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## Henry David Thoreau

(1817-1862)

When Henry David Thoreau died in 1862, aged forty-four, his friend and former teacher Ralph Waldo Emerson summarized in his eulogy: “He chose, wisely no doubt for himself, to be a bachelor of thought and Nature. [...] No truer American existed than Thoreau” (Emerson 1903, 424, 429).

Born the third of four children of John Thoreau of Concord, Massachusetts, Thoreau grew up in genteel poverty. Only after his father had established a small pencil manufacturing business was Henry able to enrol at Harvard College, where he received a classical education. A shy and quiet boy, Henry soon felt dissatisfied with his curriculum and began to immerse him-self ardently in the study of nature and Hindu literature in addition to his regular courses. One year before graduation and while on training practice as a teacher in Canton, Massachusetts, Thoreau met Orestes Brownson, one of the most brilliant and controversial reformist theologians of New England. Brownson encouraged Thoreau in his studies in Far Eastern philosophy and raised his interest in English metaphysical poetry. In retrospect Thoreau was to describe these days as “the morning of a new *Lebenstag*” (*Correspondence* 19), and when he graduated in 1837 he saw his vocation in leading the life of a poet and drinking in “the soft influences and sublime revelations of nature” (*Early Essays* 117).

Having finished university, Thoreau chose teaching in a local school to earn a living. It was a position that from the beginning carried the seeds of rebellion. When ordered by the principal of his school to use corporal punishment to maintain order, Thoreau demonstratively told several of his students to step forward, gave each of them a symbolical, slap – and resigned. At about the same time and as a further sign of his rejection of all societal norms he did not approve of, Thoreau changed his surname from David Henry to Henry David and started a diary to write down his private thoughts and conclusions.

In 1837 Thoreau also met the man who was to become his most influential mentor: Ralph Waldo Emerson. Thoreau had read Emerson’s *Nature* during his senior year and had felt deeply impressed by the ideas developed therein. Emerson had tried in *Nature* to redefine the relationship between man and nature. He held that nature transcended the mere summation of its material

objects, being instead an emanation of the World Spirit in space and time. The experience of nature was not confined to mere Physicality but was the process of the discovery of one's own Divine Self and thus a reunion of man and nature. Through Emerson Thoreau was to get acquainted with such distinguished contemporaries as the literary critic Frederic Henry Hedge, the publicist George Ripley, the reformist educator Amos Bronson Alcott, the writers Margaret Fuller, William Ellery Channing, Nathaniel Hawthorne, or the poet Jones Very. Emerson in turn saw in Thoreau the embodiment of his ideal of the "American scholar" as described in his famous lecture by the same title.

The sophisticated debates among Emerson and his friends stood in stark contrast to what Thoreau experienced daily in the public school of Concord. As a consequence Thoreau founded his own school in 1838. Having his own institute, he hoped, would enable him to realize his unorthodox pedagogic ideas without undesired interference. Much to the surprise of the sceptics around him the experiment proved successful. In the same year Thoreau was permitted to give his first lecture at the prestigious Concord Lyceum, which he called "Society." With his private school flourishing, Thoreau asked his brother John to join him as second teacher. Despite their different personalities the two brothers were affectionate friends. So close were they that during the first week of September 1839 they embarked on a canoe trip up the Concord and Merrimack rivers to Hooksett, New Hampshire, where they proceeded by foot and stagecoach to Mount Washington. Refined and elevated to symbolical significance the experiences of this journey were later laid down by Thoreau as *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849).

When in 1840 the Transcendentalist group in Concord started its own periodical, the *Dial*, under the editorship of Margaret Fuller, Thoreau had also found an outlet for the publication of poems and essays such as his "The Natural History of Massachusetts" or "A Winter Walk," which complemented his lectures at the Concord Lyceum. During this time Thoreau's friendship with Emerson became more and more intimate, with Thoreau even accepting the position of Emerson's factotum from 1841 to 1843. Emerson's vast library provided an ideal opportunity to extend Thoreau's philosophical studies. Now, in close contact to the inner circle of the Transcendentalist group, he was able to take part in their intensive discussions, with topics ranging from friendship and the communal experiment of Brook Farm to the natural right of violent resistance. It was the very year that Thoreau would publicly declare his refusal to pay church taxes, claiming that he could not be member of a community he had not deliberately chosen to join.

In 1842 Thoreau's intellectual activities were sharply interrupted when his brother John died unexpectedly of lockjaw. As Thoreau's

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dramatic psychosomatic reaction showed, the importance of this loss can hardly be overestimated. Without being infected Thoreau developed the same symptoms as his brother, finally being close to death. Deeply disturbed he reacted with gradual emotional withdrawal from human company. After a brief interlude in New York City, initiated by Emerson to make Thoreau, familiar with the press and publishing business, Thoreau, disillusioned and feeling even more depressed by city life, returned to Concord to start what was to become his most famous project: in March 1845, with his need for solitude and self-readjustment having steadily grown, Thoreau began to build a one-room cabin two miles away from the Emersons' home at Walden Pond. Choosing the nation's Day of Independence for the beginning of his hermit existence Thoreau emphasized the character of his exodus as a demonstrative separation from a society in which he saw no chance for self-actualization. The humble cabin at Walden Pond, containing only rudimentary furnishing and his most valuable books, was to remain his principal residence until September of 1847.

Critics have often interpreted Thoreau's decision to live at the pond as a quietist attempt to escape the demands of real life. Indeed, there is no question that Thoreau wanted time away from the daily duties of teaching and working in his family's factory. But it is also true that Thoreau at this point of his life needed a break for a period of continuous, undisturbed intellectual work and self-assurance. Life at Walden Pond, remote yet not entirely removed from civilization as it was, promised the rare opportunity to settle his personal problems, study nature and test his concept of self-sufficiency without losing contact to Concord's intellectual and social life.

In 1846, the government of Massachusetts, in the person of Concord's tax collector and constable Sam Staples, called Thoreau's attention to the sober fact that the authorities did not stop existing just because one of their subjects chose to ignore them – Thoreau was jailed for not paying his "poll" tax, a head tax levied on every male over twenty years old. As long ago as 1840 Thoreau had refused to pay taxes to the church. When he now included the poll tax in his refusal, the state exercised its power. In hindsight Thoreau's refusal must be seen as predominantly symbolic. Rather than being of practical value Thoreau's provocative refusal was intended as a protest against government inequity. Another reason may have been Thoreau's growing disapproval of the government's condonation of slavery, an issue he had become aware of in the early 1840s. Yet, the imprisonment did not achieve Thoreau the publicity he had hoped for. Contrary to what he would later write about it, his thundering declaration of independence ended in a whisper: the public simply ignored Thoreau's protest. He was released the next morning as the tax money had been paid the very evening of his imprisonment by an anonymous donor.

In late August 1846, Thoreau started north for the Maine woods and Mount Katahdin, the state's highest mountain. After his theorizing this trip was to afford him the test of his conclusions in the unhindered experience of genuine wilderness and its original inhabitants, the Indians. Yet again, he discovered something he had not expected. Alone in the fog on top of Mount Katahdin, he became deeply frightened. For the first time it dawned upon him that there might be a side to nature that his studies should leave untouched. Indeed, Thoreau began to seriously ask himself whether his equation of "sublime" and "savage" was not, more than anything else, a romantic projection.

In 1847 Emerson asked Thoreau, whether he could move in with his family while he himself was on a lecturing tour in Europe, and Thoreau deserted his domicile at Walden Pond. Unfortunately, living with Emerson's second wife Lilian and their children introduced yet another estranging element into Thoreau's relationship to his former mentor. As early as 1842 his friendship to Emerson had begun to cool down. Serving as surrogate father and master of the house now led Thoreau to a full realization of Emerson's human limitations as both a friend and moral guide and enhanced the alienation from his former idol.

