INDIVIDUALISM, THOREAU, 
AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

by

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The purpose of this essay is to examine Henry David Thoreau's idea of individualism and his involvement in the crucial social issues, the conflicting economic views, and the varying political controversies prior to the American Civil War. In order to do so, Thoreau's intellectual heritage of classical, Puritan, Transcendental, and frontier individualism is analyzed, along with his rejection of individualistic ideas as they came to be interpreted by emerging New England industrial capitalists and by Southern slave-holding planters. Thoreau's attempt to resolve the crisis of individualism—brought about by a growing move toward organization in society, economics, and politics during the mid-nineteenth century in America—is studied in an analysis of his Walden experience, the culmination of which took him into radical politics by way of his own notion of individualism, and subsequently, into the issues of the Civil War. Evidence is offered to show that Thoreau, as a Transcendentalist, was not apolitical, but to the contrary, intensely political because of his heritage of individualism. It is the intention of this essay then to demonstrate the relationship between the crisis of individualism, Thoreau, and the Civil War.
The examination will focus on Thoreau, not because he was a "typical" Transcendentalist, for there was no typical Transcendentalist, but because perhaps he of all the Transcendentalists, conceivably of all mid-nineteenth century Americans, felt most acutely the crisis of individualism as it eventually exploded in the Civil War. To Thoreau the problem originated in his classical, Puritan, Transcendental, and frontier heritage as it came into conflict with what he considered foreign elements: industrial capitalism and Southern slavery. The essay will illustrate that to Thoreau's mind at least, the Civil War as it finally erupted was a crisis in the nature of individualism, a crisis which was manifested in the separate issues of states' rights and nationalism, economic sectionalism, the morality of slavery, the question of majority rule versus minority rights, the cultural conflicts between North and South, and finally in the anti-slavery and abolitionist controversy itself.

The analysis will first consider the nature of individualism and its varying expressions in America. It will then focus on nineteenth century ideas of individualism in relation to Transcendentalism, and Thoreau in particular. Finally it will present an intensive study of Thoreau's embracing of some notions of individualism, and his rejection of others--all of which led him to form his own radical political individualism, which in turn took him to the forefront of Civil War controversies.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction: Individualism and the Intellectual Heritage.............................. 1

II. Thoreau and the Reform of Economics......................... 15

III. Capitalists, Slavedrivers, and Abolitionists:
A World Thoreau Never Made............. 37

IV. Walden: Crisis and Resolution......................... 59

V. Thoreau and the Politics of Individualism 1847-1861. 83

VI. Thoreau, Civil War, and the Abortive Conclusion..... 118

VII. Bibliography........................................ 123
Introduction: Individualism and the Intellectual Heritage

During the mid-nineteenth century a crisis in the nature of individualism produced a violent upheaval in nearly all aspects—social, economic, and political—of American life. The crisis arose because individualism—the attempt to realize human consciousness—came to be interpreted in a number of conflicting ways. Basically the conflict centered around three groups of Americans: New England Transcendentalists, New England capitalists, and Southern planters. The New England Transcendentalists saw individualism in terms of personal morality and conscience; the New England capitalists grasped the notions of Puritanism and expressed their individualism in economic aggressiveness; the Southern planters translated their individualistic ideas into a hedonistic and egotistic life style. While most Americans of this period asserted their peculiar individualistic attitudes, Henry David Thoreau, among only a few Americans, saw that the differing ideas were irreconcilable. To Thoreau, then, the period prior to the American Civil War was a time of vigorous struggle—at first personal and later political—against the New England capitalists and Southern planters who affronted his Transcendentalist morality and his own heritage of individualism.

Pivotal in Thoreau's individualistic heritage was the influence of Transcendentalism. Although the thinkers of
classic Greece\(^1\) and those of the Italian Renaissance\(^2\) had attempted to resolve the conflict between individualism and the demands of society for conformity and personal anonymity, the Transcendentalists in their similar attempts held the most relevance to Thoreau. Along with ideas from the Orient\(^3\) and intermingling with thoughts already current among New England intellectuals of the mid-1800s, Transcendentalism to a great extent molded the morality of Thoreau.

Foremost among Transcendental thinkers was the German, Immanuel Kant, who had published his *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781. Kant had found that metaphysics had been stunted in growth, whereas it appeared that logic, mathematics, and physics had made progressive gains. According to him, the fault lay in thinkers who had concerned themselves with the objects of knowledge, rather than with the mind that knows. Kant thus switched much philosophic thinking to a contemplation of the mind itself. To Kant's view the term "transcendental" designated a philosophy which was built on universal principle and on primary laws of the mind. The Transcendentalist preoccupation then would be analyzing the means of knowing. Kant believed that knowledge was only the recognition of ideas in the mind. Such was reality and nothing more.\(^4\)

To Kant the mind and its workings was of supreme importance. Man, therefore, must commit himself to an unswerving loyalty to himself and his mind. Man's prime duty consisted
in following the integrity of his own mind. Kant's embodiment of the "categorical imperative" meant that ethics would be of supreme importance in his thought and to all adherents of the Transcendental philosophy. It meant that above all, each individual should attempt to know himself, to realize his own human consciousness, his own individualism.

While Transcendentalism appears formally to have begun in Germany with Kant and the implications carried further to the New World by his fellow Germans, Frederick Henry Jacobi and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, it also came from French and English influences, which were perhaps more important to New England. Although Transcendentalists in America received some of their ideas through the literature and theological writings of Germans, such as Johann Goethe, Jean Paul Richter, and Novalis, those Americans who could not read German relied upon such men as Thomas Carlyle, Samuel T. Coleridge, and William Wordsworth from England, and Victor Cousin and Theodore Jouffroy of the Scottish Common Sense School in France. The influence of these writers generated a vital attempt in New England at realizing the implications of Transcendentalism. Coupled with mysticism already native to New England, the Transcendental idea with its three-way relationship between man, Nature, and God, culminating in the Oversoul, produced not only a new intellectual climate, but created ideas of a new social order as well. Transfered into social terms, Transcendentalism implied the
divinity of all men, and it was the recognition of individual worth which formed the basic thought of the idea of individualism.

Thoreau also held within his heritage the ideas of Puritanism. Contrary to Transcendentalism, Puritanism came to interpret individualism with a materialistic rather than a moralistic emphasis. The Puritan notion of individualism had presented problems to Thoreau's American forefathers at the very inception of their nation. The first challenge came in 1630 on board the ship Arabella bound for the New World with John Winthrop and his followers. At that time Winthrop pleaded with his company of migrants to be 'knit together in this work as one man.' Winthrop knew the dangers which the vast amount of available new land posed to the newcomers, who had to maintain their community if they were to survive. It was some time before the available meadows and hillsides could be grouped and conceptualized under the heads of "frontier" and "West," but Winthrop perceived that the vast available new land could subvert order, and that the heterogeneous composition of the new colonists might also breed an unquenchable desire for liberty, for individualism. The gravest problem which Winthrop faced was that of creating and maintaining restraints on the ideas and actions of the men who accompanied him. His concern was preserving community and homogeneity, and resisting individualism.

Puritanism as Winthrop attempted to maintain it was not only a religious creed, but it was a philosophy and a metaphysic;
it was an organization of man's whole life, emotional, intellectual, and social. Puritanism held that men were innately evil and that they were saved by faith. In reality and in practice it stood for a sort of social stratification: leadership by the learned and dutiful subordination of the unlearned. Obedience to the dogmas of the church hierarchy was implicit. To a large extent it was autocratic, hierarchical, and authoritarian. In his leadership Winthrop revealed his absolutism, his distrust of democracy, and his belief in the absolute authority of the law. Winthrop, however, failed in his attempts to insure community, for the history of the Puritan movement in America is the history of its disintegration as an isolationist theocracy.

Puritan homogeneity broke because it held within it the seeds of its own destruction: First, the Puritan movement contained a number of individualists who insisted on forming their own separate communities; and secondly, Puritanism lost its narrowly religious structure and came to be interpreted as an economic individualism in the form of the Protestant Ethic. The first real challenge to the Puritan theocracy by individualists came from two leaders, Thomas Hooker and Roger Williams. Hooker envisioned a less oligarchic organization of the church and so led a number of more democratically-minded Puritans in establishing Connecticut. Williams held a love for toleration, which he practiced in his separate Commonwealth of Rhode Island.
The period from 1630-1660 then was a critical time for the homogeneity of the Puritan theocracy; inevitably the homogeneity cracked with the individualism of break-away leaders, such as Hooker and Williams.

During the years 1660-1720, the Puritan disintegration was completed. "New Order" Puritans, such as Samuel Sewall and the idea of democratic congregationalism came into conflict with the Mather dynasty and its attempts to strengthen Puritan discipline, all of which produced an emergence of independent village spirit. Thus while the Puritan leaders previously had been unable to believe that government could safely permit several creeds to exist side by side within the confines of a single nation, by 1660 they found themselves confronting just such a fact. Puritan disintegration was underscored even more in the period between 1720-1763. With an influx of new immigrants—Irish, Huguenot, French, German, Scotch-Irish—whose motives were economic betterment rather than religious isolationism, and with the settling of Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey the Puritan theocracy was bombarded not only by new peoples, cultures, and ideas, but with new economic realities produced by frontier expansion.

Along with the new immigrants, the Puritans grew increasingly pre-occupied with economic interests, and it was this new economic concern which sealed the doom of their experiment in isolation. The dogma of Calvinism—that every man should
have a "calling"--expressed itself in ways more socially and economically-oriented than the narrowly religious concept of years before. The broadening of the idea of "calling" in New England had started with John Cotton, who told his followers that he did not expect them to desist from profit-making. Instead he positively encouraged them--but he did expect them to get profits without succumbing to the seductions. New England merchants, farmers, and shipbuilders thus found in the interpreted teachings of Calvin a rationale for the profit motive and were encouraged toward an economic individualism, an idea of trading which while following the implication of the Puritan "calling," nevertheless insured the death of Puritan homogeneity.

In addition to the influence of break-away Puritan individualists, the influx of new immigrants, and the redefining of "calling" in economic terms, other changes in American society insured the breakdown of the Puritan theocracy and the rejection of narrow Puritan moralism and replacement by a broad materialism. The eighteenth century idea of philosophic rationalism, the new relevance of science, and the intrusion of John Locke's ideas of sensation all contributed to the death of Puritanism as a homogeneous religious community aiming to preserve its own spiritual ideals. They all aided in the transformation of the Puritan idea--from its initial form as a closed religious community to its mid-nineteenth century expression as a rationale
for vigorous social and economic individualism. To Thoreau, who in a large sense considered himself a Puritan individualist and who often expressed his admiration for the old Puritan moralists, such as Cromwell, the change from moralism to materialism was disastrous because the change meant that economics replaced ethics, that expediency dominated principle. In Thoreau's eyes the new Puritan economic individualists increasingly encroached upon his Transcendentalist values and increasingly threatened his spiritual existence.9

Thoreau, in addition, grew increasingly at odds with individualism as it was interpreted in the South. To the Southern planters individualism meant a hedonistic life-style, a fondness for rhetoric and politics, and a personal, emotional religion. The South in the period prior to the Civil War was still basically a frontier society, zestful, primitive, sometimes naive, and somewhat prone to violence. The frontier had loosened the bonds of the Southerner almost as completely as it is possible to imagine them being loosed for man in a social state. The thin distribution of population over a vast expanse of land, the absence of distinctions among planters, and the absence of law except in its most rudimentary stages, all "combined to give his (the Southern planter's) native individualism the widest scope and to spur it on to headlong growth."10 The plantation system with its huge land areas and lack of social distinctiveness--except for slaves--aided in preserving the Southern brand
of individualism largely because the plantation was an independent, self-contained, social unit of its own. The internalized social system within the plantation and the lack of need for social competitiveness among the planter White class extended Southern individualism not only in mere quantitative fashion, but it "shifted emphasis back upon and lent new impulsion to the purely personal and puerile attitude which distinguishes the frontier outlook everywhere." Individualism in the South then meant a violent assertion of ego and a love of leisure, which was achieved by slavery. The individualistic idea of the Southern planters—with their violence, emotionalism, and love of rhetoric—appeared as a foreign element to Thoreau and his fellow New England Transcendentalists.

Much of the Southern way of life was in fact foreign not only to New England Transcendentalists, but to the New England Puritan capitalists as well. Southern individualism asserted itself much like the perverse expressions of some romantics in Europe during the mid-nineteenth century. To a large number of individualists in Europe romanticism resulted in an explosive energy expressed largely for shock value. While the South mostly expressed itself in physical violence and aggression, many European romantics channeled their energies into art forms. In Europe Baudelaire directed his violence into poetry. Byron expressed his violence in a life of sensuality, which he too revealed through poetry. The Marquis de Sade eroticized violence in his synthesis of pleasure and pain. The pre-occupation
with the perverse on the part of many nineteenth century Europeans is not unrelated to the Southern manifestation of individualism and its brawling wildness. Both were indubitably foreign to the austere Puritan and Transcendentalist-influenced individualism of New England because they were wilder and more violent than their New England counterpart. Although he considers the Southern expression of romantic individualism only by implication, Russel Blaine Nye sees that

"Romanticism in America turned out to be a much more constructive, individualistic, and democratically based movement than in Britain or Europe, a trend reinforced by the frontier tradition, which provided excellent conditions for its growth. In Europe Romantic individualism frequently took the form of an attack on established institutions, mores, social and political and economic codes; theRomantics rebelled, sometimes spectacularly against the status quo. In America, where feudalism, traditionalism, and political privilege had been under attack successfully for at least two generations before the Romantic movement was well under way, the Romantic needed to be much less the rebel or iconoclast in the European sense. . . . American Romanticism thus produced not Byron but Longfellow, not Marx, but Thoreau. Its nature was democratic, not aristocratic; and instead of attacking the status quo with Byron's Manfred, it did it with Emerson's Self-Reliance."  

Nye is correct in asserting that romantic individualists in New England were more restrained than their counterparts in either Europe or the South during the mid-nineteenth century. But he is too sweeping in his analysis, for there was at least one New England exception--Henry David Thoreau. In his politics Thoreau displayed a kind of wildness which
equalled some of the most furious romantics in either Europe or the South. He "took the basic premises of the Romantic age more seriously than most romantics were able to accept." Armed with his heritage of classical, Puritan, Transcendental, and frontier individualism, he expressed his wildness by challenging the individualistic ideas of New England capitalists and Southern planters with a barrage of revolutionary ideas and actions. With his own radical individualism he entered pre-Civil War politics with the sole aim of destroying both New England industrial capitalism and Southern planter slave-holding.
Footnotes Chapter 1

1 That Thoreau had a wide knowledge of the Greek classics and felt a particular closeness to such as Homer and Seneca is documented with precision by Ethel Seybold, Thoreau. The Quest and the Classics, U.S.A., Archon Books, 1969. Another work: Norman Foerster's, The Intellectual Heritage of Thoreau, Folcroft, Pa., Folcroft Press, 1969, reveals that Thoreau disliked abstract thought as much as Emerson relished it, and probably had only the vaguest conception of the Platonic philosophy—such as one might gather in talks with Emerson, and from English poets of the seventeenth century.

2 See Jakob Burckhardt, The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, New York, Harper, 1958, vol. 1. Burckhardt first detects individualism in Renascent Italy with the decline of the Roman Catholic Church and the realization of man as a higher being: "Man became a spiritual individual, and recognized himself as such." Burckhardt sees individualism as arising from an awareness of human potentiality: Man had inherent qualitative value as an individual, rather than simply quantitative value as a member of the state. In the Italian republics this liberation of the individual manifested itself in cultural dilettantism, political activism, and cosmopolitanism. See specifically page 143.


5 There is a question as to whether Thoreau came into direct contact with the works of Kant. Thoreau disliked German, but apparently attempted to learn it along with Orestes Brownson, as Walter Harding, The Days of Henry Thoreau, New York, Knopf, 1965, p. 46, points out. Kant's works were in limited, but general distribution among New Englanders at that time. Moreover, Thoreau acted as assistant editor of the Dial from 1842 to 1844 during which time a number of articles on Kant appeared. In his library were included the French and English spokesmen for Transcendentalism. He was also influenced by other Transcendentalists, such as Emerson, Parker, Channing, who were familiar with Kant. It is evident that the New England Transcendentalists inherited the ethical concern that underlies the practical effects of "pure" Transcendentalism and the "categorical imperative." Emerson, it is certain, was
familiar with the works of Kant. See Rene Wellek, "The Minor Transcendentalists and German Philosophy," The New England Quarterly, vol. 15 (December, 1942), pp. 652-680. Also consult Wellek, "Emerson and German Philosophy," The New England Quarterly, vol. 16, (March, 1943), pp. 41-62. In the first article Wellek documents that Alcott, Ripley, Parker, Brownson, and Margaret Fuller had knowledge of Kant and other German Transcendentalists, but holds that they also misinterpreted the Germans. In the latter article, Wellek documents Emerson's knowledge of Kant, but finds that the Americans used the Germans only to collaborate what was already "deeply rooted in their minds and their own spiritual ancestry."

