Thoreau's Sexuality

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ABSTRACT. Although Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) has often been described as lacking in sexual drive or at most a rather reluctant heterosexual, a close study of his life and writings indicates the presence of a pronounced vein of homoeroticism—although there seems to be no concrete evidence of any homosexual activity on his part. Cognizance of that homoeroticism helps one to understand many elements of his life and writings and suggests that his intense love of nature may have resulted from sublimation of that homoeroticism.

As Perry Miller pointed out some years ago, scholars over the years have come to some astoundingly different conclusions as to Henry David Thoreau's sexuality.[1] Early biographers tend to see him as asexual—that is, lacking in sexual drive. By the turn of the century they looked upon him as somewhat heterosexual. Miller thought of him as androgynous.[2] In recent years, some have begun to speak of him as homosexual. Yet, astonishingly, with all these varied opinions, very little effort has been expended in examining the facts. I believe it is time to consider the facts.

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I

At first glance there is seemingly plenty of evidence that Thoreau was sexually cold. A number of his friends testify to that effect. Ellery Channing, his closest friend and biographer, said, "Henry made no account of love at all."[3] Horace Hosmer, a pupil and life-long friend, recalled that Thoreau "did not appear to have the 'love-idea' in him: i.e., he did not appear to feel the sex-attraction."[4] George Bartlett, another Concord contemporary, said Thoreau's "interest in the sex opposite to his own, was almost nil."[5] Bronson Alcott, one of his close friends, said Thoreau "seemed to have no temptations. All those strong wants which do battle with other men's nature, he knew not."[6] And Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his eulogy delivered at Thoreau's funeral, said, "He chose wisely, no doubt, for himself to be a bachelor of thought and Nature . . . He had no temptations to fight against,—no appetites, no passions."[7] Even Thoreau himself spoke often of his own coldness, saying, "I do not melt; there is no thaw in me"[8] or "There is a . . . crust over my heart."[9]

The thought of marriage distressed Thoreau. Kicking a skunk cabbage, he told David Wasson, "There, marriage is like that."[10] He said, "If common sense had been consulted, how many marriages would never have taken place."[11] He complained in his *Journal*, "The marriage which the mass of men comprehend is but little better than the marriage of beasts" (J V:369). He commented that "It would be cruel to laugh at [those who] have actually allied themselves to one whom they thought their wife and found out their mistake too late to mend it" (J XII:384). And in one of his commonplace books, he copied out, "Take your wife's opinion and act in opposition to it."[12]

When his friend H.G.O. Blake married, Thoreau sent him as a wedding present admonitory essays on "Love" and "Chastity and Sensuality," telling Blake, "There can be nothing sensual in marriage,"[13] though adding a note saying he was sending the essays "with diffidence and shame, not knowing how far I speak to the condition of men generally, or how far I betray my peculiar defects."[14]

The sexual act he apparently thought of only with abhorrence and

disgust. He complained, "We are begotten and our life has its source from what a trivial and sensual Pleasure."[15] He even found it difficult to imagine "what the essential difference between man and woman is that they should be thus attracted to one another."[16] Nor could he accept any jesting on the subject of sexual relations. He complained of indecent graffiti he saw on the walls of outhouses and even chastised Nature for creating the "obscenity" of the phallic fungus (J IX:117). When the more earthy Ellery Channing tried to share off-color jokes with him, Thoreau was always repelled (J III:335, 406-7; IV:185). He chastized children in his school for using indecent language,[17] and thought little boys should be whipped for "impurity" (J II:341), despite his well-known objections to the use of corporal punishment. He even went so far as to renounce sex completely, extolling the virtues of absolute chastity, speaking of it, ironically, as "the flowering of man"[18] and the "perpetual acquaintance with the All" (J IX:246).

