



Thoreau on Poverty and Magnanimity

Author(s): Thomas Woodson

Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 85, No. 1, (Jan., 1970), pp. 21-34

Published by: Modern Language Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1261428>

Accessed: 03/05/2008 05:04

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=mla>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We enable the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# THOREAU ON POVERTY AND MAGNANIMITY

BY THOMAS WOODSON

True genius will not impoverish, but will liberate, and add new senses. If a wise man should appear in our village, he would create, in those who conversed with him, a new consciousness of wealth, by opening their eyes to unobserved advantages; he would establish a sense of immovable equality, calm us with assurances that we could not be cheated; as every one would discern the checks and guaranties of condition. The rich would see their mistakes and poverty, the poor their escapes and their resources.

—Emerson, "Uses of Great Men"

IN 1843 the quiet town of Concord, Massachusetts, was disturbed by the construction of the Boston-Fitchburg Railroad. In September of that year Ralph Waldo Emerson, a prominent resident and landowner, described the new activity in a letter to his young friend Henry Thoreau, who had been living since May on Staten Island, New York, as tutor to Emerson's nephew: "Now the humanity of the town suffers with the poor Irish, who receives but sixty, or even fifty cents, for working from dark till dark, with a strain and a following-up that reminds one of negro-driving . . . But what can be done for their relief as long as new applicants for the same labor are coming in every day? These of course reduce the wages to the sum that will suffice a bachelor to live, and must drive out the men with families. The work goes on very fast . . ." Thoreau's response, more than a month later, has a quite different tone: "Methinks I could look with equanimity upon a long street of Irish cabins and pigs and children revelling in the genial Concord dirt, and I should still find my Walden wood and Fair Haven in their tanned and happy faces.—I write this in a corn field . . ."<sup>1</sup>

The difference is accountable by Emerson's having seen what he describes, while Thoreau is clearly so homesick for Concord that almost any news would warm his imagination. But still it is surprising that Thoreau should seem to sentimentalize so grossly the condition of the Irish, since he was usually more eager than Emerson to criticize the exploitation of laborers by New England employers. While this passage is not typical of Thoreau's comments on Irish poverty in Concord,<sup>2</sup> it hints at an unexpected conjunction in his writing: he sees the poor Irishman within the special perspective and in the special atmosphere of Walden woods and pond. My purpose here is to explore this special perspective

through study of "poverty" as a theme in Thoreau's writing, especially in *Walden*, and thereby to encounter the larger issues raised by his theory and practice of characterization.

## I

The need for social reform in Massachusetts was becoming increasingly apparent at the time of this exchange of letters. While the Depression of 1837 had spared New England the worst outbreaks of social unrest and violence, thoughtful liberals were dismayed by the landslide victory of the Whigs in the 1840 election, by the growth of urban industrialism's unconcern for the working conditions and living standards of its "operatives," and by the sudden large immigration of Irish paupers. While Orestes Brownson and Theodore Parker wished to confront the problem directly, Emerson, despite the concern evident in the letter I have quoted, continued to stress the inner spiritual reform announced by *Nature* and "The American Scholar."<sup>3</sup> Emerson's answer to Brownson's call, in "The Laboring Classes" (1840), for a socialistic redistribution of property, was to propose once more that individuals volunteer to withdraw temporarily from the corrupt luxuries of an acquisitive and oppressive social order. This is the message of "Man the Reformer" (1841) and "The Transcendentalist" (1842). Thoreau's retirement to Walden in 1845 was the clearest evidence of his agreement with Emerson in the liberals' debate of conscience.

It is an irony of history that those in our own day who would act like Brownson have canonized Thoreau and forgotten Brownson. That "Civil Disobedience," "Slavery in Massachusetts," and the essays on John Brown later came from the egocentric, quietist side of the argument suggests that Thoreau's apparently

<sup>1</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Correspondence*, eds. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York, 1958), pp. 137, 146.

<sup>2</sup> See Frank Buckley, "Thoreau and the Irish," *NEQ*, XIII (1940), 389-400.

<sup>3</sup> Perry Miller, ed., *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950), pp. 431-457, contains the relevant documents with commentary. When Emerson published the comment on Irish working conditions quoted above in "The Young American," *Dial*, IV (1844), 484-507, he added, revealingly, that "this grim day's work of fifteen or sixteen hours, though deplored by all the humanity of the neighborhood, is a better police than the sheriff and his deputies." On Brownson's program, see esp. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Orestes Brownson: An American Marxist before Marx," *Seawanee Review*, XLVII (1939), 317-323.

impractical idealism allowed him to find a more personally compelling, dramatic involvement with the poor and with the search for social justice than the activist.

Nevertheless, the indifference of the Concord Transcendentalists to the immediate social issues of the 1840's has led some historians to see them as unconscious allies of the patrician bankers and intellectuals of Boston against the rising materialistic middle class, and therefore unconcerned with the plight of the poor.<sup>4</sup> It has also been argued that Emerson and Thoreau "reflect the Calvinist diagnosis that poverty is the symptom of a defect of character."<sup>5</sup> This seems unlikely. While both writers were certainly influenced by Carlyle's arguments for the spiritual value of work, as well as by the American Puritan tradition, *Walden* must be read as a direct attack on the Puritan ethic.

In fact, the opening pages of *Walden* seem to speak directly to Max Weber's later classic analysis of Puritan economics; Weber was to claim that "the idea of a man's duty to his possessions, to which he subordinates himself as an obedient steward, or even as an acquisitive machine, bears with chilling weight upon his life. The greater the possessions the heavier, if the ascetic attitude toward life stands the test, the feeling of responsibility for them, for holding them undiminished for the glory of God and increasing them by restless effort."<sup>6</sup> Thoreau had used the same metaphors in *Walden* in describing the "poor immortal soul . . . well-nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty" (p. 5).<sup>7</sup> Thoreau attacks the belief that the accumulation of goods glorifies God as "blind obedience to a blundering oracle" (p. 6); he turns the Westminster Catechism against its believers ("a melodious cursing of God and enduring him forever"—p. 87); and he undermines on every page of his "Economy" Benjamin Franklin's pious injunction that "time is money": the laboring man "has no time to be anything but a machine" (p. 6). For Thoreau the Protestant duty of earning has created "that seemingly wealthy, but most terribly impoverished class of all, who have accumulated dross, but know not how to use it, or get rid of it, and thus have forged their own golden and silver fetters" (p. 18).

It is true that in *Walden* Thoreau does not often stop to sympathize with the exploited pauper. In his opening address to the poor men who have "come to this page to spend borrowed or stolen time" he sees only "what mean and

sneaking lives many of you live" (p. 7), because the poor man accepts unthinkingly the economic psychology of which he is the victim. Thus he is no different spiritually from the successful merchant and factory owner. Similarly the Irish squatters James Collins and John Field are only interested in finding a place within the going economy. Thoreau disdainfully leaves them to their folly, believing it as much self-imposed as the result of circumstances. But, though he lacks the compassion of a Brownson or Parker, his disdain conceals another, deeper feeling toward the poor, as I shall try to show presently.

Thoreau's rhetorical use of the concept of "poverty" in *Walden* is worth some attention. He looks at poverty in two opposing ways; poverty is evil, because it degrades humanity, making men the victims of their environment and of themselves. This is the "inherited Irish poverty" of John Field (p. 231), or, more generally, the meaning of "the shanties which everywhere border our railroads . . . where I see in my daily walks human beings living in sties, . . . and the forms of both old and young are permanently contracted by the long habit of shrinking from cold and misery, and the development of all their limbs and faculties is checked" (p. 38). This attitude is like that of the social reformers, though Thoreau emphasizes the spiritual effects of poverty more than the physical. Therefore poverty as degradation is not a matter of money and property, since the "degraded rich" suffer attrition and paralysis alike with the degraded poor. Thoreau sees victim and oppressor with equal eye.

