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Arcadian Exile: The Imaginative Tension in Henry David Thoreau's Political Thought

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By

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Arcadian Exile: The Imaginative Tension in Henry David Thoreau's Political Thought

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Henry David Thoreau's writings have achieved a unique status in the history of American literature. His ideas influenced the likes of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., and play a significant role in American environmentalism. Despite this influence his larger political vision is often used for purposes he knew nothing about or could not have anticipated. The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze Thoreau's work and legacy by elucidating a key tension within Thoreau's imagination. Instead of placing Thoreau in a pre-conceived category or worldview, the focus on imagination allows a more incisive reflection on moral and spiritual questions and makes possible a deeper investigation of Thoreau's sense of reality.

Drawing primarily on the work of Claes Ryn, imagination is here conceived as a form of consciousness that is creative and constitutive of our most basic sense of reality. The imagination both shapes and is shaped by will/desire and is capable of a broad and qualitatively diverse range of intuition which varies depending on one's orientation of will. The criterion for determining the quality of the orientation of will and imagination is experiential reality of a certain kind. The moral and philosophical life constantly involves a struggle between an attunement or will to reality and a revolt against, or an evasion of, reality. The former characterizes the higher will and the corresponding moral imagination, while the revolt or evasion distinguishes the lower will and the idyllic imagination.

Despite studies acknowledging the importance of imagination for Thoreau, no one has located the tension in Thoreau's work within his imagination, nor appreciated the importance of this tension for his political thought. To remedy this oversight, this study outlines a theory of imagination and applies it to an analysis of the moral-idyllic tension in Thoreau's moral and political thought. Thoreau's preference for an abstract, ahistorical "higher law," his radical concept of autonomy, and his frustration with government and community foster an impractical political thought characteristic of the idyllic imagination. Nevertheless, Thoreau demonstrates a moral imagination in his emphasis on the inescapable relationship between the moral order of individuals and the order of political communities.

This study further applies the theory of imagination to Thoreau's view of nature and the non-human world and is considered alongside environmentalism's considerable debt to his work. On the idyllic side is the Thoreau who longs for an escape from human community and social obligations by withdrawing to nature and by idealizing the non-human world as a perfect companion and as divine. On the moral side is the Thoreau that awakens his neighbors to the under-appreciated sanctity, beauty, mystery and value of the non-human world.

Thoreau is much more complex than what other political theorists admit, but his overall vision ultimately creates significant problems with which environmentalists, in particular, still struggle. While Thoreau's emphasis on freedom and the immaterial aspects of human and non-human nature are of considerable value to later readers, his abstract political morality, misanthropy and escapism must be resisted both for the sake of environmental well-being and human dignity.

This dissertation by Joshua James Bowman fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Politics approved by Claes G. Ryn, Ph.D., as Director, and by David Walsh Ph.D., and Dennis J. Coyle, Ph.D., as Readers.

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Solo Deo Gloria

To Melissa, Micah and
in memory of Gary Anderson

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INTRODUCTION

Henry Thoreau has probably been more wildly misconstrued than any other person of comparable literary stature.

– E.B. White, “The Individualist” –

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) has been analyzed at length by both admirers and critics, but he remains inadequately understood in the history of political thought. He is often employed as an inspiration for specific ideological or political persuasions by theorists who overlook many of his ideas. His writings and example are claimed as representative of an extraordinary diversity of perspectives – many of which contradict each other. He has been labeled an anarchist, abolitionist, democrat, liberal, republican, Marxist, misanthrope, prophet, mystic, socialist, humanist, hermit, escapist, romantic, transcendentalist, post-modernist, environmentalist, naturalist, as apolitical and more. The only non-controversial description his readers would agree upon is his unquestionable opposition to slavery and his love of nature.

The presence of such complexity and tension has profound meaning for his political thought and legacy. If Thoreau's political thought is to be appreciated as comprehensively and accurately as possible, a correspondingly thorough and intricate framework is necessary. As this study will demonstrate, analyzing Thoreau's thought through the framework of a theory of the *imagination* allows the tensions within his political thought to be understood and appreciated in a fuller sense. While little can be done to dissuade his critics – most of whom have interpreted him

quite accurately – his own emphasis on imagination and his particular contribution to “environmental imagination,” is of considerable value.

* * * *

Thanks to standard interpretations of his most famous works, *Walden* (1854) and "Civil Disobedience" (1849), Thoreau has primarily acquired a reputation as the archetype of "rugged individualism," withdrawal and wildness, and a fondness for anarchy. This same reputation has given rise to a number of different and partly contradictory interpretations of his politics.

F.O. Matthiessen, for example, concedes Thoreau's primitive sensibilities, but contends that Thoreau exhibited a disposition of an anti-materialistic revolutionary¹ sympathetic to "left-wing individualism."² According to Matthiessen, Thoreau opposed attempts at using *Walden* as a kind of reform manual.³ This contrasts sharply with one of Thoreau's most enthusiastic admirers, E.B. White, and his view of an apolitical Thoreau living as an elite New England tourist.⁴ White and Matthiessen both would object to Richard J. Ellis, who views Thoreau as something of the quintessential hermit – an oversimplification that likely owes to Ellis' neglect of Thoreau's work

1. F.O. Matthiessen. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. (New York: Oxford Univ., 1941) p. 77-78.

2. Matthiessen. (1941) p. 77.

3. Matthiessen. (1941) p. 76.

4. E.B. White. 'Visitors to the Pond.' (1953), *Writings from the New Yorker: 1927-1976*, edited by Rebecca M Dale. (New York: Harper Collins, 1990) p. 48. In this fascinating essay, White recounts a brief excursion to Walden pond with then Senator Joseph McCarthy at McCarthy's request. It is unclear if the account is fictional, but it describes a conversation in which McCarthy is trying to get to the bottom of why people consider Thoreau to be quintessentially American, and why copies of *Walden* had been found in the U.S. Information Services offices overseas. McCarthy clearly suspects Thoreau of being sympathetic to communism and deeply antithetical to capitalism. White, a critic of McCarthy, read out loud a number of passages from Thoreau's work in hopes of defending Thoreau against the accusations, but McCarthy was apparently not persuaded. If the account is true, it is rather striking that McCarthy would view an author who had been dead 91 years as a threat to America's way of life. The tourist comment comes as E.B. White remarks that Thoreau inspired the original idea of motels, which is apparently a very "American Institution."

beyond *Walden*. Yet Ellis, more than most, captures the peculiar diversity of Thoreau's interpreters:

Few Americans have proven as difficult to categorize as Henry David Thoreau. He has become, in the words of John Diggins, 'a man for all persuasions.'⁵ For some, Thoreau is the bourgeois individualist par excellence. This was the view of such early twentieth-century Marxists as V.F. Calverton, who saw Thoreau as 'the best individual product of the petty bourgeois ideology' of his period.⁶ Much the same view is adopted by Sacvan Bercovitch, who argues that '*Walden* embodies the myth of American laissez-faire individualism.' It is a work 'intended not to change the profit system but to cure its diseases,' to wake his countrymen up to the fact that they were desecrating their own beliefs'^{7, 8}

There is little evidence, though, that Thoreau favored capitalism, communism, or any economic configuration beyond that which concerned his immediate needs as a lecturer, surveyor and in his family's pencil factory where he made considerable improvements to the pencil materials and grinding mills.⁹ Nevertheless, readers both in the U.S. and overseas have found him useful for various causes. As Ellis records:

Many on the left have attempted to claim Thoreau as one of their own. In its early years, the British Labor party used *Walden* as 'a pocket-piece and traveling bible of their Faith.'¹⁰ More recently, Staughton Lynd has stressed the similarities in the analyses of Thoreau and Marx. Lynd detects parallels not only in the two men's diagnoses of the alienating effects of capitalism but also in their 'visions of an alternative' society without a division of labor.¹¹ 'Here obviously were the spokesmen not of two utterly alien traditions with nothing to say to one another, but of two variants of one tradition springing from Rousseau's insight that (as

5. John P. Diggins. "Thoreau, Marx, and the 'Riddle' of Alienation." *Social Research* Vol. 39 (Winter 1972) p. 571.

6. Stanley Edgar Hyman. "Henry Thoreau in Our Time" reprinted in Wendell Glick. Ed. *The Recognition of Henry David Thoreau: Selected Criticism Since 1848* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan, 1969). p. 338.

7. Sacvan Bercovitch. *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin, 1978) p. 187.

8. Richard J. Ellis. *American Political Cultures*. (New York: Oxford Univ., 1993) p. 140.

9. This does not mean that Thoreau neglected the topic of economics. After all, "Economy" is the opening chapter of *Walden* and he thought about the importance of work throughout his writings, and especially in *Walden*. Brian Walker offers an excellent reading of Thoreau's reflections in this regard, demonstrating Thoreau's navigation of the tensions between liberty and employment. See Brian Walker. "Thoreau's Alternative Economics." in *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. by Jack Turner. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 2009). p. 39-67

10. Henry Seidel Canby. *Thoreau*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1939) p. 447.

11. Staughton Lynd. *Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1968) p. 94.

Thoreau expressed it) 'just in proportion as some have been placed in outward circumstances above the savage, others have been degraded below him'.^{12, 13}

The confusion can become quite humorous at times. Somehow, this strange bourgeois, individualistic Marxist becomes, perhaps by virtue of Thoreau's passion for ancient Greek and Roman literature, a classical republican. "Leonard Neufeldt," Ellis observes, "argues that Thoreau sought to purify republicanism by recovering what he considered to be its true meaning and imperatives."^{14, 15} Thoreau, however, does more to contradict republican virtue than to sustain it. As Ellis remarks, the republican "vision of life in which individual interests are subordinated to the good of the group is radically different from a vision in which individual conscience and identity are paramount. Classical republicanism taught self-sacrifice; Thoreau taught self-absorption."¹⁶

George Kateb takes Thoreau's (as well as Emerson's) individualism, as distinguished from classical republicanism, quite seriously. Indeed, this individualism is fundamental to modern Democracy. He argues that "the richest presentation of the doctrine of democratic individualism is found in the work of [Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman]."¹⁷ Kateb goes so far as to say that Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman are indispensable to the "renovation of liberalism"¹⁸ These three contemporaries, along with Abraham Lincoln, "are the second generation of intellect, the true inheritors of the founding of the American polity. They disclose the fuller

12. Lynd. (1968) p. 95.

13. Ellis. (1993) p. 140-141.

14. Leonard N. Neufeldt. "Henry David Thoreau's Political Economy." *New England Quarterly* Vol. 57 (Sept, 1984) p. 361.

15. Richard J. Ellis. (1993) p. 141.

16. Richard J. Ellis. (1993) p. 141.

17. George Kateb. *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ., 1992). p. 78

18. Kateb. (1992). P. 80.

meaning of the founding. I do not think that there has been a third generation.”¹⁹ More specifically, Emerson and Thoreau distinguish themselves by an observation of what Kateb calls an American “Wildness:”

By definition, Wildness is excess and extremism, especially in the forms of insatiability and transgressiveness. Some phrases capture aspects of wildness: going the distance, breaking through, ‘scoring,’ going one knows not where, moving just to be in motion. History is full of wildness, but it should always give the inquirer pause and reason to marvel, despite its ubiquity. We must add immediately that American democratic wildness grows in the same soil as democratic ordinariness, which has been said by many theorists, led by Tocqueville, to be characterized by restraint or modesty or mediocrity or mildness or by an unexorbitant and easily placated range of appetites and wishes...The wildness of assertive individualism in a democratic culture lives right next store to the modesty, and sometimes in the same breast.²⁰

In other words, “American democratic wildness” inspires a democracy without restraint, opposed to strains of American conservatism and tradition. Taking a line from Louis Hartz, Kateb observes the alleged absence of a pre-democratic, non-democratic or feudal past in America as the origin of a peculiar wildness. “Democratic people are on their own,” he writes.²¹ “Democracy lacks a top that presses on the psyches of the great number underneath. The democratic wildness is intensified in America by the fact that, from the start, America was a place to escape to and there try to make a new start – America is the scene of the canceled past.”²² According to Kateb, a democratic culture of equal individual rights, not tradition or the rule of law, restrains Americans’ wildness, and “at their best, unoppressed ordinary people,

19. Kateb. (1992). P. 82.

20. George Kateb. "Wilderness and Conscience: Thoreau and Emerson." Ch. 11 in *Patriotism and Other Mistakes*. (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ., 2006) p. 247.

21. Kateb. (2006) p. 247-248.

22. Kateb. (2006) p. 245.

guaranteed certain rights as persons, may grow to think that in a new secular way there is something equally precious about themselves.”²³

While Thoreau objected to the oppression of slaves and eventually of Native Americans, his ambivalence toward women is frequently observed, and it is unclear whether he would have considered his opposition to slavery, in particular, as founded on subjective “rights,” as Kateb uses the word. Thoreau, for the most part, failed to explain *why* one ought to oppose slavery at all. The evil of slavery was assumed, and inspiring greater opposition to it demanded priority. It is also unclear how sympathetic Thoreau would have been to a “new secular way.” While he was no Christian, properly speaking, much of what he thought and did could be construed as religious or spiritual. He specifically favored the religions of the Orient, and would probably not have characterized himself as secular.

Other thinkers have considered Thoreau’s importance for democracy. Nancy Rosenblum painted a picture of Thoreau as a kind of proto-Nietzsche – a democratic “overman” emphasizing the centrality and virtue of antagonism. Rosenblum, like Kateb, also observes what she calls a “secular conscience” that goes “beyond good and evil,” in the Nietzschean sense:

For Thoreau conscience was secular, and removed from its original theological meaning, where it had to do with obedience to God—with sin, faith, and doubt. Nor was conscience a matter of conforming one's will to a universal norm, as it had been for Kant. Conscience, Thoreau explained, is the obligation one assumes to do at any time what you think right...Thoreau's conscience did not depend on the existence of general rules or abstract principles of right. In morals, as in politics, he was subjective and antilegalistic. ‘Life with principle’ is not a life of rule-following, consistency, or noncontradiction at all. Conscience is a felt experience, which makes itself known as a sort of compulsion; Thoreau spoke of an inner voice that is intangible, unspecifiable, and probably evanescent. Conscience has no permanent identifiable content for Thoreau. Unlike a catalogue of right

23. Kateb. (2006) p. 248.

conduct, it cannot be taught; unlike ancient virtue, goodness is not social behavior turned habit. Conscience is an inner voice which speaks only on occasion, mainly to forbid. Perhaps the best indication that Thoreau's conscience did not comprise general norms is that he did not refer either to principle or experience to offer a moral refutation of slavery. It was his personal conviction of its evil that informed him.²⁴

Thoreau, for Rosenblum, is quintessentially modern. He suffers the imposition of no externally given moral order, but autonomously wills his own order, which seems to serve a remarkably similar role to that played by Rousseau's understanding of nature. And, despite Thoreau's explicit claims of independence and autonomy, he finds democracy both an obstacle to his will and itself an ordering force he can claim as his own. For Rosenblum, the need for equality provides the primary inhibition of democracy, and Thoreau offers individualism as a common ground on which citizens may stand. Furthermore, "Thoreau sees representative democracy as the political complement of the romantic self, where it can feel at home,"²⁵ precisely because individuality's meaning achieves full realization in democracy. That said, in Rosenblum's reading, Thoreau wishes to "claim time and solitude for one's own affairs, to refuse to permit *res-publica* to work to the detriment of *res-privata*."²⁶

The identification of Thoreau as an archetype of democratic citizenship and character emerges throughout the secondary literature. Brian Walker, for example, argues that "The key to *Walden* is the way it combines ancient philosophical practices and modern economic calculations

24. Nancy Rosenblum. "Thoreau's Militant Conscience." *Political Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Feb., 1981) p. 98.

25. Nancy L. Rosenblum. "Thoreau's Democratic Individualism." in *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. by Jack Turner. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 2009). p. 31.

26. Nancy Rosenblum. "Introduction" to *Thoreau: Political Writings*. Ed. by Nancy Rosenblum. (New York: Cambridge Univ., 1996) p. xxx.

to set out a strategy by which citizens can realize their liberty.”²⁷ Thoreau is especially concerned with demonstrating how autonomy can be cultivated for those who feel tension between the need for employment and liberty. Through its emphasis on minimizing anxiety, eschewing public opinion, and living a simple life, *Walden* becomes “a pattern book of replacement practices to help people elude the financial dependency that leads to desperate lives within ostensibly free societies.”²⁸

It is important to recognize that Thoreau vehemently defended the rights of conscience against whatever legitimacy and laws the “state” – democratic or not – claimed over its citizens. This dissertation will look more closely at Thoreau’s emphasis on the superiority of what he calls the “higher law,” but he would have disputed the notion that a democratic process itself offers any legitimacy above and beyond an abstract “moral law.”²⁹ This failure of the government to realize the centrality of the Higher Law, described by Thoreau, encourages some critics to question if he can be said to favor American liberal democracy at all. Ruth Lane, for example, portrays Thoreau as emphasizing individual self-government to the point of rendering the state itself barely worthy of one’s awareness.³⁰ Philip Abbott reads Thoreau’s more “autobiographical” writings as someone searching for a “state of nature,” compatible with the

27. Brian Walker. “Thoreau’s Alternative Economics.” in *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. by Jack Turner. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 2009). p. 49.

28. Walker. (2009). p. 55.

29. For more on this, see Charles H. Nichols Jr. “Thoreau on the Citizen and His Government.” *Phylon* (1940-1956), Vol. 13, No. 1 (1st Qtr., 1952) pp. 19-24.

30. Ruth Lane. “Standing ‘Aloof’ from the State: Thoreau on Self-Government.” *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Spring, 2005), pp. 283-310.

resources for a more communitarian society. Yet Thoreau's failure to come to terms with American culture and his tendency to withdrawal render his efforts of reform rather fruitless.³¹

Another political theorist, Jane Bennett, attempts to confront this "apolitical" interpretation by placing Thoreau's political thought in conversation with twentieth-century post-modern thinkers and others.³² This post-modern sensibility rests on three elements of Thoreau's work: (1) the positing of a tension between a sense of the utterly subjective nature of reality and a sense of its wild, unmanageable character; (2) the manifestation of a peculiar set of anxieties and a fear of conformity, restraint, limitations, and any obstacle to individuality, autonomy and privacy; and (3) Thoreau's respect for the "Wild" conceived as that which defies cultural conventions. For Bennett, Thoreau is political in some ways and apolitical in others. Ultimately, his enduring contribution is that he offers a "practical model of individuality,"³³ but to conclude that this is purely apolitical is incorrect. As Bennett writes:

Although it is often said that he withdraws from politics, I think it more accurate to say that Thoreau withdraws not from the aim to affect cultural life but from the demand that all attempts to do so be thought and enacted within the rubric of politics. For this rubric draws to the surface the wrong set of associations, images, memories, and impressions. It is, for Thoreau, too crude – it insists on reducing every identity to the product of a struggle of wills; it accentuates too baldly the arbitrated character of identity. By continually propelling the artificial, arbitrary, and contestable dimensions of identity to the foreground, politics provides a poor model for crafting a Thoreauian sensibility of treading lightly, of acting as if one were 'part and parcel of Nature.'³⁴

31. Philip Abbott. "Henry David Thoreau, the State of Nature, and the Redemption of Liberalism." *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Feb., 1985) pp. 182-208.