The years until 1854 were filled with various teaching jobs, help in his father's factory and a job as a land surveyor, the latter enabling Thoreau to escape the narrowness of his house and roam freely in nature again. Privately Thoreau suffered two further losses. His elder sister Helen, who had supported him financially during his studies at Harvard College, died on June 14, 1849, a loss that spiritually paralysed Thoreau for months. The horrors of death returned when, in July 1850, Margaret Fuller and her family drowned in a shipwreck near Fire Island, New York. Thoreau, who had been sent to the place of the catastrophe by Emerson, could salvage neither their bodies nor any of her literary remains. Death seemed to surround Thoreau: During a trip to Cape Cod in October 1849 he had already been confronted with the debris and bodies of the brig "St. John," an immigrant vessel which had run ashore in a storm near Cohasset with 145 people killed. But, however unsettling emotionally, these years proved a very productive time for Thoreau intellectually. Various essays, among them "Resistance to Civil Government" and several drafts of *Walden*, emerged from his pen, with the final version of *Walden* being published in August 1854. In contrast to Thoreau's former publications it sold well, the first printing being exhausted within a year, making Thoreau something of a local celebrity.

The 1850s in the United States also felt the first quivers of the earthquake which would finally lead the nation into one of its deepest traumas - the slavery issue. The first time that Thoreau had actively participated in the abolitionist movement was in the 1840s, when he served as a "conductor"

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on the “Underground Railroad”, a network of abolitionist activists who gave fugitive slaves shelter during their escape to Canada. So, when in 1854 a fugitive slave named Anthony Burns was arrested in Boston and sent back to Virginia, Thoreau joined other Massachusetts abolitionists in protest, giving a fiery lecture entitled “Slavery in Massachusetts.” Thoreau’s most intensive involvement in the abolitionist movement, however, was his defence of Captain John Brown’s infamous raid at Harpers Ferry of October 16th, 1859. The same Thoreau who in “Resistance to Civil Government” had declared non-violent disobedience the only acceptable means of political non-compliance now openly called for violent action. Admiring Brown as “a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles” who was willing to risk his life for his convictions (*Reform Papers* 115), Thoreau delivered speeches such as “A Plea for Captain John Brown” after Brown’s capture and also arranged memorial services in Concord on the day of Brown’s execution.

In 1859 Thoreau’s father died and Henry was obliged to take over the family’s firm. It was not for a long time, however: During his college years consumption had attacked Thoreau, leaving his lungs susceptible to problems from colds. While evaluating the age of trees in the woods in December 1860, Thoreau contracted bronchitis and became consumptive again. In 1861 he accompanied Horace Mann, a young botanist, on a journey to Minnesota searching for new botanical specimens. But the hardships of the journey, which included a visit to a gathering of Sioux Indians in Redwood, entailed a further deterioration of his health. On May 6, 1862, Henry David Thoreau died quietly in his home in Concord.

Thoreau’s thought must be seen in the context of the drastic economic and technological changes the United States underwent during the first half of the nineteenth century. The economic growth which had followed the War of 1812 was interrupted by a sequence of rapid recessions climaxing in the depression of 1819 to 1821. At the same time, waves of settlers pushed westward across the Appalachians. It was the beginning of what historians would later call the “safety-valve” function of the American West. With the introduction of the steamship and the construction of canals connecting the big cities of the East with the Great Lakes and the waterways of the West, transportation ceased to be a problem. The 1830s saw the opening of the first railway lines. Politically this development was complemented by an aggressive agrarian ideology. During his presidency Thomas Jefferson had propagated a decided westward expansionism with relatively high independence for the newly acquired territories, ideologically juxtaposing the urban industrial civilization with the independence of rural life as the more natural and hence more valuable form of existence.

Jefferson could ground his argument on the then prevailing social theory of John Locke. According to Locke, The “social contract” among free individuals, who were autonomous because of their possession of private property, would guarantee a social system in which the old feudal privileges were replaced democratically by individual titles to private property. As will be seen later, Thoreau’s Walden experiment was aimed to a large extent against this concept of possessive individualism. Moreover, during the 1830s Jefferson’s revival of the “yeoman farmer” found its completion in President Andrew Jackson’s Western policy which more or less directly prepared the missionary imperialism known as “America’s manifest destiny in the West” culminating in the Mexican War of 1846, the war Thoreau opposed so fiercely.

If the typological chiliarism of the early Puritan settlers had found in the American wilderness a burden placed on their shoulders by God to test their virtue before their final redemption, this image of the wilderness changed completely at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The young nation began to see the unknown wilderness territories as a natural resource for its settlers and as a challenge for the development of a truly American civilization. As will be seen, both Emerson’s famous reflections in “Nature” and Thoreau’s concept of nature as a sublime moral agent, can be interpreted as efforts to achieve an elaborate image of the uniqueness of the American experience before the wilderness had vanished before the “ongoing march of civilization.”

If the American wilderness saw continuous waves of explorers and settlers, the cities on the East experienced a different change. New York, Philadelphia and Boston saw a rapid industrialization. Inexpensive water energy provided for the growth of an extensive textile industry concentrated in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. The capital which had formerly been invested in ship building and the freight business was now flowing into the factories. In alliance with the banks and the shipping companies, the large trading companies and the new industrial trusts began to control the political and economic life of the American northeast. With the change from an agricultural to an urban industrial society the antagonism between capital and labour grew, while the stream of immigrants created new economic and social problems. Fostered by seemingly unlimited natural resources, an ever-growing market and an increasing industrial potential, large-scale enterprise flourished and gave birth to that type of businessman Thoreau despised so much - the Yankee capitalist

Ideologically this rapidly growing capitalist economy was complemented by a common belief in linear progress and the triumph of Unitarianism over traditional Calvinism. The influence of the European Enlightenment had led to a deterioration if not breakdown of the traditional religious explanation of nature and society. Uncertainty and doubt, formerly



proof of the sinful nature of man, were now believed to be conquerable by the application of scientific methods providing the basis for a new, perfect world of reason unfolded. John Locke's sensualistic empiricism, Thomas Hobbes' materialism, and French rationalism replaced the old dogmatic faith of early Puritanism. Man was no longer regarded as fundamentally depraved, as in Calvinist dogma, but was able to perfect himself by his own effort and thus achieve redemption. By 1825 Unitarianism had established itself firmly in the important industrial and trade centres of New England, particularly in Boston and at Harvard College, its followers recruiting themselves mainly from the upper circles of the Bourgeoisie who sympathized with the Federalists and held key economic positions of the country.

Yet, a decade later, it was precisely this unholy alliance of religion with economic power which provoked the criticism of a group of young New England ministers, who gathered around Frederic Hedge and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Opposing what they saw as a profound lack of intellectual enthusiasm and spiritual guidance within the Unitarian church of New England, the Transcendentalists, with Thoreau soon joining in their criticism, argued that man's only chance was to transcend his secular existence by his intuitive capability, thus suspending the qualitative difference between the divine and the world.

Emerson's "kingdom of man over nature" (Emerson 1903, 80), which was to become Thoreau's archetypal model, described the capability of the mystic to use nature as a vessel of the mind, that is, the capability to lose oneself so completely into nature that the sense of separation vanished and gave way to an awareness of the essential unity of creation. To Emerson, as later to his student Thoreau, the natural scientist's static concept of nature, prerequisite for his quantitative methodology, was of little interest. It was in the sublime delight nature provided to man that the meaning of nature revealed itself much more than in the realization of the natural laws operating independently of man. Emerson assumed an increasing spirituality of nature. On nature as a "commodity," that is, her assistance to the physical well-being of man, followed "beauty" as the universal enjoyment of the simple perfection of natural forms. If "beauty" was, however, to lead to the appreciation of the perfect state of nature it needed the completion by a higher, spiritual element which was provided when beauty and "virtue" met, because "Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue" (25). As an avid reader of the German idealist philosopher Schelling Emerson imagined nature and the human mind as being filled likewise by a "Universal Spirit" and an "Oversoul", which in turn have to be imagined as the pantheistic spirit of God himself. Thus the spirit of nature and the human mind were identical, with nature being "a metaphor of the human mind" and "every appearance in nature correspond[ing] to some state of the mind" (38, 32) - an

idea which Thoreau was to take over almost literally. The highest service of nature, however, was “discipline”, understood as the appreciation of the moral character and enlightening substance of nature. To the transcending mind macrocosm and microcosm presented themselves as corresponding elements: “Every universal truth which we express in words, implies or supposes every other truth” (50).