But more often in *Walden* Thoreau gives "poverty" a positive, creative meaning. We can see the word being translated from a lower to a higher mode of discourse. Early in "Economy," he distinguishes between "savageness," "pov-

<sup>4</sup> William Charvat, "American Romanticism and the Depression of 1837," *Science and Society*, II (1937), 80; Robert H. Bremner, *From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in the United States* (New York, 1956), pp. 87-88. But see also John L. Thomas, "Romantic Reform in America, 1815-1865," *AQ*, xvii (1965), 656-681, which argues that Emerson's attitude is an aspect of a larger perfectionist approach to reform which came out of and gradually transformed the conservative religious revival of the early nineteenth century.

<sup>5</sup> D. Gordon Rohman, "An Annotated Edition of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*," unpub. diss. (Syracuse, 1957), p. 75. See also Rohman, "Thoreau's Transcendental Stewardship," *Emerson Society Quarterly*, No. 44 (1966), pp. 72-77.

<sup>6</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York, 1958), p. 170.

<sup>7</sup> Citations from *Walden*, simply by page number in the text, are from Henry David Thoreau, *Writings* (Boston: Walden Ed., 1906), II.

erty," and "philosophy" (p. 13), explaining: "With respect to luxuries and comforts the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor. The ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindoo, Persian and Greek, were a class than which none has been poorer in outward riches, none so rich in inward. We know not much about them. It is remarkable that *we* know so much of them as we do. The same is true of the more modern reformers or benefactors of their race. None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what *we* should call voluntary poverty" (pp. 15-16). The rhetorical emphasis on "*we*" here calls attention to the distance between the poor man (in which group the reader clearly belongs) and the wise man. "Voluntary poverty" is evidently an inadequate and degraded way of expressing the wise philosopher's condition.<sup>8</sup> There is a similar appeal to "Transcendental" values in "Conclusion," where Thoreau tells the reader: "I learned this, at least by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life that he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours . . . In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness" (p. 356). A few pages later, we find the same thought expressed more aphoristically through two characteristically Thoreauvian puns: "Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage" (p. 361).

Behind this conception of the philosopher's economy is the distinction, familiar to Thoreau in the metaphysical religious writers of the English Renaissance, of appearance and reality. Like Donne, Herbert, or Sir Thomas Browne, Thoreau plays variations on the paradoxical injunctions of Jesus, particularly in the Gospel of St. Matthew: "He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it"; "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven"; "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Quoting these injunctions in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau exclaimed: "Think of this, Yankees! . . . Think of repeating these things to a New England audience!"<sup>9</sup> And of course "Economy" may be read as a sermon on these texts.

Max Weber characterized the Puritan sanctification of moneymaking as "worldly asceticism" (*innerweltliche Askese*) in distinction to the

"otherworldly asceticism" of the medieval monastery.<sup>10</sup> We may be tempted to read Thoreau's "voluntary poverty" and his use of Christian scripture as an effort to return America to a medieval pre-capitalist reverence for poverty.<sup>11</sup> If this was his intention, it was not conscious, for most of his thinking about the creative potential of poverty works against Christian spirituality. In his discussion of Jesus and the New Testament in *A Week* Thoreau said: "Yet the New Testament treats of man and man's so-called spiritual affairs too exclusively, and is too constantly moral and personal, to alone content me, who am not interested solely in man's religious or moral nature, or in man even. . . . [Christ] taught mankind but imperfectly how to live; his thoughts were all directed toward another world. There is another kind of success than his. Even here we have a sort of living to get, and must buffet it somewhat longer. There are various tough problems yet to solve, and we must make shift to live, betwixt spirit and matter, such a human life as we can."<sup>12</sup> Thoreau's asceticism is of this world, but anti-capitalistic as well. When he sees the poor man as admirable, it is because he is neither a medieval man nor a nineteenth-century man, but a "new man."

At some perhaps perverse moments in *Walden*, Thoreau exalts the poor man as an object of quiet contemplation rather than as a source of moral outrage. Attacking the architecture of Horatio Greenough, he claims that "the most interesting dwellings in this country, as the painter knows, are the most unpretending, humble log huts and cottages of the poor commonly," because they are "simple and agreeable to the imagination" (p. 52). In a diatribe against the wealthy farmer Flint, who despoiled the pond next to his farm, Thoreau says, "Give me the poverty that enjoys

<sup>8</sup> Thoreau's uneasiness with the term "poverty" continues in his *Journal* till the end; in 1857 he congratulates himself on his "so-called poverty," and in 1859 he discusses "what is often called poverty." Thoreau's *Journal*, eds. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allan (Boston, 1906), is cited as *J* in the text; these two passages are *J*, ix, 245 and *J*, xii, 297.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew x.39, xix.21, xvi.26, quoted in Thoreau, *Writings*, I, 73. Thoreau uses Matthew vi.19-21 at the beginning of "Economy" in *Walden* (p. 6).

<sup>10</sup> *The Protestant Ethic*, pp. 193-194.

<sup>11</sup> See R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York, 1947), p. 216. Michael F. Moloney argues for Thoreau's affinity to "the desert saints of the early Church" and to St. Francis of Assisi in "Henry David Thoreau 1817-1862: Christian *Malgré Lui*," *American Classics Re-considered*, ed. Harold C. Gardiner, S.J. (New York, 1958), pp. 193-209.

<sup>12</sup> Thoreau, *Writings*, I, 74. In "Economy" he directly denies Jesus' statement, often used to justify Puritan capitalism, "The poor ye have always with you" (*Walden*, p. 35).

true wealth. Farmers are respectable and interesting to me in proportion as they are poor,—poor farmers” (p. 218). In “Conclusion” he counsels the reader: “Love your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have some pleasant, thrilling, glorious hours, even in a poor house. . . . The town’s poor seem to me often to live the most independent lives of any. Maybe they are simply great enough to receive without misgiving” (p. 361). The wry pun in the last sentence points up Thoreau’s rebelliousness toward middle-class values, but we should not read such passages as simply negative in intent. These poor men, like the “savage” who is also dear to Thoreau, are simple and independent; they thus unknowingly share with Thoreau’s ideal philosopher “a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust” (p. 16)—certainly an anti-traditional, anti-intellectual definition of philosophy. More important, perhaps, they are “interesting,” “agreeable to the imagination.” The most exciting potentialities of poverty are its aesthetic potentialities.

## II

Of course, the same isolation which belonged to [Thoreau’s] original thinking and living detached him from the social religious forms. This is neither to be censured nor regretted. Aristotle long ago explained it, when he said, “One who surpasses his fellow citizens in virtue is no longer a part of the city. Their law is not for him, since he is a law to himself.”

—Emerson, “Thoreau”

The most subtle, and to my mind least understood, passage on poverty in *Walden* is the quotation of a speech from Thomas Carew’s masque *Coelum Britannicum* at the end of “Economy.” These “Complemental Verses” are clearly important, because they stand at the end of a long and complex chapter. Most recent editors and critics have understood the lines, and Thoreau’s subtitle, “The Pretensions of Poverty,” as “‘complemental’ to round out a one-sided view of things; Thoreau . . . permits his opposition a rebuttal to the arguments of ‘Economy,’” “a self-satire.”<sup>13</sup> I believe this interpretation to be wrong, and the “Complemental Verses” to be the key to an important and unappreciated aspect of Thoreau’s view of poverty: his insistence that in the lives of certain poor men he finds the virtues of mythological heroes.