II

Thoreau's usual reaction to women was one of embarrassment or annoyance. Emerson tells us Thoreau blushed at the presence of the maids whenever he walked through the Emerson kitchen.[19] Thoreau himself said, "I confess that 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 that I have ever tried" (J III:116). He added, "It requires nothing less than a chivalric feeling to sustain a conversation with a lady" (J III:168). He suspected his friends of attempting to foster his interest in marriageable young ladies and condemned them for it (J III:116). He thought women "lacked brains" (J III:258) and "scruples" (J II:116), were "presumptuous" (PJ I:247), "Feeble" (J XII:356), "trifling" (J XIII:52), and "an army of non-producers" (J XII:342); their clothes were "too showy and gaudy" (J IV:92), and the perfumes they used as bad as a "muskrat's odor" (J V:82).[20]

In all of Thoreau's voluminous writings I have found only one example where he thought a woman physically attractive—when he met a housewife in the Berkshires in 1844 and described her as "a

frank and hospitable woman, who stood before me in a dishabille, busily and unconcernedly combing her long black hair while she talked, giving her head the necessary toss with each sweep of the comb, with lively, sparkling eyes, and full of interest."[21] Much more typical when he bothers to mention women at all is his description of one he saw on Cape Cod: "a Nauset woman, of a hardness and coarseness such as no man ever possesses or suggests. It was enough to see the vertebrae and sinews of her neck, and her set jaws of iron, which would have bitten a board-nail in two in their ordinary action."[22]

We cannot ignore the fact that Thoreau once proposed marriage to Ellen Sewall, but in doing so he seems to have taken for granted in advance that she would turn him down.[23] Virtually all his biographers have looked upon their "romance" as "an experiment in the philosophy of love," as Canby says, with little if any physical basis.[24]

One other incident should be mentioned. In 1847 Thoreau received a proposal of marriage from Sophia Foord (or Ford), a governess for the Emerson children. Thoreau immediately wrote Emerson, then in Europe on a lecture tour:

> I have had a tragic correspondence, for the most part all on one side, with Miss Ford. She did really wish too—I hesitate to write—marry me. That is the way they spell it. Of course I did not write a deliberate answer. How could I deliberate upon it? I sent back as distinct a *no* as I have learned to pronounce after considerable practice, and I trust that this *no* has succeeded. Indeed, I wish that it might burst, like hollow shot, after it had struck and buried itself and made itself felt there. *There was no other way*. I really had anticipated no such foe as this in my career.[25]

Since Miss Foord has been described as "a dark-skinned pudgy featured woman" fifteen years older than Thoreau and apparently going through some sort of emotional disturbance at the time, it is not surprising that Thoreau turned her down, but the violence of the images he uses in writing Emerson suggests overkill.[26]

Typical of those young men who wish to avoid marriage, Tho-

reau seemed to find only those women to be of interest who were patently unavailable—married women such as Lidian Emerson and her sister Lucy Jackson Brown, or the elderly, such as Mary Moody Emerson. He was careful to point out to Mrs. Emerson that, "I think of you as some elder sister of mine"[27] and what he liked about Mary Moody Emerson was her "masculine" appreciation of poetry and philosophy (J III:114).

Thoreau was perfectly aware that his were not the usual reactions of a man to the opposite sex. He tells us:

> My nature pauses here, I do not well know why. (PJ II:239)
>
> I confess that I am lacking a sense, perchance, in this respect. (J III:116)
>
> I am sure that the design of my maker when he has brought me nearest to woman was not the propagation but rather the maturation of the species. (J II:185)

He could think of women only in a mother or sister relationship, adding, "I cannot imagine a woman no older than I,"[28] and confessed, "My most intimate acquaintance with woman has been a sister's relation, or at most a Catholic's virgin mother relation."[29]

III

Although Thoreau found little attraction to the other sex, he did, nonetheless, feel a deep longing for love and companionship, as exemplified by:

> I pine for want of a companion. (J III:390)
>
> What if we feel a yearning to which no breast answers. I walk alone. My heart is full . . . . I knock on the earth for my friend. I expect to meet him at every turn. (J VII:416-7)
>
> Our life without love is like coke and ashes,—like the cocoanut in which the milk is dried up. (PJ I:390-1)
>
> I would live henceforth with some gentle soul such a life as may be conceived, double for variety, single for harmony. (PJ I:103)

> There are those I love among men, who will know that I love them though I tell them not. (J II:391)

> It is not easy to find one brave enough to play the game of love quite alone with you. (PJ I:373)

It is enlightening to note that in none of these quotations does Thoreau use the feminine gender. Where he is specific as to sex, he uses the masculine pronoun.