Socially the idealistic philosophy of Emerson found its equivalent in the communal experiments of “Brook Farm” and “Fruitlands”. The majority of the Transcendentalists held self-reform to be impossible under the circumstances of capitalist competition. A more suitable alternative to them seemed the precommunism of the early Christian communities. From England and France the ideas of Robert Owen and Charles Fourier had come to America. Especially Fourier’s “phalange” fascinated the “Hedge Club.” On the basis of mathematical calculation Fourier had outlined a model of an ideal society joining the highest degree of individual self-actualization to the economic well-being of the community by letting everybody do precisely the work which corresponded to his abilities. Similarly, Fourier’s English colleague Robert Owen had founded in 1825 a commune called “New Harmony” which was to be the first step on the way to a harmonious global society based on the abolishment of private property.

Revitalizing the old Puritan dream of a Garden of Eden on earth, the “New Zion” promised in the Bible, the Transcendentalists set up their own Transcendentalist commune in 1841, the “Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education.” Although Emerson wanted to participate in the experiment at first, he finally withdrew, arguing that Fourierism was bound to fail because it was based on an erroneous concept of man. Man, he held, could not be changed by exterior influences alone. If one wanted to improve him, one had to start with man’s inner order, with his soul. The history of Brook Farm proved that to some extent Emerson’s reservations were correct. Unused to practical work and anything but experts in agricultural and economic planning, its intellectual communards proved unable to run a farm of this size. After five years Brook Farm had to be given up. The same happened to “Fruitlands,” the other utopian community of the Transcendentalists. Taking literally Emerson’s phrase, “We must be lovers, and at once the impossible becomes possible,” its founders, among them Amos Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller and Charles Lane, had intended to create a model society depending on love instead of restraint. Yet love proved insufficient to compensate for qualified work.

Thoreau’s cultural criticism elaborated and radicalized four aspects from the Transcendentalist spectrum of ideas: first, the idealistic assumption of a spiritual reality transcending the phenomenal and nominal reality; second, and closely linked to this, the organicist idea of nature as a guiding

metaphor for the organisation of the social and the private life of man, third, the non-conformist idea of individual self-perfection and self-sufficiency as aesthetic and moral imperatives; and last, the concept of civil disobedience as a prominent means of responsible political action.

Thoreau's criticism was guided by the belief of the idealist that there was an absolute reality behind human sensual perception, that God resided in this absolute reality, and that the noblest duty of man was therefore to seek that reality. Phenomenal reality - Thoreau held against his materialist contemporaries - was but a meagre reflection of the inner wealth of the world. Consequently the senses could play only a marginal role in man's pursuit of truth: "Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations" (*Walden* 171). Not matter but the spirit was the ultimate reality, with the phenomenal world being just "the outside of that which is within" (*Correspondence* 214). "The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heap, is because man is disunited with himself," Emerson had declared in *Nature* (77). To Thoreau, as to the conservative rebellion of the Transcendentalists in general, the epicentre of all evil was the Enlightenment which had influenced the thinking of their Unitarian fathers. Its rationalism, they complained, had blurred the real difference between essence and semblance by its oppression of human intuition in favour of reason. Thoreau went even further in that he radically denied the truthfulness of the phenomenal world and declared human consciousness to be the only reality and measurement of the true nature of things. Only the human consciousness, by its contemplative participation in the unity of all being, he held, was able to transcend the phenomenal surface and realize the spiritual essence of the world. But his contemporaries, far from realizing this, were "so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life" that they were utterly unable to pluck the "finer fruits" of life (*Walden* 6).

It was the Transcendentalist concept of nature that provided Thoreau with a legitimation for the following provocative statement: "I wish," he began a lecture before the Concord Lyceum on April 23, 1851, "to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil, - to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society" (*Writings* V, 205). Nature was perfect, free from the conflicts and shortcomings Thoreau saw in civilized life. Only by realizing nature's delicate order, he concluded, could man find the way to himself after all. Because God revealed himself in nature again and again, exploring one's natural environment meant discovering the divine *Urgrund*, and, as each human soul was part of the Oversoul, as well a survey of the spiritual essence of man:

God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality which surrounds us (*Walden* 97).

Consequently the study of nature meant much more to Thoreau than a mere scientific survey. Because the delicate pattern of the cosmos unfolded in the tiniest natural object, any natural phenomenon would reveal the spiritual essence of the universe. Untouched nature would thus show mankind a way back to a life which, however forgotten in contemporary society, was unalienated and appropriate to the true nature of man:

All nature is your congratulation, and you have cause momentarily to bless yourself. The greatest gains and values are farthest from being appreciated. [...] The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning and evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched (221).

But nature was not only symbolic in reflecting the spiritual potential of man, it also offered self-realization in that it stripped life down to its essentials, freed it from the burden of civilized decadence, that “mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion ... till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we call *reality*” (97).

James H. McIntosh and Richard Bridgman have shown that despite this idealizing concept of nature especially the older Thoreau shared a profound ambivalence towards the natural environment (McIntosh 1974, Bridgman 1982). While nature as “goodness crystallized” was the revelation of the moral law reflecting the true, divine “self of man” (*Correspondence* 598), it also referred to the animal, instinctual nature of man which “must be overcome” (*Walden* 221). If the young Thoreau unequivocally praised nature as a medication for alienated man, the older Thoreau was more careful with such quick appraisal.

A crucial role in this development played Thoreau’s trip to Mount Katahdin in 1846. Instead of idyllic loneliness he met a “savage and dreary” environment, instead of the exultant feelings nature usually imparted to him he felt “more lone than you imagine” (*The Maine Woods*, 62, 64). Deeply confused he noted: “There was there felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man” (70). Nature at Mount Katahdin was no longer the Divine answering the human question for truth but the total silence of finite matter. And the “children of nature,” the Indians, proved likewise disappointing. Already Thoreau’s first encounter with Penobscots in Oldtown had been disillusioning. The sight of a “short shabby washerwoman-looking Indian” leaving his canoe with “a bundle of skins in one hand and an empty keg or half-barrel in the other” provoked in Thoreau a bitter complaint about the devastating influence of the white race on the Native Americans (6). His

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lowest point, however, came on his second journey to Chesuncook Lake in September 1853. When his guide Joe Aitteon killed and skinned a moose, Thoreau was disgusted at the savage sight. With the “coarse and imperfect use” Indians and hunters made of nature (120), Thoreau mused, only the poet seemed capable of loving nature for her vitality. What becomes obvious here is how much Thoreau’s, image of a natural life stood under the influence of an ideal concept of primal harmony which had nothing to do with real life in the woods.

Although he shifted emphasis a few times during his life, a finely balanced relationship between city and wilderness finally was seen by Thoreau as an essential prerequisite for that physical and spiritual health he missed so much in contemporary society, “I believe,” he stated in “Walking,” “that there is a subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we consciously yield to it, will direct us aright. [ ... ] In Wildness is the preservation of the World” (*Writings* IX, 224, 225). Thoreau was convinced that an individual or a society cut off from these invigorating forces of nature was doomed. As civilized life had its advantages too, as Thoreau had learnt in the wilderness of Mount Katahdin, it seemed to maintain contact with both ends of the spectrum. Thus the best choice for man, Thoreau held, was an existence which oscillated between unspoiled nature and the achievements of civilization, in other words a “civilization that consists with the wildness” (*Journal II*, 477, Sept 7, 1851).

