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Keith D. Leisner
Rollins College, kleisner@rollins.edu

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Thoreau's Negative Contribution to Intellectualism and Its Significance to America's Cultural Identity

In American society, our lives, consisted of professional and familial obligations, bind us to our constitutions and prevent us from drastically altering the construction of our beliefs. Consequently, the intellectual, the individual who embodies knowledge from pure reason, appears unconcerned with personal crises. This appearance in Henry David Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government" and *Walden* fosters a negative stereotype regarding intellectualism, contributing to America's schismatic cultural identity.

To operate correctly, intellectualism must transcend the complexities of surrounding reality and endure the stigma of lofty pretension. However, when this philosophical doctrine is confronted with the troubles of life, its necessary transcendence appears too removed from the sphere of reality. In "Resistance to Civil Government," Thoreau writes, "If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man" (867). The author's extremity establishes the emotional detachment that traditionally characterizes intellectualism as a doctrine inconsistent with the human condition. In "Thoreau on Poverty and Magnanimity," Thomas Woodson¹ analyzes the perspective of letters exchanged between Ralph Waldo Emerson¹ and Thoreau. Emerson describes the poor working conditions of Concord, Massachusetts rail workers, with focus on the Irish immigrant population. Despite Emerson's critical view of their employment, Thoreau indifferently responds to the maltreatment of his newly arrived countrymen. Instead, Thoreau expresses a longing to return to Concord (he was tutoring Emerson's nephew in Staten Island, New York at the time of writing) (21). Home, even one populated with reminders of life's hardships, is more preferable than the confines of academia.

Thoreau's ability to romanticize his homeland demonstrates an intellectual idealism that has no appreciation for the layman's concerns, the pursuits of the nonintellectual. In "Resistance," this idealism manifests itself as a commentary informing the masses on the purest form of political expression, wherein Thoreau's lack of consideration for the universal tethers of life is once again encountered: "I do not hesitate to say, that those who call themselves abolitionists should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in person and property, from the government of Massachusetts, and not wait till they constitute a majority" (Thoreau 862). These words, infused with a confidence that arrives forcibly through the page, immediately cause the reader to shrink with inadequacy. Viewing the abolitionist movement as representative of a greater political issue, Thoreau expects his audience to match the strength of his convictions, yet the nature of the human condition, sensitized by America's

¹ Emerson was Thoreau's mentor.

cultural values, breeds in an individual the desire to carve out a unique place in the canon of his or her existence. Supported by the security of person, property, and government, this place encapsulates individual identity, which cannot be so quickly ripped away from its foundations, whether that identity is personal or national. Thus it is not surprising that Thoreau's greatest challenge is convincing his readers to throw off their self-imposed chains. Additionally, Thoreau champions the effectiveness of the minority, the call for a singular voice to defy popular convention. But like Thoreau's extreme opinions on civil resignation, this, too, is checked by reality: Individuals falter when heaping their carefully cultivated identities into the fires of rebellion. They need to be galvanized by comrades, neighbors, or the general reassurance of public opinion. In the conflict of these two ideologies, Thoreau's transcendental writing reflects the American spirit struggling to align the idealistic promise of its conception with the pragmatism of the land's discovery.

Woodson asserts that recognizing the distinction of unrealistic idealism in Thoreau's writing reveals the author's "special perspective" towards theory and practice (21), an interpretation that reinforces America's schismatic cultural identity. For example, in Emerson's letter to Thoreau noting the economic climate of Concord, Thoreau is still capable of casting a nostalgic light from his special perspective. Woodson asserts that this "impractical idealism" allows Thoreau to achieve a greater measure of involvement "with the poor and with the search for social justice," to transcend the entanglements of discouragement, and to reach a more intimate level of concern. Alternatively, it has been argued that Thoreau's and Emerson's opinions on poverty echo the Calvinist diagnosis of a defective character (22). In the first chapter of *Walden*, titled "Economy," Thoreau writes, "All things considered [...] I believe that that was doing better than any farmer in Concord did that year. The next year I did better still" (901). While it is difficult not to read this quotation as Thoreau boasting of his success to educate unenlightened consumers on the ease of economic efficiency (the author's time spent at Walden Pond does have the inescapable pretense of a capitalistic experiment), Woodson retorts that *Walden* is really an attack on the Puritan ideology of maintaining a rigid work ethic. In the book's opening pages, Thoreau condemns the function of man as a vessel to be filled with the labor of life (Woodson 22): "But men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost [...] It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before" (*Walden* 874). This declaration departs from the painstaking detail that Thoreau later employs to record the outcome of his harvests. These details, especially the notations of currency gained, evidence a capitalistic experiment. A final argument reasons that Thoreau's boasting serves as a model for the man enslaved by the chains of labor. In this interpretation, Thoreau suggests the adage "work smarter, not harder" and that efficiency is the

