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The Sovereignty of the Individual: Thoreau's Call for Reformation in *Walden*

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"I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag lustily as a chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up."

Henry David Thoreau – *Walden*

It is a gross error, and one commonly made, to read Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* as a condemnation of society, as an account of a man's resignation from society to the woods along Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. While Thoreau did, indeed, harbor a sharp distaste for the industrialization prevalent during his time, his search for a life of simplicity and truth lead him to the shores of Walden Pond. For Thoreau, reality and truth—and ultimately the reformation of society—are found through an inward evaluation of the self and a contemplation of the necessities of life. In this way, *Walden* is an attempt to reform both the individual and society during a period shackled by conformity and consensus. In essence, Thoreau argues that any reformation of society is primarily predicated on first reforming the self through an inward exploration of the soul, and that each reformation necessitates the other.

In light of this, Thoreau's experimentation at Walden Pond is a deviation from the communal utopias that were gaining popularity during his time. The largely idealistic image of a utopian community, founded on the transcendental virtues of self reliance, simplicity, and freedom, certainly had an appeal during the 1840's. These communities labored under the belief that their example of an ideal community would draw the country away from the path of increasing industrialization and slavery that was prevalent during the time. One of these utopian reformations was Brook Farm, established in 1841 in West Roxbury by its founder George Ripley, a Unitarian minister.

Brook Farm consisted of a small number of people, including, for a short time, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who sought a new style of living outside the confines of society—that is, "to break free from the deterministic roles that his or her inheritance had created" (Francis 138). In a letter written by George Ripley, Ripley describes the intentions of Brook Farm: "Our objects are to insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; to combine the thinker and the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual; to guarantee the highest mental freedom" (qtd. in Richardson Jr. 101). In essence,

members of Brook Farm labored to shed the trappings of society, from which point they could then tailor society to a state more conducive to the individual.

Yet Thoreau, while sympathetic to Brook Farm's intentions, felt that such communal reformations were hopeless. He grounded this belief on two reasons: first, that a communal reformation was no different than society in its organization and treatment of the individual; second, that a true reformation of society hinges on first reforming the individual, something a communal reformation neglects. While the Brook Farm experiment—and perhaps communal experiments in general—promised to shed the “deterministic” roles of society, Thoreau quickly points out that such involvement in the community would only result in assuming more obligations of the community itself.

Indeed, those people wishing to join the community of Brook Farm under the impression that the experience will afford a time to frolic in the wilderness, a time to languish in a warm den reading a book, would soon find they were severely wrong. Brook Farm aimed to apply a rigorous work ethic of manual labor that for many people was unbearable. Nathaniel Hawthorne, writing to his wife, Sophia Peabody, tells of a physical strain so great at Brook Farm that it gave him an “antipathy to pen and ink” (“Letter to Sophia Peabody 418). By committing yourself to a communal effort for reformation, says Thoreau, you would only be hurling yourself in another societal mold of a smaller scale.

What a communal utopia fails to provide is individual autonomy. Unlike Brook Farm, Thoreau's two year sojourn to the woods along Walden Pond is an attempt to cast off all social ties and focus on the individual, to “pursue his own way” (Walden 57). As Robert D. Richardson, Jr., writes: “Thoreau's stay at Walden was the ultimate reform commune, reduced, for purposes of emphasis, to the simplest possible constituent unit, the self” (Richardson Jr. 150). Thoreau understood, as Hawthorne experienced first-hand, that a communal reformation obligates its members to specific set of chores, not so much to reform the individual, but to sustain the community itself—thus the individual becomes subservient to the community.

However, the reason that a communal utopia truly falls short in the reformation of society, according to Thoreau, is that it fails to acknowledge that, as constituents of an institution, any reformation must first begin with the individual. In the chapter “Economy” of *Walden*, Thoreau hints that it's not the external makeup of society, but the internal temperament and virtues of the people that should be of concern to us. “While civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them. It has created palaces, but it was not so

easy to create noblemen and kings,” he states (26). “What good is any reformation of society if its constituents are not virtuous?” Thoreau asks us.