In quoting “The Pretensions of Poverty” Thoreau wished to complete the argument of “Economy,” and, more specifically, of the last section of that chapter, his attack on the practice of philanthropy in Concord and elsewhere during

the 1840’s and 50’s (pp. 80–88). Emerson had written in *The Dial* in 1844 of the immigrant Irish laborers: “In the village where I reside, through which a railroad is being built, the charitable ladies, who, moved by a report of the wrongs and distresses of the newly arrived laborers, explored the shanties with offers of relief, were surprised to find the most civil reception, and the most bounding sportfulness from the oldest to the youngest.”<sup>14</sup> The Irish were typically suspicious of the Protestant Yankees,<sup>15</sup> but they were hungry; and they were annoyed at the condescension of the charitable ladies, such condescension as we may even feel in Emerson’s report. Thoreau was fully aware of his townsmen’s activities. In the lecture he gave at the Concord Lyceum in February 1847 on his life at Walden Pond he began by listing the most frequent questions he had been asked about this eccentric way of life. Among these was “what portion of my income I devoted to charitable purposes, . . . how many poor children I maintained.”<sup>16</sup> He kept this anecdote at the beginning of the published *Walden* (p. 3), and used the last section of “Economy” to answer the question in depth.

The section begins by undermining the religious assumptions behind philanthropy through a mischievous and devastating Swiftian irony. Thoreau “confesses” that he has not “indulged” in philanthropic “enterprises,” though he has made “some sacrifices to a sense of duty,” and among others has “sacrificed this pleasure also.” He would support a poor family “if I had nothing to do—for the devil finds employment for the idle . . . As for Doing-good, that is one of the professions which are full.” Therefore he will not “forsake” his own “particular calling” (pp. 80–81). Thoreau achieves a satirical beauty here by lacing the Calvinistic vocabulary by which his contemporaries justified their charities with a

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Jones, *Index to Walden* (Austin, Tex., 1955), p. 11; Rohman, “An Annotated Edition of . . . *Walden*,” p. 167. Jones’s view has been adopted by Walter Harding, ed., *The Variorum Walden* (New York, 1963), p. 275, n. 229, and by Charles R. Anderson, ed., *Walden*, in *American Literary Masters*, eds. Charles R. Anderson et al. (New York, 1965), I, 688, n. 22, and elaborated by Lee A. Pederson, “Thoreau’s Rhetoric and Carew’s Lines,” *Thoreau Society Bulletin*, No. 82 (1963), p. 1. A fuller, though inconclusive, study of Thoreau’s use of Carew is Raymond D. Gozzi, “The Meaning of the ‘Complemental Verses’ in *Walden*,” *Emerson Society Quarterly*, No. 35 (1964), pp. 79–82.

<sup>14</sup> “The Young American,” *Dial*, iv (1844), 487.

<sup>15</sup> Oscar Handlin, *Boston’s Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), p. 132.

<sup>16</sup> J. Lyndon Shanley, *The Making of Walden with the Text of the First Version* (Chicago, 1957), p. 106.

few jarring terms from the vocabulary of the businessman. He thus creates "the suspicion that philanthropy was a device used by the rich to atone for their way of acquiring wealth,"<sup>17</sup> a balm for the reformer's "private ail" (p. 86).

The phrase "Doing-good" should remind the reader of a classical text on American philanthropy, Cotton Mather's *Essays to Do Good* (1710), which Perry Miller described as "possibly the most important work" for "the socialization of piety" of the early eighteenth century, and a continuing intellectual force in Thoreau's time.<sup>18</sup> At a crucial moment in American history, when the authority of the Puritan church was hard pressed by the pragmatism of the Enlightenment and the nascent spirit of capitalism, Mather attempted to harmonize what he described as the Christian's two "callings": a "general calling . . . to serve the Lord Jesus Christ," and a "personal calling, . . . a certain Particular Employment by which his *Usefulness* in his neighborhood is distinguished." A man might thus "glorify God, by doing of *Good* for *others*, and getting of *Good* for *himself*."<sup>19</sup> *Essays to Do Good* elaborated this doctrine into a social gospel which accommodated the gospel of Jesus to the acquisitive desires of the middle class. Miller sees the book as "a prophecy of Protestant, small-town, Middle Western culture of the nineteenth century," where the "engines of piety would become engines of conformity; the man who would go aside by himself, into profanity or to Walden Pond, who would broach a controversial topic or refuse to be pawed by reforming institutions [Thoreau's phrase (p. 190)], would stand before the community automatically convicted of antisocial propensities."<sup>20</sup>

There is good evidence of the continued popularity of Mather's program in mid-nineteenth-century Massachusetts. The merchants of Boston thought of charity for the poor as a means of forestalling revolution. Their educational program for the laboring classes sought to develop respect for private rights and for the common interests of the rich and the poor. Edward Everett opposed Brownson's project for industrial training of the poor for fear that it would divide the community into warring classes and create the possibility that the poor majority might gain control of the government.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, voluntary groups such as the Ladies General Charitable Society "sought to police community morals," and public charitable assistance also "aimed at inducing the poor to abide by middle class standards of behavior."<sup>22</sup> These attitudes led the Irish of Boston to resent "The organized charity

scrimped and iced, / In the name of a cautious, statistical Christ," and such sympathizers as Brownson to describe a philanthropist as "a person who loves everybody generally and hates everybody particularly."<sup>23</sup>

Thoreau shared the reaction of the more clever and articulate Irish to the machinery of philanthropy: "If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life" (p. 82). But his alternative to Mather's doctrine is more personal and radical than Brownson's socialism or even Emerson's self-reliance: "What *good* I do, in the common sense of that word, must be aside from my main path, and for the most part wholly unintended" (p. 81). What is his main path? A man's goodness "must not be a partial and transitory act, but a constant superfluity, which costs him nothing and of which he is unconscious" (p. 85). Such a spontaneous outflowing may use the words of Jesus in Matthew vi.3, "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand does, for it is not worth knowing," but follows them with an unmistakably Thoreauvian aphorism, "Rescue the drowning and tie your shoestrings. Take your time, and set about some free labor," which will be "a simple and irrepressible satisfaction with the gift of life" (pp. 86-87). Such "free labor" reflects the creative potentiality of Thoreau's poor man, whether he be philosopher, farmer, or resident of the local poorhouse. Finally, Thoreau argues that a man should not "stay to be an overseer of the poor, but endeavor to become one of the worthies of the world" (p. 87). His alternative to philanthropy is heroism.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Robert H. Bremner, *American Philanthropy* (Chicago, 1960), p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), p. 410.

<sup>19</sup> Cotton Mather, *Two Brief Discourses . . .* (Boston, 1701), pp. 37-38, quoted by A. Whitney Griswold, "Three Puritans on Prosperity," *NEQ*, vii (1934), 477-479.

<sup>20</sup> *The New England Mind*, pp. 411-412.

<sup>21</sup> Oscar Handlin and Mary Flug Handlin, *Commonwealth: A Study of the Role of Government in the American Economy: Massachusetts, 1774-1861* (New York, 1947), pp. 206-208.

<sup>22</sup> Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), pp. 48-49.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted by Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*, pp. 160, 132. See also Thomas R. Ryan, "Orestes A. Brownson and the Irish," *Mid-America*, xxviii (1956), 156-172. The attitudes of the conservative clerical reformers are summarized by Thomas, "Romantic Reform in America, 1815-1865," pp. 657-661.

<sup>24</sup> The fable from Saadi's *Gulistan* which precedes the "Complemental Verses" contributes to Thoreau's argument by describing the "free man" as one who does not contribute

At this point the "Complemental Verses" from Carew's *Coelum Britannicum* pick up and extend the argument. Thoreau quotes the whole of Mercury's reply to the allegorical goddess Poenia, who has just made her claim to be worshipped as a star in the British heavens; she is rejected by Mercury and Momus, Carew's spokesmen, as are also the gods of Wealth, Fortune, and Pleasure. The purpose of Carew's masque is to praise the rebirth of English greatness under Charles I, and to teach dramatically the heroic virtues of "the antient Worthies of these famous Isles" now come back to life as the present courtiers and King.<sup>25</sup> For Carew Wealth and Poverty are both unheroic. Mercury attacks Poverty because she "Degradeth nature, and benumbeth sense, / And, Gorgon-like, turns active men to stone." This description is like that of Thoreau's "degraded poor," shrinking from cold and misery (p. 38), and Poverty's role is of course that of "overseer of the poor." Poverty's own speech (which Thoreau copied into his notebook,<sup>26</sup> and would have quoted if he had agreed with it) is based in part on a speech by the character Penia in Aristophanes' *Plutus*, who argues for the cultural creativity of poverty ("Inventions," "Wit," "Vertues," in Carew) on the ground that poor men contribute to the arts and sciences in order to become rich.<sup>27</sup> To this Carew's Poverty adds the medieval Christian respect for voluntary poverty as withdrawal from the world for "Divine contemplation," and the cultivation of "all the Vertues speculative." Carew through Mercury attacks this attitude (understandably, since England had not long before disbanded its monasteries) as "some lazy or pedantic virtue." We have already noticed Thoreau's dismissal of the otherworldly aspect of Christian belief.

