

Transcendentalism and the Utopian Mentality

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I

Every spirit builds itself a house; and beyond its house, a world; and beyond its world, a heaven. Know then, that the world exists for you. For you the phenomenon is perfect. What we are, that only can we see. All that Adam had, all that Caesar could, you have and can do. Adam called his house, heaven and earth; Caesar called his house, Rome; you perhaps call yours a cobbler's trade; a hundred acres of ploughed land; or a scholar's garret. Yet line for line and point for point, your dominion is as great as theirs, though without fine names. Build, therefore, your own world. (CW 1:45).

The term "utopian" can be a multifarious and slippery one in the history of ideas, but by most standards, the above charge from Ralph Waldo Emerson expresses a utopian aspiration. We find it near the end of his 1836 book Nature, a text that unmistakably signaled a shift in the intellectual climate of nineteenth-century America. But like most everything that Emerson wrote, the passage is productively ambiguous. In the first place it is a message of courage and empowerment, offering a young and alienated readership, Emerson's primary and seemingly natural audience, a view of the world as flexible and open, tractable to their desire to mold and remake it. Emerson is in this sense playing the role that secured his importance in nineteenth-century American culture, and continues in some sense today, that of the supportive and inspiring advocate of individual integrity and self-direction, a crucial voice of courage to many who have struggled with religious or economic domination, or who have found the confines of the socially sanctioned identities and vocations in American culture too narrow and stultifying.

But for the more deeply alienated, Emerson's words suggested another kind of response, not opposed to the first, but entailing a clearer and more programmatic call to action. "Build therefore your own world" was in one of its senses a call to utopian experimentation and world-making, a challenge to the present social order of things and an expression of confidence that this order could be remade. Utopian thinking begins with the faith or confidence that there is a possible alternative to the present order of things, and while it is fueled in part by an estrangement from that order, it

also encompasses a positive and constructive energy, one capable of envisioning a new way of life and a new constitution of society.

Karl Mannheim's definition of the utopian mentality is helpful, I think, in distinguishing that element of Emerson's appeal that we might consider utopian. "We regard as utopian all situationally transcendent ideas (not only wish-projections) which in any way have a transforming effect upon the existing historical-social order" (205). In this sense, much of the energy that Emerson and other Transcendentalists devoted to antislavery thought and work were utopian, in that the abolition of slavery was indeed a transformation of the historical-social order of the nineteenth century. But more germane to our ordinary conception of utopianism would be the particular experiments in transformed living arrangements and economic organization undertaken by those associated with Transcendentalism in the 1840s: the Brook Farm agrarian community, and, more problematically, Henry David Thoreau's experiment in solitary living at Walden Pond. In each of these cases, there was a planned and deliberate program to "build a world" based on certain values and principles that were in the air during the Transcendentalist engagement with American culture. What was attempted and why, how well it succeeded, and what larger impact it had on American culture, tells us much about New England Transcendentalism, and also much about the nature of modern utopian social experiments.

Emerson's Nature was published in 1836, one of several works in the late 1830s that signaled a profound change in New England theological discourse. That change can be said to have begun several decades before, when certain ministers of the official churches in the Boston area began to coalesce around their opposition to the Calvinist orthodoxy that had been espoused by those churches since the Puritan migration of the early 1600's. These liberals, or as they later came to be known, Unitarians, rejected the Calvinist doctrines of original sin and election to grace, seeing them as deterministic concepts that denied human agency and human moral responsibility. Arguing for a renewed sense of the importance of human will, they propounded a theology that established reason over Biblical authority as the primary criterion for religious judgment, and emphasized the human capacity for benevolence, self-determination, and spiritual and moral development. While Emerson and his Transcendentalist followers are in many sense the product of this theological shift, they found the established nineteenth-century Unitarian churches to be stiffly rational and closed to the intuitive and visionary bases of religious experience, and tied too strongly to a materialism and empiricism that we would associate generally with enlightenment thought.¹ Emerson's Nature, and the influential addresses that were to follow in succession, "The American Scholar," the Divinity School Address, and the lectures "The Philosophy of History," "Human Culture," and "The Times," were expressions of an intellectual restlessness that attempted to integrate aesthetic

sensibility, philosophical idealism, and a sense of the unjust and restrictive qualities of American society.

While questions of political transformation were inextricably interwoven into the discourse of the Transcendentalists, it would be wrong to think of Emerson and Thoreau as political radicals. Their political legacy has indeed been susceptible to two quite differing schools of interpretation. In a line of criticism that includes Quentin Anderson and Sacvan Bercovitch, Emerson and Thoreau are taken as the exponents of a strand of American individualism that reinforces *laissez-faire* economics, and is not amenable to the kind of class and group identification and large-scale community building that is necessary to significant social transformation in a modern industrial economy. Emerson's avowal of "self-reliance" as the soul's right posture, and Thoreau's highly individualistic experiment in life at Walden Pond are for these critics the classic intellectual formulations of a way of life that explains much about an American culture that is self-absorbed, economically stratified, and driven by empty and easily-manipulated material goals.

