

Thoughts on Solitude and the Hermitage: Emerson and Thoreau on the Abandonment of Reason in Mass Society

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What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude (Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, 20).

Thoreau and Emerson stress solitude as a major part of the intellectual life. All of these men had very similar qualities that brought them to solitude, or at least to a philosophical sense of it. Nietzsche argued that the Overman required solitude so as to avoid infection from mass-ideology. It was a defensive mechanism before the superiority of such a person could be sharpened enough to withstand the destruction of bourgeois life.

Thoreau takes a more economic approach to the question. This is not to relieve the significance of the spiritual elements, but the period of Thoreau's writing is right in the middle of a massive burst in American economic expansion. The problem with that is that it refused to accept human needs. These are very few. If real human needs – not socially generated wants – were the only need for production, labor socially would be no more than few minutes a day. He plants gardens and exercises his mind at the same time, leading to a pleasure that only derives from no attachments. If needs are few, then man can easily turn his attention to objects of contemplation.

There is no mistaking the purpose of *Walden*. It is a serious literary critique against the industrial and capitalist revolution that had just begun to reshape American life. Dealing with *Walden* is to deal with both an economic and philosophical critique of modern life. Even a cursory glance at this book shows that, importantly, Thoreau has a single and consistent definition of modernity that is sinfulness and vice.

For him, modernity is capitalist, individualist (or egocentric), materialist and internationalist. All of these things are tightly interwoven. He makes no mistake – the private and public sources of power are really the same – and they cooperate more than they compete. Power attracts power and it matters not its source. Reading *Walden* is to read an updating of Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*. Civilization is the problem. Civilization and the division of labor it implies creates a new, inferior type of human being. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche said the same, and for the same reason.

Rousseau and Thoreau have an identical point of view: modernity, mechanism and science have created a man that is non-spiritual, bound by the demands of the economy, and, via the profit motive, sees other human beings as equally material. Men become means not ends, and self-interest becomes the only reality to the point where other motives seem absurd. In a striking passage, Thoreau states

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere

ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that. Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be anything but a machine (*Walden*, 6, chapter 1a).

The modern academic has no idea how to digest such things, as it points to *him* as a part of the problem. This passage, more than any other in *Walden*, summarizes his views of human society in the age of mechanism. Thoreau is in good company as Rousseau, Hegel and Bonald have all aimed their rhetorical guns at the modern market myth and the industrial colossus it rationalizes. . The market is a machine that, through transforming wants into needs, creates an oligarchy. The above passage is what men are reduced to as they interact in this profoundly alienating existence. The “factitious cares” are precisely those false “needs” that the modern system places on an increasingly alienated society. The more “wants” are generated, the more labor is demanded.

Human beings become one dimensional in that they are reduced to economic quantity. They are a minor part of a much larger machine. The industrial world has from its inception been international and cosmopolitan, since raw materials and surplus value first came from England's far-flung colonies. This massive Regime can not be controlled, and is rarely understood, by the average worker. Material needs dominate all things, debt always increases, and both money and prestige become near obsessions of the now destroyed human spirit. Life becomes meaningless, and the diminution of literature and the standardization of education render the comprehension of alternatives fantastic.

The reduction of human beings to material quantities is death. Material objects cannot reason and do not have souls. Material objects, more importantly, are easy to control and manipulate. If man is just a bundle of nerve-endings, then those institutions that have figured out how to manipulate those nerves automatically rule, and there is no moral reason why this should not be so. It is just a matter of using modern, materialist science to excite one passionate part of man over another, and the rest becomes predictable. *Walden*, almost needless to say, is a literary protest against this significant element of modernity. We read:

I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of. Better if they had been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolf, that they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in. Who made them serfs of the soil? Why should they eat their sixty acres, when man is condemned to eat only his peck of dirt? Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born? . . . How many a poor immortal soul have I met well-nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and woodlot! The portionless, who struggle with no such unnecessary inherited encumbrances, find it labor enough to subdue and cultivate a few cubic feet of flesh. But men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon plowed into the soil for compost (*Walden* 4-5, chapter 1a).

