

# Henry David Thoreau Voicing ‘the Barbaric Yawp’

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## Henry David Thoreau L'Expression du Hurlement barbare

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### Introduction

When people ask: “why are you interested in Thoreau ? We answer: “read him, and you will see how worth it is to ‘comprehend the nectar’” as Emily Dickinson said.

Thoreau was at the heart of Transcendentalism, which began as an intellectual movement in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts. It arose as a response against Boston Unitarianism. This reaction was a result of a crisis of faith. Its main interest was the search for appeasement between the individual and theology. Nichols said: “The movement began in a remarkably small geographic area ... in Boston ... that encompassed the homes and workplaces of Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, the Alcotts, the Parkers<sup>1</sup>, and the [Elizabeth] Peabody sisters.” (Nichols, 2006: 6)

Transcendentalism’s elementary principle was that God is both inherent and transcendent, inside and outside the world. The notion of immanence implicitly encloses the fundamental value of man and the unquestionable presence of God within individuals and the world. These ideas are pretty odd for the traditional Christian theologians; some consider these new thoughts heresy.

Transcendentalism was more than just conciliation between the individual and theology; it sought to reject biblical Christianity by substituting the faith in the God of the Bible with confidence in the divinity of humanity. They surpassed Unitarianism, which studied the Bible rationally, not as a sacred text. Therefore, it is evident that Unitarianism opened the passage to Transcendentalism. It declined the notion of predestination, and it was rather inclined to individual responsibility. It was the first movement to believe in the perfection of the human character and the possible successful combination between the spiritual and the intellectual with a focus on freedom and inherent goodness. The most renowned Transcendentalist who settled the criteria of this new archetypical man is Ralph Waldo Emerson. The second scholar who went on the path of Emerson was Henry David Thoreau. This article highlights the significance of Thoreau’s experience in Walden, which helped him develop his mystical and

1. The Parkers is in reference to Theodore Parker born in 1810.

religious sights and demonstrates that the metaphor of the "barbaric yawp"<sup>2</sup> chosen in the title of this article corresponds to this man who left his city and lived his life as he wanted.

## **1. Non-conformity or Voicing 'the Barbaric Yawp'**

Thoreau was a non-conformist liberal who thought a lot about a utopian life's conditions and requirements. His singular act lies in the decision to move a little far from Concord in 1845. He moved out of the village to live his life as he wanted. The act is without harm or destruction; however, it remains symbolically very unconventional. The distance helped him think and resist the dominant view, depriving him of personal liberty. In *Walden*,<sup>3</sup> he described the development of the necessary sweat and energy to practice creative idleness in a country where work is ethical and highly revered. This place allowed him to enter into a life of movement; he continued alone to search for new frontiers and routes. His new life was symbolically rejecting any given and established thought. The first critics of *Walden* stressed the point that Thoreau was eccentric and excessive in his opposition to received ideas. However, we can consider his action a strategic undertaking to remove himself from fixed ideas and stereotypes. In this case, one can view it as a positive experiment, an attempt to create his life and his firm and hard books to the aspect of traditions. When he began to emancipate himself, Thoreau created a character who transgresses the limits and rebels against himself to dominate his impulses. He made himself available for some suggestions about his inner life. He strengthened the discipline to evaluate things around him. He danced to the rhythm of the music; he was able to hear what others probably did not perceive. This faculty allowed him to think outside the borders of conformity. It made him able to innovate and recreate his own life. Through this attitude of systematic opposition and independence, Thoreau exercised his mind to keep permanent attention and observance. He saw reality with different eyes, too diverse to activate a rereading of this world. He shared it in his diary, his

2. A reference to a phrase from *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman

3. I visited Walden Pond on Saturday 13th October 2012. Thoreau has made this place famous. Walden is still very special for all its natural settings and its calm atmosphere. My pilgrimage started in Walden Pond to end up in Emerson's house that has become a museum. Emerson has really marked his time and so many places are named after him in Boston. I already knew that Emerson and Thoreau had a close relationship, the lady who offered a tour in Emerson's Museum talked about this relationship and mentioned also that Thoreau was like a big brother to Emerson's children. I could have never imagined that the distance between Walden Pond and Emerson's house is so close. It is only ten minutes by car, thus Thoreau was lucky in living in such paradisiac surroundings and so close at the same time to his spiritual father, Emerson.

lectures and essays without ever being compliant with the weights and pressures of the literary circles. He had not written a famous novel because he thought his responsibility, as a direct expression, would better fulfil a writer. He made a lot of noise through his pacific experience to awaken the minds to a daring and audacious life without material luxury.