For primary documentation of Thoreau's knowledge of German philosophers see the collection, Thoreau's Harvard Years, ed. Kenneth W. Cameron, Hartford, Transcendental Books, 1966, part 2, pp. 41-47. This section is a condensed reprint of a book from Thoreau's college years, Translations in Poetry and Prose from Celebrated German Writers. Included in the book, which Thoreau used, are works of Goethe, Richter, Jacobi, Korner, and Burger. Such suggests that Thoreau himself was certainly familiar with the professors of German Transcendentalism.

6 For a discussion of the French influence see Walter L. Leighton, French Philosopher and New England Transcendentalism, New York, Greenwood Press, 1968. For the German influence consult Stanley M. Vogel, German Literary Influences on the American Transcendentalists, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1955. Vogel finds that Thoreau studied German, but never learned it well enough to read German literature in the original. Vogel cites Thoreau's attraction to Goethe, whose works are included in the Thoreau library. For the British influence see Walter Harding, Thoreau's Library, Charlottesville, Va., University of Virginia Press, 1957. Harding finds that Thoreau owned not only the complete works of William Wordsworth, Samuel T. Coleridge, Percy B. Shelley, John Keats, and Thomas Carlyle, but of Goethe as well. Consult further Joseph J. Kwiat, "Thoreau's Philosophical Apprenticeship," The New England Quarterly, vol. 18, (March, 1945), pp. 51-69. Kwiat establishes the Oriental, Greek, German, and French heritage of idealism and advances into an intensive study of Thoreau's debt to the Scottish commonsense philosophy in particular. Using the curriculum of Harvard's philosophical instruction from 1833-1837 (Thoreau's college years) he finds that the study included William Paley, Joseph Butler, Dugold Stewart, and John Locke. Kwiat finds that Thoreau reacted against the
materialistic aspects of Locke as well as against Paley's common place ethics. Later Thoreau's dissatisfaction with the limitations of the Scottish philosophy ended in his emergence as a Transcendentalist. In short, Kwiat holds that Thoreau's fleeting interest in the Scottish philosophy served as a bridge from Locke's materialism to the idealism of the Germans, British, and others.

7 For a general discussion of Puritanism consult Vernon L. Parrington, The Colonial Mind, 1620-1800, New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1927. For a richer and more intensive analysis see Perry Miller, ed., The Puritans, vol. 1, New York, Harper and Row, 1938. Also Miller's Nature's Nation, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1967. See Robert A. Nisbet, The Quest for Community, London and New York, Oxford University Press, 1953, for the influence of individualism, not only on Puritanism, but on most other ideas in the modern West as well. Nisbet finds that of "all the philosophies of freedom in modern Western society, the most generally accepted and the most influential has been individualism. Whether with respect to economic, religious, or intellectual autonomous, the dominant assumption has been that the roots of these freedoms lie in the individual himself." (p. 224) For the specific connection between individualism and Puritanism in America see R. Jackson Wilson, In Quest of Community: Social Philosophy in the United States 1860-1920, New York, John Wiley and Sons, 1968.


8For a thorough discussion connecting Puritanism, Transcendentalism, and individualism see Henry G. Fairbanks, "Theocracy to Transcendentalism," Emerson Society Quarterly No. 44 (Third Quarter, 1966), pp. 45-59.


10 Ibid., p. 42.


Reform of industrial capitalism was the central preoccupation of a number of Americans in the mid-1800s. Of the varying ideas of economic reform nearly all focused in differing degrees around Puritanism and its Protestant Ethic. Reformers either took the implications of Puritanism to heart completely, rejected Puritanism wholly, or they accepted Puritanism as a point of departure and went on to create new economic variations. In all cases they looked upon the emerging New England industrial capitalist as a foreign element and as a perverter of the old notion of Puritanism, for he had created the disturbing new phenomena of technology, organization, and government and business collusion. In most cases the reformers' notions of how to remedy the injustices of industrial capitalism varied markedly with Thoreau's ideas on reform. While most reformists wanted change of external circumstance first, Thoreau thought that man's first duty was to reform himself individually.

To the expectant capitalists of the frontier, Puritanism was still a very real way of life. These small businessmen and farmers clinged steadfastly to the faith of economic self-sufficiency and opportunity for all, a faith which was
increasingly challenged by the new realities of organized business. To the men of the frontier of the West individualism, self-reliance, and equality resulted in an unbridled optimism. In their ability to carry on their own affairs they rarely doubted themselves. They had faith in themselves and in their destiny. That optimistic faith in the worth and possibility of the common man was responsible both for their confidence in their own ability to rule and for their passion for expansion. They looked to the future. Shunning restraints, they expressed a certain wildness, which came from their own Puritan heritage and belief in rugged economic individualism. As fearful of industrial capitalism as of arbitrary rule, these "contentious Calvinistic advocates of liberty" developed an individualism and with it a certain narrowness of view and emphasized the doctrine of equality. Holding the self-made man as the ideal of their society, they looked to Andrew Jackson to re-establish and protect their faith in the laissez faire individualism of the frontier. To them Jackson symbolized an idea of economic and personal self-sufficiency. Ignoring his aristocratic background and admiring his rustic dress and manner, these small Western capitalists found in Jackson a spirit which re-asserted their own home-grown traditions, "sanctioned the rejection of Europe," and stood for the special favor "of God which consecrated American expansion."
Jacksonian Democracy meant a revitalizing of laissez faire economic individualism and a fight against large combines and vested interests which had arisen both inside and outside of government. Originally a fight against political privilege, the Jacksonian movement broadened into a fight against economic privilege, rallying to its support a host of rural capitalists and village entrepreneurs.\(^5\) In attempting to re-establish economic individualism in America, the Jacksonians preached a philosophy of "anti-statism . . . in the name of weak government,"\(^6\) aimed at breaking the banking interests, and set themselves up as fighters against organization, both political and economic. In their efforts to re-establish the laissez faire capitalist and his heritage of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus, and Thomas Jefferson, the Jacksonians looked upon the New England businessmen, industrialists, and speculators as their major antagonists, for they had entered into politics in order to solidify their special interests in government. In committing the Democratic Party to opposition to high tariffs and federal grants to private corporations and to the elimination of the national bank, Jackson made a direct challenge to the conservative business interests of New England and their spokesman from Massachusetts, Daniel Webster. But in committing themselves to a re-assertion of
economic individualism, the Jacksonians themselves became caught in an inner conflict as they tried to apply the moral rhetoric of the simpler social order of the Old Republic to a society drawn into a more rapid pace of economic development with all its lures in new forms of acquisition, promotion, and speculation.

Along with the Jacksonians and the frontier individualists, the Transcendentalists and Thoreau in particular looked distrustfully at the new economic realities of New England. But while the Jacksonians attempted to find a solution in reform, in a re-assertion of Jeffersonian economics and \textit{laissez faire} individualism, they found little support from the Transcendentalists. Thoreau himself was well aware of the new economic structure of New England as is shown by his January 24, 1841, entry in his \textit{Journal}: "Wealth, no less than knowledge, is power. Among the Bedouins the richest man is the sheik; among savages he who has most iron and wampum is chief; and in England and America he is the merchant prince." Thoreau could sympathize with the frontier individualist for in a large sense he was also of the frontier. His continual excursions into the woods, his trips to Maine and into Canada, and his travels to Minnesota just before his death, all demonstrate his kinship to the frontiersmen. Along with them he looked with distaste upon the new industrialism and the resultant urbanization and encroachment into
the land: "I am amused to see from my windows here how busily man had divided and staked off his domain. God must smile at his puny fences running hither and thither everywhere over the land." Although Thoreau looked ominously at the emerging industrialization of the early and mid-1800s, he along with most other Transcendentalists had little use for reform through established political systems: "Reform keeps many scores of newspapers in its service, but not one man." He viewed Jacksonian Democracy with distrust, as his February 11, 1840, entry in the *Journal* indicates: "The ring leader of the mob will soonerest be admitted into the councils of state." While Nathaniel Hawthorne and James Fenimore Cooper placed themselves on the side of the Democratic cause, Thoreau and the rest of the Transcendentalists of Massachusetts, as Arthur Schlesinger relates, "constituted the one important literary group never much impressed by Jacksonian Democracy." Basically, most of the Transcendentalists were too individualistic to align themselves with the Jacksonians, and those who were not attempted to build their own utopian economic systems outside the established governmental system.

While the Puritan economic individualists of the frontier looked to Andrew Jackson to re-establish the old notions of individualism, another segment of Northern society—the utopian social reconstructionists—rejected Puritan economics completely and constructed their own economic systems.
The originators of these utopian communities held many diverging ideas, and as a result, constructed widely varying societies. Perhaps the most fluctuating was Orestes Brownson, who changed wildly not only in the nature of his causes, but in the religious and philosophical beliefs which determined his causes. Progressing from Unitarianism and later Universalism, he sometimes flirted with Transcendentalism. While he frequently interacted with the Transcendentalists, before his death he turned to Catholicism. Not only democratic in his thought, he was extremely unpredictable in his actions. In American economic history he acted as radical intellectual guide for the Loco-Foco movement of New York City workingmen. He embraced Saint-Simon and his theory of socialism and also looked momentarily toward Calhoun for answers. Later he denounced the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people because it meant "democratic absolutism"—tyranny by the majority. Brownson hotly condemned capitalists; yet he also criticized abolitionists; he was for reform, but not rapid reform; he condoned revolution, but felt it unnecessary in the America of his time.

Brownson found that since the availability of land was declining, class structure, such as in Europe would be inevitable. His only concrete answers to the workingman's plight appears to be the formation of workingmen's associations. All in all, his economic socialism, along with his support of Calhoun's "concurrent majority" and supplemented by the belief
that the constitution should remain in its present form as it was created by God, exemplifies his over-all inconsistences. Nevertheless, Brownson was one among a small but growing minority who rejected capitalism and professed socialism.

Two other economic reconstructionists, Albert Brisbane and Horace Greeley, while not Transcendentalists at least worked closely with a number of them. Both preached the ideas of Fourier. According to Brisbane's interpretation of Fourier, man needs riches and pleasing work to be happy. The only legitimate way to acquire riches is through industry. But to the man of the nineteenth century industrialized work had become repugnant. Because he was made to perform unpleasant work, man was a slave. The evil in civilization, in industrialization, was the disorganization brought about by irresponsible capitalists. Brisbane believed that civilization contained all the elements essential for satisfying man's social destiny--agriculture, manufactures, commerce, banking, the positive sciences, and internal communications--but these had developed incoherently because they were neither regulated nor organized to prevent abuses.

Brisbane saw in Fourier the doctrine which would allow for social and economic control and thus true freedom within the perfected social form of phalanxes--joint-stock corpora-
tions of about four hundred families or two thousand people. These phalanxes would be economically self-sufficient and the products would be divided in the proportion of five-twelfths to labor, four-twelfths to capital, and three-twelfths to skill or talent. Brisbane viewed Southern slavery as not basically a social evil because it was only part of a more malicious and immoral economic system. He urged a complete economic change to phalanxes rather than a forceable attempt to coerce only the slaveholder into giving up his system.

Horace Greeley gave much initial support to Brisbane's movement as editor of the Whig organ, the *New York Tribune*. But to Greeley, Fourier had to be fitted into Henry Clay's American System. To Greeley the protective tariff was the first great instrument for social reform. He argued that the American worker would receive much more money if the tariff were enacted since with the tariff American production would increase. Greeley too, advocated no economic-based revolution and even shunned direct action by labor in the form of strikes and regulation of hours. He found no criticism in capitalism and enterprise but found them instead the great engines of industrial progress. At the same time, however, he recognized the worsening condition of laborers. To head off any future conflict between
capitalism and labor, he saw that phalanxes served as a solution for economic disparity.

Another Utopian idealist, John Humphrey Noyes, while not a Transcendentalist at least held a number of common beliefs with Transcendentalists: mysticism and a Puritan heritage. Noyes too reacted against both the philosophic and economic materialism of his day in his attempts at re-ordering society. Actually, his mystical speculations, and social, political, and religious radicalism were brewed together into a spiritual anarchism. He influenced William L. Garrison, Edmund Quincy, son of Josiah Quincy, the Grimke sisters, Henry C. Wright, and other abolitionists. In an attempt to realize his ideal society he set up the Oneida Community, which embodied his rejection of both contemporary American political parties, the present government, and in fact his rejection of the idea of the political state as it was presently defined. The intellectual basis of Noyes' Perfectionism was in no sense a by-product of Transcendentalism. It owned little to French romanticism or German idealism, but instead had its origins in the individualism of such men as Roger Williams; it was of the New England tradition, "a breaking through of the submerged New England spirituality, a volcanic release from sterile conformity."13
Another Utopian communal experiment, Brook Farm, also had its origins within the New England experience. Brook Farm, whose heritage also included Transcendentalism, grew out of the impact of the industrial revolution upon the social conscience of New England. The basic foundation of this society was a concern for restructuring the unorganized capitalism of the mid-nineteenth century. The premise of the Brook Farmers was their Transcendental belief in the excellence of human instincts. But the problem they faced along with most members of the mid-1850s was reconciling their individualistic ideas with the social, political, and economic phenomena of organization. When it came to the vexing problem of reconciling individualism and mutualism, creating an economic fellowship out of electric personalities, the more ardent Transcendentalists took fright and prudently kept outside the gates of Brook Farm. Organization seemed to them the fatal poison in the bottom of the cup. Such was precisely the position of Thoreau. Like many other Transcendentalists, he viewed the new economic communes as repulsive to his own ideas of individualism. His February 28, 1841, Journal entry records his distaste:

"As for these (utopian) communities, I think I had rather keep bachelor's hall in hell than go to board in heaven. Do you think your virtue will be boarded with you. It will never live on the interest of your money, depend upon it. The boarder has
no home. In heaven I hope to bake my own bread and clean my own linen. The tomb is the only boardinghouse in which a hundred are served at once. In the catacomb we may dwell together and prop one another without loss."

The Transcendentalists with the exception of Ripley and his Brook Farm, Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands, William Henry Channing's socialism, and Theodore Parker's Associationism remained largely opposed to a socialistic economic re-organization of American society. They distrusted not only the industrialism of New England capitalists, but also the communal efforts of their New England fellows, who had as their ideal the preservation and maturation of the God-like individualistic qualities which the Transcendentalists believed to be inherent in every man: "The Transcendentalist with his Puritan conscience could understand and sympathize with the perfectionist zeal for universal righteousness; but collectivistic systems of economy seemed alien and a community of good uncongenial to his (the Transcendentalist's) Yankee individualism." To Transcendentalists, such as Emerson and Thoreau, the answers had to be found in new ideals and methods. But while Emerson largely remained a critic of American economics, whether industrial capitalist, Jacksonian, or communal, Thoreau not only criticized but also attempted to build a real and practical Transcendental economics for the individual. Such was the plan behind his critique of the Fourierst socialist, Etzler, in 1843.
Thoreau's critique centered around Etzler's *The Paradise Within the Reach of All Men, Without Labor, by Powers of Nature and Machinery: An Address to All Intelligent Men*. Etzler, a German-born inventor, printer, and promoter, had prepared a solution to the ills of the laboring class, a solution based upon machine technology. To Etzler the great advantage of machines was not in the mere machinery, but in the efficiency and cheapness of such machines. He saw that the "costless" powers of nature, such as wind and water, could be used to create a machine-run universe. Mankind could avoid the drudgery of labor and live a life of leisure and intellectual and social enjoyment. Etzler viewed the production of machines as simple and almost costless. The first machines built would go on to drive other machines until ultimately the whole country would be converted into a paradise of leisure. He urged the formation of associations of inventors and wanted the government to grant these associations tracts of land. Etzler's idea of reform and social progress was: First, action by society to eliminate evil; secondly, conscious reform directed at changing the environment within which economic and social activity occurs; and finally, generation of change in man himself. 17

The Transcendental individualists, such as Thoreau, believed just the opposite: *Man must first reform himself,* then reform society and its economic system. The Transcenden-
talists gave precedence to regeneration of the human spirit over reform of human circumstance.