key to breaking the beast of burden. Ultimately, no one reading disproves another. Rather, it is their discord that proves most important. It contextualizes America's cultural identity as a composite sense of self constantly oscillating between positions of idealism and pragmatism, liberalism and conservatism, and naivety and awareness.

Thoreau's inconsistencies with the human condition extend beyond his prose and into the author's life. In Chapter Two of *Walden*, "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," Thoreau writes, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, 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" (920). Thoreau identifies the woods as anti-culture, the only place for one to confront "the essential facts of life." In doing this, he renders other modes of life as inferior pursuits of Truth that cannot hope to achieve the results of his two-year seclusion. This distinction is important for two reasons. Firstly, Thoreau's seclusion contrasts against his intellectual style. As early as the book's first chapter, he employs Greco-Roman mythology to dramatize Puritan ideology: "The twelve labors of Hercules were trifling in comparison with those which my neighbors have undertaken" (873). Although this quotation does not substantially depart from his Transcendental manifesto, the inclusion of a Classical allusion presents a side of Thoreau's writing that is at odds with the simplicity of his vision. The literary device was likely lost on *Walden's* intended audience: the working class. Moreover, the author characteristically maintains a level of sophistication that is inaccessible for a reader lacking a formal education. Because of these attributes, the thematic comprehension of his writing is only accessible to the intellectual. Ironically, though, for Thoreau's literary agenda to succeed, he needed his message to reach working-class readers. Furthermore, the phrase *learn what it had to teach* (920) implies the desire for re-education that abandons the halls of academia and determines the offerings of the woods at a higher value. In this estimation, one discovers sarcasm in the question, "'But,' says one, 'you do not mean the students should go to work with their hands instead of their heads?'" (898). Indeed, it is counterintuitive that Thoreau chose such a style in which to craft his message.

Secondly, as an individual, Thoreau is not entirely aligned with his prose. In "Paleface Thoreau," Donald E. Houghton places American writers into one of two categories: redskins or palefaces. Houghton defines redskins as "the romantic roughs of American writing whose barbaric chants or drawled wisdom issue spontaneously from cabins, orchards, or open roads" (23). This definition matches the initial image of Thoreau sequestering to Walden Pond, denouncing society's ills. Comparatively, "*palefaces* [authorial emphasis] are the highly civilized, conscious artists whose carefully written books and poems are filled with symbolic ambiguities" (Houghton 23). This second description is related to the

image of Thoreau that employs Greco-Roman mythology throughout a text aimed at the working class. In an attempt to reconcile these two opposing identities, Houghton creates three character templates of Thoreau the Writer: Thoreau is the redskin of legend; Thoreau is a “life-sized” (24) individual with a shared mortality. This second template is informed by the following facts: Thoreau was at Harvard University longer than Walden Pond; Walden Pond was only a mile and a half from Concord, Massachusetts; and Thoreau spent more time studying than engaged with the earth (23-24). The contradictory descriptions of these two templates produce the third: The narrator of *Walden* is a hybrid of identities, a fictional and nonfictional Henry David Thoreau (24).

Applied to academia, Thoreau’s writing and person contribute to intellectualism’s negative stereotype. Applied to the American identity, they signify a schismatic composition. So what greater significance is to be concluded from this dichotomy? The contradictions contained therein represent an innumerable list of fundamentally clashing ideologies, all of which are vital in forming the mosaic called America’s cultural identity. Members of these systems earnestly fight to make their agenda the prevailing wind that guides America’s direction. While it is not an acceleratory assumption to consider these members as citizens working under the assurance of good intentions, they are really disfiguring the very national identity that they attempt to protect. America’s cultural identity is a coalition of temperaments safeguarding the promise of its inception. Although it may be frustrating that we are constantly pulled in different directions, it is the realization missing from Thoreau’s desired transcendental harmony.

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