Thoreau's second act of non-conformity was his imprisonment for not paying taxes. He was against the American engagement in a war against Mexico as he believed it was illegitimate. He was against Manifest Destiny and his great preoccupation was with all kinds of threats against nature. Thoreau also wrote *Civil Disobedience*, where he became more revolutionary. Elwood Johnson refers to this text as 'passive resistance' (Johnson, 1995: 127). He voiced the 'the barbaric yawp' that claimed his profound aversion towards some government policies. With this text, Thoreau moved from social to political.

## **2. Loneliness, or Sitting with the Self**

Thoreau talked about this amount of thinking which consumed his mind. He said in *Walden*:

“With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent.” (Thoreau, 1854: 112-113)

He talked first about constant thinking that brings this feeling of doubleness as a man sitting beside himself in a sane schizophrenic way. A powerful mind can sit like a spectator to watch his actions, criticise, praise, command, and admire. It is pretty funny when Thoreau described this spectator as somebody taking notes rather than somebody sharing an experience. He said that this state of mind or this doubleness was intolerable with friends and neighbours because most of the time, they felt his absences. Thoreau was aware of the benefits and the weaknesses of a great mind.

The faculty of looking at life like fiction requires a lot of imagination. To live by the self is excruciating because the person is primarily alone, and his only companion is solitude. Thoreau said: “We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers. A man thinking or working is always alone; let him be where he will.” (Thoreau, 1854: 113) Thoreau conveyed a kind of loneliness that is prevailing and present even among men. He connected this solitude to thoughts and work. For him, a man is alone, especially while working or thinking. He did not ignore the meeting with others and described those conventional moments of conformity in a sordid

way. He said: "We meet at meals three times a day, and give each other a new taste of that old musty cheese that we are. We have had to agree on a certain set of rules, called etiquette and politeness, to make this frequent meeting tolerable, and that we need not come to open war." (Thoreau, 1854: 113) Thoreau's non-conformity was his lifestyle. He talked about it metaphorically when he said:

The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity! I did not wish to take a cabin passage, but rather to go before the mast and on the deck of the world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the mountains. I do not wish to go below now. (Thoreau, 1854: 264)

Thoreau was not keen to gain followers. He walked his way. He preferred freedom above all. He did not spend time getting rich furniture or a gothic house. He experienced a personal transformation at Walden. His actions were as free as his opinions. He was acting according to his inclinations and judgments; thus, he was at times a nuisance to others. He was a non-conformist because he was full of his existence. He guided himself to his path. He said: "At any rate, I might pursue some path, however solitary and narrow and crooked, in which I could walk with love and reverence." (Thoreau, 1854: 302) Thoreau's vocation is the denial of this world, its social institutions, and its materialism to seek the supreme spirituality. As an existentialist who questioned all that is established made him a non-conformist.