In reviewing Etzler's book, Thoreau used it as a vehicle to question the rising New England industrialization, to criticize Etzler's Fourierst-oriented utopia, and to relate his hope for the answers which he felt his own individualism offered. The essence of Thoreau's critique is that Etzler wrongly wished to harness nature to man's work before man had succeeded in harnessing himself. Thoreau felt that Etzler had not come to grips satisfactorily with two crucial issues. First, what is the purpose of progress? Secondly, what will be the impact upon nature if man views progress solely as something to be used by man to further his own ends. Thoreau rightly questioned Etzler's values and his implication that progress is defined merely as an increase in the level of material output. Thoreau wanted ethics to be central to any consideration of economics. His Puritan and Transcendentalist concerns for the "higher laws" of man produced a questioning in him which thought not in terms of quantity, but in terms of quality. Thoreau's own answer lay in cementing the new industrialization, its concern with amount, to the Transcendental pre-occupation with quality; the bonding agent, Thoreau proposed, would be human love. By offering such a solution it is all too evident that Thoreau's economics in 1843 were not as yet workable or even
practical. Thoreau's Etzler analysis is important, however, for its marks the point after which Thoreau increasingly became occupied with constructing his own alternative economic plan.

Thoreau's practical economics originated deeply within his Puritan heritage, a heritage which emerges again and again in his thoughts and writings. With Thoreau as with the Puritans man's dual nature of materiality and spirituality was a prime concern. Thoreau's reverence for the more primitive and savage aspect of man was not unrelated to the Puritan interest in man's lower or more material pursuits. In both "Baker Farm" and "Higher Laws" in Walden he dealt with this duality. Like the Puritans he believed that warfare between virtue and vice was continuous in the individual. In addition, Thoreau's concept of nature was somewhat similar to that of the Puritans:

"Nature to Thoreau and to the Romantics generally is vastly different from that of the Puritans; and yet on close examination the Nature of Thoreau turns out to have a similarity to the Puritan Creator and source of light and life. Thoreau would have every man retain a part of himself, uncultivated and wild, responsive to this vast and universal Nature, not brought under the control of the institutions and forms of man's society."18

In his essay, "Slavery in Massachusetts," Thoreau built the content of the work around a Puritan-like spiritual journey toward higher laws. Thoreau's attack upon a state based
upon injustices was in keeping with his Puritan tradition, and the language Thoreau used was the language familiar to Bunyan. Likewise in October of 1859, when Thoreau was thrust into action by the failure of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry and the resultant public reaction, he drew upon Puritan foundations to denounce Brown's critics and those of the life of principle. Thoreau considered Brown a Puritan admirably representing the spirit and the principle of Puritan action. Thoreau in defending and interpreting Brown and his act designated the foes and denounced them with the fervor of the militant Puritan preachers.

The nature of Thoreau's individualism insured that his economics would include ethics. Thoreau's background of Greek stoicism, Eastern mysticism, Puritan individualism, and Transcendental idealism accounts for his austerity, his struggle always toward a higher road, a struggle which left little room for diversions and in fact left little room for personal, (not philosophic) emotionalism. As did many New England intellectuals in the American romantic period, Thoreau rejected Puritanism and rejected membership in any formal religious group; yet by his adhering to a hard individualism, a tough moralism, and in the end, a near fanatic effort to discover the "higher laws" of the universe, he revealed just how influential the Puritan New England
past was and would continue to be in his moralistic economic vision.\textsuperscript{19}

Thoreau's own answer to the various economic systems current in New England can be summarized in one word—simplicity. Rejecting industrial capitalism, the individualism of the Jacksonian expectant capitalists, and the socialism of the reform communities, Thoreau built upon his own Puritan heritage and even transcended it by his doctrine of simplicity. He went beyond Puritanism and even beyond his friend Emerson, who became so preoccupied with developing the Puritan economics in higher terms—in the "costs" and higher "rewards" of life and the constant references to wealth, prosperity, benefits, compensation, made-up losses, budgets, and payments of existence—that he eventually became taken into the very system he attempted to react against.\textsuperscript{20} Thoreau too used a kind of Puritan economic ledgerism in his thinking when he observed that

"It is hard to be a good citizen of the world in any great sense; but if we do render no interest or increase to mankind out of that talent God gave us, we can at least preserve the principle unimpaired. One would like to be making large dividends to society out of that deposited capital in us, but he does well for the most part if he proves a secure investment only, without adding to the stock."\textsuperscript{21}

But he rose above such moral accountancy by his stress of simplicity and for this reason he avoided being entangled
in the American economic system. Thoreau, like most other puritan individualists, was almost fanatically orthodox in following the doctrine of "calling," but his calling was in philosophic, not materialistic terms. What most separated Thoreau from many of the men of the mid-nineteenth century was his recognition of alienation, an alienation created by industrialized work. What differentiated Thoreau was his belief that the mundane affairs of the business world in a sense brought death to the individual: "In my experience nothing is so opposed to poetry—not crime—as business. It is a negation of life." He realized that the division of labor clearly meant the internal division of the laborer. Thoreau avoided confusing American economic individualism with his own individualism. He saw that there were three possible solutions open to him—to exploit himself, to exploit his fellows, or to reduce the problem to its lowest denominator. The solution at which Thoreau arrived was to live a life of simplicity, of ascetism. He saw that

"To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically... When he (the philosopher) has obtained those things which are necessary to life, there is another alternative than to obtain the superfluous; and that is, to adventure on life now, his vacation from humble toil having commenced."
Thoreau, the arch-individualist, replied to the tyrannous complexities of society by advocating simplicity. Rejecting the economic answers of other mid-nineteenth century Americans, Thoreau rose above his Puritan heritage and developed his own economic individualism of simplicity.

Coupling his Transcendental principles with his transcending of Puritanism and supplementing that with his frontier-wild individualism, he would go to Walden to realize his own economic theory. By his idea of simplicity he would be able to ignore the economic establishment. By reducing his life at Walden to the subsistence level he would find an excess of time which allowed for thinking, observing, analyzing, and planning. By keeping his needs at a minimum he would practice an economics so simple, yet so radical that translated into social terms it could mean the undermining of the American economic system. At first his radicalism would be passive. Thoreau's initial economic ideas would not be part of an aggressive, conscious attempt on his part to subvert the nation's economic system.

Thoreau's economic simplicity would not be important in its threat to the larger economic organization of America; it would be important in that it would give Thoreau an excess of time. With this excess he would analyze not only himself but American society as well. He would realize that the
conflicting notions of individualism in America were incompatible with his principles. Realizing such, he would extend his transcending of the establishment even further, and as a radical political individualist begin a series of very direct assaults against the established government.
The idea of the Protestant Ethic, which derives largely from Max Weber's, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, needs to be clarified, qualified, and refined. Weber attempts to prove that the religious revolution of sixteenth century Calvinism produced a psychological change in man which promoted capitalism, and as a result, laid the foundations for the acquisitive nature peculiar to contemporary Western society. A German economist and sociologist, Weber certainly attempts plausibility for he advances his thesis with abundant footnotes and research references. After closer analysis, however, it is evident that Weber, if not deliberately misrepresenting the doctrines of Calvin certainly places undue emphasis on some of his minor ideas. By comparing the doctrines of Calvinism as interpreted by Francois Wendel in Calvin: *The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought*, New York, Norton, 1963, with Weber's use of Calvinism in his thesis, it appears that although, Weber arrives at an interesting conclusion, he does so only by prostituting words and retrospectively misinterpreting the history of Europe and of the New World. Perhaps the most important error of Weber lies in his corruption of the word, "calling." Weber explains Luther's concept of the "calling" as worldly duties outside of and often unconnected with the church and infers that Calvin and his followers thought of the term in a similar manner. According to Weber, Luther believed that the "monastic life is not only quite devoid of value as a means of justification before God, but he also looks upon its renunciation of the duties of this world as the product of selfishness... Labor in a calling appears to him as the outward expression of brotherly love." Weber, however, fails to give convincing evidence that Calvin or even Luther recognized the "calling" in a worldly sense. Wendel, on the other hand, gives evidence to prove that Calvin thought of the calling only as activity restricted to the confines of the church. Wendel paraphrases Calvin: "The Church is the body of Christ; it is an organization of which each member has the place and functions assigned to him by the Holy Spirit." (pp. 75-6) Importantly, these functions were strictly within the church. Thus' Webers thesis merits close criticism. But while Weber has somewhat misinterpreted Calvin himself, he does correctly interpret the Puritan notion of Calvinism. Weber, then, would have constructed a much more solid thesis if he would have distinguished between what John Calvin actually said and what the American Puritans thought that he said.

Death in the American Novel, New York, Stein and Day, 1966. Fiedler views the West as a symbol of rebellion from the commercial East. He cites such fictional characters as Twain's Huck Finn and Cooper's Natty Bumppo. Also see Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, New York, Schocken Books, 1961, vol. 2. For de Tocqueville's discussion of individualism see pages 118-127. For his attitudes on equality in America see pages 195-346.


9Ibid., p. 320.


19 For a further discussion of Thoreau's Puritan heritage see D. Gordon Rohman, "Thoreau's Transcendental Stewardship," *The Emerson Society Quarterly* No. 44 (Third Quarter, 1966), pp. 72-77. Also Joseph Wood Krutch, *Henry David Thoreau*, New York, Dell, 1948. Included in Thoreau's Puritan heritage was an interest by many old Puritans in the slavery question. Lorenzo Dow Turner, *Anti-Slavery Sentiment in American Literature Prior to 1865*, Port Washington, N.Y., Kennikat Press, 1966, finds that even the early Puritans had an indirect interest in the abolition of slavery: "The majority of the Puritans who showed interest in the welfare of the slave were concerned primarily with his (the slave's) moral and religious instruction. Consequently seeing in slavery a hindrance to this instruction they opposed slavery." (p. 3.) Turner documents the Puritan opposition to slavery from 1641-1808, and cites Samuel Sewall's pamphlet, "The Selling of Joseph," published in June 24, 1700, as the first significant example of the Puritan moral and religious argument against slavery.


Henry Thoreau's individualism led him from being simply a radical critic of American industrialization and capitalist economics to being a radical activist devoted to the breakdown of the established American economic system. In effect his economic individualism took him to a position of political radicalism. As we have seen, Thoreau during the 1830s and early 1840s had viewed ominously the new industrialization of America, had rejected the solutions of others in forming a more livable economic system, and had attempted to form his own economic individualism of simplicity in order to counteract it. His attempts through his doctrine of simplicity, while certainly sincere, were nevertheless not very forceful. It would take an issue, an immediate issue which was emotionally relevant to Thoreau, to move him to full activism against the established economic system. Such an issue was slavery.

Thoreau was vocal in his dislike of the growing New England industrialism and the collusion between business and government, but his distaste for the new economics was largely expressed in criticism; it was not as yet vital and emotional and activist. What produced his activism, his radicalism, was the relationship he saw existing between the New England
capitalists and the Southern plantation owners, a relationship which included an agreement to ignore the issue of slavery and which aimed at maintaining a precarious equilibrium, a shuffling aside of principle for expediency in order that both might realize economic gain. It is quite possible that Thoreau might have connected the slavery issue with that of New England capitalism earlier, but by 1846-47 at least he would see the connection:

"Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians at the South, but a hundred thousand merchants and farmers here, who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity and are not prepared to do justice to the slave and to Mexico, cost what it may. I quarrel not with far-off foes, but with those who, near at home, cooperate with, and do the bidding of, those far away, and without whom the latter would be harmless."  

In the mid-1840s Thoreau would realize that a partnership had taken place between Northern businessmen and Southern planters and that the national government was their place of meeting.

In Massachusetts as Boston shippers, merchants, and manufacturers doubled and tripled their Southern trade, the leading politicians, Harrison Gray Otis and Theodore Lyman Jr., established a conspiracy of silence on slavery. No one could interfere with or even criticize an institution that was so crucial to the business of the North.
The seed of the partnership between New England businessmen and Southern planters goes back nearly to the inception of America as a nation. It first manifested itself in the series of compromises between North and South which started during the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Although at that Convention an agreement was reached which prohibited slavery forever in the Northwest Territory, the agreement also included a fugitive slave clause. Secondly, the Convention agreed on the compromise known as the Three-fifths Clause—representation and direct taxes would be assessed to the South in the proportion of declaring every five slaves as worth three white men. Under the Three-fifths Clause, the Northern states with eight hundred thousand people would have one third fewer representatives in the House than four Southern states with about seven hundred thousand people.

While compromise between New England and the South had begun with the initial planning of the American nation, it became an accepted economic arrangement after the invention of the cotton gin and the rapid development of mills in New England between 1815 and 1825, during which time New England mills increased their purchase of Southern cotton by six hundred per cent. The textile industry made Massachusetts the nation's leading manufacturing state; for this reason Boston's prosperity was firmly linked with the South, and the new commercial aristocracy of Boston was drawn into an
alliance with the slave system for economic reasons. In addition, the shortage of ships in the Southern states to carry the vast amount of exports further strengthened the link between the two. Northern ships, particularly from Boston and New York, carried cotton both to England and to New England and returned to the South with textile goods, machinery, and other New England manufactures.²

The textile industry was dominated by a closely-linked groups of Boston families—informally called the "Boston Associates"—who owned every Boston bank but one and controlled a number of insurance companies and railroads. Lawrence Lader pinpoints the co-operation between these New England businessmen and the Southern planters, an inconsistent co-operation in which New England aimed at keeping its economic system not merely in tact, but ever growing and world-wide:

"When Francis Lowell went to Washington in 1816 for the tariff hearings, he convinced Calhoun of the advantages of mutual cooperation. The planters had no liking for the tariff, but Calhoun supported Lowell in tariff benefits highly favorable to the Waltham (Massachusetts) mills."³

The controversy over the tariff would ultimately cause a break between North and South, but all throughout the first few decades of the nineteenth century, New England industrialists concentrated on maintaining the advantages of the
relationship between New England and the South, a relationship which the South at times found to its disadvantage, but one which nevertheless New England wanted preserved at almost any cost.

In their attempts to preserve equilibrium the New England capitalists both elected representatives to Washington whose duty would be to insure that the arrangement be maintained, and the capitalists also discouraged any anti-slavery sentiment in New England itself. The first method of attack—sending representatives of capitalism to Washington—was by far the most successful, for it was the representatives from Massachusetts who worked out the great compromise measures prior to the Civil War. The history of the agreement between New England capitalism and Southern planters is embodied in the compromises which start at the Convention of 1787, advance to the Compromise of 1820, and the Compromise of 1850, and culminate in the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854—compromises which had as their aim the patching over of any violent sectional conflict and the soothing of business disruption which it would entail. In their efforts to maintain their financial relationship with the South, New England businessmen sent men to government who would press for compromise. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 is a case in point: Both Massachusetts senators voted for the
compromise; in the House eleven Massachusetts representatives supported it, while only three opposed and six refrained from voting. Writes Lader: "A few dissidents like John Quincy Adams continued to rail against the evils of slavery, but Boston had made its convenient peace with the South." Referring specifically to another of the compromises--the Compromise of 1850--Arthur Schlesinger explains further:

"The business community dreaded sectional conflict lest the delicate and shimmering web of commerce and credit, spread wide across the country, be rudely broken, with consequent convulsions on the stock market and destruction of assets and dissolution of contracts."  

Key among the Massachusetts compromisers was Daniel Webster. It was he who pled for moderation; it was he who became personally entangled with the New England business interests; and it was he who ultimately received the wrath of moral individualists, such as Thoreau. In the collusion between the New England business representatives and the Southern planter spokesmen Daniel Webster, senator from Thoreau's state of Massachusetts, acted as the Northern bonding agent with the South. Webster represented Boston textile mill owners and supported policies which would best benefit them. Webster expressed interest in states' rights, but he also became committed to the business interests and the idea of strong government because of his connection as legal counsel to the Bank of the United States and his constant financial
indebtedness to it. For this reason he joined Clay and Biddle in opposing Jackson's plan to abolish the Bank. Webster's policies, as a result, were all too often formed through expediency.

After the tariff issue of 1828 had heated the South to such an extent that it renewed cries of nullification, Webster, representing the New England capitalists' desire for equilibrium chose to minimize the moral issue of slavery. He made his central theme the potential harmony of all interests and all classes. As the crisis over the slave issue between North and South heightened, Webster pleaded for tolerance and let principle take a back seat to expediency--there were many evils in the world besides slavery, he believed, and one of the worst of them was war.