32. Among Thoreau's interlocutors for Bennett's work are Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, Mila Kundera, Gilles Deleuze, Franz Kafka, and Feliz Guattari.

33. Jane Bennett. *Thoreau's Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild*. New Ed.. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) p. xxi.

34. Bennett. (2002) p. xxix.

Bennett's Thoreau ends up seeming less and less human as the work proceeds, and Bennett's own thoughts in this work increasingly eschew politics. Thoreau's entire corpus, in her view, elevates disorder, impulse and a radical autonomy as a "war against the They," or against society. Reading his more explicitly political writings, she claims that Thoreau "surely exaggerates the power of imagination and clearly underestimates the constraints upon individual expression posed by poverty, minority status, unliberal political regimes."³⁵ By this she means that Thoreau, in an attempt to be radically autonomous, overestimates his own liberty. She then presents a number of "techniques of the self," in which Thoreau employs imagination to cultivate and practice his escapism and misanthropy, while conceiving of an alternative order, free from both the constraints of others and from a divine or cosmic order of the universe. Nature offers Thoreau a sanctuary of self-determination that sounds less like post-modernity than a kind of hyper-modernity.

Ultimately, Bennett wishes to "move the Thoreauian sensibility toward one that can engage government and public affairs while still loving the heteroverse [(a universe conceived as lacking unity and harmony)], fronting the wild, and fighting the They."³⁶ She aims to inspire a sensibility which rejects the notion of order, truth, morality and community toward engagement with the government. For Bennett, this goal can be achieved through a tension between avoiding the "destructive power of fantasies"³⁷ and a "genealogical idealism," defined as a more sophisticated idealism in which the boundary between ideal and real is broken down by individual will. Genealogical idealism "is skeptical toward established ideals, privileges the

35. Bennett. (2002) p. 10.

36. Bennett. (2002) p. 107.

37. Bennett. (2002) p. 108.

protean act of idealization, and develops techniques to diffuse what Nietzsche described as existential resentment.”³⁸ Bennett’s Thoreau is faithful to a kind of genealogical idealism which may not avoid utopia, but understands such ideals to be instructive and useful for reform.

Leigh Kathryn Jenco, on the other hand, and in a move parallel to Ruth Lane’s, regards Thoreau as a strident critic of American democracy whose moral and philosophical commitments run contrary to a liberal democratic regime itself. What Bennett celebrates as Thoreau’s elevation of the “Wild,” Jenco sees as fundamentally inimical to the liberal democracy in which Kateb and Rosenblum have placed him. “The problem,” Jenco argues, “with [Kateb and Rosenblum’s] interpretation...is that it fails to take seriously how deeply Thoreau’s numerous and overt criticisms of democracy, and his exhortations to transcend it, are grounded in a deontological moral philosophy that renders impossible the mediation of justice through democratic institutions.”³⁹ While Thoreau elevates the importance of liberty and embraces a number of values central to liberal democracy, he is not confident that democracy can do little more than pay lip service to such values. Representative institutions and the failure of democracies to “secure true consent”⁴⁰ render such governments tragically unjust. According to Jenco, Thoreau “consistently portrays the democratic regime as a force that polarizes mind and body, disrespects the right in favor of the democratic process, and substitutes offices and institutions for the actions of men.”⁴¹ Because moral authority resides exclusively within the individual and his or her attunement to an abstract, ahistorical Right, liberal democracy and representative government

38. Bennett. (2002) p. 133.

39. Leigh Kathryn Jenco. “Thoreau’s Critique of Democracy.” in *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*. Edited by Jack Turner. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 2009). p. 68.

40. Jenco. (2009). p. 69.

41. Jenco. (2009). p. 69.

ultimately fail to provide a law or justice which retains individual moral autonomy.

Representation is itself a questionable enterprise for Thoreau, since it is limited by laws and procedures which will likely obstruct the representation of the “most moral individual.”⁴²

Democracy at its core requires politics, compromise, expediency, and imperfect means to imperfect ends. Such realities cannot tolerate the abstract Higher Law. The very institutions of liberal democracy make the moral life impossible. Instead, Thoreau offers an alternative (but ultimately utopian) vision of a depoliticized political life. “The alternative to liberal democracy, Thoreau makes clear, is not communitarianism; social harmony and moral integrity are better sustained when we ‘succeed alone, that we may enjoy our success together.’^{43,44}

While Thoreau’s sharp critique of liberal democracy and its inadequacy at reconciling the many competing conceptions of the Good, or attending to the Right, is well taken – and well rehearsed by many other thinkers – his alternative is rather impractical and essentially utopian. This is another reason why a number of readers have found him fundamentally apolitical. Hannah Arendt, in her article on Civil Disobedience, referred to Thoreau’s position as “unpolitical.”⁴⁵ This issue has made Thoreau particularly problematic for his heirs in modern environmental thought. Bob Pepperman Taylor could subsequently characterize the history of American environmentalism as a tension between the "progressive" political tradition represented by the first U.S. Forest Service chief, Gifford Pinchot, and the pastoral and apolitical

42. Jenco. (2009). p. 76.

43. Henry David Thoreau. “Paradise (to Be) Regained,” in *The Higher Law: Thoreau on Civil Disobedience and Reform*. Ed. by Wendell Glick (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 2004). p. 42.

44. Jenco. (2009). p. 87.

45. Hannah Arendt. “Civil Disobedience” in *Crises of the Republic*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1969-1972) p. 61.

tradition of Thoreau.⁴⁶ This contrasts with Roderick Nash, who looks back on a Thoreau who breathed new life into an American pastoral tradition by giving it greater moral, philosophical, *and political* depth.⁴⁷ Yet this same moralism, alongside his naturalistic preoccupations, results, according to William Chaloupka, in an essentially apolitical disposition that, specifically, disappoints Thoreau's later environmentalist readership.⁴⁸ To be sure, Thoreau inspired a profound love and understanding of the non-human world, but he left no explicitly systematic political theory or proposal for how to realize his vision. Yet by focusing on his imagination I will demonstrate that whether Thoreau was explicitly or deliberately political or not has had little impact on his significance for modern environmental thought.

One more account of Thoreau's political theory, though, deserves attention because of its deliberate interest in Thoreau's entire corpus and attention to historical context. Bob Pepperman Taylor's *America's Bachelor Uncle*⁴⁹ argues for a more politically sophisticated Thoreau and regards Thoreau's life's work as a profound critique of the American political tradition and culture. For Pepperman Taylor, Thoreau wanted to exert strong influence on the American conception of citizenship and vision for the future. Pepperman Taylor explains how Thoreau's critique evinces an exceptional and overlooked sensitivity to the historically conditioned nature of American values, culture, and politics. Pepperman Taylor ultimately concluded that, "although [Thoreau] writes magnificently about the natural world, the most disturbing and least

46. See Bob Pepperman Taylor. *Our Limits Transgressed: Environmental Political Thought in America*. (Lawrence, KS: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1992).

47. See Roderick Nash. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. 4th Ed. Originally published 1967. (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ., 2001).

48. William Chaloupka. "Thoreau's Apolitical Legacy for American Environmentalism" in *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. by Jack Turner. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 2009).

49. Bob Pepperman Taylor. *America's Bachelor Uncle: Thoreau and the American Polity* (Lawrence, KS: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1996).

defensible element of his political project is the politically educative and equalizing influence he assigns to nature.”⁵⁰ Rather than be humbled by Nature in all its mystery, Thoreau “tries to become nature’s equal. Rather than accepting his life as a man, he attempts to become a god.”⁵¹ And while he may not be or become a god, Pepperman Taylor does demonstrate that Thoreau may nevertheless find himself in the role of a prophet. Thoreau called Americans to “confront the gulf between our ideals and practices,”⁵² and his work continues to perform a similar function today.

* * * *

This enduring confusion – the blame for which lies partially with Thoreau and his love of paradox – also reveals something critical about the whole enterprise of reading and interpreting Thoreau: he matters. His footprint on the intellectual and imaginative history of the West – especially in the twentieth century – is consistently underestimated.⁵³ Writers and thinkers still confront him, apply his ideas, quote his work and ask whether or not he is on “our side.” Indeed, “according to a 1991 MLA survey of American professors” *Walden* remains “the single most important work to teach in nineteenth century literature courses”⁵⁴ Lawrence Buell notes that Thoreau “has been canonized as natural historian, pioneer ecologist and environmentalist, social activist, anarchist political theorist, creative artist, and memorable personality combining some

50. Pepperman Taylor (1996) p. x.

51. Pepperman Taylor (1996) p. 11.

52. Pepperman Taylor (1996) p. 13.

53. Among the many accounts of his influence is Michael Meyer. *Several More Lives to Live: Thoreau's Political Reputation in America*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977).

54. Lawrence Buell. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1995) p. 9.

or all of these roles.”⁵⁵ And this fame can be found well beyond America; Thoreau can claim “admirers and interpreters in Japan, Australia, India, South Africa, Russia, and eastern and western Europe, as well as in the United Kingdom.”⁵⁶ In the United States, the cultural impact of Thoreau borders on the ridiculous. As Buell recalls:

[F]rom the mid-sixties through the mid-seventies... Thoreau was acclaimed as the first hippie by a nudist magazine, recommended as a model for disturbed teenagers, cited by the Viet Cong in broadcasts urging American GI's to desert, celebrated by environmental activists as ‘one of our first preservationists,’ and embraced by a contributor to the John Birch Society magazine as ‘our greatest reactionary.’ American astronauts named a moon site after Walden; a Thoreau button was sold in San Francisco; several housing developments were named after him; the Kimberley-Clark Corporation marketed a new grade of paper as ‘Thoreau vellum’; a rock opera and a black comedy were written about him, as well as the highly successful play *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*. A Boston paper considered it news when a *Playboy* girl of the month confessed her love for Thoreau, and the journal *Medical Aspects of Human Sexuality* printed a page of quotations entitled “Thoreau on Sex.” Allen Ginsberg, Martin Luther King, Jr., B.F. Skinner, and Rod McKuen all paid homage to him.⁵⁷

Despite the enormous and always growing literature on Thoreau, his larger political vision is susceptible to being used for purposes he knew nothing about or could not have anticipated, such as postmodernism and modern environmentalism. There are a number of reasons for this problem. *Walden* is easily his most popular work, but it is not sufficiently representative of his political thought as a whole. Many of the thinkers mentioned earlier base nearly their entire reading of Thoreau on *Walden* and a few influential “Reform Papers.” Interpreters of his work may have been too eager to read him through the lens of a particular political camp or ideology.

55. Buell (1995) p. 315.

56. Buell (1995) p. 315.

57. Buell (1995) p. 313-314.

A more systematic examination of Thoreau's ideas, including his neglected larger corpus, yields a much more complex thinker and a fuller understanding of his political thought.

* * * *

The purpose of this dissertation is to enter the formidable conversation about Thoreau's work and legacy by elucidating a key tension within Thoreau's political imagination as manifested in his larger corpus. Within his considerable oeuvre, several scholars outside of political theory have observed a tension within Thoreau's work that may have profound implications for his politics. E.B. White for example, observes that "Henry was torn all his days between two awful pulls – the gnawing desire to change life, and the equally troublesome desire to live it."⁵⁸ William Peter Michaels argues that Thoreau operated between the "imperfect opposites" of spiritual ideals labeled as the "good" and the "wild."⁵⁹ Alfred Tauber notes that "despite all his efforts to touch, if not live, his 'wildness,' Thoreau remained 'civilized' as a writer."⁶⁰ Finally, H. Daniel Peck, commenting on Thoreau's journal, observes a tension between what Peck calls an associative, relational imagination and a more scientific or categorical imagination.⁶¹

A number of scholars have addressed Thoreau's imagination more directly. Frederick Garber analyzes Thoreau's relationship to the European romantics, his originality, and the "redemptive imagination" he develops in wrestling with the question of the self's relationship to

58. E.B. White. 'The Individualist.' (1949), in *Writings from the New Yorker: 1927-1976* (1990). p. 39.

59. William Peter Michaels. "The Good and the Wild: A Dichotomy in the Works of Thoreau." PhD Dissertation, University of California-Berkeley, 1980.

60. Alfred I. Tauber *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing*. (Los Angeles: Univ. of California, 2001) p. 4.

61. H. Daniel Peck. *Thoreau's Morning Work: Memory and Perception in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers and the Journal and Walden*. (New Haven, Yale Univ., 1990).

nature.⁶² For Garber, Thoreau resides comfortably in the tradition of European Romanticism – represented by Rousseau, S.T. Coleridge, and Wordsworth – but Thoreau’s way of navigating the tension between “self” and “world” is essentially original. Thoreau lives in the tension between the good and the wild, or between reclamation and the wild. He wants to find his place in nature and clear a space for himself, but also to clear a space *within* himself for nature to inhabit. This constitutes Thoreau’s original process of redemption. Garber’s Thoreau seems to achieve such redemption by being as ahistorical and abstract as possible.

Lawrence Buell in his pivotal work, *The Environmental Imagination*,⁶³ also examines the tension in Thoreau’s imagination between "ecocentrism" and "anthropocentrism" as running parallel to similar tensions within environmentalism and American nature writing. While there is much to recommend in Buell’s work, his dichotomy of the imagination fails to account for the complexity of imagination itself. A fuller critique and consideration will be provided in Chapter Five on the environmental imagination.

In *Walden*, Thoreau himself invokes S.T. Coleridge's distinction between "fancy" and "imagination" as powers by which to conceive alternative ways of life.⁶⁴ In his *Journal* entry of July 11th, 1851 he writes, “Our feet must be imaginative, must know the earth in imagination only, as well as our heads.”⁶⁵ Then on August 21st, 1851 he states:

62. Frederick Garber. *Thoreau’s Redemptive Imagination*. (New York: New York Univ., 1977)

63. Buell. (1995)

64. Henry David Thoreau. *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) p. 50. There are an untold number of editions of *Walden* and Thoreau’s essays and works. While the standard edition is that Edited by J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) as part of Princeton Univ. Press’ decades-long effort to publish *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau*, I have chosen to use a copy I have had in my possession the longest and which contains my personal notes and underlining.

65. Henry David Thoreau. *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau: In Fourteen Volumes Bound as Two*. 2 Vols. Ed. by Bradford Torrey and F. H. Allen. Originally published in 1906 by the Houghton Mifflin Company (Mineola, NY:

What a faculty must that be which can paint the most barren landscape and humblest life in glorious colors! It is pure and invigorated senses reacting on a sound and strong imagination. Is not that the poet's case?...It is the marriage of the soul with Nature that makes the intellect fruitful, that gives birth to imagination . When we were dead and dry as the highway, some sense which has been healthily fed will put us in relation with Nature, in sympathy with her; some grains of fertilizing pollen, floating in the air, fall on us, and suddenly the sky is all one rainbow, is full of music and fragrance and flavor. The man of intellect...is a barren, staminiferous flower ; the poet is a...perfect flower .⁶⁶

Despite the importance of imagination for Thoreau and the above scholars, no one has fully and explicitly located the tension in Thoreau's work within his imagination, nor appreciated the importance of this imaginative tension for his political thought. This dissertation aims to remedy these intimately related oversights. This will be accomplished by a new reading of Thoreau's political thought animated by Claes Ryn's theory of imagination and in light of a neglected and ubiquitous tension within that imagination.

The dissertation will be divided into two parts. Part I outlines the theory of imagination and then applies this theory to an understanding of the moral-idyllic tension in Thoreau's moral and political thought. Part II narrows the focus to the role of imagination in Thoreau's view of nature and the non-human world and is considered alongside American environmentalism's considerable debt to his work.

Chapter One presents Claes Ryn's theory of imagination and considers its sources in the work of Benedetto Croce and Irving Babbitt. Ryn's theory will be compared to Thoreau's reflections on the importance of imagination. The significance of Thoreau and Ryn's

Dover Publications, 1962). Vol. II, Ch. VI. p. 300. Though the Princeton edition of the *Writings of Henry D. Thoreau* has currently reissued a more complete and edited version of Thoreau's *Journal* through 1854, I will be using this 1906 version.

66. Thoreau. *The Journal*. Vol. II, Ch. VII. August 21st, 1851. p. 413-414.

understanding of imagination for politics and morality will be examined at length. Drawing on this theory of imagination Chapter Two and Three take a closer look at how Thoreau's imagination informs his view of political morality, human nature, friendship and community. Chapter Four then proceeds to more explicitly political questions of freedom, law, government and slavery in light of the theory of imagination and Thoreau's views on morality and human nature. Throughout Part I, Thoreau is found to live in the tension between the moral and idyllic imagination, but favors the idyllic. His radical concept of autonomy, an ahistorical political morality and his frustration with law, government and community foster a naive and impractical political thought. Nevertheless, Thoreau manages to demonstrate a moral imagination in his emphasis on the inescapable relationship between the moral order of individuals and the order of political communities.

Chapter Five shifts to a focus on the role of imagination in how one views nature and the non-human world. Special attention is given to why Thoreau is critical for this "environmental imagination," and his substantial impact on environmentalism. In Thoreau and in his environmentalist heirs, the tension between the idyllic imagination and the moral imagination manifests itself in a number of ways. Chapter Six examines one form of this tension in relation to what Irving Babbitt calls the "Arcadian longing," and its importance for the politics of wilderness and notions of "rewilding." Chapter Seven analyzes a second form of the idyllic-moral tension with what Babbitt terms the "pursuit of the dream woman," and its importance both for notions of animal rights and the relationship between environmental politics and community. Finally, Chapter Eight looks at the way in which the idyllic-moral tension shapes environmentalism's more religious tendencies. Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight demonstrate the

modern environmental imagination's considerable debt to Thoreau. When combined with Thoreau's notions of political morality, human nature, government, freedom and law, however, his overall vision creates significant problems with which environmentalists still struggle today. While there are a number of virtues in Thoreau's work which recommend themselves to later environmental political thinkers, his frequent capitulation to the idyllic imagination provokes a number of significant vices as well. Reading Thoreau in light of the tension between the moral and idyllic imagination reveals that he is much more complex than what other political theorists have found. The tension reveals, however, that there are elements of Thoreau's legacy which ought to be resisted by the moral imagination as well as elements which warrant imitation.

* * * *

There is a sense, when analyzing one's imagination, in which all thought can be understood as systematic.⁶⁷ But this, by no means, guarantees that such a system will be well organized, easy to identify or to follow. "System," in the sense employed here, is not the imposition of order but a recognition of an order and interconnectedness in which we find ourselves. It is a system and order that makes knowledge of conceptual "wholes" possible. Thoreau, at times, demonstrates a recognition of this order, but he also frequently succumbs to the temptation to rebel against that order and occasionally assert his own. It is no easy task to systematically read a writer who resisted systematic thought as much as possible.