Thoreau often found himself deeply emotionally attracted to members of his own sex. It was something deep within him and all-compelling, something he was not at ease with, something he felt he must hide—not only from others, but even at times at least from himself:

> When some rare specimen of manhood presents itself, they are some fresher wind that blows, some new fragrance that breathes. They make the landscape and the sky for us. (PJ I:98)

> My nature, it may [be] is secret. Others can confess and explain; I cannot. It is not that I am too proud, but that is not what is wanted. . . . I am under an awful necessity to be what I am. (J III:146)

> Like cuttlefish, we conceal ourselves, we darken the atmosphere in which we move; we are not transparent. I pine for one to whom I can speak my *first thoughts*; thoughts which represent me truly, which are no better and no worse than I . . . . Our sin and shame prevent our expressing even the innocent thoughts we have. I know of no one to whom I can be transparent instinctively. I live the life of the cuttlefish; another appears, and the element in which I move is tinged and I am concealed. (J IV:315)

> My acquaintances sometimes imply that I am too cold . . . . It is not that I am too cold, but that our warmth and coldness are not of the same nature; hence when I am absolutely warmest, I may be coldest to you. . . . That I am cold means that I am of another nature. (J III:146-7)

He found young men to be particularly attractive:

> When a man is young and his constitution and body have not acquired firmness, i.e., before he has arrived at middle age, he is not an assured inhabitant of the earth, and his compensation is that he is not quite earthy, there is something peculiarly tender and divine about him. . . . The young man is a demigod. . . . He bathes in light. He is interesting as a stranger from another sphere. (J XIII:35)

Like many intellectuals, he seems to have had a particular preference for men from the laboring classes:

> You can tell a nobleman's head though he may be shovelling gravel beneath it six rods off in the midst of a gang with a bandana handkerchief tied about it.[30]
>
> Even the tired laborers I meet on the road, I really meet as traveling gods. (PJ II:175)

Despite his usual anti-military attitudes, he was also attracted to soldiers. Upon visiting the military establishment at Quebec in 1850, he said, "One regiment goes bare-legged to increase the attraction. If you wish to study the muscles of the leg about the knee [which he obviously did], repair to Quebec" (J II:401). And several years later, looking back upon his Quebec visit, he reminisced about the young Englishman he had seen there "whose clear, glowing English complexion I can still see' (J III:338-9). Even the local Concord militia he thought made "a handsome appearance" (J I:479).

He was intrigued by nude male bodies and liked to imagine an athlete stripping for "what a display of muscle" (J XI:260). He loved to watch boys swimming naked, peering out of the woods at them:

> Boys are bathing at Hubbard's Bend, playing with a boat (I at the willows). The color of their bodies in the sun at a distance is pleasing, the not often seen flesh-color. . . . What a singular fact for an angel visitant to this earth to carry back in

> his note-book, that men are forbidden to expose their bodies under the severest penalties. (J IV:92)

He reveled in the "alabaster whiteness" of swimmers in Walden Pond, thinking them "fit studies for a Michel Angelo."[31] The sight of naked hired men in the river attracted him (J VII:14). Although he rarely speaks of any of the fine arts, he does single out the nude Apollo Belvidere statue as a favorite (J VI:56). In his imagination he visualized priests exposing themselves (J III:95).[32]

Often when he saw a physically attractive young man, he assumed that he was also intellectually attractive:

> A man may be young, athletic, active, beautiful. Then, too, his thoughts will be like his person. They will wander in a living and beautiful world. (J XIII:69)
>
> Men can help one another indeed . . . by being gods to oneanother [*sic*]—objects of adoration. (PJ II:246)

When he saw a man swimming in Fair Haven Bay, too far away to be recognized, he imagined "he is a poet in his yet obscure but golden youth" (J VI:417). Yet on another occasion he thought "a man may be an object of interest to me" even though he could not speak (J I:461). And sometimes his interests were anything but intellectual as when he speaks in his early essay " The Service" of "a fellow . . . [who] yields to me as the air to my body! I leap and dance in his midst, and play with his beard till he smiles."[33]

As one reads through Thoreau's *Journal* and even his more formal works, he is struck, by the frequency with which Thoreau on his walks and travels mentions seeing men who are attractive to him—a young peddler on Cape Cod is described as "an unusually good specimen of Young America" (J IX:422-3); a man in a passing boat as "a vision bound to [the] land of the blessed" (J II:423); a fellow passenger on a stage coach as "a handsome man about thirty years old, of good height, but not apparently robust, of gentlemanly dress and faultless toilet";[34] a woodchopper as "more ideal than in any picture I have seen" (J II:254); another woodchopper as "stout and handsome" (J XII:30); a neighbor as "a representative of the divinity on earth" (J II:207); another neighbor to whom

he "bowed instinctively";[35] a stone-mason, "a young man of our own age. . . . We could still distinguish the strokes of his chisel for many sweeps after we had left him";[36] or another fellow-passenger on a coach, "a handsome man. . . . [with] a fair white complexion . . . [who] might have passed for a divinity student."[37] The list could be continued almost indefinitely.