Webster's compromising position brought the wrath of New England Transcendentalists and abolitionists, including Thoreau, who reacted sharply against the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, one of the compromise measures pushed by Webster:

"This law rises not to the level of the head of the reason; its natural habitat is in the dirt. It was born and bred, and has its life, only in the dust and mire, on a level with the feet; and he who walks with freedom, and does not with Hindu mercy avoid treading on every venomous reptile, will inevitably tread on it, and so trample it under foot--and Webster, its maker, with it, like the dirt bug and its ball."
Thoreau, Emerson and other Transcendentalists increasingly looked upon Webster as a turncoat, and they grew more militant as they realized that Webster, who supposedly represented them in the established political system, in fact did not represent their position in the least. They came to recognize that slavery to Webster was merely a disagreeable fact which in time would disappear, while to them it was an abomination against higher principles and had to be dealt with accordingly.

While the attempts by New England capitalists to preserve their bond to the South met with a large degree of success with the infiltration of the political system by representatives, such as Webster, the second line of attack—suppressing the idea of the immorality of slavery—was partially successful only prior to 1830, and this success came mostly because those concerned with the immorality of slavery, such as the members of the American Colonization Society, urged that the solution to the problem lay in the removal of the Negro from America. After 1830, however, the anti-slavery movement became noticeably more radical with the entrance of William Lloyd Garrison and the starting of his anti-slavery newspaper, The Liberator, in Boston on January 1, 1831. Garrison, who advocated the immediate emancipation of all slaves, went further by establishing the New England Anti-Slavery Society on January 6, 1832. By 1835, the New Eng-
land movement had mushroomed across the country, and it could claim 500 societies; by 1837 there were 145 societies in Massachusetts alone, and by 1838, there were 1350 societies in the national organization. Calls for slavery reform came not only from New England, but they came from many Westerners, such as the Oberlin College reformists like Asa Mahan, and others in the South itself, such as the Grimke sisters. Since many New England anti-slavery reformers operated in Thoreau's state of Massachusetts, especially in Boston and Concord, it is to the latter that we now turn.

The Concord anti-slavery abolitionists had a profound impact upon Thoreau. His development as a political radical came not only from his heritage of classical, Puritan, Transcendental, and frontier individualism, but also from the specific temperament and life-style of his family within their Concord environment. Thoreau's grandparents had a background of rebellion: One grandfather had led a food strike at Harvard years earlier; and another, a Loyalist, had fled to Canada. Thoreau's father was a "quiet mousey man," but Mrs. Thoreau was a much more dynamic person and she "dominated not only her meek spouse, but to a certain extent, the whole household." She herself showed "compassion for the downtrodden, whether Negro, Indian, or White." And Mrs. Thoreau was a founder of the Concord Women's Anti-Slavery Society.
During Thoreau's early years, the influence of the abolitionists was immediate. In 1833, Mrs. Joseph Ward and her daughter Prudence, both active and radical abolitionists, moved to Concord and made their home with Thoreau's aunts. When the Women's Anti-Slavery Society was formed in Concord in 1837, not only did they both become charter members, but they were joined by Thoreau's mother and his sisters. In addition, Mrs. Mary Merrick Brook, a close friend of both the Wards and the Thoreaus, also held active membership in the Anti-Slavery Society, as did Mrs. John Wilder, wife of the Trinitarian minister and another close friend of the Thoreau and Ward ladies. In Concord then there were definite anti-slavery leanings which helped mold the attitudes of Thoreau.

In the summer of 1841, Thoreau moved into the family home of Emerson, and in 1842, when Emerson took over editorship of The Dial, Thoreau became an assistant editor. During 1842-44, a number of Thoreau's articles appeared in the publication; one of these works was an appreciative essay on the Herald of Freedom, an anti-slavery weekly published in Concord, New Hampshire, by Nathaniel P. Rogers. Rogers, unlike Garrison, believed in an individualistic rather than an organizational approach to the anti-slavery movement. He went so far as to advocate the dissolution of all anti-slavery societies because he thought all institutions
impeded the exercise of freedom on the part of individual abolitionists. For this reason Rogers was removed from the paper's editorship by Garrison.

In his *Herald of Freedom* article Thoreau wrote that he felt Rogers was applying principles in keeping with Transcendentalism and praised his individualism. The article and Thoreau's position illustrates his differences with Garrison. They demonstrate Thoreau's belief in the necessity of individual reform first, rather than group reform. Thoreau was willing to lend his weight to any movement which would have for its objective the complete moral reform of man. He was unwilling, on the other hand, to align himself with most reformers who descended into the grubby arena of politics. Thoreau's position with regards to the slavery question prior to Walden in 1845 was so individualistic that he refused to join the organized anti-slavery movement. His retirement at Walden, however, would serve as the period of time for assessing just how he would go about attacking slavery. It would be at Walden that he would find the answer in his own radical political individualism.

Even in the period prior to this radical clarification at Walden, however, Thoreau's interest in the anti-slavery cause is certain. On December 21, 1842, Thoreau invited
Wendell Phillips to speak at the Concord Lyceum and in so doing, shocked the Concord townspeople. He also met with anti-slavery activists during his stay in New York City in 1843. On May 6 of that year Thoreau plunged into the urbanized and industrialized society that was changing the lives of millions of people on the East Coast: He went to Staten Island to teach the sons of William Emerson, brother of Ralph. While in New York he called upon Henry James, Sr., and upon two Transcendentalists, Giles Waldo and William Tappan. He also met Horace Greeley, who volunteered his services as Thoreau's literary agent. While there he heard the Quaker anti-slavery speaker, Lucretia Mott, and was "delighted that she did not hesitate to speak out strongly against slavery..." and thought her talk "Transcendentalism in its mildest form."13 By 1843 Thoreau had begun to contrast the tenets of Transcendentalism and the injustice of Southern slavery.

But as important to Thoreau's development as a radical individualist was his increasing dislike for life in the city. On November 29, 1843, his homesickness reached such proportions that he returned to Concord, and except for traveling back to New York to resign his teaching position, he rarely left Concord again. At Concord he participated in a large number of anti-slavery activities. On August 1,
1844, the anti-slavery women of Concord and thirteen surrounding towns conducted their annual fair. Thoreau, among others, persuaded Emerson to deliver an address commemorating the tenth anniversary of the emancipation of the slaves in the British West Indies. Thoreau acted as agent for the anti-slavery women and negotiated successfully with James Munroe and Company of Boston to have Emerson's address printed in pamphlet form.

In the spring of 1845 controversy again arose over the inviting of an anti-slavery speaker to the Lyceum. A violent disagreement broke out between conservatives and radicals of the Lyceum. Several conservative curators resigned and were speedily replaced by Emerson, Samuel Barrett, and Thoreau on March 5. The new curators immediately issued an invitation to Wendell Phillips, who spoke on the eleventh. The next day Thoreau sent off his first and only "letter to the editor" to William Lloyd Garrison of the anti-slavery Liberator eloquently defending Phillips' right to speak. The letter was subsequently published on March 28, 1845. Like Thoreau, Phillips saw the connection between New England capitalism and Southern slavery. He warned Northerners that they were "sitting in the very bulwarks of the slave system," and that New England's "wharves had not been of granite, her palaces had not been of marble, but that slave and white man
both were robbed at the South by the jugglery of Yankee cunning.¹⁴ He advocated radical action because he feared that attempts for reform through the established system would be ineffective since the government had become a party to the crime.

Prior to Walden it is evident that Thoreau had within his intellectual heritage of Transcendental ethics and within his local environment influences which strengthened his position as an anti-slavery advocate. Except for his Herald of Freedom article and his actions within the Concord Lyceum, however, documentation of Thoreau's exact anti-slavery position is sparse. Thoreau destroyed his Journal writings for the two years immediately prior to Walden, and in doing such, he destroyed precise documentation as to the nature of his position by latter-day analysts. But the very act of extinguishing two years of work demonstrates the confusion which he had begun to feel and which he would attempt to resolve at Walden. Thoreau's uncertainties were like those of many other anti-slavery advocates.¹⁵

To Thoreau Walden would come to represent a locale for resolving his uncertainties; it would represent his progression from a general anti-slavery position to one of overt abolitionism, with the development of his own radical political individualism as a basis and means of action. Before
Walden, however, Thoreau was not an abolitionist, but a neophyte radical with no plan for action.

If Thoreau before 1845 had not yet determined a positive basis of action and had remained simply a critic of group reform and organized anti-slavery efforts, others such as Garrison had decided upon their mode of action and that action was radical—having as its target not only the destruction of Southern society, but also the destruction of the New England capitalist alliance and the established government that made such an alliance possible. Extremists, such as Garrison and his followers, unsettled the nerves of New England capitalists; Garrison and his fellow radical abolitionists threw the South into a panic and forced it to change from simply a position of defense, of preserving its community, to one of offense, a position which meant the conscious attempt by the South to prove its society and economy superior to the North. In such a position Southern individualism asserted itself aggressively.

New England abolitionists assaulted the South to such an extent that what seemed at first only an ill-conceived attack against slavery grew in the decade after 1840 into a full-fledged assault on all American political institutions, and to many Southerners it was clear that the abolitionists formed the vanguard of an unholy crusade against authority.16
Southern individualism—violent, aggressive, rowdy, and maintained on the foundation of a closed internal society of separate plantations—reacted to the abolitionists by an even more vigorous attempt at maintaining community. Dissent was stifled and conformity was the order of the day. The community and uniformity of Southern origins, the nearness in time of the frontier, the failure of immigration and the growth of important towns—all these cooperated to cut men to a single pattern; the total effect of the plantation world was to bind Southerners to a single focus which they held with peculiar intensity. 17

After the 1828 tariff hikes the South served warning to the North that it was in danger of losing its commercial relationship with the South. John Calhoun, spokesman for Southern planters, had come to understand the advantages which the North was reaping at the cost of the South. Calhoun wrote in 1828 in his "Exposition and Protest":

"After we (the planters) are exhausted, the contest will be between the capitalists and operatives (workers); for into these two classes it must ultimately, divide society. The issue of struggle here must be the same as it has been in Europe. Under the operation of the system, wages must sink more rapidly than the prices of the necessaries of life, till the operatives will be reduced to the lowest point,—when the portion of the products of their labor left to them, will be barely sufficient to preserve existence." 18

In the late 1820s Calhoun devised his ideas of "concurrent majorities" and nullification as a defense of the Southern
position. By the 1840s and 1850s, however, two other Southern intellectuals, Henry Hughes and George Fitzhugh, demonstrated that the individualism of the South had turned offensive, and had resulted in a kind of "anti-individualism." This "anti-individualism" came from a number of Southern sociologists and political economists, Hughes and Fitzhugh chief among them. Hughes in his Treatise on Sociology, Theoretical and Practical, rationalized Southern society and economics based on slavery and called for the abolition of free labor societies:

"Both Free Labor and Warrantee (associational) forms of society, are progressive. Free labor progress is a progress by antagonism. Warrantee progress is a progress by syntagonisms. The Free Labor form of society, must be abolished; it must progress to the form of mutual-insurance or warranteeism. It must progress from immunity to community. It must necessitate association." 19

Only under the Southern system, Hughes concluded, could the existence and progress of all classes be assured. He repudiated the idea that the Southern system was slavery: "It is WARRANTEEISM WITH THE ETHICAL QUALIFICATION."

Fitzhugh, like Hughes, wrote in order to head off attacks from Northern agitators: "The abolitionists are trying to apply the match to the explosive materials under our Parliament House; we are endeavoring to anticipate them by drenching those materials with ridicule." 20 He pictured the South as the upholder of property rights and morality, while the North
by its reformist actions, was following the road to decadence.

New England agitators had forced the South to an increased militancy in attempts to preserve its social and economic system. New England reformers had challenged Southern individualism, and the South reacted by constructing a new kind of individualism, an "anti-individualism" which meant internal conformity at home and external aggressiveness toward the North. The abolitionists, such as Garrison, had threatened not only the structure of Southern society and the precarious pact between New England capitalists and Southern planters, but this threat also challenged the internal social position of the industrialists and businessmen within New England society itself. The New England abolitionists—young, highly-educated, basically of Protestant backgrounds, coming from old New England families and finding themselves alienated from Jacksonian Democracy—attempted to re-assert their anti-urban, anti-materialist views by regaining their lost social position from the crass new industrial capitalists. Abolitionism in New England was a double crusade:

"Seeking freedom for the Negro in the South, these reformers were also attempting a restoration of the traditional values of their class at home. Leadership of humanitarian reform may have been influenced by revivalism or by the British
precedent, but its true origin lay in the drastic dislocation of Northern society. Basically abolitionism should be considered the anguished protest of an aggrieved class against a world they never made."21

If by 1845 Thoreau was still somewhat numbly anti-slavery, he certainly held in his Puritan, Transcendental, and frontier individualism a contempt not only for the South, but for the emerging New England industrialists as well. He held a hatred both for the urbanization and the materialism which the industrialists represented. To the Transcendental individualist Thoreau, the world of the 1830s and 1840s was indeed a world he never made, nor would have made if given the choice. The world of the 1830s and 1840s was a world of a Jacksonian Democracy which failed to catch his interest. It was a world of increasing urbanization, industrialization, and capitalist materialism—all of which increased his uneasiness. It was a world in which the old notion of laissez faire, Puritan individualism had been perverted by monopolies and collusion between government and business with the resultant enslavement of the Northern worker. It was a world in which American optimism expressed itself in a falsely diverting manifest destiny. It was a world in which reform took place in communes rather than in individual souls. It was a world in which anti-slavery individualists were made to bow to organized methods of reform. It was a world in which the Southern
idea of individualism meant the enslavement of his fellow man. It was a world of politicians more concerned with compromise and expediency than with principle. In sum it was a world which ran directly counter to the ideals of Thoreau. And so on July 4, 1845, rejecting the world as he found it, he set out to create his own world and moved to his hut at Walden Pond, as he said, not necessarily to run away from the world, but "to meet the facts of life--the vital facts, which are the phenomena or actuality the gods meant to show us--face to face." He wanted to confront and resolve not only the question of Negro slavery, but also the larger question of slavery of the mind:

"I wonder men can be so frivolous almost as to attend to the gross form of negro slavery, there are so many keen and subtle masters who subject us both. Self-emancipation in the West Indies of a man's thinking and imagining provinces, which should be more than his island territory,--one emancipated heart and intellect! It would knock off the fetters from a million slaves." It is to this new direction of Thoreau--to his crisis and ultimate progression from economic and ideological simplicity to political radicalism at Walden--that we must travel.
Footnotes Chapter 3

1Thoreau, Civil Disobedience, ed. Meltzer, p. 41.


3Ibid., p. 40.


5Lader, Brahmins, p. 41.

6Schlesinger, Age of Jackson, pp. 469-470.


9Louis Ruchames, The Abolitionists. A Collection of Their Writings, New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1963, p. 20. Abolitionists often met violence in New England. George Thompson, the leading British proponent of the Emancipation Act which had passed Parliament in 1833 and freed the slaves of the British West Indies was often attacked when he spoke throughout New England; on September 18, 1835, W.L. Garrison himself was mobbed in Boston.


17 Cash, Mind, p. 88.


20 George Fitzhugh, Sociology for the South or the Failure of Free Society, New York, Burt Franklin, (no date), p. 189.


23 Loc. cit.
By July 4, 1854, war was gathering on the southern border of the United States. Troops under General Zachary Taylor were massed at the Sabine River ready for an advance to the Rio Grande. On that day a convention assembled in the Republic of Texas had voted all but unanimously in favor of annexation to the United States. By May of 1846, President Polk would have committed the United States to an expansionist foreign policy of manifest destiny. It was amidst such a flurry of events that Thoreau moved on July 4, 1845, to Walden Pond, living in a cabin he had built on Emerson's land.