### **3. Thoreau's Religiosity**

While Thoreau was dying, his aunt asked him if he had made peace with God. He told her he did not know that they had quarrelled. Thoreau was not keen on religious institutions: he said: "Your church is a baby-house of blocks" (Young, 2009: 15). Thoreau thought that hypocrisy was overwhelming the churches. He considered the church members as cowards whose deeds were influenced by the anxiety of punishment rather than true faith. Thoreau assumed that a truthful man has got God's quality because God entered his heart. He said in Walden: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, ... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life." (Thoreau, 1854: 56)

Thoreau went to Walden, a forest he called "God's Drop" (Thoreau, 1854: 60), to meditate. He said, "Walden is blue at one time and green at another, even from the same point of view. Lying between the earth and the heavens, it partakes of the color of both." (Thoreau, 1854: 146) This quote designated

Walden as a heavenly place. The setting corresponded perfectly to the inner soul of the writer. Thoreau was seeking to transform his soul, to reach that 'inner peace' to enjoy his life far from all the worries and anxieties of life. To suck out all the marrow of life is to live the moment as the first and the last. Sucking out all the marrow of life is to drink life with purity to clean the soul and deal with people with clarity. It is to live a simple but profound life. When Thoreau went to Walden, he undertook an ascetic life that led to the gratification of God 'to glorify God and enjoy him forever.' He put the focus on simplicity. He said: "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!" (Thoreau, 1854: 56) to ban all kinds of excesses. For Thoreau a man should live a humble life and work to earn a living without falling into lust. He was working just for a basic living. This simplicity was not only to discard materialism but also a good remedy against any kind of servitude. Thoreau experimented poverty as it taught him. He was never shy of it. He said:

Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage. Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends. Turn the old; return to them. Things do not change; we change. Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts. God will see that you do not want society. (Thoreau, 1854: 204)

Thoreau criticized the Christians for their engagement with the past. He highlighted their hypocrisy and the fact of worshiping God not for love but fear of punishment. Thoreau did not like the Christian's focus on the original sin and repentance, just like the Hindus who did not have this idea. He said: "God prefers that you approach him thoughtful, not penitent." (Young, 2009: 17) Thoreau was very familiar with Indian thoughts. When he read the Veda, he said, "I associate with it the idea of infinite remoteness, as well as of beauty and serenity, for to the senses that is farthest from us which addresses the greatest depth within us." (Thoreau, 1868: 184) Thoreau admired the austerity of the Brahmins and tried to practice it in Walden. He felt he understood the greatest secrets of his existence in his 'closest intercourse with nature' (Young, 2009: 34). In this intercourse, he felt a desire for knowledge and a desire to connect with the spirit of the universe. He wanted to be intoxicated with 'the divine nectar' (Thoreau, 1868: 34). His need for contact and communion with the universe was eternal compared to his desire for knowledge that he considered episodic. Walden was his *zawia*.<sup>4</sup> He described his daily connection with nature in his book, which he called the same as the place he lived in for two years, Walden.

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4. *Zawia* is a Sufi lodge

## 4. Walden or A Mystic Life

In Walden, Thoreau dealt with both: nature and his untamed soul. Each person has the potential to make his life higher through conscious attempts; it is, without doubt, a moral and personal choice. According to Thoreau, it was a choice that required the denial of an earthly life where all ambitions are linked with wealth to the advantage of a personal life based on the renewal of the spirit found in nature. He gave a name to the wild, to the undomesticated nature. He celebrated nature and identified it with the true self. He trusted humankind's genuine spirituality that could be revealed and freed from its chains. Thoreau described how one seeks his most profound identity. He consecrated nature by making it something holy. He privileged the identity of the self in the knowledge of nature. He said in Walden:

In warm evenings I frequently sat in the boat playing the flute, and saw the perch, which I seemed to have charmed, hovering around me, and the moon travelling over the ribbed bottom, which was strewn with the wrecks of the forest.

Formerly I had come to this pond adventurously, from time to time, in dark summer nights, with a companion, and making a fire close to the water's edge, which we thought attracted the fishes, we caught pouts with a bunch of worms strung on a thread; and when we had done, far in the night, threw the burning brands high into the air like skyrockets, which, coming down into the pond, were quenched with a loud hissing, and we were suddenly groping in total darkness. Through this, whistling a tune, we took our way to the haunts of men again. But now I had made my home by the shore. (Thoreau, 1854: 109-110)

The text above from Walden incited people to live an ascetic life. It exposed man's happiness without artifice, without luxury. Joy for Thoreau was to ignore all that is not necessary to live. In short, happy life for him was to reduce it to the vital needs. He said: "The grand necessity, then, for our bodies, is to keep warm, to keep the vital heat in us." (Thoreau, 1854: 7) The vital heat was the slightest necessity for an ascetic life that makes a person close to God. Thoreau said: "Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open. By turns our purity inspires and our impurity casts us down. He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established." (Thoreau, 1854: 138)

Thoreau's experience in the woods was a marvellous story of humans' capacity to live a difficult life and endure all the underground secrets of nature.

