

THOREAU'S COMIC STRATEGY:  
A STUDY OF THOREAU'S USE OF HUMOR IN WALDEN

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A Thesis

Presented to

the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English  
University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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by  
Anthony Fields Montgomery  
April, 1974

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Thoreau's Walden is one of the rare volumes of American literature that has won universal acclaim as a classic. A prominent feature of the book, which has greatly contributed to its acceptance as a prose masterpiece is Thoreau's skillful use of humor. Thoreau's humor in Walden is the source of the book's enduring freshness; it is the magic elixir which gives this artistic narrative a timeless quality. This thesis, therefore, will examine Thoreau's use of humor in Walden, base this examination on representative pieces of evidence from the text, and establish that Thoreau's artful utilization of humor has been the proper strategy for maintaining the narrative and a contributing factor to its general excellence and universal appeal.

Although Thoreau's humor pervades the work and enhances its effectiveness, scant critical attention has been paid to this important facet. Some critics who have been concerned with the book have either questioned, misconceived, ignored, or denied Thoreau's humor, while others have mentioned it only in passing. A review of representative critical and biographical estimates of Thoreau serves to resolve much of the misapprehension and general neglect of his humor and show that an awareness of this pervasive quality is basic to a complete evaluation of Thoreau's literary genius.

Before any attempt can be made to examine Thoreau's humor in Walden,

the exact nature of it must be fully understood. Consequently, a brief examination of the over-all purpose of humor followed by a relatively close analysis of the nature and extent of Thoreau's humor will help in understanding Thoreau's own purpose in making humor such an indispensable part of his book.

As its major task, this thesis will examine Thoreau's use of humor in Walden and show how humor functions as the proper strategy for sustaining his work. Walden's strength as a classic stems primarily from Thoreau's use of humor in the form of comic devices. These comic elements allow Thoreau to shape and unify his narrative while enhancing its comic appeal. Moreover, the clever use of these elements functions as the perfect strategy for maintaining the narrative. The strategy of humor enables Thoreau to lighten his transcendental philosophy and make it more acceptable to his reader, chastise the foibles and weaknesses of his audience without losing them, render pleasant, amusing deviations in his writing, and encourage his readers in their search for ideals while with genial mirth reconciling them to the shortcomings they may encounter in their quest.

The novelty and interest of Walden lies, to be sure, in Thoreau's pervasive humor. Humor allows the pages of the book to come alive, to crackle close at hand. It permits Thoreau to affirm his philosophy through a ludicrously comic impression, while inviting the reader to share an awareness of the realities of life in relation to what life should ideally be. The quality and excellence of Walden is thus determined by the significance of the inherent humor, by the skill and consistency of its use, and by the profundity and aptness of its artistic expression.

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Humor is not so distinct a quality . . .  
but allied to every, even the divinest faculty.  
Henry David Thoreau

## INTRODUCTION

Henry David Thoreau's Walden stands as one of the most significant pieces of literature of its century, a seminal work of rich literary integrity and high artistic dimensions which has achieved universal acceptance as a classic prose masterpiece. A major facet of the book, which has contributed to its over-all excellence and universal appeal, is Thoreau's skillful use of humor. Throughout Walden Thoreau utilizes almost every aspect of humor available to the writer and has thus devised a perfect strategy for maintaining his narrative--a comic strategy which prevents his book, celebrating the beneficence of life and the value of the individual from becoming solemn or didactic, cloying or pompous, and which enables laughter, or some reaction akin to it, to give an added dimension to a reader's perception of the quality of life and the divinity inherent in man.

The general valuation of Thoreau's Walden has risen steadily over the past century to a point where its excellence is no longer disputed, yet since Thoreau's time there has been a general lack of accord among Thoreau critics as to precisely what has rendered this work excellent. As this thesis contends, Thoreau's use of humor is a major factor responsible for the enduring quality of Walden, an important facet too often questioned, misunderstood, and even denied. By a too literal reading of Thoreau, some of his critics, from James Russell Lowell on down, have



made the error of either failing to detect his humor or denying the possibility of its existence altogether. On the other hand, there are those scholars who admit the existence of Thoreau's humor, but do not know what to make of it; consequently, by their lack of understanding, these men have added to the complexity of the critical views of Thoreau and have caused his humor to be relegated to a place of minor importance. Not until the turn of the century did another group of critics not only take notice of Thoreau's humor but also realize that this humorous aspect of Thoreau's writing was an essential part of Thoreau in general and Walden in particular. And so, for the first time, scholars began to recognize the importance of humor in Thoreau's work as well as its underlying purpose and realize that Thoreau's shrewd wisdom, hyperbolic style, and innate sense of humor became the appropriate expression of his essential nature.

Before any successful attempt can be made to illustrate how Thoreau employs humor in Walden and how humor functions as the proper strategy in maintaining his narrative, the exact nature of Thoreau's humor must be fully understood. Therefore, this thesis will render a brief examination of the nature and extent of Thoreau's humor, as revealed not only by those in close association with him but also by Thoreau himself, in order to help in understanding the basic characteristics of his humor as well as his purpose in making it an indispensable part of his writing. Much evidence exists to show Thoreau possessed and maintained a healthy sense of humor the nature and extent of which is revealed by certain primary and secondary sources at hand. Not only are there many recorded

instances in Thoreau's life which will most certainly bear witness to his prevailing humor, but also there exists much secondary evidence, based on the writings of those in close association with Thoreau, which gives penetrating insight into the nature and extent of his humor. Moreover, apart from Walden there exists much primary evidence in Thoreau's other writings which reveals the essential nature and characteristic flavor of his humor coupled with his various attitudes toward it.

From a review, then, of Thoreau criticism and an examination of the nature of his humor, it will be shown that Thoreau maintained throughout his life a fresh and witty sense of humor which remained as an essential part of his writing. However, the major task of this study will be to consider how Thoreau artistically employs humor, mainly in the form of comic devices, throughout Walden, the work on which his fame primarily rests, and to show how these humorous elements function as the correct strategy for sustaining this classic work.

Throughout his narrative of Walden Pond, Thoreau uses just about every comic device available to an author, ranging from the comic narrator technique, paradoxical statement, wordplay, understatement, verbal irony, and comic exaggeration to mock-heroics, humorous caricature, altered proverbs and rhymes, Swiftian satire, whimsical comparison and sententious statement. Without the generous sprinkling of these comic elements, Walden would be like so much spice without its savor. If Thoreau had simply left an account of one man's life in the woods, or a record of the flaws of society, or even an exercise in nature-loving

balanced by a collection of inspirational tidbits, Walden would not have lasted the test of time. As things turned out, however, Thoreau took man's dilemma in society, man's ability for transcending his human limitations, and man's relation to nature, and mingled these matters with a fresh and savory admixture of comic spirit and vigor. By masterfully employing these strategies of humor, Thoreau has produced an original and flavorful dish from which readers could draw sustenance during a famished age.

Undoubtedly, Thoreau's most immediate problem in Walden was to sustain a first person narrative glorifying the goodness of life and the divine aspect of the individual in such a way that it would not become cloying or satiated. His solution to this problem was to devise a comic strategy so that humor would make his transcendental philosophy more palatable to his readers. Since Thoreau believed that the general function of humor should be to act as a leaven which would render serious writing digestible, he consciously and skillfully designs his narrator as a comic figure so that laughter would help facilitate a reader's acceptance of the dignity of life and worth of the individual. Thoreau likewise held that humor could function as a mild ridicule of his own and others excessive tendencies. By cleverly employing such devices as comic exaggeration, mock-heroics, paradox, satire, wordplay, verbal irony, and sententious statement Thoreau can chastise his readers without losing them and invite them to laugh with him, not at the bizarre or unique, but at the common and conventional follies of mankind. Similarly, Thoreau felt that humor could, at times, serve as a pleasant,

amusing, or otherwise entertaining diversion in writing. With understatement he can keep his satiric passages free of bitterness and qualify the lyric passages by providing a setting that keeps them from becoming cloyingly sweet, while with humorous characterization, whimsical metaphor, altered rhymes and proverbs, and less serious wordplays he can enliven sections of relatively straightforward narrative.

One last function of Thoreau's humor in Walden, not linked with any particular comic device, seems to be the reconciliation of the real and ideal. Many passages in Walden reflect the notion that most men are not satisfied with a rational account of human experience, and although they seek the same assurance in the ideal as they experience in the actual, they never capture more than a fleeting glimpse. These same passages, then, seem to contain an underlying humor which functions to encourage the reader in his search for the ideal, but, at the same time, acts as a safety-valve reconciling him either to partial success or utter failure.

As the pages of this thesis unfold, the reader will come to recognize that humor is an indispensable part of Thoreau's literary genius. In Walden Thoreau's humor lends itself to the apt expression of his ideas, guards against didacticism and petty sentimentality, and gives resiliency and balance to the work as a whole. Humor then is Thoreau's most genuine quality; it is the factor which makes Walden most persuasive, most interesting, and most enduring.

## I. THE QUESTION OF THOREAU'S HUMOR

At present, few scholars will question the fact that Thoreau's Walden ranks as one of the indisputable masterpieces of American literature. Yet since Thoreau's time there has been a general lack of agreement among Thoreau critics as to precisely what has rendered this work excellent. As this thesis contends, Thoreau's use of humor is a major factor responsible for the enduring quality of Walden, an important facet of Thoreau's literary genius too often questioned, misunderstood, neglected, and even denied. This general disregard for Thoreau's humor becomes apparent when one considers that almost everyone who has written about Thoreau has attempted to prove some particular point--that he was a recluse or not a recluse, a skulker or humanist, imitator or egotist, naturalist or poet, crusader or stoic--and have thus overlooked the very aspect which has made his most famous work endure, a compelling prose style polished and seasoned by a shrewd wit and prevailing humor. As a result, much of the early criticism, and even some of the latter, has either been marked by a singular combination of misunderstanding, misreading, lack of appreciation, ignorance, and personal prejudice, or been left tainted by too good intentions from patronizing friends who speak with more enthusiasm than judgement. Hence, a brief review of representative critical and biographical estimates of Thoreau will serve to clarify much of the controversy over Thoreau's humor and show that humor is certainly an

integral part of Thoreau in general and Walden in particular.

Because of a too literal reading of Thoreau, many of his critics, from Briggs, Emerson, Lowell, and Stevenson on down to Van Doren and Miller, have made the error of either failing to detect his humor or denying the possibility of its existence altogether. For example, in 1854 Putnam's Monthly published a review of Walden, entitled "A Yankee Diogenes," written by Charles Frederick Briggs, a friend of James Russell Lowell. It was Briggs who saw to the publication of Lowell's A Fable for Critics in 1848, which said of Thoreau:

There comes \_\_\_\_\_, for instance; to see him's rare  
sport,  
Tread in Emerson's tracks with legs painfully short;  
How he jumps, how he strains, and gets red in the face  
To keep step with the mystagogues natural pace!  
He follows as close as a stick to a rocket,  
His fingers exploring this prophet's each pocket.  
Fie, for shame, brother bard! With good fruit of  
your own  
Can't you let Neighbor Emerson's orchard alone?<sup>1</sup>

Briggs was a man who patterned himself after the ideas expounded by Lowell, and in his review of Walden added to the initial charge of imitating Emerson the allegation that Thoreau was an eccentric egotist and imposter, lacking sincerity and consistency in his praise of the simple life. This contemptuous reviewer is quick to point out that Thoreau is "happy enough to get back among the good people of Concord," and, "although he paints his shanty-life in rose-colored tints, we do not believe he liked it, else why not stick to it?"<sup>2</sup> Somewhat later Briggs goes on

<sup>1</sup> James Russell Lowell, "A Fable for Critics," in The Writings of James Russell Lowell (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1890), IX, 42.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Frederick Briggs, "A Yankee Diogenes," Putnam's Monthly, 4 (Oct. 1854), rpt. in S. A. Jones, ed., Pertaining to Thoreau (1901; rpt. Folcroft, Pa.: The Folcroft Press, Inc., 1969), p. 36.

to say that "though we have called him a Yankee Diogenes, the only personage to whom he bears a decided resemblance is that good humored creation of Dickens, Mark Tapley, whose delight was being jolly under difficulties."<sup>3</sup> Concluding his review, Briggs regards Thoreau's propensity toward deliberate privation at Walden Pond as nothing more than a symptom of "a true vagabondish disposition," and, "if there had been a camp of gypsies in the neighborhood of Concord," he feels quite sure Thoreau "would have been a king among them."<sup>4</sup>

Clearly Briggs' detractions of Thoreau are based on a mere surface reading of Walden, and if his review seems almost a partial echo of Lowell's appraisal of Thoreau in A Fable for Critics, published six years earlier, one may rest assured that the similarity is not wholly accidental. As previously mentioned, Briggs and Lowell were mutual friends, and Briggs had a particular interest in A Fable for Critics, having received, as James Wood relates, the copyright to that work from the author.<sup>5</sup> He therefore was quite familiar with the text, and certainly could not have been ignorant of Lowell's depiction of Thoreau as one of Emerson's "imitators in scores," one whose lack of ambition, according to Lowell, was more properly a turn for laziness.<sup>6</sup>

Such allegations appear too ostensibly absurd to require more

<sup>3</sup> Briggs, pp. 41-42.

<sup>4</sup> Briggs, p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> James Playsted Wood, "English and American Criticism of Thoreau," New England Quarterly, 6 (1933), 734.

<sup>6</sup> Lowell, "A Fable for Critics," pp. 41-42.

refutation than the mere mention that Briggs obviously read Thoreau literally and that his close association with Lowell, the most infamous of Thoreau's detractors, influenced most of his shallow conclusions. But less conceivable is how such an astute man as Ralph Waldo Emerson could likewise misread Thoreau and interrupt the sane and penetrating comments in his biographical sketch, "Thoreau," to give sanction to the unjust complaint of his friend's supposed indolence. "I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of action," says Emerson, "that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was captain of a huckleberry party. Pounding beans is good to the end of pounding empires one of these days; but if, at the end of years, it is still only beans."<sup>7</sup> Exactly what kind of engineering Emerson had in mind is neither clear nor definite, and this statement seems all the more vague when one considers that Thoreau was the wisest judge of his own powers, as time has proven, having conferred a far greater benefit on humanity by writing Walden than he could ever have done by engineering for all America.

Although Emerson's final estimate of Thoreau is clouded in parts, the tone of disappointment and perplexity is unmistakable, speaking well of the impediment that always existed between these two friends, and confirming the weakness of Briggs and Lowell's over-simplified view of Thoreau as Emerson's imitator. Apart from some obvious similarities,

<sup>7</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thoreau," Atlantic Monthly, 10 (Aug. 1862), rpt. in Owen Thomas, ed., Walden and Civil Disobedience (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1966), p. 279.



which Lowell and others have exaggerated out of proportion, their differences, as Joel Porte so painstakingly points out, prove ultimately insuperable.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, Thoreau could write unhesitatingly of Emerson, in the privacy of his Journal, "There is no such general critic of men and things, no such trustworthy and faithful man" (Journal, I, 432).<sup>9</sup> Yet, at the same time, the humorless solemnity and grandeur of Emerson's own behavior always kept Thoreau somewhat aloof. As Thoreau whimsically reflects, "I doubt if Emerson could trundle a wheelbarrow through the streets because it would be out of character. One needs to have a comprehensive character" (Journal, III, 250). Thoreau's own comical analysis of the problem may be found in an additional passage from the Journal: "Talked, or tried to talk with R. W. E. Lost my time--nay, almost my identity. He, assuming a false opposition where there was no difference of opinion, talked to the wind--told me what I knew--and I lost my time trying to imagine myself somebody else to oppose him" (Journal, V, 188).

The crux of the whole matter is that Emerson was likewise guilty of

<sup>8</sup> For an in-depth discussion of Emerson's and Thoreau's basic discrepancies see Chapter Five of Joel Porte's Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict (Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 93-130.

<sup>9</sup> All references in this thesis to Thoreau's writings are to the "Walden Edition" of The Writings of Henry David Thoreau, 20 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1906). References to Thoreau's writings exclusive of the Journal will hereafter be cited parenthetically in the text as Works along with volume and page numbers. References to Thoreau's Journal will hereafter be cited in the text as Journal, again, along with volume and page numbers. Since Thoreau's Journal comprises volumes VII to XX of the Writings, it is renumbered separately in publication I to XIV; the latter numbering is thus adopted in this study.

misreading Thoreau. The object of Thoreau's existence was not the chancellorship of any huckleberry party, nor ministry of any bean-field. His ambition rested in an intense desire to represent himself in his writings, which imparted a freshness and delightful comic spirit as alive as nature itself. Accomplishing as perfectly as lay in his power what his business was, Thoreau's whole being fitted in with the task he undertook--certainly as manifest a destiny as any man's ever was. Conforming to the role of perennial teacher, Emerson was forever eager to demonstrate that Thoreau would have been better and wiser had he done this or omitted that, but the fact remains that Thoreau had a lucid and definite goal before him which he followed with unfaltering earnest.

In an essay which was ostensibly a review of Thoreau's Letters to Various Persons, James Russell Lowell issued probably the most damning analysis of Thoreau ever published. Previous to this publication, Lowell in his Fable for Critics already gave an indication of his estimate of Thoreau as a conscious imitator; consequently, none of Thoreau's virtues would seem to have been apparent to Lowell when he penned this notorious essay on Thoreau appearing in North American Review almost twenty years later. Lowell's essay, which has been variously denounced as one of the most hostile and ludicrous judgements in the history of American literary criticism, resolved into a scathing diatribe against Thoreau as a shanty man and solitaire, an arrogant rustic and hypocrite, and, above all, a pretentious imitator and humorless mystagogue, proficient only in being misty.<sup>10</sup> Walter Harding maintains that Lowell entertained a prejudice

<sup>10</sup> For solid arguments against Lowell's criticism of Thoreau the

against Thoreau occasioned by Thoreau's quarrel with Lowell over the editing of his "Chesuncook" when it appeared in Lowell's Atlantic Monthly, and cites a comment from Emerson as proof of this prejudice: "Lowell . . . had a good deal of self consciousness," says Emerson, "and never forgave . . . Thoreau for wounding it."<sup>11</sup> However, Lowell's criticism remains more than just an outburst of personal bigotry. His essay seems more the result of a lack of sympathy and gross inability to perceive Thoreau's point of view, coupled with a strict literal reading, a reading which carelessly or deliberately ignores the paradoxical and exaggerative humor which pervades not only Walden but most of Thoreau's prose works.

In one of those biting characterizations for which he is noted, Lowell begins his essay with a contemptuous designation of Thoreau as one of "the pistillate plants kindled to fruitage by Emersonian pollen," one who "has picked his strawberries from Emerson's garden."<sup>12</sup> That Thoreau was to a degree influenced by Emerson cannot be negated, for

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reader is referred to the following sources: John Albert Macy, The Spirit of American Literature (New York: Doubleday, Page, and Co., 1908), p. 171; Norman Foerster, Nature in American Literature (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1923), pp. 128-31; and Odell Shephard ed., The Heart of Thoreau's Journals (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1927), p. ix. No single estimate of Thoreau has been more attended by critics than Lowell's, which had the effect of deferring a full appreciation of Thoreau for many years to come. These sources, therefore, though only representative, will give the reader a sample of the resentment by critics over Lowell's unjust and damaging appraisal.

<sup>11</sup> Cited by Walter Harding in Thoreau: A Century of Criticism (Dallas: Southern Methodist Univ. Press, 1954), p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> James Russell Lowell, "Thoreau," North American Review, 101 (Oct. 1965), rpt. in Owen Thomas, ed., Walden and Civil Disobedience (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1966), p. 285.

there can be no doubt that Emerson exercised a rather subtle and indomitable influence on all who came into contact with him. But that Thoreau was a mere imitator and imposter, whose writings, beliefs, and philosophy were a bare image or refraction of his brilliant contemporary, is hard to fathom. To be sure, both men possessed some similar aspects, yet they were miles apart in many essentials; and surely anyone with even a second-hand knowledge of their more familiar works would have to concede that Thoreau was not a disciple emulating his master but an original genius. Thus the charge of imitation, fostered by Lowell, seems rather groundless and untenable.

Focusing the bulk of his review on Walden, Lowell asserts somewhat later that "Thoreau's shanty life was a mere impossibility, as far as his own conception of it goes, of an entire independency of mankind," and he states further that "his experiment actually presupposed all that complicated civilization which it theoretically abjured," triumphantly pointing out, "He squatted on another man's land; he borrows an axe, his boards, his nails, his bricks, his mortar, his books, his fish-hooks, his plough, his hoe."<sup>13</sup> But if Thoreau did not squat on someone's land, the failure of that action would presuppose the purchase of land, involving bargain and sale, transferral of deeds and money, a means which would come nearer to "all that complicated society" than mere squatting. Furthermore, Lowell's preposterous demand that Thoreau should have made his own axe, mix his own mortar, bake his own bricks, forge his own plow, and write his own library before he went into the woods for a little

<sup>13</sup> Lowell, "Thoreau," p. 292.

contemplation seems too severe a requirement. It is a wonder why Lowell stopped at this point and did not carry his absurd argument further by insisting that Thoreau don a fig-leaf and revert to the stone age, or even burrow for a while in the earth like a mole.