There is considerable virtue in Thoreau's aphoristic style that accommodates a preoccupation with the imagination. Claes Ryn writes that "Thought, like all human life, is

67. Claes G. Ryn. *Will, Imagination, and Reason: Irving Babbitt and the Problem of Reality*. Originally published in 1986. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997) p. xxiv.

continuous activity. Although it contains an element of oneness or identity, namely, that it aims at truth, thought never comes to rest in static ideas divorced from the flow of history. Knowledge is carried by concepts that can be forever improved.”⁶⁸ There is a sense of restlessness, movement and openness animating Thoreau’s striving toward truth. This may be why he held poets and poetry in very high regard and believed, in a manner anticipating Heidegger,⁶⁹ that poetry, rather than prose, more fully expressed the truth of lived experience. By striving for a more poetic and aphoristic expression, Thoreau makes more explicit and transparent the quality of his imagination.

In light of this, it would be tempting to read Thoreau’s incessant use of symbols, allegory, paradox and pictures as a form of esoteric writing. There is no evidence to suggest that Thoreau had any reason to write in this manner. He did not fear the repercussions of what he said, nor was he motivated, unlike his Transcendentalist neighbors, by any need to be deliberately obscure. Thoreau meant what he wrote and wrote what he meant. He could be brutally honest, impulsive, inconsistent and frustratingly paradoxical. He wrote as deliberately as he lived and this premise will remain an important part of the analysis.

This dissertation demonstrates that Thoreau supersedes existing categories of political thought and philosophy, but he is by no means above criticism nor undeserving of admiration. By locating Thoreau’s political thought in a tension between the moral and idyllic imagination, and between the corresponding higher and lower will, this study both appreciates Thoreau’s

68. Ryn. (1997) p. 120.

69. For more on comparing Thoreau and Heidegger, see an essay by one of Thoreau’s most influential 20th-century interpreters, Stanley Cavell, “Night and Day: Heidegger and Thoreau.” in *Appropriating Heidegger*. Ed. by James E. Faulconer. (New York: Cambridge Univ., 2000).

complexity and his complicated legacy – especially for environmental politics and thought.

While, ultimately, I will argue that the more idyllic side of his imagination triumphs most often, he will continue to elude classification. I have every reason to believe he would prefer it that way.

CHAPTER I

IMAGINATION, MORALITY AND POLITICAL THOUGHT

The world is but a canvas to our imaginations.

–Thoreau, *Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* –

The complexity of Thoreau's political thought is best appreciated and understood by analyzing the nature and quality of his imagination. The word "imagination" often provokes conflicting or contradictory assumptions and traditions within the philosophy of mind, aesthetics, psychology, literature, theology, epistemology and more.¹ This chapter begins by outlining the specific theory of imagination animating the overall analysis and considers the theory's primary philosophical sources. It will then move to articulate Thoreau's reflections on imagination, and how his own thought compares with the animating theory. Finally, I will look more carefully at the relationship between imagination and politics by explaining the imagination's role in understanding political morality and human nature.

The imagination is neither a passive faculty nor decaying sense. It is, in the words of S.T. Coleridge, a "power," or a form of consciousness that is synonymous with intuition.² It is

1. Good sources for the history of studies of the imagination are Eva T.H. Brann's *The World of the Imagination: Sum and Substance* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991) and Tamar Gendler's "Imagination" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/imagination/> as well as many others

2. The word "intuition" for Benedetto Croce, discussed shortly, was understood as "immediacy uncontaminated by thought, whereas 'perception' is at once immediacy and thought, or concrete thought." (Claes G. Ryn. *Will, Imagination, and Reason: Irving Babbitt and the Problem of Reality*. Originally published in 1986. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997). p. 141) According to Claes Ryn, the criteria by which Croce made the distinction between intuition and perception was on the basis of intention. Perception *intends* to know reality, intuition disregards the question of reality. As Ryn explains, "Practical acts of will, or decisions, on the other hand

creative and constitutive of our most basic sense of reality— human freedom, morality, truth, beauty, etc. The imagination, according to Claes Ryn, both shapes and is shaped by will/desire and is capable of a broad and qualitatively diverse range of intuition which varies depending on one's orientation of will. It is most fundamentally through imagination that an individual or group of people hold an intuitive sense of what is real, right, wrong, good, true and beautiful. Ryn's theory acknowledges the inevitable limitations of subjectivity and time without denying the presence and relevance of universality.³ The overall goal is not to expose a form of esoteric writing or to disproportionately emphasize what Thoreau did *not* say, but to identify the underlying pre-rational unity and vision which animated his arguments, assertions and behavior.

Ryn, Babbitt and Croce on Imagination

Claes Ryn has developed a method for understanding the tension that recurs in the imagination and for interpreting its importance for politics. While the work of several significant thinkers will be incorporated, two have been of particular interest to Ryn: Harvard literary scholar Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) and his contemporary, the influential Italian philosopher

are such stuff as perceptions are 'made on.' Decision-action as a doing is followed by an undergoing; perception is the reflective awareness of this doing and undergoing. 'This is real' means, 'this is decision-action and subsequent undergoing.' 'This is unreal' means, 'this is a projection of mere desires.' (Ryn (1997) p. 142-143) In other words, intuition becomes aware of itself through perception, but that intuition still has content and influences decisions and our reflection on that intuition. Using the words "imagination" and "intuition" interchangeably then emphasizes the former's pre-rational nature and immediacy. Identifying perception as reflective awareness of that intuition shows how that intuition shapes and is shaped by the quality of our will/intention. While I could conceivably use only the word intuition instead of imagination, the latter term more effectively evokes the importance of creative works of imagination which are critical to giving intuition its content. Furthermore, the immediacy of intuition seems (incorrectly) to exempt it from qualitative distinctions, undermining the possibility that a "moral" or "idyllic" intuition could even exist. Because the criterion of an intuition/imagination's quality is dependent on reality, however, that pre-rational immediacy can still be evaluated based on its hold on life as it actually is. Intuition is not morally neutral, and the term "imagination" arguably captures this reality more effectively.

3. The role which universality plays within this theory may not be immediately obvious here, but it will be clarified later on.

Benedetto Croce (1866-1952). Drawing on these prolific thinkers, Ryn has developed an innovative theory of imagination that expands the analysis of political behavior, political morality, epistemology, aesthetics and the philosophy of history.

Ryn's theory of imagination elucidates the relationship between will and imagination, and expands the repertoire of questions and ideas subjected to the scrutiny of political theory. He defines will as "the generic, categorical name for that infinity and variety of impulse that orients the individual to particular tasks."⁴ We think and do what we will to do; what we desire to do.⁵ The will "sustains" and directs human character and behavior, but the direction that our will takes is informed by the imagination. The relationship of the will and imagination is complicated further by the fact that "in one sense," Ryn argues, "will and imagination are the same. A desire, in reaching the human consciousness, is no longer some blind practical urge. Even a seemingly simple impulse to quench one's thirst immediately translates itself into imagination."⁶ The will/desire becomes aware of itself by means of the imagination.⁷ Precisely how that desire translates into imagination, however, is informed by the quality of imagination – a quality determined by its hold on reality. Given humans' intrinsic moral predicament, namely the struggle between good and evil, it follows that the will and imagination underlie this tension:

If will decides the direction of human activity, Babbitt also emphasizes that the human will is dualistic, forever torn between higher and lower potentialities. Both of these poles of man's being express themselves in imagination. Transfigured into more or less poetic intuition, the higher or lower desires acquire the power that comes with concreteness, sensual texture, immediacy. As intuitions they are

4. Claes G. Ryn. *Will, Imagination, and Reason: Irving Babbitt and the Problem of Reality*. Originally published in 1986. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997). p. 147.

5. A number of words fit what Ryn is communicating by using the word will. Among them he lists "desire, wish, aspiration, impulse, interest, inclination, passion." Ryn (1997) p. 147.

6. Ryn (1997) p. 148.

7. Ryn (1997) p. 148.

not realized in practice; but, as living visions of what life could be, they stir the human self, inviting practical action consonant with themselves...[The higher will] is never present to man in its fullness. It is a potentiality for Good to be progressively realized in continuous tension with an opposite quality of will. To become more fully realized, the ethical will needs the power of imagination to give it concreteness and to draw the human will more deeply into its own potentiality of goodness.⁸

The imagination, then, holds considerable power over the identity and character of an individual or a group. It gives content to individuality and human relationships and places. This means that the study of man must place considerable emphasis on art, tradition and experience as fundamental influences on humanity and reason.

Worldviews and ideologies, alternative frameworks to which political theorists attach considerable importance, tend to pick and choose which pieces of reality their abstractions will or will not accommodate. Worldviews and ideologies are evaluated more on the basis of their logical or rational coherence than on whether they are politically practical and realistic. By focusing on tensions between the higher and lower will and *within* the imagination, Ryn's theory moves beyond discussions of tensions between ideologies, allows an incisive reflection on moral and spiritual questions and makes possible a deeper investigation of a person's sense of reality. Logical coherence, on the other hand, is not indicative of one's hold on reality.

Ryn's most fundamental epistemological argument is "that knowledge of reality rests upon a certain orientation of the will and upon the corresponding quality of imagination (intuition) that the will begets. Reason is dependent for the truth and comprehensiveness of its concepts on the depth and scope of the material that it receives from the imagination."⁹ In other

8. Ryn (1997) p. 148.

9. Ryn. (1997) p. 16.

words, an effective epistemology and an adequate notion of philosophical reason require extensive attention to the intuitive and ethico-practical side of thought. One should not attend to either the universal or to the historical particulars of life at the expense of the other. Ryn describes the connection between intuition and reason as occurring when “philosophical reason joins the universal and the historical.”¹⁰ Human beings become who they are and develop their view of the world through the interplay of will, imagination and reason.

Ryn’s theory is not meant merely to describe this interplay of imagination, will and reason; it intends to fully assess its fruits. Ethically admirable or “higher” will and a corrupt “lower” will can be distinguished, but modern philosophy, according to Ryn and Babbitt, fails to offer a compelling criterion for this distinction because it ignores experiential fruits.¹¹ In particular, “attempts by modern philosophy to solve the problem of knowledge rest on a vain belief in abstract rationality.”¹² Appeals to such rationality “signify a failure to understand that, in the end, man will attach himself only to a standard of reality that has immediacy and concreteness – that is, one firmly established in experience.”¹³ The criterion for the dichotomy between the higher and lower will (and, in aesthetics, between the moral and idyllic imagination) then, is concrete experiential reality of a certain kind – our own and that of others.¹⁴ The distinction assumes that a particular quality of will is inherently what it should be; that is conducive to what Aristotle would call happiness (*eudaimonia*). Ryn assumes that this moral

10. Ryn. (1997) p. 17.

11. This understanding of one kind of will having a moral direction is admittedly controversial among other streams of thought, and especially those standing outside of, or in opposition to Christianity. As Ryn writes, “it has seemed to intellectualists virtually self-evident that will as such lacks moral or other direction, whereas reason possesses insight and hence the proper authority to govern the will.” Ryn (1997) p. xix.

12. Ryn. (1997) p. 25.

13. Ryn. (1997) p. 25.

14. In keeping with Babbitt’s own line of thought, what qualifies as “experience” is not artificially restricted.

reality can only be known in experience, but is nevertheless subject to philosophical investigation.¹⁵ The will becomes central to this investigation because “more than anywhere else, man discovers the essence of reality in ethical action.”¹⁶ Babbitt and Ryn place a high priority on moral character over theorizing when it comes to questions of epistemology. As Ryn explains:

Theorizing about the nature of moral virtue will not bring the individual much closer to understanding those values unless he also has some experience of them in concrete action. Philosophizing about the good can easily become an excuse or pretext for not doing what is always more difficult, namely getting on with the task of good action. The crux of the ethical life, Babbitt argues, is not acquiring definitive theoretical knowledge of the good, which is beyond man, but the ability to *act* on whatever ethical insight one does have.¹⁷

The struggle to know reality and to will the good is a permanent task of human civilization. No human being can gain access to truth in its entirety, nor will moral order ever be realized completely. The fundamental limitations of human existence present an obstacle to a full understanding of reality, but such an admission must not be construed as a concession to radical subjectivism, skepticism or relativism. The moral and philosophical life constantly involves a struggle between an attunement or will to reality and a revolt against, or an evasion of, reality. For Ryn and Babbitt, and for the purposes of this study, this attunement and movement towards reality characterizes the higher will and the corresponding moral imagination, while the revolt or

15. There is an important sense in which this moral good can be referred to as “transcendent.” The word “transcendence,” however, is a particularly problematic concept in the context of this study. It means something rather different for Ryn than it does for Thoreau and Emerson. For Ryn, there exists “an ethical imperative that transcends particular historical circumstances,” but he does “not assume a pre-existing ideal reality, a universal model or plan for individual and society.” (Ryn, 1997, p. xiii). His fear is that invoking knowledge of a transcendent, ideal order may provide a “spiritual sanction” for an ahistorical, abstract ideal which may claim a kind of absolute authority regardless of historical circumstances. For Ryn, “one of the valid meanings of transcendence is that goodness may be realized in forever new circumstances.” (Ryn, 1997, p. xii).

16. Ryn (1997) p. 26.

17. Ryn (1997) p. 26.

evasion distinguishes the lower will and the idyllic imagination. The moral imagination and the higher will strive for and express moderation, order, prudence, proportion and the restraints of tradition and civilization. The idyllic imagination, on the other hand, favors what is spontaneous, “wild,” unrestrained and merely sentimental. The latter kind of imagination celebrates human freedom understood as opposed to the inhibitions of tradition, civilization and historical experience.

It is important to note that the tensions within which Thoreau lives are not *between* extremes but between a balance or mean with *both* extremes. Furthermore, the tension between the idyllic and moral imagination always takes place within the same person. Thoreau, like most individuals, is never wholly given to one or the other,¹⁸ and reading his work often leads to an examination of one’s self. As Croce remarked, “Great artists are said to reveal us to ourselves.”¹⁹ Thoreau is no exception. The purpose of this study is not to identify Thoreau as wholly moral or idyllic, but to understand how his living and thinking between the two types of imagination shape who he was, inform what he said and explain his legacy.

18. I am not suggesting that Thoreau was a “personalist” in any of the many ways that term is used. It is not inconceivable that he would have been familiar with the notion, however, given the first known use of the term in English was made the year after Thoreau’s death by Bronson Alcott. And Walt Whitman published his essay “Personalism” in *The Galaxy* in May 1868. It will also be noted that, given personalism’s origins in German thought, we ought not be surprised if Thoreau shows an early sympathy for this direction. The literature on personalism is considerable, but an excellent place to start is Thomas D. Williams and Jan Olof Bengtsson, “Personalism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014) <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/personalism/>.

19. Benedetto Croce. *Aesthetic: As Science of Expression & General Linguistic*. Trans. by Douglas Ainslie. Reprint 1909. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1995) p. 14.

Forms of Consciousness and Moments of Immediate Experience

The interplay of will, imagination and reason produce the behaviors and beliefs which constitute morality.²⁰ This is why Ryn observes that, “in one sense, will and imagination are the same.”²¹ The imagination of a concrete action and the *desire* to perform that action are simultaneous. The desire would be unaware of itself without images of concrete action, and the action or the imaging would not take place without a corresponding will/desire.

What, then, does Ryn’s theory of imagination offer for the purposes of reading, interpreting and analyzing a particular work or thinker? We begin with the “powers,” or the forms of consciousness identified as will, imagination and reason.²² Using the distinction between “moral” and “idyllic,” we must ask: Which side of that dichotomy is favored by the interplay of those faculties? Babbitt approaches this subject by distinguishing three “moments” in immediate experience. He terms them “perception,” “conception” and “discrimination,” which can happen in any order and may appear to occur simultaneously.²³

In explicating Babbitt’s meaning of will and imagination, Ryn builds on and sharpens ideas that are underdeveloped or implicit in Babbitt’s thought. “Perception,” Ryn explains, for example, “is another term for concrete thought; it is an act in which immediate experience

20. It is important to note that the working understanding of morality here entails a broader concept of ethics, in the sense of duties, human flourishing and the development of character. It includes the interplay of an intuitive sense of the larger moral order and the choices Thoreau makes within that order. The order participates in the action and the action participates in the order.

21. Ryn (1997) p. 148.

22. It is also important here to note, as Ryn does, that “will, imagination, and reason are not ‘things.’ They are potentialities of life, forms of activity and consciousness.” (Ryn, 1997, p. xxi).

23. Drawing them out as distinctive moments is helpful for constructing our analytic framework, though this separation should not be construed as delineating their chronology or priority.

acquires conceptual self-awareness.”²⁴ The mind has turned from pure intuition – that is, an intuition unaware of a distinction between real and unreal²⁵ – to *inquiring* about concrete reality and its relationship to historical experience. A judgment is being made as to whether that which is perceived is real and not *merely* intuitive or a figment. Perception is the immediate experience of man’s deliberate act to know, and is not the same as so-called “sense impressions”; rather, it is an apprehension of meaningful *wholes*. We experience wholes within other wholes in a world that is interconnected, historical and intelligible though also mysterious. In Croce’s words, perception is “the apprehension of something as *real*.”²⁶ But perception *begins* in intuition, Croce explains. “Perception is intuition...[T]his means that the distinction between reality and non reality is extraneous, secondary to the true nature of intuition.”²⁷ Ryn connects Croce’s explication of perception to Babbitt’s idea of the moral imagination. The apprehension of reality *as real* is the ability to distinguish what is merely intuition-imagination, which may be true to historical reality or not, from that which exists historically, the latter owing its sense of reality to the moral imagination.

Grasping historical reality must not be construed as the objectification of reality. Croce writes, “Intuition is the undifferentiated unity of the perception of the real and of the simple image of the possible. In our intuitions we do not oppose ourselves as empirical beings to external reality, but we simply objectify our impressions, whatever they may be.”²⁸ The perception of reality, on the other hand, separates mere intuition from what is rooted in the

24. Ryn (1997) p. 69.

25. Croce (1995) p. 4.

26. Croce (1995) p. 3.

27. Croce (1995) p. 3.

28. Croce (1995) p. 4.

actual, historical world. The philosophical mind or reason is that which makes the distinction. It looks back on what was just intuited, separating reality from dream. This reason is neither independent of, nor a substitute for, life as actually lived. It is an integral part of our humanity. Imagination/intuition provides the material with which reason “works,” and the power or ability either to imagine or perceive is dependent on the will directing us. *Who* we are with respect to will has profound implications for what we imagine and what we perceive.

Perception is the apprehension of the immediate experience of wholes, but the recognition and analysis of those wholes – their shape and character – involves the use of concepts. By means of concepts, philosophy intellectually elaborates the intuition of historically grounded wholes. Babbitt contends, then, “[i]f we mean by imagination not merely what we perceive, but what we conceive, it follows inevitably that the problem of the imagination is closely bound up with that of the One and the Many.”²⁹ “What we conceive” is Babbitt’s way of speaking of the synthetic roll of the imagination, and the ability of the imagination to grasp the universal – a capacity which older philosophical traditions attached only to reason. Before 1917 Croce, too, seemed to argue that only philosophical reason and concepts expressed the universal,³⁰ while intuition as such, that is, intuition without conceptual perception, were only about the particular and individual. Later, Ryn observes, Croce became more willing to admit what Babbitt stressed, that “there can be an ‘imaginative perception of the universal’”³¹ prior to reason. This ability is what Babbitt calls ‘the moral imagination,’ which conjoins the universal and the particular in its fidelity to reality. In moments of imaginative “conception,” then,

29. Irving Babbitt. *Democracy and Leadership*. 1924 Reprint. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1979) p. 35.