The elongated passage deserves to be quoted at length because it is the foundation of

the critique of modern economics. How the modern professor, rhapsodizing about this to students, brackets it from the ultra-modernist liberalism he defends is the source of a great degree of over-compensation and other coping mechanisms of neurosis.

Like Rousseau and Dostoevsky, Thoreau stresses that it is not poverty that destroys the soul, but prosperity. Just as in Rousseau, the problem is that the goals of modern society have actually been reached. The problem is that modernity is prosperous. It has, generally, delivered the goods. Its Potemkin villages are easily visible and most, if they cannot share in it, see the fault lying in themselves. It is not the failures, but the success of modernity that makes it so dangerous. "Prosperity" is used in an ironic sense, sense the drive to economic efficiency has led to something it never predicted: an irrational life both personally and socially.

The prosperity of modern economic life is paralleled by a work schedule that is inhuman. For the prosperous farmer, owning several hundred acres and several hired hands, life is a constant worry, a constant struggle. Maintaining a prosperous farm (or any business) is an endless job. Work is constant, worry never ends. The slightest error in judgment or a sneaky lawsuit could spell the end. The success of a farm just means that the owner must work all the more to maintain it. The state sees him as a cow to be milked while consumers seek to lower prices at his expense. Workers, never receiving what they produce, are alienated and care little for land that is not theirs. Hence, the "successful" farmer or businessman is miserable. Work is endless, and there can be no way that the work itself will be alleviated. The very concept of financial success is death.

This was written a long, long time ago. The 20th century eliminated even the naive "prosperity" Thoreau saw around him. Today, even the most basic goods cannot be had without endless work, while the overwhelming majority of the production of labor goes to the pockets of those who control it. Massive increased in human production over the last 80 years has gone to the owners, not those who are actually producing, whether intellectually or physically.

WH Mallock developed the ingenious argument a short time after *Walden* came out that the worker is a mere instrument, like the hammer in the hand. The brain directing the hammer is the owner. Labor, of itself, is useless and must be directed. It is to celebrate Shakespeare's pen rather than the Bard himself. The plan to which labor is directed is the function of the small class of owners. Labor cannot have rights against this since, without this intellectual class, labor would have no purpose. Mallock's problem, especially after his works were written, was that the intellectual class is also the employee of the owner. The owner is not even knowledgeable about the business, he merely takes a percentage.

Modernity cannot provide what human beings crave – truth and reality. "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, and obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board" (*Walden*, 15, chapter 18). Moderns cannot understand the argument since "truth" is reduced to pragmatic rule following and economic efficiency.

The relation between success, materialism and truth is another major theme of *Walden*. If the human person, immersed in modernity, continues to accept its basic assumptions, then the man will become as distorted as the regime that molds him. Put differently, the basic perception of the American citizen at this period is profoundly affected by the nature of the revolution in economic and social life. The world becomes a projection of the industrialist – a mockery of the natural order.

Modern America has changed the very ontology of perception. Nature is seen as a dead entity, since, by itself, it is worthless to the capitalist. Only when labor is added to nature does it have value. Workers then take, transform and commodify nature for the sake of a profit earned by others. This implies that, in looking at the natural world, the modern

American does not see “nature” in the sense that Thoreau means it. He sees, instead a field of undifferentiated bits of matter that need to come under the control of the factory. More recently, “nature” is idealized as a serene place where no human suffering exists. So either nature is non-existent or its beauty is idealized in man's projection of his own suffering and past bliss. In a sense, since market relations totally commodify objects and reduce them to a money value, nature does not exist in any real sense at all. The point is that if truth is reality (or a correspondence between the two), there is no reasonable way that the modern can know anything. What he sees is a world capable only to be reduced to the most base of quantitative measures. The economy is epistemology.