It may be justly said, that from the publication of his first book, Thoreau was confronted by a really formidable antagonist in the person of Lowell, whose chief weapon, ridicule, had the effect of obscuring Thoreau's own gift of humor and satire. As a rule, satirists are not generally prone to mutual admiration unless they agree closely as to what should be satirized, and in this respect never were there two men more widely and hopelessly apart. Yet Lowell's unjust criticism, which lampoons Thoreau's character and ethical opinions and ridicules his supposed misanthropy, emulation, indolence, and insincerity, is more than just a surface discord as to what is most ridiculous in human behavior. The whole essay, contrary to what Austin Warren might have one believe in his weak defense of Lowell's criticism, is rather the direct result of a genuine failure on Lowell's part to realize the humorous element in Thoreau's character and writings.<sup>14</sup> And it is this element of humor which Lowell either consciously or unconsciously chooses to ignore that both explains and answers his charges. Moreover, Lowell not only fails to detect Thoreau's humor but also denies its existence, and

<sup>14</sup> Austin Warren in "Lowell on Thoreau," Studies in Philology, 27 (1930), 442-61, defends Lowell's review on the grounds that Lowell took the point of view of a socially-conscious humanist who regarded Thoreau as a local example of romanticism, an attitude toward life of which the former heartily disapproved. This defense is hard to accept for neither Lowell nor Warren ever indicate that they are aware of the dimensions of Thoreau's own humanism, of the real reasons why he went to Walden, and of Thoreau's deep, genuine concern for the wastage of human life he perceived going on about him.

in the extremity of his irritation he comes to the final conclusion that "Thoreau had no humor."<sup>15</sup>

Next to Lowell's, the best known hostile criticism of Thoreau has come from Robert Louis Stevenson who in 1880 issued a review in Cornhill Magazine entitled "Henry David Thoreau: His Character and Opinions." With this essay Stevenson has presumed to reveal Thoreau's philosophy, personality, and disposition substantiated only by a perusal of the published letters, Walden, Emerson's biographical sketch, and by a cursory examination of a badly conceived and executed wood-cut of his subject. The essay begins with a feeble attempt by Stevenson at phrenological analysis:

Thoreau's thin, penetrating, big-nosed face, even in a bad wood-cut, conveys some hint of the limitations of his mind, and character. With his almost acid sharpness of insight, with his almost animal dexterity in act, there went none of that large, unconscious geniality of the world's heroes. He was not easy, not ample, not urbane, not even kind; his enjoyment was hardly smiling, or the smile was not broad enough to be convincing.<sup>16</sup>

Stevenson's chief complaint, however, is not just that Thoreau seemed to lack humor, but that he was antisocial. Stevenson believes he perceives almost a rude nobility, like that of a primitive monarch, in the steadfast confidence Thoreau had in himself and in his assumed indifference to the needs, thoughts, and hardships of others. This belief thus leads the reviewer to state positively, "In one word Thoreau was a

<sup>15</sup> Lowell, "Thoreau," p. 289.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, "Henry David Thoreau: His Character and Opinions," Cornhill Magazine, 41 (June 1880), rpt. in Walter Harding, ed., Thoreau: A Century of Criticism (Dallas: Southern Methodist Univ. Press, 1954), p. 59.

skulker. He did not wish virtue to go out of him among his fellow-men, but slunk into a corner to hoard it for himself."<sup>17</sup> Walden, of course, is the foundation for Stevenson's screed; yet it is plain that many key passages of the book must have been glossed over and many others simply misread, for Stevenson never really points out in what respect Thoreau's retirement to the woods shows apathy to the wants and sufferings of others. Thoreau, as he was constituted, was better able to help his fellow man by living his own life as perfectly as possible than by any pretentious acts of charity, and to use a paradoxical term, right here lies the very unselfishness of Thoreau's suspected selfishness.

Sometime after Stevenson published this detraction in Cornhill Magazine, it caught the interest of Thoreau scholar, Dr. A. H. Japp, and this gentleman, as Wendell Glick recounts, immediately took the detractor to task.<sup>18</sup> As a result, when the essay was reprinted in the collection entitled Familiar Studies of Men and Books, Stevenson wrote a short preface appended to the essay, in which he retracted a number of his misconceptions about Thoreau, attributing them to "an admirable instance of the 'point of view' forced throughout, and of the earnest reflection on imperfect facts."<sup>19</sup> More specifically, he states:

I have scarce written ten sentences since I was introduced to him, but his influence might be somewhere detected by a close observer. Still it was as a writer that I had made

<sup>17</sup> Stevenson, "Henry David Thoreau," pp. 60-61.

<sup>18</sup> See "Preface" to Wendell Glick, ed., The Recognition of Henry David Thoreau (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1969), p. xi.

<sup>19</sup> See "Stevenson's Recantation" in Walter Harding, ed., Thoreau: A Century of Criticism (Dallas: Southern Methodist Univ. Press, 1954), p. 84.

his acquaintance; I took him on his explicit terms and when I learned details of his life, they were, by nature of the case and my own parti pris, read even with a certain violence in terms of his writings. There could scarce be a perversion more justifiable than that; yet it was still a perversion.<sup>20</sup>

Stevenson's excuse for his initial misreading of Thoreau is especially pertinent to the argument that Thoreau is too frequently misread and misconstrued. Moreover, his retraction is a good example of how easily deduced inferences, based on a surface reading, can often miss the bed-rock of fact. Only when Stevenson realized that Thoreau was not to be taken literally, did he learn that Thoreau's retreat to Walden Pond was not the selfish conduct of a humorless skulker, but the conscious design of a concerned man who wished to improve his neighbors by improving himself in order to serve mankind in the highest sense.

Unfortunately, Stevenson's recantation, which he appended to later editions of his essay in book form, is almost completely unknown and seldom read. Consequently, to this day its author is remembered, along with Briggs, Emerson, and Lowell, as one of the four most influential in shaping the public opinion of Thoreau during most of the nineteenth century. Even though he retracted many of his initial charges, Stevenson left with his first essay the false impression which crystallized in people's minds the picture of Thoreau as an antisocial person and humorless skulker.

The distorted notions of Thoreau's character and writings did not stop with the estimates of Briggs, Emerson, Lowell, and Stevenson. In 1916 the famous critic Mark Van Doren carried some of the views of Thoreau,

<sup>20</sup> "Stevenson's Recantation," p. 84.



propounded by these influential critics, into the twentieth century with his Henry David Thoreau: A Critical Study, an étude which marked Thoreau as a sullen, repining man suffering from loneliness and plagued by continual dissatisfaction. To Van Doren, Thoreau is in the main "an expansive bore," with a saving "genius only for the specific."<sup>21</sup> Throughout his book, he looks upon Thoreau as a bitterly disappointed man, speculating all the while that Thoreau's personal life was marred by a certain imbalance. Like Stevenson, Van Doren considers Thoreau an antisocial person, who inhabited a vacuum and spent his life adroitly defending his choice of habitation. The end result for Van Doren is that "Thoreau's main product was nothing and his main effort vain."<sup>22</sup>

Apart from Lowell's and Stevenson's hostile attacks, one will look in vain for criticism of Thoreau more demolishing than Van Doren's volume. Though Van Doren reluctantly concedes that Thoreau is often taken too literally, causing the skill, variety and flavor of his expression to be often neglected, this outspoken critic remains guilty of the same error he condemns, when he concludes that in the final analysis Thoreau's work seems ultimately futile and somewhat less than adequate. If Van Doren really understood the stylistic method and content of Walden, he would never have reached such an inane conclusion. Instead of admitting Walden's full complexity and pervasive humor, he chooses to concentrate upon an escapist aspect of the book, as proof of

<sup>21</sup> Mark Van Doren, Henry David Thoreau: A Critical Study (1916; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), p. 67.

<sup>22</sup> Van Doren, p. 109.

Thoreau's repining nature and preferred solitude, at the expense of the larger philosophical implications so neatly conceived and so skillfully and variously expressed. Few writers have been more misunderstood than Thoreau, and certainly to dismiss this great author as nothing but a misanthropic recluse whose main work conveys nothing is to admit a complete misunderstanding of Thoreau and the whole Walden episode. For if this classic prose work does anything of lasting value, it persuades men to re-examine their lives, to become more aware of their inner selves, and this call to action remains the most liberating and exhilarating thing Thoreau had to offer--not a plea for escape, but a great discovery and gift.

As a final representative estimate of the misconception of Thoreau and the failure to detect his humor, one can cite Perry Miller's Consciousness in Concord in which the author regards Thoreau as a kind of Romantic egoist bound to an unhappy end and thereby reaches the conclusion that Walden finishes, not on an optimistic note, but in tortured irony, symbolized by the thawing sandbank as a scene foredoomed to sterility. Through the first part of the book, Miller presents a rather unperceptive and inadequate commentary of Thoreau, whom he detects in the course of "circumventing death, evading woman, discounting friendship" and committing himself after initial failures to a principle of anticipation in Walden.<sup>23</sup> "All Walden," Miller relates, "is an adroitly suspended anticipation of the climax of thawing sand and clay."<sup>24</sup> In

<sup>23</sup> Perry Miller, Consciousness in Concord (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1958), p. 127.

<sup>24</sup> Miller, p. 104.

place of admiring the method that produced the great writing and unity of Walden, Miller terms it a vice, believing Thoreau's writing to be too contrived and rigid. For Miller, then, Walden becomes a highly schematized though cunningly disguised "song of death" and "paeon of resurrection" deliberately brought to "its climax in a slime of sand."<sup>25</sup>

No conscientious reader of Thoreau is likely to follow Miller in believing any of these ludicrous contentions, for to do so would require the rejection of more reasonable and less narrow interpretations. Some of the inferences in the commentary are clearly wrong, such as that Thoreau agonized over his writing, that his whole life was plagued by disappointment, and even that Thoreau was not only shiftless but dangerously irresponsible because of a fire over which he and Edward Hoar were cooking escaped into the woods. Accordingly, the prevailing tone of Miller's commentary is one of contempt, varied now and then by some patronizing commiseration. Although one will find a few admissions that the author of Concord wrote here and there a great passage, no inference is ever drawn that Thoreau was on that account, or any other account, a great writer. Through the entire course of Miller's commentary, Thoreau's debits are made regularly to cancel out his credits, and always Miller sees to it that Thoreau is, in one way or another, discredited. When referring to Walden, Miller never suspects that Thoreau might often be jesting, and with accents of self-assertion he selects to call Thoreau truculent, arrogant, and egotistical. Finally,

<sup>25</sup> Miller, 126.

with many erroneous speculations and assertions, this presumptuous critic makes it quite clear that he himself has not the faintest notion of what Thoreau meant in Walden, why he retreated there for a short time, and what he hoped to learn and experience during his stay. On the whole, Miller's Consciousness in Concord remains a rather hollow volume, written by a man who continues to demonstrate his own unconsciousness with regard to the very elements that make Thoreau worthy of remembrance.

The injustice of much of the foregoing criticism consists chiefly in the charges of imitation, eccentricity, egotism, inconsistency, cynicism, misanthropy, and above all, lack of humor, all of which have been brought about by a too literal reading of Thoreau. But in addition to those who fail to detect Thoreau's humor by reading him too literally, there are those scholars who admit the existence of his humor but do not know what to make of it. Consequently, by their lack of understanding they have augmented the complexity of the critical views of Thoreau and have caused his humor to be relegated to a place of minor importance. To make matters worse, some of the critics falling into the category were close personal friends of Thoreau, and in an earnest attempt to answer many of the slights against their comrade they rarely avoided a tone of patronage which left many of their own estimates of Thoreau tainted with good intentions.

The first significant evidence of Thoreau's humor is noted by his close friend and biographer William Ellery Channing in Thoreau: The Poet Naturalist. Though Channing refutes many of the earlier charges aimed at Thoreau by presenting adequate evidence of his friend's humor, much

of which will be offered later in this study, he remains to the end uncertain of Thoreau's purpose for employing it. Channing's perplexity is rather explicitly stated in a fragmentary preface in his notebook, cited by Henry Seidle Canby: "I have never been able to understand what he meant by his life . . . Why was he so much interested in the river and the woods and the sky & c. Something peculiar I judge."<sup>26</sup> A natural reaction to this statement is the argument that there is little prospect of discovering the true quality and purpose of Thoreau's humor over a hundred years after his death, when his most intimate friend and biographer, after years of association with him, was still dubious as to the real meaning of Thoreau's life, a "human enterprise," according to Channing, "which had been something miscellaneous."<sup>27</sup> But a plausible explanation of Channing's uncertainty can be deduced from the fact that in an over-zealous attempt to defend his friend from charges of eccentricity and misanthropy, Channing chooses to place emphasis on Thoreau as some sort of nature-poet rather than on Thoreau the literary artist who consistently asked and tried to answer in a light-hearted, humorous manner the most important question of all: how to live. This fact, patent enough to one who reads Thoreau without prepossession, has been obscured by Channing's hypersensitive reactions to the slights against his friend, by his cumbersome "interlocutory" chapters designed to "furnish a more familiar idea of Thoreau's walks and talks with his

<sup>26</sup> Cited by Henry Seidle Canby in his "Preview" to Thoreau (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1939), p. xii.

<sup>27</sup> William Ellery Channing, Thoreau: The Poet Naturalist (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1873), p. 318.

friends and their locality," and, most of all, by Channing's idle notion of Thoreau as primarily a poet-naturalist.<sup>28</sup>

Following in the wake of Channing's biography has come F. B. Sanborn's The Life of Henry David Thoreau, which gave further proof of Thoreau's humor but, like Channing's, failed to recognize his purpose for utilizing it. Since Sanborn lived in Concord and knew Thoreau personally, some of his comments on Thoreau's humor, though scattered and indistinct, are at times penetrative. For example, in the preface to the second edition of his book, Sanborn remarks that Thoreau's writing, especially in Walden, is characterized by a certain "felicity of expression," a prevalent "vigor and independence of thought," and a pleasing "quaintness of humor."<sup>29</sup> However, throughout his book Sanborn never pursues these observations, considering Thoreau's humor too self-evident to require demonstration. Instead, in a latter chapter, he simply admits the common misconception of Thoreau's humor, and with an apologetic overtone states "the mistake grew partly out of Thoreau's humorous way of expressing himself, and partly from the dullness of his hearer's and reader's," supporting this explanation with the sweeping assertion that "there was a lurking humor in almost all he said--a dry wit, often expressed, but not always understood."<sup>30</sup> And so, like Channing, Sanborn is aware of Thoreau's prevailing humor but does not

<sup>28</sup> Channing, p. 120.

<sup>29</sup> F. B. Sanborn, The Life of Henry David Thoreau, 2nd ed. (1882; rpt. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1917), p. xii.

<sup>30</sup> Sanborn, pp. 283-84.

know what to make of it and has caused an important aspect of Thoreau's writing to be shaded by a cloud of uncertainty.

The inability to understand Thoreau's humor after an initial recognition was not confined solely to Thoreau's patronizing friends, for many critics in the twentieth century were equally guilty of the same lack of discernment. Two such critics who remain as good representatives are Brooks Atkinson and Sherman Paul, both of whom acknowledge that humor exists in Thoreau's writings but lose ground in comprehending Thoreau's purpose. In 1927 Atkinson published his Henry Thoreau, The Cosmic Yankee, describing Thoreau as a thinker whose ideas might be considered valid for the current times as well as treating of him essentially as a nature writer and excursionist. Again, like previous critics, Atkinson gives testimony to the humorous aspect of Thoreau but fails in recognizing its central purpose. Missing the point of much of Thoreau's humor in Walden, he writes it off as nothing more than "pure truculence, as exhilarating shadow boxing."<sup>31</sup> Concluding his book, Atkinson is doubtful of whether Thoreau ever won happiness in the life scheme he devised. By the same token, Paul in The Shores of America finds much of the humor and optimism in Walden to be forced and unconvincing, viewing Thoreau's life after Walden as years of decay and disappointment. "For the harmony of relations," says Paul, "the organic life he had known at Walden, was behind him, and breakdown before him . . . Everything he wrote after the Walden years bore marks of the

<sup>31</sup> Brooks Atkinson, Henry Thoreau: The Cosmic Yankee (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927), p. 112.

difficulties."<sup>32</sup>

There is no need to enter a biographical dispute here, but the reader should note that for a man whose final years were painfully disappointing Thoreau had a remarkably cheerful way of dying. Asked by his aunt, as Walter Harding cites, if he had made his peace with God, Thoreau congenially answered, "I did not know we quarreled," and when asked by a concerned friend if he was getting glimpses of the next world to come, he remarked with comical reproof, "One world at a time."<sup>33</sup> As for regarding the humor of Walden forced and truculent, both Atkinson and Paul seem inconsistent in their views. In several places of their respective books, each seems quite sure Thoreau's humor and optimism served to mask his despondency but in other places each gives evidence against it. For this reason then, their arguments for despair, decay, and unhappiness are never made out. Clearly the disappointments of Thoreau's career, are written on its surface too easily interpreted by the phlegmatic reader who may overlook the strong faculties that underlie them. But these frustrations are not the tests by which writers like Thoreau can be judged. In the first place, any careful evaluation of Thoreau's life and works will reveal that Thoreau maintained a healthy, delightful sense of humor throughout his days, enjoying all the while the priceless success which consists in perfect serenity of mind. Secondly, he believed in the true value of his work and possessed an inward

<sup>32</sup> Sherman Paul, The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration (Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1958), p. 238.

<sup>33</sup> Walter Harding, A Thoreau Handbook (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1959), p. 15.



assurance it would ultimately be appreciated. Over more than a century which has passed since his death his fame has steadily increased and is destined to increase even further.

All of the criticism reviewed thusfar has been marked either by a failure to detect Thoreau's humor, or an inability to discern Thoreau's purpose for employing it. Each critic mentioned, intent upon proving some particular thesis about Thoreau, has glossed over the very aspect of Thoreau's writing which has made it endure, a compelling prose style flavored by an artistic use of humor. The majority of these critics have done no better than to coin curt, vague phrases about Thoreau such as "Yankee Diogenes," "Emersonian Imitator," "Huckleberry Captain," "Skulker," "Romantic Egoist," "Solitary," "Poet-Naturalist," and "Cosmic Yankee." Their criticism therefore leaves much unexplained; and the truth remains that their neglect either to touch upon or pursue the humorous element in Thoreau's character and works, which is far more central to a well-rounded interpretation of Thoreau than any speculation relating to his success or failure, philosophy or disposition, is a disabling awareness of a major aspect which makes Thoreau such an enduring writer.

Fortunately, the task of settling the controversy over Thoreau's humor has not been left solely in the hands of contemptuous detractors, patronizing friends, and indiscriminant scholars. Beginning around the turn of the century, another group of critics, spearheaded by such men as H. S. Salt and George Beardsley, not only took notice of Thoreau's humor but also realized that the humorous aspect in Thoreau's writing

was an essential part of the man and his works. Salt was the first critic to recognize the importance of humor in Thoreau's writing as well as its underlying purpose and in the prefatory note to his excellent biography, The Life of Henry David Thoreau, he declares: "My purpose has been to combine the various records and reminiscences of Thoreau, many of which are inaccessible to the majority of readers, and so to present what may supply a real want--a comprehensive account of his life, and a clear estimate of his ethical teaching."<sup>34</sup> Holding firm to his purpose, Salt not only gives an unusually comprehensive and accurate picture of Thoreau's life and character but also aptly deflects much of the Thoreau criticism from its inordinate preoccupation with the man and points it in the direction of the palpable ingredients which make Walden a great classic. Most significantly Salt concludes, "The brief, barbed, epigrammatic sentences which bristle throughout his writings, pungent with shrewd wisdom and humor, are the appropriate expression of his keen and thrifty nature."<sup>35</sup> In all, Salt's biography remains, even to this day, the most satisfactory single account of Thoreau's life and works, for it brings together those elements which are essential to a complete understanding of Thoreau and enables a just conception of his humor to be made.

In conjunction with Salt, a more intense statement concerning the importance of Thoreau's humor has come from George Beardsley in his

<sup>34</sup> H. S. Salt, The Life of Henry David Thoreau (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1890), p. vi.

<sup>35</sup> Salt, p. 262.

article "Thoreau as Humorist," in which Beardsley shows a penetrating insight into the serious purpose of Thoreau's humor as well as its calculated function. According to Beardsley,

It is a question if there exists another set of books (of wisdom, at least) so potent for smiles, even hearty laughs, as are the works of Henry D. Thoreau . . . Even those who have essayed to interpret him in criticism have not adequately reckoned with this phase of his genius . . . In "Walden," if the book be read with an eye to this element, one may enjoy a running feast of humor of a quality seldom matched in a book primarily serious . . . Let it be hoped that some day the appreciation will be general that this is a higher kind of humor than any machine output of our professional wits or comic papers. When understanding does come, and along with the comforts people swallow the pills of wisdom, Thoreau's cure for the world's ills will begin to take effect.<sup>36</sup>

Admittedly, Beardsley's argument, which asserts that Thoreau's humor is of a high order and the appreciation of "this phase of his genius" is essential to a complete understanding of the man and his works, is extremely valid. Beardsley likewise demonstrates a keen ability for discriminating between a piece of professional comic writing and a literary work of humorous wisdom such as Walden, and thus comes closer than any other previous critic to a sound recognition of the artistic quality of Thoreau's humor as well as its serious purpose.

The aspect of humor which Salt and Beardsley initially regarded as a vital element in Thoreau's writing has been further expounded through more recent times by such erudite critics as Henry Seidler Canby, Joseph Wood Krutch, James Paul Brawner, E. B. White, and J. Golden Taylor. Canby in his authoritative biography Thoreau accords Thoreau's humor

<sup>36</sup> George Beardsley, "Thoreau as Humorist," Dial, 28 (1900), 241-43.

favorable recognition by bringing a conspicuously broadened apprehension of this unique facet of Thoreau's genius. Contrary to the false observation that Thoreau was by and large a repining, sullen figure, bound to years of decay and frustration, Canby finds Thoreau as the happiest of the whole Concord group. Firmly believing that "a life of Thoreau must chiefly emphasize the creative thinker," Canby includes a detailed discussion of Thoreau as a writer, asserting that "his importance lies entirely in what he wrote not in what he did."<sup>37</sup> Holding to a view of Thoreau as a lifelong apprentice to the art of good writing, Canby concludes Thoreau had a "mind of infinite suggestiveness," excelled all moderns "in control over metaphor," possessed "the most manly, most common sense voice in America of his time," and was "the greatest critic of values among writers of English."<sup>38</sup> Appropriately then, out of the shadows and wraiths of inveterate interpretation, Canby's volume has drawn forth and molded a substantial, three-dimensional, believable Thoreau, an intensely human writer endowed with a prevailing comic spirit, and placed him in the front rank of American prose masters.

With his critical biography, Henry David Thoreau, Joseph Wood Krutch has again aptly stressed the significance of Thoreau's humor, especially in Walden, reasoning that it is "inseparable from his seriousness," for it remains as a "splendid means of saying what Thoreau profoundly believes."<sup>39</sup> Instead of propounding some thesis about Thoreau

<sup>37</sup> Canby, pp. XV-XX.

<sup>38</sup> Canby, pp. 449-51.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch, Henry David Thoreau (New York: William Sloan Ass., Inc., 1948), p. 284.

Krutch presents an eminently sane and delightful marshaling of those elements of Thoreau's genius which account for his present status, one element being the skillful ability to intermingle without incongruity humor with seriousness. To borrow Krutch's words, "it might be maintained that to unite without incongruity things ordinarily thought of as incongruous is the phenomenon called Thoreau, whether one is thinking of a personality or of a body of literary work. This is what constitutes his oneness, and the oneness of the man is the most important thing about him; is perhaps the man himself."<sup>40</sup>

In "Thoreau As Wit and Humorist" James Paul Brawner has further advanced the scholarship concerning the humor of Thoreau, by successfully demonstrating many instances of Thoreau's humor as well as substantiating the fact that Thoreau possessed a fresh and original wit which enabled his serious and impassioned writing in Walden to be received with better enthusiasm. Even though Brawner feels "it is incomprehensible that anyone could fail to find Thoreau pervasively witty and humorous," he proceeds with a detailed inquiry into the uniqueness of Thoreau's use of humor.<sup>41</sup> At all times he is aware the best of Thoreau's artistry lies precisely in that this great prose writer never bowed to a single exigency of writing or utilized a single humorous device without serious purpose.

Following Brawner's article has come E. B. White's pertinent essay,

<sup>40</sup> Krutch, p. 286.

<sup>41</sup> James Paul Brawner, "Thoreau as Wit and Humorist," South Atlantic Quarterly, 44 (1945), 171.