Nearly a century ahead of his time, Thoreau was fundamentally an ecologist. In the aggressive dynamics of capitalist economy and the dawning industrial revolution Thoreau saw a fatal threat to the spiritual qualities of nature. The destruction of the environment and exploitation of the natural resources meant not only physical disaster but also a sacrilege against the divine balance of things thus depriving man of his chance, for spiritual and moral self-refinement Thoreau demanded the criminal prosecution of environmental violators and suggested that each community declare part of their grounds a sanctuary and ban any cultivation from that area.

He was too much a Transcendentalist, however, to stop at the mere scientific analysis or critical description of the environmental sins of his time. At the core of his cultural criticism was the conviction that, with the outer world being a reflection of the inner realm, man himself was obviously deficient. Disorder, social conflict and alienation were not objective qualities of the world to be abolished by means, of social or political action, but defects of the spiritual condition of the individual. Thus, not some agricultural technology was responsible for the demolition of nature but the limitless greed of the great landowners who had lost all measure and feeling of responsibility:

By avarice and selfishness, and a groveling habit ... of regarding the soil as property, or means of acquiring property chiefly, the landscape is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives. He knows Nature but as a robber (*Walden* 165).

Instead of curing the symptoms only, one had better mend the spiritual deformation of those who had caused the destruction. As long as the value of nature was estimated in terms of economic profit, or, in Thoreau's words, as long as men were "the tools of their tools" (37), ecological countermeasures would be doomed to fail. This radical condemnation of industrialization, predominant in the writings of the young Thoreau, later gave way to a more balanced view. In his study *The Succession of Forest Trees* (1860) Thoreau came to the conclusion that economy and ecology might be compatible, if both were regarded as complementary and their use was guided by strong ethical principles.

Thoreau and his fellow Transcendentalists were unanimous in their diagnosis of contemporary society as being ill. Yet they differed strongly in their analysis of the reasons for the malbeing and the therapy needed. To Thoreau it was especially the reduction of man to a working machine that provoked his criticism. Instead of having his spiritual potential furthered man was degraded to a mindless and greedy species: "The ways in which most men get their living, that is, live, are mere makeshifts, and a shirking of the real business of life, chiefly because they do not know, but partly because they do not mean, any better," he wrote angrily in "Life Without Principle" (*Reform Papers* 162). And in *Walden* he criticized that his contemporaries laboured "under a mistake":

By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before (5).

Because economic necessity condemned man to be entirely occupied with grabbing a living, Thoreau complained, human relations had deteriorated to a state of oblivion. Social etiquette maintained the illusion of culturedness but in the end only served the prevention of "open war." Instead of developing their inner wealth in solitude and freedom, people herded together and lost "respect for one another" (136). Moreover, the division of labour forced the individual into total dependence on the community. Having finished his cabin at Walden Pond, Thoreau mused:

Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter? ... I never in all my walks came across a man engaged in so simple and natural an occupation as building his house. We belong to the community. It is not the tailor alone who is the ninth part of a man; it is as

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much the preacher and the merchant, and the farmer. Where is this division of labor to end? and what object does it finally serve? No doubt another *may* also think for me; but it is not therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself (46).

Suspicious of the technological progress industrial America was so proud of Thoreau held that it was no advance at all if the prevailing materialism was not complemented by an improvement in the quality of human affairs. In fact, Thoreau argued, any technological and social progress remained superficial as long as it lacked the elevating dimension of spiritual refinement “We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas,” he wrote, “but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate” (52).

Thoreau even went so far as to challenge the faith of his contemporaries in the progressive quality of American civilization. Taking housing as an example, he stated with disgust that “in the large towns and cities, where civilization especially prevails,” only a very small proportion of the population actually owned their home. The majority was held in relative poverty because of the rent they were obliged to pay. In the end this exploitative civilization seemed worse off than the savage Indians whom it despised so much: “In the savage state every family owns a shelter as good as the best ..., in modern civilized society not more than one half the families own a shelter” (30). And he concluded: “If it is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the condition of man, and I think that it is, though only the wise improve their advantages it must be shown that it has produced better dwellings without making them more costly” (31).

While the majority of his contemporaries revelled in optimistic enthusiasm about the prospects of American capitalism Thoreau felt a deep moral, deficiency in their materialism. The Puritan work ethic held that happiness would grow parallel to a person’s material wellbeing, as the latter was a sign of Gods benevolence and reward for a life in compliance with God’s will. Thoreau stood too much in the Puritan tradition to criticize this belief in general. What he disapproved of was the secularization of this parallelism to a law like necessity. On the contrary, he argued, the more time man spent on working for his material wellbeing, the more he lost sight of his spiritual vocation in life: “Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not indisputable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind” (14). As a consequence Thoreau demanded a radical change of morals: “A man had better starve at once than lose his innocence in the process of getting his bread. If within the sophisticated man there is not an unsophisticated one, then he is but one of the Devil’s angels” (*Reform Papers* 167).

Against the moral corruption and lowminded selfishness of his contemporaries he set his ideal of simplicity and spiritual self-refinement: "The aim of the laborer should be, not to get his living, to get 'a good job,' but to perform well a certain work... . An efficient and valuable man does what he can, whether the community pay for it or not" (159).

Simplicity and voluntary poverty were antidotes to the corrupting influence of consumerism: "Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends. Turn the old; return to them," Thoreau advised his readers. Instead of restricting man, the lack of luxuries rather confined him "to the most significant and vital experiences" (328). In terms of a moral imperative Thoreau here anticipated the epistemological distinction between quantitative and qualitative needs, which a decade later Karl Marx would discover in his analysis of bourgeois capitalist society. But unlike Marx Thoreau did not blame the dialectic of the class struggle for the deprivation of contemporary man but an alienation from the basics of existence, that is, a simple life close to nature. Indeed, he described his temporary exile at Walden Pond as an effort to experience "the essentials of life," thus emphasizing not only its symbolic value but also its general meaning as an experiment of self-refinement. "It would be of some advantage," he wrote in a much quoted passage in Walden, "to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have been taken to obtain them" (11).

Supreme "learning of the necessities of life" meant, above all, replacing the Yankee economy, the aim of which was to accumulate material property. Taking the example of a poor Irish farmer who had entered the vicious circle of trying to fulfil his increased needs by more work and thus increased his consumptive needs even more, Thoreau exposed the dynamics of artificially generated rather than natural needs as one of the factors that kept capitalist consumption going. He juxtaposed these artificial needs with man's inalienable needs "whatever, of all that man obtains by his own exertions, has been from the first, or from long use has become, so important to human life that few, if any, whether from savageness, or poverty, or philosophy, ever attempt to do without it." These "necessaries of life", namely "Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel", and only these were enough to provide man with the basis for "the true problems of life" (12). If this meant being poor by the standards of society, only the better, only in "what we should call voluntary poverty" could man free himself from the moral pollution of industrial capitalist society (14).

The only problem was that such a life would be dictated by the pure necessity of making a material living, reducing next to nothing the



time for intellectual self-improvement. Thoreau hoped to counteract this tendency by developing an economic system of preindustrial form. If there was no division of labour, no separation of physical and intellectual work, no institutional influences and no market, the unalienated creativity of the individual itself would take care of his or her spiritual improvement.

In contrast to his fellow Transcendentalists, who largely sympathized with the collective experiment of Brook Farm, Thoreau took the inherent individualism of Transcendental theory to its limits. Self reform for him meant self healing in total harmony with nature. It was the solipsistic unfolding of the spiritual potential of the individual which was to guarantee the abolishment of alienation and social wrong, not the creation of seemingly paradisiacal circumstances as they were intrinsic to communal experiments. With Emerson Thoreau held that man's ultimate goal should be "selfrecovery," a rediscovery of the true essence of man through participation of the human self in the all encompassing self of the universe. Full humanity, or "selfculture," was to be achieved by the virtues of "selftrust," respectively "selfreliance," which required trust in the spiritual qualities of man:

I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness (372).