It does not take much imagination that Thoreau's protest, and his natural ideal, is anything but a negation of the Puritan ethic. Puritanism, or an English-language redaction of Calvin's extreme denunciation of traditional Christianity, seemed to rise and fall on all those “modern” virtues Thoreau and Emerson mocked and excoriated.

The Puritans were extremely social; Thoreau was alone. The Puritans believed in capitalism and the merchant life; Thoreau assaulted that approach to the world. The Puritans held to the strictest of moral codes; Thoreau held to a moderate, “Rousseauian” view. The Puritans believed in a tightly organized and integral community; Thoreau's entire life was a rejection of this (Osgood, 1891: 1-10). Herbert Osgood, one of the 19th century's experts on Puritan social ideas writes,

It is their duty also to reform the corrupted worship of God, and to defend with the sword the pure worship. Still, they have no authority to interfere in the election of church officers, to perform any ecclesiastical functions or to establish anything but a pure form of worship. Finally, all freemen should be church members, and magistrates should be chosen exclusively from them, (Osgood, 1891: 22).

It would be difficult to discover a point of view less Thoreauian than this. Yet, it still might be possible to see where the Puritan ethic, in less social areas of life, might be seen in Thoreau's work. Of course, Puritans rejected the traditional concept of sacraments with vehemence. In fact, to be a Puritan is to desire a “purified church” that contains no sacramental thought. Yet, for both the New England Puritans and Thoreau, there is a broader element of the “sacral” that might serve as a bridge between the two.

While it is true that the Puritans accepted (and even helped create) the capitalist ethic, that is not to say that they accepted the much later vice of ostentation. Pride is one of the most common vices associated to prosperity, something harshly condemned by the Puritans. More to the point, the concept of the “sacral” is far from accepting a specific “sacramental” theology.

For the Puritan (and this is quite different from the modern capitalist idea), the world of nature is not dead. It is alive. It is home to the presence of God. Yet, logos theology eludes them, lest the analogous presence of Christ in the Eucharist pull the faithful to the Romans. Order has been created, and humanity must work with it rather than seek to replace it (as the modern technocrat does). In other words, the Puritan mind, as well as the Walden protest, seek simplicity, humility and a basic, fundamental moral code for a community. Unfortunately, the market has no patience for such barriers to total efficiency and mechanization. To remain competitive, the community must be ruthlessly subordinate to the firm. Thoreau, as in his *On Civil Disobedience*, the public authority rarely accomplishes things that are in the interest of those who have nominally empowered the state. The state, as the economy, becomes an autonomous social actor with its own interest.

The small, integrated community of the 17th century Puritan colonies of New England

might be able to fully justify the contractual nature of society as envisaged by its founders. But the large, transcontinental nature of America in the late 19th century cannot be so easily understood. The very use of this metaphor is cynical. For Thoreau, at the very least, the modern state is far too large and diverse to be justified under the “covenant” metaphor of Locke or John Winthrop. Here, the Puritan approach to political science can be used to justify Thoreau's anti-state activity and therefore, the mentality of *Walden*.

The pond, as such, functions objectively like a guide or prophet, eternally reflecting (on) the sidereal hemisphere, and subjectively like a conscience, a pure distillation of natural law. Thoreau's struggle is not simply against the material manifestations of cultural decadence, blindness, greed, and waste, but also against the social, moral, and philosophical assumptions that have, like belching smog, obscured the reality of heaven and earth. . . Reality for Thoreau is repeatedly associated with depth and purity. One must always work downward toward it, digging and scraping away the grime of misconception, sometimes with hands and feet but also with the head, which he designates as “an organ for burrowing,” until one arrives at something clear, unsullied, and eternal (Poetzsch, 2008: 393).

The social and religious conception of *Walden* is encapsulated here by Poetzsch's prose. What matters is ontology, or our approach to existence. Thoreau, like most of the Transcendentalists, held that the human psyche is, in its relation to the rest of the world, an integral unity. The Puritans held to the community what Thoreau held for our relation with the world – it is an integral whole. The problem Thoreau cannot see is that the Puritan obsession with nominalism is at the root of the issue, not the sick society that based itself on it. One cannot insist on community while pursuing an ideology that rejects any meaning or universal entities.