"Walden--1954," which recognizes Thoreau as the most delightful of New England figures and Walden the most humorous of books. Fully appreciating the comic skill of Thoreau, White finds Walden like "an invitation to life's dance, assuring the troubled recipient that no matter what befalls him in the way of success or failure he will always be welcome at the party--that the music is played for him too, if he will but listen and move his feet."<sup>42</sup> Honoring Thoreau's humor throughout his essay, White closes with an image of Thoreau which deftly summarizes his intense appeal:

Thoreau is unique among writers in that those who admire him find him uncomfortable to live with--a regular hairshirt of a man . . . . Hairshirt or no, he is a better companion than most, and I would not swap him for a soberer more reasonable friend even if I could. I can reread his famous invitation with undiminished excitement. The sad thing is that not more acceptances have been received, that so many decline for one reason or another, pleading some previous engagement or ill health. But the invitation still stands. It will beckon as long as this remarkable book stays in print--which will be as long as there are August afternoons in the intervals of a gentle rainstorm, as long as there are ears to catch the faint sounds of the orchestra.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, the greatest advancement in the study of Thoreau's humor to appear in recent years is J. Golden Taylor's Neighbor Thoreau's Critical Humor which succeeds in identifying Thoreau's humor and showing how it is the chief vehicle of his social criticism not only in Walden but throughout all of his works. Taylor's position in this study is "that Thoreau was neither hermit, anarchist, nor misanthrope" but a man

<sup>42</sup> E. B. White, "Walden--1954," The Yale Review, 44 (1954), rpt. in Owen Thomas, ed., Walden and Civil Disobedience (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1966), p. 349.

<sup>43</sup> White, p. 356.

"who lived and wrote with the solicitude and prerogative of a neighbor."<sup>44</sup> Never losing sight of Thoreau's pervasive, serious humor, Taylor shows a complete understanding of its true function: "Only in a high-keyed figurative, hyperbolical humor," Taylor discloses, "could he achieve the intensity which would adequately convey the tragic irony he saw between man's performance and potentiality."<sup>45</sup> Over all, Taylor's book contains much excellent evaluation of Thoreau's humor, bringing to the fore, as no other volume has previously done, this important aspect of Thoreau's artistry. Lucid in expression and mature in reflection, it is a substantial study of Thoreau's humor in relation to his literary genius and will certainly leave its mark on Thoreau scholarship for years to come.

Representative as the review of Thoreau criticism has been, it serves to show the basic trend of scholarship concerned in part or in whole with the question of Thoreau's humor. As is true with any writer who has offered any controversial material to the world, Thoreau, along with his greatest writing Walden, has met with a variety of critical appraisal over the years. Because he is a complex figure--too complex for some who would explain him--some of this criticism has been ludicrously erroneous. There has been a tendency by some to label and classify the man by standards which did not happen to be his. To men like Lowell he was a conscious imitator, who lacked humor, and to be criticized as such. Next to the charge of being Emerson's man, that which followed

<sup>44</sup> J. Golden Taylor, Neighbor Thoreau's Critical Humor (Logan, Utah: Utah State Univ. Monograph Series, 1958), p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Taylor, p. 5.

Thoreau most doggedly through most of the nineteenth century and even through some of the twentieth century was the charge of being a strange, cold, indolent, misanthropic person, an oddity, a recluse. In a zealous effort to deny these allegations, Thoreau's friends were of no avail, for his reputation suffered as much initially from the apology and patronage of these sensitive comrades as it did from the attacks of contemptuous detractors. Only when critics ceased insisting on or denying these charges, did they turn their attention to a consideration of Thoreau as a first-rate author and come to savor the excellence of his prose style.

No doubt the changed estimate of Thoreau today is due in part to the simple fact that the most original writers commonly require the passage of considerable time before they can be understood well enough to be appreciated. But still the truth remains, and can never be over-emphasized, that the chief obstacle impeding Thoreau's more immediate rise to fame has been a basic misconception of Thoreau and Walden, rooted in an outright failure by critics to detect or comprehend Thoreau's humor, his fondness for extravagance of statement, his hyperbole. Instead they have accepted him too literally, thus missing the point that he is a confessed exaggerator who writes most often in the effort at paradox. Admittedly, on the surface of Walden there is about Thoreau much charming and innocent boasting, which some have attributed to an intrinsic egotism. But if one only penetrates the surface, he will find, not an egotistical bore, but a most loving friend, a faithful companion, a veritable philosopher, helpful counselor, amusing narrator, and, above all, a brilliant humorist. Consequently,



Thoreau's prevailing humor is the essential and fundamental thing for critics to perceive, for no man can be labeled a recluse or cynic, or be dubbed a misanthrope or skulker, earnest in an acute desire to paradoxically demolish society, who possesses a humor such as Thoreau's. This aspect of humor then is certainly Thoreau's most genuine quality; it is the trait which makes him most human, most persuasive, and most enduring. Those who have not discovered this quality in him, have read him in vain.

## II. THE NATURE OF THOREAU'S HUMOR

In its review of representative critical and biographical estimates of Thoreau, the preceding chapter has brought to light many of the previous misconceptions concerning Thoreau's humor and has contended that humor is indeed an essential element of Thoreau's literary genius. Yet before any attempt can be made to show how Thoreau employed humor in Walden and how his skillful use of comic elements was the proper strategy in maintaining the Walden narrative, the exact nature of Thoreau's humor must be fully understood. Thus a cursory examination of the over-all purpose of humor followed by a close analysis of the nature and extent of Thoreau's humor, as revealed not only by those in close association with him but also by Thoreau himself, will help in understanding Thoreau's basic attitudes toward humor as well as his purpose in making it an indispensable part of his writing.

Presently, no universally accepted definition of humor exists, for the problem of humor or what produces human laughter is one which has been approached from a number of varied points of view by philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, and littérateurs without producing any degree of consensus. Probably no human trait has brought about so many conflicting theories as those found in works dealing with humor. Thus John Greig and George Meredith believe that humor involves

emotion,<sup>1</sup> Henri Bergson that humor is produced by the absence of emotion;<sup>2</sup> Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, and Charles Baudelaire that malice is essential to humor,<sup>3</sup> Alexander Bain that humor is based on the amiable or loving;<sup>4</sup> Charles Darwin that humor is the expression of pleasure,<sup>5</sup> William McDougall that it reveals no pleasurable

<sup>1</sup> Both John Y. T. Greig in The Psychology of Laughter and Comedy (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1923), p. 199, and George Meredith in An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit, ed. Lane Cooper (Ithica, N. Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1956), pp. 11-12, consider the emotional or mental effect of humor to be of utmost importance.

<sup>2</sup> According to Henri Bergson in Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1911), p. 4, a necessary condition of humor or anything associated with laughter is the absence of feeling, for "laughter has no greater foe than emotion."

<sup>3</sup> Plato in his "Philebus," The Dialogues of Plato, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), III, 189-193, regards malice and pain as an essential factor of humor. In dealing with comedy and humor, Aristotle in his Poetics, trans. Gerald F. Else (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), p. 183, goes deeper than Plato, insisting upon the distinction of comedy proper and invective or personal satire. For Aristotle, the essential difference between tragedy and comedy is that the latter with its accompanying humor deals with subdivisions of the ugly, aiming at the representation of men at their worse. Thomas Hobbes' "sudden glory" theory, cited by Boris Sidis in The Psychology of Laughter (New York: A. Appelton and Co., 1919), p. 65, is one of the best known views on humor and laughter. Hobbes firmly holds, as Sidis quotes, that "laughter is a sudden glory arising from sudden conceptions of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly." Charles Baudelaire in The Essence of Laughter and Other Essays, Journals, and Letters, ed. Peter Quennell (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), pp. 112-118, sums up his philosophy of humor by suggesting that laughter is satanic and thus human; consequently, humor is a diagnostic or symptom carrying with it the feeling of superiority and malevolence.

<sup>4</sup> See Alexander Bain, The Emotions and the Will, 3rd ed. (London: Longman's, Green, 1880), pp. 256-60.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Darwin, The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals (New York: D. Appelton and Co., 1899), pp. 196-97.

experience whatsoever.<sup>6</sup> As one can readily see, the conflicting schools of humor are endless, and a consideration of each of them would lead into a long and cumbersome discussion which would be beyond the scope of this study. But even though humor is more easily understood than defined and even if the theory of humor still remains as one of the unsolved problems of literary, philosophical, and psychological study, some basic assumptions as to the general purpose of humor can be formulated, assumptions which will certainly aid in discovering the exact nature of Thoreau's humor.

The main difficulty one meets in approaching the purpose of humor is a verbal one. In its usual application, the word "humor," according to Webster's New World Dictionary, refers to "the ability to perceive, appreciate, and express what is comical, amusing, funny, or ludicrous."<sup>7</sup> This definition, however, is too constricted, too pat, to be applied to the present undertaking, thereby demanding a more detailed explanation. Humor is something more than just the mere perception, appreciation, or expression of what is funny or ludicrous. Humor seems to hold the special distinction of combining comic perception with links of sympathy among the participants. According to J. C. Gregory, "When one person laughs simultaneously at and with another and especially if there is more with than at the laughter of both seems to deserve the

<sup>6</sup> William McDougall, Outline of Psychology (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), p. 165.

<sup>7</sup> Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, College Edition (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Co., 1960), p. 708.

special title of humor."<sup>8</sup> In other words, the comic perception of what is funny can certainly produce an amused laughter containing the feeling of the ludicrous, and in turn this laughter can either be pure, as when dispassionately free from animus or sympathy, or mixed as when mingled with triumph, contempt or other emotions according to the predominance of feeling. But when comic perception participates sympathetically in the ludicrous situation, as Gregory maintains, it can properly be described as humor.<sup>9</sup>

At any rate, the key phrase to remember in any attempt to determine the purpose of humor is "the sympathetic perception of the ludicrous." For example, when a discerning man ponders the various weaknesses of the world, the varieties of human absurdity often appear limitless. Perceiving the many forms of vanity, hypocrisy, and self-deception coupled with the unconscious violation of proper, sensible behavior, and the laughable incongruity between words and actions, an individual may respond in a number of ways. He may be indifferent, contemptuous, or indignant, refusing to absolve mankind for its failure to be what it should be, or he may regard himself as sharing like other men in the weaknesses and shortcomings his intelligence perceives, and so end in a mood of tolerance. His comic perception and amused laughter are thus tempered by sympathy, for he sees life both internally and externally, combining thought and feeling, discernment and tolerance. His humor then

<sup>8</sup> J. C. Gregory, The Nature of Laughter (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., Ltd., 1924), p. 119.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory, p. 119.

is a way of seeing common weaknesses, a way, in fact, of viewing the ludicrous sympathetically.

If the purpose of humor is to provide an accepted means of perceiving the disparities of life sympathetically, then the following assumptions can be formulated: First of all, it is assumed that humor is genuinely important in human experience; next, it is assumed that humor, although at times playful, can be distinguished from the activity called play, for as Max Eastman asserts, "no definition of humor . . . will ever stand up which is not based on the distinction between playful and serious";<sup>10</sup> and last, it is assumed that humor can refer simultaneously to a varyingly pleasurable emotional reaction tempered by sympathy, to the comic perception of whatever stimulus prompted the reaction, or to the means by which the reaction may best be expressed. These basic assumptions are precise enough to be meaningful and are, by the same token, general enough to be applied to the various ramifications of this thesis. Furthermore, they provide an appropriate starting point for the discussion of the nature of Thoreau's humor; for if humor is important in the human experience, if it can be distinguished from the playful and serious, and provide an effective means of viewing the ludicrous sympathetically, the primary concern of this chapter must be to establish the existence of Thoreau's humor as well as determine its exact nature, characteristic flavor, and particular purpose.

Much evidence exists to show that Thoreau possessed and maintained

<sup>10</sup> Max Eastman, Enjoyment of Laughter (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), p. 15.

a fresh and witty sense of humor the nature and extent of which is revealed by certain secondary and primary sources at hand. There is much secondary evidence, based on the verbal and written testimonies of those in close association with Thoreau, which gives penetrating insight into the nature and extent of his humor. A good many familiar stories, drawn from secondary sources, illustrate Thoreau's penchant for humor. Answering an inquiry one time why he had not taken the trouble to secure his diploma at Harvard, he is credited with saying, "Let every sheep keep but his own skin."<sup>11</sup> On another occasion, when asked at the table what dish he preferred, he answered, "The Nearest."<sup>12</sup> Once when he sent notices to the houses in Concord that he would speak in a public hall on the character of John Brown, the Abolitionist committee informed him that it was premature and unadvisable. His answer was, "I did not send to you for advice, but to announce that I am to speak."<sup>13</sup> Still on a different level is the reply he made when declining an invitation to a dinner party, because he could not meet the individuals to any purpose: "They make their pride in making their dinner cost much; I make my pride in making my dinner cost little."<sup>14</sup> As Brawner suggests, probably the best of the stories that demonstrate Thoreau's comic temperament is the report concerning

<sup>11</sup> Cited by Brawner, pp. 171-72.

<sup>12</sup> Cited by Emerson in "Thoreau," p. 268.

<sup>13</sup> Cited by Emerson in "Thoreau," p. 270.

<sup>14</sup> Cited by Emerson in "Thoreau," p. 268.

the time Thoreau was jailed for refusing to pay taxes to a government he thought unjust. As the account goes, Emerson, upon hearing of Thoreau's sudden imprisonment, supposedly went to the jail, gazed at Thoreau in a perplexed manner, and asked, "Henry, why are you there?" "Waldo," was the reply, "why are you not here?"<sup>15</sup> Whether or not there is enough evidence to conclude this exchange actually occurred is impertinent, for, as Brawner asserts, the reply is so positively Thoreauvian that the fact of the matter is irrelevant.<sup>16</sup>

According to F. P. Sanborn, the "best of the single witnesses in Thoreau's case" was his close friend and biographer William Ellery Channing.<sup>17</sup> Even though Channing fails to recognize the purpose of his friend's humor, as mentioned in the previous chapter, he still provides substantial proof of its existence and cites as one of many examples Thoreau's Latin fun in naming wild apples:

"There is, first of all, the wood apple, Malus Sylvatica; the blue-jay apple; the apple which grows in dells in the woods, syvestrivallis; also in hollows in pastures, campestrivallis; the apple that grows in an old cellar-hole, Malus cellaris; the meadow apple; the patridge-apple; the truant's apple, cessatoris; the saunter's apple--you must lose yourself before you find your way to that."<sup>18</sup>

Channing offers better proof of Thoreau's humor in a passage of his biography which explains the disagreement in Concord as to the question

<sup>15</sup> Cited by Brawner, p. 172.

<sup>16</sup> Brawner, p. 172.

<sup>17</sup> Sanborn, p. 342.

<sup>18</sup> Channing, p. 246.



of Thoreau's disposition:

A lady once asked whether he ever laughed. She was well acquainted with him halfway, but, did not see him unless as a visitor; and he never became versed in making formal visits, nor had much success with first acquaintances. As to his laughing, no one did that more or better. One was surprised to see him dance,--he had been well taught, and was a vigorous dancer; and anyone who ever heard him sing "Tom Bowline" will agree that, in tune and in tone, he answered, and went far beyond, all expectation.<sup>19</sup>

Not only did Thoreau laugh heartily and frequently, but when he laughed, Channing goes on to say, "the operation was sufficient to split a pitcher."<sup>20</sup> This fun-loving nature was not simply affectation nor a spontaneous release from a brooding temperament, for as Channing relates, "Not only made he no complaint, but in him was no background of complaint as in some, there a lifelong tragedy dances in polished fetters."<sup>21</sup> Countering the misconstrued impression of misanthropy which Thoreau's manner conveyed to many a casual, unperceptive reader, Channing adds,

A notice of him would be incomplete which did not refer to his fine social qualities. He served his friends sincerely and practically. In his own home he was one of those characters who may be called household treasures. . . . It is needless to dwell on the genial hospitable entertainer he was. His readers came many miles to see him, attracted by his writings. Those who could not come sent their letters. Those who came when they could no more see him, as strangers on a pilgrimage, seemed as if they had been his intimates, so warm and cordial was the sympathy they received from his letters . . . A great comfort in

<sup>19</sup> Channing, pp. 40-41.

<sup>20</sup> Channing, p. 273.

<sup>21</sup> Channing, p. 11.

him was eminently reliable. No whim of coldness, no absorption of his time by public or private business, deprived those to whom he belonged of his kindness and affection. He was at the mercy of no caprice; a firm will and uncompromising sternness in his moral nature, he carried the same qualities into his relation with others, and gave them the best he had, without stint.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, Channing's affirmation of Thoreau's sense of humor is not as conclusive as the more direct evidence available, for the testimony of a close friend is quite naturally biased. However, such testimony still reinforces the primary evidence of Thoreau's humor, by showing him amiable, friendly, good-natured, and distinctively disposed to mirth.

If Channing is the best witness of Thoreau's sense of humor, Edward Waldo Emerson is certainly the next best. Edward Emerson, Concord physician and son of Ralph Waldo Emerson, had as a boy known Thoreau intimately as a guardian, household friend, and neighbor. In 1917 he published a little volume entitled Henry Thoreau As Remembered By A Young Friend, which was written in hopes of clarifying much of the misunderstanding, "both in Concord and among his [Thoreau's] readers at large, not only of his character, but of the events of his life--which he did not tell to everybody," and of uncrystallizing the distorted picture of Thoreau in people's minds, produced "by the false impressions given by accredited writers."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Channing, pp. 24-25.

<sup>23</sup> Edward Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau as Remembered by a Young Friend (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1917), pp. v-vi.

Like Channing, Edward Emerson gives ample proof of Thoreau's humorous disposition, maintaining that Thoreau's happy nature was an inborn trait, inherited from his parents:

The father, John Thoreau, whose father came from the Isle of Jersey, was a kindly, quiet man, not without humor. . . . The mother, Cynthia Dunbar, of Scotch ancestry, was spirited, capable, and witty, with an edge to her wit on occasion, but there is abundant and hearty testimony from many of her neighbours--to which I can add my own--to her great kindness . . . also to her thoughtfulness and her skill in making home pleasant, even on the smallest capital, by seasoning spare diet and humble furnishings by native good taste, and, more than all by cheerfulness; for this good woman knew how to keep work and care in their proper places, and give life and love the precedence.<sup>24</sup>

More specific proof of Thoreau's fun-loving nature, can be found in a passage in which Edward Emerson happily recalls the frequent visits made by Thoreau to the Emerson household, visits which were marked always by kindness and good cheer:

This youthful cheery figure was a familiar one in our house, and when he, like the "Pied Piper of Hamelin" sounded his note in the hall, the children must needs come and hug his knees, and he struggled with them, nothing loath, to the fireplace sat down and told stories, sometimes of the strange adventures of his childhood or more often of squirrels, muskrats, hawks he had seen that day, the Monitor-and-Merrimac of mudturtles in the river, or the great Homeric battle of the red and black ants. Then he would make our pencils and knives disappear and redeem them presently from our ears and noses . . . . Later this magician appeared often in house or garden and always to charm.<sup>25</sup>

This portrait of Thoreau the human being should dispel any notion of Thoreau as a cold, misanthropic person, for the man who secured a

<sup>24</sup> Edward W. Emerson, pp. 13-14.

<sup>25</sup> Edward W. Emerson, pp. 3-4.

very special place in the pleasant memories of Edward Emerson was a warm, kind, friendly, and witty man, appreciated by his neighbors and beloved by the children of his town.

At this point, the reader may be wondering what, then, in Thoreau's personality prompted his peculiar difficulties with Ralph Waldo Emerson if Thoreau was really the lovable, good-natured figure depicted by Emerson's son. Edward Emerson is quick, however, to recognize the less genial aspects of Thoreau's character, but accurately perceives them as superficial and oftentimes misconstrued facets of Thoreau's temperament:

Thoreau was a good talker, but a certain enjoyment in taking the other side for the joy of intellectual fencing, and a pleasure of startling his companions by a paradoxical statement of his highly original way of looking at things, sometimes were baffling to his friends. His ancestry on his mother's side, the Dunbars, was Scotch, and he had the national instinct of disputation, pugnacity, love of paradoxical statement. This fatal tendency to parry and hit with his tongue, as his ancestors no doubt did with cudgel or broadsword, for no object but the fun of an intellectual fence, as such, was a temperamental fault standing in the way of relations that would otherwise have been perfect with his friends.<sup>26</sup>

There can be no doubt that Edward Emerson recognized and appreciated Thoreau's keen sense of humor, fully realizing its multi-faceted, pervasive character. Regretting that Thoreau's humor was most often misunderstood even by such astute men as his father, Edward never let this compunction affect his strong admiration for Thoreau, as may be evidenced by his final and probably strongest statement as to the

<sup>26</sup> Edward W. Emerson, pp. 72-73.

extent of Thoreau's humor: "Thoreau had the humor which often goes with humanity. It crops out slyly in all his writings, but sometimes is taken for dead earnest because the reader did not know the man."<sup>27</sup>

Considered alone, the secondary evidence of Thoreau's humor, afforded by the testimonies of those in close contact with him, is inconclusive, for the testimony of friends, as noted previously, is naturally biased and less objective than more direct proof. To be persuasive, the evidence of so complex a quality as humor must also be found in an author's own writings, in passages which reveal the essential nature and characteristic flavor of his humor, and such primary evidence is abundant in Thoreau's works.

Outside of Thoreau's greatest work Walden, which furnishes the best example of his humor and which will be sufficiently examined in later chapters, there exists much primary evidence in Thoreau's other writings that will certainly bear witness to his humorous character and give penetrating insight into the nature, extent, and purpose of his humor. In a leisurely reading of the Journal as well as some of his better known works, there is virtually no immunity from the appealing mirth, gaiety, good cheer, and humor that permeate many portions. Everyday occurrences in Thoreau's life such as the behavior of animals, the diverting antics of children, amusing quirks in society, the talk of family, friends, and neighbors, and comical situations which reveal himself primarily, provided him with various areas in which he could exercise his witty sense of humor. All these happenings he enjoyed to

<sup>27</sup> Edward W. Emerson, p. 84.

the fullest and chose to record in his writings. But always he applied his humor in a mood of tolerance, and one can almost feel a warm and earnest effort by Thoreau to share sympathetically with his readers in perceiving the incongruities and foibles of life.

To begin with, the behavior of animals furnished Thoreau choice opportunities to display his humor, and many times he would interrupt his saner journalizing to comment about it: "Somebody shut the cat's tail in the door just now, and she made such a caterwaul as has driven two whole worlds out of my thoughts. I saw unspeakable things in the sky and looming in the horizon of my mind, and now they are all reduced to a cat's tail" (Journal, II, 98). With another entry, Thoreau records the time a resourceful pig ruined his morning walk in the woods by escaping from its pen and dodging a good number of townspeople for most of the day. "Here was an ugly duty not to be shirked," Thoreau discloses, for the pig could run with "swinish cunning and speed . . . . He bolts into that neighbor's yard and so across his premises. He has been twice there before it seems; he knows the road; see what work he has made in his flower garden!" After an intense effort, Thoreau and his neighbors corner the pig in a shed and Thoreau remarks, "He is resting quietly on his belly in the further corner thinking inutterable things . . . at length he is stuck for an instant between the spokes of a wheel, and I am securely attached to his leg" (Journal, VIII, 451-56). Humor sparkles from this episode as Thoreau transforms this account into amusing whimsicality, leaving the comical impression in his readers' minds of himself returning home dirty and exhausted after chasing a

pig all day and groveling with it in the mud.

