# LIFE WITHOUT PRINCIPLE

*Three essays by Henry David Thoreau*
*with a preface by Henry Miller*

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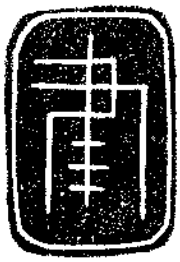
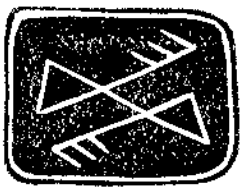
STANFORD UNIVERSITY: 1946



# PREFACE



THERE ARE BARELY a half-dozen names in the history of America which have meaning for me. Thoreau's is one of them. I think of him as a true representative of America, a type, alas, which we have ceased to coin. He is not a democrat at all, in the sense we give to the word today. He is what Lawrence would call "an aristocrat of the spirit," which is to say, that rarest thing on earth: an individual. He is nearer to being an anarchist than a democrat, socialist or communist. However, he was not interested in politics; he was the sort of person who, if there were more of his kind, would soon cause governments to become nonexistent. This, to my mind, is the highest type of man a community can produce. And that is why I have an unbounded respect and admiration for Thoreau.

The secret of his influence, which is still alive, still active, is a very simple one. He was a man of principle whose thought and behavior were in complete agreement. He assumed responsibility for his deeds as well as his utterances. Compromise was not in his vocabulary. America, for all her advantages, has produced only a handful of men of this calibre. The reason for it is obvious: men like Thoreau were never in agreement with the trend of the times. They symbolized that America which is as far

from being born today as it was in 1776 or before. They took the hard road instead of the easy one. They believed in themselves first and foremost, they did not worry about what their neighbors thought of them, nor did they hesitate to defy the government when justice was at stake. There was never anything supine about their acquiescence: they could be wooed or seduced but not intimidated.

The essays gathered together in this little volume were all speeches, a fact of some importance if one reflects how impossible it would be today to give public utterance to such sentiments. The very notion of "civil disobedience," for example, is now unthinkable. (Except in India perhaps, where in his campaign of passive resistance Gandhi used this speech as a textbook.) In our country a man who dared to imitate Thoreau's behavior with regard to any crucial issue of the day would undoubtedly be sent to prison for life. Moreover, there would be none to defend him – as Thoreau once defended the name and reputation of John Brown. As always happens with bold, original utterances, these essays have now become classic. Which means that, though they still have the power to mould character, they no longer influence the men who govern our destiny. They are prescribed reading for students and a perpetual source of inspiration to the thinker and the rebel, but as for the reading public in general they carry no weight, no message any longer. The image of Thoreau has been fixed for the public by educators and "men of taste": it is that of a hermit, a crank, a nature faker. It is the caricature which has been preserved, as is usually the case with our eminent men.

The important thing about Thoreau, in my mind, is that he appeared at a time when we had, so to speak, a choice as to the direction we, the American people, would take. Like Emerson and Whitman, he pointed out the right road – the hard road, as I said before. As a people we chose differently. And we are now reaping the fruits of our choice. Thoreau, Whitman, Emerson – these men are now vindicated. In the gloom of current events these names stand out like beacons. We pay eloquent lip service to their memory, but we continue to flout their wisdom. We have become victims of the times; we look backward with longing and regret. It is too late now to change, we think. But it is not. As individuals, as *men*, it is never too late to change. That

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is precisely what these sturdy forerunners of ours were emphasizing all their lives.

With the creation of the atomic bomb, the whole world suddenly realizes that man is faced with a dilemma whose gravity is incommensurable. In the essay called "Life Without Principle," Thoreau anticipated that very possibility which shook the world when it received the news of the atomic bomb. "Of what consequence," says Thoreau, "though our planet explode, if there is no character involved in the explosion? . . . I would not run around a corner to see the world blow up."