30. Croce (1995) p. 42.

31. Ryn (1997) p. 185 (and see p. 187).

universals and particulars (Babbitt's "One" and the "Many") are synthesized into complex wholes or "worlds." Babbitt further emphasizes that this quality of imagination is deeply tied to the higher will. We often resist, for example, what we do not *want* to see and embrace what we wish were the case. Persuasion, as Ryn illustrates, is often difficult if the persuader and the individual being persuaded have contradictory intuitions of the world or conflicting visions of the universal and particular. Reason alone may be inadequate to the task. The ethical will centers human imagination and roots it in the real world, but will of a different kind may pull the imagination into self-serving illusion, making persuasion increasingly difficult. We perceive and conceive what we do because of who we are, and much of what makes human relationships "work," is built on the extent to which we share common perceptions and conceptions of the world we find ourselves in.

The centrality of personal identity and will is particularly important in the moment that Babbitt calls "discrimination"—the ability to distinguish different types of imagination. Babbitt writes, "To determine the quality of our imaginings, we need to supplement the power in man that perceives and the power that conceives with a third power – that which discriminates."³² "Discrimination" refers, in short, to the ability to separate reality from illusion. For Croce this is the office of philosophical reason, while for Babbitt, knowledge of reality requires a *discipline* of resisting idyllic intuitions of the world and of affirming the moral imagination. Moral virtue, character and knowledge are not primarily dependent on the depth of one's theoretical knowledge, but, rather, on the quality of one's will and the ability to discriminate. "The crux of the ethical life, Babbitt argues, is not acquiring definitive theoretical knowledge of the good,

32. Babbitt (1979) p. 36.

which is beyond man, but the ability to *act* on whatever ethical insight one does have.”³³ The primacy of practical activity is critical for understanding the moral and idyllic imagination, for both are shaped by the will – the former by diligent exercise of the higher will, the latter by a lazy self-indulgent will. The moral imagination corresponds to a will toward reality and what Babbitt calls “civilization” while the idyllic imagination clouds or distorts reality. Will and imagination work in concert to make us more or less receptive to the world as it really is. In the end, the ability to discriminate among illusory and realistic notions depends on the ethical will orienting us to reality:

In emphasizing the importance of the power in man that discriminates, I mean this power, working not abstractly, but on the actual material of experience. I may perhaps best sum up my whole point of view by saying that the only thing that finally counts in this world is a concentration, at once imaginative and discriminating, on the facts. Now the facts that one may perceive and on which one may concentrate are not only infinite in number, but of entirely different orders.³⁴

Humans’ capacity for discrimination determines whether we will give the appropriate emphasis to the central facts of life and then be able to live in the real world or whether we will adopt more or less illusory versions of it. When we analyze the writings of someone like Thoreau, we are reading expressions of his imagination. His intuitions color and shape his more historical-philosophical observations. What does he perceive as important or universal? How does he synthesize, or fail to synthesize, universality with the particulars of human experience? How and why did he pick that synthesis or articulate that expression or use that example? Thoreau’s writings and their moral and intellectual quality ought not to be interpreted or judged

33. Ryn (1997) p. 26.

34. Babbitt (1979) p. 36

apart from how his imagination works. As will be discussed later, Thoreau would not want his readers to make such a separation.

This understanding of imagination and the will draws attention to the great influence of artists, poets, composers and women and men of literature. Emerson remarks in this vein that “Not he is great who can alter matter, but he who can alter my state of mind.”³⁵ As Ryn explains:

A recurring theme of [*Will, Imagination, and Reason*], belonging to its philosophical core, is the great extent to which our outlook on life is influenced, for good or ill, by the imagination, and most especially by the imaginative masterminds – poets, novelists, composers, painters, and others. Collectively they decide the tenor of an age. They have a way of penetrating our personalities, directly or indirectly. They draw us into their visions in intricate and subtle ways, making us see the world through their eyes.³⁶

The importance and power of appealing to the imagination and to create and inspire “visions” of life, morality and politics is a key reason for Thoreau’s influence among political theorists. His imaginative vision continues to persuade and provoke. He continues to hold considerable sway in a number of ways and especially over American environmentalism. As Lawrence Buell observes, “Thoreau has had a history of changing peoples’ lives...and one cannot understand any historical actor’s significance without confronting posterity’s repossession of him.”³⁷ Thoreau’s ability to “change” people is to a great extent attributable to the pull of his imagination.

35. Ralph Waldo Emerson. “The American Scholar.” in *Nature and Selected Essays*. Edited by Larzer Ziff. (New York: Penguin, 1982) p. 98.

36. Ryn (1997) p. xv.

37. Buell (1995) p. 312.

My use of Ryn's theory of imagination is not arbitrary.³⁸ While he draws primarily on Irving Babbitt and Benedetto Croce, he is also indebted to Edmund Burke, John Dewey, S.T. Coleridge, Immanuel Kant, Aristotle and others, and his synthesizing of their influence is particularly relevant to a study of Thoreau. I adopt Ryn's theory for a number of reasons, but two are particularly prescient for this study.

First, Ryn's theory self-consciously resists reductionist explanations of reality and persons. As Irving Babbitt observed, "when studied with any degree of thoroughness, the economic problem will be found to run into the political problem, the political problem in turn into the philosophical problem, and the philosophical problem itself to be almost indissolubly bound up at last with the religious problem."³⁹ The imagination at its best brings all aspects of life – experience, desires, character, faith, etc. – into an intricate and unified whole without reducing those aspects to the whole nor isolating them. Human interconnectedness and historicity require an understanding of the complexity of circumstances. The moral imagination defies the identification of persons as merely voters, taxpayers, consumers, employees and minds, and views our humanity as an infinite web of complex relationships, meaning and mystery.

Second, as I explain later in this chapter, Ryn's theory coincides consistently, though not entirely, with Thoreau's understanding of imagination. The moral-idyllic tension within Thoreau's imagination is inspired largely by the work of the European Romantics, such as

38. Claes Ryn's theory of imagination, interestingly, and to the best of my knowledge, has been virtually ignored by others studying the imagination in politics, philosophy, aesthetics, theology, and so on. A project placing Ryn's theory of imagination, built upon his synthesis of Irving Babbitt and Benedetto Croce, in conversation with other theories of imagination would be of considerable value and interest. The present work, however, will not endeavor to perform this much needed service.

39. Babbitt. (1979) p. 29.

Coleridge, Wordsworth and the German Idealists.⁴⁰ To understand Thoreau as he understood himself requires significant attention to the manner in which these traditions, and his occasional departures from them, manifest themselves in his thought.⁴¹ While a comprehensive reading of Thoreau's sources and debts cannot be undertaken here, the fact that Ryn's account of the imagination draws, in part, on these same sources suggests a significant compatibility with Thoreau's own self-understanding.

Thoreau on the Imagination

I do not think much of the actual, it is something that we have long since done [away] with. It is [a] sort of vomit in which the unclean love to wallow.

– Thoreau, *Journal*, July 1850 –

I find that actual events, notwithstanding the singular prominence which we all allow them, are far less real than the creations of my imagination.

– Thoreau, Letter to H.G.O. Blake, 9 August 1850 –

The explosion in scientific discoveries during Thoreau's life, the peculiar cast of literary characters in and around his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts and his interest in travel

40. As to the last influence, Robert D. Richardson, Jr. writes, "One simply could not expect, in 1837 [(the year Thoreau graduated from Harvard)], to understand the advanced intellectual atmosphere of the times without taking up Germany." Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Orestes Brownson, for example, were all preoccupied with German language and literature, including the works of Kant, Herder, Hegel and especially Goethe. Robert D. Richardson Jr. *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*. (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California, 1986) p. 27.

41. An excellent resource for considering Thoreau's "sources," is Robert Sattelmeyer. *Thoreau's Reading: A Study in Intellectual History, with bibliographical catalog*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 1988) as well as the intellectual biography by Robert D. Richardson mentioned earlier. Reading more broadly, and on the German influences for New England Transcendentalism specifically, see René Welleck. *Confrontation: Studies in the Intellectual and Literary Relations Between Germany, England, and the United States During the Nineteenth Century*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Uni., 1965); Philip F. Gura. *American Transcendentalism: A History*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); and Henry A. Pochmann. *German Culture in America: Philosophical and Literary Influences, 1600-1900*. (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin, 1957).

literature and the natural world provided considerable provocation for the creative imagination. A thoughtful individual of his time and place would be unlikely to overlook and reflect on the imagination's importance. It is no surprise, then, that such a concern appears rather early, beginning with Thoreau's days as a student at Harvard.

In September of 1836, Thoreau composed an essay with the topic assigned as follows: "The Love of stories, real or fabulous, in young and old. Account for it, and show what good use it may serve."⁴² His response, though only that of a nineteen-year-old and written for the purpose of a class, is quite telling. He writes of the mystery of life and the way in which the love of pleasure – especially that afforded by novelty – has considerable bearing on what we do and who we are. As Thoreau explains:

[I]t by no means follows that those topics most replete with instruction will afford us the greatest pleasure. The love of novelty grows with our growth. Not satisfied with the world around us, we delight to revel in an imaginary one of our own creation. The ideas afforded by sensation and reflection are seized upon with avidity by the imagination, and so combined and arranged as to form new wholes of surpassing beauty, awfulness, or sublimity, as the case may be. It is in the exercise of this divine faculty that age finds its readiest solace, and youth its supreme delight. A mutual inter-change of imaginings serves not a little to enlarge the field of enjoyment.⁴³

Despite being downplayed as merely a college essay, this passage reveals an extraordinary amount of Thoreau's understanding of the imagination, most of which he retains throughout his life. This "divine faculty" of imagination eschews didacticism and works to synthesize and integrate "sensation" and "reflection" (similar to "perception" and "conception") into wholes. These wholes are the narratives or visions of life which inform how we live.

42. Henry David Thoreau. *Early Essays and Miscellanies*. Ed. by Joseph J. Moldenhauer and Edwin Moser, with Alexander C. Kern. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 1975) p. 45.

43. Thoreau. *Early Essays*. p. 45-46.

Significantly, Thoreau focuses on the imagination's ability to give meaning to the novelty of life, and to offer an escape or solace to both young and old. Indeed, it would seem the activity of the imagination is more important for pleasure than for virtue and character, though he would increasingly appreciate the ethical dimension of the imagination.

Finally, "a mutual inter-changing of imaginings," the encounter one has with the imaginative expressions of others, shapes what we love and who we become. This interchange "reconciles us to the world – our friends – ourselves"⁴⁴ and contributes to the formation of individual character. These imaginings and subsequent expressions are deeply moral moments for Thoreau:

In fine, the same passion for the novel, somewhat modified to be sure, that is manifested in our early days, leads us in after life, when the sprightliness and credulity of youth have given way to the reserve and skepticism of manhood, to the more serious, though scarcely less wonderful, annals of the world. Whatever is said or done, seen or heard, is in any way taken cognizance of by the senses or the understanding, produces its effect – contributes its mite towards to the formation of the character. Every sentence that is framed, every word that is uttered, is framed or uttered for good or for evil, nothing is lost.⁴⁵

Stories become one of the building blocks of our moral foundations. They are the "principles of our principles."⁴⁶ Much like Ryn's theory of imagination, Thoreau puts tremendous responsibility and influence into the hands of authors and other artists whose expression necessarily evokes a vision of what is real, right, wrong, good, true and beautiful. Unlike Ryn, however, the young Thoreau seems less concerned with whether or not the imagination is rooted in reality. Escapism is not a problem and may even be a sign of maturity.

44. Thoreau. *Early Essays*. p. 46.

45. Thoreau. *Early Essays*. p. 46-47.

46. Thoreau. *Early Essays*. p. 47.

Still, there is something about the love of stories that requires honesty, morality and even fosters community. “The Love of Stories and Story-telling,” he concludes the essay, “cherishes a purity of heart, a frankness and candor of disposition, a respect for what is generous and elevated, a contempt for what is mean and dishonorable, a proper regard *for*, and independence *of*, the petty trials of life, & tends to multiply merry companions and never-failing friends.”⁴⁷ There is something about the love of stories that evokes one’s moral compass and discernment. Yet Thoreau does not seem willing to discriminate between moral and idyllic stories.

A second Harvard essay responds to the assigned prompt, “whether the cultivation of the Imagination conduce to the happiness of the individual.”⁴⁸ He begins by declaring that “man is an intellectual being”⁴⁹ and that cultivation of this intellect is necessary both for the sake of honoring the Creator and of maintaining our free agency. Where then does imagination fit in this cultivation and what is its relationship to reason? He writes:

If reason was given us for any one purpose more than any other, it was, that we might so regulate our conduct as to ensure our eternal happiness. The cultivation of the mind, then, is conducive to our happiness. But this cultivation consists in the cultivation of its several faculties. What we call the Imagination is one of these, hence does its culture, in a measure, conduce to the happiness of the individual.⁵⁰

Imagination is a faculty and a component of the intellect that is subordinate to reason. It is unclear here how sincere Thoreau’s formulation is. The previous essay on stories seems animated by a tone consistent with his later thoughts on the subject of art and imagination, while this subordination of imagination to reason seems more like pandering for a good grade. One can

47. Thoreau. *Early Essays* p. 47.

48. Thoreau. *Early Essays*. p. 47.

49. Thoreau. *Early Essays*. p. 47.

50. Thoreau. *Early Essays* p. 48.

only speculate, of course, but Thoreau *does* maintain here and elsewhere that the imagination is neither passive nor a decaying sense. It participates in knowing and doing alongside the discriminating function of reason. It is, in keeping with the European Romantics' reappraisal of the imagination, *creative*:

Whatever the senses perceive, or the mind takes cognizance of, affords food for the Imagination. In whatever situation a man may be placed, to whatever straits he may be reduced, this faculty is ever busy. Its province is unbounded, its flights are not confined to space, the past and the future, time and eternity, all come within the sphere of its range. This power, almost coeval with reason itself, is a fruitful source of terror to the child. This it is that suggests to his mind the idea of an invisible monster lying in wait to carry him off in the obscurity of the night. Whether acquired or not, it is obviously susceptible of a high degree of cultivation.⁵¹

The imagination is of great importance for Thoreau. He goes on to encourage persons to balance a cultivation of the mind, body and imagination, never attending to one and unduly neglecting the other. This neglect would fail to cultivate the full human person and realize his or her complexity, thereby frustrating the pursuit of happiness. "Unlike most other pleasures" he explains, "those of the Imagination are not momentary and evanescent, its powers are rather increased than worn out by exercise; the old, no less than the young, find their supreme delight in the building of cob-houses and air castles out of the fragments of different conceptions. It is not so with the pleasures of sense."⁵² He again omits any criteria by which to evaluate that cultivation of imagination. Simply accumulating more "material" from experience and reflection and from the imaginings of others is not itself indicative of a moral or corrupt imagination. What

51. Thoreau. *Early Essays*. p. 49.

52. Thoreau. *Early Essays*. p. 49.

does one *do* with the imaginative vision, and why prefer some visions over others? What role has the *will* in relation to the imagination?

The limitations and insights of the young Thoreau are instructive. First, Thoreau stands in the rather young (at the time) tradition of those building on and reformulating the pre-romantic and classical understanding of imagination as essentially passive, imitative or as merely a kind of mental mirror.⁵³ While more primitive sources of aesthetic philosophy, such as those of Plato and Aristotle, were sympathetic to the sense of a whole, unified vision, they did not fully appreciate the creative and ethical side of this “power,” nor would they have necessarily understood an artistic expression as reflective of the character of the artist. Beginning with Rousseau and the romantics, as well as with figures such as Dugald Stewart – whom Thoreau had read for the Harvard essays discussed above – the imagination’s creative and illuminative nature emerged as central to knowledge. As M.H. Abrams observes, though, the older understanding was not entirely absent in the era preceding Thoreau: “The concept that the inventive process, in its boldest flights, consist in the severances of sensible wholes into parts and the aggregation of parts into new wholes united even antagonistic schools of eighteenth century philosophy.”⁵⁴ Still, a number of great thinkers and leaders, particularly Wordsworth and Coleridge, began to acknowledge that man’s moral character had considerable bearing on his or her *capacity* to know

53. For more on the nature of this tradition and the changes taking place in Thoreau’s time and in the works of others regarding the study of the imagination, see M.H. Abrams. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. (New York: Oxford Univ., 1953).

54. Abrams (1953). p. 161.

and *what* one came to know and express.⁵⁵ The imagination was now revealed to be more active, constructing wholes as well as experiencing them.

Even if the creative side of the imagination is appreciated, one can overlook, as the young Thoreau had, the importance of the ethical side of knowledge. This oversight was a significant shortcoming in the earlier writings of Benedetto Croce. Irving Babbitt and Croce both follow the Romantic tradition of acknowledging the imagination's creative potential as well as its interplay with will and reason. Both appreciated the imagination's capacity for synthesizing the universal and particular and the evocation of "wholes." Yet Croce's early work did not seem to grasp the sense in which imagination may construct and provide an intuition of *unity*, but not necessarily an intuition of reality. Ryn recognized Croce's shortcomings in this regard and found Babbitt to be an essential corrective. Ryn argues that "[e]pistemology can learn from Babbitt that for a person to be receptive to truth, his intuitive-volitive orientation must predispose him toward reality. No amount of argumentation will overcome a faulty theory of man and society unless the arguments are designed to undermine the imaginative construction dear to the heart which energizes and gives appeal to the theory."⁵⁶ In other words, humans see, hear and believe what they *want* to see, hear and believe. Reason itself is subject to this "intuitive-volitive orientation," but Croce did not believe that reason could be fallible, and by extension nor could the intuition/imagination be distorted.⁵⁷ Babbitt and Ryn have rightly recovered the importance of

55. This distinction between the pre-romantic and Romantic conceptions of imagination is indebted to Abrams (1953).

56. Ryn (1997) p. 158.

57. Ryn writes, "According to Croce, reason always gives truth; otherwise it is not reason. 'False reasoning' is a round square. Error is due to the interference with the work of reason by some passion that causes a break in the chain of valid arguments. Error is the absence of thought. This holds true for both philosophical and pragmatic

ethical will for the cultivation of the imagination. Thoreau would eventually move in a similar direction by acknowledging the importance of moral character and the ethical life for the acquisition of knowledge, but his temptation to surrender to the idyllic imagination exposes significant divergence from Ryn, Croce and Babbitt as well.

Thoreau does not provide a systematic theory of knowledge in the same sense as the theory animating this study. Still, beyond the Harvard essays, he did speak of imagination and was occasionally transparent as to how he understood its importance.⁵⁸ The following specific points can be made about how this understanding of imagination emerges in Thoreau's work, and these will begin to demonstrate the overlap between Thoreau's account and especially that of Ryn and Babbitt's interest in the ethical element of knowing.