An alternative reading, articulated by such critics as Daniel Aaron, Irving Howe, Stanley Cavell, and Cornel West, finds the emphasis that Emerson and Thoreau placed upon self-determination and willed agency to be a powerful transformative and progressive element in American culture, a guarantor of a kind of experimental openness and resistance to authority and institutional inertia that is crucially necessary to a working and developing social critique.

There is evidence for both of these viewpoints, both in the writings of the Transcendentalists themselves and in later developments of American culture.² But this division of opinion is of some importance in helping us understand the issues surrounding the utopian experiments at Brook Farm and Walden. These experiments bring into focus the tension between the desire for communal harmony and broad inclusivity and the desire for individual freedom and self-expression that runs through the discourse of the Transcendentalists, and is central to much of the discourse of utopianism.

II

One of the most committed and theologically astute of Emerson's associates was George Ripley, a Unitarian minister who had an early hand in the controversies over Biblical interpretation and religious authority that set the Transcendentalists apart from the mainstream Unitarians. By the late 1830s Ripley had begun to believe that the key issues of the day extended beyond the confines of the church and the discourse of theology, and to take a deep interest in questions of social justice and democratic economic reform. After attending an 1840 convention of "Friends of

Universal Reform," he began to be drawn toward the doctrines of "association," the term applied to early forms of communitarian socialism. A wide spectrum of reform ideas were fermenting in the America of the early 1840s, a period with some similarities to the late 1960s, and Emerson, who had attended the same reform convention, offered this wry description of it for readers of the Dial:

A great variety of dialect and costume was noticed; a great deal of confusion, eccentricity and freak appeared, as well as of zeal and enthusiasm. If the assembly was disorderly, it was picturesque. Madmen, madwomen, men with beards, Dunkers, Mug gletonians, Come-outers, Groaners, Agrarians, Seventh-day Baptists, Quakers, Abolitionists, Calvinists, Unitarians and Philosophers,--all came successively to the top, and seized their moment, if not their hour, wherein to chide, or pray, or preach, or protest. (W, 10:374)

But the voice that seemed to emerge from this cacophony most persuasively for Ripley and many others was that of the French social theorist Charles Fourier, whose work, translated and expounded by a passionate American follower Charles Brisbane, became a focal point for New England utopian theorizing and experimentation. By the fall of 1840 Ripley had proposed a communal experiment at a meeting of the Transcendental Club, which launched serious talk and negotiation about it with Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Henry Channing and others. In April 1841, after a period of reading on agricultural methods, Ripley and his wife Sophia Alden Ripley, founded the Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education, a commune centered on a farm and school, and dedicated to the possibility of providing an economic and social alternative to the harried, competitive, and fragmented nature of American society.³

Although not at first formed as an explicitly Fourierist phalanx, Brook Farm would gradually move in that direction, declaring its affiliation with Fourierism in 1845. Ripley's initial motivations, however, were to make two things were made possible that were increasingly impossible, as he felt, in conventional American life. The first was to reintegrate intellectual and physical labor, by making the necessary agricultural duties equally shared, and shared in such a way that enough leisure and opportunity remained for the pursuit of knowledge and intellectual cultivation.⁴ Ripley was worried about the increasing specialization of labor for two reasons. First, he was increasingly worried about class division in American society, in which physical laborers were separated from both the intellectual class, and from the possibility of intellectual life itself. This had been a growing worry among some of the leaders of the Unitarian and Transcendentalist movements, whose congregations were generally of the middle and upper classes, and whose ministry inherited to some extent the intellectual authority and cultural status of the original Puritan ministry. Harvard College had been founded in 1636, only six years after the immigrants of the

Massachusetts Bay Colony had landed. Few cultures had placed more authority in their intellectual leadership than had the New England Puritans. But the Unitarians had espoused a democratic emphasis on individual self-cultivation and moral autonomy that did not cohere well with the existence of an intellectual elite, and they also worried that the increasing numbers of the working class and poor in urbanized Boston and New York presented a major challenge to the cohesion of American society.