As esoteric and individualistic as the actual process of self reform was, in the eyes of Thoreau it was not restricted to an elite. Replacing the traditional Calvinist dichotomy of the elect and the damned, Transcendentalist theory proclaimed an essential equality of all human beings based on the participation of each individual soul in the divine Oversoul. Thoreau accordingly argued that by *imitatio* everyone could gain the sanctification of his or her life. If Emerson and other Transcendentalists disapproved of Thoreau's Walden experiment it was rather because they regarded it as quietism. Thoreau himself, however, stressed the practical side of his experiment. Having written "what I began by reading I must finish by acting" (*Journal I*, 216, Feb 19, 1841), he still had to provide the proof of his theoretical conclusions.

It was this union of theory and practice that Thoreau enacted in his Walden experiment, availing himself of the Quaker tradition of proving the truth of ones spiritual rebirth by the sanctification of one's secular life. To further stress his claim of the general importance of his experiment he

used the image of a sleeper not yet awake: “Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep,” he wrote, and, “we must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep” (*Walden* 90). Everybody, no matter how alienated and corrupted by society, was able to explore the divine in himself and thus capable of salvation.

From his time at Walden Thoreau gained three crucial insights: First, that happiness and inner wholeness could not be acquired once forever but had to be achieved in a continuous process of self realization. Secondly, that the healing process had to start with the exploration of one’s self in order to discover one’s “higher” self, i.e. the immanence of God. And thirdly, that ardent self reform led to a social and spiritual reconstitution of one’s entire personality. Only if this effort was made again and again would man be able “to affect the quality of the day” (90) and thus be freed from the corrupting influences of society.

To make this endeavour even more complicated, there were besides the temptations of capitalist consumerism two influential institutions in society that hindered self reform: the church and the educational institutions. Unlike the German Feuerbach, who had dismissed religion as an anachronism, Thoreau reaffirmed the importance of the religious experience as an expression of the spiritual essence of man. His criticism was directed at the clerical establishment, whom he denounced as torpid and unable to help man actualize this spiritual potential. Contemptuously he called the New England clergy a “unique combination of prayer assembly and picknick” (*Writings* IV, 48). This radical criticism was complemented by his proposal that *all* world religions and their Holy Scriptures should be regarded as equal emanations of the same mystic experience of the divine. Thoreau himself had been introduced to Hindu thought at Harvard and parts of his Concord and Merrimack River travelogue paralleled the seven meditative “Devayana” stages of the Brahma Sutras which describe the inner journey to the Gods.

Thoreau’s criticism of the educational system basically converged in one reproach: that the professors at the schools and colleges of the country, instead of preparing their students for practical life, were feeding them with theoretical knowledge only. Although the predominant theory of knowledge in Harvard had been the Scottish common sense school, Thoreau complained that this common sense obviously had little practical consequence. What was praised as common sense was only the predominance of conventions, the vulgar taste of the masses and popular prejudices, “the foolish view which is commonly taken” (*Journal II*, 267, June 22, 1851). Deeply disappointed in his expectation to meet teachers who actually were living what they were teaching, Thoreau demanded:

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I mean that [students] should not play life, or study it merely, while the community supports them at this expensive game, but earnestly live it from beginning to end. How could youths better learn to live than by once trying the experiment of living? (*Walden*, 51)

Because for Thoreau a reform of society could only be achieved through self reform of the individual as spiritual self realization, politics had for a long time been of no interest for him. “What is called politics is comparatively so superficial and inhuman, that, practically, I have never fairly recognized that it concerns me at all,” he confessed in “Life without Principle” (*Reform Papers*, 177). This attitude changed, however, after his imprisonment for his refusal to pay taxes. Two years later, in 1848, he wrote what was to become his most influential essay: “Resistance to Civil Government” or “Civil Disobedience” as it was later called. Varying the Jeffersonian motto of that government being the best which governs least, the essay opens with the anarchist proposition that “that government is best which governs not at all.” Any government is “at best but an expedient,” Thoreau declared, and thus should be watched with utmost distrust, as it frequently failed to respond to the people from whom it derived its power (63). Governments, he criticized, were a “tradition” and as such more concerned with transmitting themselves “unimpaired to posterity” than fulfilling the will of the people (63). Intrinsically, government actions tend to be motivated more by self interest and concern for legitimation by popular opinion than by a true concern for justice:

This government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. *It* does not keep the country free. *It* does not settle the West. *It* does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished (64).

Indeed Thoreau’s criticism of governmental and legislative power aimed at the very heart of democratic decision making:

After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule, is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the majority, but because they are physically the strongest. But a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? (64)

What Thoreau radically calls into question here is the principal possibility of justice under majority rule. In fact, he even concludes that all forms of political decision making except consensus necessarily amount to

political repression and must thus be rejected. If one does not want to take part in this injustice, one cannot do otherwise than radically deny both the government and its laws their respect. But what counts even more for Thoreau is that not only is there no justice, the free will of the individual is also ignored by such a government: “A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers ... marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, aye, against their common sense and conscience” (65). Although Thoreau acknowledged that the American governmental system provided methods like voting or petitioning to achieve change for dissenters, he found these means too unreliable or too slow to be counted upon. Voting, for example, he cynically described as “a sort of gaming, like chequers or backgammon, with a slight moral tinge to it” (69). Taking the American assault on Mexico in 1848 as a case in point, Thoreau concluded that the only counter-measure to be taken by the individual against an unjust government was disobedience and denying the government allegiance. Facing an injustice, a person’s ultimate duty, he declared, was at least “to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought any longer, not to give it practically his support. If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting on another man’s shoulders” (71). In particular he proposed refusing to pay taxes, thus withdrawing financial support from the government.

The question of whether “Resistance to Civil Government” can be interpreted as a plea for strict non-violence - as its reception by Gandhi and by the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s suggests - has been widely debated among critics. In the essay itself the question of violence is deferred largely in favour of a general moral legitimization of the inalienable right and duty to resist. Only when discussing strategic aspects of collective resistance does Thoreau speak of a “peaceable revolution”:

A minority is powerless when it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. [ ... ] If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible (76).

The argument can be supported by a passage in *Walden* in which Thoreau describes how he was arrested: “It is true, I might have resisted forcibly with more or less effect, might have run ‘amok’ against society; but I preferred that society should run ‘amok’ against me, it being the desperate party” (*Walden* 171). Thoreau takes the position of the victim here, restricting his activities to the provocation of government action thus revealing its structural violence. On the other hand, he was prepared to

admit that there might be circumstances under which the use of violence was inevitable. As Klumpjan (1984) has pointed out, one of the reasons for Thoreau's ambivalence in this matter might have been that his refusal to pay taxes was predominantly the individual act of a citizen purifying himself of the guilt of supporting the immoral actions of his government. Thoreau may have desired further-reaching consequences of this "action from principle" but they were neither his primary aim nor a criterion of legitimation for him.

If the measures discussed in "Resistance to Civil Government" stayed largely within the boundaries of non-violent non-compliance, this attitude changed when he became increasingly involved in the Abolitionist cause. In "Resistance to Civil Government" Thoreau had already written with reference to the American Declaration of Independence that "all men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to and to resist the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable" (*Reform Papers* 67). In "Slavery in Massachusetts" he openly pleaded for violent action as a legitimate means to end slavery: "I need not say what match I would touch, what system endeavour to blow up, but as I love my life, I would side with the light, and let the dark earth roll from under me, calling my mother and my brother to follow" (*Reform Papers* 102).

