when there are so many millions to whom it glooms rather, or who never use it till an hour after it has risen."<sup>3</sup>

Thoreau had the habit of using a certain expression over and over again. This is especially true in his use of figures which he liked. Two passages alluding to Ceres are almost exactly alike. One is in the section of the journal, called Winter and refers to the alders of which Thoreau said, "They are my little vegetable redeemers..."

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1. Excursions, p. 377

2. Walden, p. 11

3. Cape Cod, p. 208

They are worthy to have had a greater than Neptune or Ceres for their inventor."<sup>2</sup> The second passage is in the Natural History of Massachusetts, which is included in the collection, Excursions. The thought is unchanged although some of the words are different. "They are our little vegetable redeemers.....they are worthy to have had a greater than Minerva or Ceres for their inventor."<sup>2</sup> Another example of the same repetition is found in a comparison of a passage in A Week, with a passage in Summer for July 8, 1840. In this case the myth of Minerva is used.

In most men's religion the ligature which should be its umbilical cord connecting them with divinity, is rather like that thread which the accomplices of Cylon held in their hands when they went abroad from the temple of Minerva, the other end being attached to the statue of the goddess."<sup>3</sup>

In the second passage there are only a few minor differences in words.

In most men's religion the ligature which should be the umbilical cord connecting them with the source of life is rather like that thread which the accomplices of Cylon held in their hands when they went abroad from the temple of Minerva, the other end being attached to the statue of the goddess."<sup>4</sup>

This similarity suggests that Thoreau must have been in the habit of taking material from his journals for his books, or that he was so familiar <sup>with</sup> certain myths that he repeated himself without noticing the repetition.

Thoreau used Roman as well as Greek myth in describing common things. Speaking of the blacksmith's trade reminded him "how primitive and honorable a trade was Vulcan's."<sup>5</sup> He used the Vulcan myth five times.

1. Winter, p. 94

2. Excursions, p. 154

3. A Week, p. 99

4. Summer, p. 354

Other mythological allusions are: Jove or Jupiter, five; the Parcae, four; Saturn, Diana, Proserpine, and Neptune, each three; Proteus, two; Romulus and Remus, Juno, Sibyl, Venus, Mercury, Pomona, Terminus and Lar, each one.

The Roman influence on Thoreau is less extensive and less notable than that of the Greek. His quotations from the Roman are about equal to those from the Greek, but his allusions to Roman literature are only about a third as many as those from the Greek. His tendency to quote from the Latin was probably due to the fact that he read it as easily as English. Sanborn says that he read Greek without difficulty, but probably the Greek characters were more inconvenient to write than the Latin words. He expressed more admiration for the Greeks than for the Romans, although, according to his reading list, he must have read as widely from one literature as from the other.

The Roman mythology, as well as the Greek, gave Thoreau material for the figures which he loved to use in describing the common world about him. In this way he gave all common things a touch of poetry.

There appears no evidence of Roman influence on Thoreau's thought. Most of his reading in the Roman literature was not concerned with the deep or profound thoughts of the old Latin writers. He cared most for the pastoral poems and farm treatises. Although he admired and read the odes of Horace, his allusions to that poet show that his interest was particularly in Horace's life on the Sabine farm. It is singular that he made no allusion to any Roman dramatist, and mentioned the great Roman historian, Tacitus only once.

Julius Caesar and Livy also are noticeably missing from his allusions although he included them both in his reading list. Probably his pastoral life explains his interest in the pastoral poets and the writers of farm treatises.

### Chapter III

#### The Influence of Biblical Language and Thought

##### On Thoreau.

The one work of Oriental literature which influenced Thoreau most was the Bible. He did not refer to any other Hebrew work, although the works of Josephus were included in his reading list. Thoreau made seventy-five allusions to the Bible, and quoted from it directly nineteen times. Occasionally his allusions are really indirect quotations. Thirty-five of his allusions are to the New Testament, and thirty-five are to the Old Testament; five are general references. Twelve of the nineteen quotations are from the New Testament, and seven are from the Old Testament.

Thoreau, who was reared in a New England home, in the period when the ice of Puritanism was only beginning to break up, was trained to read his Bible. However, his opinions concerning it must have been startling at times even to the Transcendentalists themselves, who were breaking away from the outworn creeds. He lamented that it is a Hebrew Bible, and consequently, not always intelligible to the Occidental. "Surely it is a defect in our Bible that it is not truly ours, but a Hebrew Bible. The most pertinent illustrations for us are to be drawn not from Egypt or Babylonia, but from New England."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Thoreau believed that those who have no better source of truth should cling to the Bible.

"They who know of no purer sources of truth, who have traced up its stream no higher, stand, and wisely stand, by the Bible and the

1. Autumn, p. 116.

Constitution, and drink at it there with reverence and humility; but they who behold where it comes trickling into this lake or that pool, gird up their loins once more, and continue their pilgrimage toward its fountainhead. <sup>1</sup>

Thoreau's comments upon the Bible as a Scripture and a philosophy of life were concerned mostly with the New Testament. While he quoted from the Old Testament and used its stories to illustrate his points, he did not comment upon its value or its charm. On the other hand, he had some very pointed things to say of both the strength and the weakness of the New Testament. His comment upon his introduction to it suggests the Puritanical atmosphere in which his childhood was spent.

The New Testament is an invaluable book, though I confess to having been slightly prejudiced against it in early days by the church and the Sabbath school, so that it seemed, before I read it, to be the yellowest book in the catalogue. Yet I early escaped from their meshes. <sup>2</sup>

It was not the New Testament that Thoreau criticised so much as people's interpretation of it and their attitude toward other people's interpretation of it. He lamented the coolness and bigotry with which people appropriated the New Testament in a conversation, as if they alone had the key to the Scriptures. He had heard two persons conversing at a tea-table, both lovers of the New Testament, each in his own way, the one a lover of all kindred expression of truth also, and yet the other appropriated the book wholly to herself, and took it for granted with singular or rather lamentable blindness and obtuseness that the former neither knew nor cared anything about it. Horace Greeley found some fault with me to the world, because I presumed to speak of the New Testament, using my own words and thoughts, and challenged me to a controversy. The one thought I had was that it

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1. Miscellanies, p. 168.