Some months before Thoreau's encounter with the pig, a cow, which Thoreau's father was keeping temporarily, did more bodily damage than her squealing animal friend by kicking at Thoreau's mother. When Thoreau's father came home and attempted to "bustle right up to her," the cow "lifted her leg knocked him flat, and broke the bridge of his nose . . . This 'started the claret,' and without staunching the blood he at once drove her home to the man he had her of" (Journal, VIII, 93-94). And still another entry humorously recounts the time Thoreau's cat "Min" spent too long frolicking with a wounded mouse:

It had got away from her once or twice, and she caught it again; and now it was stealing off again . . . when her friend Riordan's stout but solitary cock stepped up inquisitively, looked down at it with one eye, turning his head, then picked it up by the tail and gave it two or three wacks on the ground, and giving it a dexterous toss into the air, caught it in its open mouth, and it went head foremost and alive down his capacious throat in the twinkling of an eye . . . It is a question whether Min ever understood where that mouse went to.

(Journal, IX, 154-55)

These amusing entries concerning the behavior of animals are admittedly examples of Thoreau's humor in its mildest form, but still they reveal the distinctive flavor of his humor, marked by the intense concentration, powerful extravagance, conscious vigor, and fillip of surprise and contradiction that pervade his writing. More importantly, they combine to form an accurate gauge of a temperament characterized by a humorous disposition and innocent enjoyment of even the most simple things of life.

Besides animals, children frequently amused Thoreau, and their

unpredictable behavior often became the source for much of his humor. A particularly good example is the antics of four small Irish boys who are guiding a horse to their father. Devoting a page of the Journal to their unpredictable behavior, Thoreau records,

They have all in a row got hold of a very long halter and are leading him. All wish to have a hand in it. . . . At length, by dint of pulling and shouting they get him into a run down a hill, and though he moves very deliberately, scarcely faster than a walk, all but the one at the end of the line soon cut and run to right and left, without having looked behind, expecting him to be upon them.

(Journal, IX, 98)

Thoreau's intense appeal for children is not hard to imagine, as the earlier testimony of Edward Emerson reinforces, and this appeal is further substantiated by the warmly human description of the little boys' demanding task. Here Thoreau's sympathy is as unmistakable as his humor for he shares with his readers not only the comical actions of the children but also the trepidation of the boys, who run from the horse because of its size, and the steadfast courage of the leader who dares not release the line for fear of his father. Relating the incongruities of this scene, Thoreau is moved both to sympathy, produced by the children's plight in leading an animal of such prodigious dimensions, and mirth, caused by the air of self-importance the boys try to assume.

Thoreau's writings also abound in humorous references to various quirks in society. The pretense of religious creeds and ceremonies, the artificial and complex mode of living imposed on the individual by society, the shortcomings of conventional education, and the drawbacks



of contemporary politics, supplied him with unfailing sources of amusement. Much of his best humor was leveled at these inconsistencies in society, and Thoreau never lost an opportunity of shaking their foundations, as representative examples of each will serve to illustrate.

Concerning the affectation of orthodox religion, Thoreau expresses one of his most humorous observations of how ludicrous the church and its preachers appear:

The church! it is eminently the timid institution, and the heads and pillars of it are constitutionally and by principle the greatest cowards in the community. The voice that goes up from the monthly concerts is not so brave and so cheering as that which rises from frog-ponds of the land. The best "preachers" so-called, are an effeminate class; their bravest thoughts wear petticoats. If they have any manhood they are sure to forsake the ministry, though they were to turn their attention to baseball.

(Journal, XI, 324)

Thoreau again comically expresses his regard for the orthodox church with the comment, "Lectured in basement (vestry) of the orthodox church and I trust helped to undermine it" (Journal, IX, 188). In the same fashion, he relates his distaste and inability to endure the false solemnity in religion: "Heard one speak today of his sense of awe at the thought of God, and suggested to him that awe was the cause of the potatoe-rot" (Journal, IX, 377). From these selections, the reader should not infer that Thoreau blamed God for the affectation and hypocrisy in religion. As J. Golden Taylor points out, Thoreau took issue only with self-appointed religionists and pretentious Christians who tried to present themselves as official portraits of God.<sup>28</sup> To these would-be

<sup>28</sup> Taylor, p. 73.

models of Christianity Thoreau would invariably answer as he does so aptly in A Week, "You did not invent it; it was imposed on you. Examine your authority" (Works, I, 71). To Thoreau, therefore, man's unceasing preoccupation with how God should be worshipped appeared to take precedent over how God should be emulated, and this affinity for religious custom, ceremony, and tradition was the flaw in orthodox religion Thoreau could not support, the weakness he found most absurd and laughable.

Along the same comic vein, Thoreau directs much of his humor toward the materialistic and complex mode of living that society imposes on its members. The money-hungry fellows who uphold this artificial mode of living are common subjects of Thoreau's more effective applications of humor. A typical specimen concerns the rich, old farmer, dedicated to the pursuit of the dollar, who would milk his cows relentlessly day and night. As Thoreau observes, this coarse "creature of fate" would milk "his seventeen cows though the thermometer goes down to 25 degrees," and never know "why he does it,--draining sixty-eight cows' teats in the dark of the coldest morning! Think how helpless a rich man who can do as he has done, and as his neighbors do, one or all of them! What an account he will have to give of himself" (Journal, XIII, 84). Perhaps Thoreau's most genuinely funny description of society's prepossession for business and material gains is recorded in the following paragraph from "Life Without Principle":

This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! . . . It is nothing but work, work, work. I cannot easily buy a blank-book to write thought in; they are commonly ruled for dollars and cents. An Irishman, seeing me making a minute in the fields took

it for granted that I was calculating my wages. If a man was tossed out of a window when an infant, and made a cripple for life, or scared out of his wits by the Indians, it is regretted chiefly because he was thus incapacitated for--business! I think there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business.

(Works, IV, 456)

This paragraph is one of Thoreau's most vigorous humorous achievements, and if the reader does not take Thoreau too literally, he may discover some rare economic wisdom here. Thoreau does not condemn business if done for the satisfaction of needs, but only when society allows it to become the sole function in life; the absurdity of man's obsession for accumulating wealth is what Thoreau comically conveys to his readers.

The ludicrous disparities in conventional education likewise drew Thoreau's attention and offered him a further source of amusement. As Harry Hurd maintains, education for Thoreau was a life-long endeavor, but always he remained disenchanted with the conventional means of obtaining it.<sup>29</sup> In his constant search for enlightenment, Thoreau reveals the humor involved in his approach to the inadequacy of current educational systems:

We of Massachusetts boast a good deal of what we do for the education of our people. . . . I have yet to learn that one cent is spent by this town, this political community called Concord, directly to educate the great mass of its inhabitants who have long since left the district school . . . I believe that some of our New England villages within thirty miles of Boston are as boorish and barbarous communities as there are on the face of the earth.

(Journal, III, 24-26)

<sup>29</sup> Harry Hurd, "Henry David Thoreau--A Pioneer in the Field of Education," Education, 49 (1929), 372.

Concord's complacency to the educational needs of its citizens is brought out particularly well in yet another Journal entry:

We have a comparatively decent system of common schools, schools for infants only, as it were, but excepting the half-starved Lyceum in winter, no schools for ourselves. It is high time we had uncommon schools, that we did not leave off our education when we begin to be men . . . This town has just spent sixteen thousand dollars for a town-house. Suppose it had been proposed to spend an equal sum for something which will tend far more to refine and cultivate its inhabitants, a library for instance. We have sadly neglected our education. We leave it to Harper and Brothers and Redding & Company.

(Journal, IV, 323-25)

To be sure, Thoreau's humor glances from this selection in every direction, especially with the final barb which concerns the relegation of education to the caprice of publishing companies. And if this humorous barb is not enough to convey the shortcomings of current education, Thoreau makes one more distinction to those who suppose their formal education may be adequately supplemented not only by publishing companies but by newspapers. With an appropriate play on words, he answers them by proposing, "Read not the Times, Read the Eternities" (Works, IV, 471). In comical manner Thoreau can thus successfully impart to his readers that in formal education there is little safeguard against Philistinism.

Thoreau's sense of humor found a way of manifesting itself even in his attitudes toward current political philosophies and practices. In one singularly interesting paragraph from "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau demonstrates how current political philosophy has made even the American Revolution nothing more than a mere platitude with its principles no

longer applicable:

All men recognize the right of revolution; that is the right to refuse allegiance to and to resist the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable. But almost all say that such is not the case now. But such was the case, they think in the Revolution of '75. If one were to tell me that this was a bad government because it taxed certain foreign commodities brought to its ports, it is most probably that I should not make an ado about it, for I can do without them: all machines have their friction and possibly this does enough good to counterbalance the evil. At any rate, it is a great evil to make stir about it. But when the friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are organized, I say, let us not have such a machine any longer. In other words, when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that is is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more urgent is the fact, that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army.

(Works, IV, 360-61)

The impact of Thoreau's revolutionary proposals is effectively moderated here by his prevailing humor. First describing the absurdity inherent in his country's accepting platitudes without any understanding of their origin, he next turns to incisive irony to repudiate his country's policies of condoning immoral slave laws and waging a reckless, unjust war against a weaker nation. His humor, consequently, lends a measure of understanding to the fact that he is not a violent subversive anarchist intent on the over-throw of existing government, or not even a practical politician, but a concerned American attempting to raise the moral tone of his fellow country-men out of which enlightened political action can arise and be sustained.

Thoreau's humorous propensity is discernible not only in his regard for government practices but also in his expressed contempt for

the government practitioners who pose as earnest, sincere men. According to Thoreau, "While honest men are sawing wood for them," these members of Congress are bent on "trifling," and the "Congress halls" thus possess "an ale-house odor,--a place for stale jokes and vulgar wit. It compells me to think of my fellow creatures as apes and baboons" (Works, VI, 129). Obviously, Thoreau feels much of a legislator's work is essentially superficial and unnecessary as a corner stone of society. But even more superficial to Thoreau is the role of the unscrupulous politician who submerges his identity in the political opportunism of party affiliation. For this type of politician Thoreau reserves probably some of his most apt and vivid comical imagery: "The oldest wisest politician grows not more human so, but is merely a gray wharf rat [underlining mine] at last. He makes a habit of disregarding the moral right and wrong for the legal and political, commits a slow suicide, and thinks to recover by retiring on to a farm at last" ( Works, V, 445).

In addition to animals, children, and various quirks in society, prompted by certain flaws in religion, the economy, education, and politics, Thoreau's references to relatives, friends, and neighbors as well as recorded incidents which reveal himself primarily, offer further evidence of his comic temperament and likewise disclose the nature and flavor of his humor. In his writings, he repeatedly includes humorous anecdotes which reveal the personalities of his family, friends, and townsmen. Depicting their personalities, Thoreau is at his level best particularly when the humor involved pertains to certain

foibles, eccentricities, or excesses of manner in their behavior or social relations. Regarding his relatives, on one occasion, he records his sister's light-hearted despair at his housekeeping: "Sophia says, bringing company into my sanctum, by way of apology, that I regard the dust on my furniture like bloom on fruits, not to be swept off" (Journal, IX, 83). On another occasion, he relates a certain conversation with his old uncle who has been carried away into a kind of senility by the intensity of their night's discussion: "After talking with Uncle Charles the other night about the worthies of this country . . . considering who were the geniuses and who were not, I showed him up to bed, and when I had got into bed myself, I heard his chamber door opened, after eleven o'clock, and he called out in a earnest, stentorian voice, loud enough to wake the whole house, 'Henry was John Quincy Adams a genius?' 'No, I think not,' was my reply. 'Well, I didn't think he was,' answered he" (Journal, IV, 440).

Typical of the scores of gibes in Thoreau's writings concerning his friends is the following encounter which seems to refer to Emerson: "If my friend would take a quarter of the pains to show me himself that he does to show a piece of roast beef, I should feel myself irresistibly invited. He says, 'Come and see / Roast beef and me.' I find the beef fat and well done, but him rare" (Journal, VIII, 348). Similarly, in his descriptions of certain friends, Thoreau is pre-eminently comical and amusing. One may recall Thoreau's account of the old oysterman in Cape Code who stood before the fireplace, preoccupied with story telling, and ejected "his tobacco-juice right and left in the fire behind him, without

regard to the various dishes which were there being prepared" (Works, IV, 99). Finally, there is the highly amusing account of Joe Pollis, the whimsical Indian guide in The Maine Woods, whose native chants proved to be only the vestiges of religious hymns taught to his tribe by missionaries and whose replies to white men, whenever addressed, were deliberately vague and purposely indirect:

A tipsy Canadian asked him at a tavern, in a drawling tone, if he smoked, to which he answered with an indefinite "yes." "Won't you lend me your pipe a little while?" asked the other. He replied, looking straight by the man's head, with a face singularly vacant to all neighboring interests, "Me got no pipe"; yet I had seen him put a new one, with a supply of tobacco, into his pocket that morning.

(Works, III, 186)

During his years at Concord Thoreau never hesitated in whimsically recording the social airs and excesses of his neighbors. Attractive, yet unimaginative, young women in the town, for example, he regards as "social blunders," claiming their attractiveness "may be the reason" why he "should look at them but is certainly not the reason" why he "should talk to them." Frankly dismayed, he confesses, "I am lacking a sense, perchance, in this respect and I derive no pleasure from talking with a young woman half an hour simply because she has regular features. The society of young women is the most unprofitable I have ever tried" (Journal, III, 116). As for the excesses of his neighbors, Thoreau could likewise not resist in humorously revealing some of their foibles. A highly unimaginative and thoroughly amusing piece of humor, which deserves the reader's attention, concerns the incidents of a young Dutch inebriate:

Getting into a Patchogue late one night in an oyster boat, there was a drunken Dutchman aboard whose wit reminded me of Shakespeare. . . . I should not know whether to call it



ridiculous or sublime: You would say that he humbled himself so much that he was beginning to be exalted . . . But ever and anon, when aroused by the rude kicks or curses of the skipper, the Dutchman, who never lost his wit nor equanimity, though snoring and rolling in the vomit produced by his debauch, blurted forth some happy repartee, like an illuminated swine. It was the earthliest, slimiest wit I have ever heard.

(Journal, II, 49)

Equally imaginative and amusing is Thoreau's description of another drunkard, an Irishman named Hugh Quoil who had fought against Napoleon at Waterloo:

Colonel Quoil as he was called--I believe that he had killed a Colonel and ridden off with his horse,--who lived from hand --sometimes to mouth--though it was commonly a glass of rum that the hand carried . . . He was a man of manners and gentlemanlike, as one who had seen the world and was capable of more civil speech than you could well attend to . . . He had fought on the English side before, but he fought on the Napoleon side now. Napoleon went to St. Helena: Hugh Quoil came to Walden Pond. He was thirstier than I and drank more probably, but not out of the pond. That was never the lower for him. Perhaps I ate more than he.

(Journal, I, 414-15)

There is much humor in Thoreau's relaxed enjoyment of the young Dutchman and old Colonel Quoil, but Thoreau is, at the same time, sensitive to the reversals of fortune sustained by both men. The humor involved, in the Dutchman's drunken antics are sufficiently incongruous to provide a comical situation, yet throughout Thoreau's description, the real humor lies in the surprise and contradiction of a drunkard excelling in wit, equanimity, and *grandeur*, usually associated with relative sobriety. The same sensitivity is evident in Thoreau's depiction of Hugh Quoil. In that highly comical passage there exists the hint of Quoil's former dignity modified by a tone of sympathetic

tenderness concerning the Colonel's present status. In brief, Thoreau's playful descriptions of the foibles of his neighbors illustrate his unique ability to perceive, savor, and express rare humorous experiences. Moreover, his thoroughly amusing comic imagery leaves nothing to be desired in the realm of connative humor. Yet Thoreau's descriptions never provide him an occasion to moralize or condemn, for he is constantly aware that this unscrutable world of which he is a part is pre-  
vailing incongruous and absurd.

Surprisingly enough, Thoreau's most genuine vein of humor is to be found in passages of his writings which reveal himself primarily. According to J. Golden Taylor, Thoreau had developed through his life the rarest of all gifts, the maturity not to take himself too solemnly or seriously.<sup>30</sup> Realizing the various foibles, frustrations, and excesses inherent in his perverse independence, he could laugh at himself and express his inconsistencies with unadorned, rigid candor. Revealing, for instance, an awareness of the incongruity of his present economic status, he allows his humorous personality to come into play: "The assessors called me into their office this year and said they wished to get an inventory of my property; asked if I had any real estate. No. Any notes at interest or any railroad shares? No. Any taxable property? Not that I know of. 'I own a boat,' I said; and one of them thought that that might come under the head of a pleasure carriage, which is taxable" (Journal, VIII, 36-37).

Thoreau was quick to appreciate and record the humorous aspects of

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, p. 14.

situations particularly ones in which he knew the joke was on him. Well aware of his reputation as a dour eccentric, he was sometimes amused by the exasperation he caused. Thoreau relates an amusing instance of mistaken identity in which his odd habits were interpreted on one occasion to be those of a town drunkard: "I learned that one farmer, seeing me standing a long time still in the midst of a pool, said that it was his father who had been drinking some of Pat Haggerty's rum and had lost his way home. So, setting out to lead him home, he discovered it was I" (Journal, X, 387). This passage has to be one of the most revealing observations Thoreau ever made about himself. The implications are fairly plain that Thoreau realizes that to his neighbors, even some of his most sober, disciplined actions appear, at times, to be the aimless antics of an inebriate.

It is hard to imagine an instance that would attest more adequately to Thoreau's humorous temperament than his final realization that his first published book was a failure. When the publisher of A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers could no longer endure the incumbrance on his shelves of almost three fourths of the original thousand copies of Thoreau's book, he sent a wagon-load of the remaining copies to Thoreau, who hauled them upstairs and stored them in his attic. As Thoreau writes, "They are something more substantial than fame as my back knows, which has borne them up two flights of stairs to a place similar to which they trace their origin . . . I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself" (Journal, V, 459-60). Here, as so often is the case, Thoreau is able to

view his shortcomings and frustrations with acceptance, resolve, and, above all, good humor.

That Thoreau could laugh at himself is evidenced by one final example from the Journal. In this particular passage Thoreau emphatically states that the absurdity of man's behavior applies also to himself. In fact, he is almost willing to subscribe to the premise that sanity is only a relative term:

When I review the list of my acquaintances from the most important point of view, and consider each one's excesses and defects of character,--which are the subjects of mutual ridicule, astonishment, and pity,--and I class myself among them,--I cannot help asking myself, "If this is the sane world, what must a madhouse be?" It is only by a certain flattery and an ignoring of their faults that even the best are made available for society.

(Journal, III, 270)

From the preceding examples, one might well assert that the primary evidence of Thoreau's humor is virtually endless. Furthermore, one might well conclude that this type of evidence not only attests to the prevailing humor of Thoreau's character, but also reveals the essential nature and characteristic flavor of his humor. Yet the reader must remember that whatever is whimsical or humorous in Thoreau's writings was not just transcribed for its own sake. More often than not, Thoreau, in recording or adducing the incongruous aspects of a situation, did so in order to illustrate his thought. Consequently, the nature of his humor must be qualified by his own attitudes toward humor, attitudes which reveal his purpose for making it an inseparable part of his writing. Most of Thoreau's attitudes that qualify the exact nature and particular purpose of his humor can be found, once again, by a perusal of his Journal

and especially by a close reading of his essay, entitled "Thomas Carlyle and His Works,"

With the Carlyle essay Thoreau aptly outlines many of his basic attitudes toward humor. As Charles Anderson points out, Thoreau's essay praising Carlyle was a sort of disguised preface to his own literary intentions; consequently, much of what Thoreau says of the humor of Carlyle's writings applies with equal appropriateness to his own.<sup>31</sup> Thoreau begins by referring to humor as "this indispensable pledge of sanity, without some leaven of which the abstruse thinker may justly be suspected of mysticism, fanaticism, or insanity (Works, IV, 333). Clearly suggested here is the adoption of this principle to his own emergent style, and in the passage which follows the same transfer of reference is suitable:

Carlyle's humor is vigorous and titanic, and has more sense in it than the sober philosophy of many another. It is not to be disposed of by laughter and smiles merely; it gets to be too serious for that: only they may laugh who are not hit by it. The pleasant humor which the public loves is but the innocent pranks of the ballroom, harmless flow of animal spirits, the light plushy pressure of dandy pumps, in comparison. But when an elephant takes on treading on your corns, why then you are lucky if you sit high, or wear cowhide.

(Works, IV, 334)

This distinction in humor is important to note and corresponds precisely with one of the basic assumptions concerning the general purpose of humor, formulated earlier in this chapter. That is to say, humor unmixed with a serious emotion such as sympathy can only remain, as Thoreau says, "harmless" and "plushy," but when it combines with serious matter, it

<sup>31</sup> Charles Anderson, The Magic Circle of Walden (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 48.

cannot be ignored. Thus Thoreau states positively, "humor is always subordinate to a serious purpose" (Works, IV, 334). At times, however, humor is not readily distinguishable from the serious matter it serves to lighten, but Thoreau is prompt to recognize this difficulty and compensate for it:

Humor is not so distinct a quality as for the purpose of criticism, it is commonly regarded, but allied to every, even the divinest faculty. The familiar and cheerful conversation about every hearthside, if it be analyzed, will be found to be sweetened by this principle. There is not only a never failing, pleasant and earnest humor kept up there, embracing the domestic affairs, the dinner and the scolding, but there is also a constant run upon the neighbors, and upon Church and State, and to cherish and maintain this in a great measure, the fire is kept burning and the dinner provided.

(Works, IV, 335)

Although, for Thoreau, humor is subordinate to the serious, it must be based on a fun-loving nature akin to the play of children. "The child plays continually, if you let it," Thoreau says further in the essay, "and all its life is a sort of practical humor of a very special kind, often so fine and ethereal a nature, that its parents, its uncles and cousins, can in no wise participate in, but must stand aloof in silent admiration and reverence even" (Works, IV, 335). At this point, Thoreau again reminds the reader that fun-loving and playful as humor might be, it should never be an end in itself but strictly a means. Making one last distinction, Thoreau holds that humor for its own sake will often become "wearisome," and if sustained, "intolerable," for idle humor is the trademark of the "mere humorist" whom Thoreau considers "a most unhappy man; and his readers are most unhappy also" (Works, IV, 335).