Thoreau's move to the Pond was positive; his Walden experience was in no sense a retreat or a withdrawal. Thoreau was certainly innocent of any intention to break relations with his family or fellow townsmen; he was not in any serious sense a hermit. Largely Thoreau wanted to simplify his physical and intellectual life and reduce expenses while writing *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, a memorial account honoring the trip he and his brother took earlier. While at the pond he decided upon writing an additional book, which after being revised seven times appeared in 1854 as *Walden*. Thoreau's move into the world of unspoiled wildness
symbolizes the hopes he held in the independent forest dweller of the frontier. Thoreau's Walden experience, as well as the book which arose from that experience, marked a desire on the part of Thoreau to begin anew, to bring to "imaginative fulfillment the New World promise of dignity to the individual man."¹

The book Walden is the pivotal work arising from his stay at the pond. Walden is many things--spiritual autobiography, natural history, criticism of modern civilization, literature of alienation--but it also represents Thoreau's journey into the abolitionist movement. Before Walden Thoreau attempted with varying degrees of success to ward off the mundane problems of politics and society. During the writing of Walden Thoreau plunged to the core of his journey into his spiritual self. After completing most of Walden Thoreau decided to end his two-year stay at the pond, and in so doing, he at once became more passionately involved in the political events and controversies which led to the Civil War, for as he himself explained, he "had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one."²

Walden is a diverse work, but most of all it is a parable--a purported account of economic simplicity on one level, a journey into the self and the relationship with universal higher laws, on another level. In the second chapter of
Walden, "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," Thoreau reveals, among many other things, that his journey has led him out of his self and into society. He begins the chapter by expounding anti-materialist views against owning land, ideas, or anything for that matter, which would lead to a recurrent desire for trading. Thoreau mentions his desire to buy the Hallowell farm for "its complete retirement, being about two miles from the village, half a mile from the nearest neighbor, and separated from the highway by a broad field..." He explains that he "was in haste to buy it before the proprietor finished getting out some rocks, cutting down the hollow apple trees and grubbing up some young birches which had sprung up in the pasture, or in short had made any more of his improvements." Thoreau is facing the choice between the isolation of personal introspection--of one's own "farm" and being limited to that farm only, and the alternative of concerning oneself with all "farms" and owning none:

"To enjoy these advantages I was ready to carry it on, like Atlas, to take the world on my shoulder--I never heard what compensation he received for that--and do all those things which had no other motive or excuse but what I might pay for it and be unmolested in my possession of it; for I knew all the while that it would yield the most abundant crop of the kind I wanted, if I could only afford to let it alone. But it turned out as I have said."

It is clear that Thoreau has made a decision of supreme importance to himself: He would not delimit his self to himself. Thoreau instead has decided to commit himself.
going to Walden he decides, like Voltaire, to first cultivate his own "garden." But Thoreau does not stop there; instead he goes beyond and cultivates or "farms" on a large scale; this progression means, as he himself clearly understands, that he must go on to a life of principle and commitment:

"All that I could say, then, with respect to farming on a large scale--I have always cultivated a garden--was, that I had seeds ready. Many think that seeds improve with age. I have no doubt that time discriminates between the good and the bad; and when at last I shall plant, I shall be less likely to be disappointed. But I would say to my fellows, once for all, as long as possible live free and uncommitted. It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail." 6

Thoreau goes on to explain that his "house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defense against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walks being of rough, weather-stained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night." 7 Thoreau here reveals that he had left some questions in his mind unresolved and that his removal to Walden was an attempt to resolve the conflicts in his mind.

Thoreau's next passage may be interpreted in a number of ways when considering the over-all style and content of the books Walden, but taken in the context of his actions after the Walden journey, it discloses that after the conclusion of his stay he became committed in a social and human sense:

"The only house I had been the owner of before, if I except a boat, was a tent, which I used occasionally when making excursions in the summer,
and this is still rolled up in my garret; but
the boat, after passing from hand to hand has
gone down the stream of time. With this more
substantial shelter about me, I had made some
progress toward settling in the world. This
frame, so slightly clad, was a sort of crystal-
lation around me, and reacted on the builder."

Thoreau adds that the serenity of Walden Pond, the shining
water itself (a reflective journey into the self) was impor-
tant in arriving at a clear decision: "One value of even
the smallest well is that when you look into it, you see
that the earth is not continent but insular. This is as
important as that it keeps butter cool."9

In view of Thoreau's post-Walden activism this segment
of Walden may be interpreted as a debate between the two
natures of Thoreau: his individualistic side and his
social side. He is discussing how far he should emerge
out of himself and by what means he could best enter society.
He repeatedly presents the frivolity of worldly events and
their irrelevance to any firm foundation for the individual
man; he decries their time-consuming pointlessness:

"For my part, I could easily do without the post
office. I think that there are very few important
communications made through it . . . and I am sure
that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper.
. . . To a philosopher all news, as it is called, is
gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women
over their tea."10

As is so evident throughout his experience at Walden, in his
work Walden, and even after his departure from his stay at
Walden, Thoreau continually backtracks, advances, and retreats again in his decision to activate his individualism.

Like most seekers of wisdom, he fears total commitment to any one idea.

The Walden stay, while not marking any change of stance which he held with never-yielding determination, at the least, represents the conscious attempt by Thoreau to resolve the conflict between individualism and society. After his Walden experience he opted more often on the side of individualist activism. Above all, the Walden journey was an attempt by Thoreau to realize his full consciousness. At Walden he attempted to come to grips with the nature of reality or truth. He found that "shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truth, while reality is fabulous" in the minds of most of his fellow men. He urged deliberation and unemotional experiments in arriving at truth. For him the specific move to Walden represented his desire to reduce himself and his beliefs down to what he felt was a strong foundation in order that he might rebuild more strongly. He did not want his decision-making to be based on the host of current events and social emotions which would rain upon him if he let them. He wanted to gather himself together in certainty before he shined his ray—he wanted to re-check and reconstruct, if necessary, his internal world, before starting his own path of social and
political reform of the external world:

"Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice and tradition, and delusions, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through Church and State, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is and no mistake; and then begin, having a point d'appui below freshet and frost and fire, a place where you might found a wall or a state, or set a lamppost safely, or perhaps a gauge, not a Niometer, but a realometer, that future ages might know how deep a freshet of sham and appearance had gathered from time to time."

The passages indicate that Thoreau has decided to build; they advise us of his decision for positive action, and in view of his involvement after the Walden experience, they tell us of his plan for constructing in his present world. They demonstrate Thoreau's conclusion that he is of the world and that the organ of intellect he possesses is for use in this world, for activity, for reasoned motion:

"My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and forepaw, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining rod and then rising vapors I judge; and here I will begin to mine."

Thoreau's pondering of man's social nature in the work Walden set the stage for his act of civil disobedience
and the essay by the same name--"Civil Disobedience"--which resulted mid-way through his stay at Walden Pond. While not as artful as Walden, "Civil Disobedience" must be examined as it is the closest approximation of a political manifesto that Thoreau ever wrote.

In July of 1846, one year after Thoreau entered his search for selfhood at Walden he stepped across the boundaries of his personal individualism and protested the policies of the established government of the United States. As a result he was thrown into jail for refusing to pay his poll tax. While the act itself did not represent any change in Thoreau's stance, since he had refused more than once prior to 1846 to pay his taxes, the work of literature which came from the experience, rather than the bare fact of his going to jail, represents the heightened radicalism to which Thoreau's individualism had already led him. Thoreau had stopped paying the tax four years earlier, unwilling to support a state which sanctioned slavery, but had escaped any confrontation until the night when Sam Staples, Concord's bailiff, picked him up as he strolled into town to collect a repaired shoe from the cobbler. Thoreau's confinement, however, was short-lived, for before the night in jail was over, his Aunt Maria had paid the tax and by morning Thoreau was free.

It was this event, brief as it was, which led to Thoreau's best known essay, "Civil Disobedience." Only a short time
before he went to jail, the United States had begun the war with Mexico. Thoreau believed that it was promoted by a relatively few slaveholders using the government as their tool for extending slavery into new territory. For Thoreau a slave-power conspiracy existed and acted as a major source of sectional disruption. Thoreau's conscience did not permit him as a moral man to associate himself with any American government which enforced slavery: "I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also." Thoreau's evolving political individualism meant that he could not recognize an immoral governmental system, that he would not use its normal political channels when they were basically corrupt. This vision of American government insured Thoreau's ultimate radicalism, his inevitable place working outside and against the established American system.

In immediate effectiveness "Civil Disobedience" reached only a handful of listeners in its first form as a lecture entitled, "The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to the Government," which was delivered twice at the Concord Lyceum early in 1848. In 1849, Thoreau's lecture was renamed, "Resistance to Civil Government," when it appeared in Elizabeth Peabody's Aesthetic Papers. "Civil Disobedience" was largely ignored until four years after Thoreau's death, when it was included in his A Yankee in Canada, With Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers.
The work itself goes to the heart of Thoreau's politics. While it was provoked by the Mexican War and the slavery controversy, the essay goes beyond immediate issues and discusses his whole conception of moral law in conflict with governmental law. Thoreau believes that "it is not desireable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right." If unjust laws exist, civil disobedience poses as an effective way to oppose and change them. He attacks not only unjust laws, but the idea of laws and of government. He is attracted to anarchy and states that he "heartily accepts the motto, 'That government is best which governs least.'" Such a thought, carried to its logical conclusion, Thoreau admits, finally amounts to: 'That government is best which governs not at all.' He says that when men are prepared for it "that will be the kind of government which they will have." Thoreau not only objects to the idea of a standing army, but also to a "standing government." The original, just intent of the government is always liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act to insure its proper use. Specifically, he points to the Mexican War, "the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool." Because government may be perverted it should hold a minimum of importance in the life of the individual. Government is basically unimportant because it "has
not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will." Thoreau thus probes the central problem of politics—the individual in relation to his political and social position—and simply denies any inherent ties between individuals and government.

Espousing ideas of free trade, he criticizes the artificiality of trade restrictions imposed by government and implicitly criticizes the position of Northern capitalists: "Trade and commerce, if they were not made of india rubber, would never manage to bounce over the obstacles which legislators are continually putting in their way . . . ." But in jumping immediately into forms of political and economic anarchism, Thoreau true to his paradoxical nature, soon retracts: "But to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for not at once no government, but at once better government."

Next in Thoreau's rather disorganized essay is a comment on minority-majority rights, one of the key issues between the North and South, leading to the South's secession and consequently to the Civil War. He propounds the view that majority rule is only an expedient, merely a simple show of physical strength:

"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 minority, 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."  

Thoreau insists that government should make decisions by a show of personal morality rather than a show of numbers: "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 expedience is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree resign his conscience to the legislator?"  

Thoreau proceeds to ask why governmental agents seem to feel individuals are incapable of making moral judgments: "Why has every man a conscience, then?" Such a question originates with his knowledge of Plato and the idea of forms and of the final good which is attainable by all men. Thoreau places prime trust in this inherent goodness of man, a supposition underlying most Transcendental thought:

"Law never made men a whit more just; and by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice."  

The inevitable result of obeying the law unquestioningly "is that you may see a file of soldiers—colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder monkeys, and all—marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences . . . "  

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Thoreau next cites examples of men, whom placing undue trust in laws, become tools of decadence themselves. One such type, the soldier, comes under special attack by Thoreau:

"Visit the navy yard, and behold a marine, such a man as an American government can make, or such as it can make a man with its black acts—a mere shadow and reminiscence of humanity, a man laid out alive and standing and already, as one may say, buried under arms with funeral accompaniments. . ."27

Thoreau also expresses his contempt for those who serve the state as slaves in other ways, the legislator for example. To Thoreau these men are despicable because they serve "the state thus not as men mainly, but as machines with their bodies."28 Thus the lowest type of men, Thoreau finds, are those members of the standing army and militia, jailers, constables, and posse comitatus. These men serve the state on a level with "wood and earth and stones" and exercise no moral judgment whatsoever. A second and less despicable group, according to Thoreau, consists of legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and officeholders. These men too rarely make moral distinctions and they are "as likely to serve the devil, without intending it, as God."29

In contrast, a third group, above the second, are the "heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense," men who "serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it."30 Thoreau and most other Transcendentalists view the members of this group—men such as
John Brown—as the highest individualists of all because they place ethics ahead of expediency, and morality ahead of materialism.

After assessing the individuals who comprise the state, Thoreau jumps to a discussion of revolution. He expresses benevolent opinions on the subject and specifically mentions the possibility of a revolution in his time, significantly, a political revolution: "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." He brushes aside as nonsense objections that the necessity for the revolution for independence in the America of the 1770s may not be compared to the need for revolution in the 1840s. He feels that when in 1840 the government "oppression and robbery are organized (a reference to the collusion between capitalists and government). ... when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army and subjected to military law (Mexican War), I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize." 

After expressing his contempt for a government perverted by special business interests, the policy of American manifest destiny, and the defense of Southern slavery, Thoreau directs
his attack upon those uninvolved men who watch evil silently, who attempt to bury their heads and their consciences:

"There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing; who even postpone the question of freedom to the question of free trade (reference to Webster), and quietly read the prices--current along with the latest advices from Mexico, after dinner, and, it may be, fall asleep over them both."

Through this argument Thoreau declares himself committed to overt and activist abolitionist sentiments.

His abolitionist attitude as such makes Thoreau impatient of majority rule. His heritage of individualism demands action. He views voting as the stupid expedient of leaving the determination of what is right to the sluggish majority. Thoreau refuses to accept the idea that the majority through some inherent virtue will rightly determine the slave question:

"When the majority shall at length vote for the abolition of slavery, it will be because they are indifferent to slavery, or because there is but little slavery left to be abolished by their vote."

He expresses his contempt for the myth of a virtuous American democracy made up of wise individuals:

"The American has dwindled into an Odd Fellow--one who may be known by the development of his organ of gregariousness, and a manifest lack of intellect and cheerful self-reliance."
He believes that simply refusing to serve in an unjust war is not enough; a true man must also refuse his money to an immoral government.

The just man, moreover, will not simply withdraw from society; he will actively fight against the evil government to realize his principles of the good:

"Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divides States and churches, it divides families; ay, it divides the individual, separating the diabolical in him from the divine."[36]

Thoreau is fully conscious of his predicament at Walden, as well as the predicament that most other individuals of society face—the choice of withdrawal or commitment—and finally he preaches the latter. He argues that when an unjust government commits an act offensive to conscience, individuals should not hesitate to resist and should not await the time when the majority will be persuaded to change the evil. Thoreau, however, disclaims any intention of his own for reform through group politics of the establishment:

"As for adapting the ways the State has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man's life will be gone. I have other affairs to attend to. I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad."[37]

Thoreau clearly finds traditional party politics too slow; he does not want to be bothered by the lodgings of established
systems, and thus he heads toward immediate revolutionary action. He insists that the established structure holds no relevance to him: "It is not my business to be petitioning the Governor or the Legislature any more than it is theirs to petition me, and if they should not hear my petition what should I do then?" He denounces those reformists who attempt to work through the established system and end up "voluntarily chosen to be an agent of the government." Group reform "keeps many scores of newspapers in service, but not one man." Thoreau's emerging politics of radical individualism makes mere reformism only a simple palliative, a weak and ineffectual compromise in which the right and the good are continually sacrificed to expediency.

In language similar to Calhoun, he urges every minority to resist, for it "is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight." He urges public office-holders in an immoral state to resign their offices and join the fight against the state, and if such action turns violent, then he condones violence: "But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this would a man's real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now." Thoreau next mellows in tone. He explains that he has rejected the American state, but not the individuals who
comprise it, for he sees that appeal to individuals "is possible, first and instantaneously from them to the Maker of them, and secondly, from them to themselves." His mellowness, however, soon disappears, and he renews his stinging criticism, not only of men within the power structure of government, such as soldiers, but also of would-be reformists, such as Daniel Webster, who delude themselves and others into thinking that any real reform can be accomplished from within the system. Reformists are impotent because immediately they became a part of the system:

"Statesmen and legislators, standing so completely within the institution, never distinctly and nakedly behold it. They speak of moving society, but have no resting place without it. . . . Webster never goes behind government policy and so cannot speak with authority about it. His words are wisdom to those legislators who contemplate no essential reform in the existing government; but for thinkers, and those who legislate for all time he never once glances at the subject." Webster, it is plain, does not represent the position of Thoreau, for his policy of compromise is directly contrary to Thoreau's idea of principle, of universal individualism. That Webster does not represent his idea of principle is abundantly clear to Thoreau, who explains that Webster, like other contemporary politicians, reflects the poverty of quality in America: Thoreau sees that "no man with a genius for legislation has appeared in America." He finds
that American legislators "have not yet learned the com-
parative value of free trade and of freedom of union, and
of rectitude, to a nation."\textsuperscript{45}

Thoreau makes a final thrust at government and demands
individual freedom, a freedom dependent upon and answerable to
itself: "There will never be a really free and enlightened
State until the State comes to recognize the individual as
a higher and independent power, from which all its own
power and authority are derived, and treats him accord-
ingly."\textsuperscript{46} While Thoreau recognizes the benefits of the
American democracy as ideally constituted, he insists in
his politics of individualism that the government, its con-
stitution and its representatives, are only a small step on
the road to a utopian state which above all, recognizes
individual freedom of conscience—in the words of Thoreau,
"a still more perfect and glorious state, which also I have\textsuperscript{47}
imagined, but not yet anywhere seen."