First, according to Thoreau, one must be prepared for what they will see. Perception, conception and discrimination require an imagination sufficiently cultivated to see and desire reality in as comprehensive a sense as possible. We see what we want to see, and we see it *as* we want to see it. Experience, desire, emotion, awareness of physical and historical context – these things contribute to what we see and how we interpret it. As Thoreau explained briefly, “We cannot see anything unless we are possessed with the idea of it, and then we can hardly see

thought. An error in mathematical calculation means that at some point we just did not think. There was a blur and a deceptive hope that the result would still be correct.” Ryn (1997) p. 154.

58. Alfred Tauber notes, for example that: “*Imagination* is the Romantic faculty par excellence. It is to imagination that Thoreau turns again and again as the cognitive apparatus upon which he builds his history, his science, his poetry. In the Journal, the vision of Walden Pond, first appearing to him as a child, remains scored in Thoreau's *imagination*, actively working and directing him. The memory is no longer *of* the past, but resides firmly *in* his active present. His entire life is devoted to the emancipation of that imagination, the free expression of all that this muse might hold for him, whether expressed by him as a naturalist, a historian, a philosopher, or a poet.” Tauber's reading of Thoreau moves in the right direction and appreciates the extent to which imagination was central to Thoreau's work. Alfred I Tauber. *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing*. (Los Angeles: Univ. of California, 2001) p. 62.

anything else.”⁵⁹ In the essay “Life Without Principle,” Thoreau writes that “Only the character of the hearer determines to which it shall be open, and to which closed.”⁶⁰ Alfred Tauber observes that, for Thoreau, “Knowledge is selective. We know what we want to know, or at least seek knowledge in the particular context of self-interest. Each of us follows his or her unique train.”⁶¹ Not only are we *prepared* then, but we are potentially limited and/or enlarged by our subjectivity, which we cannot and need not escape. Thoreau writes in the *Journal* that:

There is no such thing as pure objective observation. Your observation, to be interesting, i.e. to be significant, must be subjective. The sum of what the writer of what ever class has to report is simply some human experience, whether he be poet or philosopher or man of science. The man of most science is the man most alive, whose life is the greatest event. Senses that take cognizance of outward things merely are of no avail. It matters not where or how far you travel, – the farther commonly the worse, – but how much alive you are. If it is possible to conceive of an event outside to humanity, it is not of the slightest significance, though it were the explosion of a planet.⁶²

Earlier he had written in the spirit of this subjectivity that “the question is not what you look at, but what you see.”⁶³ And in a “Natural History of Massachusetts” he reminds his readers of the temporal or historical conditions for *seeing*: “We must look a long time before we can see.”⁶⁴ One’s conscience is the only starting point and that is a good thing for Thoreau and Emerson,⁶⁵ but it also means that one’s moral character is critical to not only *what* one sees and *how* they see it but their *ability* to see in the first place. For Thoreau “there is no neat separation

59. Thoreau. *Journal*, Vol. XI, Ch. 5, November 4th, 1858. p. 285.

60. Henry David Thoreau. “Life Without Principle.” in *The Higher Law: Thoreau on Civil Disobedience and Reform*. Ed. by Wendell Glick (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 2004) p. 172-173.

61. Tauber (2001) p. 2.

62. Thoreau. *Journal*, Vol. VI, Ch. 6, May 6th, 1854. p. 236-237.

63. Thoreau. *Journal*, Vol. II, Ch. 7 August 5th, 1851 p. 373.

64. Henry David Thoreau. “Natural History of Massachusetts” in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*. Vol. V, *Excursions and Poems*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1906). p. 131.

65. Richardson (1986) p. 49.

between knowing the world (epistemologically) and valuing that knowledge (a moral judgment).”⁶⁶ Leo Marx observed a similar aspect of Thoreau, explaining that:

Thoreau is clear, as Emerson seldom was, about the location of meaning and value. He is saying that it does not reside in the natural facts or in social institutions or in anything ‘out there,’ but in consciousness. It is a product of imaginative perception, of the analogy-perceiving, metaphor-making, mythopoetic power of the human mind. For Thoreau, the realization of the golden age is, finally, a matter of private and, in fact, literary experience.⁶⁷

The inescapable centrality of the subject and one’s character means that we cannot separate the author or artist from the work of art. Understood another way, an artistic expression or writing is the fruit of the artist or author’s ethical-aesthetico disposition. We know what we will to know, but that will, and the activity the will begets, provides the substance for the intuition preceding the will/action. That action and the imagination/intuition informing it supply the content of one’s character.

Thoreau writes in his *Journal*, “Our feet must be imaginative, must know the earth in imagination only, as well as our heads.”⁶⁸ Then, in one of his most explicit explanations of how he understands philosophy generally, he writes that:

There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. 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...The philosopher is in advance of his age even in the outward form of his life. He is not fed, sheltered, clothed,

66. Tauber. (2001) p. 6.

67. Leo Mark. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. 1964 Reprint. (New York: Oxford Univ., 2000) p. 264.

68. Thoreau. *Journal* Vol. II, Ch. VI, July 11th, 1851. p. 300.

warmed, like his contemporaries. How can a man be a philosopher and not maintain his vital heat by better methods than other men?⁶⁹

Building and dwelling at Walden Pond are just as important, and just as philosophical, as the writing of *Walden* itself. His trips to Maine and Cape Cod, his excursions to nearby mountains and villages, his lectures and his assistance to runaway slaves and marginalized Irish immigrants were as much a part of his philosophy as was the content of his works. Writing about Thomas Carlyle, Thoreau asserts that “The philosopher’s conception of things will, above all, be truer than other men’s, and his philosophy will subordinate all the circumstances of life. To live like a philosopher is to live, not foolishly, like other men, but wisely and according to universal laws.”⁷⁰ On the one hand, the mention of “universal laws” risks moving the philosopher toward ahistorical abstractions. On the other, Thoreau is bringing to the fore another significant element of his understanding of imagination, which he shares with Emerson: a belief in the unity of knowledge. Claes Ryn observes that:

All human self-understanding and interaction presuppose the synthetic activity of an intuitive Self joining all particular selves. Without the more or less developed intuitive grasp of our common humanity and common world, experience would shatter into chaotic dispersion. The conceptual synthesis of reason presupposes and incorporates the pre-logical synthesis of intuition.⁷¹

The recognition of one’s subjectivity is not itself a blindness to the “common humanity and common world” in which the self participates. Emerson writes, “There is one mind common

69. Henry David Thoreau. *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. Intro by Michael Myer. (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) p. 57.

70. Thoreau. “Thomas Carlyle and His Works.” in Thoreau. *Early Essays and Miscellanies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 1975) p. 256.

71. Ryn (1997) p. 185.

to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same and to all of the same.”⁷² Thoreau, in a similar spirit, observes “Go where we will, we discover infinite change in particulars only, not in generals”⁷³ And in his essay, “Walking,” Thoreau exclaims that “I walk out into a nature such as the old prophets and poets, Menu, Moses, Homer, Chaucer, walked in.”⁷⁴ The world of the Greeks and the Romans is his. As Robert D. Richardson writes, “Thoreau’s conception of history, like Emerson’s, would not concede any superiority to the Greeks and Romans. If nature was the same and if men were the same – two constants in a world of change – then the modern writer stood in relation to his world in just the same way Homer stood in relation to his, and modern achievements could indeed rival the ancients.”⁷⁵ The great writers of history are great inasmuch as their particularity partakes of the same universal, timeless reality which Thoreau himself can access. The problem for Thoreau, as will be seen in later chapters, is that this particularity is viewed more as an obstacle in the realm of politics than it is in the world of poetry, literature and art.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of imagination for Thoreau. He was deeply concerned with how one *sees* and understands, and what that meant for how one lives. “The Imagination,” Tauber writes, is “as close to a vital center as we might find in Thoreau’s moral cosmos, [and it] is more than our faculty by which to understand nature, or create art, for it

72. Ralph Waldo Emerson. “History.” in *Nature and Selected Essays*. Ed by Larzer Ziff. (New York: Penguin, 1982) p. 149.

73. Thoreau. *Journal*. Vol. I, Ch. 4, July 5th, 1840. p. 162. and in Henry David Thoreau. “Monday” in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Originally published 1849. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001) p.77. From here on, referred to as *A Week*.

74. Henry David Thoreau. “Walking.” in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*. Vol. V, *Excursions and Poems*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1906). p. 214.

75. Richardson (1986) p. 25-26.

serves as the means by which the self might grow according to its own telos.”⁷⁶ The imagination is where we become who we are and where we experience human freedom. It also means that seeing and knowing are deeply moral activities. Tauber writes:

The stultification of a repressive culture is the gravest threat to...thriving, and besides the direction nature offers us, more basically, it is the freedom from civilization’s inhibition that afford us the opportunity to flourish. This is Thoreau’s well-known and celebrated credo. But I venture to argue that his moral attitude extended beyond ethical action as normally understood. When he declared that ‘our *whole* life is startlingly moral’ (*Walden* 1971, p. 218; emphasis added), I take him literally. Beyond social consciousness and individual action, Thoreau’s moral universe extended to investing the natural world with his own vision. Plainly stated, Thoreau’s world-making is value-laden, which simply means that he *chose* how to see, and in so doing, he discovered a world that was uniquely his own...Thoreau allowed his inner eye – the poetic and spiritual ‘organ’ to direct his optical vision and attune his ear. Thus there is a cognitive component to Thoreau’s moral vision, one fully integrated with ethical conduct in a more ordinary sense. To *see* creatively was itself, for Thoreau, a value.⁷⁷

In this freedom, then, did Thoreau *see* reality? Did he want to? On his own terms, did Thoreau attune his imagination in a manner that was not simply “value-laden” in general, but laden by values with a commitment to reality? Did he achieve the imaginative perception of a synthesis between the universal and particular as the other great writers had? The remainder of this dissertation considers these questions.

Imagination and Politics

What does imagination, as understood here, have to do with politics? For the individual, political beliefs and behavior always indicate more than an adherence to a particular platform, ideology, culture or even a set of values. Politics occurs within a comprehensive view of life, and

76. Tauber (2001) p. 172.

77. Tauber (2001) p. 172

our political behavior and beliefs draw on an intuition of reality, which helps direct our action. We act in the world in which we find ourselves and which we perceive through our imagination. Because will and imagination are, in a sense, the same, we imagine the kind of world in which an action has to be taken before that action takes place. Our actions and related experiences in turn shape our imaginations and the way we behave in the future. While one can observe a connection between specific values, cultural prejudices and ideological preferences and particular political activities, attention to the broadest context and sources of these particular influences discloses the large and pervasive role of the imagination as our most fundamental sense of what life is like. The imagination in this wider sense provides the general background for our particular preferences, directs reason and ultimately shapes our will and behavior. As will be discussed extensively later in this chapter, the quality of a person's imagination is especially indicative of the nature of the person's political morality, just as the latter influences the quality of the imagination.

In this analysis, "politics" encompasses more than Thoreau's views on such issues as war, property, slavery and the size of government. Politics is more than the "art and science of government," a set of policy preferences or party platforms, the distribution and practice of power, the management of scarce resources or the processes by which a group of people makes and executes decisions. All of these elements do characterize the "political," but they do not operate beyond imagination. Ethical questions of "how shall we live," theological and moral inquiries as to "what is the good" and cultural reflections regarding tradition, value and identity impact the activities and thoughts commonly viewed as the "political." Eric Voegelin expanded the understanding of politics in a similar manner, opening his *New Science of Politics* by saying:

“The existence of man in political society is historical existence; and a theory of politics, if it penetrates to principles, must at the same time be a theory of history.”⁷⁸ Voegelin’s considerations, too, imply, even if they do not explicitly recognize, the imaginative and historical “background” of human existence.

All of the above can be incorporated into an understanding of politics that would be agreeable to Thoreau, who never compartmentalized his thinking into separate “disciplines.” He assumed a fundamental interconnectedness in his thought and was adamant about the incorporation of questions of morality into politics. It is equally important, however, that the same man would also famously write, “That government is best which governs not at all.”⁷⁹ To say that all is political is not necessarily a statement about the jurisdiction or practice of *government*. One must come to terms with the diffuse border between “public” and “private,” as well as with the purpose and efficacy of law, among other concerns.

Thoreau’s political thought, as I will demonstrate, exhibits a marked tension between the moral and the idyllic imagination. He is not always on any one side, and this struggle accounts for much of the complexity of his thought as well as for that complexity’s significance. Adopting a broad definition of the “political” and focusing on imagination as the basis for one’s view of reality allows Thoreau’s overall thought to disclose itself more freely.

78. Eric Voegelin. *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*. Originally published 1952. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1987) p. 1.

79. Henry David Thoreau. “Resistance to Civil Government.” in *The Higher Law: Thoreau on Civil Disobedience and Reform*. Ed. by Wendell Glick. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 2004) p. 63.

Imagination, Human Nature and Political Morality

Thoreau was rarely explicit about overtly political questions, but he was outspoken regarding his assumptions about human nature and morality, which are fundamental to any political philosophy. Politics is not simply the study of constitutions, decision making, public administration and ideologies. It begins with the questions, “what is man?” and “how should I/we live?” Plato, of course, was among the greatest representatives of such thinking, exemplifying what Eric Voegelin called the “Anthropological Principle,”⁸⁰ meaning, in part, that the political community is “man writ large.” That is, the order of the polis or political community reflects the order of the soul. Thoreau’s politics and his experience of the tension between the moral and idyllic imagination then cannot be understood without first appreciating the relationship of morality and human nature with imagination.

Ryn’s, as well as Thoreau’s, theory of imagination assumes an integration of morality with all of life. This is, in part, why the nature of such a study can never be merely descriptive. It must conclude in some level of moral judgment upon Thoreau in light of the quality of his will and imagination. But a theory of imagination is not strictly judgmental; it identifies both negative choices or prohibitions and positive alternatives.

Thoreau’s work, as this study contends, lives within the tension between the idyllic imagination and the moral imagination. In what way do these two poles manifest themselves in relation to questions of human nature and morality? Beginning with human nature, the “person” of the idyllic imagination is primarily an abstraction and conceived in terms of extremes. He or

80. See Eric Voegelin. *Order and History, Vol III: Plato and Aristotle*. Ed. by Dante Germino. Vol. 16 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. (Columbia, MO: Univ. of Missouri, 2000). p. 123-125, 139-142, 156, 162-166, 178-180 and especially 140.

she may be divine or a mere animal, as Rousseau's "the most sociable and loving of men,"⁸¹ or the most isolated and hateful of men.⁸² The person is entirely good or utterly evil, the greatest victim or the greatest hero, and nothing or everything. The idyllic imagination tends at both extremes to base its judgments of persons in general at the expense of, and often in complete contradiction with, the reality of persons in the particular.

The moral imagination, on the other hand, appeals to proportion, prudence and the limits of knowledge regarding human nature. Moral, spiritual, physical and social elements of the person are understood as constituents of a single order that require one-another's cooperation and a sensitivity to maintaining that order. The person strives for a more realistic and honest self-awareness and lives within what Babbitt calls the "civil war in the cave,"⁸³ a struggle between higher and lower moral potentialities within him or herself, never quite achieving a comprehensively good or evil character. As Ryn writes, for Babbitt, "Man is a unity of opposing inclinations."⁸⁴ Persons in the moral imagination are not mere abstractions or generalizations but *particular* persons. They elude even the most comprehensive definition by virtue of their inherent mystery.

Morality in the moral-idyllic tension can be more complicated because, as the labels imply, "idyllic" morality is essentially the abolition of morality. Irving Babbitt's most widely read work, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, does much to delineate this tension early on. He finds, specifically, that the nineteenth century was overwhelmingly marked in the Western world by the

81. Jean-Jacques Rousseau. "First Walk" in *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. First published 1782. Trans. by Peter France (New York: Penguin Books, 2004) p. 27

82. There is of course, a sense in which a sociable person might be misanthropic and the isolated person more loving. The point is that regardless of the combination, the idyllic imagination eschews balance and proportion.

83. Babbitt (2009) p. 130.

84. Ryn (1997) p. 29.

dominance of the “sense of the individual” over what he calls the “general sense.”⁸⁵ By this he meant that the ideal of morality became, following the example set by Rousseau, the individuality of thinking, feeling and acting. To imitate someone else’s thinking, acting and feeling was to be a slave to them. It was possible that one could imitate another coincidentally, but for many in the nineteenth century, what one thinks, feels or does must be their *own*. Furthermore, for Emerson and even more for Rousseau, one must be free entirely in their imaginative expression. “Imitation,” Emerson wrote, “cannot go above its model. The imitator dooms himself to hopeless mediocrity.”⁸⁶

This aversion to imitation is in deliberate contrast to classical and Christian traditions, which elevate imitation of good examples and, in the case of Christianity, encourage a level of suspicion of one’s own thoughts, feelings and actions. The Christian conception of morality calls for imitation of the Divine, which it then acknowledges is impossible without the Divine intervention of grace. Humility is the fundamental principle of Christian morality, while, for Babbitt, proportionality becomes the foundation of classical morality. The classical and Christian traditions stand in sharp contrast to the Rousseauistic ideal of moral autonomy and uninhibited expression. As the authority of the classical and Christian traditions erode, however, Romantics’ conflation of God, man and nature ultimately eliminates God, and even man, from morality altogether.⁸⁷

85. Babbitt. (2009) p.114.

86. Ralph Waldo Emerson. “An Address Delivered Before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge.” in *Nature and Selected Essays*. Ed. by Larzer Ziff. (New York: Penguin, 1982) p. 123.

87. “The strict Christian supernaturalist” Babbitt writes, “had maintained that the divine can be known to man only by the outer miracle of revelation, supplemented by the inner miracle of grace. The deist maintains, on the contrary, that God reveals himself also through outer nature which he has fitted exquisitely to the needs of man, and that inwardly man may be guided aright by his unaided thoughts and feelings (according to the predominance of thought

The Romantics, whom Babbitt occasionally labels “pantheists,” can be emotional and effusive and given to a tendency he refers to as *sentimental humanitarianism*. Like Rousseau’s influential idea of *pitie*, the *feeling* of compassion or empathy for someone else is elevated above *acting* compassionately.⁸⁸ This is, again, in deliberate distinction to an older classical view of morality: “The humanist maintains,” according to Babbitt, “that man attains to the truth of his nature only by imposing decorum upon his ordinary self. The Rousseauist maintains that man attains to this truth only by the free expansion of his ordinary self.”⁸⁹ This expansion is primarily emotional and is meant, in part, to resist the compassion and empathy which may bind one’s will to another’s.⁹⁰

or feeling the deist is rationalistic or sentimental). Man, in short, is naturally good and nature herself is beneficent and beautiful. The deist finally pushes the harmony in God and man and nature so far that the three are practically merged. At a still more advanced stage God disappears, leaving only nature and man as a modification of nature, and the deist gives way to the pantheist who may also be either rationalistic or emotional. The pantheist differs above all from the deist in that he would dethrone man from his privileged place in creation, which means in practice that he denies final causes.” Babbitt. (2009) p. 121-122.