The most important similarities between Mercury's speech and Thoreau's argument, moreover, are the positive ones. Thoreau's emphasis on the free man's "constant superfluity" is echoed by these lines:

but we advance  
Such virtues only as admit excess,  
Brave, bounteous acts, regal magnificence,  
All-seeing prudence, magnanimity  
That knows no bound, and that heroic virtue  
For which antiquity hath left no name,  
But patterns only, such as Hercules,  
Achilles, Theseus.

Throughout his literary career Thoreau appealed to the heroes of Greek mythology as "patterns" for his own concept of heroism. He claimed to be writing a new American mythology.<sup>28</sup> It is not

surprising, then, that in the First Version of this section of "Economy" he should have characterized his free man in these terms: "He must be a sort of appreciable wealth to us, or at least make us sensible of our own riches—In his degree an Apollo—a Mercury—a Ceres—a Minerva—or the bearer of divine gifts to me."<sup>29</sup> For Thoreau the "worthies of the world" who would not "stay to become overseers of the poor" are like the heroes of antiquity; Thoreau says with Carew: "Study to know but what those worthies were."

It is also important that Carew describes a "constant superfluity" as "magnanimity / That knows no bound," for the word "magnanimity" is one of Thoreau's favorite means of characterizing his free hero. In "Economy" he describes the ideal philosopher's life as one of "simplicity, independence, magnanimity and trust" (p. 16), and in "Conclusion," in the passage on the creative possibilities of poverty, he claims, "No man loses ever on a lower level by magnanimity on a higher" (p. 362). Further, in a passage from the first version of "Visitors," he says of a group of "healthy and sturdy working men" who visited his house at Walden Pond, "There appeared in some of these men even at a distance, a genuine magnanimity equal to Greek and Roman, of unexplored and uncontaminated descent—The expression of their grimed & sunburnt features made me think of Epaminondas of Socrates & Cato. The most famous philosophers & poets seem in some respects infantile beside the easy and successful life of natural men."<sup>30</sup>

---

external goods to the community (the basis of Mather's piety), but who simply possesses an internal wisdom which is beyond the mutability of time. Thoreau's most succinct statement on this matter is perhaps this from "Civil Disobedience": "He who gives himself entirely to his fellow-men appears to them useless and selfish; but he who gives himself partially to them is pronounced a benefactor and philanthropist" (*Writings*, iv, 360).

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Carew, *Coelum Britannicum, A Masque*, l. 855, in Carew, *Poems*, ed. Rhodes Dunlap (London, 1949). Citations of the masque not quoted from *Walden*, p. 89, are from this edition.

<sup>26</sup> *Literary Notebook in the Library of Congress: Facsimile Text*, ed. Kenneth Walter Cameron (Hartford, Conn., 1964), p. 296. Thoreau used the edition of Carew edited by John Fry (London, 1810).

<sup>27</sup> Aristophanes, *Plutus*, ll. 507–517; see Dunlap's note, Carew, *Poems*, p. 281.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, *J*, III, 98–99. For an interpretation of these lines from "Complemental Verses" as a key to the mythology of *Walden*, see William Bysshe Stein, "Walden: The Wisdom of the Centaur," *ELH*, xxv (1958), 194–215, and "The Motif of the Wise Old Man in *Walden*," *MLN*, lxxv (1960), 201–204.

<sup>29</sup> Shanley, *The Making of Walden*, p. 135.

<sup>30</sup> Shanley, *The Making of Walden*, p. 173.

There are, of course, differences between Carew and Thoreau on the connotations of "magnanimity." Carew's association of the term with "regal magnificence" and "all-seeing prudence" suggests that he is influenced by Spenser's concept of the magnanimous man as the true Renaissance courtier, idealized as Prince Arthur, allegorically representing "magnificence," or magnanimity in action.<sup>31</sup> The dramatic situation and theme of *Coelum Britannicum* are consonant with this conception. Thoreau accepted the Renaissance ideal only in part. He had found early in his literary career that his youthful idol, Sir Walter Raleigh, could not be a pattern for the democratic hero he was to create; Raleigh "seems to have carried the courtier's life to the highest pitch of magnanimity and grace it was capable of. He is liberal and generous as a prince,—that is, within bounds; brave, chivalrous, heroic, as the knight in armor and not as a defenseless man. His was not the heroism of Luther, but of Bayard" (*J*, I, 333). Thoreau therefore turned for the best heroic model to Greek mythology and history. He takes the idea of magnanimity, "greatness of soul," back to its source in Western intellectual history: Aristotle's characterization of the *megalopsuchos*, the proud or dignified man, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>32</sup>

Aristotle's hero shares with Thoreau's an inner-directed confidence and sense of purpose which make wealth and power of little importance to him (1124a, 17-18). The magnanimous man's "economy" is such that "he is one who will possess beautiful and profitless things rather than profitable and useful ones; for this is more proper to a character that suffices to itself" (1125a, 11-12). Further, both heroes will generously tempt fate, and dare the unknown; the *megalopsuchos* is willing to "spend himself" for truth: "when he is in danger he is unsparing of his life, knowing that there are conditions on which life is not worth having" (1124b, 8-9). Thoreau "went to the woods . . . to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. . . . Be it life or death, we crave only reality" (pp. 100-101, 109).

To juxtapose two such passages is to see also what Thoreau has done to the concept of magnanimity; he has radically internalized the activity of Aristotle's hero: Thoreau's democratic hero is, like many heroes of Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville, removed from the places and events of power—from the battlefield, the Areopagus, the marketplace, even from the academy—as far

as to a rude hut near the shore of a pond, or even to the inside of the county jail.<sup>33</sup>

### III

The magnanimous heroes of Thoreau's mature writings, the demigods of his Concord mythology, and the characters who populate his later *Journal*, are poor farmers and hunters living at the edge of civilized society—Cyrus Hubbard, John Goodwin, Reuben Rice, George Minott—men who for him combine the outer freedom of the savage with the inner freedom of the philosopher.<sup>34</sup> (In his discussion of American mythology in "Walking," Thoreau noted that the present was "*the heroic age itself*, though we know it not, for the hero is commonly the simplest and obscurest of men"—*Writings*, v, 224.) What is most important is the aesthetic freedom Thoreau derives from observing these characters. Of the drunken musquash hunters he writes:

I meet these gods of the river and woods with sparkling faces (like Apollo's) late from the house of correction, it may be carrying whatever mystic and forbidden bottles or other vessels concealed, while the dull regular priests are steering their parish rafts in a prose mood . . . In the musquash-hunters I see the Algonquian still pushing swiftly over the dark stream in their canoes. These aboriginal men cannot be repressed, but under some guise or other, they survive and reappear continually. (*J*, xi, 424-425)

Of another messenger of the gods: "Minott adorns whatever part of nature he touches;

<sup>31</sup> Maurice B. McNamee, S.J., *Honor and the Epic Hero: A Study of the Shifting Concept of Magnanimity in Philosophy and Epic Poetry* (New York, 1960), pp. 140-145.