It is apparent that Thoreau's position in "Civil Disobed-
ience" is solid; he does not vacillate. He criticizes the
South; he challenges the New England capitalists and their
materialism; he takes compromising politicians to task, he
proclaims his own individuality and rejects group reform
through established politics; he recognizes the value of
revolution; and he even goes so far as to condone violence.
In short, Thoreau's position as a radical political individualist is firmly proclaimed. Seen by itself, "Civil Disobedience" is the equivalent to a political manifesto of revolution. 

Newly committed to abolitionism, Thoreau took the whole of his Walden experience—the completion of the essay, "Civil Disobedience," and the concluding of his book Walden—before he formulated a practical means of activism. Walden Pond was Thoreau's locale for an attempted resolution of the nature of individualism—namely, whether individualism was to be a dogma of passive resistance to organization, or whether individualism itself meant an active, organic method of liberation. Was individualism, as in the cases of the Puritan theocracy and the Boston capitalists, merely a means of preserving community and the status quo? Or was individualism a means whereby an ever-renewing liberation was attempted, as in the cases of the break-away Puritan sects, the Western frontiers individualists, and indeed in the Southern perversion of libertarianism as aggressive, sectional politics?

Walden represented a flurry of writing by Thoreau; it did not in any way mean a stagnation or a retreat from society. It meant an intense self-analysis, placed within an analysis of American society, and leading to a recognition by Thoreau of his position within American culture. With the end of his crisis at Walden and his decision in favor of a committed
political individualism, Thoreau began some eight years before his death a life of action based upon principle, a commitment which for him meant specifically a violent struggle against slavery. Offended by the issues of the slavery question and pushed into deciding for himself the nature of man's position in society, he decided in favor of an activist commitment, a life almost totally concerned with the abolition of American slavery. With such a commitment, Thoreau went beyond Emerson and most of his fellow Transcendentalists, and making use of his writing, his intellectual, and his speaking abilities, entered the forefront of the battle as one of what later historians would label, "irresponsible agitators."


4Loc. cit.

5Ibid., p. 91.

6Loc. cit.

7Ibid., p. 92.

8Ibid., pp. 92-93.

9Ibid., pp. 94-95.

10Ibid., pp. 101-2.

11Ibid., p. 103.

12Ibid., p. 105-106.

13Ibid., p. 107.

14Leo Stoller, *After Walden*, p. 17, finds that after the Walden experience Thoreau, although still desirous of committed non-action, nevertheless recognized that his entrance into social activism was necessary: "Thoreau's social thinking thus ends on a fruitful inconsistency. In each of its chief areas it arrives at the recognition that the achievement of correspondence with higher laws is not a matter solely for the individual but for society as well."


16Ibid., p. 23.

17Ibid., p. 21.

18Loc. cit.
19 Ibid., p. 22.
20 Loc. cit.
21 Loc. cit.
22 Ibid., p. 23.
23 Loc. cit.
24 Loc. cit.
25 Loc. cit.
26 Loc. cit.
27 Ibid., p. 24.
28 Loc. cit.
29 Loc. cit.
30 Ibid., p. 25.
31 Loc. cit.
33 Ibid., p. 27.
34 Ibid., p. 28.
35 Ibid., p. 29.
36 Ibid., p. 31.
37 Ibid., p. 33.
38 Loc. cit.
39 Ibid., p. 34.
40 Loc. cit.
41 Ibid., p. 35.
42 Ibid., p. 36.
43 Ibid., p. 45.
44 Ibid., p. 47.
Consult H.A. Page, "Preface and excerpts from Part II," The Recognition of Henry David Thoreau, ed. Wendell Glick, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1969, p. 56. Page points out Thoreau's realization that individuality could be, in fact must be translated into a social context: "He waged a war with the power of mere wealth and perverted authority, whether in the North or in the South, and was at a crisis on the side of humanity because he reasoned that, in the last resort, the cause of humanity and the cause of individuality were identical."

For the initial hesitancy and progression to increased militancy of the nineteenth century American writers in entering Civil War issues see: Darrel Abel, "The American Renaissance and the Civil War: Concentric Circles," The Emerson Society Quarterly No. 44 (Third Quarter, 1966), pp. 86-91.
Thoreau considered established politics as an ineffective means to resolve both his inner conflicts and his sense of political problems: "Man and his affairs—church and State and school, trade and commerce and agriculture—Politics—for that is the word for them all here today—I am pleased to see how little space it occupies in the landscape... It is but a narrow field." Although Thoreau had no use for conventional politics, he was not apolitical. He was radical in his politics, a politics which worked outside of the established governmental system. In realizing this distinction it is necessary to study his writings on politics from two different points of analysis: First, his attitudes as an observer of conventional politics, and secondly, his activism as a participant in radical, unconventional politics. Throughout his post-Walden life he expressed his distaste for conventional politics and his desire to remain untainted by the social and political concerns of the mass of men. On November 17, 1850, for instance, he criticized the newspapers as comprised of the irrelevant gossip of established politics: "If a man neglects to read the Daily Times, government will go on its knees to him; this is the only treason in these days. The newspapers
devote some of the columns specially to government and politics without charge, and this is all that saves it, but I never read those columns." On April 3, 1853, Thoreau again rebuked newspapers as simple reflectors of the common affairs of society and conventional politics:

"I have no time to read newspapers. If you choose to live and move and have your being in that stratum in which the events which make the news transpire--thinner than the paper on which it is printed--then these things will fill the world for you; but if you soar above or dive below that plane, you cannot remember, nor be reminded of them."3

Throughout the years after Walden Thoreau considered established politics as something which should go on routinely and unnoticed: "A wise man is as unconscious of the movements in the body politic as he is of the process of digestion and the circulation of the blood in the natural body."4 He believed that the drudgery of practical matters, such as politics and business did not deserve the prolonged concentration of men, that conventional politics was a diversion which should demand little time and intellectual energy:

"I sometimes awake to a half-consciousness of these things going on about me--as politics, society, business, etc., etc.,--as a man may become conscious of some of the processes of digestion, in a morbid state, and so have the dyspepsia, as it is called. It appears to me that those things which most engage the attention of men, as politics, for instance, are vital functions of human society, it is true, but should (be) unconsciously performed, like the vital functions of the natural body. It is as if a thinker submitted himself to
be rasped by the great gizzard of creation. Politics is, as it were, the gizzard of society, full of grit and gravel, and the two political parties are its two opposite halves, which grind on each other."

Thoreau preferred never to think of conventional politics on a fully conscious level. To him politics represented the rude, rather crude awakening of a real as versus an ideal world: "Our life is not altogether a forgetting, but also, alas, to a great extent a remembering of what which perchance we should never have been conscious of--the consciousness of what should not be permitted to disturb a man's waking hours."

Thoreau found little relevance in conventional politics because he distrusted the men who used its channels. He decried the circumstance of human existence, where the majority of men attend to superfluous and trivial affairs. In his Journal on April 24, 1853, he wrote:

"I know two species of men. The vast majority are men of society. They live on the surface; they are interested in the transient and fleeting; they are like driftwood on the flood. They ask forever and only the news, the froth and scum of the eternal sea. They use policy; they make up for want of matter with manner. . . It is of prime importance to them who is the president of the day. They have no knowledge of truth, but by an exceedingly dim and transient instinct, which stereotypes the Church and some other institutions. . . Society, man, has no prize to offer me that can tempt me: not one. That which interests a town or city or any large number of men is always something trivial, as politics. It is impossible for me to be interested in what interests men generally. Their pursuits and interests seem to me frivolous."
Thoreau's contempt for conventional politics was expressed often in his writings before the Walden experience and remained firmly consistent during and after it until his death. His own political unconventionality came not only from classic, Puritan, Transcendental, and frontier influences, but it also came from the uncertain shifting borders of anarchism, liberalism, and socialism in the America of the mid-1800s as well. Many of Thoreau's contemporaries embraced varying political ideas with relative swiftness in an attempt to resolve their political frustrations. It was hardly fortuitous that all the most notable American individualist anarchists—Josiah Warren, Ezra Heywood, William B. Greene, Joshua K. Ingalls, Stephen Pearl Andrews, Lysander Spooner, and Benjamin Tucker—came from Thoreau's home state of Massachusetts and were his contemporaries. A number of these men held paradoxical and conflicting political philosophies. Andrews, for instance, saw himself at one and the same time a believer in the socialism of Fourier and the anarchism of Josiah Warren. Thoreau was not alone in political unconventionality.

Thoreau's unconventionality presents analytic problems as is amply demonstrated in the literature of his politics. Emma Goldman believes Thoreau to be an anarchist; John Sanborn, friend and biographer of Thoreau, insists that he was not. Joseph Wood Krutch doubts that Thoreau felt a direct responsi-
bility for any social order and stresses his individualism. Sherman Paul finds it an error to view Thoreau as an "anarchical individualist;" John H. Holmes writes that "Thoreau was not an anarchist but an individualist." Richard Drinnon labels Thoreau's beliefs the "Politics of the Upright Man." Confusion arises because all too often Thoreau's critics analyze his politics by attempting to find a set governmentalist position in his thoughts. One should not look for a strict governmentalist or even a neat political philosophy in Thoreau, however, because Thoreau himself firmly established his hatred for systematic politics, and he continually discouraged his fellows from giving established politics much thought.

While Thoreau's contempt for politics was evident in his writings before Walden and remained firmly consistent during and after his Walden experience until his death, his own activism, his radicalism--action outside conventional channels--stood out clearly in the words and deeds of his abolitionism. Thoreau's abolitionist beliefs after Walden were the result of his hatred of Southern slavery, New England capitalism, and the American government. They were the product of his moralist heritage coming into conflict with the materialist realities of the mid-nineteenth century. Thoreau's abolitionism resulted in an assault on the American government,
a complete by-passing of government, and an appeal directly to the consciences of his fellow humans. In effect, Thoreau's abolitionism meant a conscious attempt to subvert the American state by means of his speaking and writing abilities and by committing illegal acts against that state.

Although Gilman M. Ostrander and Henry Canby hold that Thoreau was not an abolitionist, Nick Aaron Ford bluntly discounts their analysis: "The evidence brought to light seems to prove conclusively that Mr. Canby's position is indefensible." Ford rightly urges that the underlying philosophy implicit in a study of Thoreau's complete works is more telling of his attitude than "two or three scattered statements" which show his distaste for abolitionist societies. Ford finds that although Thoreau began keeping a journal in 1837, the first entry concerning slavery does not appear until July 6, 1845: "Thereafter he wrote fifteen different entries concerning slavery in eight of the fourteen volumes of his journal. Also, eighty-six pages in Cape Cod and Miscellanies are devoted to the subject, and six of his letters refer to some aspect of it."

While Thoreau's sympathies for the Negro were in evidence before his Walden experience, his commitment to abolition became final after the Walden journey. After Walden and the resolution of his position, which increasingly replaced any non-committal leanings he might have held, Thoreau turned
from his first goal--achieving his own freedom--to his second purpose--helping to obtain freedom for his fellows. At Walden he had realized his own freedom in his doctrine of economic simplicity. After the Walden journey he plunged into an attempt at achieving social freedom. The change was not marked immediately--but in considering his actions of the twenty or so years before the Walden retreat and those years after Walden until his death in 1862, the over-all progression to a social and political position, a concern for humanity, was starkly evident.

Before July 4, 1845, when Thoreau moved to Walden Pond he made twenty references of a political and social nature in his writings, including his review of Etzler's Paradise and his Herald of Freedom article defending individualistic anti-slavery methods. After July 4, 1845, and until his death in 1862 Thoreau made 137 written references of a social or political nature, including such pivotal works as "Civil Disobedience," the chapter in Walden, "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," "Slavery in Massachusetts," "A Plea for Captain John Brown," "The Last Days of John Brown," and "Life Without Principle." Thoreau's own individualism came to full fruition in his radical writing on abolition and in what Drinnon calls his "revolutionary" politics.

Thoreau's post-Walden change with regards to the Irish, an immigrant group which met with impoverishment, antipathy,
and discrimination in New England during the mid-1800s, demonstrated his new concern not only for the Negro, but for other social minorities as well. In the early 1840s Thoreau apparently had little sympathy for the Irish and in fact ignored their plight. In 1843, moreover, he went so far as to make slightly derogatory comments about the Irish, who at that time were considered notorious for their slovenliness and shiftlessness. After 1850, however, Thoreau underwent a distinct change: Not only did he refer more frequently to the Irish, but he was more ardent in his defense of them, as his November 1, 1853 account of a "poor Irish laborer" who apparently had been cheated by one of Thoreau's fellow Concord citizens, indicates. While still retaining a slightly patronizing attitude toward the Irish as a group, Thoreau's Journal writings and actions after 1850 show that he had begun to consider the Irish more on their individual merits. 14

But if Thoreau's change after Walden is exemplified by his concern for the Irish, it is underscored by his refusal to obey the Fugitive Slave Law. During the winter of 1851 Thoreau joined others in opposition to the law, which granted federal marshals the right to seize and carry back to the South any runaway slaves they found in the North. Along with other abolitionists, Thoreau simply refused to obey the law, and in fact, openly disobeyed it. In February of 1851, a Negro waiter in Boston, by the name of Shadrach, was arrested
for his Virginia master. He was rescued by an abolitionist, taken to the home of Thoreau's friend and neighbor, Mrs. Mary Brooks in Concord, and from there conducted safely to Canada. On April 3, 1851, Thomas Sims, a seventeen-year-old Negro fugitive was also arrested in Boston. Again the abolitionists organized and attempted a rescue, but this time government officials were prepared with 250 troops on hand. On April 12, Sims was escorted by federal marshals and city militia to a ship waiting in the harbor at Boston and transplanted back to Georgia. Thoreau exploded in his Journal writings for weeks after, and in one entry definitely showed his willingness for war over the question: "I do not believe that the North will soon come to blows with the South on this question. It would be too bright a page to be written in the history of the race at present."

On September 30, 1851, Henry Williams, who had escaped to Boston from slavery in Stafford County, Virginia, the previous October, learned that there were warrants out for his arrest and that the police had called for him. Accordingly he fled to Concord, carrying with him letters of introduction to the Thoreaus from William Lloyd Garrison. The Thoreaus lodged him for the night and collected funds to help him along his way. On the morning of October 1, Henry Thoreau went down to the railroad station to buy him a ticket to Burlington, Vermont, and later that day recorded in his Journal:
"Just put a fugitive slave, who has taken the name of Henry Williams, into the cars for Canada. He escaped from Stafford County, Virginia, to Boston last October; has been in Shadrach's place at the Cornhill Coffee House; had been corresponding through an agent with his master, who is his father, about buying himself, his master asking $600, but he having been able to raise only $500. Heard that there were writs out for two Williamses, fugitives, and was informed by his fellow servants and employer that Augerhole Burns and others of the police had called for him when he was out. Accordingly fled to Concord last night on foot, bringing a letter to our family from Mr. Lovejoy of Cambridge and another which Garrison had formerly given him on another occasion. He lodged with us, and waited in the house till funds were collected with which to forward him. Intended to dispatch him at noon through to Burlington, but when I went to buy his ticket, saw one at the depot who looked and behaved so much like a Boston policeman that I did not venture that time. An intelligent and very well-behaved man, a mulatto." 

Arrangements were later made to raise Williams' purchase price of six hundred dollars, and he was enabled to return safely to Boston. Williams was so grateful that he purchased a china statue of Uncle Tom and Eva and walked from Boston to Concord to present it to Thoreau.