Furthermore, his growing engagement for John Brown and his approval of Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in a speech like "A Plea for Captain John Brown," which he called "a righteous cause" (*Reform Papers* 133), leave little doubt that the older in contrast to the young Thoreau was fully prepared to condone if not support violence as the appropriate answer to social and political injustice.

The morality so highly appraised by Thoreau in the person of John Brown superseded the restrictions of traditional moral behaviour by deliberately claiming a position beyond all legal definition. According to Thoreau the absolute measure of just action could only be a "higher law" which transcended the approval of society. In this sense John Brown was not only a person who could serve as a model of radicalism but was also, as Thoreau wrote in "The Last Days of John Brown," "the embodiment of principle" (*Reform Papers* 146), a principle which rendered the question of legal responsibility obsolete. In contrast to the young Thoreau, the older was no longer satisfied with a marginal dominance of virtue over vice. Instead he demanded the absolute tyranny of virtue. If John Brown was not recognized as the virtuous "superman" that he was in the eyes of Thoreau, this was because of the moral blindness of those condemning him. In a tautological conclusion reminiscent of the traditional Puritan idea of "sainthood" Thoreau defined the moral quality of those judging Brown by their acceptance

of his action. Virtuous were those who supported Brown and those who supported Brown were virtuous: "When a noble deed is done, who is likely to appreciate it? They who are noble themselves. I was not surprised that certain of my neighbours spoke of John Brown as an ordinary felon, who are they?" (148)

If Thoreau in his early criticism had celebrated the antinomian ideal of the anarchic disobedience of those spiritually cleansed and reborn, his later essays postulated the dictatorship of saints, thus reinaugurating the Puritan theocracy of the chosen few. John Brown became the "Angel of Light" (137), the divine sword on earth striking those who resisted the erection of God's state. Instead of the former transcendence of a deficient world now the violent elimination of the world's deficiencies became the ultimate criterion for virtue. In reference to Cromwell's Calvinist protectorate Thoreau called Brown a "new Cromwell". While „*A Natural History of Massachusetts*“, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden* had been dominated by a cyclical concept of history, reflecting eternal repetition in nature, now the ultimate goal was the progressive establishment of the "New Zion" in America, with John Brown as a Christ like figure sacrificing himself for the liberation of the slaves. Yet, it was a New Jerusalem with an openly totalitarian strain. It was not until shortly before his death that Thoreau was to drop this eschatological totalitarianism and return to the mystic criticism of his early years.

When Thoreau died, not even the most optimistic of his contemporaries would have predicted his later popularity, which reached a climax when in the 1950s and 1960s he even became something of a cult figure of movements as diverse as the beatniks, the hippies, the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam protest. During his lifetime Thoreau had been mentioned in only one American literary history. Edward Duyckinck's *Cyclopaedia of American Literature* (1855). After his death even this modest reputation seemed to fade quickly. As early as 1865 James Russell Lowell had turned his scorn for Thoreau's censorship of his own work into a commemorative essay condemning Thoreau as a queer, humourless good-for-nothing who was to be dismissed as a mere echoer of Emerson. Similar criticism would be waged against Thoreau in Europe by Robert Louis Stevenson, who depicted him as a continuous naysayer, a "skulker" in life and work, fleeing the world in order to avoid the difficulties of coming to terms with it.

Facing such initial deprecation, Thoreau's friends found it difficult to alter his negative image. Bronson Alcott described Thoreau's humanity and warmth in *Concord Days* (1872), H.E. Channing tried to

stress his love for nature in Thoreau: *The Poet Naturalist* (1873), followed by John Burrough's favourable essays in the 1880s. Capitalizing on this new attention, Thoreau's favourite disciple H.G.O. Blake published excerpts from Thoreau's journals, linking them to the seasons of the year. In 1893 Houghton Mifflin published the first collected works edition of Thoreau's writings (Riverside Edition). With the nineteenth century drawing to a close, Thoreau profited, moreover, from a growing interest of the American reading audience in nature poetry.

Thoreau's cultural criticism was rediscovered not at home but abroad. The first to appreciate his social and political ideas were British socialists at the end of the nineteenth century. *Walden* became popular reading among the members of the Fabian Society and the Independent Labour Party. Many of its local centres called their assembly halls "Walden Clubs." It was also in this context that the first important biography of Thoreau originated, Henry S. Salt's *The Life of Henry David Thoreau* (1890), a book that five decades later in a country as far away as South Africa would make a small, fragile solicitor named Mahatma Gandhi an intellectual disciple of Thoreau. Yet, apart from Britain, Thoreau's ideas remained little known in Europe, with perhaps the only exception of a commune of utopian socialists in Amsterdam calling themselves "Walden". In 1897 the first German issue of *Walden* was published, a French translation followed in 1922. Both won favourable criticism but lacked a wider public response.

Not until the 1920s did Thoreau meet with a renewed interest in his home-country. Owing to the predominantly conservative atmosphere of the time, Thoreau was seen with ambivalent admiration. He was interpreted as the pastoral moralist whose works represented the precious American heritage which one had lost in an age dominated by the urban experience. Before 1910 academic response to his cultural criticism had been so scarce and brief as to be negligible. In 1913 John Macy had devoted a chapter in his *The Spirit of American Literature* to Thoreau viewing him as "the one anarchist of great literary power in a nation of slavish conformity to legalism" (Meyer 1977, 19). The conservatism and general fear of left-wing unorthodoxy of the succeeding decade made such a response an exception. More typical was J. Brooks Atkinson's view in *Henry Thoreau: The Cosmic Yankee*, describing Thoreau as "a selfcontained, unsocial being, a troglodyte of sorts" (Meyer 1977, 36). Representative of the highly ambivalent reception of Thoreau during this period are also Lucy Hazard's *The Frontier in American Literature* (1927), which assessed Thoreau in terms of Frederick Jackson Turner's „Frontier Thesis“ of 1893, and Verrion Louis Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927), which celebrated Thoreau as the "Transcendental Economist" thus anticipating in part the leftist appreciation of the next decade.

In the 1930s social and economic questions took the place of the moral criticism of the 1920s. Under the impression of the worldwide economic crisis, American intellectuals began to look for alternatives to avoid the recurrence of similar catastrophes. Moreover, the propagation of the “New Deal” caused a general interest in collectivistic ideas like Communism or Socialism. Thoreau’s economic theory and his social philosophy became subject to controversial and passionate discussion among Marxists and Libertarians. While V.F. Calverton dismissed Thoreau’s ideas in *The Liberation of American Literature* (1932) as “petty bourgeois individualistic,” Max Lerner defended Thoreau in his essay “Thoreau: No Hermit” (1934) as being “forced by the crudities of an expanding capitalism into a revulsion against society and its institutions” (Paul 1962, 22) and pointed at Thoreau’s denouncement of industrial exploitation and his active involvement in the Abolitionist cause. In contrast, libertarians like Joseph Wood Krutch stressed just what the Marxists had criticized Thoreau’s individualism. Characteristically enough, in these approaches essays like “Resistance to Civil Government” or “A Plea for Captain John Brown” were blatantly ignored. In general, Thoreau’s writings were often used to support one’s own political argument but hardly ever thoroughly analysed.

While the 1930s undeniably assigned Thoreau the status of a major American voice, interest in him as a social reformer was to decline again in the following decade, although published material on Thoreau became ubiquitous in these years. If his cultural and political criticism was dealt with, libertarians like Thomas Lyle Collins in his essay “Thoreau’s Coming of Age” stressed his individualism as an antidote to the corporate state dragging America into a war it did not really want. This concentration on Thoreau’s pacifist and primitivist writings took a preposterous turn when in the conformist atmosphere of the 1950s ultraconservative values gained influence and Thoreau’s writings were among those made responsible for the seeming decay of law and order. Senator Joseph McCarthy openly accused Thoreau of having prepared the ideological ground for the rise of various “un-American activities” such as subversive anti-materialism, antisocial selfishness and anarchy. In 1951 this anathema even resulted in the worldwide removal of “Resistance to Civil Government” from the libraries of the U.S. Information Service. It is one of the ironies of history that the writings of a man were indexed of whom Ralph Waldo Emerson had said that nobody had incorporated the true spirit of America more convincingly.