<sup>32</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book iv, Ch. iii, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York, 1941), pp. 991-995. McNamee, *Honor and the Epic Hero*, Chs. i and ii, argues convincingly that Homer's Achilles (one of Carew's "worthies") lives according to this ethic. See also Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, trans. Gilbert Highet (Oxford, 1939), I, 9-10, 23-27, 45-46.

<sup>33</sup> "Magnanimity" for Thoreau contains the post-Aristotelian connotation of generosity, of democratic comradeship impulse, but to a lesser degree than in the usage of Emerson, Whitman, or Melville; for Thoreau, "constant superfluity" is less a matter of intention than a by-product of an egoistic code of conduct. Similarly, he finds magnanimous people aesthetically useful for reasons of which they are usually unconscious.

<sup>34</sup> Francis H. Allen, ed., *Men of Concord . . . as Portrayed in the Journal of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston, 1936), pp. vii-xi; F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (New York, 1941), pp. 174-175, 646-649; Laurence Stapleton, ed., *H. D. Thoreau: A Writer's Journal* (New York, 1960), pp. xxv-xxxix. For a more "economic" view of Thoreau's attitude toward these characters, see Leo Stoller, *After Walden: Thoreau's Changing Views on Economic Man* (Stanford, Calif., 1957), pp. 114-127.



whichever way he walks he transfigures the earth for me. If a common man speaks of Walden Pond to me, I see only a shallow, dull-colored body of water without reflections or peculiar color, but if Minott speaks of it, I see the green water and reflected hills at once, for he *has been* there" (*J*, x, 168). Cyrus Hubbard is "a redeemer for me," because he is "moderate, natural, true, as if he were made of earth, stone, wood, snow" (*J*, ix, 144-145). Thoreau values men for their ability to make him see life anew, not for their civilized accomplishments, for, as he said in *A Week*, he was "not interested solely in man's religious or moral nature, or in man even."

One of his most remarkable characters is the child of one of his Irish neighbors in the Concord woods, little Johnny Riordan:

I have seen, in the form, in the expression of face, of a child three years old. the tried magnanimity and grave nobility of ancient and departed worthies. Just saw a little Irish boy, come from the distant shanty in the woods over the bleak railroad to school this morning, take his last step from his last snow-drift on to the schoolhouse door-step, floundering still; saw not his face or his profile, only his mien, and imagined, saw clearly in imagination, his old-worthy face behind the sober visor of his cap. Ah! this little Irish boy, I know not why, revives to my mind the worthies of antiquity . . . Here he condescends to his a-b-c without one smile, who has the lore of worlds uncounted in his brain. He speaks not of the adventures of the cause-way. What was the bravery of Leonidas and his three hundred boys at the pass of Thermopylae to this infant's? They but dared to die; he dares to live,—and take his "reward of merit," perchance without relaxing his face into a smile, that overlooks his unseen and unrewardable merits. Little Johnny Riordan, who faces cold and routs it like a Persian army, who, yet innocent, carries in his knees the strength of a thousand Indras. (*J*, iii, 149-150)

This is probably the most expansive exaltation of magnanimity in outward poverty that Thoreau wrote. But this mythologizing of character is often subtly present in his writing. Johnny Riordan's heroism is "unseen"; likewise, the musquash hunters "cannot be repressed but, under some guise or other they reappear continually." And in *Walden* Thoreau "sees clearly in imagination" and alludes in a variety of ways to a hidden secret heroism which confirms his celebration of Johnny Riordan's innocent magnanimity. The Canadian woodchopper Alex Therien, this "true Homeric or Paphlagonian man," reminds one of "a prince in disguise" (pp. 159, 164).<sup>35</sup> The Irishman John Field's youngest child, a "wrinkled, sibyl-like cone-headed infant . . . sat on its father's knee as in

the palaces of nobles, and looked out from its home in the midst of wet and hunger inquisitively upon the stranger, with the privilege of infancy, not knowing but it was the last of a noble line, and the hope and cynosure of the world, instead of John Field's poor starveling brat" (p. 226). Thoreau feels that the myth of Romulus and Remus would serve the townsmen of Concord, and perhaps make it great: "Better if they had been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolf, that they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in" (p. 5). Again, the Hindu legend of the king's son who was expelled from his native city in infancy and grew up among barbarians should teach the inhabitants of New England to recognize the real heroism in their midst; they live mean lives because their "vision does not penetrate the surface of things" (p. 107).<sup>36</sup>

As the themes I have been tracing, poverty and magnanimity, come together in Thoreau's writing, they often generate an archetypal characterization of the hero. For the historian of mythology this is the myth of the divine child, the royal changeling.<sup>37</sup> Thoreau is but one of a number of nineteenth-century writers in whom it appears. He shares it with writers as different in temperament and method as Dickens and Mark Twain, and with the whole host of American sentimental female scribblers. What commends Thoreau's handling of the archetype is the genuine intellectual energy which his own "constant superfluity" of living puts into his words, our sense of latent power at the source of his creativity. In his letter of 1843 to Emerson he imagined "a long street of Irish cabins and pigs and children revelling in the genial Concord

<sup>35</sup> In a letter of 1850 to H. G. O. Blake Thoreau wrote: "I am not afraid that I shall exaggerate the value and significance of life, but that I shall not be up to the occasion which it is. I shall be sorry to remember that I was there, but noticed nothing remarkable,—not so much as a prince in disguise; lived in the golden age a hired man; visited Olympus even, but fell asleep after dinner, and did not hear the conversation of the gods" (*Correspondence*, pp. 257-258). And in his late essay "Wild Apples": "Every wild-apple shrub excites our expectation thus, somewhat as every wild child. It is, perhaps, a prince in disguise. What a lesson to man! . . . Poets and philosophers and statesmen thus spring up in the country pastures, and outlast the hosts of unoriginal men" (*Writings*, v, 307).

<sup>36</sup> In his poem "Poverty," Thoreau sees his "mineral wealth hoarded in earth . . . Buried in seas in mines and ocean caves / More safely kept than is the merchant's worth, / Which every storm committeth to the waves." *Collected Poems*, ed. Carl Bode, enlarged ed. (Baltimore, 1965), p. 219.

<sup>37</sup> For a somewhat different approach to the theme of the "prince in disguise," see Joel Porte, "Emerson, Thoreau, and the Double Consciousness," *NEQ*, xli (1968), 40-50.

dirt." In the larger context of his long observation of Irish poverty the word "genial" takes on a deeper sense than expected, and Thoreau does indeed find *his* Walden wood and Fair Haven in their faces. He transforms them into heroes, more monumental and more memorable than the degraded society they do not even wish to escape.<sup>38</sup>

Looking back many years later, Walt Whitman decided that Thoreau's weakness was "disdain—disdain for men (for Tom, Dick and Harry): inability to appreciate the average life—even the exceptional life: it seemed a want of imagination."<sup>39</sup> Whitman was right, in part: Thoreau could not appreciate the averageness of the average life. He lacked that kind of imagination: he had none of the novelist's respect for the otherness of other people, but rather he had the more private vision of the romancer. The emotional power in his portrait of Johnny Riordan is much like Melville's in "Cock-A-Doodle-Do!," where the pauper Merrymusk's dying children are "transfigured" by the cock's exuberant crowing, and in the moment of their death they seem "children of emperors and kings, disguised."<sup>40</sup> These children, like Johnny Riordan, are really self-projections of the artist. And so, perhaps, in a more subtle way, is even Hawthorne's Pearl.