On this point, Hawthorne seems to share a kindred spirit with Thoreau in that he, too, acknowledges that a reformation must begin with the soul although, Hawthorne seems ready to cast humanity under the province of evil. In “Earth's Holocaust,” Hawthorne writes: “Unless [reformers] hit upon some method of purifying the foul cavern [the heart or soul], forth from it will re-issue all the shapes of wrong and misery” (Cain 330). A true reformation, according to both writers, is not exterior, but interior. With this in mind, it's clear that Brook Farm's reformation attempt simply starts at the wrong point.

At the heart of *Walden* is the need for people to subject themselves to an inner-exploration of the soul—and with good reason. At the time Thoreau went to Walden Pond, industrialization was slowly inching its way across New England, forcing people to work mechanical jobs and to “lead lives of quite desperation” (5). As Thoreau flatly put it: “But men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon plowed into the soul for compost. It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before” (3). Thoreau saw that people's lives were dictated by their industrial work, not by an inner desire to live and explore life's offerings. Of this drone-like existence Thoreau states:

Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our Genius, but by the mechanical nudgings of some servitor, are not awaked by our own newly acquired force and aspirations from within. (71)

Here Thoreau criticizes, if not laments, the hollowness of life that the industrial era has visited upon New England. While the increase of industrialization throughout New England certainly agitated, if not enraged Thoreau, it was the extravagant and wasteful ways of the people—the symptoms of industrialization—that disheartened him. People seemed to accept their robotic existence; they wrapped themselves material goods. Thoreau felt that “most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only dispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind” (10). Throughout *Walden*, Thoreau asks readers not to scorn society, but to question the necessities of life; to evaluate society's values; and, more importantly, to excavate the soul through earnest contemplation of life. And it is for this purpose that Thoreau takes to the woods of Concord, axe in hand, and builds his cabin along Walden Pond. “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front the 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” (72). Such a statement embodies Thoreau’s irritation with the society in which he grudgingly lived, a society enthralled by materialism. Yet, at the same time, this statement (and *Walden* in its entirety) is a statement of hope—hope in that what it means to live can be found through an individual reformation, through a life of contemplation.

Mason Marshall likens Thoreau’s experiment at Walden to a Socratic attempt to spiritually elevate the citizens of Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau plays “a vital role in his service to other people, much as other rhetorical devices were integral to ancient spiritual guidance,” he states (417). Indeed, like Socrates and other ancient philosophers, Thoreau urges people to seek the truths and necessities of life in order to enrich their conscience. The idea that truth cannot be found in materialism resonates throughout Thoreau’s *Walden*. On truth he writes: “No face which we can give to a matter will stead us so well at last as the truth [...] we are not where we are, but in a false impression,” and “Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things” (259,41). There’s a whisper of Socrates’ famous dictum “the unexamined life is not worth living for men” in these statements (Plato 39).

Unlike any communal reformation, Thoreau’s *Walden* attempts to reform the individual through an examination of the self and the necessities of life. In the first chapter of *Walden*, “Economy,” Thoreau argues that the necessities of life—food, shelter, clothing, and fuel—can be procured self-sufficiently without a “sacrifice of life” (39). This account is very much a statement of autonomy in that Thoreau highlights that many people lead a life of desperation because they choose extravagance over simplicity. He is essentially saying that we have the choice as to whether we want to free ourselves from materialism or search for the spiritual truths that life has to offer.

By finding truth and understanding the necessities of life, says Thoreau, the individual can free his conscience and find personal autonomy, which is essential for a life of well being. Only when a person attains freedom can he actualize his fullest potential. Ruth Lane, in *Review of Politics*, describes Thoreau’s conception of autonomy:

[Thoreau] defines freedom, not as overwhelming and ceaseless self-

aggrandizement but as the freedom to grow, to grow to the fullest maturity of which each [person is capable]. Human beings are not animals, merely to follow their genetic dictates, but thinking individuals who thus may pass through and transcend many different types of behavior. (292)

Needless to say, the “mechanical nudgings” of the booming industrialization and rigid institutionalization of New England—and of communal reformations in general, for that matter—posed a threat to such intellectual growth and independence.