Walter Harding records the following incident, not referred to by Thoreau in his writings:

"On July 28, 1853, Moncure Daniel Conway, a Harvard Divinity School student from Virginia came to Concord to visit Emerson. The son of a well-to-do slaveowner, he had served for a time as a conservative Methodist circuit rider in Maryland after his graduation from Dickinson College, but happening upon Emerson's essays, had been converted to more liberal views on both slavery and religion and entered Harvard. Emerson promptly introduced him to Thoreau, who invited him to go for a walk the next day. When Conway arrived in the morning, he found Thoreau nursing a fugitive slave who had come
in the night. The Negro was immediately alarmed, or he recognized Conway from Virginia and feared he was about to be seized. Both Conway and Thoreau quickly reassured him and Thoreau spent the night not only standing guard over him, but bathing and caring for him, astounding Conway with his tenderness. Only the next day after the fugitive had been safely sent along his way to Canada was Thoreau willing to redeem his promise to take Conway on a walk.17

On November 1, 1853, Thoreau housed a free Negro woman and recorded the event in his Journal, reflecting all the while upon the grubby meanness of his fellow men:

"About three weeks ago my indignation was roused by hearing that one of my townsmen notorious for meanness, was endeavoring to get and keep a premium of four dollars which a poor Irish laborer whom he hired had gained by fifteen minutes' spading at our Agricultural Fair. Tonight a free colored woman is lodging at our house, whose errand to the North is to get money to buy her husband who is a slave to one Moore in Norfolk, Virginia. She persuaded Moore, though not a kind master, to buy him that he might not be sold further South. Moore paid six hundred dollars for him, but asks her eight hundred. My most natural reflection was that he was even meaner than my townsmen. As mean as a slaveholder!"18

Thoreau's radicalism stood out clearly in his participation in the so-called Underground Railroad. Mrs. Edwin Bigelow, the leader of the Concord link in the "railroad" has testified that rarely did a week go by without some fugitive being sheltered overnight in Concord and then being sent along his way the next day: "'Henry Thoreau more often than any other man in Concord looked after them,' she said, 'caring for them, for the night, purchasing their tickets, escorting them to
the station—often taking them to West Fitchburg, where
since it was a smaller station, they felt safer . . . "19

Thoreau's indignation against the slave-holder reached
its height with the Anthony Burns case, and it was this
episode which to a large extent marked the turning point in
Massachusetts in the anti-slavery fight. On May 24, 1854,
Burns, who was a fugitive slave employed in Boston, was
found by his former master, arrested, and made ready to be
shipped back to Virginia. Abolitionists called a protest
meeting at Faneuil Hall in Boston, and Thomas Wentworth
Higginson led an unsuccessful attempt to rescue Burns from
his Boston jail cell. President Franklin Pierce ordered out
the militia and Burns was escorted under armed guard back
to Virginia. To Thoreau the Burns incident was the depth
of disgrace. When the Concord abolitionists called a meeting
in Concord and then devoted it to denouncing the activities
of the pro-slavery men in Nebraska, Thoreau was further
incensed and informed them that he was more concerned with
what was happening right in their state of Massachusetts.
A more radical group of abolitionists led by Garrison called
a meeting in nearby Framingham for July 4, and Thoreau
selected some of his Journal writings of the past few weeks,
organized them into an attack on the government, entitled
"Slavery in Massachusetts," and read the essay to the more
radical group at Framingham.
The speech begins by expressing shock that New Englanders should be more concerned with the "destiny of Nebraska, and not of Massachusetts." Thoreau castigates those who find it easier to worry over far-off problems rather than those at home: "There is not one slave in Nebraska; there are perhaps a million slaves in Massachusetts." He criticizes the representative of the United States government, Commissioner Edward G. Loring, who had ordered Burns sent back to slavery:

"Does any one think that justice or God awaits Mr. Loring's decision? For him to sit there deciding still, when this question is already decided from eternity to eternity, and the unlettered slave himself and the multitude around have long since heard and assented to the decision, is simply to make himself ridiculous." Thoreau next criticizes the Governor of Massachusetts, the commander-in-chief of the militia, and denies the legality of his actions: "He was no Governor of mine. He did not govern me." Similar to his essay, "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau's "Slavery . . ." speech accuses men in government and the military of being mere immoral puppets:

"The whole military force of the State is at the service of a Mr. Suttle, a slaveholder from Virginia, to enable him to catch a man whom he calls his property; but not a soldier is offered to save a citizen of Massachusetts from being kidnapped! Is this what all these soldiers, all this training have been for these seventy-nine years past? Have they been trained merely to rob Mexico and carry back fugitive slaves to their masters?"

Ignore the law, ignore judges, ignore courts, and act according to individual morality, Thoreau urges in clear evocations of subversion and in passionate pleas for activist moralism.
Consider the city your enemy, he says, for the city represents the perversion of both capitalism and government:

"It is evident that there are, in this Commonwealth at least two parties, becoming more and more distinct—the party of the city and the party of the country. I know that the country is mean enough, but I am glad to believe that there is a slight difference in her favor. But as yet she has few if any organs through which to express herself. The editorials which she reads, like the news, come from the seaboard. Let us, the inhabitants of the country cultivate self-respect. Let us not send to the city for aught more essential than our broadcloths and groceries; or if we read the opinions of the city, let us entertain opinions of our own." 25

Direct your assault on the press and the church, Thoreau says to the Framingham crowd, for they represent the Bostonian capitalistic sentiments of compromise and the "complete servility" which such entails:

"Among measures to be adopted I would suggest to make as earnest and vigorous an assault on the press as has already been made, and with effect, on the church. The church has much improved within a few years; but the press is, almost without exception, corrupt... I say that probably no country was ever ruled by so mean a class of tyrants as, with a few noble exceptions, are the editors of the periodical press in this country." 26

Divorce yourselves from the state, the Constitution, and the notion of majority rule, Thoreau challenges. Nature, he says in words similar to Nietzsche, does not exert itself in compromise, but only by force of will:

"Nature has been partner to no Missouri Compromise. I scent no compromise in the fragrance of the water lily. It is not a Nymphoea Douglasii. (Reference to Douglas of Illinois.) In it, the sweet and pure, and innocent are wholly sundered from the obscene and baleful." 27
Thoreau's speech is clearly revolutionary and his position radical. He scoffs at compromise as being unnatural. Thoreau's passion is unmistakable and when Garrison ceremonially burned a copy of the United States Constitution at the meeting to symbolize his defiance, Thoreau heartily approved. Thoreau's revolutionary speech was widely distributed in journals and newspapers throughout New England. The *Anti-Slavery Standard* published a shortened version of the address. Garrison's *Liberator* and Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, both published it, thus guaranteeing a wide circulation in the North. Thoreau's "Slavery in Massachusetts" speech, moreover, represented his increased impatience with having to "tone down" or modify his lectures to pacify his audiences. In his early years of public speaking Thoreau often revised his lectures to suit the tastes of his audiences. During the 1850s, however, he became discouraged at delivering his "second best," and by 1858 he almost totally ignored the entertainment criteria that he as a lecturer had been forced formerly to consider. After 1858 Thoreau would refuse completely to any modifications in his lectures to suit his listeners.

But while Thoreau's activism in regards to abolition was almost complete, he nevertheless at times expressed a desire to retreat back to his self. On January 3, 1853, he wrote in his *Journal*: "I love Nature partly because she is not
a man, but a retreat from him. None of his institutions control or pervade her."30 And again during the crisis in Kansas and Nebraska over the expansion of slave territory, Thoreau wrote on February 18, 1854, of his contempt for the affairs which have so concerned him:

"I read some of the speeches in Congress about the Nebraska Bill—a thing the like of which I have not done for a year. What trifling upon a serious subject! While honest men are sawing wood for them outside. Your Congress halls have an ale-house odor—a place for stale jokes and vulgar wit. It compels me to think of my fellow creatures as apes and baboons . . ."31

Nearly two months later Thoreau again related his preference for inward philosophical and religious events over worldly happenings; nevertheless, his writing established to what extent the concerns of the world had influenced him:

"A little relaxation in your exertion, a little idleness, will let in sickness and death into your own body, or your family and their attendant duties and distractions. Every human being is the artificer of his own fate in these respects. The well have no time to be sick. Events, circumstances, etc., have their origin in ourselves. They spring from seeds which we have sown. Though I may call it a European War, it is only a phase or trait in my biography that I wot of. The most foreign scrap of news which the journals report to me—–from Turkey or Japan—is but a hue of my inmost thought."32

But while at times he wanted to return to personal solitude, his post-Walden experience and resolution of his position through his own individualistic means—writing, speaking, and illegal action—overshadowed, even dominated his desire for withdrawal. By his actions and words it is
clear that at least outwardly, Thoreau was a revolutionary, for not only did he continue his attack on the state, but he blasted the moral degeneracy of Maryland:

"New England is flooded with the Official Schemes of the Maryland State Lotteries, and in this that state is no less unprincipled than in her slave-holding. Maryland and every fool who buys a ticket of her, is bound straight to the bottomless pit. The State of Maryland is a moral fungus." 33

On October 20, 1856, Thoreau went farther and advocated the setting up of underground governments outside and above the established state. In a revealing letter to his friend in Britain, Thomas Cholondeley, he wrote of his attraction to underground governments and recognized that only violence and war could accomplish the goals of abolition:

"While war (Crimean War) has given place to peace on your side, perhaps a more serious war still is breaking out here. I seem to hear its distant mutterings though it may be long before the bolt will fall in our midst. There has not been anything which you could union between North and South in this country for many years, and there cannot be so long as slavery is in the way. I only wish that Northern—that any men—were better material, or that I for one had more skill to deal with them; that the North had more spirit and would settle the question at once, and here instead of struggling feebly and protractedly away off on the plain of Kansas. They are on the eve of a Presidential election, as perhaps you know, and all good people are praying that of the three candidates, Freemont may be the man; but in my opinion the issue is quite doubtful. As far as I have observed, the worst man stands the best chance in this country. But as for politics, what I most admire nowadays is not the regular governments but the irregular primitive ones, like the Vigilance Committee in California and even the free-state men in Kansas. They are the most divine." 34
Thoreau's love of the primitive, of the wild, of the spontaneous, coupled with his hatred of slavery, brought into his politics a call for revolution, an applause for radical counter-governmental groups outside of the establishment, and a support for violence to accomplish principles. While his Puritan and Transcendentalist heritage molded his notions or morality, Thoreau's love of the wild and of frontier individualism to a great extent determined that his mode of action would be radical, revolutionary, and even violent. His love of the Indian—shown throughout his Journal, such as in the April 26, 1841, entry: "The charm of the Indian to me is that he stands free and unconstrained in Nature..."35 and in 1850: "Here and there still you will find a man with Indian blood in his veins, an eccentric farmer descended from an Indian chief; or you will see a solitary pure-blooded Indian, looking as wild as ever among the pines..."36 and through to November 9, 1855: "I thoroughly sympathize with all savages and gypsies in so far as they merely assert the original right of man to the productions of Nature and a place in her."37--his love of the Indian and the wild led him to the ideas and actions of John Brown, actions which directly sparked the Civil War. In his frontier wildness Thoreau decided to ignore the government and take the law into his own hands. He acted as a link in the Underground Railroad, a subversive organization;
he supported such extra-governmental groups as vigilance committees; and finally he would figure in John Brown's subversive force and condone the violence Brown used in an attempt to over-throw established authority.

Thoreau's frontier individualism and his love of the wild and primitive brought him into a curious relationship with Walt Whitman, the poet of passionate democracy and primitive sensuality—a relationship which served to emphasize Thoreau's radical direction. Thoreau at first found the poet not to his liking and questioned his sincerity as a democrat: In a letter to H.G.O. Blake on November 19, 1856, Thoreau mentioned his first visit with Whitman:

"He is apparently the greatest democrat the world has seen. Kings and aristocracy go by the board at once as they have long deserved to... He has long been an editor and writer for the newspapers—was editor of the New Orleans Crescent once; but now has no employment but to read and write in the forenoon, and walk in the afternoon, like all the rest of the scribbling gentry." 38

Thoreau's pungent first impressions of the poet were soon to mellow, however, as the December 7, 1856 letter to Blake indicates:

"That Walt Whitman, of whom I wrote to you, is the most interesting fact to me at present. I have just read his second edition (which he gave me), and it has done me more good than any reading for a long time. Perhaps I remember best the poems of Walt Whitman an American and the Sun Down Poem. There are two or three pieces in the book which are disagreeable, to say the least,
simply sensual . . . But even on this side, he has spoken more truth than any American or modern that I know . . . We ought to rejoice greatly in him. He occasionally suggests something a little more than human. You can not confound him with the other inhabitants of Brooklyn or New York. How they must shudder when they read him. He is awfully good.  

It was precisely the wildness in Whitman that Thoreau liked:

"Though rude and sometimes ineffectual it is a great primitive poem . . ." But Thoreau found Whitman too tame, for by this time Thoreau was a revolutionary outside of the mainstream of America. Whitman, on the other hand, still considered himself well within the flow of American life, and with this Thoreau disagreed:

"I did not get far in conversation with him--two more being present--and among the few things which I chanced to say, I remember that one was, in answer to him as representing America, that I did not think much of America or of politics, and so on, which may have been somewhat of a damper to him."  

With his love of the primitive and by his radical actions, Thoreau clearly established that he was not of America, as Whitman, but rather like the Indian, the vigilantes, and John Brown, he was outside of the established system and his law was his own. 

In his specific relationship with Brown, not only in terms of the two articles defending Brown, "A Plea for Captain John Brown," and "The Last Days of John Brown," but in terms of his actions and activities with and for the
Brown cause, Thoreau's wildness became clear. Thoreau's work, "Life Without Principle," preceded his dealings in the John Brown affair and in some respects served as an intellectual foundation for his involvement in it. During the years immediately after the Compromise of 1850 and during the time of the Kansas-Nebraska dispute of 1854, Thoreau wrote in his Journal thoughts which eventually were published under the title, "Life Without Principle," in 1863. The Journal entries were first organized into a lecture which Thoreau delivered widely during the 1850s throughout New England, in New Bedford and Nantucket and then in Worcester, Concord, Perth Amboy, and probably in Philadelphia.

In his lecture Thoreau first tells the audience that he is not going to give them only what they wanted to hear. He insists on expressing his opinions on the slavery issue unclouded by any influence or interests other than his own: "A man once came a considerable distance to ask me to lecture on slavery, but in conversing with him, I found that he and his clique expected seven-eighths of the lecture to be theirs and only one-eighth mine; so I declined." Having asserted his oratorical independence, as it were, he proceeds to criticize the capitalist and materialist mentality of America and sets himself as a lecturer apart from it: "The ways by which you may get money almost without exception lead downward . . . If you would get money as a writer or
lecturer, you must be popular, which is to go down perpendicularly. "43 He distrusts the state and its ability to
reward the proper genius or virtue, and warns of the temptations of joining the mean life of the majority of men:
"The community has no bribe that will tempt a wise man."44

After expressing his own standard of principle, he urges
others to examine the hollowness and superficiality of their
lives, and he chides them for their lack of principle, their
concern with events which are fleeting, and their ignorance
of "higher goals": In proportion as our inward life fails,
we go more constantly and desperately to the post office."45
He reiterates his distaste for newspapers as symbols of
human superficiality:

"I find it so difficult to dispose of the few
facts which to me are significant, that I hate to
burden my attention with those which are insignifi-
cant, which only a divine mind could illustrate . .
It is important to preserve the mind's chastity in
this respect."46

He urges: "Read not the Times. Read the Eternities . . .
Even the facts of science may dust the mind by their dryness
unless they are in a sense effaced each morning, or rather
rendered fertile by the dews of fresh and living truth.
Knowledge does not come to us by details, but in flashes of
light from heaven."47 Thoreau reveals his intuitionist frame
of mind, his belief that the world is not explainable by
reason alone, that the slow blooding of careful reasoning all
too often results in compromise, expediency, and impotence. First construct your own individual morals, Thoreau implores his audience; then perhaps the unfulfilled dream of a free American state will be realized:

"America is said to be the arena in which the battle of freedom is to be fought; but surely it cannot be freedom in a merely political sense that is meant. Even if we grant that the American has freed himself from a political tyrant, he is still the slave of an economical and moral tyrant. Now that the republic—the respublica—has been settled, it is time to call after the res-privata—the private state—to see, as the Roman senate charged its consuls, ne quid resprivata detrimenti caparet, that the private state receive no detriment." 48

There is little freedom in America, Thoreau warns, for the nation is only interested in preserving a shell of freedom, rather than any meaningful personal freedom:

"Do we call this the land of the free? What is it to be free from King George and continue the slaves of King Prejudice? What is it to be born free and not to live free? What is the value of any political freedom, but as a means to moral freedom? Is it a freedom to be slaves, or a freedom to be free, of which we boast. We are a nation of politicians, concerned about the outmost defenses only of freedom. It is our children's children who may perchance be really free. We tax ourselves unjustly. There is a part of us which is not represented. It is taxation without representation. We quarter troops, we quarter fools and cattle of all sorts upon ourselves. We quarter our gross bodies on our poorer souls, tell the former eat up all the latter's substance." 49

Abandon your small materialistic concerns, Thoreau challenges; only in this way may you spontaneously express your spiritual concerns. To Thoreau the major materialistic obstacle to a realization of sublime morality is the government:
"Government and legislation! These I thought were respectable professions. We have heard of heaven-born Numos, Lycurguses, and Solons, in the history of the world, whose names at least may stand for ideal legislators; but think of legislating to regulate the breeding of slaves, or the exportation of tobacco. What have divine legislators to do with exportation or the importation of tobacco? What humane ones with the breeding of slaves?"50

Thoreau's essay, rather than loudly expressing his radicalism, instead documents his profound disillusionment with America. Rather than serving as a call to action, the essay demonstrates Thoreau's complete disgust with the small and low concerns of his fellow Americans and their established government. What pervades both the style and the content of the work is Thoreau's complete loss of faith in the workings of the American system. While his previous essay, "Slavery in Massachusetts," reveals his contempt for the state of Massachusetts and contains calls to subvert it, his work, "Life Without Principle," shows that his disillusionment has grown to such an extent that he finds the whole American system disgusting. What distinguishes the latter essay is the expression of Thoreau's gnawing desire for higher morality, unrepressed by sluggish systems of government and given full vent in the sublimity of spontaneous moral activism. This longing on the part of Thoreau for pure, activated morality was soon fulfilled by John Brown.