I feel certain Thoreau would have kept his word, had the planet suddenly exploded of its own accord. But I also feel certain that, had he been told of the atomic bomb, of the good and bad that it was capable of producing, he would have had something memorable to say about its use. And he would have said it in defiance of the prevalent attitude. He would not have rejoiced that the secret of its manufacture was in the hands of the righteous ones. He would have asked immediately: "Who is righteous enough to employ such a diabolical instrument destructively?" He would have had no more faith in the wisdom and sanctity of this present government of the United States than he had of our government in the days of slavery. He died, let us not forget, in the midst of the Civil War, when the issue which should have been decided instantly by the conscience of every good citizen was at last being resolved in blood. No, Thoreau would have been the first to say that no government on earth is good enough or wise enough to be entrusted with such powers for good and evil. He would have predicted that we would use this new force in the same manner that we have used other natural forces, that the peace and security of the world lie not in inventions but in men's hearts, men's souls. His whole life bore testimony to the obvious fact which men are constantly overlooking, that to sustain life we need less rather than more, that to protect life we need courage and integrity, not weapons, not coalitions. In everything he said and did he was at the farthest remove from the man of today. I said earlier that his influence is still alive and active. It is, but only because truth and wisdom are incontrovertible and must eventually prevail. Consciously and unconsciously we are doing the very opposite of all that he advocated. But we are not happy about it,

nor are we at all convinced that we are right. We are, in fact, more bewildered, more despairing, than we ever were in the course of our brief history. And that is most curious, most disturbing, since we are now acknowledged to be the most powerful, the most wealthy, the most secure of all the nations of the earth. We are at the top, but have we the vision to maintain this vantage point? We have a vague suspicion that we have been saddled with a responsibility which is too great for us. We know that we are not superior, in any real sense, to the other peoples of this earth. We are just waking up to the fact that morally we are far behind ourselves, so to speak. Some blissfully imagine that the threat of extinction – cosmic suicide – will rout us out of our lethargy. I am afraid that such dreams are doomed to be smashed even more effectively than the atom itself. Great things are not accomplished through fear of extinction. The deeds which move the world, which sustain life and give life, have a different motivation entirely.

The problem of power, an obsessive one with Americans, is now at the crux. Instead of *working* for peace, men ought to be urged to relax, to stop work, to take it easy, to dream and idle away their time for a change. Retire to the woods! if you can find any nearby. Think your own thoughts for a while! Examine your conscience, but only after you have thoroughly enjoyed yourself. What is your job worth, after all, if tomorrow you and yours can all be blown to smithereens by some reckless fool? Do you suppose that a government can be depended on any more than the separate individuals who compose it? Who are these individuals to whom the destiny of the planet itself now seems to be entrusted? Do you believe in them utterly, every one of them? What would *you* do if you had the control of this unheard of power? Would you use it for the benefit of all mankind, or just for your own people, or your own little group? Do you think that men can keep such a weighty secret to themselves? Do you think it *ought* to be kept secret?

These are the sort of questions I can imagine a Thoreau firing away. They are questions which, if one has just a bit of common sense, answer themselves. But governments never seem to possess this modicum of common sense. Nor do they trust those who are in possession of it.

"This American government – what is it but a tradition,

though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity? It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will. It is a sort of wooden gun to the people themselves. But it is not the less necessary for this; for the people must have some complicated machinery or other, and hear its din, to satisfy that idea of government which they have. Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed on, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage. It is excellent, we must all allow. Yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. *It* does not keep the country free. *It* does not settle the West. *It* does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way. . . ."

That is the way Thoreau spoke a hundred years ago. He would speak still more unflatteringly if he were alive now. In these last hundred years the State has come to be a Frankenstein. We have never had less need of the State than now when we are most tyrannized by it. The ordinary citizen everywhere has a code of ethics far above that of the government to which he owes allegiance. The fiction that the State exists for our protection has been exploded a thousand times. However, as long as men lack self-assurance and self-reliance the State will thrive; it depends for its existence on the fear and uncertainty of its individual members.

By living his own life in his own "eccentric" way Thoreau demonstrated the futility and absurdity of the life of the (so-called) masses. It was a deep, rich life which yielded him the maximum of contentment. In the bare necessities he found adequate means for the enjoyment of life. "The opportunities of living," he pointed out, "are diminished in proportion as what are called the 'means' are increased." He was at home in Nature, where man belongs. He held communion with bird and beast, with plant and flower, with star and stream. He was not an unsocial being, far from it. He had friends, among women as well as men. No American has written more eloquently and truthfully of friendship than he. If his life seems a restricted one, it was a thousand times wider and deeper than the life of the ordi-

nary American today. He lost nothing by not mingling with the crowd, by not devouring the newspapers, by not enjoying the radio or the movies, by not having an automobile, a refrigerator, a vacuum cleaner. He not only did not lose anything through the lack of these things but he actually enriched himself in a way far beyond the ability of the man of today who is glutted with these dubious comforts and conveniences. Thoreau lived, whereas we may be said to barely exist. In power and depth, his thought not only matches that of our contemporaries, but usually surpasses it. In courage and virtue there are none among our leading spirits today to match him. As a writer, he is among the first three or four we can boast of. Viewed now from the heights of our decadence, he seems almost like an early Roman. The word virtue has meaning again, when connected with his name.