2. A Week, p. 89

would give me real pleasure to know that he loved it as sincerely and as enlightenedly as I did. <sup>1</sup>

Thoreau found in the New Testament a guide for the legislator. He asked, "Where is the legislator who has wisdom and practical talent enough to avail himself of the light which it sheds on the science of legislation?"<sup>2</sup>

Although Thoreau praised the New Testament whole-heartedly, he felt that "the book has never been written which is to be accepted without any allowance."<sup>3</sup> He appreciated the practical side of the New Testament but he had some criticisms to make concerning its lack of beauty and poetry. He felt that "there is no harmless dreaming in it, but everywhere a substratum of good sense. It never reflects, but it repents. There is no poetry in it, we may say, nothing regarded in the light of pure beauty, but moral truth is its object. All mortals are convicted by its conscience".<sup>4</sup> Another criticism grew out of Thoreau's own reaction to the future life. He preferred a Bible that dealt more with the present life than one which treated of the future. The New Testament was too personal to please him entirely. He was not particularly concerned about the future.

Yet the New Testament treats of man and man's spiritual affairs too exclusively, and is too constantly moral and personal, to alone content me, who am not interested solely in man's religious or moral nature, or in man even. I have not the most definite designs on the future. Absolutely speaking, Do unto others as you would that they should do unto you, is by no means a golden rule, but the best

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1. Winter, p. 297.

2. Miscellanies, p. 169

3. A Week, p. 92.

4. Ibid., p. 177.

of current silver. An honest man would have but little occasion for it. It is golden not to have any rule at all in such a case.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of his criticism Thoreau still loved the Book.

"In fact," he said, "I love this book rarely, though it is a sort of castle in the air to me, which I am permitted to dream. Having come to it so recently and so freshly, it has the greater charm, so that I cannot find any to talk with about it."<sup>2</sup>

Thoreau lamented the fact that many people do not care to read the Bible. He felt that, "there is no hospitality shown to, there is no appreciation of, the order of truth with which it deals. I know of no book which has so few readers. There is none so truly strange, and heretical, and unpopular. To Christians, no less than Greeks and Jews, it is foolishness and a stumbling block."<sup>3</sup>

Over eighty years ago Thoreau suggested a collection of Scriptures such as modern scholars are suggesting now. These would include... "the collected Scriptures of Sacred Writings of the several nations, the Chinese, the Hindoos, the Persians, the Hebrews and others, as the Scripture of mankind. The New Testament is still, perhaps, too much on the lips, and in the hearts of men to be called a Scripture in this sense. Such a juxtaposition and comparison might help to liberalize the faith of men. This is a work which Time will surely edit, reserved to crown the labors of the printing press. This would be the

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1. A Week, p. 92

2. Ibid., p. 90

3. Ibid., p. 91

Bible, or Book of Books, which let the missionaries carry to the uttermost parts of the earth."<sup>1</sup>

To Thoreau the supreme story of the Bible is that of Christ. The New England interpretation of Christ did not please him; consequently he was usually considered unorthodox by his associates. To him it seemed unnatural that the great reformer of the world should be used as a text on which to preach conformity to outworn creeds. He felt that "it is necessary not to be Christian, to appreciate the beauty and significance of the life of Christ."<sup>2</sup> Because Thoreau was himself a radical, he could appreciate the fact that Christ was "the prince of Reformers and Radicals. Many expressions in the New Testament come naturally to the lips of all Protestants, and it furnishes the most pregnant and practical text."<sup>3</sup>

Although Thoreau believed that "Christ was a sublime actor on the stage of the world"<sup>4</sup> he criticised the founder of Christianity for his lack of practical leadership. He declared that Christ "taught mankind but imperfectly how to live; his thoughts were all directed toward another world. There is another kind of success than his. Even here we have a sort of living to get, and must buffet it somewhat longer. There are various tough problems yet to solve, and we must make

1. A Week, p. 187.

2. Ibid., p. 177

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 92.

shift to live, betwixt spirit and matter, such a human life as we can." <sup>1</sup>  
Another objection that he had to Christ's teaching was that "he had his scheme, his conformity to tradition, which slightly vitiates his teaching. He had not swallowed all formulas. He preached some mere doctrines." <sup>2</sup>

Thoreau's reaction to Christianity was not entirely disapproving. He said that "Christianity is humane, practical, and, in a large sense, radical". <sup>3</sup> However, there was something about it which he felt was not suited to men in all walks of life. A laboring man "with steady employment, as wood chopping at fifty cents a cord, and a camp in the woods, will not be a good subject for Christianity. The New Testament may be a choice book to him on some but not all or most of his days. He will rather go fishing in his leisure hours. The apostles, though they were fishers too, were of the solem race of sea-fishers, and never trolled for pickerel in inland streams." <sup>4</sup>

It was not the New Testament story in itself that Thoreau refused to accept but the so called Christianity which people had made out of it. Here is one of the plainest indications of Thoreau's transcendentalism. He believed that "So far as thinking is concerned, surely original thinking is the divinest thing..... We check and repress the divinity that stirs within us to fall down and worship the

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1. A Week, p. 93.

2. Ibid., p. 88

3. Ibid., p. 176

4. Ibid., p. 93

divinity that is without us. I go to see many a good man or woman, so called, and utter freely that thought which alone it was given me to utter, but there was a man who lived a long, long time ago and his name was Moses, and another whose name was Christ, and if your thought does not, or does not appear to, coincide with what they said the good man or good woman has no ears to hear you." <sup>1</sup> Thoreau felt that some who loved the great divinities might well be outside of their churches.