Thoreau not only struck up a close friendship with some of Brown's raiders, but he also had close dealings with the
individuals who gave it financial and moral support, such as Franklin B. Sanborn, Gerrit Smith, and John Brown himself. All were directly connected with the Harper's Ferry raid. Sanborn, one of Brown's principal supporters and a close friend, corresponded often with Thoreau and visited him a number of times in Concord. Later in March of 1855 Sanborn opened a private school in Concord and the two became even closer. Sanborn and his sister made arrangements to room at Channing's house and soon after, to take their dinner each day at the Thoreau table—a practice they continued until April of 1858. Sanborn apparently attempted to persuade Thoreau to lecture at his school, but Thoreau felt he could not spare the time, although he often accompanied Sanborn and his students on weekly excursions into the woods near Concord. During this time Emerson urged Sanborn to expand his school into a college and hire Agassiz, Hedge, Parker, Alcott, and Thoreau as a faculty, but the plan did not develop.

Not only did Thoreau have close dealings with Sanborn in the early and middle 1850s, but he also came into direct contact with John Brown in this early period before the Harper's Ferry incident. Thoreau first met Brown in the late winter of 1857 when Brown visited Sanborn in Concord. Sanborn introduced Brown to the Massachusetts Legislature and then brought him out to Concord for a brief stay. Since
Sanborn was dining with the Thoreau's he brought Brown along with him and Brown remained at the Thoreau's for the rest of the afternoon while Sanborn taught school. Brown and Thoreau talked at length, Brown telling of the details of the battle of Black Jack in Kansas, where he with only nine men had captured more than twenty under the command of Henry Clay Pate, and also recounting his childhood and young manhood. That evening Brown lectured at Concord Town Hall. When Brown pleaded for funds Sanborn gave one hundred dollars, Emerson fifty, and Thoreau's father ten. Thoreau himself contributed only a small amount because he was irritated that Brown was not willing to take his supporters more into his confidence and explain what he wished to do with the funds.

Brown's next visit to Concord was on May 7, 1859, to visit Sanborn. Previous to that day in January of the same year, George Luther Stearns, a well-to-do abolitionist and supporter of Brown, from Medford, Massachusetts, had spent an afternoon skating with Thoreau and Emerson at Walden Pond. Stearns devoted a good part of his time extolling Brown's virtues to Thoreau and apparently convinced Thoreau of Brown's heroism. On May 8, Brown spoke again at Concord Town Hall, further explaining the nature of his Kansas activities and asking for more financial support. Thoreau was in the audience again and was more impressed than he had been at the time of Brown's first visit.
On October 16, 1859, Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry shocked the world. Brown's scheme aimed at fomenting a slave revolt by distributing the captured military supplies at the Harper's Ferry arsenal to the Negroes, whom he believed would follow him in a slave revolt. But Brown's attempt aborted and he was subsequently captured. Thoreau's friend Sanborn, along with the wealthy New Yorker Gerrit Smith, helped plan and finance the Brown raid. Sanborn wrote that his "own first knowledge of the plans of John Brown for invading the South and forcibly emancipating slaves--the same plan he afterwards attempted to execute in Virginia--was obtained from Brown in Gerrit Smith's house at Petersboro, N.Y., February 22, 1858...."51 It is evident that Sanborn acted as fellow-conspirator with Brown. There is no evidence, however, to suggest that Thoreau had knowledge of Sanborn's activities.

Although Thoreau knew little about Brown's raid beforehand, he nevertheless spearheaded the defense and glorification of Brown after the raid. Thoreau was at Emerson's house when news of the raid reached Concord, and Thoreau. From that moment on he emplanted himself on the side of Brown with such an emotional firmness that he was stirred for weeks with the thought of Brown's deed, which Thoreau believed to be the essence of Transcendental individualism. In Brown Thoreau found his "minority of one"--a man of principle, of
radical individualism, who carried out the ideal of his life until he had accomplished it. For three days after the news reached Thoreau, he wrote in his *Journal* the words which became known later as "A Plea for Captain John Brown." On October 30, 1859, Thoreau summoned the Concord citizens to the town hall to hear what he had to say about the meaning of Brown's action. The address was the first public defense of Brown. In it Thoreau did not make any apologies for Brown, but instead credited him with lasting greatness. To Thoreau the raid was the "best news that America has ever heard," and Brown was "a Transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles." Brown was a true Transcendentalist in the eyes of Thoreau; he was not a military robot, but a militant man of activist principle. Brown "saw enough ... to disgust him with a military life; indeed to excite in him a great abhorrence of it." According to Thoreau, Brown was so committed against militarism for its own sake that "he refused to train when warned, and was fined for it. He then resolved that he would never have anything to do with any war, unless it were a war for liberty ... ."53

To Thoreau Brown was not only a Transcendentalist, but he was also a Puritan--one of the old individualists more concerned with morality than materialism. He was a New England farmer who had remained untainted by urbanity: He did not go to Harvard, "good old Alma mater as she is. He was not fed on
the pap that is there furnished."  

Brown was a Puritan individualist from a long line of such men, "neither Democrats or Republican, but men of simple habits, straightforward, prayerful . . . not making any compromises." He was a member of the Puritan worthy, a member of a class who "died lately in the time of Cromwell, but he re-appeared here." Brown's moralism, his fiery rhetoric were "like the speeches of Cromwell compared with those of an ordinary king."  

Thoreau, moreover, admired Brown for the Greek leanness, the frontier rawness that he saw in the man: "He was a man of Spartan habits, and at sixty was scrupulous about his diet at your table, excusing himself by saying that he must eat sparingly and fare hard, as became a soldier, or one who was fitting himself for difficult enterprises, a life of exposure."  

In a word Brown was enlightened. To Thoreau he symbolized the heritage of individualism itself. To Thoreau Brown embodied the principles for which the Transcendentalists and the old Puritans had sought. He stood for moralistic, rather than materialistic concerns. To Thoreau, Brown radiated a toughness of both mind and body. He was a Greek in the best tradition: He synthesized clean, clear ideals and swift activism. He was a frontier individualist who by-passed irrelevant institutions and organizations and spurred ahead in a spontaneous, almost reckless drive for freedom. Brown
had successfully achieved a sublime balance between intellectual idealism and activistic realism. Brown had demonstrated to Thoreau that it was imperative to translate and transfer "higher laws" into reality; recognizing such, Thoreau lit into Brown's critics with a savage wildness. He attacked the newspapers for condemning Brown:

"Even the Liberator called it 'a misguided, wild, and apparently insane effort' ... Republican editors, obliged to get their sentences ready for the morning edition, and accustomed to look at everything by the twilight of politics, express no admiration or true sorrow even, but call these men 'deluded fanatics,' 'mistaken men,' 'insane,' or 'crazed.' ... They do not know the man. They must enlarge themselves to conceive of him ... They have got to conceive of a man of faith and religious principle, and not a politician ..."58

Thoreau spewed contempt for the establishment, specifically the Democratic Party who was "looking around for some available slave holder, perhaps to be its candidate, at least for one who will execute the Fugitive Slave Law, and all those other unjust laws which he (Brown) took up arms to anul!"59 Don't expect the "monster" of representative government to remedy wrongs, Thoreau warned; for its corruption is all too evident. Instead, look to counter-governments to establish morality, for only they will turn talk into action: "The only government that I recognize and it matters not how few are at the head of it, or how small its army--is that power that establishes justice in the land, never that which establishes injustice."60 You as individuals are not basically corrupt, Thoreau told the audience, but you are immoral because you
allow a corrupt power to govern you. Assert your morality; replace the government's immorality by radical, moral activism. If force is necessary, then I along with John Brown, condone it:

"It was his (Brown's) peculiar doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder in order to rescue the slave. I agree with him . . . I shall not be forward to think him mistaken in his method who quickest succeeds to liberate the slave. I speak for the slave when I say that I prefer the philanthropy of Captain Brown to that philanthropy which neither shoots me nor liberates me . . . I do not wish to kill nor to be killed, but I can foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable."

It is apparent that Thoreau as a Transcendentalist was neither alienated, irresponsible, nor apolitical. His radical politics, when taken to its furthest logical extension, as he himself admitted, justified violence, force, and even taking other human lives. Thoreau not only admired John Brown, but he publicly praised Brown's principles and his means of action, specifically the radical politics of violence. Thoreau praised John Brown for the traits he saw in him--classical, Puritan, Transcendental, frontier--and for his position as moralist rather than materialist. Thus while John Brown best put his talents to work in an immediate and actual flash of violence, Thoreau best put his talents to work in lecturing, in writing, and symbolizing what John Brown epitomized. While Brown threw himself into explosive violence in one deed, Thoreau threw himself into the interpretation and publication of that deed.
While Brown contributed to the Civil War by forcefully igniting one of its sparks, Thoreau contributed to the Civil War by making that particular spark immortal to his contemporaries.
Footnotes Chapter 5


5Loc. cit.

6Loc. cit.


8Richard Drinnon, "Politics of the Upright Man," Walden and Civil Disobedience. Authoritative Texts, Background Reviews and Essays in Criticism, ed. Owen Thomas, New York, Norton, 1966, pp. 410-422. Drinnon suggests that Thoreau drew not only from anarchists about him but he also gathered his ideas from the Stoics, Ovid, and Sophocles' Antigone with its "libertarian view."


12Ibid., p. 364.

13Drinnon, op. cit., p. 422.


17Harding, Days, p. 316.

19 Harding, Days, pp. 316-317.


21 Loc. cit.

22 Ibid., p. 110.

23 Ibid., p. 111.

24 Ibid., p. 112.


26 Ibid., p. 116.

27 Ibid., p. 123.

28 Harding, Days, p. 318.


34 Thoreau to Thomas Cholmondeley, 20 October, 1856, Correspondence, ed. Harding and Bode, p. 435.


38 Thoreau to H.G.O. Blake, 19 November, 1856, Correspondence, pp. 441-442.

39 Thoreau to H.G.O. Blake, 7 December, 1856, Correspondence, pp. 444-445.

40 Ibid., p. 445.
41 loc. cit.


43 Ibid., p. 209.

44 loc. cit.


46 Ibid., p. 219.

47 Ibid., p. 221.

48 loc. cit.

49 Ibid., p. 222.

50 loc. cit.


53 Ibid., p. 170.

54 Ibid., p. 171.

55 Ibid., p. 172.

56 loc. cit.

57 Ibid., p. 173.

58 Ibid., pp. 179-180.

59 Ibid., pp. 181-182.

60 Ibid., p. 184.

61 Ibid., p. 185.

62 Ibid., p. 187.
Thoreau, Civil War, and the Abortive Conclusion

After arousing the people of Concord with his defense of Brown, Thoreau suggested that someone should make a trip to Virginia to see Governor Wise and plead mercy for Brown. Thoreau meanwhile traveled throughout New England repeating the lecture and then went to Boston to attempt to persuade publishers to bring his address out in pamphlet form to be sold for the benefit of Brown's family. Thoreau called a meeting in the town hall on November 28, to arrange services for the day of Brown's execution. On December 2, 1859, the day of Brown's hanging, Thoreau, along with Emerson and Alcott, took part in memorial services held in Concord. Thoreau briefly addressed the group. The next day he helped one of Brown's men who had evaded capture at Harper's Ferry to escape to Canada.

Thoreau's final act in the John Brown affair was his preparation of "The Last Days of John Brown." He had been invited to speak at the burial services for Brown in North Elba, New York, the family home, but since he was too ill to make the journey the paper was read for him. "The Last Days . . . " was organized by Thoreau from Journal entries of November and December, 1859. The address began by recounting the brilliance of Brown's campaign. Although Thoreau said that he "commonly attend(ed) more to nature than to
man," he was forced by the sublimity of the event to turn his attention to human affairs. He charted what he saw: "a revolution of public opinion" in favor of Brown:

"Men have been hung in the South before for attempting to rescue slaves, and the North was not much stirred by it. Whence this wonderful difference? We made a subtle distinction, forgot human laws, and did homage to an idea. The North, I mean the living North was suddenly all transcendental. It went behind the human laws, and it went behind the apparent failure and recognized eternal justice and glory."2

The address demonstrates that Thoreau had left behind his disillusionment with a "world he never made"--a world of compromising politicians, immoral slave-holders, greedy New England capitalists--a world in which formerly he had seen little hope. Instead, he had moved to a more optimistic frame of mind, for he saw his utopia forming, a utopia peopled by men of principle, such as John Brown, and united in what he called, the "Transcendental North." After the John Brown raid, Thoreau viewed the North as coming over to the side of principle. Even the established government and its representatives, such as Charles Sumner and other "radical Republicans," received Thoreau's approval as his July 16, 1860, letter to Sumner indicates:

"I wish to thank you for your speech on the Barbarism of slavery, which, I hope and suspect, commences a new era in the history of our Congress, when questions of national importance have come to be considered occasionally from a broadly ethical, and not a narrowly political point of view alone."
"It is refreshing to hear some naked truth, moral or otherwise, uttered there—which can always take care of itself when uttered, and of course belongs to no party... Whereas this only has been employed occasionally to perfume the wheel-grease of party or national politics."\(^3\)

Thoreau, moreover, saw new hope in the catharsis of war, which he saw begin before his death. Such is the sentiment in his letter of April 10, 1861, to Parker Pillsbury:

"As for my prospective reader, I hope that he ignores Fort Sumter, and Old Abe, and all that, for that is just the most fatal, and indeed the only fatal weapon you can direct against evil ever; for as long as you know of it, you are particeps criminis. What business have you, if you are 'an angel of light,' to be pondering over the deeds of darkness, reading the New York Herald and the like? I do not so much regret the present conditions of things in this country (provided I regret it at all) as I do that I ever heard of it. I know one or two who have this year, for the first time, read a President's message; but they do not see that this imolies a fall in themselves rather than a rise in the President. Blessed were the days before you read a President's message. Blessed are the young, for they do not read the President's message.

"Blessed are they who never read a newspaper, for they shall see Nature, and through her, God.

"But alas, I have heard of Sumter, and Pickens, and even of Buchanan (though I did not read his message.)

"I also read the New York Tribune, but then I am reading Herodotus and Stratbo, and Blodget's Climatology, and Six Years in the Deserts of North America, as hard as I can to counter-balance it."\(^4\)

The letter, taken by itself, could easily read as a document of Thoreau's simple distaste for politics. Taken in the context of Thoreau's style and in recognition of the inconsistencies which he himself recognized as inherent in individualism
and which he himself pointed out in his use of self-reproaching humor, the letter is clearly self-congratulatory. The letter relates that Thoreau detested being bothered by external circumstances, but it also suggests that when external events so disturbed his internal workings that he was drawn into social and political concerns which he could no longer ignore, he did not regret the method of radical activism that he chose, nor the consequences—in this case, the Civil War—to which such action led. Thus before his death on May 6, 1862, Thoreau lived to see the "Transcendental North," challenged by the tactics of the South and prodded by the moralism of abolitionist agitators, enter into the mass violence which he himself helped to bring about. Thoreau, however, did not live to see that while the Civil War would resolve the question of Negro slavery, it would resolve neither the question of slavery to an economic system, nor the problem of human individuality in a mass society.
Footnotes Conclusion


2 Ibid., p. 194.

3 Thoreau to Charles Sumner, 16 July, 1860, Correspondence, p. 585.

4 Thoreau to Parker Pillsbury, 10 April, 1861, Correspondence, p. 611.
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