He screamed the ability to reduce desire which is usually full of pain and grief, into the blessing of living and existing only. Thoreau must be a strange compound of characters to be able to live such a mystic and ascetic experience in the difficulty of nature and the environment. He descended to the heart of nature to transcend all the luxuries of life. He said: “Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor.” (Thoreau, 1854: 8)

Thoreau grasped the wisdom inside him. He built his cabin himself and survived with his labour. He referred so prettily to his daily harvest as “intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched.” (Thoreau, 1854: 136) He preferred to keep his vibrant energy through manual labour. Thoreau was in perfect communion with nature. He was in it and part of it. Walden was where Thoreau thought he was near God and heaven (Thoreau, 1854: 121). It was the self-disciplined life where the cry of the flesh was reduced to its lowest degree. Contentment was a decisive battle against thirst, hunger, cold, and unnecessary lust. Thoreau said: “Love your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have some pleasant, thrilling, glorious hours, even in a poor-house.” (Thoreau, 1854: 204) For many critics, Thoreau’s misdemeanour was his relationship with God. Many people did not accept that Thoreau ranked the Buddha the same as Christ. They disapproved when he put the Eastern scriptures on the same pedestal as the western ones. Thoreau remained inflexible in the publications of his thoughts no matter the flux of disappointments and rejections. His friend and literary supporter, Horace Greeley, criticized his “Defiant Pantheism”, and Thoreau answered, “I was born to be a pantheist”. (Hodder, 1993: 404) Thoreau considered nature as his divine refuge. He regarded it as his Godly shelter, where man feels warmth and light. The return to the breast of nature is a rebirth. It was a recovery from sin and the offense of city life. One cannot go indifferent when reading Thoreau’s famous passage from “A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers”:

We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish a purely sensuous life. Our present senses are but the rudiments of what they are to become. We are comparatively deaf, dumb and blind, and without smell or taste or feeling. Every generation makes the discovery that the divine vigor has been dissipated, and each sense and faculty misapplied and debauched. The ears were made, not for such trivial uses as men are wont to



suppose, but to hear celestial sounds. The eyes were not made for such grovelling uses as they are now worn out by, but to behold beauty invisible. May we not see God ? (Thoreau, 1868: 403)

In the passage above, Thoreau was looking for another visibility and another hearing enquiry, another taste of feeling to be able to see God. The invisibility of beauty was the invisibility of God. Thoreau abhorred religion without beauty. He said: "The poet's body even is not fed like other men's, but he sometimes tastes the genuine nectar and ambrosia of the gods, and lives a divine life. By the healthful and invigorating thrills of inspiration his life is preserved to a serene old age." (Thoreau, 1868: 237)

In the passage below, Thoreau was divinizing the poet. For him, a poet can live a divine life. A poet can see God because his senses are well developed to appreciate beauty wherever it is found. Thoreau was secularizing religion on the one hand and divinizing man by attributing him divine qualities on the other hand. He saw God in all human creation. For Thoreau Americans have already achieved a lot in secularization, but they will never disregard God and continue without him because his product is everywhere.

Thoreau thought that people had got the God that they deserved. Their God suits their history and culture. He was praising the nations of Christendom for all the climbing they have done, that is, all their efforts to the point that God was no more needed and man became God himself. This emblematic alliance with God is frequently found in Thoreau's writing, and Professor Wolf talked about him in his book as "a Christian hero" (Wolf, 1975: 637), but at the end of his book, he said that Thoreau "does not share the basic faith in God's incarnating and redeeming activity in Jesus Christ." (Wolf, 1975: 637) For this reason, the Christianity of Thoreau remained iconoclastic.