If Thoreau's imaginative grasp of poverty leads him, as I have argued, toward molding the character of the defenseless, but magnanimous, hero, then Whitman was right in telling Traubel that "Thoreau had an abstraction about man—a right abstraction," but one which kept him from a broader sympathy with "the men we meet here, there, everywhere—the concrete man." Yet Thoreau's conceptualization of his poor hero is not like that of the social reformers. Thoreau's heroes are characters of romance, and not only for the mythopoeic transformations of everyday reality he sees through them, but for the very abstractness and sudden fragmentary way in which they appear. Richard Chase has characterized the American romance as possessing, "besides the more obvious qualities of the picturesque and the heroic, . . . a more or less formal abstractness and, on the other hand, a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness; a willingness to abandon moral questions or to ignore the spectacle of man in society, or to consider these things only indirectly or abstractly. . . . The very abstractness and profundity of romance allow it to formulate moral truths of universal validity, although it perforce ignores home truths that may be equally or more important."<sup>41</sup> Thoreau's characters have this

kind of abstractness and profundity. Although his writing often shows a deep concern for the home truths of economic repression and, later, of Southern slavery, he felt a deeper commitment to the artistic possibilities of romantic characterization. This commitment allowed him to stop to see, on the last day of 1851, an old Irishwoman at her shanty in the woods, "sitting out on the hillside, bareheaded, in the rain and on the icy though thawing ground, knitting." In recording this incident in his *Journal* Thoreau did not give the woman a direct mythological identification—to see her as a Fate or Sybil—but simply admired her naturalness, her belonging to the ground where she sat: "What must be the philosophy of life to that woman, ready to flow down the slope with the running sand! Ah, what would I not give for her point of view!" (*J*, III, 166). Thoreau's expression of such wonder is central to his view of poverty in America.

#### IV

Thoreau is thus a creator of myths and of mythological characters. One of his artistic purposes is to elicit the heroic potential of the actual, to enact the process of myth-making, defined by Northrop Frye as finding "fictions and metaphors that identify aspects of human personality with the natural environment," turning a character into a god, "who is both a person and a class of natural objects."<sup>42</sup> In the history of democratic myth-making Thoreau's old Irishwoman follows Wordsworth's leech-gatherer and precedes Robinson's Eben Flood and Frost's

<sup>38</sup> See Carl F. Hovde, "The Conception of Character in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*," *The Thoreau Centennial*, ed. Walter Harding (Albany, N. Y., 1965), pp. 5-15.

<sup>39</sup> Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (Boston, 1906), I, 212. Compare the more sweeping (and more debatable) conclusion of Tony Tanner: "What of course is missing in all Thoreau's nature is human nature . . . Consequently Thoreau is not really interested in the moral possibilities of the innocent eye," in *The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature* (Cambridge, Eng., 1965), p. 63.

<sup>40</sup> Herman Melville, *Complete Stories*, ed. Jay Leyda (New York, 1949), p. 146. Sidney P. Moss, "'Cock-A-Doodle-Do!' and Some Legends in Melville Scholarship," *AL*, XL (1968), 192-210, argues convincingly against the idea that Melville in this story satirizes Emerson or Thoreau, and argues for Melville's sharing with them "the comedic vision" of "defiance of life-denying forces."

<sup>41</sup> Richard Chase, *The American Novel and its Tradition* (Garden City, N. Y., 1957), pp. ix, xi. See also Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 304-307, and "The Drunken Boat: The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism," in *Romanticism Reconsidered*, ed. Northrop Frye (New York, 1963), pp. 11-12.

<sup>42</sup> *A Study of English Romanticism* (New York, 1968), p. 4.

**Hill-Wife.** But his heroic characters lack the tragic dimension of these. Thoreau fails to engage the deepest anomalies and inconsistencies of the American experience; he finds the heroic—we must argue from our perspective, I believe—too easily, in too pure and simple a form. I should therefore like to conclude by looking briefly at the limitations of this aspect of his art.

When he translated, at the beginning of his career, Goethe's lines from *Torquato Tasso* describing the ideal Romantic poet, Thoreau managed an excellent brief statement of his own literary intentions. He said of the poet,

Often he ennobles what appeared to us common,  
And the prized is as nothing to him. . . .  
He seems to be looking at us, and spirits, forsooth,  
Appear to him strangely in our places. (*J*, I, 4-5)

The problem in such ennobling, Thoreau sometimes understood, was in reconciling the hard truths of common life with the strange beauty of which the imagination was capable. On the one hand, the character of the poor man was an open door to the world of spirit, of myth. On the other, poverty was a fact of life, which any sensitive man must see and deplore and work to alleviate. In his poem "The Hero," probably written at about the time of his retirement to Walden Pond in 1845, he reminded himself that the hero must sustain "Some mighty pain," "So to preserve / His tenderness. / Not be deceived / Of suffering bereaved / Not lose his life / By living too well / Nor escape strife / In his lonely cell / And so find out Heaven / By not knowing Hell."<sup>43</sup> Earlier, the *Journal* of 1842 reveals an interesting conjunction of thoughts about poverty and thoughts about artistic ambition:

How can I talk of charity, who at last withhold the kindness which alone makes charity desirable? The poor want nothing less than me myself, and I shirk charity by giving rags and meat.

Very dangerous is the talent of composition, the striking out the heart of life at a blow, as the Indian takes off a scalp. I feel as if my life had grown more outward since I could express it.

What can I give or what deny to another but myself? . . .

The artist must work with indifference. Too great interest vitiates his work. (*J*, I, 348-349)

When the hidden secret heroism of the poor man is expressed in words, is it any longer real? If Thoreau gives himself completely to the poor (to reality), this simple, direct identification becomes somehow a literary act, and a violent, destructive blow at "the heart of life." There is something in the other person, or in himself,

which he senses he must fall short of touching, if he is to survive as a writer. He therefore uses the mythological mode to "work with indifference," and to maintain a distance from a dangerous overinvolvement with the reality of poverty. But to preserve indifference is to lose "tenderness," as he reminded himself in "The Hero." His dilemma seems absolute.

But he was able to keep his equilibrium by writing, in *Walden* and the nature essays, in a Romantic, metaphorical style which only seems as artless and simple and sincere as he claimed it to be. In the political essays, however, problems arose. Here Thoreau applied the character of the poor and magnanimous hero to the immediate social issues of imperialism ("manifest destiny"), slavery, and republican political process. Through these essays he gained the social involvement which has made his writing so relevant to the concerns of our time, though at the cost, it seems to me, of revealing the narrowness of his moral and artistic resources in characterization.

In "Civil Disobedience," the first political essay, the problem of facing the actual world of poverty is not acute, because the hero's centering action, going to jail, is a passive resistance, and an almost idyllic, pastoral vision. Thoreau uses the same devices as in *Walden* to celebrate the values of creative poverty:

If there were one who lived wholly without the use of money, the State itself would hesitate to demand it of him. But the rich man,—not to make any invidious comparison,—is always sold to the institution which makes him rich. Absolutely speaking, the more money, the less virtue; for money comes between a man and his objects, and obtains them for him; and it was certainly no great virtue to obtain it. (p. 372)<sup>44</sup>

You must hire or squat somewhere, and raise but a small crop, and eat that soon. You must live within yourself, and depend upon yourself always tucked up and ready for a start, and not have many affairs. (p. 373)

Thoreau, the poor hero, refuses to let money come "between him and his objects," and by going to jail attains "a wholly new and rare experience," the transformation of Concord, an ordinary shire town, into a magical place for heroic action, where "visions of knights and castles passed before me." Further, the trans-

<sup>43</sup> *Collected Poems*, pp. 161-162, 318.

<sup>44</sup> Citations in the text from "Civil Disobedience," "Slavery in Massachusetts," "A Plea for Captain John Brown," "The Last Days of John Brown," and "After the Death of John Brown," are from Thoreau, *Writings*, IV.

formation does not keep him from seeing his "objects" clearly; in fact, myth and reality harmonize: "It was a closer view of my native town. I was fairly inside it. I never had seen its institutions before" (p. 378).

When he was let out of jail, he proceeded to dismiss any negative aspect of his experience there, joining a huckleberry party, and hurrying to a high hill where "the State was nowhere to be seen" (p. 380). Thus the whole incident became no more than an interlude—and a happy one—in the life of an essentially unpolitical man. There is no suffering for the hero, and no social responsibility, except to the most tenuous and abstract vision of an ideal "perfect and glorious State" (p. 387) with which the essay ends.