In an early draft of *Walden* Thoreau wrote:

> Sometimes there would come half a dozen men to my house at once—healthy and sturdy working men, descended from sound bodies of men. . . . I met them so often in the woods—that they began to look upon me at least as one of their kin . . . . One a handsome younger man a sailor-like—Greek-like man. . . .
>
> There appeared in some of these men even at a distance, a genuine magnanimity equal to Greek or Roman, of unexplored and uncontaminated descent—The expression of their grimed & sunburnt features made me think of Epaminondas of Socrates and Cato.[38]

But it is interesting to note that he cut this passage out before he published *Walden*.

Many of Thoreau's comments on young men are of greater length, as for example, his report in *A Week* on attending the local Concord cattle-show:

> Every farmer lad too appears to scud before [the wind],—having donned his best peajacket and pepper and salt waistcoat, his unbent trousers, outstanding rigging of duck, or kersymere, or corduroy, and his furry hat withal,—to country fairs and cattle-shows. . . . Amos, Abner, Elnathan, Elbridge,—[39]
>
> "From steep pine-bearing mountains to the plain." I love these sons of earth every mother's son of them, with their great hearty hearts rushing tumultuously in herds from spectacle to spectacle, . . .
>
> "Wise nature's darlings . . . "
>
> Such as had no love for nature . . . "at all,
>
> Came lovers home from this great festival."

> . . . Their fairest cattle and richest fruits . . . are all eclipsed by the show of men. . . . This is the true harvest of the year.[40]

When Thoreau was locking through the canal at Cromwell's Falls on his *Week* journey, he noticed a "brawny New Hampshire man . . . bareheaded . . . and in shirt and trousers only, a rude Apollo of a man, coming down from that 'vast uplandish country' to the main; . . . with flaxen hair and vigorous, weather-bleached countenance." They stopped and "parleyed awhile, and parted not without a sincere interest in one another."[41] What makes Thoreau's comment particularly interesting is that his quoted phrase, "vast uplandish country," is taken from Christopher Marlowe's "Hero and Leander," which in context reads:

> Had Hippolytus Leander seen,
> Enamored of his beauty had he been:
> His presence made the rudest peasant melt,
> That in the vast uplandish country dwelt;
> The barbarous Thracian soldier, mov'd with naught,
> Was mov'd with him, and for his favour sought.
> Some swore he was a maid in man's attire,
> For in his looks was all that men desire,
> A pleasant smiling cheek, a speaking eye,
> A brow for love to banquet royally;
> And such as knew he was a man would say,
> "Leander, thou are made for amorous play."[42]

In other words, even a man indifferent to love would fall in love with him.

On his first trip to the Maine Woods, Thoreau chose a young lumberman, Tom Fowler, to be one of his guides. Thoreau was obviously attracted to him, and in an unpublished manuscript described him as "a young and ingenuous waterman . . . [with] the noble frankness of a forest child."[43] In his *Journal*, Thoreau praised Fowler as one who "had had much intercourse with rude nature" (PJ II:346) and went on to quote from Thomas Heywood's "The Hierarchy of the Blessed Angels":

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CONTENTS

A Canon, A Choirboy, and Homosexuality in Late Sixteenth-Century Italy: A Case Study — 1
Richard Sherr, PhD

Thoreau's Sexuality — 23
Walter Harding, PhD

Factors Affecting the Coming Out Process for Lesbians — 47
Marla J. Kahn, PhD

The Relation of Gender and Sexual Orientation to Measures of Masculinity, Femininity, and Androgyny: A Further Analysis — 71
Barbara Finlay, PhD
Karen E. Scheltema, BA

BOOK REVIEWS

One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love, by David M. Halperin, PhD

The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece, by John J. Winkler, PhD — 87
Reviewed by Richard Hoffman, PhD