This is the most significant social concept of *Walden*. The nature of the society is reflected both in our own personal self-identification and what we consider to be the “truth.” Epistemology, metaphysics, economics, social life and ontology are all one thing, seen from different points of view. This may be true of the Puritans as well. Sin, especially when it becomes a habit, does not just addict the sinner to the action, but alters his very concept of reality, rendering repentance almost impossible. The pornography addict sees the social world through a sexual lens, the businessman sees opportunities for profit, the glutton sees new and exciting dishes to devour. The world becomes a projection. All of these examples of fallen people have slowly altered their existence so as to reflect their particular passion. This is the problem with sin – it is not just the transgression of a law. It is much more than that – it can recreate your very self-identity and even color radically your vision of the outside world.

As Poetzsch clearly states, Thoreau holds that reason and reflection only carry out their ends when our human passions are under control. The pond is pure so long as the filth of our modern addictions does not pollute it. Reason can go from the intrepid investigator of inconvenient reality to a mere slave to the dominant addiction, justifying its tyranny and showing how it might be furthered.

If Thoreau's tiny house represents the new society that he wants to see, then the pond is the reflection of reason. Reason is problematic because it too, comes under the spell of the passions. Passions are always present, but only modernity has based itself on their provocation and then, profits from its endless demands. Reason is just a tool. It seeks to find the ground of things, their ultimate cause, yet, if infected by a habit, it will reflexively impose that desire upon the “external world.” Thoreau's tiny house is a microcosm. It is the community as it should be – compact, small, integrated. The pond is our reason – reflective

and pure (also see D'Amore, 2009:73ff), but the ideology of the nominalist Puritan and Protestantism in general will soon destroy it.

Thoreau here is in a dual struggle: there is first, the “manifestations of cultural decadence” which are clear enough, but also, second, the whole of the society that has founded itself on decadence. The point is that social reformation has two elements: the external and the internal. The external world provides ample justifications and rewards for vice. Those who are successful are not those who are rational and virtuous, but only those that are devious. Deviousness is not intelligence. Those who dominate the society are only those who are antisocial enough to claw their way to the top. Those people, and the institutions they control, then impose rewards for behavior that mirrors their own. It is the twofold nature of revolution that forces Thoreau to the pond in the first place. If the “raw material” for social reform is not present, then what is there to do? The hermitage is, for the time being, the only rational response.

Thoreau's *Walden* does not reflect the Puritan ethic. It is at war with it. On theological and economic grounds, the New England Calvinists, without realizing it, set in motion the events that will lead to the industrial revolution and the reduction of human society to a massive, dehumanizing mechanism. Puritanism certainly did not desire the cultural decadence that came as the direct result of radical urbanization and technocracy, yet, they set its wheels in motion and were shocked at what it inevitably produced. They did not realize that the influence of the Compact does not work on huge, diverse societies. The New England Compacts made sense within the tiny communities fighting for survival in the new world. Their ethic will be abused and distorted until it could justify modernity.

Emerson agrees with Thoreau on almost all points. What Emerson stresses is the corrosive nature of modernity. Both writers are coming of age at a time of immense industrial and financial expansion and control, the very beginnings of an American Empire. These writers are concerned with the routinization of human life under modernity, where efficiency is stressed over all. This drive for efficiency means that labor must be squeezed all the harder as individuality gives way to the bureaucracy. Like Thoreau, Emerson sees the life of solitude as the ultimate protest against this highly unnatural way to live.

Both Emerson and Thoreau stress the nature of modernity, albeit indirectly. Nearly all in modernity is bureaucratic. This, by its very structure, destroys the individual. It is important to note that there is a huge gulf separating the ego from the self. None of these writers on solitude stress the ego. There is no drive to “liberate” the ego from tradition or the welfare of others. The ego is a creation of modern bureaucracy and the ideology of nominalism. The self derives only from solitude. In the past, it came from the community.