I trust that some may be as near and dear to Buddha or Christ or Swedenborg, who are without the pale of their churches.... .i know some will have hard thoughts of me, when they hear their Christ named beside my Buddha, yet I am sure that I am willing they should love their Christ more than my Buddha, for the love is the main thing and I like him too.<sup>2</sup>

Whether Thoreau acknowledged it or not, the Christian story left its mark upon his thought. His references to the crucifixion, when he was discussing the fate of John Brown, show his admiration for the Christian ideal of self sacrifice. He addressed the slayers of John Brown in this manner "You who pretend to care for Christ crucified, consider what you are about to do to him who offered himself to be the saviour of four millions of men."<sup>3</sup> He found the same parallel when he considered that Brown, perhaps, had been hanged. "Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are two ends of a chain which is not without its links."<sup>4</sup>

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1. Autumn, p. 280

2. A Week, p. 85

3. Miscellanies, p. 232

4. Ibid., p. 234.

Thoreau's familiarity with the New Testament language is proved by his use of many expressions, not as direct quotations, but as part of his ordinary vocabulary. He was quick to catch and use any expression that caught his fancy, and he used especially those of beauty and poetic imagery. Such an expression is in one of his letters to Emerson about Emerson's little child, "As for Edith, I seem to see a star in the east over where the young child is".<sup>1</sup> No doubt his allusion in the following passage is to Christ's clearing the temple of the money changers, "The same indignation that is said to have cleared the temple once will clear it again."<sup>2</sup> In describing so commonplace a thing as the frost of winter he found use for his imagery. "When the frost had smitten me on the one cheek, heathen as I was, I turned to it the other also."<sup>3</sup> He found a small town a place "fitted to raise not only corn and potatoes, but poets and philosophers for the coming ages..... out of such a wilderness comes the Reformer eating locusts and wild honey."<sup>4</sup>

Evidently the story of Christ appealed more to Thoreau than the comments made upon it by later writers, since ten of his twelve quotations from the New Testament were taken from the four gospels, one from First Corinthians, and one from Revelation. The ten quotations are the words of Christ, and were taken in most cases from the gospel of St. Matthew.

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1. Familiar Letters, p. 122

2. Miscellanies, p. 229

3. Walden, p. 412

4. Excursions, p. 280

Thoreau's allusions to the Old Testament show a diversity of reading. He alluded to or quoted from the following books: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Judges, First Kings, Second Kings, First Chronicles, Second Chronicles, Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Jonah, Joel. Most of the allusions and quotations are from Genesis, with Exodus and Psalms next in importance. Many of the allusions are to Old Testament characters like Moses, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Thoreau used the Old Testament expressions as a part of his vocabulary, quite as naturally as he did those from the New Testament. No doubt he remembered that Nimrod "was a mighty hunter before the Lord",<sup>1</sup> because he referred to a hunter in the Walden woods as "one gaunt Nimrod who would catch up a leaf by the roadside, and play a strain on it."<sup>2</sup> His guide in the Mainwoods was "our Nimrod".<sup>3</sup> He trusted that he would never sell himself to society, "as most appear to do..... I trust that I shall never thus sell my birthright for a mess of pottage."<sup>4</sup> In speaking of the fog rolling away to the east he said, "The waves of the foggy ocean divide and flow back for us Israelites of a day to march through."<sup>5</sup> After spending several days surveying Thoreau came back to his old life of meditation, glad to be rid of the tiresome duties which reminded him of the story of Samson. "I thus from time to time

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1. Genesis, 10:9

2. Walden, p. 433

3. The Main Woods, p. 77

4. Miscellanies, p. 260

5. Summer, p. 168

break off my connection with eternal truths, and go with the shallow stream of human affairs, grinding at the mill of the Philistines." <sup>1</sup>

The willows which he observed in the spring reminded him of the willow of Babylon. "The willow of Babylon blooms not the less hopefully with us though its other half is not in the New England world at all, and never has been." <sup>2</sup> The nights in New England are "nights which warrant the Grecian epithet ambrosial, when, as in the land of Beulah, the atmosphere is charged with dewy fragrance, and with music, and we take our repose and have our dreams awake." <sup>3</sup>

Of the seven Old Testament quotations, two are from Ecclesiastes, and one each from Ezekiel, Song of Solomon, Job, Joel and the Psalms. The longest quotation is from the first chapter of Joel. In his study of wild apples Thoreau was reminded of the quotation from The Song of Solomon, "Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples." <sup>4</sup> The accumulation of property is a custom handed down from father to son. Thoreau, in considering the useless lumber which most of his neighbors possessed, was moved to quote this passage from Ezekiel. "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge." <sup>5</sup>

The Jehovah of the Israelites was not Thoreau's favorite deity; the divinities of Greece were more to his taste. "I am not

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1. Winter, p. 114
2. Spring, p. 174
3. Excursions, p. 407
4. The Song of Solomon, 2:5
5. Ezekiel, 18:2

sure but I should betake myself in extremities to the liberal divinities of Greece rather than to my country's God. Jehovah, though with us he has acquired new attributes, is more absolute and unapproachable, but hardly more divine than Jove. He is not so much of a gentleman among gods, not so gracious and catholic, he does not exert so intimate and genial an influence on nature as many a god of the Greeks." <sup>1</sup>

Thoreau's favorite god was the Greek Pan who "still reigns in his pristine glory, with his ruddy face, his flowing beard and his shaggy body, his pipe and his crook, his nymph Echo, and his chosen daughter Iambe; for the great God Pan is not dead, as was rumored. Perhaps of all the gods of New England and of ancient Greece, I am most constant at his shrine." <sup>2</sup>

The Biblical influence on Thoreau is more easily traced than that of some other literatures. His seemingly unconscious use of Biblical expressions has been noted in the discussion on Biblical allusions. His use of these allusions without conscious quotation proves that he had read and studied the Hebrew classic thoroughly. Perhaps boyhood study of the Old Testament in the despised Sabbath school gave him his knowledge of Genesis and Exodus, especially Genesis to which he alluded sixteen times. Perhaps his thought was influenced more by the Bible than he would acknowledge, especially by the New Testament, for his ideals of justice, honor, brotherhood, meditation and spiritual development are undoubtedly those of the Christ. He did not accept either Testament blindly, but weighed it coolly in comparison with the other Scriptures of the world. His declaration that Christianity is superstitious and his suggestion for a comparative study

1. A Week, p. 81

2. Ibid.,

of the world's Scriptures are not the blind utterances of a fanatic  
but the considerations of a cool thinker.