88. Jean Jacques Rousseau. “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality” in *The Basic Political Writings*. Trans. by Peter Gay. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987) p. 55. Rousseau’s notion of “pity,” is not always consistent. In one sense, he seems to see pity as motivating a care for others, but this care is somehow unreflective, and eschews “laws, mores, and virtue,” which may actually present obstacles to rendering aid. Furthermore, he turns the old maxim, “Do unto others as you would have them do to you,” on its head saying, “Do what is good for you with as little harm as possible to others.” (p. 55). This self-centeredness is striking, and appears to relegate concrete active care, let alone conformity to law or norms, to something of a vice.

89. Babbitt. (2009) p. 128.

90. Perhaps the best example of Rousseau’s objection to the manner in which empathy and compassion may inhibit one’s autonomy occurs in the “Sixth Walk” of his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782). He describes a woman who would set up a cart to sell fruit in a location that Rousseau would frequent. A crippled boy would join her, and Rousseau became well acquainted with the boy, who would compliment him and Rousseau would return the favor with a small gift or some money. Over time, however, Thoreau began to avoid the boy altogether, believing that the habit of visiting the boy had become an obligation undermining his autonomy. Reflecting on his visits, he writes, “This pleasure gradually became a habit, and thus was somehow transformed into a sort of duty which I soon began to find irksome, particularly on account of the preamble I was obliged to listen to, in which he never failed to address me as Monsieur Rousseau so as to show that he knew me well, thus making it quite clear to me on the contrary that he knew no more of me than those who had taught him. From that time on I felt less inclined to go that way, and in the end I unthinkingly adopted the habit of making a detour when I approached this obstacle.” *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Trans. Peter France. 1782 Reprint. (New York: Penguin Group, 2004) p. 93-94.

Morality in the idyllic imagination has thus far been characterized as rejecting humility, decorum and imitation. It elevates uninhibited sentiment over concrete action and obligation, pursuing moral autonomy to a point that paradoxically conflates God, man and nature until only “nature” remains. This nature, for Rousseau and others consumed by an idyllic imagination, is naturally good. Evil, alternatively, is introduced from outside of this nature and is foreign to man.⁹¹ What is called evil shifts to “society.” While the Christian tradition would place moral conflict between good and evil, in part, within the soul of the individual, the idyllic imagination places the conflict between society and nature. This results in a virtual rejection of Babbitt’s “Civil War in the Cave.” For the idyllic imagination, the cave is man’s soul and is no longer the stage for his conscience acting as a kind of “inner check” against man’s baser tendencies. Indeed, there are no base tendencies to check. “The conscience ceases to be a power that sits in judgment on the ordinary self and inhibits its impulses. Morality for an idyllic imagination tends so far as it is recognized at all, to become itself an instinct and an emotion.”⁹² The dominance of the “sense of the individual,” renders morality as less a choice between good and evil and more as a choice for or against an emotionalist moral autonomy.

The morally excellent individual of the idyllic imagination has no need to imitate others’ morality, let alone obey their laws. To remain autonomous and pure, his will, imagination and reason must be ordered strictly to his own emotions. Babbitt writes, “Love, according to the Rousseauist, is not the fulfillment of the law but a substitute for it.”⁹³ Admiration is due, in the idyllic imagination, to she who ignores her inhibitions and only acts on those thoughts and

91. Babbitt. (2009) p. 130.

92. Babbitt. (2009) p. 130-131.

93. Babbitt. (2009) p. 141.

feelings that are unique to her person. Social and political disorder is not a result of the disordered soul for the idyllic imagination. The source of the problem is exclusive to society itself, as opposed to the individual, and occurs when that society abandons nature.

Proportionality, decorum, self-control, humility, inhibition and even prudence become vices in the idyllic imagination. The classical virtues, once meant as a means to effectively wage the “Civil War in the Cave,” are no longer useful for Rousseau and his followers.⁹⁴

A final and pivotal aspect of morality in the idyllic imagination is also one of the most difficult to explain. Drawing on the notion of dialectical or philosophical reason described earlier, the idyllic imagination views universality and particularity in opposition, while the moral imagination views the universal and particular as synthesized. Rousseau, in his “Discourse on the Origins of Inequality,” illustrates the idyllic disposition well:

Let us therefore begin by putting aside all the facts, for they have no bearing on the question. The investigations that may be undertaken concerning this subject should not be taken for historical truths, but only from hypothetical and conditional reasonings, better suited to shedding light on the nature of things than on pointing out their true origin.⁹⁵

Truth, for Rousseau and many others, must be independent of the facts. The very *nature* of things is ahistorical. Yet in the same discourse, he writes:

Moreover, general ideas can be introduced into the mind only with the aid of words, and the understanding grasps them only through sentences...Every general idea is purely intellectual. The least involvement of the imagination thereupon

94. Babbitt offers a quote from the French philosopher, Ernest Renan (1823-1892) which illustrates this sentiment well: “Morality...has been conceived up to the present in a very narrow spirit, as obedience to a law, as an inner struggle between opposite laws. As for me, I declare that when I do good I obey no one, I fight no battle and win no victory. The cultivated man has only to follow the delicious incline of his inner impulses...Be beautiful and then do at each moment whatever your heart may inspire you to do. This is the whole of morality.” Babbitt.(2009) p. 133. Ernest Renan quote from his *Avenir de la Science*, p. 354. Edition not listed, but it is likely Babbitt’s own translation.

95. Rousseau. “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality.” (1987) p. 38-39.

makes the idea particular...Purely abstract beings are perceived in the same way, or are conceived only through discourse. The definition of a triangle alone gives you the true idea of it. As soon as you behold one in your mind, it is a particular triangle and not some other one, and you cannot avoid making its lines to be perceptible or its plane to have color. It is therefore necessary to utter sentences, and thus to speak, in order to have general ideas.⁹⁶

Rousseau admits that the universal as experienced must be particularized, but he nevertheless seeks to achieve “sentences,” which are “purely intellectual” and “general.” With impressive consistency, Rousseau resists accounting for the “facts” that he did away with so as not to corrupt the universal, *Nature*.

Resisting this ahistorical disposition of Rousseau and others is central to Ryn’s theory of imagination and builds both on Croce’s dialectical logic and Babbitt’s ethico-aesthetical philosophy.⁹⁷ The alternative to Rousseau and the idyllic imagination is a synthesis of the universal and the particular. This notion may strike some as strange. How can abstract, universal truths and principles be compatible with concrete, particular moral decisions and historical reality? The apparent conflict dates back to at least the time of Plato and Aristotle. For Plato, the Forms (*eidos*) of things, and especially the Good (*Agathon*), the Form of forms, was more real than the good experienced in everyday life. Humans, for Plato, inhabit a world of shadows in which truth, as the oneness of an unchanging universality, is constantly obscured by the particularities of historical circumstances and change. The application of unchanging universal principles, once they are known by philosophy, is inevitably imperfect in a changing world. For some, this means re-thinking the relationship of unity, universality, change and particularity. For those with a more idyllic imagination it can mean a virtual rejection of the historical, concrete

96. Rousseau. “Discourse on the Origins of Inequality.” (1987) p. 50.

97. Ryn. (1997) p. 17.

particulars of life. Why bother with shadows when the source of light is accessible? When the Right is known, why compromise to accommodate a particular circumstance or, in Thoreau's words, to accommodate "expediency"? That which is universal and unchanging provides our highest, eternal ideals. Since God too is unchanging, would adherence to these universal ideals not *also* be, at the very least, imitation of the divine and more fully real? Why would anyone settle for something less *real*?

Given the perceived tension between the universal and the particular, the idyllic imagination may favor the universal at the expense of the particular for two reasons. First, if Nature itself is treated as something of an unchanging, universal oneness, then rejecting Nature is akin to rejecting the universal abstract Right and Truth at the heart of what is most real. Second, the elevation of the universal over the particular coincides with the idyllic imagination's understanding of moral autonomy. Concrete problems and questions demand compromise and accommodation, requiring the abstract to submit to the historical and seemingly becoming enslaved to the particular. The idyllic imagination admires those who refuse to submit to the pressures of historical reality. At the extreme, there are no exceptions, excuses or qualifications. There is only the Right and individual or society's decision to embrace it or reject it.

It would be tempting to choose an emphasis on particularity over universality as a way of describing the moral imagination. Yet the elevation of particularity is just as problematic and potentially idyllic. In this vein, the concrete particular is not necessarily more real—it is simply all there is. The particular does not participate in a universal, unifying reality. Reality itself may be in question, as is the possibility of judgment. There is no universal sense of the Good, the True and the Beautiful. There is *only* the particular good, true and beautiful. Morality cannot

even be considered “contingent” or “efficacious,” because such terms assume a universal in which the underlying notion of necessity participates. Babbitt accuses Croce of this tendency, saying that “the result of Croce’s failure to see the One in the Many and so to impose standards upon the flux is a weakening or obliteration of boundaries.”⁹⁸ In Babbitt’s reading, nothing seems to be above the flux for Croce. Much like the elevation of the universal, this type of idyllic imagination is motivated by autonomy, as one desires freedom from the universal. There are no perennial or universal principles and questions. There may be similarities, but ultimately they are all entirely coincidental.⁹⁹

Another way of thinking about distinctions regarding the universal and particular in imagination is to say that Rousseau and others like him intuit the formula, “A=A, and not non-A” as fundamental to right thinking. On the other hand, the “idyllic particularists” question whether there is an “A” at all. “Actual thought,” Ryn counters, “is a straining towards truth, a conceptual self-identity in search of itself.”¹⁰⁰ Concepts are provisional and potentially incomplete, so reason seeks its self-realization in light of universality and particularity as intuited by the imagination and oriented by will. In the moral imagination this reason must ultimately be *dialectical* in order to be faithful to life as it is actually lived. This is in contrast, as Ryn makes clear, to those who might use “dialectical” in a rather ahistorical sense by entertaining a kind of omniscience. Instead, Ryn defines dialectical reason by observing that “Thought, like all human

98. Irving Babbitt. *Spanish Character and Other Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940) p. 68.

99. Perhaps the best example of this tendency is the work of intellectual historian, Quentin Skinner. For him, there is nothing above the flux. There are no perennial problems, questions, or issues. He would deny Ryn’s definition of transcendence as “goodness realized in forever new circumstances.” (Ryn, 1997, p. xii), by simply denying the existence of “goodness” in any universal sense at all. For more on Skinner’s method and views, see James Tully. Ed. *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. 1989)

100. Ryn. (1997) p. 119.

life, is continuous activity...Knowledge is carried by concepts that can be forever improved.”¹⁰¹

“A” exists, but *knowing* A is a historical process in which, at times, A might equal or be very similar to non-A. There is always hope, mystery and something to learn. Ryn’s dialectical reasoning, consequently, maintains a commitment to humility that is critical to his entire theory of knowledge and moral philosophy.

The problem, as noted earlier, is that the idyllic imagination cannot be said to actually provide a conception of morality.¹⁰² Unless morality consists of choosing between a right and wrong in fidelity to abstract principles while maintaining independence of individual and historical circumstances, the idyllic imagination will have nothing to do with it. The moral imagination, then, is tasked with ensuring the recognition and practice of morality in reality. It responds to this reality and attunes to it by favoring decorum, proportion, self-control, humility and similar virtues that the idyllic imagination rejects. As Babbitt explains:

True decorum is only the pulling back and disciplining of impulse to the proportionateness that has been perceived with the aid of what one may term the ethical or generalizing imagination. To dismiss like the romantic expansionist everything that limits or restricts the lust of knowledge or of power or of sensation as arbitrary and artificial is to miss true decorum and at the same time sink, as a Greek would say, from ethos to pathos.¹⁰³

This “true decorum” is descriptive of the other side of the idyllic-moral tension in light of morality. While the idyllic imagination describes man as naturally good, the moral imagination acknowledges the “civil war in the cave” – the great duel within man between his higher and lower impulses. Lower impulses, characterized by their flight from reality, emerge from the same

101. Ryn (1997) p. 120.

102. It bears observing, as Babbitt did, that “The ideal of romantic morality...is altruism. The real, it should be clear...is always egoism.” Babbitt. (2009) p. 192. Babbitt also observes that the notion of a “romantic morality” is essentially a misnomer. (2009) p. 217.

103. Babbitt (2009), p. 201.

“nature,” which Rousseau and other representatives of the idyllic imagination identify as the source of all purity and perfection. This is not to say that the moral imagination sees all Nature as evil, but a “natural” man is just as easily tempted to lust as he is capable of the virtues of humility and self-control. What is often referred to as “nature” does not have an abstract reality; it is realized and encountered historically. At the level of human nature this means that one cannot “do away with the facts,” as Rousseau would have it, and acquire knowledge of a purely natural man. Man is a historical being, and what we call human *nature* is a product of lived human experience.

Concepts of human nature emerge as human beings, confronted by an ever-changing experience, rely on traditions and imitation to navigate challenges and questions. The moral imagination adopts a more positive and creative view of this imitation than Emerson or Rousseau. Babbitt describes the moral imagination as imitating things, not necessarily as they *are*, in an uncreative manner, but as they *ought* to be in a profoundly creative task.¹⁰⁴

In line with dialectical reason’s straining toward truth, history’s models, forms and laws are conceived less as prisons and more as the parameters in which freedom can order itself to the higher potentialities of man’s ethical existence. Order and proportion are fundamental needs of the moral imagination in that they provide the means by which one attunes to reality – the good, true and beautiful. This order must be achieved by moral effort and the inhibitions of conscience and the will toward reality.

The proportionality and order of the moral imagination also have the effect of distinguishing, instead of conflating, God, man and nature. Man must understand his place in the

104. Babbitt (2009) p. 17.

world and that within him which is not divine – namely, nature. Nature, in the classical and Christian traditions (especially as represented by Thomas Aquinas), finds its source in the divine, but is not itself divine. By separating out God, man and nature, one need not make them radically independent of one another. The interplay of God, man and nature frames the inevitable struggle between Good and Evil which the moral imagination recognizes.

Finally, the moral imagination sacrifices neither the universal nor the particular on the altar of the other. Instead of opposing an unchanging oneness to a constantly changing particularity, the moral imagination acknowledges, in Babbitt's phrase, a "oneness that is always changing."¹⁰⁵ Babbitt's dynamic conception of oneness is critical for understanding the tension that Thoreau lives with. Aristotle first raised the issue of the apparent conflict between "oneness" and "change" by disputing Plato's notion that a thing and its form could exist separately. Then, according to Christianity, Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God who had come in the flesh to earth and into history. How could an unchanging, perfect divinity become man and participate in time without somehow becoming less divine and imperfect? For Ryn, this "incarnation" or "embodiment" reflects how the universal and particular relate to one another and how the moral imagination conceives the good, true and beautiful. Each particular participates in the oneness of which it is a part without doing any violence to its particularity or its historical relationship with other particulars. The universal is known only by the encounter with the particular: by means of the incarnation of the universal in the concrete reality of everyday life. Furthermore, universality may be expressed in a remarkable diversity of particulars. This, for Ryn, is another way of

105. Babbitt (2009) p. lxxiv.

conceiving the notion of transcendence, understood as the reality that “goodness may be realized in forever new circumstances.”¹⁰⁶

In sum, morality in the idyllic imagination is the rejection of humility, proportion, order, inhibition and imitation while morality in the moral imagination elevates these same things as virtues necessary for full human flourishing and a well-ordered life. The idyllic imagination conflates God, man and nature while the moral imagination distinguishes them in order to understand their interconnectedness. Finally, the idyllic imagination elevates the universal or the particular at the expense of the other, while the moral imagination sees them as permanently and necessarily connected. Practically speaking, the morality of the idyllic imagination ends in the abolition of morality. There is no moral struggle at all; there is only the liberation of impulse and emotion from the constraints of reality and history. Laws, traditions, models and even reason are obstacles to be overcome. The moral imagination gives prominence to the virtues of the moral life as the very framework by which man perceives and participates in reality.

Commentary on Thoreau too often focuses on “Thoreau the nature lover” as if this Thoreau were unmoored from his larger, complex self and thought. One unfortunate consequence is that problematic elements in how he imagines human beings and morality are neglected by those interested in his environmental imagination. In the remainder of Part I, I will examine Thoreau’s imagination in regard to morality, human nature, government, freedom and friendship before evaluating his intuition of nature in Part II. The Thoreau who is in a struggle between the moral and the idyllic imagination is the Thoreau with whom countless readers have most identified. His struggle is their struggle, and his writings beckon them to follow his

106. Ryn (1997) p. xii.

example as they make sense of their own imaginative tension and as they seek to learn more about the world around them. The question is whether, in the end, his example is one which political theorists and practitioners would do well to follow.

CHAPTER II

THOREAU ON POLITICAL MORALITY AND HUMAN NATURE

The world rests on principles.

–Thoreau, Letter to H.G.O. Blake,

19 December 1854 –

“Our whole life is startlingly moral,” Thoreau writes. “There is never an instant’s truce between virtue and vice. Goodness is the only investment that never fails.”¹ Morality shaped the content of most of his works, what he read, his time spent at Walden and his canoe trip down the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. Moral questions dominate his writings on politics and slavery, and they even appear in his late natural history writings. Whether assumed or delineated, implied or pronounced, Thoreau’s sense of what was right, wrong, good, true and beautiful was regularly on display. This emphasis on morality provided great depth to his reflections and ensured his perennial ability to connect to a great diversity of readers and influence *their* imaginations.

This chapter focuses on Thoreau’s imagination of, and struggle with, questions of morality and human nature as they pertain to politics. Thoreau lived within a number of tensions in light of his views on persons: balancing a need for friendship with a desire for autonomy, admiring the Native Americans yet struggling to resist a temptation toward an idyllic savagism

1. Henry David Thoreau. “Higher Laws.” *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) p. 266.

and abhorring slavery while not always clearly articulating his reasons. Thoreau's imaginative tension was even more pronounced as he wrestled with what he perceived as a conflict between abstract "Right" and "principle" with historical circumstances, politics and "expedience." Illustrative of these tensions, and taken up in Chapters Three and Four, is an enduring concern with human freedom and friendship as critical to moral philosophy. Thoreau believed that morality requires conformity to a pre-existing standard or expectation. Given his understanding of human nature, how would Thoreau square his moral philosophy with the freedom he treasured? How would Thoreau bring all this to bear on questions of politics? Politics and morality often seem to mix as well as oil and water, but Thoreau knew that this was no reason to artificially separate two aspects of life that must ultimately confront one another. Politics considered separately from morality was the root of Thoreau's infamous disdain of politics. Nowhere is this tension more evident than in his more polemical essays on slavery and in his most famous and influential political work, "Resistance to Civil Government," which is taken up in Chapter Four.