No one can deny that Puritan beliefs deeply moved Thoreau, but he expressed a pantheistic confidence that stressed his individualistic and iconoclastic view on religion. He went above unbending rules. He rose above Christianity without abandoning the essence of his religion, which is the "inner light". Emerson noticed Thoreau's mysticism and speculated on his reading for Emmanuel Swedenborg as he found a strange resemblance between them though he never heard him talking about him. (Young, 2009: 23) Thoreau said it clearly: "The religion that I love is very laic ... for our religion is as unpublic and incommunicable as our poetic vein- and to be approached with as much love and tenderness." (Young, 2009: 24) Thoreau made a comparison between religion and poetry in terms of their approach. His line toward religion was that of love and discretion that required much care and tenderness like a poem



to be understood individually and communicated like a poem with so many interpretations without the authority over the others. Thoreau advocated a free religion, a very secular and laic religion. Despite his disregard for the need for repentance, Thoreau was still a Christian hero who believed in the inner light. He approved a possible Christianity without the belief in redemptive qualities. He was daring enough to claim that individuals are more important than institutions, contrary to most people who usually need to follow established institutions.

## Conclusion

Thoreau's non-conformist life was not free from fears and uncertainties because the watercourse was likely to change from one time to another. The outcome was not always apparent and discernible. Voicing 'the barbaric yawp' was his ability to say 'no' to disagreeing with conventions. The sound was sometimes displeasing, but so much wakening people.

Thoreau had first turned towards the social objective. He was for liberating the individual and social reformation, but his main interest was a society where man thrives. He repudiated any debt concerning past generations. He found a lot of optimism in man and the energy of progress. He believed that every man could do well. He legitimated the priority granted to the regeneration of the individual. Thoreau was fascinated with the heroic aspects of man. He insisted on bringing into view the remarkable personages to represent idealistic figures. He emphasised portraying an independent man who had only his conscience as a guide. For Thoreau, the writer can become a motor of an institution, an engine of a nation. Thus, the literary creation was no more a frivolous activity, and it became a very respectful job that was granted prophetic roles. It gave him a different look to perfect himself, go beyond appearance, and exceed his capacity. Consequently, Thoreau's work proposed a liberating vision. It opened other perspectives on how one analyses and recognises truth by a transcendent language that could penetrate ordinary life. Thoreau presented the significant role of the writer that plays a decisive part in his country. In the nineteenth century, this author reinforced the place of art by encouraging vocations. During this era, the United States felt the need to produce national literature expressing the specificity of human experience on the American territory. Americans discovered nature, and the meeting with the new environment created a unique lifestyle in the wild imaginary continent; it was necessary to stop turning towards Europe, toward the past. Literary imitation failed; thus, the new continent needed its academic codes. It was required to invent new welcoming forms adaptable to the spatial immensity, the wilderness, which is

more tolerant concerning cultural variety. Thoreau disregarded conventions without fearing the price he could pay. He had a mission to liberate man from the chains of societal injustices to reach perfection. Thoreau's 'barbaric yawp' is not a limited philosophy, which was fenced within the barrier of the nineteenth century. It is a futurist intellectual attitude that calls for the privatisation of religion and advanced tolerance.

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## Abstract

Thoreau was among the Concord intellectuals who were impressed by the man of letters Emerson. He was a particular case of nonconformity; he led a life of a hermit to assert his independence. His only act of dissent was his decision to walk away from Concord in 1845. This article highlights the significance of Thoreau's experience in Walden, which helped him develop his mystical and religious sights and demonstrates that the metaphor of the "barbaric yawp" chosen in the title of this article corresponds to this man who left his city and lived his life as he wanted. The act is without harm or destruction but remains symbolic and highly unconventional. The distance helped him reflect and resist the dominant opinion, depriving him of his freedom. In Walden, he described the development of work and energy required to exercise creative idleness in a country where labour is considered ethical and highly respected. This place allowed him to enter into the life of movement that he pursued alone. He was looking for new paths and frontiers. His intellectual life symbolically rejects all

established and given thought. His way of life and logic may seem very strange and peculiar to some readers, but reducing his life to the bare necessities was a source of happiness. Like some Hindu ascetics, he was content with certain things necessary to keep the body warm to stay close to God in his way.