The Transcendentalists also resisted the division between head and hands on more personal grounds, feeling a certain falsity of the position of an intellectual unconnected to the reality of the material world. "When I go into my garden with a spade and dig a bed," the notoriously clumsy Emerson declared in his lecture "Man the Reformer," "I feel such an exhilaration and health, that I discover that I have been defrauding myself all this time in letting others do for me what I should have done with my own hands." Moreover, he adds, "I feel some shame before my woodchopper, my ploughman, and my cook, for they have some sort of self-sufficiency" (CW, 1:150). Emerson's admissions typified a shared feeling by most of the Transcendentalists that there was a suffocating falsity in an intellectual life divorced from physical work. Brook Farm promised to heal that condition by making it everyone's duty to work, and giving everyone the opportunity to think and create.⁵

This emphasis on the balanced integration of physical and mental labor was one specific manifestation of a greater utopian desire in Ripley and the Brook Farmers. We can best describe that desire under the rather general term "social harmony," which encompassed goals that we would generally label in the categories of peace and justice in the political realm, but which also included interpersonal relationships. Brook Farm, in fact, seemed to be a place whose residents remembered it fondly and had a generally good time. There was an encouragement of aesthetic activities and a broad acceptance of play as a crucial part of the life there, and we have to remember how unusual and, indeed, even mildly subversive, such endorsements were among the nineteenth-century New England intelligentsia.⁶ Even the liberal Unitarians and Transcendentalists had embraced a doctrine of perpetual self-culture to replace the older Puritan doctrines of religious conversion, and the result could be a kind of unrelenting spiritual pressure. The historical record is full of narratives of extreme stress, exhaustion, and collapse among Unitarian ministers--the dark side of this otherwise optimistic and positively pragmatic ideology. As Mark Twain wryly observed, considering the versions of heaven propounded by new creeds which had abandoned the leisure of harp-playing and eternal rest for continual improvement, even in the afterlife, in this heaven you "pro-gre ss, pro-gress, pro-gress,--study, study, study, all the time--and if this isn't hell, I don't know what is" (116).

A sense of the satisfaction and even joy of community was part of the Brook Farm mind set, and it reinforced the overtly political concern with the more equal distribution of goods and the provision of an alternative to the competitive economy that helped generate support for a communal economic structure. Ripley wanted Emerson to be part of this experiment, and Emerson had seen plans for the community develop at meetings of the Transcendental Club and in talks and correspondence with Ripley. Clearly he was interested, and from motives of both friendship and a desire for the public relations triumph that Emerson's membership in the community would have meant, Ripley worked hard to persuade him to join. Although Emerson and Ripley shared much intellectually, there were some important differences suggested by Emerson's refusal to join the commune. Even though he found the idea of a socialist community intriguing, he was profoundly skeptical about what the individual could gain from such an experience. "I go for churches of one" (JMN 15:115), he noted characteristically in his Journal, and in another entry commented tersely, "The Communities will never have men in them but only halves & quarters. They require a sacrifice of what cannot be sacrificed without detriment" (JMN 8:302).

The differences between Emerson and Ripley were accentuated when Ripley led Brook Farm in a conversion to Fourierism, an act that reflects a high tide of interest in Fourier's theories in the American 1840s. To summarize briefly Fourier's elaborate theories, he held that groups of 1620 persons could be so organized that, through a highly planned sequence of constantly changing activities, no individual would have to perform any work or task that was distasteful or irksome, and every individual's needs and desires could similarly be fulfilled. Such groups would have the advantages of the shared and organized economic productivity. Fourier envisioned a society in which work was redefined, in a sense, as play, because the organization of his groups required allowed you to work in a constantly changing variety of tasks, and to work only according to your inclinations.⁷ It was an extreme expression of both Enlightenment optimism and pseudo-scientific calculation, and at first one wonders how it could have taken such hold of the Transcendentalists. But it promised what many of them were looking for--a way to reconcile individual drives with the idea of a conflict-free and harmonious social organization. With Fourier, one could have both the extreme of individual freedom along with the most tightly knit and smoothly functioning social organization.⁸

Fourier's emphasis on social organization as a means of fulfilling individual desires had one consequence that many of his American disciples were loathe to publicize widely. He envisioned a society in which the prohibitions on desire were greatly relaxed, and had little use for conventional bourgeois family structures, the institution of marriage, or the sexual proscriptions that those entailed. Fourierism became a shorthand for many intellectuals like Margaret Fuller who were attempting to work

through her conflicts with women's roles in the family and in society, and for others it became a shorthand for the questionable moral basis of communal experimentation in general.⁹ As Emerson observed, "Married women uniformly decided against the communities. It was to them like the brassy and lackered life in hotels" (JMN 9:54).

Like the others, Emerson looked into Fourier's doctrines with interest, but he was tartly skeptical of them as a blueprint for practical life. Admiring the theories for their expression of "order," and for offering a plan of "bold & generous air & proportion" in "a day of small, sour, & fierce schemes," he nevertheless found that Fourier's "system was the perfection of Arrangement & Contrivance," with mechanistic and deterministic qualities that robbed it of a necessary connection to the actual experience of men and women. "Fourier has skipped no fact but one, namely, Life" (JMN 8:208-10).