As a consequence of the prevailing apolitical mood, scholarly attention in the 1940s and 1950s saw the majority of the critics skimming Thoreau’s works for their importance as literature. Topics ranged from source studies to analyses of Thoreau’s poetry. The critical landmarks of this period are Francis O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance: Art and*



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*Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941) and Sherman Paul's study *The Shores of America* (1958). While Matthiessen stated that the moral, cultural and social value in Emerson, Thoreau and their fellow artists must be discovered by sensitive awareness of their works as art and as art only, Paul's study was an attempt to analyse the spiritual development of Thoreau in order to demonstrate "what it meant to live a Transcendental life." Other influential studies like Stanley Edgar Hyme's "Thoreau in Our Time" followed in the wake of these two ground breaking treatises, firmly establishing scholarship in Thoreau. In 1941, moreover, the "Thoreau Society," which today claims to be the largest literary society in the United States, had been founded under Walter Harding, author of numerous studies on Thoreau's works and editor of *Thoreau: A Century of Criticism* (1954).

In spite of the discrimination against Thoreau as an anarchist and subversive propagandist in the 1950s, an image that has dominated the conservative reception of his political thought in the United States until today, Thoreau was admitted to the "American Hall of Fame" in 1960, thus finally belonging to those noble few every patriotic American has to know. Since the 1970s, moreover, Thoreau is regarded a "Classic" of American Arts and Letters.

Thoreau's reluctant acceptance by bourgeois literary criticism stands in sharp contrast to his immense influence on the antinomian and alternative strain in American culture. In tune with the general search of a national identity during his time, Thoreau had repeatedly pointed out that the essence of America lay in its landscape and that a truly American identity could only spring from this source. Nearly a century later his notion was given new importance when in the 1920s a group of intellectuals and artists from the East coast, tired of urban life, which they perceived as overly Europeanized, migrated into the desert of the American Southwest to discover what they saw as America at its best. From here, they demanded, a new American art and literature should spread taking its form and content from the American wilderness.

As major spokeswoman of this group, which was loosely scattered around Taos and Santa Fe, Mary Austin emerged, author of *The Land of Journeys' Ending* and *Land of Little Rain*. The "American desert" and its images, she held, provided those "primal springs of existence" necessary for a "nationally releasing expression" (Austin 1924, 441). Echoing the Transcendentalist unity of all being, she tried to find a form in her poetic theory in which the American landscape, its psychic and physical experience by man, and the aesthetic representation of both intersected Thoreau's "language which all things and events speak without metaphor" (*Walden* 111) returned here as "rhythmic forms arising fortuitously in our environment." In the 1960s the

beat poet Gary Snyder would create a similar anti-mimetic poetry trying to incorporate a “sense of locus.” If mankind did not want to annihilate itself, Snyder stated, its only chance was “to transform the five-millennia-long urbanized civilization tradition into a new ecologically-sensitive harmony-oriented wild-minded scientific-spiritual culture” where wildness becomes a “state of complete awareness” (Snyder 1974, 99). It was in the 1960s also that Thoreau’s political ideas found their most persistent realization when Martin Luther King adopted Thoreau’s concept of civil disobedience in his civil rights movement. King had come across “Civil Disobedience” during his studies of Mahatma Gandhi’s civil rights activities in South Africa and his independence movement in India. He learnt that Gandhi had first read Thoreau in 1907 while trying to organize resistance against discriminatory laws administered by the South African apartheid system. When Gandhi returned to India in 1915 the question arose how to oppose the ruling British colonial system by means of civil action and below a level where military action seemed inevitable. Thoreau’s simple concept of non-compliance seemed to fit ideally what Gandhi needed. It allowed to press Gandhi’s issues without bloodshed and also made his own Hindu concept of “satyagraha” (non-violent disobedience by reasons of conscience) comprehensible to a wider European public, thus serving both strategic and propagandistic functions. In its simple logic it also seemed appropriate for those of his fellow countrymen who were not familiar with Gandhi’s philosophical background. One should note, however, that there is an essential difference between Thoreau’s understanding of civil disobedience and Gandhi’s actual application of it. What Thoreau had understood primarily as an act of individual moral behaviour on the basis of Christian ethics, Gandhi proposed as an agitational political strategy of mass action, stripping it of its individualistic implications.

Martin Luther King, searching for a useful strategy he could employ in his fight against racial discrimination in the USA, took over the pragmatic interpretation of Thoreau’s concept of civil disobedience. Sharing Gandhi’s political rather than Thoreau’s subjectivist view King could still adopt Thoreau’s philosophy because it could serve as welcome evidence that there was a long American tradition of civil disobedience which the civil rights movement could use in its struggle against the laws and regulations administering segregation. Moreover, King stressed that aspect of civil disobedience which had a provocative effect. By provocation, mass protest was to induce ethical and social change. In his “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” he wrote: “Non-violent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue” (Klumpjan

1984, 254). While Thoreau had, out of his Transcendentalist perfectionism, striven for a spiritually cleansed, perfect America, Martin Luther King saw Thoreau's method as a means for political change, the administration of equal rights to the black minority in the USA, thus transforming it from a radical symbolic criticism of society to a pragmatic instrument.

After 1964 Thoreau's influence on the protest movement grew even further when the opposition to the war in Vietnam discovered civil disobedience as a useful means for their protest. Thousands of young Americans returned their draught cards to the recruiting offices with an issue of Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government" enclosed and the words "Mexican war" replaced by "Vietnam war." Military transports to the harbours on the West coast were blockaded by warprotesters, and those arrested quoted Thoreau's dictum that "under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison" to the police and their judges. With equal reference to Thoreau many well known people, among them the folk singer Joan Baez, entirely or in part refused to pay taxes as long as US military forces had not withdrawn from Vietnam. And in 1970 a play entitled *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* swept university campuses clear, filling American College theatres with enthusiastic crowds.

But it was not only the Thoreau of "Civil Disobedience" whose ideas were echoed in the protest movement of the 1960s. With the appearance of the "beat generation" there was also a renewed interest in *Walden*. Even during the second half of the nineteenth century *Walden* and Thoreau's other nature writings had been influential in John Muir's struggle for the conservation of Yosemite. The resulting "wilderness cult," which had led to the foundation of the American National Park System, experienced a revival when in the 1960s many young Americans, with poets like Gary Snyder or Allen Ginsberg as spokesmen, began to rediscover the "wisdom of nature" and the simple quality of "life in the woods." After the peaceful counter culture of the hippies had for the most part failed in the urban environment, a mass exodus into the country began. "Mother Nature" was to cure her children from alienation and teach them a life in accordance with the natural rhythm of the earth.

Working on the land and living from its harvests promised that immediacy which had been lost in the urban environment "I love dealing with things that are simple and direct," a communitarian of the "Wheeler Ranch" in California echoed Thoreau's "essentials of life" (Davidson 1973, 341). "Organic" became a key term in the evaluation of the right approach to life and society. On the Wheeler Ranch the communitarians preferred walking twenty miles for water and firewood, growing a garden and visiting each other on foot to taking advantage of modern automobile technology. One felt that Western civilization would sooner or later destroy itself. Thus a simple and

natural lifestyle was not only a question of self refinement but also of survival. The anarchist antinomianism of the “flower children” pushed Thoreau’s statement “It would be of some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life” to the extreme. Many of the “dropout” communes consequently were called “Walden.” Yet this naming practise concealed a crucial difference. Thoreau had started his experiment in decided opposition to the collective reformism of Brook Farm or Fruitlands, whereas the communes of the counter culture propagated collectivistic ideas like the abolishment of private property or the dissolution of the bourgeois nuclear family.