In conjunction with his essay on Carlyle, Thoreau substantiates many of his attitudes toward humor in various passages of his Journal. Time and again, Thoreau maintains that the pathway to truth can be paved by the gravel of light-hearted abandonment and the mortar of childlike mirthfulness. "Not by constraint or severity shall you have access to true wisdom," he insists, "but by abandonment, and childlike mirthfulness. If you know aught, be gay before it" (Journal, I, 150). Though Thoreau realizes humor should never be an end in itself, he is aware that legitimate uses of mirth serve occasionally as healthy diversions from sober thought: "By spells seriousness will be forced to cut capers and drink a deep and refreshing draught of silliness." Moreover, he realizes that even in these playful diversions ultimate truths may often be perceived: "We think the gods reveal themselves only to sedate and musing gentlemen. But not so; the buffoon in the midst of his antics catches unobserved glimpses, which he treasures for the lonely hour. When I have been playing tom-fool, I have been driven to exchange the old for a more liberal and catholic philosophy" (Journal, I, 175-76). In general, this childlike abandonment in humor is a constant theme throughout the Journal, yet always Thoreau is careful to draw the important distinction that light-hearted mirth is not meant to displace the serious philosophy which it is intended to lighten; it acts instead as a sign of health, a possible means to true wisdom, an occasional relief from sober thought.

In the Journal, as in the Carlyle essay, Thoreau is genuinely sensitive to the distinction between purposeful and idle humor, upbraiding

humor whenever it remains merely idle or demerits life. Oftentimes, Thoreau becomes incensed when humor is allowed to degenerate into idle frivolity and when people fail to recognize the use and abuse of it. "What a groveling appetite for profitless jest and amusement our country men have! Next to a good dinner, at least, they love a good joke--to have their sides tickled, to laugh sociably, as in the East they bathe and are shampooed" (Journal, VII, 89). Accordingly, Thoreau chides humor when it becomes coarse or degrading. Whether Thoreau was ever amused by an obscene jest is dubious, for as he declares, "Each man's mode of speaking of the sexual relation proves how his own relations of that kind are. We do not respect the mind who can jest on this subject" (Journal, III, 335). Henry Seidler Canby has noted Thoreau's aversion to coarse humor and particularly his disappointment with friends who chose to indulge in it. Showing Thoreau's disapproval of Channing on this account, Canby relates, "He approved of a man who said that the excuse for cows was that they made paths in the pastures; and never criticized Ellery's nature love, which was as sincere and dilettante as his poetry. But when the 'high keys' of the conversation faltered, and Channing let it down by telling smutty stories, as happened probably more than once, Thoreau froze."<sup>32</sup>

Thoreau's objections to coarse humor should not be taken as the sentiments of a prig. On the contrary, he appreciated rigid candor even on the subject of sex, and fervently believed that no phase of human experience should be restricted with regards to humor if the

<sup>32</sup> Canby, pp. 172-73.



participants were sincere and earnest. Nevertheless, he expected certain standards to be met, and his test for humor, like his test for values, was often severe. Thus Thoreau considered that the propriety or sanctity of any topic may be humorously spurned, at times, if the humor served as an avenue to higher things, but when the humor degraded life it was sufficient grounds for the separation of even close friends.

Thoreau's attitudes toward humor expressed in his Journal and in his essay on Carlyle plainly reveal what he believes to be the particular purpose of humor. In essence, for Thoreau, humor acts as "pledge of sanity," the "leaven" in philosophy. It is the "never failing principle" which sweetens "every hearthside conversation, the "fine and ethereal quality" akin to the play of children. Though occasionally a healthy escape from sober thought, humor should never stand alone for its own sake, never become idle or degrading, but remain mingled with sympathy, forever subordinate to the serious. Only then can it remain purposeful, serving as an effective tool of the conscious, perceptive critic of life whose saving sense of humor renders his philosophy "light and digestable."

In sum, the nature of Thoreau's humor should now be clear. The secondary evidence at hand has demonstrated that Thoreau had a genuine sense of humor based on a cheerful nature and light-hearted temperament. The more direct evidence not only reinforces that Thoreau was characteristically disposed to humor, but that his humor was of inimitable quality, that it was tempered always by tolerance and sympathy, that it served to lighten his serious philosophy, and that it never remained merely idle nor frankly degrading. Taken together and carefully weighed,

this evidence points to the fact that humor was an inseparable part of Thoreau and his writings; it points to the reality that had Thoreau lived and wrote without this vital, pervasive quality, he might have attained other heights, but whatever else he might have been, he would not have been Thoreau.

### III. THE COMIC STRATEGY OF WALDEN: THOREAU'S USE OF COMIC DEVICES

From the review of Thoreau criticism and the examination of the nature of his humor, the evidence is conclusive that Thoreau possessed and maintained a keen sense of humor which figured prominently in his writings. Yet it remains to consider how Thoreau employs humor in Walden, the work on which his fame primarily rests, and to show how his adroit use of humor has been the proper strategy for maintaining his narrative and a contributing factor to its lasting appeal. Throughout Walden, Thoreau employs humor mainly in the form of comic devices, and he utilizes almost every humorous literary device on record--the comic narrator technique, paradox, wordplay, understatement, verbal irony, tall-tale exaggeration, mock-heroes, comic portraiture, altered proverbs and rhymes, Swiftian satire, whimsical metaphor, and sententious statement. All of these devices Thoreau artistically uses in order to enhance and sustain his narrative, render his transcendental philosophy more digestable, and jolt his audience into an awareness of the divine possibilities in man and life. By skillfully incorporating these elements of humor into his book, Thoreau is better able to urge new perspectives upon his readers, thereby allowing them to share his ecstatic vision of the infinite potentials open to the self.

A close look at Walden immediately reveals that Thoreau enhances the humorous aspect of the work and sustains his narrative by deliberately

employing a comic narrator. The initial evidence of the comic "I" appears in the epigraph on the title page which reads, "I do not propose to write an ode to defection, but to brag lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up" (Works, II, 3). During Thoreau's era, a current vogue with writers was to use epigraphs or quotations taken from classic works. Reading further, one will note that Thoreau borrows his epigraph from Walden itself, and, in doing so provides a highly comical and ludicrous image of the narrator.<sup>1</sup> The narrator emerges not as a great philosopher, moralist, or creature of inspiration such as a skylark or nightingale, but as the most stentorian, preposterous of birds, a rooster crowing in the morning, awakening everyone whether he wants to be awakened or not. At this point, the reader should make the distinction between the writer and the narrator. As Joseph Moldenhauer relates, the "I" of this discourse is a carefully shaped creation, a character invented for the purpose of holding the discourse.<sup>2</sup> He may bear a close resemblance to the author, but he is nonetheless a character. Hence, the reader should be able and willing to recognize the difference between Thoreau the writer and the "I" of Walden.

The introductory pages of the first chapter "Economy" proceed

<sup>1</sup> Thoreau takes his epigraph from the second chapter of the text, "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Moldenhauer, "Paradox in Walden," The Graduate Journal, 4 (Winter 1964), rpt. in Richard Ruland ed., Twentieth Century Interpretations of Walden: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1968), p. 77.

quickly to cultivate the themes presented in the epigraph. Clearly enough, the book is no ode to dejection, and the narrator is no one to be regarded too seriously. In the first paragraph of "Economy," the narrator begins by describing himself in a deflating manner. He is a man who has "lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor" in a house built "on the shore of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts," sustaining himself solely by the merits of his own hands. Presently, he is a casual visitor, "a sojourner in life again" (Works, II, 3). In the next paragraph, he facetiously refers to his curious neighbors, who, like most industrious Yankees, are eager to learn how much it cost him to live and how he managed his money. Jokingly, he apologizes to the reader for the autobiographical cast to follow: "In most books the 'I' or first person is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference" (Works, II, 3). Still jokingly, he makes a justification to the reader for rambling on so much about himself. "I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well" (Works, II, 4). Before the reader can finish the second paragraph, he has received strong intimations not to take this narrator or book too literally. The book is like a still useful secondhand coat, and the narrator is a deadpan joker and accomplished trickster, who trusts "that none will stretch the seams in putting on the coat, for it may do good service to him whom it fits" (Works, II, 4).

After concluding his exuberant scolding of the way "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (Works, II, 8), this comic "I" continues

with an account of the undertakings he has cherished. "In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment to tow that line" (Works, II, 18). According to Edward Galligan, Thoreau, through his comic narrator, may be developing here the idea that there is an enormous disparity between what men do with their lives and what men might do with them between the accidental facts of existence and the essential truths of life.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, Thoreau's way of developing this notion is consistently humorous. His "I" or narrator is a man trapped in an incongruous situation, for society perceives him as a mediocre figure, but he knows himself to be exalted. And although he realizes that he possesses celestial qualities within himself, a good portion of his life falls short of perfection.

In the paragraphs that follow, the comic nature of the narrator is adequately stressed. For example, the narrator, seeking a means of expressing the loss of something valuable in his life selects everyday, commonplace symbols: "I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle dove, and am still on their trail" (Works, II, 18). Likewise, trying to explain what his profession involves, this comic figure speaks of assisting "the sun in his rising," sinking his capital in efforts "to hear what was in the wind," reporting to a journal "of no very wide circulation," acting as "self-appointed inspector of snow-storms,"

<sup>3</sup> Edward Galligan, "The Comedian at Walden," South Atlantic Quarterly, 69 (1970), 27.

supervising "the wild stock of the town," and watering "the red huckleberry, the sand cherry and the nettle tree . . . which might have withered else in dry seasons" (Works, II, 19-20). And finally, pondering a way to summarize the notion that a man should determine his vocation by consulting his own desires instead of listening to others, the narrator tells the anecdote of an Indian who emulated the diligence of white men by weaving baskets, and who became angered when people refused to buy them, yelling to these people as they walked away, "What! do you mean to starve us?" (Works, II, 20-21).

The rest of the first chapter "Economy" is crowded with situations and comments which reveal the narrator's comic nature. This humorous raconteur's discussion of clothing leads him to believe that it is far better "that a man be clad so simply that he can lay hands on himself in the dark" (Works, II, 26-27). He admits to being afraid of the discovery that three pieces of limestone which he kept on his desk required to be dusted daily, and therefore "threw them out the window in disgust" (Works, II, 40). So intensely does he cherish his freedom and individuality that he "would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to himself than be crowded on a velvet cushion" (Works, II, 41). When making bread, he resorts "to the recipe Marcus Portius Cato gave about two centuries before Christ" (Works, II, 70). Looking upon the needless burden of excessive furniture and possessions, he believes that "it would surpass the powers of a well man nowadays to take up his bed and walk" and a sick man "to lay down his bed and run" (Works, II, 74). When offered a doormat by a lady, he declined it and preferred wiping

his feet on the sod before the door because he "had no room to spare within the house, nor time to spare within or without to shake it" (Works, II, 74). And when criticized for his retreat from society, which his neighbors regarded as a selfish excuse for not helping the poor, he decided to maintain certain persons as comfortably as himself but noticed "they have one and all unhesitatingly preferred to remain poor" (Works, II, 80). As J. Golden Taylor implies, the only other writer in the history of nineteenth-century American prose capable of producing a narrator who could sustain passages of such pithy and exuberant language as these was the great humorist, Mark Twain.<sup>4</sup>

Thoreau's narrator is prevailingly humorous, according to Walter Harding, and in the chapters that follow, nothing changes the characterization and a good many instances strengthen it.<sup>5</sup> For example, in "Where I Lived" the narrator ends the chapter with a lavishly comical metaphor of himself: "My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore paws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills" (Works, II, 109). In "Reading" after examining the shallow types of romantic heroes and heroines upon which popular novels are based, the narrator suggests "they had better metamorphose all such aspiring heroes of

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Harding, "Five Ways of Looking at Walden," Thoreau in Our Season, ed. John H. Hicks (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1966), p. 50.



universal noveldom into main weathercocks, as they used to put heroes among constellations, and let them swing around there till they are rusty, and not come down at all to bother honest men with their pranks" (Works, II, 117). In "Solitude" consideration of the "indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature" leads the narrator to the serenely comic and rhetorical questions: "Shall I have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?" (Works, II, 153). In "Higher Laws" his long discourse on the benefits of a vegetarian diet begins with the admission that he once had an acute desire to seize a woodchuck and "devour him raw" (Works, II, 232), and ends with the exuberantly humorous comment that "I was never unusually squeamish, I could sometimes eat fried rat with a good relish, if it were necessary" (Works, II, 240). And, subsequently, "Brute Neighbors" concludes with a choice account of how he spent the greater portion of one calm afternoon paddling all over the pond, playing what could be best described, according to Alan Holder, as a game of hide-and-seek with a loon, who, incidentally, won.<sup>6</sup>

The last chapter of Walden is permeated with humorous parables and metaphors which emphasize the comic quality of the narrator. One of the most interesting of these is the narrator's advice that "the universe is wider than our views of it," and even "if you are a chosen town-clerk," and cannot venture "to Tierra del Fuego this summer, you may go to the land of infernal fire nevertheless," for "the other side

<sup>6</sup> Alan Holder, "The Writer as Loon: Witty Structure in Walden," Emerson Society Quarterly, 42, No. 43 (1966), 76.

of the globe is but the home of our correspondent" (Works, II, 352). A few pages later, the narrator asks why men forever "level downward to the dullest perception" and "praise that as common sense," and then he points out, "the commonest sense is sense of men asleep, which they express by snoring" (Works, II, 357). Again, in great comic fashion, the narrator tells the story of "Tom Hyde, the tinker," who, "standing on the gallows, was asked if he had anything to say. 'Tell the tailors,' said he, 'to remember to make a knot in their thread before they take the first stitch.' His companion's prayer is forgotten" (Works, II, 360-61). Finally, this comic figure draws his narrative to a close with a parable of rebirth, the story of "a strong bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty years" (Works, II, 366). And so a humble bug becomes the narrator's final symbol of himself. On the whole, Thoreau's use of the comic narrator technique is indeed an effective means of sustaining his narrative, for this device lends a certain coherence to the book, and, at the same time, enables Thoreau to affirm his philosophy through a ludicrously comic impression.

In addition to the comic narrator technique, Thoreau employs a great deal of paradoxical statement. This element of humor, Moldenhauer asserts, uses the medium of contradiction and may be witnessed in full flower throughout Walden.<sup>7</sup> In "Visitors" Thoreau antithetically describes the inconvenience to conversation occasioned by the smallness of his

<sup>7</sup> Moldenhauer, p. 73.

hut: "In my house we were so near that we could not begin to hear,-- we could not speak low enough to be heard" (Works, II, 156). In "Economy" he delivers a paradoxical blow at the unrealistic belief that an inherited fortune is the answer to one's every needs:

I see young men my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, horses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got ride of . . . . How many a poor immortal soul have I met well-nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, on one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and wood-lot.

(Works, II, 5)

A briefer statement of a similar idea is the following sentence from the same chapter: "And when the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him" (Works, II, 37); or again, the statement from "Where I Lived" which contends that "a man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone" (Works, II, 91). Inherent in these examples is an undeniable quality of playfulness, but this quality seems to vary in inverse proportion to the seriousness of the subject. As a result, these paradoxes yield most of their humor to an earnestness that momentarily conceals the playfulness of the form.

In Walden Thoreau's paradoxes are rarely formal, and the contradiction is based as much on the thought as it is on the language. A typical specimen of Thoreau's paradoxes which illustrates the proper balance of thought and language is the following statement taken again from "Economy": "The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very

likely to be my good behavior" (Works, II, 11). Not only is this contradiction clear in words, but the humorous thought behind it is unmistakable. Choosing his words carefully, Thoreau condemns not the instinctive behavior of his neighbors, but their outward behavior. For Thoreau, what his neighbors "call good" is not necessarily what they deem in their hearts to be good. Moreover, the words "repent" and "good behavior" have so righteous and religious a connotation that one cannot mistake Thoreau's underlying thought which subtly scorns the shallow, conventional patterns of ethical behavior. In a word, by effectively balancing his thought and expression, Thoreau successfully conveys to his readers the difference between the merely respectable and the truly virtuous.

Thoreau had any number of comic devices by which to impart his humor in Walden, and one of the most delightful of these is perhaps the pun or wordplay.<sup>8</sup> Thoreau's wordplays, David Skwire feels are most remarkable "both for number and brilliance," endowing the art of punning with a new depth of content and comic appeal.<sup>9</sup> The examples of puns and wordplays included here range from the lowest or most frivolous to the most serious or thought provoking. To illustrate the variety of Thoreau's frivolous wordplays the following samples are not far removed

<sup>8</sup> Albert Rapp in The Origins of Wit and Humor (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co. Inc., 1951), p. 87, defines a pun as either "a play on two words, which have the same (or a similar) sound but with different meanings," or "a play on a single word or phrase, with two or more different meanings."

<sup>9</sup> David Skwire, "A Checklist of Wordplays in Walden," American Literature, 31 (Nov. 1959), 282.

from buffoonery:

I was not anchored to a house or farm, but could follow the bent [underlining mine] of my genius, which is a very crooked one, every moment.<sup>10</sup>

(Works, II, 62)

I did not fear the hen-harriers, for I kept no chickens, but I feared the men-harriers rather.

(Works, II, 170)

Only one or two of my guests were ever bold enough to stay and eat a hasty pudding with me; but when they saw that crisis approaching they beat a hasty retreat rather.

(Works, II, 271)

We made a "bran new" theory of life over a dish of gruel, which combined the advantages of conviviality with the clear-headedness which philosophy requires.

(Works, II, 295)

Equally frivolous are some of Thoreau's puns on names of persons and places:

East of my bean field across the road lived Cato Ingraham, slave of Duncan Ingraham . . . Cato, not Uticensis, but Concordiensis.

(Works, II, 283).

Look at the teamster on the highway, wending to market by day or night . . . Does he not drive for Squire Make-a-stir?

(Works, II, 8)

The last inhabitant of these woods before me was an Irishman, Hugh Quoil (if I had spelt his name with coil enough) . . . .

(Works, II, 288)

And so I went to my bed, and left him to pick his way through the darkness and mud to Brighton,--or Bright-town,--which place he would reach some time in the morning.

(Works, II, 148)

Flint's Pond! Such is the poverty of our nomenclature. What right had the unclean and stupid farmer . . . to give his name to it? Some skin-flint who loved better the reflecting surface

<sup>10</sup> For the purpose of emphasis, all subsequent puns and wordplays will be underlined.

of a dollar, or a bright cent, in which he could see his own brazen face . . . .

(Works, III, 217)

The reader may feel superior to such humor, but Thoreau reveals that this type of humor was a healthy outlet for him during his stay at Walden Pond. In "Winter Visitors" Thoreau writes that "at suitable intervals" he shared with his visitors these "regular salutes of laughter, which might have been referred indifferently to the last-uttered or the forthcoming jest" (Works, II, 295). Apparently, Thoreau and his guests not only indulged in sheer fun and merriment, but laughed at their own simple jests.

More concrete, but hardly less humorous than the preceding examples, are puns that stimulate more serious reflection. Explaining on the first page of Walden why he obstrudes his private affairs to the public, Thoreau engages a rather learned pun on the word "impertinent": "I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life, which some call impertinent, though they do not appear to me at all impertinent, but, considering the circumstances, very natural and pertinent" (Works, II, 3). Employing the Latin root of this adjective, Thoreau ingeniously complicates its meaning. To be "impertinent" is to be insolent only because it is not "pertinent," meaning not relevant, but the desire of average men to understand abnormal behavior seems to him "very natural and pertinent." Just as ingenious as the previous wordplay are the puns which affirm his philosophy on self-worth and self-determination: "What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates

his fate . . . As if you could kill time without injuring eternity" (Works, II, 8), or, "A man sits as many risks as he runs" (Works, II, 170).

Occasionally, the seriousness of a subject so preoccupies Thoreau's thought that he will devote a whole paragraph to a single pun, as in his extended comment on the railroads:

We do not ride on the railroads; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over; so that, if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon. And when they run over a man that is walking in his sleep, a supernumerary sleeper in the wrong position, and wake him up, they suddenly stop the cars, and make a hue and cry about it, as if they were an exception. I am glad to know that it takes a gang of men for every five miles to keep the sleepers down and level in their beds as it is, for this is a sign that they may sometime get up again.

(Works, II, 102-3)

In this paragraph which takes a satirical thrust at the triumph of technology over human values, Thoreau artistically elaborates on the word "sleeper" which refers simultaneously to the railroad ties and to the poor laborers who lay them. With an appropriate play on words Thoreau hints that the very laborers who "keep the sleepers down and level in their bed" may "get up again" and some day rise to the dawn of their own divine faculties.

In the same adroit fashion as the foregoing devices, Thoreau incorporates into his narrative generous amounts of understatement, or what G. G. Sedgewick calls "saying less than one means."<sup>11</sup> This

<sup>11</sup> G. G. Sedgewick, Of Irony (1935; rpt. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 49.

understatement derives from the tradition which Constance Rourke identifies as "understated Yankee humor," and which Walter Blair describes as "Down East humor."<sup>12</sup> Rourke maintains that Thoreau's understatement "is peculiarly Yankee and reveals the direct flavor of Thoreau's native monologue, which allows whole passages of his writing to have an unmistakable native authority and a true sound of native speech."<sup>13</sup> Again, a number of passages such as the opening paragraphs of the book, the itemized account of Thoreau's expenditures at Walden, and the final words of Tom Hyde, the tinker, serve to illustrate Thoreau's use of this device, but one may add to these examples many more. For instance, the comments that "it is not necessary that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow unless he sweats easier than I do" (Works, II, 78), "None is so poor that he need sit on a pumpkin. That is shiftlessness" (Works, II, 72), or even, "I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors . . . If I have any experience which I think valuable, I am sure to reflect that this my Mentors said nothing about it" (Works, II, 10) are in the best tradition of Yankee cracker-barrel humor.

As the pages of Walden unfold, the number and variety of understated comments of this sort, or of a more overtly humorous nature,

<sup>12</sup> See Constance Rourke, American Humor: A Study of the National Character (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1931), pp. 166-68; see also Walter Blair, Native American Humor: 1800-1900 (New York: American Book Co., 1937), p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> Rourke, p. 168.



begin to accumulate, and hardly a page goes by that does not contain some understatement. Yet there is always a mark of subtlety conveyed by Thoreau's use of this device which in other hands might become purely farcical. A good example of Thoreau's more subtle brand of understatement occurs in the middle of "Economy" and concerns the inclination of weak-willed people to conform to fashionable trends:

When I asked for a garment of a particular form, my tailoress tells me gravely, "They do not make them so now," not emphasizing the "They" at all, as if she quoted an authority as impersonal as the Fates, and I find it difficult to get made what I want, simply because she cannot believe that I mean what I say, that I am so rash. When I hear this oracular sentence, I am for a moment absorbed in thought, emphasizing to myself each word separately that I may come at the meaning of it, that I may find out by what degree of consanguinity They are related to me, and what authority they may have in an affair which affects me so nearly; and, finally, I am inclined to answer her with equal mystery, and without any more emphasis of the "they,"-- "It is true, they did not make them so recently, but they do now."