The shift to Fourierism at Brook Farm was probably more important for its ideological implications than for the significance of the changes it brought. Fourier's theories gave the Brook Farmers a more definite perspective or body of knowledge which they could both rally around and begin to analyze and refine, and they were in the process of that refinement, under the leadership of William Henry Channing, when a disastrous fire in 1846 destroyed a new community residential building into which they had committed most of their resources. Ripley, who along with Theodore Parker was probably the best scholar among the Transcendentalists, was forced to sell his personal library to pay some of the commune's debt. "I can now understand how a man would feel if he could attend his own funeral," he remarked, as the last of his books were taken away (Swift, 137). By 1847 the commune had disbanded, and while the causes of its demise were several, one of Ripley's nineteenth-century biographers, Octavius Brooks Frothingham, blamed Fourierism for the commune's seeming failure to achieve its goals.

To those who think that Brook Farm failed through lack of organization, it may be replied that it failed quite as probably through having too much. The introduction of Fourierism, from which so much was expected, proved in the end unfortunate. It frightened away idealists whose presence had given the spot its chief attraction, and injured the pastoral bloom which beautified it. The reputation of Brook Farm for brilliancy, wit, harmless eccentricity, was seriously compromised. The joyous spirit of youth was sobered.-(Frothingham, 188-89)

Frothingham depicts Fourierism as the forbidden apple that caused the Brook Farmers to fall from innocence, and while both Fourier's theory and the Brook Farmers' enactment of it were problematic, such a view seems to belittle Ripley and his colleagues, who were strenuously searching for real social alternatives, and seemed to have sustained one, albeit however briefly.

III

Henry David Thoreau adopted one important element of the Transcendentalist agenda, Emerson's call to "build your own world," and transformed it into an aspiration toward what he termed a "natural life," one that he pursued in his experiment in life at Walden Pond. "I wish to meet the facts of life--the vital facts, which were the phenomena or actuality the Gods meant to show us,--face to face. And so I came down here." His journal entry of July 6, 1845, two days after he had taken up residence at the pond, suggests the combination of determined purpose and open experimentation that marked his decision to live at Walden. His mixed mood of confidence, anxiety, and curiosity suggests that he understands his departure to the woods as a significant turning point, an opportunity for both discovery and self-formation, but one that entailed a risk if it did not yield a new perspective or a new way of living. "Life! who knows what it is--what it does? If I am not quite right here I am less wrong than before--and now let us see what they will have" (J 2:156). "They" are the "gods," Thoreau's mythical personifications of the terms and conditions under which we must live; Thoreau's aim is to bring himself into as direct a contact as possible with those elemental forces that both energize and define the living of life. His sense of embarking on a heroic or mythical adventure at the pond is plain from a journal entry the next day, in which he remembers that "I too am at least a remote descendent of that heroic race of men of whom there is tradition. I too sit here on the shore of my Ithaca, a fellow wanderer and survivor of Ulysses." This self-conscious posture has its perils in that it raises the stakes of ordinary experience. If Thoreau does not uncover in this new life a renewed sense of purpose and find indications that he is at least moving in a positive and fruitful direction, he will indict himself and quite possibly the conditions of human life as inadequate in some fundamental sense. Nowhere is this more evident than in the sentences in his Journal that follow immediately his allusion to The Odyssey, his observation of the quite ordinary pine tree near the doorway of his Walden cabin.

How Symbolical, significant of I know not what the pitch pine stands here before my door unlike any glyph I have seen sculptured or painted yet-- One of nature's later designs. Yet perfect as her Grecian art. There it is, a done tree. Who can mend it? And now where is the generation of heroes whose lives are to pass amid our northern pines? Whose exploits shall appear to posterity pictured amid these strong and shaggy forms? (J 2:156-57)

Thoreau's passage emphasizes the significance of the ordinary, as suggested by his description of the tree as unknowably symbolic in its existence, but a countervailing skepticism of the reduction that the symbolization of natural objects might entail. "There it is, a done tree. Who can mend it?" And who, he implies, can add to the meaning it holds forth by its plain, factual existence.

The tree, of course, is also a means of self-reflection, and whatever else it might symbolize, it certainly represents one aspect of Thoreau's thinking at this moment, as he struggles between the desire to discover and explain the meaning of his life, and the impulse to live it directly and without self-consciousness. Pulled by the image of the distant heroic past, and yet anchored by the reality of his immediate natural surroundings, Thoreau had embarked on a project that required the reconciliation of these seemingly conflicting impulses.