As the ferment over slavery continued to rise during the 1850's Thoreau's essays gradually moved their emphasis from the creative potential of man in nature to the need to change society. One passage from "Slavery in Massachusetts" (1854) catches this change: "I walk toward one of our ponds; but what signifies the beauty of nature when men are base? We walk to lakes to see our serenity reflected in them; when we are not serene, we go not to them. Who can be serene in a country where both the rulers and the ruled are without principle? The remembrance of my country spoils my walk. My thoughts are murder to the State, and involuntarily go plotting against her" (p. 407). These words were written probably just after Thoreau completed *Walden* (see *J*, VI, 355-358); they imply the same need for violence in response to unpleasant reality which followed the passage on poverty in the *Journal* of 1842. The only way of finding the ideal union of man and man, man and nature, seems to involve, at least in words, the need to murder, to strike out the heart of life at a blow.

Since Thoreau was committed to the ideal of the poor but magnanimous hero, and since the events of the 1850's led him from pastoral withdrawal into increasing involvement with the issues of slavery and social repression, it seems inevitable that the final and most striking hero in his pantheon should have been the fierce revolutionary John Brown. As a man of action, a historical force shaping the future, John Brown added something new to the dimensions of Thoreau's hero. Brown was a public figure, widely known. Now Thoreau could hold the same faith Emerson had always had in history, and apply the criteria of magnanimity Emerson had drawn from the heroes of antiquity celebrated in Plutarch's *Lives* and *Moralia*.<sup>45</sup> In the first version of *Walden*, in a passage I have quoted, Tho-

reau said of the vigorous young workingmen who visited his cabin, that they possessed "a genuine magnanimity equal to Greek and Roman," making him "think of Epaminondas of Socrates & Cato," the proud, self-denying heroes of Plutarch. At that time, the mid-1840's, Thoreau went on to exalt these American anonymous heroes above the great names of antiquity, seeing them, as would Whitman, as young gods of democracy: "I observe among these men when I meet them on the road an ineradicable refinement & delicacy—as old as the sun & moon. . . . You can tell a nobleman's head though he may be shovelling gravel beneath it six rods off in the midst of a gang with a bandanna handkerchief tied about it. Such as are to succeed the worthies of history. . . ."<sup>46</sup> Commenting on this passage, F. B. Sanborn, the young abolitionist who became Thoreau's close friend in the late 1850's, said: "It was this gift of insight which made Thoreau and Emerson recognize the heroism of John Brown, under his 'rustic exterior'."<sup>47</sup> Thus Brown became the living embodiment of a character Thoreau had long cherished as a mask for himself.

Thoreau's image of John Brown contains all the heroic qualities I have found implied by his definition of magnanimity. Brown was born poor, but was the descendent of early settlers of New England. He was not corrupted by formal education, but "went to the great university of the West, where he sedulously pursued the study of Liberty" (pp. 409-412). He was a man of simplicity, of Spartan habits, "of rare common-sense and directness of speech, as of action; a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles" (pp. 412-413). His attack on Harpers Ferry Thoreau compares to "any ancient example of heroism, such as Cato or Tell or Winkelried" (p. 441). Brown's speeches express an

<sup>45</sup> Ethel Seybold, *Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics* (New Haven, 1951), p. 38, says that under the influence of Plutarch's *Lives* Thoreau "inclined to believe that the events themselves were unimportant and that only the courage and wisdom—or the lack of them—with which men met events had value as history, that history became truth only as it approached the mythical or apocryphal." For a study of the relation of poverty to heroism in Emerson's writings, see Edmund G. Berry, *Emerson's Plutarch* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), esp. pp. 74-82, 102-108. A typical Emersonian-Plutarchan expression of the theme is this from "Heroism": "The heroic soul does not sell its justice and its nobleness. . . . The essence of greatness is the perception that virtue is enough. Poverty is its ornament. It does not need plenty, and can very well abide its loss"—*Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston and New York, 1903-1904), II, 255.

<sup>46</sup> Shanley, *The Making of Walden*, p. 174.

<sup>47</sup> *The Life of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston, 1917), p. 282.

“authority superior to our laws” (p. 444), and his death warrants “a universal liturgy, applicable to those rare cases of heroes and martyrs for which the ritual of no church has provided” (p. 451).

Beyond the Plutarchan or even the Aristotelian ethos of the *megalopsuchos*, Thoreau raises Brown to the image of a dying and (to be) resurrected god. Emerson had mentioned, in one of his speeches on Brown, a legend (doubtless promoted by the man himself) which identifies Brown with the archetype of the divine child: “A shepherd and herdsman, he learned the manners of animals, and knew the secret signals by which animals communicate . . . If he kept sheep, it was with a royal mind . . .”<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Thoreau wrote ecstatically in his “Plea for Captain John Brown”: “Think of him,—of his rare qualities!—such a man as it takes ages to make, and ages to understand; no mock hero, not the representative of any party. A man such as the sun may not rise upon again in this benighted land. To whose making went the costliest material, the finest adamant; sent to be the redeemer of those in captivity; and the only use to which you can put him is to hang him at the end of a rope!” (p. 437).

Thoreau agrees enthusiastically with a writer who “says that Brown’s peculiar monomania made him to be ‘dreaded by the Missourians as a supernatural being,’” because “a hero in the midst of us cowards is always so dreaded” (p. 436). At one moment, in the *Journal*, Thoreau indulges a mythopoeic sentiment which he did not put into public print: “When I hear of John Brown and his wife weeping at length, it is as if the rocks sweated” (*J*, XIII, 4). But there is enough in the essays to confirm Thoreau’s vision of Brown translated, Christ-like, from death to immortality: “He is not old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light” (p. 438). After the death of John Brown: “I meet him at every turn. He is more alive than ever he was. He has earned immortality. He is not confined to North Elba nor to Kansas. He is no longer working in secret. He works in public, and in the clearest light that shines on this land” (p. 450). Thus Brown provided a new pattern of Carew’s “heroic virtue / For which antiquity hath left no name.” He became Thoreau’s American Hercules and Achilles.

But the characterization of John Brown shows a stridency and strain not apparent in Thoreau’s earlier writings, as a number of readers have commented.<sup>49</sup> Certainly C. Roland Wagner is essentially correct in describing Brown as “a monstrous mirror of Thoreau’s inner life, reflecting all the dammed up wildness of a male Hester

Prynne—but he was *no more* than a mirror to Thoreau, not a real person to be rationally and sympathetically understood.”<sup>50</sup> Thoreau’s whole experience in making literary characters led him to see Brown in this way, I should argue. And this experience seems to have reached a crisis just a few days before Brown’s attack on Harpers Ferry. Writing in his *Journal* on 3 October 1859, musing on the smoke slowly rising from a chimney in the Concord woods—with no idea in his mind of the violence Brown was then plotting on the Kentucky farm he had turned into an armed camp—Thoreau is struck with the difficulty of reconciling the actual world to the world the imagination creates. The smoke

suggests all of domestic felicity beneath. There beneath, we suppose, that life is lived of which we have only dreamed. In our minds we clothe each unseen inhabitant with all the success, with all the serenity, which we can conceive of. . . . There we suspect no coarse haste or bustle, but serene labors which proceed at the same pace with the declining day . . . Why does any distant prospect ever charm us? Because we instantly and inevitably imagine a life to be lived there such as is not to be lived elsewhere, or where we are. We presume that success is the rule. We forever carry a perfect sampler in our minds. Why are distant valleys, why lakes, why mountains in the horizon, ever fair to us? Because we realize for a moment that they may be the home of man, and that man’s life may be in harmony with them. Shall I say that we thus forever delude ourselves? . . . We are constrained to imagine a life in harmony with the scenery and the hour. The sky and clouds, and the earth itself, with their beauty forever preach to us, saying, Such an abode we offer you, to such and such a life we encourage you. *There* is not haggard poverty and harassing debt. There is not intemperance, moroseness, meanness, or vulgarity. Men go about sketching, painting landscapes, or writing verses which celebrate man’s opportunities. . . . We think that we see these fair abodes and are elated beyond all speech, when we see only our own roofs, perchance. We are ever busy hiring house and lands and peopling them in our own imaginations. There is no beauty in the sky, but in the eye that sees it. Health, high spirits, serenity, these are the great landscape painters. . . . When I see only the roof of a house above the woods and do not know whose it is, I presume that one of the worthies of the world dwells beneath it, and for a season I am exhilarated at the

<sup>48</sup> *Complete Works*, xi, 279–280.