(Works, II, 27)

The reader is amused by the wit of this story together with the clever repartee, only to suddenly realize that Thoreau means more than he says, and the reader soon finds himself laughing at his own idiosyncrasies of speech as well. Earlier in this chapter, Thoreau's understated comment on a certain piece of advice given by a neighboring farmer bears the same mark of subtlety: "One farmer says to me, 'You cannot live on vegetable food solely, for it furnishes nothing to make bones with'; and and so he religiously devotes a part of his day to supplying his system with the raw materials of bones; walking all the while he talks behind his oxen, which with vegetable-made bones, jerk him and his lumbering plow along in spite of every obstacle" (Works, II, 10). The comic

quality of Thoreau's understatement here is unequivocal, when one considers the ridiculousness of the farmer's inane advice. But this comic quality is heightened by the unwillingness of Thoreau to expose himself by enthusiasm. In other words, instead of over-reacting to the farmer's suggestion, this shrewd, witty Yankee feigns apathy to the reader and with utmost subtlety and delicacy delivers a choice bit of understatement which deepens the meaning and acts as the final snapper to his comment.

Frequently occurring in Walden and generally with humorous effect is verbal irony, a type of irony, according to Sedgewick, in which the intended meaning is opposite of that expressed by the words used.<sup>14</sup> To be sure, little difference exists between verbal irony, or saying one thing but meaning another, and understatement, a form of verbal irony which expresses less than the intended meaning. Nor is verbal irony so far removed from punning, or playing on a word with different meanings. Furthermore, verbal irony is a variety of contradiction not unlike paradox which relies heavily on antithesis and opposite meanings. Among the examples of paradox, wordplay, and understated humor, cited earlier, verbal irony is a prominent ingredient. One will recall the contradiction implied in Thoreau's assertion that he repented only of his "good behavior," or his play on the word "sleepers" which simultaneously pertains to the Irish railroad workers and the ties they laid, or to the vegetable-boned oxen who plow the field of the meat-eating farmer. In each of these passages, the key words must be recognized so that

<sup>14</sup> Sedgewick, p. 6.

their exact opposites may be understood. Once the reader is aware of the key phrasing, the laughable incongruity between the generally assumed and the actual takes place and combines with Thoreau's wit, resulting in a sudden, humorously-lively shock of surprise for the reader.

Since verbal irony has figured so prominently as an ingredient of many of the passages already cited, only a few separate examples are needed. In "Economy" Thoreau uses humorous irony when discussing his responsibility to society of doing good to his neighbors:

But all of this is very selfish, I have heard some of my townsmen say. I confess that I have hitherto indulged very little in philanthropic enterprises, I have made some sacrifices to a sense of duty, and among others have sacrificed this pleasure also . . . While my townsmen and women are devoted in so many ways to the good of their fellows, I trust that one at least may be spared to other less humane pursuits. You must have a genius for charity as well as for anything else. As for Doing-good, that is one of the professions which are full.

(Works, II, 80-81)

The verbal irony in the reference to philanthropy as a "pleasure" and in the distinction between what Thoreau calls his "less humane pursuits" and the "genius for charity," possessed by professional philanthropists, is an appropriate means of exposing the insincerity and superficiality of "Doing-good" for a living. Two other examples of this device, taken from "The Bean Field," concern Thoreau's ironical treatment of peace-time military activities, which consist mainly of maneuvers and band music. While in his bean field, Thoreau overhears the noise created by trainees engaged in mock-battles and with a twist of irony comments, "I felt proud to know that the liberties of Massachusetts and of our fatherland

were in such safe keeping; and as I turned to my hoeing again I was filled with an inexpressible confidence, and pursued my labor cheerfully with a calm trust in the future." In the very next paragraph, Thoreau ironically relates that he sometimes heard military band music at a distance; this music stirred his patriotic blood so much that he felt he could "split a Mexican with a good relish,--for," as he facetiously inquires, "why should we always stand for trifles?--and looked round for a woodchuck or a skunk to exercise my chivalry upon" (Works, II, 177). Most assuredly, Thoreau's clever use of verbal irony serves as a good indication of his mastery of yet another element of humor and stands as a hallmark of his versatility as a prose stylist.

Thoreau's use of exaggeration or extravagant statement is as characteristic a feature of his humor as his use of paradox, wordplay, understatement and verbal irony, and in Walden he utilizes this humorous device to great advantage. During the time Thoreau was writing, the American tradition of tall-tale frontier humor had its beginning.<sup>15</sup> Appearing on the American frontier in the early nineteenth century was the braggart, the tall-tale raconteur, or folk hero, who passed into literature in the figures of such men as Jonathan Slick, Johnny Appleseed, Davy Crockett, Mike Fink, and Daniel Boone. Thoreau was well acquainted

<sup>15</sup> For good discussions of the American tradition of tall-tale frontier humor the reader is referred to the following sources: Mody C. Boatright, Folk Laughter on the American Frontier (1942; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1971), pp. 95-107; Walter Blair, Native American Humor: 1800-1900, pp. 62-102; Walter Blair, Tall Tale America: A Legendary History of Our Humorous Heroes (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1944); and Richard Curtis, The Genial Idiots: The American Saga as Seen by Our Humorists (New York: Crowell-Collier Press, 1968), pp. 59-69.

with the methods of extravagant narration used to describe the exploits of these men, and clearly recognized his own tendency to brag and exaggerate. In "Economy" he says, "If I seem to boast more than is becoming, my excuse is that I brag for humanity rather than myself; and my shortcomings and inconsistencies do not affect the truth of my statement" (Works, II, 55).

Thoreau probably had more native humor than any other writer of his time, according to Kenneth Kurtz, and the hyperbolical, figurative language so distinctive in tall-tale frontier humor is certainly an essential part of Thoreau's compelling prose style.<sup>16</sup> During the course of writing Walden, Thoreau would often resort to spinning some yarn, telling a tall-tale, or overstating some particular incident in order to emphasize a point, and his masterful prose narrative presents these colorfully amusing examples:

I have travelled a good deal in Concord; and everywhere, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways. What I have heard of Brahmins sitting exposed to four fires and looking in the face of the sun; or hanging suspended, with their heads downward over flames . . . or dwelling chained for life, at the foot of a tree or measuring with their bodies, like caterpillars, the breadth of vast empires; or standing on one leg on the top of pillars,--even these forms of conscious penance are hardly more incredible and astonishing than the scenes which I daily witness. The twelve labors of Hercules were trifling in comparison with these which my neighbors have undertaken; for they were only twelve, and had an end; but I could never see that these men slew or captured any monster or finished any labor.

(Works, II, 4-5)

<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Kurtz, "Style in Walden," Style in the American Renaissance: A Symposium, ed. Carl F. Strauch (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1970), p. 59.

I have heard of a dog that barked at every stranger who approached his master's premises with clothes on, but was easily quieted by a naked thief.

(Works, II, 24)

Consider first how slight a shelter is absolutely necessary. I have seen Penobscot Indians in this town, living in tents of thin cotton cloth, while the snow was nearly a foot deep around them, and I thought that they would be glad to have it deeper to keep the wind out.

(Works, II, 31)

This spending the best part of one's life earning money in order to enjoy a questionable liberty during the least valuable part of it, reminds me of the Englishman who went to India to make a fortune first, in order that he might return to England and live the life of a poet.

(Works, II, 59)

As for your high towers and monuments, there was a crazy fellow once in this town who undertook to dig to China, and he got so far that, as he said, he heard the Chinese pots and kettles rattle; but I think that I shall not go out of my way to admire the hole which he made.

(Works, II, 64-65)

I know a good woman who thinks that her son lost his life because he took to drinking water only.

(Works, II, 68)

We read that the traveller asked the boy if the swamp before him had a hard bottom. The boy replied that it had. But presently the traveller's horse sank in up to the girths, and he observed to the boy, "I thought you said this bog had a hard bottom." "So it has," answered the latter, "but you have not got half way yet."

(Works, II, 363)

These passages are worthy even of Mark Twain. The nonchalant beginning, the steady rise to a climax, and the final snapper make an effective formula. Moreover, they indicate that no complete evaluation of Walden can be made without the realization that Thoreau characteristically exaggerated, and the more deeply he was touched by an issue, the more elaborately did he contrive his exaggerations.

Another device commonly employed in Walden is the mock-heroic, which, according to Raymond Adams, comes from the English tradition of mock-heroic humor, popularized by such men as Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope.<sup>17</sup> For certain, Thoreau knew the epic at its fountain-head in Homer, as Ethel Seybold substantiates; therefore, an imagination so vivid as Thoreau's would be quite capable of making a fanciful analogy out of the most trivial occurrence, turning, as it would, the smallest event into heroic proportions.<sup>18</sup> To illustrate Thoreau's use of the mock-heroic technique, one could cite any number of passages. But perhaps the best and clearest illustrations would be his observation of the flight of a mosquito in "Where I Lived," the celebration of freshly picked huckleberries at the beginning of "The Ponds," the description of a steam locomotive in the middle of "The Ponds," and, of course, the unforgettable account of the battle of the ants near the end of "Brute Neighbors."

Thoreau's account of the mosquito's flight immediately takes on epic proportions: "It was Homer's requiem itself an Iliad and Odyssey in the air, singing its own wrath and wanderings" (Works, II, 98-99). This insect is endowed with all of the traits of Greek heroes, at once a vengeful Achilles and a wandering Odysseus. As Adams aptly puts it, "That one invisible matutinal buzz should be two Homeric heroes rolled

<sup>17</sup> Raymond Adams, "Thoreau's Mock-Heroics and the American Natural History Writers," Studies in Philology, 52 (1955), 86-87.

<sup>18</sup> Ethel Seybold, Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics (1951; rpt. New Haven: Archon Books, 1969), p. 15.

into one and should do his (or their) own singing of wrath and wanderings must give Thoreau's mosquito some kind of All-American mock-epic rating."<sup>19</sup> Another illustration of the technique is the opening paragraph of the chapter, "The Ponds," in which Thoreau celebrates the flavor of freshly picked huckleberries and pities those who have tasted only the huckleberries sold at market. Referring to these huckleberries almost as if they were natives taken from their natural habitat and sold into slavery, Thoreau concludes, "As long as Eternal justice reigns, not one innocent huckleberry can be transported thither from the country's hills" (Works, II, 192). A further illustration is Thoreau's vividly heroic description of a steam locomotive which possesses all the sinister qualities of the immense wooden horse used by the Greeks to deceive their enemies at Troy: "That devilish Iron Horse, whose ear-rending neigh is heard throughout the town, has muddied the Boiling Spring with his foot, and 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!" (Works, II, 213-14). And a final illustration is Thoreau's incomparable account of "the war between two races of ants" (Works, II, 253-54), which mocks the heroism displayed at Concord, Austerlitz, and Dresden, and which makes the conflict of two noble races of ants as immense, as explosive, and as crucial as Bunker Hill.

A further aspect of humor in Walden, which Thoreau utilizes with a great degree of skill and craftsmanship, is humorous characterization. Throughout the book Thoreau delights in creating poignant portraits

<sup>19</sup> Adams, p. 88.



of all kinds. Particularly noteworthy, is the caricature of the Canadian woodchopper who visited Thoreau at Walden Pond and who was either "as wise as Shakespeare or as simply ignorant as a child." Thoreau could hardly decide which; for the man who, when asked if he had got a new idea during the summer replied, "Good Lord, a man that has to work as I do, if he does not forget the ideas he has had, he will do well" (Works, II, 165). Next, there is the half witted man from the almshouse, who, as Thoreau relates, "told me with utmost simplicity and truth, quite superior or rather inferior, to anything that is called humility, that he was 'deficient in intellect . . . I never had much mind; I was not like other children; I am weak in the head. It was the Lord's will I suppose.' And there he was to prove the truth of his words" (Works, II, 167-68). Of equal appeal is Thoreau's extended description of the various people who visited him at Walden Pond:

Men of almost every degree of wit called on me in the migrating season . . . Men of one idea, like a hen with one chicken, men of a thousand ideas . . . like those hens which are made to take charge of a hundred chickens, all in pursuit of one bug . . . men of ideas instead of legs, a sort of intellectual centipede that made you crawl all over . . . Restless committed men, whose time was all taken up in getting a living or keeping it; ministers who spoke of God as if they enjoyed a monopoly of the subject, who could not bear all kinds of opinions; doctors, lawyers, uneasy housekeepers who pried into my cupboard and bed when I was out,--how came Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ to know that my sheets were not as clean as hers?--young men who had ceased to be young, and had concluded that it was safest to follow the beaten track of professions,--all these generally said it was not possible to do much good in my position.

(Works, II, 169-70)

Then there is the poignant characterization of John Field, a "hard-working, but shiftless" farmer whose chickens stalked about his home like members

of the family, "too humanized, methought, to roast well," and whose wife "with round greasy face and bare breast, still thinking to improve her condition one day" remained "with the never absent mop in one hand, and yet no effects of it visible anywhere" (Works, II, 227). And last, there is the chronically inebriated veteran of Waterloo, Hugh Quoil, whose face was "affected with the trembling delirium," and whose house, upon his death, bore on its back the freshly-stretched "skin of a woodchuck" which served as a fitting "trophy of his last Waterloo" (Works, II, 289). These highly comical portraitures and many more are surely fashioned in the best tradition of native American humor and are certainly equal, if not superior, to any of the humorous caricatures written by contemporary authors of Thoreau's time.

As an added touch of comic flavor to his narrative, Thoreau often includes paraphrased or altered proverbs, old sayings, or familiar rhymes to enhance the humorous effect. Some delightful samples of this technique will show how Thoreau applies his own comic touch to altering proverbs, a practice not dissimilar to the one exercised by early American humorists and crackerbox philosophers, who, as Jennette Tandy points out, would invariably corrupt scriptural passages and wise sayings to get a laugh.<sup>20</sup> Thus, for Thoreau, the well-known proverb "A woman's work is

<sup>20</sup> See Jennette Tandy, Crackerbox Philosophers in American Humor and Satire (1925; rpt. Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1964), pp. 41-42. According to Grant Loomis in "Henry David Thoreau as Folklorist," Western Folklore, 16, No. 2 (April 1957), 90, Thoreau's knowledge of proverbs and old sayings was certain; for as the pages of his Journal for a quarter of century (1837-1861) will testify, Thoreau was a man who traveled widely within the bounds of his native township, and who became almost "a sporadic annotator" of the ideas, sayings, and customs of its inhabitants.

never done," becomes "A woman's dress, at least, is never done" (Works, II, 25);<sup>21</sup> "If the cap fits, wear it," is expanded to "I trust that none will stretch the seams in putting on the coat, for it may do good service to him it fits" (Works, II, 4); "One man's meat is another man's poison" is transformed into "What is one man's gain is not another man's loss" (Works, II, 62); and "Early to bed, early to rise, makes the man healthy, wealthy, and wise" is changed to "who would not be early to rise . . . till he became unspeakably healthy, wealthy, and wise" (Works, II, 141). As for corrupting familiar rhymes, Thoreau is not at all reluctant, and in "Visitors" he chooses to rewrite the old nursery rhyme "This is the house that Jack built":

Finally, there were the self-styled reformers, the greatest bores of all, who thought that I was forever singing,--

This is the house that I built

This is the man that lives in the house that I built,

but they did not know that the third line was,--

These are the folks that worry the man

That lives in the house that I built.

(Works, II, 170)

Several instances of Swiftian satire likewise appear in Walden and serve as a means of delivering poignant social criticism.<sup>22</sup> Many of Thoreau's sentences somehow suggest, as Joseph Wood Krutch implies, the satirical ring of the supreme satirist, Jonathan Swift, and the reader

<sup>21</sup> For the sake of comparison, the original forms of the proverbs altered by Thoreau in Walden are given. These original forms are taken from Robert Christy ed., Proverbs Maxims and Phrases of All Ages (2 vols. in 1, New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1887).

<sup>22</sup> Gilbert Highet in The Anatomy of Satire (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 149-50, maintains that Swiftian satire, distinguishable from scornful monologue or parody, is a particular form of satire which uses the background of a narrative as a means of ridiculing the foibles of society.

does not have to read very far before the similarities to Swift's satire begin to materialize.<sup>23</sup> When, for example, Thoreau satirizes the inconsistency involved in following the trends of fashion, he resorts to the comment, "The head monkey at Paris puts on a traveler's cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same" (Works, II, 28). One is reminded here of the ape-like creatures in Gulliver's Travels, called Yahoos, which represented man's baser impulses.<sup>24</sup> Again, when Thoreau satirizes society's pompous acceptance of inferior intellectual standards, he states "our reading, our conversation and thinking are all on a very low level, worthy only of pygmies and manikins" (Works, II, 119). This reference to men as "pygmies and manikins" reminds the reader of the tiny creatures in Gulliver, the Lilliputians, who also thought that their system of learning was superior to all others.<sup>25</sup> And when Thoreau satirically comments on the "broad, flapping American ear" so eagerly awaiting the arrival of the telegraph system (Works, II, 58), one recalls the custom that Gulliver observes in Laputa which involved servants flapping the mouths and ears of their masters with an inflated bladder fastened to the end of a stick.<sup>26</sup> With Swiftian satire, Thoreau can thus effectively

<sup>23</sup> Krutch, p. 227.

<sup>24</sup> In Part IV, Chap. X of Swift's Gulliver's Travels (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 316, Swift conjectures the absurdities of European customs by imagining the conduct of the hairy, tree-climbing Yahoos "who had a small proportion of reason."

<sup>25</sup> See Part I, Chap. IV of Gulliver's Travels, pp. 62-67.

<sup>26</sup> In Part III, Chap. II of Gulliver's Travels, pp. 179-80, Gulliver relates, "I observed here and there many in the habit of servants, with a blown bladder fastened like a flail to the end of a short stick, which they carried in their hands. In each bladder was a small quantity of dried pease, or little pebbles (as I was afterwards informed). With these

deliver important social criticism, blending it into the background of his narrative. The proper mixture of narrative and criticism prevents Thoreau's satire from becoming too barbed or acrid, yet still allows it to hit at the core of society's weaknesses as efficiently and trenchantly as any satire ever penned.

Whatever drew Thoreau's attention was certain to suggest some whimsical comparison, and his talent for whimsical metaphor in Walden often reveals a genuinely poetic and fanciful imagination. Thoreau's metaphor in Walden ranges in the usual way from pure levity to more serious reflection, but, according to William Drake, "rarely draws on literature, formal learning, or iconographic symbols for its point; a practice that may be contrasted, for example, with contemporary 'metaphysical' poetry."<sup>27</sup> Although Thoreau's metaphors rarely appear in a formal state, they nevertheless border on the poetic. Such examples as the following will show Thoreau's ability to apply figurative comparison to commonplace objects and experiences:

I think that the man is at a dead set who has got through a knothole or gateway where his sledge load of furniture cannot follow him.

(Works, II, 73)

bladders they now and then flapped the mouths and ears of those who stood near them . . . it seems the minds of these people are so taken up with intense speculations, that they neither can speak, nor attend to the discourses of others, without being roused by some external taction upon the organs of speech and hearing; for which reason those persons who are able to afford it keep a flapper (the original is climenole) in their family, as one of their domestics, nor ever walk abroad or make visits without him."

<sup>27</sup> William Drake, "Walden," Thoreau: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Sherman Paul (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1962), pp. 77-78.

We meet at meals three times a day, and give each other a new taste of that old musty cheese that we are.

(Works, II, 151)

One generation abandons the enterprises of another like a stranded vessel.

(Works, II, 12)

The bullet of your thought must have overcome its lateral and ricochet motion and fallen into its last and steady course before it reaches the ear of the hearer.

(Works, II, 156)

If the legislature regards it [the pond], it is chiefly to regulate the number of hooks to be used there; but they know nothing about the hook of hooks with which to angle for the pond itself, impaling the legislature for a bait.

(Works, II, 236)

My bricks being second-hand ones required to be cleared with a trowel . . . The mortar of them was fifty years old, and was said to be still growing harder; but this is one of those sayings which men love to repeat whether they are true or not. Such sayings themselves grow harder and adhere more firmly with age, and it would take many blows with a trowel to clean an old wiseacre of them.

(Works, II, 266)

If the snow lies deep, they strap on his [a train] snowshoes and with the giant plow, plow a furrow from the mountains to the seaboard, in which the cars, like a following drill-barrow, sprinkle all the restless men and floating merchandise in the country for seed.

(Works, II, 130)

In the meanwhile all the shore rang with the trump of bullfrogs, the sturdy spirits of ancient wine-bibbers and wassailers, still unrepentant, trying to sing a catch in their Stygian lake . . . who would fain keep up the hilarious rules of their old festal tables, though their voices have waxed hoarse and solemnly grave, mocking at mirth, and the wine has lost its flavor . . . and sweet intoxication never comes to drown the memory of the past. . . . The most aldermanic with his chin upon a heart leaf . . . passes the cup with the ejaculation tr-r-ronk, tr-r-ronk, tr-r-ronk! . . .

(Works, II, 139-40)

I was very pleasant, when I stayed late in the town, to launch myself into the night, especially if it was dark and tempestuous, and set sail from some bright village parlor or lecture room, with

a bag of rye or Indian meal upon my shoulder, for my snug harbor in the woods, having made all tight without and withdrawn under hatches with a merry crew of thoughts, leaving only my outer man at the helm, or even tying up the helm when it was plain sailing.

(Works, II, 187-88)

As may be witnessed from these selections, Thoreau's metaphorical vein runs from serious reflection to almost idle levity, but, in all, the element of humor is both apparent and efficacious. At their best, Thoreau's whimsical metaphors dazzle with variety, spontaneity, and evocative power, adequately revealing Thoreau's capability of relaying in figurative language total experiences. Furthermore, they show his keen apperception for taking everyday objects and converting them into an array of comic symbols. Thoreau's metaphors, therefore, are truly expressive of his sudden tangential insights and moods, and particularly the whimsical play of his fanciful imagination.

The last humorous device to consider is Thoreau's adept use of sententious statement, or comically pompous moralizing, which in Walden usually take the form of either epigram, maxim, or anticlimatic statement.<sup>28</sup> At the bottom-most foundation of Thoreau's narrative is a tinge of the crackerbox philosopher, the amusing character, identified by Jennette Tandy, who forced his way into the anthologies of American

<sup>28</sup> The clearest, most concise definitions of these forms of sententious statement can be found in William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard's A Handbook to Literature (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1936). According to the authors, an epigram is a pointed saying, often antithetical, which bears a witty or satirical thrust (p. 157); a maxim is a "short, concise statement," synonymous with aphorism, "usually drawn from experience and inculcating some practical advice," or some truth (p. 244); and anticlimax is "a sudden or gradual decrease in interest or importance in the items of a series or two or more statements" (p. 24).

humor by coining curt little sayings that still ring in his countrymen's ears.<sup>29</sup> Most of Thoreau's more familiar sententious statements taking the form of epigram are invested with the same home-spun wit, exercised by these platitudinous poets and philosophers:

But men labor under a mistake. The better part of man is soon plowed into the soil for compost.

(Works, II, 6)

There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers.

(Works, II, 16)

Nevertheless, we will not forget that some Egyptian wheat is said to have been handed down to us by a mummy.