Politics, Imagination and Human Nature

Thoreau's view of human nature and morality is best understood in the context of the history of Western political thought and alongside his relationship to Ralph Waldo Emerson. The great political thinkers of modernity outlined their fundamental assumptions on humanity's moral disposition in order justify much of their political philosophy and prescriptions. Machiavelli, for example, developed his understanding of principalities and republics with a rather dismal view of humanity. He writes in *The Prince*: "For this can be said of men in general:

that they are ungrateful, fickle, hypocrites and dissemblers, avoiders of dangers, greedy for gain; and while you benefit them, they are entirely yours, offering you their blood, their goods, their life, their children,...when need is far away, but when you actually become needy, they turn away.”² The role of the prince, then, is to ensure the endurance of order and the republic by anticipating the inevitable violence inspired by the human condition, and by doing whatever is necessary to guard his rule against usurpers and the whims of fortune. Machiavelli’s prince was arguably not as powerful as Thomas Hobbes’ sovereign, whose extensive authority might preserve the peace forfeited by a selfish, competitive and mistrustful humanity. John Locke held a more optimistic view, believing that man was born free and rational and possessed the ability to achieve a considerable level of order outside of civil society’s “social contract.” Still, Locke knew that humans were no angels and the want of greater protection for private property would inevitably inspire the need for a limited government. Jean-Jacques Rousseau would then turn these beliefs on their head by rejecting the older doctrine of original sin and human imperfection while asserting that man was naturally good. If there is to be rule over men it must be implemented in such a way as to ensure that one is subject to the same general rules or *will* that they would impose on themselves. This will must be expressed in unison with the natural impulses of the entire community, uninhibited by reason or civilization. Rousseau’s naturally good man enters into a contract with everyone and therefore, in a sense, with no one, since no obligations nor rights are claimed or exchanged.

2. Niccolò Machiavelli. *The Prince*. (1513) Ch. XVII, in *The Prince and Other Writings*. Trans. by Wayne Rebhorn. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003) p. 72.

Arguably the most important context for Thoreau's thoughts on the person, is his friendship with Ralph Waldo Emerson. Clearly identifying Emerson's "political anthropology" is no easy task given his prolific literary output. He was not always consistent, but he was arguably more explicit and deliberately systematic in his philosophy than Thoreau. A few brief observations on Emerson's major thoughts in this regard may provide some insight into Thoreau.

Emerson, much more so than Thoreau, was indebted to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Though he never articulated an anthropological narrative like that of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, Emerson did operate under a number of similar assumptions. There was, for Emerson, an ideal and savage stage in the history of man. Humans cannot return to this stage, but its historical reality is fundamental to human self-understanding. Of particular importance is the need to achieve the ideal of self-reliance; which man did not need to forfeit in the transition from his savage origins to civilization. Emerson claimed to identify within each and every man a "divine-self" on which a person is to rely as much as possible. This reliance and divinity was to correspond with a fierce independence that was, in part, a recognition, according to Russell Goodman, "that there is a self already formed on which we may rely. The 'self' on which we are to 'rely' is, in contrast, the original self that we are in the process of creating. Such a self, to use a phrase from Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, 'becomes what it is.'"³ Emerson channeled (not necessarily accurately) the extensive influence of Kant, and encouraged human beings to recognize that *true* genius is "to believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in

3. Russell Goodman. "Ralph Waldo Emerson." from *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (Stanford CA: Stanford Univ., 2011). First published Thu Jan 3, 2002; substantive revision Wed Aug 18, 2010. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/emerson/>

your private heart is true for all men.”⁴ We must eschew imitation and envy and learn to trust ourselves. As Emerson argues, “Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist...Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of your own mind.”⁵ In a sense, human liberty comes from a conformity to a self that has already been given to us, but we are never to deliberately conform to external influences. Thankfully, Emerson explains, “no man can violate his nature.”⁶ And that nature is of infinite worth and entirely different from that of anyone else. Does this mean that Emerson embraces a radical subjectivism with little or no sense of unity or space for a legitimate government? James H. Read answers, writing:

From the beginning there have been critics who saw in Emerson’s self reliance a kind of “radical egoistic anarchism” that “vaporized the social world,” pitting the individual against the community and its traditions and laws. But Emerson never claimed that a self-reliant individual possessed unlimited freedom, or that self-reliance was inconsistent with fulfilling one’s duties to others. The self-reliant human being recognizes his or her own limitations—must “take himself, for better or worse, as his portion”— but grasps that traditions, institutions, and received opinions are at least equally limited and imperfect. Self-reliant individuals recognize the call of justice and the obligation to fulfill duties toward others, but do so “in a new and unprecedented way”: not after the customs of others, but as their own inward perception of truth prescribes.⁷

There is room for politics and society in Emerson’s thought, but not at the expense of individual autonomy or in the service of conformity. This is reminiscent, in a sense, of Rousseau’s “general will” in which man only obeys those laws which he would otherwise have imposed on himself. The self-reliant man, like Rousseau’s citizens under the “Social Contract,”

4. Emerson. “Self Reliance.” *Nature and Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2003) p. 175.

5. Emerson. “Self Reliance.” (2003) p. 178.

6. Emerson. “Self Reliance.” (2003) p. 183.

7. James H. Read. “The Limits of Self-Reliance: Emerson, Slavery, and Abolition.” in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. by Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk. (Louisville, KY: Univ. of Kentucky, 2011) p. 152.

only conforms to that which is no different from himself. A government remains necessary, not to enforce a kind of conformity, but to preserve an environment compatible with the realization of individual autonomy. Wilson Carey McWilliams explained:

Emerson left to the state only the task of designing ways for his assertive individuals to live in reasonable concord. Even so, the state exists to minimize itself; coercion and compulsion, which Emerson identified with politics, are evil because they violate the autonomy of the individual will, and the task of political wisdom is to decrease them. The state has a passive role; believing that only education could change men's "hearts," Emerson saw education as something separate from politics. Political life was merely a negative, almost accidental, factor in man's life, not a part of his nature.⁸

The problem of conformity for Emerson was not that it promoted a fundamental disunity. For Emerson, as well as for Thoreau, human individuality and autonomy was a necessary outgrowth of the infinitely complex unity underlying all of life. Emerson describes this unity as being rooted in the "Over-Soul," defined as the One, ahistorical, permanent and "most real" part of existence.⁹

Emerson's belief in a greater reality present in the world of ideas, his rejection of the doctrine of original sin and his assertion of man's "divine self," all place him in the tradition of related European thinkers such as Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.¹⁰ Consequently, when he observes something of a "dual nature" in man he is less inclined to

8. Wilson Carey McWilliams. "Emerson: The All and the One." in Levine and Malachuk. (2011) p. 49.

9. The notion is reminiscent of Plato's "forms," and is bound to puzzle those not sympathetic to the ideas of Irving Babbitt discussed earlier. Babbitt was an enthusiastic reader of Emerson because of the latter's compatibility with the notion of the "One and the Many," in which human persons and all of life is a "oneness that is always changing." This seems like a paradox but it was not a fundamental contradiction for Babbitt or Emerson. Where Emerson differs is in his tendency to relegate that which is temporal and changing to something less real than the One and the permanent. In this way Emerson is not much different than Plato and the Neo-Platonists who had a considerable influence on his work.

10. Coleridge and Kant however, did not share Rousseau's rejection of original sin and the reality of evil.

emphasize conflicting imaginations or tensions between higher and lower moral potentialities.

Instead, as Len Gougeon explains:

Emerson believed that human nature possesses a dual aspect, basically material and ethereal. Every person has the capacity to operate in both of these realms. In dealing with the practical world of everyday life, we use what Emerson called ‘the Understanding.’ But our actions in this world must be informed by universal moral laws that are intuitively perceived through what Emerson called, ‘the Reason.’ Like other Transcendentalists, Emerson borrowed these terms from ...Kant, via his English interpreter, [S.T.] Coleridge. In a letter to his younger brother...Emerson makes the distinction between the Understanding and the Reason explicit...’Now that I have used the words,’ he says, ‘let me ask you to draw the distinction of Milton[,] Coleridge & the Germans between Reason & Understanding. . . . Reason is the highest faculty of the soul—what we mean often by the soul itself; it never reasons, never proves, it simply perceives; it is vision.’ On the other hand, ‘the Understanding toils all the time, compares, contrives, adds, argues, near sighted but strong-sighted, dwelling in the present the expedient the customary’...’Reason,’ he says, ‘is potentially perfect in every man—Understanding in different degrees of strength.’¹¹

Questioning whether Emerson correctly interpreted Coleridge and Kant’s significant distinction of “Reason” and “Understanding” is less important than asking where the imagination fits within this dichotomy. There is a sense in which these two terms fit very well with Claes Ryn’s emphasis on will, imagination and reason, as well as Babbitt’s distinctions of perception, conception and discrimination. Emerson clearly understands Reason as participating at least in the act of perception, and the Understanding as affecting conceptualization and discrimination. Where Emerson differs from Ryn and Babbitt, however, is that Emerson assigns a passive role to Reason, which for him is much closer to Imagination than the Understanding.

11. Len Gougeon. “Emerson, Self-Reliance, and the Politics of Democracy.” in Levine and Malachuk. (2011) p. 186-187.

Where then, would Thoreau fit in the tradition of asking the question, what is man and how does it color his political thought? Addressing this question in any comprehensive sense will require attention to the nature of freedom, morality and the relationship of universals and particulars. Addressing Thoreau's *imagination* allows us to open this comprehensive account of morality, human nature and life to greater illumination.

Thoreau and the Human Condition

Thoreau, like Emerson, embraced the notion that human nature and Nature generally are fundamentally permanent and unchanging. Such a disposition allows for greater appreciation of the present. Longing for a bygone golden age and heroes, as did a number of Thoreau's contemporaries, distracts from the ability to see *today* as a golden age, and the people around you (especially one's self) as a potential hero. Richardson writes that

Thoreau's conception of history, like Emerson's, would not concede any superiority to the Greeks and Romans. If nature was the same and if men were the same – two constants in a world of social change – then the modern writers stood in relation to his world in just the same way Homer stood in relation to his, and modern achievements could indeed rival the ancients.¹²

Yet Thoreau also believed that reading the texts of ancient Greece and Rome (in their original language) recovered this heroic sentiment and imagination. Modern writers simply cannot inspire what the Classics have kindled. In the "Reading" chapter of *Walden* he writes,

Men sometimes speak as if the study of the classics would at length make way for more modern and practical studies; but the adventurous student will always study classics, in whatever language they may be written and however ancient they may be. For what are the classics but the noblest recorded thoughts of man? They are

12. Robert D. Richardson Jr.. *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*. (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California, 1986) p. 25-26.

the only oracles which are not decayed, and there are such answers to the most modern inquiry in them...We might as well omit to study Nature because she is old. To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem.¹³

Thoreau's sympathies for the ancients may explain his departure from paradigms of modern political thought. The central preoccupation for Thoreau's conception of human nature is based less on a "State of Nature" or sweeping generalizations like those of Machiavelli and Hobbes.¹⁴ Instead, Thoreau sought to recover and attune himself to a universal humanity and to the kind of moral heroism represented by the ancients. For Thoreau, then, the primary question is the individual or society's relationship to "Right." Man is capable of good and evil, and he is free and accountable relative to this Right.¹⁵ Thoreau recognizes a struggle in humans between these higher and lower potentialities, or between good and evil. He writes in his *Journal* that "No faculty in man was created with a useless or sinister intent; in no respect can he be wholly bad, but the worst passions have their root in the best, - as anger, for instance, may be only a

13. Thoreau. *Walden*. "Reading." p. 146-147.

14. This reading contrasts with Philip Abbott. *States of Perfect Freedom: Autobiography and American Political Thought*. (Amherst, MA: Univ. of Massachusetts, 1987). For Abbott, Thoreau is primarily preoccupied with a romantic utopia, or a pre-political society and alternative order much like Rousseau's state of nature (though Abbott doesn't mention Rousseau). Abbott sees it more as a Lockean "state of perfect freedom," but his reading of both Locke and Thoreau is questionable. For Thoreau, there is no evidence that he intends for the freedom he describes to operate, as other state-of-nature formulations did, as an explanation for some kind of legal, political, and social order.

15. He writes, for example, that "Man is the artificer of his own happiness. Let him beware how he complains of the disposition of circumstances, for it is his own disposition he blames." Thoreau. *Journal* (1906) Vol. I, Ch. 2, January 21st, 1838 p.25. Thoreau also acknowledges his own imperfections. In his *Journal* on Feb. 10th, 1852, Thoreau writes "Now if there are any who think that I am vainglorious, that I set myself up above others and crow over their low estate, let me tell them that I could tell a pitiful story respecting myself as well as them, if my spirits held out to do it; I could encourage them with a sufficient list of failures, and could flow as humbly as the very gutters themselves; I could enumerate a list of as rank offenses as ever reached the nostrils of heaven; that I think worse of myself than they can possibly think of me, being better acquainted -, with the man. I put the best face on the matter. I will tell them this secret, if they will not tell it to anybody else." *Journal* (1906) Vol. III, Ch. 5 p. 293.

perverted sense of wrong which yet retains some traces of its origin.”¹⁶ In a footnote added later, he argues that our virtues can be the source of our vices: “We must consider war and slavery, with many other institutions and even the best existing governments, not withstanding their apparent advantages, as the abortive rudiments of nobler institutions such as distinguish man in his savage and half-civilized state.”¹⁷ There is a temptation here for Thoreau to view evil merely as the privation of good or as a kind of unreality. Elsewhere, evil appears to be defined as the ignorance and rejection of principle,¹⁸ or as a way to describe the perennial mass die-offs of suckers in the Spring.¹⁹ In this sense, and in his opposition to slavery and the Mexican-American War, evil has a very clear, concrete reality. The previous quote also demonstrates that Thoreau shares with Emerson and Rousseau the belief that Western civilization and government tends to be inferior to the “institutions” of the “savage and half-civilized state.”

Thoreau also views the tension between the highest and lowest in man as the source of the same tension in the government. This tension emerges in part due to Thoreau’s preference for classical authors over more modern thinkers.²⁰ For Plato, the “order of the soul” was the foundation for the “order of the polis.” For Aristotle, the Good Man and the Good Citizen were synonymous. For Thoreau, the virtues and vices of society both originated in the character of individuals. An example of his concern appears in the essay, “Paradise (To Be) Regained” (1843). Thoreau reviews a utopian prescription by J.A. Etzler entitled, *The Paradise within the*

16. Thoreau. *Journal*. Vol. I, Ch. 1, December 12th, 1837. p. 16.

17. Thoreau. *Journal*. Vol. I, Ch. 1, December 12th, 1837 p. 16.

18. Thoreau. *Journal* Vol. VI, Ch. 7, June 16th, 1854 p.358.

19. Thoreau. *Journal* Vol. IX, Ch. 8, March 28th, 1857 p. 309-310. Suckers are a species of freshwater fish.

20. The extent to which Plato and Aristotle influenced Thoreau is debated. The most comprehensive account of Thoreau’s interactions with classical thought is found in Ethel Seybold. *Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics*. (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ., 1951).

Reach of all Men, without Labor, by Powers of Nature and Machinery. An Address to all Intelligent Men (1833). Etzler essentially calls for perfection of the world and human life by means of technology.²¹ For Etzler, the order of the soul is irrelevant – if the soul exists at all. Thoreau finds Etzler’s faith in machines to be misplaced, and he judges Etzler’s subsequent disregard for the individual to be reprehensible. Etzler also views the cessation of the need for human labor as the great appeal of his vision. Once paradise is achieved, man may put up his feet and enjoy the perfection that machines have provided. Thoreau, however, does not conceive how the abandonment of labor would ever be paradise. Labor for its own sake or labor as enslavement are equally undesirable, but labor itself is ultimately both unavoidable and potentially beneficial.²² While living at Walden Pond, he found labor – especially the cultivation of some beans– to be an almost spiritual exercise, and he regularly took long afternoon walks between writing. He also worked extensively in his family’s pencil business, helping to craft and sell their product. He even pioneered new methods of manufacturing pencils, engineered new devices and researched improvements in graphite. Thoreau, most importantly, however, cannot endorse Etzler’s notion that the “outward improvements” provided by machines would negate the need for inner reform. As he explains,

The chief fault of this book is, that it aims to secure the greatest degree of gross comfort and pleasure merely...Undoubtedly, if we were to reform this outward life truly and thoroughly, we should find no duty of the inner omitted. It would be employment for our whole nature; and what we should do thereafter would be as vain a question as to ask the bird what it will do when its nest is built and its

21. Interestingly, many of the ideas Etzler proposes are now realities: including solar power, enormous windmills, earth-movers and other heavy-industrial devices. Thoreau’s copy of Etzler’s book was an 1842 reprint.

22. Henry David Thoreau. “Paradise (To Be) Regained” in *The Higher Law: Thoreau on Civil Disobedience and Reform*. Ed. by Wendell Glick.(Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 2004) p. 40.

brood reared. But a moral reform must take place first, and then the necessity of the other will be superseded, and we shall sail and plough by its force alone.²³

Etzler's utopia, like those attempted by Thoreau's contemporaries at Fruitlands and Brook Farm, must fail because it ignores the reform of the individual and neglects to consider humans as they are.

The question, then, is how *does* Thoreau understand the moral condition of human beings, and what are the consequences? It is unlikely that Thoreau would have embraced the doctrine of original sin,²⁴ which Emerson also rejected.²⁵ Yet he did not go so far as Rousseau and deny the presence of competing moral potentialities within man.²⁶ There are considerable streaks of pessimism, misanthropy and frustration with other individuals in Thoreau's work, but he also shares much of this pessimism regarding his *own* ability to live up to his moral expectations.²⁷

Given Thoreau's imagination of good and evil, what does he establish as the criteria of moral and immoral behavior? Thoreau's moral and political thought centers around an appeal to what he calls Right, or to the "Higher Law." This Right serves as a fixed moral standard, and is not subject to historical particularity, prudence or compromise. It is abstract, universal and

23. Thoreau. "Paradise (To Be) Regained." (2004) p. 45-46.

24. I am unaware of any instance in which Thoreau specifically discusses "original sin." He does briefly mention sin in his journal, writing, "Sin, I am sure, is not in overt acts or, indeed, in acts of any kind, but is in proportion to the time which has come behind us and displaced eternity, – that degree to which our elements are mixed with the elements of the world. The whole duty of life is contained in the question how to respire and aspire both at once." *Journal*. Vol. I, Ch. 5, December 26th, 1841 p. 300.

25. Russell Kirk observes that, "On his eighty-fifth birthday, Emerson remarked, 'I never could give much reality to evil and pain.'" Russell Kirk. *The Conservative Mind*. 2001 printing. (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1953) p. 244.

26. Thoreau and Rousseau, as Melissa Lane observes, did share a kind of Pelagianism. See "Thoreau and Rousseau: Nature as Utopia." Jack Turner. Ed. *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*. (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2009).