Both of these writers hold that nature is the greatest of teachers. The beautiful harmony among all the parts of any ecosystem teaches all we need to know about ourselves. Emerson in particular holds that the great harmony of nature shows us that all has its place (cf 25). There is no honor nor dishonor, only the tug of aptitude that brings each person into their assigned place in nature. There is no honor or dishonor in being the soil that gives life to the tree, or the tree that gives life to the leaves. These are three functions, three areas of “expertise” and three areas of necessity. Nature's strict delineation of function teaches us all we need to know about our lives.

For both Emerson and Thoreau, self reliance means self sufficiency. This is the key variable uniting both writers – self sufficiency makes us independent of what moderns call “the grid.” The “grid” of bureaucracy and power does not follow the gentle law of nature, but rather is an unnatural, coercive bureaucracy that serves the wealthy and powerful. Even more, the whole concept of “wealth and power” is profoundly alienating, since wealth does not bring happiness, but a worship of dead matter that is beneath the human reasoning facility.

Property comes at a great price. Property leads to inequality. Inequality requires the state to enforce it and protect contracts. The state then leads people into war, with its standing armies and tax police. The mere desire of certain people to have their property secure leads to Leviathan. The benefits of the protection of property are far less valuable than what the state will soon destroy. Hence, non-conformity and solitude become a mode of protest.

Wordsworth as well holds nature as the ultimate teacher of human relations. While writing at the end of the 18th century, Wordsworth sees things developing in outline that were later to explode in America and Britain bit later – the mundane work within the bureaucracy which is the specific aspect of modernity that all supporters of solitude loathe. In fact, bureaucracy as the primary method to organize labor is specific to modernity and renders it odious. Wordsworth uses the phrase “dreary intercourse of daily life” to refer to the life of the modern man (318). It is drear because it is devoid of significance and moral worth – it is, as we might say today, a “going through the motions” idea. It is, however, not human.

The artificiality of the prestige bureaucracy creates is clear in these writings. To be “President” of a large corporation is to, in a sense, attach your own ego and sense of self worth on your ability to control others. Even more, to insist that this control be seen as something wonderful, proof of the President's intellectual superiority over others.

Wordsworth and Emerson note a vicious cycle: the wealthy and powerful use their wealth and power to convince the world that wealth and power are the only things worth having. The truth is that these things can be taken away at any moment. It is for this reason why Thoreau seeks the virtue of solitude, since no one can take that away. The goods of solitude are not based on social life, social standing or economic relations. This is what makes this type of pleasure superior to all others. It is not contingent on anything but nature.

In Wordsworth's case, like the other two, the ideas and concepts to which we refer all our experiences are not ours. They belong to the society that imposes its vision on us. Hence, non-conformity for Emerson, the economic self-sufficiency for Thoreau, and the immediate, inner experience of natural wisdom for Wordsworth all focuses on the same object: the world of estranged relations. Our work, as reflective members of the human race, is to avoid these pitfalls and traps. The main way to do that is through self-renunciation and the rejection of all artificial causes of “self worth.” The forgetfulness of self might be best manifest in Wordsworth, but there are many traces of it in Thoreau and Emerson as well. The ego is rejected, and the true sense of personality is perfected in the immediate experience of nature's beauty, but a beauty that is seen in the harmonious arrangement of her parts. The modern assembly line is the ultimate in dehumanization, bureaucracy and alienation, and it should come as no surprise that all three of these writers are dealing with things that are specifically modern.

Emerson's “Self-Reliance” is brief, but extremely complex. Written in 1841, it appears in the beginning of what used to be called “mass society.” This is a society dominated by democracy, rights and money. All three of these things are granted or earned without regard to merit. Or in the case of money, the opposite of merit: deviousness and greed. In response to this, he writes this essay. It is a fight against petty motives. Such motives destroy freedom since you become a slave to your drives, your will, your greed. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were also 19th century writers saying more or less the same thing a bit later.