## Chapter IV

### The Influence of Other Oriental Literatures.

It has been shown in the last chapter that Thoreau believed that mankind should study the Scriptures of the different nations. In his day Thoreau was one of a very small group of American scholars who read the ancient Scriptures. The remaining literatures which must be considered in a study of his scholarship in the ancient literatures are Sanscrit, Chinese and Persian. He mentioned the Arabian Nights once and made one allusion to Sardanapalus, an Assyrian ruler. He might have read of Sardanapalus in some literature other than the Assyrian, however. Of the three first mentioned literatures the most important is the Sanscrit. Thoreau referred thirty-one times to the ancient Hindoos and their literature, and made twenty-eight quotations from writers of Sanscrit.

Thoreau was not a student of Sanscrit as far as the language is concerned. He read the Sanscrit classics in translation. Channing says of Thoreau that "His East Indian studies never went deep technically; into the philological discussion as to whether *ab*, *ab* is Sanscrit, or 'what is *Om*?' he entered not. But no one relished the Bhagvat Geeta better, or the good sentences from the Vishnu Purana. He loved the Laws of Menu, the Vishnu Sarma, Saadi and similar books." <sup>1</sup>

Thoreau thought that the best of the Sanscrit classics were "The Bhagvat Geeta (an episode in an ancient poem called the Mahabarata).

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1. Channing, W. E., Thoreau, The Poet Naturalist, p. 50

the Vedas, the Vishnu Purana, the Institutes of Menu etc."<sup>1</sup> His favorite of these was the Bhagvat Geeta, which he mentioned seven times and quoted from seventeen times. He also praised it highly. He suggested to readers of Scriptures that "if they wish for a good book to read, read the Bhagvat Geeta, an episode to the Mahbarat, said to have been written by Kreesna Dwypaven Veias.".....It deserves to be read with reverence even by Yankees, as a part of the sacred writing of a devout people; and the intelligent Hebrew will rejoice to find in it a moral grandeur and sublimity akin to those of his own Scriptures"<sup>2</sup> Thoreau believed that "Beside the vast and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta, even our Shakespeare seems sometimes youthfully green and practical merely".<sup>3</sup> He declared that "The reader is nowhere raised into and sustained in a higher, purer, or rarer region of thought than in the Bhagvat Geeta. It is unquestionably one of the noblest and most sacred scriptures that have come down to us."<sup>4</sup>

In the chapter, Monday, of A Week Thoreau gave seventeen extracts from the Bhagavat Geeta and commented upon them. He found something inspiring in the discussion of wisdom and the forsaking of works as taught by Kreesna. According to Kreesna:

Wise men call him a Pandeet, whose every undertaking is free from the idea of desire, and whose actions are consumed by the fire of wisdom. He abandoneth the desire of a reward of his actions;

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1. Familiar Letters, p. 351

2. A Week, p. 184

3. Ibid., p. 186

4. Ibid., p. 177

he is always contented and independent; and although he may be engaged in a work, he as it were, doeth nothing."

"He is both a Yogee and a Sannyasee who performeth that which he hath to do independent of the fruit thereof; not he who liveth without the sacrificial fire and without action.

"He who enjoyeth but the Amreeta which is left of his offerings, obtaineth the eternal spirit of Brahm, the Supreme." 1

While Thoreau felt that such teaching was not as practical as that of the New Testament, he believed that there was something worth while in the patient waiting and contemplation of the Hindoo philosopher. He asked:

"What after all does the practicalness of life amount to? The things immediate to be done are very trivial. I could postpone them to hear this locust sing. The most glorious fact in our experience is not anything that we have done or hope to do, but a transient thought or vision or dream which we have had. I would give all the wealth of the world, and all the deeds of all the heroes, for one true vision. But how can I communicate with the gods who am a pencil maker on earth and not be insane?" 2

Thoreau acknowledged that Kreeshna's argument was defective. In the dialogue of Arjoon and Kreeshna, Arjoon was enjoined to fight, but he was not given any reason why he should fight, only that it was his duty. There was no promise of reward if he fought and no consequence of his action. However, Thoreau saw in this ancient faith something glorious and supreme. He remarked that "we know not where we should look for a loftier speculative faith." 3 He saw the difference between the Oriental and the Occidental in this philosophy. He decided that "The former has nothing to do with this world; the latter is full of activity. The one looks in the sun till his eyes are put out; the

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1. Bhagvat Geeta

2. A Week, p. 181

3. Ibid., p. 183

other follows him prone in his westward course.....There is a struggle between the Oriental and the Occidental in every nation; some who would be forever contemplating the sun, and some who are hastening toward the sunset." <sup>1</sup> Probably the secret of Thoreau's interest in the Hindoos lay in the fact that he also loved "to contemplate the sun."

Thoreau believed that "We are accustomed to exaggerate the immobility and stagnation of those eras (the early Oriental), as of the waters which leveled the steppes.....Methinks history will have to be tried by new tests to show what centuries were rapid and what slow. Corn grows in the night. Will this bustling era detain the future reader longer?..... Who is writing better Vedas? How science and art spread and flourished, how trivial conveniences multiplied, that which is the gossip of the world is not recorded in them, and if they are left out of our scriptures too, what will remain?" <sup>2</sup> The Vedas, especially the Rig Veda, were fascinating to Thoreau because they suggested not only the primitive peoples of the time in which they were composed, but a more ancient race. He believed, "If you read the Rig Veda, oldest of books as it were, describing a very primitive people and condition of things, you hear in their prayers of a still older, more primitive and aboriginal race in their midst and roundabout, warring on them, and seizing their flocks and herds, infesting their pastures." <sup>3</sup> He wondered if the translator had not

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1. A Week, p. 183  
2. Summer, p. 60  
3. Winter, p. 228

amplified the text? if he had not inserted a thought of his own, instead of translating the original.