While these larger aspirations are crucial to our understanding of Thoreau's experiment at Walden and his account of it, it is also important to bear in mind other considerations of a more immediate and practical nature that helped to dictate the terms and the results of his stay. Obviously the move to Walden was directly linked to Thoreau's ongoing attempt to settle the question of vocation for himself. With the advantages of his education, much was expected of him, both from his community and culture, and from himself. His resignation of his teaching position in Concord soon after he had graduated from Harvard, and his clear unhappiness with the later attempt at tutoring for the children of William Emerson in New York, had by this time closed the door on any fulfillment as a teacher or educator in any ordinary or established channel.¹⁰ These abortive attempts at teaching had been accompanied, as Stephen Fink has shown in detail, by a persistent ambition to become a professional writer, a field for which there were few successful models in America, and which demanded not only luck and skill, but a willingness to conform oneself to a literary market, a trait that was, to say the least, difficult for Thoreau.

Thoreau's only real model for such a vocation was Emerson, who also served as a kind of mentor and patron as well, to further complicate their relationship. Emerson's situation was a unique one, given his ministerial experience and identity, and the oratorical skill that this entailed, and his financial stability arising from his inheritance from Ellen Tucker Emerson and his careful investments. What Emerson earned from his publications was far less important to his financial soundness than what he earned from lecturing and investments. Thoreau lacked Emerson's reputation as a minister and preacher, and Emerson's oratorical skills; moreover, he had no independent financial means like Emerson's. He could expect and did receive constant support from his family, but he also had to contribute both labor and planning to their pencil manufacturing business. In some sense, his family was as dependent on his work and innovative improvements in the business as he was on their material support. Given the precarious situation of most American magazines of the time, and the general lack of a market for the publication of the kind of work that Thoreau was inclined to do, his literary ambitions were difficult to fulfill insofar as they included the earning of any kind of stable income.

Emerson's support and friendship were crucial to Thoreau, and both by example, encouragement, and material aid he helped to keep Thoreau's literary ambitions alive and developing in the early 1840s. His lending Thoreau the land on which to build his cabin at Walden was perhaps the most important such gesture, given the fact that so much of Thoreau's literary accomplishment was connected with his stay there. But Emerson's support brought certain problems with it, the chief of which was a kind of dependence that was both material and intellectual. Thoreau had lived in Emerson's house for a good portion of his life after graduating from Harvard serving as both an intellectual companion and student, and a general handyman. In a role that combined aspects of younger brother, son, apprentice scholar, secretary, gardener, carpenter and childcare provider, he had been an integral part of Emerson's household, learning much and providing much in return, but postponing the important question of forming his independent identity. While both men profited from the relationship, both recognized that Thoreau's independence was vital, both to his maturity and well-being, and to his literary ambitions.

The Walden experiment was also an effort to strike an independent course from Emerson, even though it was more clearly of Thoreau's initiation and execution. In this sense, Thoreau's emphasis on thrift and the simplified definition of one's economic necessities in the "Economy" chapter of Walden had both a theoretical and a practical source in his experience, as did the work in the bean field and the other gardening that Thoreau undertook during his stay at the Pond. For Thoreau, the life at Walden promised to answer a number of philosophical questions, but it also promised to answer, or at least render temporarily irrelevant, the question of his vocation. There he would not only be free from considerations of work in the conventional sense, but also free for the extended projects that he felt necessary to fulfill his literary ambitions. Readers and commentators who have noted that Thoreau was not completely cut off from the potential economic support of his family and of Emerson in Concord have a point, and it is a mistake to read Walden as a narrative of a survivalist experiment in the wilderness, as modern readers are sometimes prone to do. But that is not to dismiss the vitally important nexus of economic and vocational forces that made the experiment a logical and practical step for him.

Thoreau's remark that he had "private business" to conduct at the pond highlights another crucial motivation in his undertaking the experiment. In a certain sense the financial, vocational, and literary motivations for the experiment, even the emotional motivations connected with his friendship with Emerson and his desire for a more independent identity, were superficial considerations when compared with the contemplative and spiritual program of self-discovery and heightened awareness that the life at the pond offered. While life at Walden may certainly have been conducive to his literary work--the evidence is overwhelming on this--and may also have

provided him with a measure of self-confident maturity, these results do not in themselves explain the deeper aim and accomplishment of the experiment. Thoreau's sense that he was coming into closer contact with fundamental ethical laws and bedrock ontological realities permeates Walden, and this sense of the world's opening is almost indistinguishable from a parallel sense of inner discovery that he described as one of the experiment's chief benefits. Part of this discovery lay in the work of self-discipline, in mustering the necessary strength and ingenuity to execute the ethical laws that solitude, nature, and persistent thinking continued to reveal. "I had this advantage, at least, in my mode of life, over those who were obliged to look abroad for amusement, to society and the theatre, that my life itself was become my amusement and never ceased to be novel. It was a drama of many scenes and without an end. If we were always indeed getting our living, and regulating our lives according to the last and best mode we had learned, we should never be troubled with ennui" (112).