## Keywords

Henry David Thoreau, Transcendentalism, Non-conformity, Walden, Asceticism

## مستخلص

كان ثورو من بين مثقفي كونكورد الذين انبهروا برجل الأدب إمرسون. لقد كان حالة خاصة من عدم المطابقة وقاد حياة ناسك لتأكيد استقلاله. كان تصرفه الفريد المتمثل في عدم المطابقة يكمن في قراره بالابتعاد قليلاً عن كونكورد في عام 5481. توضح هذه المقالة أهمية تجربة ثورو في والدن، والتي جعلته ما أصبح عليه من وجهة نظر صوفية ودينية لإثبات أن استعارتنا "الصراخ البربري" المختارة في عنوان المقال يناسب هذا الرجل الذي غادر مدينته، ليعيش حياته كما يشاء. الفعل نفسه بدون ضرر أو تدمير لكنه يظل رمزياً غير تقليدي للغاية. ساعدته المسافة على التفكير ومقاومة النظرة السائدة التي حرمته من حريته الشخصية. في والدن، يصف تطوير العمل والطاقة اللازمين لممارسة الخمول الإبداعي في بلد يعتبر العمل أخلاقياً ويحظى باحترام كبير. هذا المكان يسمح له بالدخول في حياة الحركة التي يسعى إليها وحده. كان يبحث عن طرق وحدود جديدة. حياته الفكرية ترفض رمزياً كل فكر راسخ ومعطى. قد تبدو طريقة حياته ومنطقه غريباً جداً ومميزاً لبعض القراء، لكن بالنسبة له كان اختزال الحياة في الضروريات الأساسية مصدراً للسعادة. مثل بعض الزهاد الهندوس، كان راضياً ببعض الأشياء الضرورية للحفاظ على دفء الجسد للبقاء بالقرب من الله بطريقته الخاصة.

## كلمات مفتاحية

ثوروديفيد هنري، والدن، عدم المطابقة، الفلسفة المتعالية

## Résumé

Thoreau fait partie des intellectuels de Concord qui étaient impressionnés par l'homme de lettres Emerson. Il était un cas particulier de non-conformisme et menait une vie d'ermite pour affirmer son indépendance. Son unique acte de non-conformité fut sa décision de s'éloigner un peu de Concord en 1845. Cet article souligne la signification de l'expérience de Thoreau à Walden, qui fit de lui ce qu'il était devenu d'un point de vue mystique et religieux pour démontrer que notre métaphore le "hurlement barbare" choisie dans le titre de l'article correspond à cet homme qui a quitté sa ville, cela l'a aidé à vivre sa vie comme il l'entend. L'acte lui-même est sans offense ni destruction mais reste figuratif et très peu orthodoxe. La distance l'a aidé à réfléchir et à résister à l'opinion dominante qui le privait de sa liberté personnelle. Dans Walden, il décrit le développement du travail et de l'énergie nécessaires pour exercer

l'oisiveté créatrice dans un pays où le travail est considéré comme éthique et hautement respecté. Ce lieu lui permet d'entrer dans la vie du mouvement qu'il recherche seul. Il cherchait de nouvelles voies et frontières. Sa vie intellectuelle rejette symboliquement toute pensée établie et donnée. Son mode de vie et sa logique peuvent sembler très étranges et particuliers à certains lecteurs, mais pour lui réduire la vie aux nécessités de base était une source de bonheur. Comme certains ascètes hindous, il se contentait de certaines choses nécessaires pour garder le corps au chaud pour rester proche de Dieu à sa manière.

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### **Mots-clés**

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Henry David Thoreau, transcendantalisme, non-conformisme, Walden, ascétisme