Reading the hymns of the Rig Veda, translated by Wilson, which consists, in a great measure of simple epithets addressed to the firmament or the dawn or the winds, which mean more or less as the reader is more or less alert and imaginative,.....I am sometimes inclined to doubt if the translator has not made something out of nothing, whether a real idea or sentiment has been thus transmitted to us from so primitive a period.....While the commentators and translators are disputing about the meaning of this word or that, I hear only the resounding of the ancient sea, and put into it the deepest meaning I am possessed of, for I do not care in the least where I get my ideas or what suggests them." <sup>1</sup>

The distant and the mysterious had the same charm for Thoreau that it has always had for the scholars of any age. It was not the actual content of the Rig Veda, which is much repetition of the same ideas, but the remoteness of the time which produced it that appealed to him. Even "a strain of music reminds me of a passage of the Vedas, and I associate with it the idea of infinite remoteness, as well as of beauty and serenity, for to the senses that is farthest from us which addresses the greatest depth within us. It teaches us again and again to trust the remotest and finest as the divinest instinct, and makes a dream our only real experience." <sup>2</sup> Although Thoreau alluded to the Vedas six times he quoted from them only once. They seem to have appealed to him less than the Bhagavat Geeta. Perhaps the reason for the difference in his feeling for the two lies in the fact that the Vedas were hymns, and contained much repetition of praise to the gods of the winds and the mountains, while the Bhagvat Geeta contained the philosophy of the ancient Hindoos.

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1. Winter, p. 240

2. A Week, p. 227

The Laws of Menu was one of the most attractive of the ancient Hindoo books to Thoreau. He knew "of no book which has come down to us with grander pretensions than this and it is so impersonal and sincere that it is never offensive nor ridiculous.....It has such rhythm as the winds of the desert, such a tide as the Ganges, and is as superior to criticism as the Himalaya mountains..... The whole book by noble gestures and inclinations seems to render many words unnecessary. English sense has toiled but Hindoo wisdom never perspired."<sup>1</sup> Thoreau found a moral philosophy in it that seemed to come nearer to the individual than that spoken in the pulpit. While "any moral philosophy is exceedingly rare, this of Menu addresses our privacy more than most. It is a more private and familiar, and at the same time, a more public and universal word than is spoken in parlor or pulpit nowadays. As our domestic fowls are said to have their original in the wild pheasant of India, so our domestic thoughts have their prototypes in the thoughts of her philosophers."<sup>2</sup> Another appeal which the book had for Thoreau was the fact that "it has relation to the dim mountain line and is native and aboriginal there. Most books belong to the house and street only, and in the fields their leaves feel very thin. They are bare and obvious, and have no halo nor haze about them. Nature lies far and fair behind them all. But this, as it proceeds from, so does it address what is deepest and most abiding in man. It belongs to the noontide of the day, the midsummer of the year, and after the snows

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1. A Week, p. 193

2. Ibid., p. 194

have melted, and the waters evaporated in the spring, still its truth speaks freshly to our experience".<sup>1</sup>....Thoreau was impressed by the universality of Menu. He felt that "there is an orientalism in the most restless pioneer, and the farthest west is but the farthest east. This fair modern world is only a reprint of the Laws of Menu with the gloss of Culluca. Tried by a New England eye, or the mere practical wisdom of modern times, they are the oracles of a race already in its dotage, but held up to the sky, which is the only impartial and incorruptible ordeal, they are of a piece with its depth and serenity, and I am assured that they will have a place and significance as long as there is a sky to test them by."<sup>2</sup> The old sentences in such a classic are "like serene lakes in the southwest, at length revealed to us, which have so long been reflecting in our own sky in their bosom."<sup>3</sup>

Another ancient Sanscrit classic which Thoreau commented upon was the Hestopades of Veeshnoo Sarma. He commented thus:

It is always singular, but encouraging, to meet with common sense in very old books, as the Hestopades of Veeshnoo Sarma; a playful wisdom which has eyes behind as well as before, and oversees itself. It asserts their health and independence of later times. This pledge of sanity cannot be spared in a book, that it sometimes pleasantly reflects upon itself. The story and fabulous portion of this book winds loosely from sentence to sentence as so many oases in a desert, and is as indistinct as a camel's track between Mourzouk and Darfour. It is a comment on the flow and freset of modern books. The reader leaps from sentence to sentence, as from one stepping-stone to another, while the stream of the story rushes past unregarded."<sup>4</sup>

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1. A Week, p. 195

2. Ibid., p. 196

3. Ibid., p. 197

4. Ibid., p. 191

Thoreau quoted three times from the Vishnu Purana. When he wished to enforce his own argument that men should not make themselves the slaves of laws he quoted the Vishnu Purana as saying, "That is active duty which is not for our bondage; that is knowledge which is for our liberation; all other duty is good only unto weariness; all other knowledge is only the cleverness of an artist."<sup>1</sup> When Thoreau waited for the visitor who never came, he thought of the injunction of the Purana which enjoined the householder "to remain at eventide in his courtyard as long as it takes to milk a cow, or longer if he pleases, to await the arrival of a guest."<sup>2</sup>

Thoreau quoted the Harivansa Sanscrit poem, once in his chapter on "Where I Lived and What I Lived For in Walden" when he commented on the birds which visited his dwelling. "An abode without birds is like a meat without seasoning,"<sup>3</sup> said the Harivansa. The sulphur-like pollen of the pitch-pine reminded him of a description in Kalidas' drama of Shakoontala of "rills dyed yellow with the golden dust of the lotus."<sup>4</sup>

Thoreau was interested in the Brahmins as philosophers, but he was not so much concerned about the actual germ of their philosophy as he was about the fact of their having a philosophy. He said of them. "We are not so much concerned to know what doctrines

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1. Excursions, p. 295

2. Walden, p. 418

3. Walden, p. 135

4. Ibid. p. 491

they held as that they were held by any.....Any sincere thought is irresistible. The very austerity of the Brahmins is tempting to the devotional soul, as a more refined and nobler luxury.....In the very indistinctness of their theogony a sublime truth is implied. It hardly allows the reader to rest in any supreme first cause, but it hints at a supreamer still which created the last, and the Creator is still behind, increate." <sup>1</sup>

Thoreau was interested in the Hindoos because of their remoteness, the universality of their thought, their austerity and their asceticism. Even their unintelligible sentences were fascinating to him. He liked a "sentence which no intelligence can understand. There must be a kind of life and palpitation to it." <sup>2</sup> He did not accept the Hindoos' philosophy without qualifying it. While he acknowledged that they lived on a high plain, he recognized the fact that the plain was a narrow one. He knew that "bouyancy, freedom, flexibility, variety, possibility, which also are qualities of the Unnamed, they deal not with." <sup>3</sup> He recognized their conservatism as sublime, but the pencil maker of Concord could not accept any conservatism as his philosophy. He did not accept Brahmanism nor Buddhism any more than he had accepted Platonism or Epicureanism. The part of their philosophy

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1. A Week, p. 198

2. Ibid. p. 196

3. Ibid. p. 176

of life that strengthened his own individual philosophy he accepted, but whatever he found that did not lead him to a newer and better philosophy he discarded.

