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## SOME THOUGHTS ON BURANELLI'S CASE AGAINST THOREAU

RALPH L. KETCHAM

PERHAPS it is not desirable to write in the midst of an emotional reaction against it something one has just read. No doubt, a less heated atmosphere would produce saner and sounder thoughts. Yet I cannot be silent after reading Vincent Buranelli's slashing attack on Thoreau printed in the July, 1957, issue of this *Journal*. And I will admit frankly that I am one of the Thoreau worshipers who perhaps has never taken a good look at his idol's feet, which Buranelli finds are made of the softest clay.

It seems to me, however, that Buranelli starts from unsympathetic premises and proceeds to attack Thoreau in the obvious logical manner which brilliantly misses the point of what the "solitary of Walden" was trying to say to the world. Buranelli charges that Thoreau was a preacher and a transcendentalist. Buranelli is obviously neither of these things, and thus is engaged in the time-honored tilt, squarely at cross-purposes, of the logician against the mystic. He proves beyond cavil that *he* is more logical than Thoreau, and demonstrates just as plainly that he is constitutionally unsympathetic to the kind of life Thoreau led and the kind of spiritual insight Thoreau can provide. Thoreau was a poor logician. For reasons which Emerson expressed poignantly, he would have been a terrible schoolteacher. And he would have been a disaster in politics if he had ever been elected to office. But, having admitted all these things, is it proper to vilify a man for inadequacies in realms he never ventured to enter?

Looking at Thoreau through the same magnificent introspection in which he has displayed himself to all the world—*Walden*—what does one find? In simplest terms, Thoreau went and lived alone for twenty-six months on the shore of a pond, a mile from any neighbor, near the village of Concord, Massachusetts. During this time he

tilled the soil, observed nature, studied, talked to visitors, and reflected upon life generally. To most people, including Buranelli, this no doubt appears unnecessarily eccentric, at best, and selfishly antisocial at most. To compound matters, Thoreau wrote (some would say "preached") about this experience in glowing terms which seemed to beckon others to imitate his irresponsibility and escape reality by returning to nature—bringing with them, as he did presumably, such civilized accomplishments as seeds and an ax. Here, by the way, Buranelli's logic scores devastatingly—Thoreau bleated about the joys of nature; yet all the time he depended on the tools of the civilization he claimed to despise. Surely any schoolboy knows better than that! To make matters worse, Thoreau proceeded to write wild essays about the public affairs of his day, apparently applying the wisdom of Walden to the real world. A step toward responsibility, one might say, but in Thoreau's case, says Buranelli, the step was from the frying pan of idleness into the fire of fanaticism. Thus Thoreau advocated such nonsense as civil disobedience, the supremacy of individual conscience over law, and, in a final plunge of lunacy, the heroism of John Brown of Ossawatimie and Harper's Ferry.

But this is far afield from *Walden* and, for this lover of Thoreau's habitat in the woods, suggests some things he might better have left unsaid, just as he had sense enough not to participate physically in the fanaticism of his day. Thoreau might better have contented himself with the private life, where he was a superb prophet of the soul, and left the political essays to those who knew something about politics. Thoreau was indeed an anarchist in politics, something which, whatever its theoretical attractiveness, has never had any relevance

in human affairs. More than that, his support of John Brown, the self-righteous murderer of Kansas, represents the deepest kind of betrayal of the ground-rules of democracy—a tendency widely enough shared so that many historians now place principal blame for the Civil War at its doorstep. Thus a nation of Thoreaus would be a chaotic and probably catastrophic place in which to live—assuming, that is, that all those who took Thoreau's advice to "step to the music which he hears," heard the same music as the Concord handyman.

But it is precisely the impossibility of this happening which makes Buranelli's critique irrelevant. In the fashion of logicians, Buranelli bases his case on the effect of generalizing from specific instances and the logical consequences of this or that act or idea. Thus such sentiments as "if all people followed Thoreau's advice" or "following this to its logical conclusion," underlie Buranelli's analysis. That is to say, he is assuming in his critique that those who speak as Thoreau spoke would be as precisely reasonable and purposeful as logicians such as himself. Yet who can seek the heart of *Walden* and suppose that its author had social systems in mind when he wrote it? Is the point of watching the ice melt on the pond to find an experience that all the world must mimic? Rather, is the point not to suggest *a* (not *the*) way that the soul can be brought to grow and blossom? Or need we assume that Thoreau was urging (as some logic says he must) the absurdity that all men, for the sake of their own personality, go and live at least a mile from every other person, on the shore of a pond which he shares with none? It seems to me that Buranelli's analysis displays a rather curious form of the pathetic fallacy. He has insisted that Thoreau assume the same burden of consistency which he has striven for in his attack upon Thoreau. In a way, Buranelli is just as fanatic in his demand that Thoreau be logical as he claims Thoreau was in his preachments about the inviolability of the individual conscience.

To press the rebuttal a point further, is

it really true that Thoreau thought there was something so sacred about the kind of life he led at Walden that there could be no other way of living to compare with it? Fortunately, we have Thoreau's explicit testimony on this point: "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 life, living is so dear. . . . I wanted to live deep and suck all the marrow out of life." Thus Thoreau looked upon his sojourn at the pond as a device to enable him to discover the depth and variety of his own consciousness. The ebb and flow of the seasons, the creatures of the woods, and tilling the soil were the firmament Thoreau chose in order to nourish his soul.

But Thoreau left Walden after two years—why? Again he tells us explicitly: "*I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one*" (italics added). Rather than being the one and only wholesome life for a man, the years at Walden were looked upon by Thoreau as merely a phase in which one in search of the fullness of life must not linger overlong.

The case *for* Thoreau takes only a fraction of the space occupied by Buranelli's adverse case. With a freshness and lucidity unequaled by any American and in prose unsurpassed in the English language, Thoreau called upon every man to seek his own greatness. In order to justify the "solitary of Walden," it is not necessary to retreat to Buranelli's condescending position that perhaps a little bit of Thoreau now and then is a good thing to "adjust the balance" when too much emphasis is given to social conformity. Residence at the pond was not undertaken to defy the world and proclaim Thoreau's non-conformity. Rather, it was part and parcel of a life devoted to developing the deepest spiritual insights of which human beings are capable. Those who snicker at the self-deluding and unsharable

nature of such insights often succeed only in demonstrating the different (some would say "shallow") dimensions of their own lives. Instead of finding a life such as Thoreau's profoundly dangerous to society and thus only to be tolerated with the gravest reservations, it would seem to me to be of the utmost importance to have as many people as possible who can inspire the human spirit as Thoreau did. What a pity that they burst into glory so infrequently.

Perhaps those who share Buranelli's analytical strictures are willing to live in a world which does not see beyond logical consequences. There are others who will remember Emerson's warning about the hobgoblins of consistency and follow his friend Thoreau to Walden Pond and beyond to all the soaring regions in which the human spirit can dwell.

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