<sup>49</sup> See esp. Joseph Wood Krutch, *Henry David Thoreau* (New York, 1948), pp. 230–237, and Heinz Eulau, “Way-side Challenger: Some Remarks on the Politics of Henry David Thoreau,” *Thoreau: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Sherman Paul (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1962), pp. 123, 127–129.

<sup>50</sup> “Lucky Fox at Walden,” *Thoreau in Our Season*, ed. John D. Hicks (Amherst, Mass., 1966), p. 133.

thought. I would fain sketch it that others may share my pleasure. But commonly, if I see or know the occupant, I am affected as by the sight of the almshouse or hospital. (*J*, xii, 366-368)

It is apparent that "poverty" is still an ambivalent concept for Thoreau, leading him sometimes to the highest flights of imagination, and sometimes to involuntary contempt or disgust. In this soliloquy, moreover, he brings himself to question the psychological premises of his Romantic idealism, the harmony of man and nature. Truth and art, sincerity and imagination, will not be finally reconciled. The nagging sense of his personal inadequacy as a writer bedevils him into this long-winded meditation.

The apotheosis of John Brown, which begins in the *Journal* on 19 October, is a reaction to the self-doubting of 3 October. Brown, Thoreau insists, is a living reality, not a dream of perfection in the woods. Interestingly, there is much less sense of the embrace of nature in the Brown essays than the reader of *Walden*, or even of "Civil Disobedience," would expect. Thoreau restlessly left pastoralism behind when he chose aesthetic involvement with Brown's cause. Brown's reality is, paradoxically for Thoreau, his *perfection as a man* who acts cleanly and simply from principle in a sick and evasive world. Brown's conscience is totally alive, Thoreau feels; he is the truly philanthropic hero Thoreau looked for in the last pages of "Economy," the hero whose goodness is a "constant superfluity." But in the context of bleeding Kansas and Harpers Ferry "goodness" is expressed now for Thoreau not by going quietly about his own affairs, but by violence: "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" (p. 433). Liberty and death are practically synonymous. Thoreau pleads with his audience: "Though you may not approve of his method or his principles, recognize his magnanimity" (p. 423). As Heinz Eulau argues, Thoreau here "rationalized the a-moral consequences of his new departure,"<sup>51</sup> justifying means by ends, abandoning what I should call his life-long mythopoeic individualism for what Truman Nelson has called "revolutionary individualism."<sup>52</sup> By separating *magnanimity* from *method* and *principles* Thoreau unconsciously cuts loose from the empirical ground which makes *Walden* great; he loses himself in self-consuming emotion.

The magnanimity of Brown, as "The Last Days of John Brown" defines it, is still a literary quality, for Brown is to Thoreau a great poet,

the speaker of a hidden truth: "Not being accustomed to make fine distinctions, or to appreciate magnanimity, they read his letters and speeches as if they read them not. They were not aware when they approached a heroic statement, —they did not know when they *burned*" (p. 444). Again, even in pun, heroism and a suicidal, destructive impulse are identified. It is a sign of the near hysteria of that moment that even Emerson in his Boston speech should marvel at Brown's spoken defense to the jury: "What magnanimity, and what innocent pleading, as of childhood!"<sup>53</sup> Childlike innocence is an essential quality of Thoreau's hero, and in the portrait of Johnny Riordan it was associated with a bravery that "dares to live" rather than with the conventional heroism of Leonidas at Thermopylae. That is all gone now, for Brown's effect is, Thoreau says, to teach how to die and *thereby* how to live (p. 435). More revealing than Emerson's, perhaps, is his description of Brown's oratory: the uneducated genius is more eloquent than the mass of "literary gentlemen, editors, and critics," because he is more simple and direct. This is a standard Transcendentalist argument, of course, but Thoreau's way of putting it is important: "The *art* of composition is as simple as the discharge of a bullet from a rifle, and its masterpieces imply an infinitely greater force behind them" (p. 447). Such a statement (though it is true that Thoreau often before oversimplified in talking about style) is to define magnanimity as sheer power, and to give up much that is human in the process. It means abandoning Achilles for Ajax; it is a reduction of American potentiality to the cult of violence which plagues America still.

Thoreau's John Brown, a godlike prophet, an angel of light, leads me to think of the John Brown of Melville's poem "The Portent." On this occasion Melville is more aware of the oneness of man's life with nature: his Brown, hanging from the beam, suggests a tree of the green Shenandoah Valley, now blasted. And Melville knows, as Thoreau does not, how to tremble before the mystery of violence in Brown, the sheer energy of abstract principle unleashed into life:

But the streaming beard is shown  
(Weird John Brown)  
The meteor of the war.

<sup>51</sup> "Wayside Challenger," p. 129.

<sup>52</sup> "Thoreau and John Brown," *Thoreau in Our Season*, pp. 145-147.

<sup>53</sup> *Complete Works*, xi, 269.

Melville compresses a far more searching sense of character into his few lines than Thoreau attained in his three impassioned speeches.

Finally, it seems fair to compare Thoreau's Brown, his last portrait of magnanimity, with Melville's last such character, Billy Budd. Billy shares with Brown the legendary qualities of the American magnanimous hero. He is poor, simple, and uneducated, but is a prince in disguise, the royal foundling whose heroic form can be seen by those who know how to look. Billy's story is an "inside narrative," but its public counterpart is the life and death of Lord Nelson, whose "excessive love of glory" (p. 58)<sup>54</sup> qualifies him as an Aristotelian *megalopsuchos*. Billy the "child-man" (p. 86) is an "angel of God" (p. 101), a Hercules (p. 51), a young Achilles (p. 71); he is also the embodiment of democratic innocence and defenselessness, the impressed sailor. Billy dies, as did Brown, by peremptory hanging, punished for committing the murder of a purely evil force which bore false witness to the possibilities of life, just as Brown was punished. Melville even compares Billy's arm, which speaks for him in striking Claggart, to "the flame from a discharged cannon at night" (p. 99). But of course the characters are vastly different; Billy retains his innocence to the moment of death, while Brown resisted at Harpers Ferry with a cool and implacable fury, over the bodies of his dead and dying sons. At the moment of death, Billy dares

to bless, while Brown dares only to curse.

Melville speaks of magnanimity, but in a way Thoreau would not have understood in October 1859. It is in his relation to Captain Vere after the murder that Billy's "novice magnanimity" (p. 85) becomes a "diviner magnanimity" (p. 115), and what Warner Berthoff has described as "the mystery of magnanimity," the "complementary greatness of soul" of judge and criminal, even for a moment the love of father and son, of Abraham and Isaac.<sup>55</sup> For Melville, as for Thoreau, anything which has a soul may grow into the condition of magnanimity, but Melville's understanding of democratic characterization moves beyond the simplistic, abstracting polemics to which the ugly fact of slavery reduced Thoreau. Even so, in order to appreciate Thoreau's art we must put him in the company of his most imaginative contemporaries, rather than only with the critics of society and the observers of nature. In this company we should judge the aesthetic achievements of his magnanimity, and the aesthetic shortcomings as well.

OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY  
Columbus

<sup>54</sup> Citations in the text are from Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor (An Inside Narrative)*, eds. Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Chicago, 1962).

<sup>55</sup> *Billy Budd, Sailor*, p. 115. Warner Berthoff, *The Example of Melville* (Princeton, 1962), pp. 193-200.