Thoreau quoted from only two Chinese writers--Mencius and Confucius. Of the two, Confucius seems to have been his favorite, as he quoted eight times from him and only once from Mencius. In 1856 B. H. Wiley wrote to Thoreau for a copy of A Week, and, incidentally, inquired about Confucius and the Hindoo philosophers. Thoreau replied with the following discussion of the great Chinese philosopher:

I do not remember anything which Confucius has said directly respecting man's origin, purpose, and destiny. He was more practical than that. He is full of wisdom applied to human relations,-- to the private life, -- the family, --government, etc. It is remarkable that, according to his own account, the sum and substance of his teaching is, as you know, to do as you would be done by.<sup>1</sup>

It is evident that Thoreau knew Confucius fairly well because so careful a scholar would hardly have made so sweeping a statement as he made concerning Confucius in the preceding passage, if he had not been sure of his ground. He stated in another passage of the same letter that he had read Confucius in a French translation. His quotations from Confucius show that he had read widely in his works, because of the eight only two are about the same subject. Probably the practical philosophy of Confucius appealed to him.

Apropos of his statement that Confucius discussed the human relationships, Thoreau quoted the following from him, "Conduct yourself suitably towards the persons of your family, then you will be able to

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1. Familiar Letters, 350

instruct and direct a nation of men."<sup>1</sup> Another quotation shows the tendency of Thoreau to accept the austere and the plain, and to scorn all wealth and position that come by any other means than hard work.

To nourish one's self with a little rice, to drink water, to have only his bended arm to support his head, is a state which has also its satisfaction. To be rich and honored by iniquitous means is for me as the floating cloud that passes.<sup>2</sup>

Knowing the austerity and simplicity of Thoreau's life one is not surprised to find that his quotations from the great philosopher were of this type.

When Thoreau came to the discussion of friendship, which is almost a separate essay in one chapter of A Week, he used the great Chinese philosopher to re-enforce his argument. Thoreau believed that friendship should be on a high level, and he quoted Confucius as saying "Never contract Friendship with a man that is not better than thyself."<sup>3</sup> When he came to discuss motives in friendship, Thoreau again took a text from Confucius "To contract ties of Friendship with any one is to contract Friendship with his virtue. There ought not to be any other motive in Friendship."<sup>4</sup> Such a statement pleased Thoreau who refused to see "that to be right which I know to be wrong"<sup>5</sup> for the sake of a friend.

Thoreau noticed the tendency of people in general to deny the possibility of change, and their wish to travel only one way when

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1. Familiar Letters, p. 350

2. Ibid.

3. A Week, p. 357

4. Ibid., 371

5. Ibid.

"there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one center. Confucius said, 'To know that we know what we know, and that we do not know what we do not know, that is true knowledge.'" <sup>1</sup>

Thoreau discussed the animal in mankind and illustrated his point by quoting from Mencius, who said, "That in which men differ from brute beasts, is a thing very inconsiderable; the common herd lose it very soon; superior men preserve it carefully." <sup>2</sup> He did not make any other allusion to Mencius.

Thoreau used the opinions of the great philosophers to support his own arguments against the taxing of the unwilling citizens (Thoreau, being the principal one) by the State of Massachusetts. It is rather amusing to notice how Thoreau used the great philosophers to support his own rebellion against law. The passage from the Chinese philosopher that attracted him was this. "If a state is governed by the principles of reason, poverty and misery are subjects of shame; if a state is not governed by the principles of reason, riches and honors are subjects of shame." <sup>3</sup>

In a study of Persian influence on Thoreau it seems pertinent to include not only the one great work of antiquity, the Zend-Avesta, but also the work of two later poets—Sadi and Hafiz who belong to the Middle Ages. In this chapter on Oriental literatures, they seem to have a place which is determined, not by their chronological position,

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1. Walden, p. 20

2. Ibid., p. 342

3. Miscellanies, p. 153

but by their influence on Thoreau's work. Their day seems almost as distant in thought, as compared with Thoreau's time or our time, as does the Zend-Avesta period.

Thoreau mentioned Zoroaster, the great philosopher of Persia, three times, and his greatest work the Zend-Avesta once. He did not discuss this work as he did the other great Bibles of the world; he simply included it in his list of classics in speaking of the time "when the Vatican shall be filled with Vedas and Zend-Avestas and Bibles, with Homers and Dantes and Shakespeares, and all the centuries to come shall have successively deposited their trophies in the forum of the world." <sup>1</sup> He spoke of the "sublime sentences, as the Chaldean oracles of Zoroaster, for instance, still surviving after a thousand revolutions and translations make us doubt if the poetic form and dress are not transitory, and not essential to the most effective and enduring expression of thought." <sup>2</sup>

Although he did not discuss Zoroaster's particular works Thoreau seemed to know the Persian philosopher's spiritual experiences thoroughly and recognized their universality. He realized that "the questions that disturb and puzzle and confound us have in their turn occurred to all the wise men; not one has been omitted; and each has answered them according to his ability, by his words and his life....  
...The solitary hired man on a farm in the outskirts of Concord, who has had his second birth and peculiar religious experience, and is

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1. Walden, p. 164

2. A Week, p. 186

driven, as he believes, into silent gravity and exclusiveness by his faith, may think it is not true; but Zoroaster, thousands of years ago, travelled the same road and had the same experience; but he being wise, knew it to be universal, and treated his neighbors accordingly, and is even said to have invented and established worship among men. Let him humbly commune with Zoroaster then, and through the liberalizing influence of all the worthies, with Jesus Christ himself, and let 'our church' go by the board."<sup>1.</sup> This high praise of Zoroaster's faith and worship suggests a thorough knowledge of his philosophy on the part of Thoreau.