But even beyond this level of "amusement," as Thoreau ironically terms it, self-knowledge entailed a more profound recognition of the self's kinship, its shared identity, with a presence much beyond what we might ordinarily take to be the boundaries of the self. Thoreau expressed this sense of the self's broad affinities in a variety of ways, searching for forms of expression that would clarify experience that we could classify as spiritual in nature, but avoiding the conventional theological terminology that had become for most of the Transcendentalists something of a barrier to actual religious understanding. Making light of his moments of loneliness and melancholy at the pond, he makes it clear that his growing ability to redefine the self in larger terms also entailed a redefinition of the things in the world and the possibilities of our relationships with them. Rather than viewing the natural world as a place devoid of the human, Thoreau began to learn that he could see it in relational and social terms, and that such a shift in perspective also had a direct intellectual and emotional impact on him. "Yet I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man" (131).

His description of the companionship he found in a rainstorm at the pond is one of the more vivid explorations of this theme, one which dramatizes his efforts to make peace with the isolation of his new life while it emphasizes the larger point that the self is a more flexible and amorphous entity than we ordinarily imagine. Referring to the one incident in which he felt loneliness "a few weeks after [he] came to the woods," he dismisses the feeling as "a slight insanity in my mood" during which he could, even then, anticipate his "recovery." During this experience, he came to understand more directly this phenomenon of the companionship of natural objects. "I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature," he explains, "in the very

pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house" (132). Thoreau's mood is altered dramatically by the convergence of the sounds, sensations, and sights of the storm with his mood of "slight insanity," an event in which the sheer volume of aural and visual stimuli increase dramatically, and one is reminded of a certain exposure and vulnerability to forces beyond human control. What he comes to recognize in this moment is "an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me" (133), an expression of having crossed a threshold in changing his instinct of self-identification. He no longer witnesses the rainstorm, he becomes part of it, its physical manifestations both familiar and sustaining to him. As he tells us, that experience proved to be a turning point, one that allowed him not only to overcome the brooding feeling of loneliness, but which made him consistently more "aware of the presence of something kindred to me" (132).

This incident suggests how Thoreau was beginning both to execute and to enlarge Emerson's charge to cultivate an inner life more deeply, a central tenet of the Transcendentalist ethos. Both his surroundings at the pond and the disciplined awareness that they helped to make possible worked to undermine the dichotomy of participant and observer that structured ordinary perceptual awareness. What Thoreau records in the moments of greatest philosophical and poetic intensity in Walden are his experiences of perceptual reorientation, moments that are also profoundly compelling as evidence of the inadequacy of conventional self-comprehension.

IV

Woven into the "simple and sincere account of his own life" (3) that Thoreau proposes to tell in Walden is an aggressive critique of the life that most people around him live, exposing the thralldom of endless labor that depletes them of both perspective and energy, and the pointless and wasteful search for satisfaction and social status through the ownership and consumption of goods. "But men labor under a mistake," he warns. "The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost. 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). Thoreau foregrounds his "natural life" at the pond against this "fool's life," using its values and patterns of behavior as a kind of reverse guide to his own reconstruction of possibility. Almost everything that he shows his readers about the reformation of his way of life in the chapter on "Economy" also reflects his rejection, explicit or implicit, of commonly accepted axioms about the requirements of living, and the prevalent but unexamined practices of ordinary life. "The whole ground of human life seems to some to have been gone over by their predecessors, both the heights and the valleys, and all things to have been cared for" (9). Such habitual and unquestioning comportment, belying an apathetic trust in the inevitability of present social

conditions, fuels an ire that both quickens and amplifies Thoreau's narrative, appending a social dimension to his work of autobiography. The move to the pond may be one individual's experiment in solitary living, but it is "solitary" in only a very restricted and literal sense. The significance of Thoreau's solitude is amplified by what it is not, and thus carries with it a continual reflection of the life of the town, the farm, and the family that it implicitly repudiates.