(Works, II, 28)

Age is no better, hardly so well, qualified for an instructor as youth, for it has not profited so much as it has lost.

(Works, II, 9)

I am wont to think that men are not so much the keepers of herds as herds are the keepers of men, the former are so much the freer.

(Works, II, 62)

We are a race of tit-men and soar but little in our intellectual flights than the columns of the daily paper.

(Works, II, 119)

Similarly in Walden, sententious statement takes the shape of maxim or aphorism. One characteristic of Thoreau's humor, mentioned earlier, is his ability to add his own comic twist to old saws, proverbs, and catch phrases in order to make a point. However, Thoreau is quite capable of coining his own original maxims to illustrate his thought, capturing the same essential flavor of the proverbs he selected to alter:

Old deeds for old people, new deeds for new.

(Works, II, 9)

<sup>29</sup> Tandy, p. x.



Old shoes will serve a hero longer than they have served his valet.

(Works, II, 25)

If you have any enterprise before you try it in your new clothes.

(Works, II, 26)

There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root.

(Works, II, 84)

Olympus is but outside the earth everywhere.

(Works, II, 94)

Time is but a stream I go fishing in.

(Works, II, 109)

I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.

(Works, II, 155)

Referred to this standard, speech is for the convenience of those who are hard of hearing.

(Works, II, 156)

Goodness is the only investment that never fails.

(Works, II, 241)

Every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthy empire of the Czar is but a petty state, a hummock left by the ice.

(Works, II, 353)

If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

(Works, II, 356)

If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.

(Works, II, 358)

It is life near the bone where it is sweetest.

(Works, II, 362)

Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only.

(Works, II, 362)

God is the only president of the day, and Webster his orator.

(Works, II, 363)

Every nail driven should be as another rivet in the machine  
of the universe, you carrying on the work.

(Works, II, 364)

Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth.

(Works, II, 364)

There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.

(Works, II, 367)

Finally, in conjunction with epigram and maxim, sententious statement comes to the reader in the cast of anticlimax. Walden offers a number of examples of anticlimatic statement, a comic device deliberately employed by Thoreau to lighten his more serious thoughts and drop them to a lesser, more trivial level. In "Economy" Thoreau can finish his serious discourse on the follies of philanthropy with the remark: "If you should ever be betrayed into any of these philanthropies, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, for it is not worth knowing. Rescue the drowning and tie your shoestrings" (Works, II, 86-87). In the same manner, ending a rather lofty discussion of the absurdity inherent in nations forever aspiring to leave monuments of their greatness, Thoreau can conclude, "As for the Pyramids, there is nothing to wonder at in them so much as the fact that so many men could be found degraded enough to spend their lives constructing a tomb for some ambitious booby, whom it would have been wiser and manlier to have drowned in the Nile, and then given his body to the dogs" (Works, II, 64). Like the other varieties of sententious statement illustrated, the humor of Thoreau's anticlimax is as unmistakable as its conscious design, and Thoreau's adroit use of this device has brought the comic appeal of the narrative to an even greater height.

Thoreau's humor in Walden thus manifests itself in many forms: the comic narrator technique, paradox, wordplay, understatement, verbal irony, tall-tale exaggeration, mock-heroics, comic portraiture, altered proverbs, Swiftian satire, whimsical metaphor, and sententious statement. All of these devices are used throughout Thoreau's masterpiece with a great deal of skill and consistency, serving as a means of unifying the narrative and providing probably the best method of presenting Thoreau's ideas and illustrating his thought. In the next chapter, the reader will see how Thoreau's humor functions in Walden, as the proper strategy for maintaining his narrative and a contributing factor to its lasting appeal.

#### IV. THE COMIC STRATEGY OF WALDEN: THE FUNCTION OF THOREAU'S HUMOR

For certain, Thoreau's most immediate problem in Walden was to sustain a first person narrative glorifying the beneficence of life and the divine aspect of the individual in such a manner that it would not become solemn or didactic, cloying or sweet. His answer then was to devise a comic strategy so that humor would lighten his transcendental philosophy and make it more acceptable to his readers. Sincerely believing that the initial purpose of humor was to render serious writing more digestable, he deliberately fashioned his narrator as a comic figure. Likewise holding that humor should function as a mild ridicule of the weaknesses and inconsistencies of human nature, he sagaciously utilized tall-tale exaggeration, mock-heroics, paradox, wordplay, sententious statement, verbal irony, and Swiftian satire in order to chastise his readers without losing them, thereby inviting them to laugh at the excessive tendencies shared by all mankind. Similarly, Thoreau subscribed to the notion that humor operates, at times, as an occasional relief from serious thought, and so with his understated Yankee humor, comic portraitures, inverted rhymes and proverbs, whimsical metaphors, and less serious wordplays he could enliven sections of his more sober narrative and thus add a certain zest to the work. Lastly, Thoreau felt that humor could serve to encourage the reader in his search for the ideal, and, at the same time reconcile him to accepting many of the actual

shortcomings encountered in the search. An important task of this thesis, therefore, will be to render a relatively close examination of these functions of the given forms of humor mentioned, in order to help the reader better comprehend Thoreau's strategy in making humor such an essential part of the Walden masterpiece.

As previously noted, Thoreau believed that the primary function of his humor was to render his transcendental writing more palatable to his audience; consequently, his strategy called for making the narrator of Walden a comic figure so that laughter, or some reaction akin to it, would give an extra dimension to a reader's perception of the divine faculties inherent in man. As Joseph Moldenhauer explains, the comic narrator of Walden is the modern variant of the eirone of traditional comedy, the clever, witty character whose deflating actions are directed toward the establishment of an ideal order.<sup>1</sup> In classical and Elizabethan plays, according to Charles Anderson, he was the trickster who would often set actions in motion from the love of pure mischief.<sup>2</sup> Norman Foerster contends that Thoreau was thoroughly familiar with classical and renaissance drama from reading Terence, Aristophanes, and Shakespeare; hence Thoreau would certainly be well acquainted with this comic type.<sup>3</sup> Yet, before

<sup>1</sup> Moldenhauer, p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Norman Foerster, "The Intellectual Heritage of Thoreau," The Texas Review, 2 (1916), rpt. in Richard Ruland ed., Twentieth Century Interpretations of Walden: A Collection of Critical Essays, (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), pp. 46-47.

the important messages of Walden can hit with full impact, the reader must learn to separate the actual Thoreau of Concord from this fictive character who is both the persona and voice speaking to the reader in the book; for, as stressed earlier, it is this comic "I" who weaves the plot of Walden.

The evidence of the comic narrator in Walden has been sufficiently pointed out in the previous chapter, and it remains only to consider how the "I" figure functions as the leading character of Thoreau's book. In the first chapter, Thoreau artistically fashions the role of the narrator as a character speaking to a silent audience. The narrator is made to address any of "the mass of men who lead lives of quiet desperation" or any poor soul who has the misfortune of "accumulating dross." In turn, Thoreau creates characters who act as foils for the narrator's address. These are the hecklers, or as Moldenhauer describes them, the Alazons or imposters who resist the comic hero's efforts to awaken his neighbors and establish harmony, but who are welcomed into the ideal order when the hero finally succeeds.<sup>4</sup> These hecklers are commonly money-hungry farmers, professional reformers and philanthropists, factory owners, followers of fashion, elderly people who have not learned from their mistakes, architects, missionaries, philosophers, or any person belonging to the class of unbelievers opposed to the narrator's experiment. This particular class of skeptics registers the complaints against the hero, concerning, for example, his supposed lack of charity, his assumed indifference to society, his eccentric behavior, and even

<sup>4</sup> Moldenhauer, p. 79.

the uncleanness of his bed sheets. In a heated battle of wits, the narrator, through the skill of the author, is thus made to answer these complaints, ultimately triumphing over his adversaries with a brilliant humor that dazzles the reader's perspective.

By the end of the second chapter, Thoreau has firmly established the character of the narrator as well as his basic function. This humorous character is a man who is excessively covetous of his individuality and freedom and who is openly indifferent to the figure of himself he establishes among his critics. Realizing that the main threat to his individuality is the pretense of respectability, he describes himself in a deflating, unrespectable manner, reserving his esteem for persons who are either below approbation such as half-wits, woodchoppers, inebriates, and Indians, or far above respectability such as poets and seers. In truth, he urges his neighbors, his fellow townspeople, his readers to laugh at him. By evoking their laughter he can then gain and keep their attention, while showing them how ludicrous are the petty things they normally worry over and how absurd is their inefficacy to be conscious and confident of their own potentials.

This same nimble trickster appears through the remaining chapters of the book evading visitors to his humble retreat in "Solitude," rushing down a hill with a wheelbarrow over his shoulder to go fishing in "Baker Farm," chasing a loon in "Brute Neighbors," gathering grapes and different kinds of nuts in "House Warming," and describing the feats of a humble bug in "Conclusion." When making his appearance he frequently assumes various roles and disguises. At one time, he is a

genial companion or bemused hermit, at another time, he is a crackerbox philosopher or whimsical poet. But under the various masks he dons, he still remains the sly, fanciful trickster, poking fun at himself and his neighbors, while regarding his experiment at Walden Pond as a shrewd joke on respectable citizens.

Briefly, through the whole of Walden the narrator is prevailingly humorous. Moreover, every comic symbol--ranging from the crowing chanticleer in the epigraph of "Economy," through the playful loon in "Brute Neighbors," to the humble insect in "Conclusion"--that Thoreau offers the reader illustrates the narrator's own intrinsic comic nature. The evidence is lucid and consistent, therefore, that the narrator of Walden is consciously designed by Thoreau as a comic hero. He is a hero for he has shown steadfast courage in battling the cynics who would disrupt his order; he is a hero for he has shown valor and consistency of purpose in driving "life into a corner" even at the risk of finding it "mean" (Works, II, 100-1). But, more importantly, he is a comic hero, endowed with a humorous spirit, comic vigor, and unique talent for making men laugh at him so as to recognize the foibles inherent in themselves.

A second function of Thoreau's humor in Walden is a mild ridicule of his own and others' excessive tendencies. His humor, as a result, is not leveled at the bizarre or unique but at the common and conventional, and once again he asks his readers to laugh with him. One method which Thoreau uses to ridicule the extreme tendencies in himself and his neighbors is tall-tale exaggeration. A number of examples of



this device have already been cited, but such passages as Thoreau's comments on distracting inventions, his contempt for hypocrites posing as philanthropists, the inconvenience of conversing in his small house, the inanity of the luxuries men desire, and his aversion to popular fiction are among the best and clearest illustrations of how the device operates. On inventions Thoreau remarks:

Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. . . . We are in a great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate. . . . We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world some weeks nearer to the new; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough.

(Works, II, 57-58)

On his contempt for hypocrites posing as philanthropists, he indicates:

There is no odor so bad as that which arises from goodness tainted. . . . If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life . . . A man is not a good man to me because he will feed me if I should be starving or warm me if I should be freezing, or pull me out of a ditch if I should ever fall into one. I can find you a Newfoundland dog that will do as much. Philanthropy is not love for one's fellow man in the broadest sense . . . . [What good are philanthropists to us] if their philanthropy does not help us in our best estate, when we are most worthy to be helped.

(Works, II, 82)

On the burden of conversing in a small house he points out, "One inconvenience I sometimes experienced in so small a house, the difficulty of getting to a sufficient distance from my guest when we begin to utter the big thoughts in big words" (Works, II, 156). On the futility of desiring luxuries he admits, "The luxuriously rich are not simply kept comfortably warm, but unnaturally hot; as I implied before, they are

cooked, of course a la mode" (Works, II, 15). And on his dislike of contemporary fiction, he says, "The next time the novelist rings the bell I will not stir though the meeting house burn down." For people read daily, according to Thoreau, such putrid trash as "The Skip of the Tip-Toe-Hop, A Romance of the Middle Ages" with "saucer eyes" like "some little four-year-old bench his two-cent gilt-covered edition of Cinderella," and he wholeheartedly regrets that "This sort of ginger bread is baked daily and more seduously than pure wheat or rye-and-Indian in almost every oven, and finds a surer market" (Works, II, 117).

Obviously a strong tall-tale quality is inherent in each of these passages, and each passage illustrates both the characteristic flavor and major function of Thoreau's adaptation of this device. The function of tall-tale exaggeration can be expressed in various ways. Its use allows Thoreau's satiric passages to achieve a coherence, while securing the reader's attention. Similarly, it lets Thoreau chastise his readers for the way they live without making them despondent over the quality of their lives. As a result, for Thoreau, comic exaggeration, besides being a technique for promoting coherence and gaining attention, is one means of calling the reader to personal action instead of summoning him to come into the dark and lament.

The mock-heroic serves as another means of mild ridicule. Essentially the same functions mentioned about comic exaggeration may be applied with equal appropriateness to the mock-heroic technique, for certainly the mock-heroic, which blows the small to epic proportions, is a distinctive variation of the tall-tale. Yet, to these basic

functions, Gilbert Highet adds another, asserting that the mock-epic serves as an effective parody of life's inconsistencies, a parody which he likens to a "laughing child or grinning dwarf, wearing a full-scale unit of majestic armor."<sup>5</sup> In Thoreau's classic account of the battle of the ants near the end of "Brute Neighbors," the functions of the mock-heroic are clearly discernible:

One day when I went out to my wood-pile . . . I observed . . . a war between two races of ants, the red always pitted against the black. The legions of the Myrmidons<sup>6</sup> covered all the hills and vales in my woodyard, and the ground was already strewn with the dead and dying, both red and black. It was the only battle which I have ever witnessed, the only battlefield I ever had while the battle was raging; internecine war; the red republicans on the one hand, and the black imperialists on the other. . . . It was evident that their battle cry was "Conquer or die." In the meanwhile there came along a single red ant on the hill-side of this valley, evidently full of excitement, who either had dispatched his foe, or had not yet taken part in the battle; probably the latter, for he had lost none of his limbs; whose mother had charged him to return with his shield or upon it. Or perchance he was some Achilles, who had nourished his wrath apart, and had now come to avenge or rescue his Patroclus . . . . I should not have wondered by this time to find that they had their respective musical bands stationed on some eminent chip, and playing their national airs the while, to excite the slow and cheer the dying combatants. I was myself excited somewhat even as if they had been men. The more you think of it, the less the difference. And certainly there is not the fight recorded in Concord history, at least, as if in the history of America, that will bear a moment's comparison with this, whether for the numbers engaged in it, or for the patriotism and heroism displayed. For numbers and for carnage it was an Austerlitz and Dresden.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Highet, p. 106.

<sup>6</sup> In Greek legend, the Myrmidons, according to Owen Thomas, ed., Walden and Civil Disobedience (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1966), p. 152, were a warlike people who fought with Achilles in the Trojan War.

<sup>7</sup> Dresden and Austerlitz were two battles fought by Napoleon (Thomas, p. 153).

Concord Fight! Two killed on the patriots' side, and Luther Blanchard wounded. Why here every ant was a Buttrick,--"Fire! for God's sake fire!"--and thousands shared the fate of Davis and Hosmer.<sup>8</sup> There was not one hireling there. I have no doubt that it was a principle they fought for, as much as our ancestors, and not to avoid a three-penny tax on their tea; and the results of this battle will be as important and memorable to those whom it concerns as those of the battle of Bunker Hill.

(Works, II, 253-55)

Pretending to be serious, Thoreau invests his account of these tiny creatures with all the trappings of the epic struggles at Troy, Concord, Austerlitz, and Dresden, thus lending a depth and comic quality of the highest degree to the narrative. Thoreau's style here is lofty, full of rhetorical devices. His writing is ambitious and seeks to rival the mightiest achievements in literature. Taking the theme of a trivial encounter between two species of ants, Thoreau treats it with elaboration, grandeur, and feigned solemnity. It goes without saying, that the struggle between the two types of ants was for them a serious thing: some suffered, some were wounded, some died. But when these little creatures are given the grand names of both ancient and contemporary heroes, when their tiny bitings and scratchings are described with all the intensity of a Homeric battle, or even the famous battle of Bunker Hill, the whole account becomes ludicrous. Yet Thoreau's elaboration is not without purpose, for Thoreau's plan here is to raise the embattled insects to the level of men in order to reduce men to the level of insects. In doing so, Thoreau can provide an apt prose parody effectively mocking the absurdity of war

<sup>8</sup> During the first major battle of the American Revolution at Concord, the five hundred "minute men" were under the command of Major John Buttrick. Isaac Davis and David Hosmer were the only two minute men killed (Thomas, p. 153).

and the petty heroics to which some men aspire.

With Swiftian satire Thoreau can often blend criticism, wit, and, at times, sardonic humor in order to paint a black picture with bright, gay colors. Thoreau's satirical disquisitions on human frailties and vices function as a censor of the common flaws of human nature. These satirical disquisitions range from playful taunts at current fashions to wholesale gibes at what is considered respectable human behavior. Bringing to the public's attention, for example, the foolishness of scorning old fashions while solemnly adhering to the new, he can humorously satirize the fashion-monkeys in America who don a new cap at a mere signal from the main monkey in Paris. He can attack the white man's efforts to civilize the American Indian and confront the overcrowded profession of philanthropy with incisive humor, because, for him, society's ethical code of behavior is most despicable, and an honest man usually repents of his good behavior.

Setting his satirical thrusts against the background of a pleasing narrative, Thoreau can deliver poignant social criticism to his readers without losing them. He can show them that the Iron Horse may equate the Trojan Horse in magnificence, but, by the same token, it pollutes the water of Walden Pond and demeans the lives of Yankee laborers employed to maintain it. The answer to these problems, as Thoreau's satire implies, is not to be found in political institutions whose only concern is to support superfluous courts or contemptible armies. Nor can the answer be found in orthodox religion whose conventional practices of goodness and generosity are pretentious and over-rated. In other

words, when magnanimous acts become consciously designed, they approach corruption, and, as Thoreau contends, there is almost no odor so vile and nauseating as that which arises from "goodness tainted." To Thoreau, consequently, real reform should stem from the heart of the individual and should not be sought elsewhere; for generosity and kindness toward one's neighbors should be as natural as tying one's shoe strings and not sponsored by governmental or religious projects.

In addition to operating as a mild censor, Thoreau's satirical passages serve as an innocent almost positive kind of satire which ridicules despair and melancholy by its own good cheer. As David Worcester claims, the innocent function of mild satire with its accompanying comic spirit can attack pretense and despair, while acting as "the watchdog of society."<sup>9</sup> Throughout Walden Thoreau's love for the individual is emphasized by his positive acceptance of the common imperfections he shares with his neighbors. A particularly good example which best illustrates this positive kind of satire can be found on the closing pages of "Conclusion":

Consider the China pride and stagnant self-complacency of mankind. This generation inclines a little to congratulate itself on being the last of an illustrious line; and in Boston and London and Paris and Rome, thinking of its long descent, it speaks of its progress in art and science and literature with satisfaction. . . . We know not where we are. Besides we are sound asleep nearly half our time. Yet we esteem ourselves wise, and have an established order on the surface.

(Works, II, 364-65)

<sup>9</sup> David Worcester, The Art of Satire (New York: Russell and Russell, 1960), p. 7.

In a cheerful tone, Thoreau is saying in this passage that all men are a rather silly race of creatures disguised by the pomp of their incessant pride and vanity. Thoreau does not exclude himself from the race, for by using the plural form "we" of the first person pronoun, he sees himself as sharing equally in man's vanity. Hence his very admission that he has likewise fallen a victim of common human pride serves in reassuring his readers not to despair but to inculcate their own divine faculties in relinquishing this mutual flaw.

Thoreau's paradoxical statement, verbal irony, and more serious wordplays, epigrams, and maxims all function in Walden to ridicule the conventional. Moreover, all serve as an efficient means of asserting his philosophy, while keeping his reader by achieving a comical impression. Paradoxical statement, when employed indiscriminately, can become cumbersome and intolerable. Yet this device can be rather effective, as Moldenhauer attests, when made to function as a meaningful part of a writer's style, as evidenced in Walden.<sup>10</sup> As Moldenhauer suggests, the primary function of Thoreau's paradoxical statement is satirical, allowing the reader to question the values and practices of his own kind.<sup>11</sup> However, a secondary function to Thoreau's paradoxes acts to allow the comic "I" to transcend convention by transforming language into new meaning. The narrator speaks in contradictions, utilizing paradoxical language to relate the paradoxes of life. With the proper use of paradox Thoreau can thus make his audience realize

<sup>10</sup> Moldenhauer, p. 81.

<sup>11</sup> Moldenhauer, pp. 81-82.

important transcendental concepts--that the possessions that they value are really valueless, that the constant striving for material gain is not freedom but slavery, and that the most simple things are really the most beautiful.

The same functions of paradox may hold true for Thoreau's use of verbal irony and more serious puns, epigrams, and maxims. With verbal irony Thoreau can define his actual intent in words which carry the opposite meaning. He can deliver mild ridicule because this form of irony is less harsh than other forms such as sarcasm or invective. Thoreau characteristically employs verbal irony to cool the fires of his expression at a time when his emotions are really heated. By creating this impression of restraint he can allow his serious philosophy to take a firm hold of his readers' thoughts. Thoreau's serious word-play also lends itself admirably to the function of mild ridicule. By using words with two or more disparate meanings and forcing them to share the same phonemic unit, Thoreau can achieve another perspective of incongruity which simulates the incongruity of life. Thoreau's more serious epigrams and maxims serve as still another means of lampooning the excessive tendencies in everyday living. Walden contains an astonishing number of pointed little sayings which set the tone of Thoreau's criticism. But more essentially, these sharp, terse sayings provide one of the best ways of introducing such social strictures as the inefficacy of traditional thinking, the pretended wisdom of old age, the futility of accumulating wealth, and the apathy toward intellectual improvement, or of defining such pertinent transcendental ideas as the fleeting quality



of time, the grandeur of one's abode, the priceless value of truth, or the divine faculty in man.

A third function of humor in Walden is that of providing the work with pleasant, amusing, or otherwise entertaining diversions. A good example of this function is Thoreau's skillful use of Yankee understatement which operates on a variety of different levels to render pleasant deviations in Thoreau's writing. On one level, understatement aids, occasionally, to keep the satiric passages free of bitterness. In the following passage, the shrewd manner in which Thoreau allows his understated Yankee humor to keep his satirical blows at society free from acrimony is readily apparent:

It is very evident what mean and sneaking lives many of you live . . . always on the limits, trying to get into business and trying to get out of debt . . . seeking to curry favor, to get custom, by how many modes, only not state-prison offences; lying, flattering, voting, contracting yourselves into a nutshell of civility, or dilating into an atmosphere of thin and vaporous generosity. . . . I sometimes wonder that we can be so frivolous, I may almost say, as to attend to the gross but somewhat foreign form of servitude called Negro Slavery, there are so many keen and subtle masters that enslave both North and South . . . . Talk of a divinity in man! Look at the teamster on the highway, wending to the market by day or night; does any divinity stir within him? . . . Think also of the ladies of the land weaving toilet cushions against the last day, not to betray too green an interest in their fates! As if you could kill time without injuring eternity.