Thoreau's essay on Books and Their Titles written in March, 1837, contains his first mention of Sadi and indeed, of any Persian influence. Speaking of the extravagance of authors in naming their books he said, "No people have been more prone to these extravagances than the Persians. Mohammed Ebn Emir Chowand Shah, who flourished in 1741, was the author of a voluminous work entitled Hortus Puritatis in Historia Prophetarum Regum et Chalifarum. A Persian-Turkish dictionary bears the title of Naamet Allah or Delight of the Gods. The Gulistan, or Flower Garden, a collection of moral fables and apophthegms, by Sheik Sadi of Shiraz, being written in an excessively florid style, may aptly enough be compared to a garden of flowers, or a parcel of nosegays."<sup>2.</sup>

Although Thoreau regarded Sadi as the writer of a florid

1. Walden, p. 170

2. Sanborn, F.B., Life of Thoreau, 127

style, he quoted from him five times and once from his biographer, Dowlat Shah. It is noticeable that all the selections from Sadi enforce some of Thoreau's favorite philosophical ideas. One of these ideas which he often put into practice was that a man may earn a sufficient living by hand labor as he travels. He found that Sadi "tells who may travel; among others, 'A common mechanic, who can earn a subsistence by the industry of his hand, and shall not have to stake his reputation for every morsel of bread, as philosophers have said.'"<sup>1.</sup>

The contemplative less practical wisdom of Sadi appealed to Thoreau also. Perhaps he found in it something of his own transcendentalism, especially in this passage from the Gulistan. "They asked a wise man, saying: Of the many celebrated trees which the Most High God has created lofty and umbrageous, they call none azad, or free, excepting the cypress, which bears no fruit; what mystery is there in this? He replied: Each has its appropriate produce, and appointed season, during the continuance of which it is fresh and blooming, and during their absence dry and withered; to neither of which states is the cypress exposed, being always flourishing; and of this nature are the azads or religious independents. -- Fix not thy heart on that which is transitory; for the Diljah, or Tigris will continue to flow through Bagdad after the race of caliphs is extinct: if thy hand has plenty, be liberal as the date tree; but if it affords nothing to give away, be an azad or free man, like the cypress."<sup>2.</sup> It is easy to see why this passage appealed to Thoreau, who was impatient of any restraint

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1. Sanborn, F. B. Life of Thoreau, 127

2. The Gulistan, Sadi

and who preached the doctrine of religious and political freedom. Another passage from Sadi showed Thoreau's interest in the contemplative. It describes the good and pious man who was absorbed in reverie but when he wakened from his vision had nothing to bring back to his friends, because he was so intoxicated by what he had seen. Perhaps Thoreau meant to suggest the impossibility of explaining much of the transcendental faith in the unseen when he quoted this passage. "O, thou! who towerest above the flights of conjecture, opinion, and comprehension; whatever has been reported of thee we have heard and read; the congregation is dismissed, and life drawn to a close; and we still rest at our first encomium of thee!"<sup>1.</sup>

The suggestion of the immortality of the soul appealed to Thoreau in this quotation from Dowlat Shah, the biographer of Sadi. "The eagle of the immaterial soul of Shaikh Sadi shook from his plumage the dust of his body."<sup>2.</sup> His only quotation from Hafiz concerns the same theme. "Yesterday at dawn God delivered me from all worldly affliction; and amidst the gloom of night presented me with the water of immortality."<sup>3.</sup>

It seems rather singular that Thoreau did not mention two well known Persian classics, - The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, and the great Persian epic, the Shah Namah of Firdausi. His interest in Hafiz, who wrote of love, wine, and youth, is rather strange too, unless one considers the fact that there may be a philosophical undercurrent

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1. The Gulistan, Sadi

2. A Week, 512

3. Ibid.

in the poems of Hafiz. Thoreau loved a hidden philosophical truth as a scientist loves a new scientific fact. It is significant that his only quotation from Hafiz should be of a transcendental nature.

Thoreau made only one allusion to the Assyrians, and that was to Sardanapalus, an ancient Assyrian king. This allusion does not necessarily suggest a knowledge of Assyrian literature, because Thoreau may have come across the name of the king in the study of the histories of other countries.

Thoreau referred twice to Hanno, a Carthaginian navigator, who wrote an account of a voyage on the west coast of Africa. Probably he read this in a Greek or French translation, although he may have heard of it merely through a study of world literature. He did not mention the work specifically, but spoke of "great discoverers and navigators, great adventurers and merchants from Hanno and the Phoenicians down to our day." <sup>1.</sup> The other allusion is in his journal for March 21, 1840, in which he spoke figuratively of travel. "Let us migrate interiorly without intermission, and pitch our tent each day nearer the western horizon. The really fertile soils and luxuriant prairies lie on this side the Alleghanies. There has been no Hanno of the affections. Their domain is untraveled ground to the Mogul's dominions". <sup>2.</sup>

He made one allusion to the Arabian Nights in his description of the water willow which, he thought, had "not a New England but an Oriental character, reminding us of trim Persian gardens, of

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1. Walden, 35

2. Spring, 195

Harcoun Alraschid, and the artificial lakes of the east." 1.

Thoreau's omissions in the field of ancient Oriental literature are almost as interesting to note as those works which he mentioned. He made no allusion whatever to the ancient Egyptian literature, and only the one previously mentioned to the Babylonian-Assyrian. His knowledge of Chinese literature is very slight and his interest in Persian is confined mostly to the Middle Ages.

Considering the bulk of Sanscrit literature, Thoreau's reading in the field may not be considered wide, but in comparison with his study of the other Oriental literatures it is quite extensive.

### Conclusion

But it is fit that the Past should be dark; though the darkness is not so much a quality of the past as of tradition. It is not a distance of time, but a distance of relation, which makes thus dusky its memorials. What is near to the heart of this generation is fair and bright still. Greece lies outspread fair and sunshiny in floods of light, for there is the sun and daylight in her literature and art.....If we could pierce the obscurity of those remote years, we should find it light enough; only there is not our day.....The gods are partial to no era, but steadily shines their light in the heavens, while the eye of the beholder is turned to stone. There was but the sun and the eye from the first. The ages have not added a new ray to the one nor altered a fibre of the other.<sup>1</sup>.