It is the young people of America who may profit from his homely wisdom, from his example even more. They need to be reassured that what was possible then is still possible today. America is still a vastly unpopulated country, a land abounding in forests, streams, lakes, deserts, mountains, prairies, rivers, where a man of good-will with a little effort and belief in his own powers can enjoy a deep, tranquil, rich life – provided he go his own way. He need not and should not think of making a good living, but rather of creating a good life for himself. The wise men always return to the soil; one has only to think of the great men of India, China and France, their poets, sages, artists, to realize how deep is this need in every man. I am thinking, naturally, of creative types, for the others will gravitate to their own unimaginative levels, never suspecting that life holds any better promise. I think of the budding American poets, sages and artists because they appear so appallingly helpless in this present-day American world. They all wonder so naïvely how they will live if they do not hire themselves out to some task-master; they wonder still more how, after doing that, they will ever find time to do what they were called to do. They never think any more of going into the desert or the wilderness, of wresting a living from the soil, of doing odd jobs, of living on as little as possible. They remain in the towns and cities, flitting from one thing to another, restless, miserable, frustrated, searching in vain for a way out. They ought to be told at the outset that society, as it

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is now constituted, provides no way out, that the solution is in their own hands and that it can be won only by the use of their own two hands. One has to hack his way out with the axe. The real wilderness is not out there somewhere, but in the towns and cities, in that complicated web which we have made of life and which serves no purpose but to thwart, cramp and inhibit the free spirits. Let a man believe in himself and he will find a way to exist despite the barriers and traditions which hem him in. The America of Thoreau's day was just as contemptuous of, just as hostile to, his experiment as we are today to any one who essays it. Undeveloped as the country was then, men were lured from all regions, all walks of life, by the discovery of gold in California. Thoreau stayed at home where he cultivated his own mine. He had only to go a few miles to be deep in the heart of Nature. For most of us, no matter where we live in this great country, it is still possible to travel but a few miles and find oneself in Nature. I have travelled the length and breadth of the land, and if I was impressed by one thing it was by this – that America is empty. It is also true, to be sure, that nearly all this empty space is owned by some one or other – banks, railroads, insurance companies and so on. It is almost impossible to wander off the beaten path without "trespassing" on private property. But that nonsense would soon cease if people began to get up on their hind legs and desert the towns and cities. John Brown and a bare handful of men virtually defeated the entire population of America. It was the Abolitionists who freed the slaves, not the armies of Grant and Sherman, not Abraham Lincoln. There is no ideal condition of life to step into anywhere at any time. Everything is difficult, and everything becomes more difficult still when you choose to live your own life. But, to live one's own life is still the best way of life, always was, and always will be. The greatest snare and delusion is to postpone living your own life until an ideal form of government is created which will permit every one to lead the good life. Lead the good life now, this instant, every instant, to the best of your ability and you will bring about indirectly and unconsciously a form of government nearer to the ideal.

Because Thoreau laid such emphasis on conscience and on active resistance, one is apt to think of his life as bare and grim. One forgets that he was a man who shunned work as much as

possible, who knew how to idle his time away. Stern moralist that he was, he had nothing in common with the professional moralists. He was too deeply religious to have anything to do with the Church, just as he was too much the man of action to bother with politics. Similarly he was too rich in spirit to think of amassing wealth, too courageous, too self-reliant, to worry about security and protection. He found, by opening his eyes, that life provides everything necessary for man's peace and enjoyment – one has only to make use of what is there, ready to hand, as it were. "Life is bountiful," he seems to be saying all the time. "*Relax!* Life is here, all about you, not there, not over the hill."

He found Walden. But Walden is everywhere, if the man himself is there. Walden has become a symbol. It should become a reality. Thoreau himself has become a symbol. But he was only a man, let us not forget that. By making him a symbol, by raising memorials to him, we defeat the very purpose of his life. Only by living our own lives to the full can we honor his memory. We should not try to imitate him but to surpass him. Each one of us has a totally different life to lead. We should not strive to become like Thoreau, nor even like Jesus Christ, but to become what we are in truth and in essence. That is the message of every great individual and the whole meaning of being an individual. To be anything less is to move nearer to nullity.

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