On the other hand, Thoreau’s refusal to pay a poll tax and his subsequent imprisonment during his stay at Walden highlights that for a self-reformation to succeed the government, too, must be reformed. Thoreau holds this belief much for the same reason that he deemed communal reformations ineffectual in reforming both the individual and society. Like Brook Farm, the government tends to render its constituents subservient to its will. Ironically, the fact that Thoreau was pursuing a self-reformation at Walden when the government arrested him underscores the need for a government that refrains from needlessly interfering in its citizens’ lives.

Much of Thoreau’s beliefs on government are discussed in his essay “Resistance to Civil Government.” Although “Resistance to Civil Government” is not part of *Walden*’s text, the reason for Thoreau having written it stems from his imprisonment *while at* Walden. Thoreau opens the essay with his famous dictum, “[t]hat government is best which governs not at all” (Lauter 1738). Such a statement draws a significant amount of criticism in that it appears that Thoreau is sponsoring anarchy. Of these critics is Sam Shaw who writes: “Thoreau saw only his own dissent; he seems not to have thought of the dangers of tyranny by a minority, as a majority” (Edel 406). Yet Thoreau does not call for anarchy, “but at once a better government” (1739). Thoreau seeks a new kind of government.

This, however, raises the question of why, according to Thoreau, a better government is needed and what kind of government should exist. Thoreau’s quarrel with the government is largely due to the government’s insistence on forcing the individual to conform to its wishes, many of which seem unjust and unwarranted. Rather than the government being the expedient of the people, the people have become the expedients of the government. Of this relationship, Thoreau states:

The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, *posse comitatus*, &c. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on the level of wood and earth and stones, and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose well. (1740)

It is clear from this statement that Thoreau firmly believes that the present government strips its citizens of their rationality, their volition, reducing them to mere pawns—a government that defies the worth and dignity of the individual.

We do not have to search long to find examples of Thoreau's government committing its citizens to do unjust acts, thereby stripping them of their individual autonomy. Of the more prevalent issues that permeated throughout the country at the time were slavery and the Mexican-American war. Thoreau felt that no person must pledge their allegiance to an institution whose actions are unjust. His imprisonment demonstrates this. Rather than pay a poll tax, a tax that he believed would pay for the war with Mexico, Thoreau chose prison.

According to Robert A. Gross, by choosing prison over paying an unjust poll tax, Thoreau invokes a principle of "negative obligation." He describes this principle as Thoreau's unwillingness to "directly or indirectly, be complicitous in injustice to others, even if called on the state to do so" (15). Such passive dissension is founded on the idea that by not serving as the government's expedient of injustice, a person's morals or conscious will not be corrupted. Thus, Thoreau's exhortation to us to renounce allegiance to any unjust and degrading government is his attempt to prevent a person from losing their individual autonomy.

At the heart of Thoreau's attack on government is the belief that government should reflect the nature and values of the individual not vice-versa. Robert B. Downs distills Thoreau's main premise as follows: "In essence, Thoreau's basic contention in "Civil Disobedience" was that the state exists for the individuals [...] Man's conscience should always be his supreme guiding spirit" (342). In this way, the individual is free to pursue his own interests and live a life undisturbed. "There will never be a really free and enlightened State," Thoreau says, "until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power" (1752). The government, in other words, must acknowledge the primacy of the individual.

It so happens, then, that we have reached Thoreau's reformation paradox. In order to achieve a successful reformation of society, the members within the society must first reform themselves. The people must find truth and reality through a life of contemplation and simplicity, a life exemplified in *Walden*. By so doing, the people can mould the government to a nature conducive to their character. At the same time, however, a precondition for a reformation of the self is that the external context in which a person resides, that is, the government must be reformed so as to prevent it from interfering with a self-reformation.

Thoreau's *Walden*, while conveying an apparent grudge against industrialization, is a cry for a reformation of society and its people, not for a people's resignation from society. Thoreau's stay at Walden Pond was an attempt to show his fellow citizens

that reformation of society is, indeed, possible but only by first reforming yourself, then the government. He calls this reformation an "effort to throw off sleep" (72). Thoreau saw that the materialism and wasteful extravagance of the people, which the increasing industrialization of the time fostered, cast a somniferous blanket upon the people. And this blanket smothered the spiritual truths of life – and, thus, the possibility of reformation. Thoreau's *Walden* is an attempt to awaken his fellow New Englanders.

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