Thoreau's attitude toward the past strikes the reader as being unusual when he reads the passages in which the American philosopher recorded his reactions to the ancient literatures which he read. Thoreau was not a reactionary nor yet a conservative. He did not accept the past wholly as the past, but admired rather what he found in it that fitted his day. The universality of the Greeks, the Romans, the Hebrews, the Chinese, and the Persians struck him as the most admirable thing in their work. Consequently he chose from his reading of them those passages which dealt with the fundamental relationships of life. He dwelt upon the friendships, the relation of man to man, as well as the relation of man to his country and his gods. He saw something more in the Iliad than an interesting story of combats and exciting scenes; he found there the universal virtues of loyalty, honor, affection, fidelity and courage, as well as the vices of selfishness, cruelty and greed.

The ancients may not have taught Thoreau to love the common things and to throw about them a glow of poetic imagery, but they

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1. A Week, 204

doubtless intensified his love of the commonplace. So ordinary a thing as the humming of a telegraph wire set him thinking of the Greek poets, who exemplified for him the purest poetic imagery in the world. He translated the battle of the ants into poetic terms. He found an Achilles with a friend, Patroclus, and a Spartan youth whose mother had charged him to return with his shield or upon it. Without his background of classical reading Thoreau might have lacked the terms in which to express his feeling for even the common insect, the mosquito, which sang its own wrath and wanderings in Greek terminology. To be sure, scientists and naturalists criticize Thoreau because he was not scientific but poetic in his interpretation of the animal and plant world, but poets, philosophers, and even ordinary students of literature are glad for his poetic interpretation.

Thoreau translated not only the natural history but also the pastoral life about him into terms of ancient imagery. He liked to refer to his labor as Herculean; he found strength like Antaeus in touching the earth. The old Roman methods of agriculture fascinated him; he read more widely from the pastoral works of the Roman poets than from their epics or odes. He contrived to throw a dignity over the ordinary drudgery of farm life by his allusions to old customs and the importance of the laborer in times past.

Greek and Roman mythology gave Thoreau a wealth of classical allusions which he used in making striking figures of speech and appropriate epithets. A reader cannot judge how much the myth of King Admetus meant to Thoreau by his sometimes half playful allusions to it.

However, it no doubt cast a dignity over the necessary drudgery of which he was sometimes impatient. At least he amused himself by his comparisons and images.

Reading the ancient scriptures like the Zend-Avesta, the Vedas and the Bible gave Thoreau a basis for a religious philosophy that his neighbors did not have. How much of the philosophy of the ancients Thoreau made his own we cannot judge, but we are assured that they did one thing in particular for him: they made him feel the necessity for a comparative study of the world scriptures. Whether the Bible gave him his high ideals of self-sacrifice, honor and courage or not, at least he chose those things from it to admire.

Thoreau found the asceticism of the Brahmins appealing, although he did not accept their ideas entirely. He liked the philosophy which taught that meditation is the great occupation of man, but he found a lack of activity, freedom and buoyancy in the Hindoos that his Yankee mind could not entirely accept. Their unchangeableness could not be entirely satisfactory to a Transcendentalist who believed that no experience should be repeated. What he found of good in the Brahmins he took and translated into his own terms; the rest, he discarded.

The beauty of Thoreau's style was enhanced by his reading of ancient literatures. Many of his adjectives are Greek in origin, and many of his epithets are from the King James version of the Bible. His sentences, which are remarkable for their smoothness and strength, no doubt owe something to his study of the ancient languages. The variety of his imagery is due to his knowledge of mythology and ancient story. He may not have followed the Greek dictum, "Nothing too much", in his

political and social philosophy, but his sentences are never florid nor overburdened. They are sometimes epigrammatic and every sentence is full of material for thought.

Thoreau's reading list showed the wide range of his reading in the ancient literatures, but his own works showed the intensiveness of his scholarship. It has been noted in the introduction that the Greek and Roman influence is predominant. Probably his early training in Concord Academy, where instruction in Greek and Latin was emphasized, was responsible for his interest in these two ancient literatures.

The distribution of Thoreau's allusions to ancient literatures is interesting. A Week On The Concord And Merrimac Rivers seems almost overburdened by classical allusions. It has eighty-two of the Greek allusions and thirty-two of the fifty-three Greek quotations. Nineteen of the one hundred and eighteen Roman allusions, and ten of the forty-six Roman quotations are to be found in A Week. Of the Hindoo there are eleven allusions and twenty-one quotations; from the Bible, nineteen allusions and eight quotations; of the Chinese, one allusion and two quotations; of the Persian, two allusions and six quotations. The total is one hundred and thirty-four allusions and seventy-nine quotations. Almost half of the one hundred and sixty-three quotations from ancient writers are to be found in A Week. Perhaps this abundant use of scholarly material was due to the fact that Thoreau was but recently out of college, and his mind was filled with the accumulated knowledge that he had been gathering for four years, or even longer. The college boy was not unlike other young scholars; the temptation to show his scholarship was too great to be resisted in this first conscious effort for the public. He continued his reading of the

classics after his school days, as his journals plainly show, but they contain less of the scholarly and more of the personal element than A Week and Walden.

Thoreau's choice of writers is another interesting thing about his scholarship. His nineteen quotations from Homer are the largest number which he used from any one writer of ancient literature. He quoted seventeen times from the Bhagvat Greeta. Anacreon and Virgil contend for third place with fourteen quotations each. Thoreau quoted oftener from the Iliad than from any other ancient classic, all of his Homeric quotations being from the Iliad.

The investigator has made a number of interesting discoveries in this study. The range and thoroughness of Thoreau's scholarship in the ancient literatures is astonishing when one considers that much of this reading was done before he was thirty years old. He read widely in his later years, but his references, especially to the Greek and the Roman, in his early works show that he had made them his own in his college years. An investigation of Thoreau's philosophy and language shows the influence of the early literatures upon his life and writing. What he found of value in the ancients he took and made his own. Thoreau's experience is an inspiration to the present day student, who cannot read the great American philosopher intelligently without at least some little knowledge of the sources from which he drew his poetic imagery and the foundation for his philosophy of life. Thoreau's cool observation of the past, his admiration for its finest qualities, and his love of them encourage thoughtful and critical study of those ancient works which are too often, at the present time, discarded for the newspaper and the periodical. "Read not the Times", said Thoreau, "Read

the Eternities."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Miscellanies, p. 279

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