Another communal experiment of the 1960s which borrowed its name from Thoreau was the “Walden Two Commune” of Arkansas. As early as 1948 B. Frederic Skinner, a behavioural scientist, had outlined in a novel called *Walden Two* what he thought to be the concept of an ideal society. By radically applying the principles of behaviouristic learning theory, he was convinced that aggression free communities could be organized which rendered monogamy and private property obsolete. However, as “Walden Two” and its derivatives depended on external conditioning instead of inner self reform as Thoreau had demanded, Skinner’s utopia had little more in common, with Thoreau’s Walden than the name.

The counter cultural disciples of Thoreau in the 1960s and 1970s largely avoided a problem that was substantial to Thoreau’s cultural and social criticism. Like Transcendentalist theory in general, Thoreau’s cultural criticism was uncompromisingly individualistic. It was hardly accidental that Martin Luther King had to strip Thoreau’s concept of civil disobedience of its subjectivistic implications in order to employ it as a strategy for mass action. Thoreau’s argument in “Resistance to Civil Government” that “any man more right than his neighbours, constitutes a majority of one already” (*Reform Papers* 74) is only valid under the presumption that individual conscience is a more reliable test of truth than the number of people consenting. The entire evidence of the moral rightness or wrongness of opposition against legislative or governmental action is thus transferred from public consensus to individual conscience. Only from such a perspective can the individual perception of justice become more important than the collectively imposed law. Thoreau’s ethical argument must crumble, however, as soon as the reliability of this conscience is subjected to critical scrutiny. With good reason the modern form of democratic counteraction against possible domination by a repressive government is a body of laws agreed upon by democratic vote. If one excludes the question of the natural right to resist totalitarian oppression, Thoreau’s faith in the supreme judgement of individual conscience dissolves the difference between justice and its defining

legal foundation in a naive trust in the inherent integrity of man.

Following the Transcendentalist dictum of "mind in matter," Thoreau's moral argument, furthermore, rests on two ontological prerequisites, i.e. "some absolute goodness somewhere" (*Reform Papers* 69) and the capability of the individual to gain access to and merge with this objective benevolence by self reform. This view, however, abstracts from the social and historical formation of moral values, presuming an ahistorical truth emanating from some divine condition of the world, which simply must be deciphered by the enlightened mind. Thoreau posited this benevolent quality of the world and a likewise benevolent God presiding over it until his disillusioning experience on Mount Katahdin. But even after Mount Katahdin, when he had come to a more realistic assessment of nature and the world, he related the malevolent aspect of man less to social factors but concluded that the moral corruption of man had obviously advanced more than he had expected.

Similar criticism must apply to Thoreau's analysis of nineteenth century capitalism. If the materialism and ruthless striving for profit which he criti-cized in American society were only a mental distortion instead of an inher-ent quality of the world or due to social forces, individual self reform would indeed have been an appropriate means to induce change. What this view neglects, however, is the manifold dialectical relationship between society and the individual and the inevitable social and economic interdependence of people which has developed in the course of history. Although clearly fore-seeing the negative social dynamics of industrial capitalism, Thoreau reduced its antagonisms to the mere socioeconomic expression of the predominant condition of the collective and individual psyche, to be overcome by individ-ual effort. In fact, one might say that Thoreau's extreme individualism even furthered what he wanted to abolish. Max Weber has shown how the development of capitalism went hand in hand with the development of the Protestant work ethic of individual responsibility and conscience. Thoreau blamed the moral corruption of his contemporaries on the present state of American society, thus ignoring the social and economic antagonisms of capitalism as the driving forces of both social conflict and social development. Yet, in enjoining the entire responsibility for a change of the capitalist system solely on the individual's willingness to self reform, Thoreau fell victim to the very ideology he wanted to overcome the capitalist ideology of individual self-reliance and free enterprise. The complex dialectical interaction between the rise of industrial capitalism, its relations of production and the living conditions of the people, was reduced by Thoreau to the question of moral integrity.

Consequently, political issues like the American assault on Mexico in 1848, the decree of the Fugitive Slave Law, the defence of slavery

by prominent Yankee politicians or the execution of John Brown did not really politicize Thoreau. Instead they reassured him in his conviction that the *res privata* was to be given priority to the *res publica*. To Thoreau slavery and expansionism were just extreme cases of restriction of freedom and the reaction had to be individual non-compliance rather than organized political resistance – an attitude that characterizes him as a petty-bourgeois anarchist rather than a revolutionary or even social reformer.

In this context it is also significant that Thoreau chose an essentially aesthetic approach for the evaluation of his Walden experiment. After Brook Farm and Fruitlands had failed as examples of communal alternatives to American capitalism, Thoreau was realistic enough to see that a one man experiment could only be of symbolic value. Although he had hoped Walden to be an economic success – the first chapters of *Walden* include minute accounts of his spendings – he soon realized the impossibility of such an endeavour. Thoreau's remark that "to affect the quality of the day" was "the highest of arts" marks this shift of emphasis from the economic and practical towards a more contemplative, that is, aesthetic dimension of his experiences. Claude Gayet has demonstrated how, when writing *Walden*, Thoreau gave it a complicated literary structure to underline the allegorical quality of his report (Gayet 1981). What Thoreau had ultimately achieved with his experiment was not so much an alternative to be generalized but a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which life and art merged. As art, however, his experiment shares the general dialectic of art, namely the radical difference between empirical and imaginative reality. The price for the utopian impetus of *Walden* is necessarily its social inefficacy.

The same aesthetic, rather than practical approach characterizes Thoreau's concept of nature as a moral agent. By contemplating nature and reading nature's language, he believed, man could merge with the Oversoul, thus suspending the difference between perceiving subject and the object perceived. Nature, Thoreau was convinced, would then release her moral guidance, which was characterized by harmony, beauty and virtuous innocence. Language, beauty and virtue, however, by definition refer to intrinsically human concepts and social capabilities. Nature herself can only provide the screen that human activity is reflected from. Any kind of moral activity of nature is of necessity mere make-believe. Like art nature can at best show life its repressed but potential possibilities. To Thoreau's Walden experiment and his view of the healing quality of a life according to the rules of nature, however, the assumption of an active role of nature was essential. Thoreau thus fell victim to the general epistemological conversion of idealist philosophy in which subject and object are changing roles. The individual projects his moral and emotional needs to nature then mistaking the echo for the source. Or, in theoretical terms, Thoreau's fundamental error

was that he was taking a method of cognition depending on an aesthetics of nature for an absolute knowledge contained *a priori* in the nature of things. Like the social remoteness of Walden, Thoreau's nature is not a habitable but an allegorical reservation of obvious nonutility and social detachment. Thoreau believed he had put a philosophical plan in action; in reality he had done the contrary. Nature as an alternative to society this concept had already proven erroneous at a time when the wilderness had not yet disappeared: for the American pioneers life in nature had been but a mere struggle for survival. Thoreau thus turned nature into a myth, a myth which cannot hide its specific social origin.

A harmonious "reconciliation with nature," in the first place, would have required harmony among mankind itself. Moreover, an unbiased view of exploited and subjugated nature cannot be achieved as long as man himself remains alienated from his own true nature by social repression and the dehumanizing forces of a society which considers profit and material consumption more valuable than its members. Thoreau's opposition to society which is not a general but a specific, historical one and his unity with nature thus involuntarily merge with the ideology of the society he wanted to criticize: the Puritanism of early American Capitalism. Yet, Thoreau and the Transcendentalists deserve credit for striking alarm by drastically denouncing the negative aspects of industrial capitalism and the accompanying consumerism. Although their philosophical idealism and individualism prevented them from realizing the underlying social dynamics, they called attention to a problem which has lost nothing of its actuality.

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