(Works, II, 7-8)

No satirist with an affinity for the invective ever used phrases like "contracting yourselves into a nutshell of civility," "dilating into an atmosphere of thin and vaporous generosity," or "weaving toilet cushions against the last day . . . . As if you could kill time without

injuring eternity." Thoreau's understated humor in this passage is not common to the harsh verbal attacks of venomous rancor usually associated, according to Worcester, with such men as Rabelais or Lucian.<sup>12</sup> Rather, his understatement is that of a man who delights in his ability to create it. In this respect, Thoreau is not basically different from such New England humorists as Seba Smith or Thomas Haliburton who, as Walter Blair points out, employed Yankee understatement not only to lighten their satiric attacks on current social foibles, but for their own amusement as well.<sup>13</sup>

On another level, understatement serves to enliven sections of relatively straightforward narrative. A few simple examples of how understated humor stimulates Thoreau's reportorial passages can be found in his initial chapter "Economy." The very first paragraph reports,

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again.

(Works, II, 3)

The first sentence begins rather straightforwardly with the "I" narrating that he has been remote from the world of common people, removed by locale, solitude, and a self-made house. The next sentence innocently discloses that his solitude was only for a short time. Yet in the third sentence the comment, "At present I am a sojourner in life again," understates the fact that his return to civilization may only be temporary. That

<sup>12</sup> Worcester, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Blair, Native American Humor, pp. 38-43.

is to say, an invigorating ambiguity in the word "sojourner" suggests that at any time the narrator is liable to return to his solitary abode, and this ambiguity taunts the reader to peruse further if he wishes to learn why the narrator may revert to his former mode of existence. As John C. Broderick contends, many of Thoreau's paragraphs begin in a deceptive manner and consist largely of monosyllabic utterances succeeded by a humorous element which acts to relieve some of the tension of the book and forecast a release from some of its narrative sections.<sup>14</sup>

Another example of understatement serving as a pleasant deviation occurs after Thoreau's long narrative discussion on the staggering problem of sheltering mankind. Relying on his Yankee humor again, he maintains a person should exercise a little shrewdness in acquiring a dwelling "lest after all he finds himself in a workhouse, a labyrinth without a clue, a museum, an almshouse, a prison, or a splendid mausoleum instead," then he goes on to say, "I used to see a large box by the railroad, six feet by three feet wide, in which the laborers locked up their tools at night; and it suggested to me that every man who was hard pushed [for a dwelling place] might get such a one for a dollar" (*Works*, II, 31-32). The remainder of the "Economy" chapter crackles with this kind of understated humor, but the best of it now takes the novel form of statistics, relating the expense of his house and food. With all the brashness of a shrewd accountant, Thoreau lists to the last half-penny everything

<sup>14</sup> John Broderick, "The Movement of Thoreau's Prose," *American Literature*, 33 (May 1961), rpt. in Richard Ruland, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Walden: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 67.

that went into the cost of living at Walden. His house cost him "28.12½" (Works, II, 54), while his food cost him "8.74, all told" (Works, II, 66). And to dramatize these figures he offers comparative ones such as "\$30" for a dormitory room at Harvard, or "\$800" for an average house in Concord (Works, II, 34, 55). These statistics then are part of Thoreau's Yankee wit and serve to lighten and vitalize entire sections of his narrative.

On still a different level, understatement functions in Walden to qualify many of Thoreau's lyric passages, furnishing a setting or providing a comic twist that keeps them from becoming excessively cloying or satiated. Thoreau can begin a poetically descriptive passage on his bean field with the comical question, "What shall I learn of beans or beans of me?" (Works, II, 171), or end a beautifully lyrical passage, praising the movements of a brown-thrasher with the wry comment, "it was a cheap sort of top dressing in which I had entire faith" (Works, II, 175). But perhaps the best sample of Thoreau's understated Yankee humor mingled with lyric praise is the passage in "Where I Lived" in which he offers poetic admiration for his house he erected on the shores of Walden Pond. Lyrically praising his house so "far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers," yet so near to divine existence that it lies in "the more celestial corner of the system, behind the constellation of Cassiopeia's Chair," Thoreau ends this choice poetic passage with the remark, "Such was that part of creation where I squatted" (Works, II, 98). To end such a lyrical passage as this one with a verb like "squatted," the connotation of which will be left to the reader's imagination, is truly

a unique example of the comic brashness and understated humor Thoreau so artfully employs. Moreover, this specimen of humor justifies Constance Rourke's apt conclusion that Thoreau is most often read for "his Yankee character inadvertently revealed."<sup>15</sup>

Thoreau's humorous characterizations, inverted rhymes and proverbs, whimsical metaphors, and less serious wordplays reveal the function of light-hearted deviation in its purest sense and are employed for no other reason than an application of sheer fun to the narrative. One does not find, for example, anything profound in Thoreau's prevailingly funny caricatures of the French-Canadian woodchopper, the half-witted man from the almshouse, or the hard working but shiftless farmer, John Field. Nor is there anything particularly abstruse in Thoreau's inverted rhyme on "the house that Jack built," or his extended analogies between the trump of bullfrogs and the drunken singing of wassailers, or between a sea voyage and his nightly walks toward home. As for Thoreau's less serious wordplays, the most concentrated example of the levity inherent in this device is the highly entertaining passage near the end of "Economy":

Not long since I was present at the auction of a deacon's effects, for his life had not been ineffectual:--

"The evil that men do lives after them."

As usual, a great proportion was trumpery which had begun to accumulate in his father's day. Among the rest was a dried tapeworm. And now, after lying half a century in his garret and other dust holes, these things were not burned; instead of a bonfire or purifying destruction of them, there was an auction, or increasing of them. The neighbors eagerly collected to view them, bought them all, and carefully transported them to their

<sup>15</sup> Rourke, 168.

garrets and dust holes, to lie till their estates are settled, when they will start again. When a man dies he kicks the dust.

(Works, II, 75)

Beyond its slight exhortative message, this paragraph contains little else serious. The pun on "effects" and "ineffectual," the etymological play on the words "auction" and "bonfire," and the playful description of the deacon's last effects, which consisted of all the furnishings and trumpery of two generations, including even a dried tapeworm preserved in a bottle, are employed for no other purpose than to lend a pleasant diversion to the narrative. In the main, the humor of Thoreau's less serious comic forms is everything, and to look for any serious implications in them is fruitless.

One last function of Thoreau's humor in Walden not linked with any one particular comic device, seems to be the reconciliation of the real and ideal. Many passages in Walden reflect the notion that most men are not content with a rational account of human experience, and although they seek the same assurance in the ideal as they experience in the actual, they never capture more than a fleeting glimpse. One such passage which admirably reflects this notion is the grand and noble defense of life in the woods:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not my life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartanlike as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to

know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to "glorify God and enjoy him forever."

(Works, II, 100-1)

This highly sublime passage provides a splendid comfort for the individual who wishes to pursue an ideal. The apt language depicting the author's fronting of "the essential facts of life" beckons the reader to do the same. By the same token, the humorous undertone of this paragraph prepares the reader for the realization that no one can live in a Walden, or Eden, or any paradisaic abode indefinitely. To perpetuate such a celestial experience would presuppose a complete metamorphosis of the human condition. The underlying humor implicit in the closing phrases "my next excursion" and "chief end of man to glorify God" reassures the reader that any individual who makes the right preparations can have a glimpse, no matter how fleeting, of the glories of life.

A similar passage, which again reconciles the reader in his search for the ideal, bears consideration:

In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line. You will pardon some obscurities, for there are more secrets in my trade than in most men's and yet not involuntarily kept, but inseparable from its very nature. I would gladly tell all that I know about it, and never paint "No Admittance" on my gate.

I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse and a turtle dove, and am still on their trail. Many are the travellers I have spoken to. I met one or two who had heard the hound, and the tramp of the horse, and even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud, and they seemed as anxious to recover them as if they had lost them themselves.

(Works, II, 18-19)

Standing alone, the last paragraph of this passage is vague in meaning, but when examined in light of the humorous undertone of the first paragraph the meaning is quite lucid. Clearly, the final paragraph whimsically states the ineffability of the ideal, yet prompts the reader to continue seeking his "hound," "bay horse," or "turtle dove," all the same. Viewed together, these same two paragraphs seem to contain an underlying humor which functions to encourage the reader in his search for the ideal but, at the same time, acts as a safety-valve reconciling him either to partial success or utter failure.

Unequivocally, Thoreau's humorous scheme in Walden functions as the proper strategy for managing his narrative and a conducive element toward its vast appeal. To be blinded to the strategy of humor in this great prose masterpiece is to see its creative author but dimly. As Thoreau shrewdly observes the disparities of life, his comic strategy functions to prevent him from becoming a cold, fanatical critic of social ills. Because of this comic strategy what could become mere cynical raillery thus becomes an appealing revelation of the inconsistencies and follies which hinder all mankind. Thoreau's comic strategy functions, then, as an effective means of awakening his readers and encouraging them to laugh in order that they may be better receptive to learning the higher truths to which the human spirit should aspire.



## V. THE COMIC STRATEGY OF WALDEN: CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters have revealed that Thoreau's strength as a writer and Walden's prominence as a classic are founded solidly on a compelling prose style marked by a pervasive humor. The final task of this thesis then will be to render explicit the basic contentions of the previous chapters: first, that an awareness of Thoreau's humor is essential to an accurate evaluation of his literary genius; second, that a keen discernment of the exact nature, extent, and purpose of Thoreau's humor is vital to a complete understanding of Thoreau in general and Walden in particular; third, that Thoreau's adroit use of humor in Walden has enriched the work and contributed to its general excellence; and last, that Thoreau's humor has functioned as the proper strategy in maintaining the Walden narrative and ensuring its universal appeal.

A complete and careful evaluation of representative critical and biographical estimates of Thoreau has clarified much of the controversy over Thoreau's humor and has established that humor is a major factor of Thoreau's literary art. Therefore, any approach to Walden which neither takes account of Thoreau's humor, nor recognizes his purpose for utilizing it must result in frequent misunderstanding of his meaning. As pointed out earlier in this thesis, many critics, from Lowell on down, made the error of reading Thoreau too literally; consequently, when

referring to the narrative of his famous experiment at Walden Pond, they chose to accuse him of indolence, misanthropy, egotism, lack of ambition, and ingratitude for the supposed benefits of progress. Even Thoreau's close friend and early mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, misconstrued Thoreau's meaning in Walden, interpreting the volume as a written refusal by Thoreau to engineer his rare powers of action for all society.

During Thoreau's lifetime Walden continued to be dismissed as the work of a minor author and eccentric, indifferent to the needs of mankind. The reasons for this dismissal are apparent, according to Henry Seidel Canby, when one considers that many of Thoreau's ideas were incomprehensible to the Northern or Western readers who saw manifest destiny erecting the great plutocracies before them. Canby further asserts that if Thoreau had been able to disregard the immoral practice of slavery, his philosophies might have been more acceptable to Southern readers.<sup>1</sup> Generally, most readers of Walden during Thoreau's time were bent on a literal interpretation, misjudging the hyperbolical humor of the book for a soberly literal intent, and assuming its author as a self-appointed, egotistical social theorist with solutions for definable problems. Yet in Walden Thoreau offers no solutions. His goal instead is to liberate as many minds as possible by exposing the meanness and desperation of conventional thinking and behavior.

Most often a literal reading of Walden which mistakes Thoreau's comic exaggeration and genial satire for uncompromising assertion results in the

<sup>1</sup> Canby, p. 444.

misconception that Thoreau is advocating a complete rejection of society. However, Thoreau does not favor the abandonment of society, but simply maintains that the determination of values of any kind must remain with the individual, for values cannot be handed down for appraisal by a society at large nor by rigid institutions. His position is not to reject society but to accept only those aspects of it that do not degrade men nor dissipate their energies. For Thoreau, the proper relation between society and its citizens must be accompanied by the conviction that a new emphasis must be placed on the individual. Read literally, then, Walden falls easy prey to erroneous interpretation, but when read in light of its pervasive humor its purpose to improve society by an appeal to its individual members is clearly discernible.

After Thoreau's death Walden became the property of a cult, comprised mainly of friends sensitive to every slight against its author. These men sought to make the name of Thoreau prevail; however, their intense devotion to Thoreau and their preoccupation with answering the charges brought against him took precedent over any objective attempt to show just how masterful a work Walden was. In place of trying to discern the touches of sheer genius that went into the making of Walden, they were simply content to venerate in its author their own beliefs. Not until the turn of the century did scholars begin to take note of Walden as a piece of literary art and to recognize that Thoreau's sly, edged excellence, his sparkling wit, his leavening power were his permanent, best qualities. In the present century, Walden has come to be recognized as one of the greatest American literary classics of all

time, largely on the merits of its humorously provocative prose style.

Since Thoreau means Walden and Walden reveals the essence of Thoreau, it seems natural that Thoreau's retreat to Walden Pond should appear as the most important feature of his career. The experiment was unique; his purpose for going there was unusual and unprecedented, producing an atmosphere of mystery and complexity around an individual already dubbed as perplexing and eccentric. The contents of his enduring classic are such as to evoke many shades of criticism, and most of the erroneous judgements of Thoreau's life and work may be traced directly to a misapprehension of the Walden episode, a false conception nurtured by a gross unawareness of Thoreau's humor. Walden is too valuable a possession, not only to American literature but to all literature, to be examined by a literal approach. The book is complex, not readily understood, and the humor which permeates each chapter is not always clearly visible by a first reading. For this reason those who would approach the book should pursue it with an eye open to this humor; for the book is one of the rare cases in literature where the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of noble, witty, inspiring man, a man with great moral force and value, have been brought together under one cover. Thoreau's book charms, amuses, inspires, elevates, and the reader who approaches the work with an awareness of its humor will leave it a wiser man. He will witness testimony without lies; he will hear melodies without discord. And there will be revealed to him a religion that insists that any man, no matter what position he holds in life, can by his own potential rise to the dawn of his own divine faculties.

In conjunction with an awareness of Thoreau's humor, a keen discernment of the exact nature, extent, and purpose of his humor is vital to a complete understanding of Thoreau in general and Walden in particular. The recorded stories of the comical instances in Thoreau's life aforementioned together with what has been revealed by Thoreau himself and those in close association with him have furnished the reader many valuable insights into the nature, frequency, and characteristic flavor of his humor. The secondary evidence of Thoreau's humor, recorded by such men as Channing and Edward Emerson, has done much to support the notions that Thoreau was characteristically disposed to humor throughout his life, that his humor was just as much a natural endowment as a literary acquisition, and that since humor was such a central element in his temperament and disposition it could not but appear in some form or another in his writing.

The more direct evidence of Thoreau's humor, drawn mainly from Journal as well as some of his better known works outside of Walden, has further illustrated the exact nature of his humor and has also helped define his position in important areas of his thought. As Carl Bode contends, Thoreau's Journal "is a record of a man who made what he observed part of himself and in the process made himself a great writer."<sup>2</sup> Thoreau once said, "My work is writing, and I do not hesitate, though I know that no subject is too trivial for me, tried by ordinary standards; for, ye fools, the theme is nothing, the life is everything. All that

<sup>2</sup> Carl Bode, ed., The Best of Thoreau's Journal (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1967), p. 9.

interests the reader is the depth and intensity of the life excited" (Journal, IX, 121). To make writing his life's work, Thoreau had to live and move. He felt he had to satiate himself in life, to become involved with people so that he could chart the disparities of life shared by all men. He journeyed through the community of Concord and its neighboring areas; he ventured to the Maine woods, Canada, Cape Cod, and the Concord and Merrimac Rivers, and all the while he observed and recorded. What he observed was that most conventional living was marked by quiet desperation, that most men were chained by their own ignorance to a rock of dross, and that a simple man was not only happier but freer. What he recorded about what he observed, he wrote wisely, sympathetically, and above all, humorously, with a pure, lucid elegance.

For Thoreau, humor was the means by which his view of man was given translation. His attitudes towards humor disclosed principally in his essay on Carlyle and in his Journal have provided readers with his reasons for making humor such an essential ingredient in his writing. From the Carlyle essay and the Journal, the evidence is clear that Thoreau was a man in whom humor was allied to every, even the divinest faculty of his being. His purposes for using it were simple. Humor disavowed fanaticism, acted as a pledge of sanity, and served as a leaven for otherwise indigestible philosophy. And since Thoreau believed humor should always be subordinate to a serious purpose and despised the practice of humor as an end in itself, his writing must be interpreted as a consciously employed means toward a particularly worthy end. Thoreau recognized, as Joel Porte substantiates, the transcendental distinction

between truth and fact, which are intelligible to the reason and the understanding.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, he was forever cognizant of the problem that confronted him as a writer: the problem of how best to communicate ineffable truth to his reader. His answer then was to address his reader's comic spirit, to call forth a comic experience that would invite a certain discernment or ability to see man as incongruously different from what he should be--a creature helpless before the needs of the body, weak, vain, and ludicrous when he might be greater.

If Thoreau regarded humor as the best way of affirming his philosophy of life and giving it translation, then it stands to reason that humor would be an essential part of Walden, the work on which his fame primarily rests. Representative pieces of evidence from the text have shown how Thoreau skillfully utilizes humor in the form of comic devices to enrich his narrative and add to its general excellence. In addition, the close analysis of the functions of these given forms of humor have established that Thoreau's clever use of humor has been the proper strategy for maintaining the narrative and ensuring its vast appeal. The comic elements employed in Walden have been shown to traverse the whole spectrum of wit: the comic narrator technique, paradox, wordplay, understatement, verbal irony, tall-tale exaggeration, mock-heroics, comic portraiture, altered proverbs and rhymes, Swiftian satire, whimsical metaphor, and sententious statement. The generous sprinkling of these elements through the whole of the book lends a coherence by enabling

<sup>3</sup> Joel Porte, Emerson and Thoreau, pp. 123-24.

Thoreau to present the totality of an idea or experience in such a way that the distinction between the comic and the serious, playful and grave, poetic and prosaic, ideal and actual vanishes and the whole complex total is present at once.

Walden reveals itself as an experience recreated in words for the purpose of routing what is demeaning to life and discovering what is important to the self. The artistic interweaving of sober thought with comic elements facilitates the discovery, for this clever admixture sets up the direction of the book, opens its multiple contrasts, and gives resiliency and balance. When a reader peruses the pages of Walden, Thoreau's humor is what entices the mind to penetrate deeper and deeper into the implications of Thoreau's meaning. This humor projects the living voice of an author speaking with concentration in his idiom about important things he derives from firsthand experiences. Thoreau's humorously provocative style is extraordinarily expressive of Thoreau himself. It allows his comic temperament to come alive and animate each paragraph with the fused thought and feeling of an original personality. Thoreau's exploitation of humorous devices accounts for the freshness, immediacy, and vitality that distinguishes Walden. His use of comic elements reveals his skill as a prose master beyond the limits of sentence or paragraph. These elements are what gives the work the power to hold a reader's attention, the power to express the energetic movement of a highly imaginative and probing mind excited by life's intensity and mystery. Much of the charm of Walden resides in Thoreau's use of humor, a dry wit always ready to kindle. Without humor Walden would be



unthinkable, for Thoreau's meaning is identical with the apt, humorous manner of his expression.

The astute critic F. O. Matthiessen remarks that Walden speaks to men of widely different backgrounds and convictions, "who have in common only the intensity of their devotion to life."<sup>4</sup> By devising an appropriate comic strategy Thoreau has permitted his narrative to speak to the intellect and heart of mankind. As stressed before, Thoreau's most crucial problem in writing Walden was to give order and shape to a narrative celebrating the goodness of life and the divine aspect of the individual so that its universal significance would be plain. The means Thoreau chose to shape his book was a comic means. With a perfect comic strategy Thoreau could communicate his transcendental philosophy to his readers without losing them. He could show them that life is so complex that it is impossible for an individual to embrace all of it. He could compel them to be selective in life, while, at the same time, advise them not to depend on the standards of selection imposed by society but base their selection on personal interest and potential. Thus he could make them realize that any man who commits himself to the accumulation of wealth or the constant striving for worldly success will, when he comes to die, discover that he has never lived.

Through a comic means Thoreau can likewise mildly ridicule his readers for the way they live without making them despair for the quality

<sup>4</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman (London and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941), p. 171.

of their lives. Thoreau firmly believed that virtue was an objective reality to all men who could see the ridiculous. To Thoreau, if foibles and follies can be made funny, if hypocrisy can be made absurd, then there is such a thing as integrity. Thoreau's comic strategy allows him to expose his readers' weaknesses and inconsistencies, while simultaneously reminding them of their potential greatness. His humor seems to be saying that if man is not great then there is nothing. This method is a way of dealing justly with the fact that Thoreau embodies in himself all the glorious possibilities and all the ludicrous failures of his neighbors and his fellow men. Because of Thoreau's comic method, the reader is thus able to feel a kinship with what the author reveals, to see himself as ridiculous when he is so, for if the reader is incapable of realizing that he is also vulnerable to human foible he is not at one with his fellow man and cannot share in the richness of human experience.

Similarly, Thoreau's comic method is a lively medium for giving information and rendering the details of his book as fresh and novel experiences. Narrative portions of his book are enlivened by the highly entertaining quality of his humor, by the energy and clarity of his sentences, and by the tang of his New England popular speech. By means of humor he can expand enormously the meaning of the literal, can make the reader see the universe in a grain of sand, and can extend boundaries to give resonance to his reportorial, lyrical, exhortative, and descriptive passages.

Finally, Thoreau's comic strategy in Walden enables him to transform the facts of experience into the truths of the spirit. His book vibrates

between the literally real and the transcendently ideal to communicate an almost inexpressible awareness of the verities of life. One great message which Thoreau leaves his readers is that man should forever strive to capture the ideal of right and of truth in all action. Yet he reminds his readers that truth is ineffable, and the quest for it may sometimes end in failure. With his pervasive comic spirit Thoreau can grasp for his readers a laughing enlivenment from failure, derive a cheerful gusto from the spectacle of human frustration, and pleasantly reconcile this frustration with genial mirth.

In short, Thoreau's use of humor in Walden is indeed a major aspect of this enduring classic and a contributing factor to its general excellence and universal appeal. In Walden Thoreau turns to humor because he is obsessed by a dual vision of life, a dual rapture so to speak. He perceives and is entranced by the sheer beauty of the simplest things the world has to offer, and at the same time, he sees and is similarly enraptured by the worth of the individual and the divine aspect of man and life. Obsessed by such a double ecstasy, Thoreau delights in the actual and has hope for the possible, and only the strategies of mirth and humor can allow him to remain loyal to his ecstatic vision. For humor is, most fundamentally, a means of viewing life from two sides, perceptively and sympathetically. Humor collates human affectations with human values; it measures human possibilities against human realities. For Thoreau, it is a method of gauging clearly and accurately the inconsistencies of life common to all men. In truth, Thoreau has aptly chosen the proper strategy for maintaining his greatest work, and because he

held steadfast to his choice, he has allowed his experience at Walden Pond to remain a singularly timeless one.

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