As we have noted, Thoreau's move to the pond answered important personal and vocational needs, but it was also a response to the rising interest in utopian experimentation in the early 1840s in which the Transcendentalists took a great interest. The same sense of the futility and apathy of ordinary life that Thoreau articulates so sharply in "Economy" was widely shared among the Transcendentalists, whose initial intervention into the religious discourse of the day quickly evolved into an interest in programs of social reform and communal economic experiments. By the time Thoreau had taken up residence at the pond in 1845, the Brook Farm commune had already been in existence and had refashioned itself, at least in theory, into a Fourierist phalanx. Bronson Alcott and his beleaguered family had returned to Concord after the failure of their Fruitlands communal experiment, an episode that tested the limits of Alcott's idealism, his wife Abigail's strength, and some of the assumptions of utopian reform thinking.¹¹ Thoreau was keenly aware of these experiments, of course, and was steeped in the discourse surrounding them, in which he and Emerson had participated with both a sincere interest and an instinctive skepticism. The mixture of hope and doubt that characterizes Thoreau's attitudes toward social reform and utopian experimentation reflect the public discourse and private conversations that were so pervasive among his friends in the 1840s.

Thoreau's life at Walden Pond can only problematically be thought of as utopian, since it was by design an anti-social rather than a social experiment.¹² Nevertheless, he took with him to the pond the attitude of experimentation and hope that is vital to utopian thinking, but also a keen sense of the problematics of performance and audience that arise when life is transformed into art. We encounter some indication of his anxiety about role-playing in his life at the pond in the first pages of Walden, when he explains that "I would not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life" (3). As a respondent to his neighbors, even as a defender of his way of life, Thoreau can justify the lengthy and detailed account he gives of his Walden experiment, and while he thereby admits that his *narrative* has an audience, he preserves the idea that his living itself did not. Moreover, the questions immediately establish the tone of ironic embattlement that works so effectively in the opening chapter; their very restatement seems to defuse them as serious challenges, reflecting only the insecurity or self-righteousness behind them. "Some have asked what I got to

eat; if I did not feel lonesome; if I was not afraid; and the like. Others have been curious to learn what portion of my income I devoted to charitable purposes; and some, who have large families, how many poor children I maintained" (3). Thoreau's retention of "the *I*, or first person" and his characterization of his book as "a simple and sincere account of his own life" (3) may indeed be crafted elements of the persona that he creates in Walden, as a long tradition of literary analysis has shown us, but it is important to recognize that this persona is a reactive one, shaped by the worry that his life at the pond might be taken merely the performance of a role rather than the logically inevitable steps that he had taken to solve specific problems in the living of life.

The second group of these questions are of particular importance, for they represent the pressure that Thoreau felt from both the established religious community and the social reformers as he undertook his solitary experiment. In referring to questions about his contributions to the poor or his support of children, Thoreau was broaching the larger question of the social relevance of his experiment, something that is crucial to his opening description and defense of his simplified economy and natural life. While his initial response is to emphasize the monotonous imprisonment of conventional life, and illustrate his own way of breaking those bonds, he addresses the question of the social relevance of his life more directly near the end of the "Economy" chapter, again using the challenge of those observing him as an opportunity for fuller self-explanation. "But all this is very selfish, I have heard some of my townsmen say" (72). This objection comes straight to the point, and it is a point that has bothered many of Thoreau's readers over the years, who have found in Walden a highly problematic individualism that, manifest in American culture at large, has been the source of a litany of social problems.

But the more pointed the objection, the more pointed Thoreau's ironic dismissal. "I confess that I have hitherto indulged very little in philanthropic enterprises. I have made some sacrifices to a sense of duty, and among others have sacrificed this pleasure also" (72). This is one of the most effective instances of Thoreau's rhetoric of inversion, the transformation of the duty of charity and good works into one of the indulgences or luxuries that he has demonstrated to be obstacles to fulfillment earlier in the chapter. "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only indispensable, but positive hinderances to the elevation of mankind" (14), he had argued, and he now turns the force of this argument on the demand for philanthropy, including it among those luxuries. This description of philanthropy as a suspect indulgence is of course related to the issue of performance and role-playing at Walden, for each case raises the question of sincerity and artificiality, and makes the clear distinction of one's motives for action crucial.

Thoreau uses the challenge of philanthropy to emphasize that his life at Walden is a genuine and necessary step of self-expression, the enactment of a calling whose moral grounding is as secure as that of any duty of working for the betterment of society or the help of others. "You must have a genius for charity as well as for anything else," he argues. "As for Doing-good, that is one of the professions which are full" (73). The "genius" he refers to is the sense of calling or inner compulsion that leads one to undertake a way of life or a project of activity that is both self-fulfilling and a contribution to the larger good of the world. Though he does not engage himself in philanthropic work ---"I have tried it fairly, and, strange as it may seem, am satisfied that it does not agree with my constitution" (73). Thoreau understands his own experiment as important in itself. By fulfilling the duty of his own calling, he is remaining faithful to a vision that is uniquely his own, the consequences of which may have a larger impact than he knows. It is finally an act of faith that a larger good will arise when individuals work in accordance with their own reason and conscience. "Probably I should not consciously and deliberately forsake my particular calling to do the good which society demands of me, to save the universe from annihilation; and I believe that a like but infinitely greater steadfastness elsewhere is all that preserves it" (73).