So, in terms of the images, attitudes and tones, we can say a few things. Superficially, it says “do your own thing.” But this is not what it means. Primarily, it is about genius. It is about how geniuses are discovered and how they are rejected. It is only written for them. This is crucial. He holds that men of genius have had specific traits:

1. They were often alone.
2. They were often poor.

3. They were always persecuted.
4. Normal rules did not apply to them.
5. They were non-conformists by definition.
6. They possessed little or no property.
7. Their ideas were radically new.
8. Their concepts were deemed inappropriate or in bad taste.
9. The ideas were found in perfect freedom, without any coercion, economic or social
10. They rejected comfort in favor of radical new departures.
11. They were usually outcasts.

So who is he addressing? Not the masses. He holds them in contempt. Not the intellectual establishment of his day, but men of genius. Intellectual establishments are bureaucratic, based on conformity and group-think, and usually remain stagnant until someone shakes it up with something new. Such a person is called a “nut,” “dangerous” or “deluded.” Worse things are often said, and such people end up in prison.

So he is writing for a tiny handful of people. For the mass, there is no hope. They are not free beings. They are conformists because it is easy. The above 11 things are not easy. The genius is known by them. Of course, so is the lunatic. The line is very fine. But that's just the issue: geniuses act like lunatics. Other geniuses might be able to tell the difference, but certainly not the ordinary.

The problem is in his use of example. He mentions skeptics of Christianity (not Christ himself, but the later churches of modernity), Irving Washington, Ben Franklin, John Locke and Issac Newton. None of these men were poor. None worked alone. All were well connected to the power structures of their day. None of their ideas were new. They were all, to one extent or another, aspects of the intellectual bureaucracy of their day.

He also mentions, even more dangerously, Columbus, Galileo and Napoleon. First of all, these people have nothing in common. All were powerful figures with strong backing (Galileo was financed by the Florentine Medici family, for example, the myths about his persecution are endless). None were poor, none were alone and none had “new” ideas whatsoever. All seem to be the opposite of what Emerson is speaking of. So:

1. He is just uninformed or inconsistent.
2. He is addressing these strange examples to the discerning reader. Since he holds that books have little value (only free creation does), why should you listen to this one? You will not learn to be a genius by reading me, he seems to say.
3. Genius is about manipulating power, not fighting it. Napoleon used the tidal wave of the French Revolution to dominate Europe, only to be defeated by the same “masses” in Russia he despises. Could these be oversights? Probably not.

To conclude, there is a massive alienation or disconnect between mechanism and nature; the organic and the inorganic. The Catholics in the west and the Orthodox of the east warned the world about the dangers of this revolution. Savonarola railed against the Medici alchemists and usurers in vain. Man cannot replace nature, and the machine will destroy those who create it. Liberalism is really the rule of capital; it has nothing to do with the vague, wispy slogans about “freedom.” Their warnings went unheeded. Once the truth of their predictions was well known, the reaction was not a return to the faith, since this was long forgotten, but a retreat to vague, Tolstoyan slogans. It is not incorrect, but its foundation had long been removed from education. Worse, the churches themselves ceased to war on the Puritan perversion, but sought to be accepted by the overwhelming power of the oligarchy.

Their arguments against modernity are worth getting to know. Our minds are attuned

to the rhythms and flows of nature. The bureaucrat is an artificial creation, and the distinction between our (organic) minds and all other forms of inorganic structures create neurosis. Solitude is the beginning of a cure for the neuroses of modernity. These bureaucratic ideas can be corporate, governmental, educational or cultural. They are all based on the “lowest common denominator” thinking and, importantly, the profit of others.

“Immediate experience” that matters the most. A “mediate” experience would be one that is filtered through our already existing categories. These categories are not natural to the mind, but unnatural creations of the broader society and its fetishes. Immediate experience is when nature is brought into the closest association with the mind without the use of arbitrary, culturally-created categories such as efficiency or popularity.

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