

Romantic Tradition in the Prose Works of Henry David Thoreau

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Abstract

The prose works of Henry David Thoreau are remarkable for romantic sensibility. Had he taken birth in England in the beginning of 19th Century, he would have been a romantic poet like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Robert Southey etc. After getting education at Harvard University U.S.A. he returned to Concord. The members of his family had high hopes from him as Concord was a growing town. Many new banks and industries were established here in the middle of 19th Century.

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Introduction

The prose works of Henry David Thoreau are remarkable for romantic sensibility. Had he taken birth in England in the beginning of 19th Century, he would have been a romantic poet like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Robert Southey etc. After getting education at Harvard University U.S.A. he returned to Concord. The members of his family had high hopes from him as Concord was a growing town. Many new banks and industries were established here in the middle of 19th Century. New traders visited the town to establish their units here. The era of advertisement and newspapers had already begun. Industries needed means of transport and the Concord authorities developed them for material gains. But all this development was disgusting to Thoreau :

Signs were hung out on all sides to allure him; some to catch him by the appetite, as the tavern and victualling cellar; some by the fancy, as the dry goods store and the jeweler's and other by the hair or the feet or the skirts, as the barber, the shoemaker, or the tailor.¹

Like Rousseau and Wordsworth, Thoreau loved nature and the industries spoiled the beauty of his beloved earth. He felt as if Concord had been totally destroyed by these traders. He asked himself how would he get pleasure & joy in his home town. In 1951 he lamented;

This earth was the most glorious musical instrument, and I was audience to its strains.... I said to myself, - I said to others, - There comes into my mind such an indescribable, infinite, all-absorbing, divine, heavenly pleasure, its sense of elevation and expansion, and (i) have had naught to do with it. I perceive that I am dealt with by superior powers. This is a pleasure, a joy, an existence which I have not procured myself.... I wondered if a mortal had ever known what I knew...the maker of me was improving me.²

As Rousseau asked everybody to return to nature, Thoreau lived on the bank of Walden pond for nearly two years and two months. He never felt any pang of loneliness as nature was his guide, friend and philosopher. As a child of nature, he said :

*Only a Zephyr that may blow
Among the reeds by the river low.
Give me thy most privy place*

*Where to run my airy race.
In some withdrawn unpublic mead
Let me sigh upon a reed,
Or in the woods with leafy din
Whisper the still evening in,
For I had rather be thy child
And pupil in the forest wild
Then be the King of men elsewhere
And most sovereign slave of care....
Some still work give me to do
Only be it near to you.*

Nature

Like Coleridge and Robert Frost, he loved all the objects of nature-both great and small. He never felt disgusted with the behavior of his family members or any beloved. Like Hindu hermits, he built his small cottage here and grew his own food. Frederic M. Smith aptly says :

He had his wish; he can only be truly appreciated by outdoor men. His opinions are too audacious for the fireside. He shocks the steady by the way in which he girds at Christianity and sneers at churches. He is bitter in his denunciation of both priests and physicians.....But he is not fierce as he looks.³

He was far away from the earthly problems as he had detached himself from the worldly things. Like Vivekanand, he was a citizen of the world, as John Burroughs remarks :

He brings us a gospel more than he brings us a history. His science is only handmaid of his ethics; his wood lore is the foil to his moral and intellectual teachings....moreover, he was contrary and disagreeable, which helps make us remember him. The herbs he preferred were bitter herbs; the woods he liked best were stub oak woods; the garden he prized most was a sphagnum swamp; the road that best suited him was a cross lots path, or a railway embracement where he was pretty sure to meet no traveler.⁴

He had no lust for political power, costly clothes, property, high standard of living etc. just he camped in the woods and enjoyed the life of detachment. Like

Wordsworth and Shelly, he thanked God for this natural piety :

My heart leaps into my mouth at the sound of the wind in the woods. I whose life was yesterday so desultory and shallow, suddenly recover my spirits, my spirituality through my hearing...I would walk, I would sit and sleep with natural piety!... For joy I could embrace the earth; I shall delight to be buried in it...now I have occasion to be grateful for the flood of life that is flowering over me. I can smell the ripening apples; the very rills are deep; the autumnal flowers.....oh, keep my sense pure.⁵

Like Shelley and Coleridge, Thoreau wanted to be just, wise and free. He ignored all the rules of political authorities and was even arrested for the non payment of taxes. Once he said :

*The life that I aspire to live
No man property me –
No trade upon the street
Wears it emblazonry.⁶*

Like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley, Thoreau tried to understand God, soul and heaven. To him the different objects of nature were dressed in divine light. He said :

*Poetry is the mysticism of mankind.
The unconsciousness of man is the consciousness of God.
Nothing was ever so unfamiliar and startling to man as is own thoughts.
He who receives an injury is to some extent an accomplice of the wrong doer.
The great thought is never found in a men dress.*

Walden

Like Keats and Emily Dickinson, he loved truth and identified it with beauty. He never ignored the harmony that he found in Nature. He asserted that the disturbance of this harmony is fatal to everyone :

*Then I said, I covet truth;
Beauty is unripe childhood's cheat;
I leave it behind with the games of youth :-
Over me oared the eternal sky,*

*Full of light and deity;
Again I saw, again I heard,
The rolling river, the morning bird;
Beauty through my senses stole;
I yielded myself to the perfect whole.*

Each And All, Lines 35-51

The different objects of nature appealed his five senses. The Vedas, The Puranas and the Gita elevated his soul and he accepted :

Morning brings back the heroic ages. I was much affected by the faint hum of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn, when I was sitting with door and windows open, as I could be by any trumpet that ever sang of fame....there was something comical about it; a standing advertisement, till forbidden, of the lasting vigor, and fertility of the world...the Vedas say, All poets and heroes, like Memnon, are children of Aurora and emit their music at sunrise....I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life....living is so dear.⁷

All sound heard at the greatest possible distance produces one and the same effect, a vibration of the universal lyre, just as the intervening atmosphere makes a distant ridge of earth interesting to our eyes by the argu tints it imparts to it.⁸

Thus Thoreau's prose works are remarkable for romantic sensibility. Like Shelley, he raised his voice against injustice exploitation and tyranny. His prose works are subjective as they deal with emotions and feelings. Like the major romantic poets. Thoreau had a desire to find the infinite within the finite and to effect a synthesis of the real and unreal.

Reference

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