This determination is of course linked to his diagnosis that the ills of conventional life are the result of the inability of men and women to maintain the integrity of their moral decision-making in the face of the demands for conformity, status, and material gain. Rather than doing good, the motto of the philanthropists, Thoreau has other advice: "Set about being good" (73). To do "good" without the inner conviction of its necessity is inherently external and superficial; to *be* good forces us an individual to accept a singular responsibility.

The false obligation of philanthropy is the last of the obstacles to the reformation of life that Thoreau considers in his initial chapter. The others are social and economic barriers, rooted in false or shallow aims, or the inability to forego unnecessary physical comforts. "Economy" is an effort to clear the decks of these obstacles, using Thoreau's counter example at Walden as its most decisive evidence. By beginning life anew at the Pond --- he moved into his cabin, as he tells us, on "the 4th of July" (45) -- Thoreau was able to reconsider his economic needs in the strictest of terms, and fulfill only those that were absolute. This radical simplification of his wants is grounded in a strict discrimination between luxuries and necessities, with the resulting observation that modern civilization has redefined many luxuries as necessities. Thoreau insists on returning to a more fundamental set of definitions. "By the word *necessary of life*, I mean 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

them" (12). Using this exacting standard, Thoreau is able to cut through most of the ordinary patterns of consumption and ownership as superfluous to a fulfilling life, and demonstrate how such superfluities account for most of the financial worry and exertion, and most of the excessive labor, that characterize the American middle class.

In this redefinition of the patterns of consumption and work, Thoreau is interrogating the concept of "freedom" that is central to the American national ideology, and insisting that it must be examined in the light of the daily experience of most Americans. "Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so preoccupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them." Thoreau's metaphor gains additional force when he extends it with a depiction of the debilitation and exhaustion that are the physical signs of overwork. "Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that" (6).

Thoreau does not reject the recognition of material necessity --- that his book begins by considering it is significant. But he does insist that obtaining the necessities must not become an end in itself, but only a necessary preliminary in living. "When he has obtained those things which are necessary to life," he argues, "there is another alternative than to obtain the superfluities: and that is to adventure on life now, his vacation from humbler toil having commenced" (15). Not to begin this "adventure," to remain enmeshed in a never completed struggle to achieve and then augment the material necessities, was thus to lose the point of living, as Thoreau felt far too many had. "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (8), having become convinced that their financial entrapment is inescapable, and thus having lost any larger sense of the purpose of living. The Walden experiment was thus only in a preliminary and superficial sense about getting a living more easily; the "natural life," as Thoreau conceived it, encompassed the pursuit of much larger means of self-expression and fulfillment. "I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor" (90). This endeavor could not overlook the material and economic requirements of living, but it could not rest there either.

FOOTNOTES

1. On the history of New England Transcendentalism, see Packer. For Emerson's development within a Unitarian context, see Robinson, *Apostle of Culture*. [Return](#)
2. Teichgraber's *Sublime Thoughts/Penny Wisdom* examines Emerson and Thoreau as authors in the context of the American economy proposes a new and useful approach to their political identities. He uses Michael Walzer's concept of "connected

critics" to describe their work. They criticized American culture from within, holding its basic values and using those values as a means of criticizing the nations' current political situation. [Return](#)

3. For Ripley's developing identity as a political reformer and utopian, see Crowe, especially pp. 139-45. [Return](#)

4. For studies of the aims and development of Brook Farm, see Stoehr, Guarneri, and Francis. [Return](#)

5. See in particular Stoehr's and Francis's accounts of the questions of work and class at Brook Farm. [Return](#)

6. On the qualities of play and "masquerade" at Brook Farm, see Francis's very perceptive discussion. [Return](#)

7. See Guarneri for an exposition of Fourier's theories, and an account of their transmission to America. [Return](#)

8. On the nature of Fourierism as it was preached and practiced in America, see Guarneri. For the adoption of Fourierism at Brook Farm, see, in addition to Guarneri, Crowe and Francis. [Return](#)

9. For the influence of Fourier on Fuller, see Zwarg. For a discussion of Fourier and the controversy over free love, see Guarneri. [Return](#)

10. The most useful biographical studies of Thoreau's life and intellectual development as a whole are those of Harding and Richardson. [Return](#)

11. On Alcott's Fruitlands experience, see Stoehr and Francis. [Return](#)

12. For a discussion of Walden in the context of the Transcendentalist utopias, see Francis. [Return](#)

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