27. See *Journal* entry on Feb. 10th, 1852 quoted earlier in the footnotes. Also see Richard Bridgman. *Dark Thoreau*. (Lincoln, NE: Univ. of Nebraska, 1982).

absolute. Man's moral quality – his or her character – is judged on one's attunement to Right and by fidelity to the Higher Law.²⁸

Right or Truth, as intuited by Thoreau, tends to be conceived as ahistorical and abstract. He writes that, "Truth is not exalted, but rather degraded and soiled by contact with humanity. We may not conform ourselves to any mortal patten, but should conform our every act and thought to Truth." While he does favor the idyllic imagination in this regard, the moral imagination has a way of pulling him from the brink. "Truth", he continues, "is that whole of which Virtue, Justice, Benevolence and the like are parts, the manifestations; she includes and runs through them all. She is continually revealing herself."²⁹ At first, Thoreau exhibits a kind of Docetism. The universal Truth cannot help but be corrupted by its incarnation in human life, nor can it accommodate historical circumstances. When he defines Truth as "the whole," though, there is a sense in which Truth's universality is revealed through its concrete manifestations of virtue, justice and benevolence. Thoreau even admits that "She," or "Truth," is "constantly revealing herself" – a phrase reminiscent of Babbitt's "oneness that is always changing." In a strikingly similar vein from *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, he relates this view of ahistorical truth to the nature of man again, saying that "We are independent of the change we detect."³⁰ The moral-idyllic tension endures as he cannot entirely abstract himself from the particulars of history and humanity. We still detect the change we live in. Truth may reveal

28. This is perhaps most evident in his essays on John Brown: "A Plea for Captain John Brown" and "The Last Days of John Brown" both written and delivered as lectures in 1860. See Thoreau. *The Higher Law: Thoreau on Civil Disobedience and Reform*. Ed. by Wendell Glick (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 2004)

29. Henry David Thoreau. *Early Essays and Miscellanies*. Ed. by Joseph J. Moldenhauer and Edwin Moser, with Alexander C. Kern. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 1975) p. 111.

30. Henry David Thoreau. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Originally published 1849. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001) p. 80.

herself in *spite* of the particular, but she reveals herself in the particular nonetheless. There is something above the flux, but the flux is still fully real.

It is nevertheless difficult to ascribe to Thoreau an understanding of human nature and morality that parallels Babbitt and Ryn's given Henry's prioritization of moral consistency and purity over moral efficacy. In Babbitt's view the oneness of universality and the changing nature of the particular are synthesized while Thoreau places them permanently at odds with one another:

The morally right, or true, differs only from the worldly or temporal, in that it is the only real and universal right – that most worthy of man's inquiry and pursuit – the only right recognized by philosophy. As it is the most abstract, so is it the most practical of all, for it admits of universal application.³¹

This appeal to the abstract as being more universally applicable is again reminiscent of Kant's categorical imperative or Rousseau's general will, but such a view of truth could be taken to an unfortunate political extreme. Like Plato's "philosopher king" withdrawing from the polis, Thoreau would have the seeker of Truth be apolitical and pursue that which is abstract enough to paradoxically retain its universal application. In an attempt to be as practical as possible, Thoreau neglects the very existence in which Truth is revealing itself. The abstract moral right he asserts is anathema to the practicality he seeks. While Thoreau's objections to slavery may violate this aversion, he nevertheless writes in *A Week*:

To one who habitually endeavors to contemplate the true state of things, the political state can hardly be said to have any existence whatever. It is unreal, incredible and insignificant to him, and for him to endeavor to exact the truth from such lean material is like making sugar from linen rags when sugar cane

31. Thoreau. *Early Essays* (1975) p. 107.

may be had. Generally speaking, the political news, whether domestic or foreign, might be written to-day for the next ten years, with sufficient accuracy.³²

The “political,” narrowly (but never explicitly) defined, is almost wholly removed from the Truth. Politics is so concrete, so changeable and so historical that it could not possibly possess the reality that Thoreau’s adherence to Right demands. He would prefer to simply ignore politics altogether. Thankfully, he possessed just enough moral imagination to not abandon political questions entirely, which is demonstrated most clearly in his public opposition to slavery and the Mexican-American War.³³

* * * *

Given the centrality of the Right and Truth, how does Thoreau conceive of the good individual? In spite of a tendency toward abstraction, Thoreau did seek to *embody* his notion of Right as well as point to others who seemingly lived up to the same standard. This appreciation for persons and the imitation of exemplars, in addition to principles, places him in one sense, in the company of Babbitt. As Ryn explains:

More than anywhere else, man discovers the essence of reality in ethical action. Such action, Babbitt contends, realizes the ultimate meaning of life and is its own reward...The crux of the ethical life, Babbitt argues, is not acquiring definitive theoretical knowledge of the good, which is beyond man, but the ability to *act* on whatever ethical insight one does have.³⁴

Thoreau would likely agree with such an emphasis in some ways, but would ultimately not surrender his commitment to the primacy of abstract moral principles. “Definitive theoretical knowledge of the good” seems, for Thoreau, to be attainable. While Babbitt and Ryn, animated

32. Thoreau. *A Week*, p. 80.

33. Thoreau’s preoccupation with slavery and the Mexican-American War will be taken up in chapter four.

34. Ryn (1997) p. 26.

by a moral imagination attuned to historical reality, celebrate the individual willing to face actual circumstances, Thoreau's man of excellence eschews the concrete details of life to remain faithful to Right.

Thoreau recognizes, though, the power of passion and love as an ordering power. Despite claiming a preference for an abstract Right, what humans desire has the potential to pull them back to concrete, historical circumstances. While at Harvard, Thoreau wrote that "Each one is, for the most part, under the influence of some ruling passion, and almost invariably possesses a taste for some particular pursuit. This pursuit, this object of all one's wishes, and end of all his endeavors, has great influence with his fellow men in determining his character..."³⁵ In D.H. Lawrence's words, "We live by what we thrill to." Or, to borrow a phrase from James K.A. Smith, humans are "desiring, imaginative animals."³⁶ Elsewhere, Thoreau writes that "I can express only the thought which I *love* to express."³⁷ Who or what one "loves" is the ordering principle in contrast to an order of reason and abstract rationality.³⁸ What one loves has the potential to ground us, in Thoreau's words, in a "particular pursuit" or, alternatively, in particular persons, places and things.

Another key element of the aforementioned Harvard essay is the importance of autonomous expectations and identity for the "true patriot" – Thoreau's shorthand for an uncompromising selfless seeker of the common good. This individual does not ignore the

35. Thoreau. *Early Essays* (1975) p.5- 6.

36. James K.A. Smith. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Vol. I of *Cultural Liturgies*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009) p. 40.

37. Thoreau. *Journal* Vol. II, Ch. 6, Jul 7th, 1851 p. 291.

38. Though he's more concerned with an understanding of *power* instead of order, we also find Thoreau reflecting on the importance of love in a similar vein in Henry David Thoreau. "Paradise (To Be) Regained" in *The Higher Law*: (2004) p. 47.

thoughts of others but makes a conscious effort to both distinguish himself and to carefully resist being defined by another. As Thoreau writes a month later:

Most of us are apt to neglect the study of our own characters, thoughts, and feelings, and for the purpose of forming our own minds, look to others, who should merely be considered as different editions of the same great work. To be sure, it would be well for us to examine the various copies, that we might detect any errors, but yet, it would be foolish for one to borrow a work which he possessed himself, but had not perused.³⁹

Thoreau lays the groundwork for his life-long preoccupation with autonomy, but he also introduces his conception of persons as “different editions of the same great work.” Human individuality participates in a unity with humanity, and by calling each person a different “edition,” and not a copy, he seems to appreciate the creative potential of imitation. Humans discover their place within a universal humanity and community by actualizing their individuality instead of suppressing it. This early reflection by Thoreau is among the best examples of his moral imagination; in which man is neither merely abstract nor concrete, but a synthesis of the universal and the particular.

A further example of Thoreau’s moral imagination qualifies the pursuit of autonomy and individuality:

I would not, by any means, have it understood that we are to neglect the advice of our friends, and ask another’s opinion, as many do, merely to refute it, without considering that it is given at our own request, and that therefore we are to consider it a favor; but the majority of mankind are too easily induced to follow any course which accords with the opinion of the world.⁴⁰

A few months later again he writes, “He who is dependent upon himself alone for his enjoyments, - who finds all he wants within himself, is really independent; for to look to others

39. Thoreau. *Early Essays*. (1975) p. 9.

40. Thoreau. *Early Essays*. (1975) p. 10.

for that which is the object of every man's pursuit, is to live in a state of perpetual trust and reliance."⁴¹ These passages reflect an individuality that is not at odds with family and community life and does not conflict with moral autonomy. Yet over the next two decades, Thoreau would come to the opposite conclusion in *Walden*, writing that "I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors."⁴² Thoreau could resist or embrace advice and influence from the same person, maintaining his individual character, but still gleaning what he could from others.

Thoreau has not yet articulated, while at Harvard, the importance of Right as the ordering element of his moral understanding, but given his preoccupation with individuality and autonomy, a problem already emerges. This Right would conceivably demand the cultivation of more than moral unity within society; it would require *uniformity* as well. Would this uniformity ultimately undermine individuality? Rousseau contemplated this problem in regards to the "General Will," which possesses a similar universality to Thoreau's Right. The answer for Rousseau was "that whoever refuses to obey the general will, will be forced to do so by the entire body. This means merely that he will be forced to be free."⁴³ Conformity to Right is chosen over and above individuality which may undermine the uniformity of the general will. Thoreau at this point, however, is either unaware of the problem with conformity or unwilling to take it that far. In a passage reminiscent of John Stuart Mill's warning about the "tyranny of the majority," Thoreau writes:

41. Thoreau. *Early Essays*. (1975) p. 20.

42. Thoreau. *Walden*. p. 51.

43. Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *On the Social Contract* Book I, Ch. VII, in *The Basic Political Writings* (1987) p. 150.

If then we find a certain Few standing aloof from the multitude – not allowing themselves to be carried along by the current of Popular feeling, we may fairly conclude that they have good reason for so doing – that they have looked farther into the subject than others – so far, at least, as to discover what has escaped the notice of the rabble. Those in the stream are not aware of the cataract at hand, but those on the bank have it in full view. Whose is the wisest and safest course?...Opposition but ‘adds fuel to the flame.’ Dam up the torrent and it will deluge the country.⁴⁴

This is not exactly the same as favoring individuality over and above Right but, rather, above popular opinion. As will be considered later on, Thoreau did not hold a similar view in regards to slavery.

Given his view of Right, Truth and the “true patriot,” what does Thoreau mean by “morality,” or more specifically by “moral excellence”? He addresses this question in another college essay on May 26th, 1837, explaining that moral excellence is not limited to acknowledging and obeying scriptural authority, nor is it defined by conformity to a kind of “popular morality.” Instead, while writing on conformity and duty, he explains that:

Duty is one and invariable – it requires no impossibilities, nor can it ever be disregarded with impunity; so far as it exists, it is binding, and if all duties are binding, so as on no account to be neglected, how can one bind stronger than another?...Mere conformity to another’s habits or customs is never, properly speaking, a duty, though it may follow as a natural consequence of the performance of duty.⁴⁵

Thoreau is not denying the existence of duty, but he recognizes that the duty must be realized on one’s own terms. Religion, in particular, plays an important role in achieving moral excellence and helps motivate one’s obedience to duty. Moral excellence for Thoreau, however:

[C]onsists rather in allowing the religious sentiment to exercise a natural and proper influence over our lives and conduct – in acting from a sense of duty, or, as

44. Thoreau. *Early Essays*. (1975) p. 24

45. Thoreau. *Early Essays*. (1975) p. 106.

we say, from principle. The morally excellent, then, are constantly striving to discover and pursue the right. This is their whole duty; for, in the inquiry what is right, reason alone can decide, and her dictates are ever identical with the dictates of duty. Here then is ample room for the exercise of the intellectual faculties.⁴⁶

This “religious sentiment” is rather vaguely defined, but in many ways this is inevitable.

Thoreau in his *Journal* asks: “What is religion?” and he responds by saying, “That which is never spoken.”⁴⁷ Bradley P. Dean interprets Thoreau as saying that “Religion is never spoken because the deepest truths of human experience cannot be communicated directly from person to person. Some fatal loss occurs.”⁴⁸ That which is “unsayable” plays a major role in Thoreau’s imagination.⁴⁹ Indeed, much of the moral-idyllic tension plays out in the inevitable struggle to convey, through paradox, allegory, symbolism, aphorism or poetry, an experience that cannot be captured by spoken or written words. Allowing for such mystery is admirable as is the sense in which “the morally excellent...are constantly striving to discover and pursue the right.”⁵⁰ In this same college essay, however, he makes the critical mistake of leaving reason alone to navigate questions of duty and moral excellence. Religious “sentiment” or judgment may have started one on the path to moral excellence, but it ultimately becomes an obstacle:

None, in fine, but the highest minds, can attain to moral excellence. With by far the greater part of mankind, religion is a habit, or rather, habit is religion, their views of things are illiberal and contracted for the very reason that they possess not intellectual power sufficient to attain to moral excellence. However paradoxical it may seem, it appears to me that to reject *Religion* is the first step

46. Thoreau. *Early Essays*. (1975) p. 106-107.

47. Thoreau. *Journal*. Vol. XI, Ch. 2 August 18th, 1858 p. 113.

48. Bradley P. Dean. “Introduction.” in Henry David Thoreau. *Letters to a Spiritual Seeker*. Ed. by Bradley P. Dean. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004). p. 16.

49. See William C. Johnson Jr. *What Thoreau Said: Walden And the Unsayable*. (Moscow, ID: Univ. of Idaho, 1991).

50. Thoreau. *Early Essays*. (1975) p. 107.

towards moral excellence; at least, no man ever attained to the highest degree of the latter by any other road.⁵¹

In tension with the later journal entry defining religion as the unsayable, Thoreau would have us discard religion in favor of reason as more conducive toward moral excellence. The “highest minds” are those which abandon religion once it is no longer required for apprehending principle.

Did Thoreau, then, abandon religion and elevate reason as the exclusive means to the end of moral excellence? The simple answer is no. While he resisted, and essentially abandoned, Christianity, Thoreau’s moralism was thoroughly shaped by a profound spirituality and a kind of pantheistic liturgy. He was seldom explicit about these sympathies, but in his letters to H.G.O. Blake and throughout his *Journal*, one finds, to use Thoreau’s words, a “religious sentiment.” He does not seem to have understood God in a personal sense,⁵² but expressed a reluctant pantheism, and referred to himself as a pantheist in a letter to Horace Greeley.⁵³ The divine was more of a presence than a person. At the same time, when Nature seemed to be assuming the role of a god for Thoreau, he would write in *Walden* that “Nature is hard to overcome, but she must be overcome.”⁵⁴ In his *Journal* he complains that “We soon get through with Nature. She excites an expectation which she cannot satisfy.”⁵⁵ Both the God of conventional religion and the divine in

51. Thoreau. *Early Essays*. (1975) p. 107.

52. Bradley P. Dean writes that Thoreau “thought it a ‘sad mistake’ to try and prove or even to acknowledge the personality of God. Our sense of eternal, infinite omnipotence ought not be circumscribed by mere personhood, which also implies separation and distance. Still, he understood that all human beings, himself included, are reduced to the necessity of using the trope of personality as a means of expressing and even conceiving our sense of the divine. ‘Every people have gods to suit their circumstances,’ he remarks...” Dean. “Introduction” (2004) p. 17.

53. Thoreau. Letter to Horace Greeley. February 9th, 1853. in *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. by Walter Harding and Carl Bode. (New York: New York Univ., 1958). p. 294.

54. Thoreau. *Walden*. “The Higher Laws.” p. 268.

55. Thoreau. *Journal*. Vol. VI, Ch. 6, May 23rd, 1854 p. 293.

nature have disappointed him, so he offers another possible explanation. Namely, that “the last of Nature is but the first of God...This earth which is spread out like a map around me is but the lining of my inmost soul exposed.”⁵⁶ Does God, in Thoreau’s view, complete and perfect Nature? Or is the divine in Thoreau revealed through his encounter with Nature? The context of this passage, in which he laments a kind of monotony in Nature reminiscent of Heidegger’s “standing reserve,” implies the latter. Thoreau, like Emerson, saw the divine in man. Encountering the “earth” around him exposed his “inmost soul” because his inescapable subjectivity participates in that which is divine in man. Allowing that divinity to emerge was the foundation of moral excellence in Thoreau’s imagination.

* * * *

Thoreau does not consistently separate intelligence and morality, reason and will, epistemology and ethics. Thoreau defies, even resists, conventional categories and specialization in this regard. One’s moral disposition and commitment is deeply implicated in what one *knows* or *understands*. This morally grounded epistemology has profound implications for the imagination of nature and for his relationship to nineteenth-century science. Thoreau was no positivist, as Alfred Tauber’s work has shown, but Thoreau “was dissatisfied with a false choice – knowledge *or* romance, science *or* poetry. Both modes of experience were crucial in fulfilling his quest for reality. Unified reason bequeathed unified experience...Thoreau’s venture as attempting to fully integrate the scientific worldview with human experience.”⁵⁷ As the poetry

56. Thoreau. *Journal*. Vol. VI, Ch. 6, May 23rd, 1854 p. 294.

57. Alfred I. Tauber. “Thoreau’s Moral Epistemology and Its Contemporary Relevance.” in *Thoreau’s Importance for Philosophy*. Ed. by Rick Anthony Furtak, Jonathan Ellsworth, and James D. Reid. (New York: Fordham Univ., 2012). p. 136.

found in Thoreau's so-called, "Natural History of Massachusetts" demonstrates, he does not live in a world of mere objects or facts. Thoreau lives in a world of meaning and value.

Thoreau intuited the world with a constant attention to moral questions. Living in the tension between the moral and idyllic imagination, he struggled to reconcile his abstract, ahistorical Right with the concrete, historical circumstances of politics. He wrestled with misanthropy, pantheism, the reality of good and evil, moral excellence by means of reason or religion and so on. As Heinz Eulau observed, "Thoreau's individualism could not possibly find practical application. The moral and the morally real were at odds."⁵⁸ Though given more toward the idyllic than the moral, the tension shaped his attitude toward politics and the community around him more so than his affinity for one side.

To even have the opportunity for the moral-idyllic struggle, one must, in Thoreau's view, be free. What does it mean to be free? For Thoreau, freedom was primarily "negative," in that it involved the removal of obstacles and inhibitions to one's moral autonomy. Yet he was also animated by a positive concept of freedom as an attunement to Right. Self-reform and fidelity to the Higher Laws required freedom. But politics and community also require an understanding of friendship and society. Who are we relative to others and how do we live with one another? Freedom and friendship, to which we turn in the next chapters, are critical themes in Thoreau's legacy, and they are fruitful areas to witness the tension between the idyllic and moral imagination.

58. Heinz Eulau. "Wayside Challenger: Some Remarks on the Politics of Henry David Thoreau." *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Winter, 1949), p. 514.

CHAPTER III

IMAGINATION IN FRIENDSHIP AND COMMUNITY

In love and friendship the imagination is as much exercised as the heart; and if either is outraged the other will be estranged. It is commonly the imagination which is wounded first, rather than the heart, - it is so much the more sensitive.”

– Thoreau, Letter to H.G.O. Blake, September 1852 –

Thoreau understands human nature as ordered by what man loves, desires and imagines. Political morality is evaluated on its adherence to abstract “Right,” and, as will be discussed in the next chapter, an uninhibited individual freedom is, for Thoreau, the foundation of a fully realized life. Understanding Thoreau’s politics, however, demands a consideration of not simply his understanding of himself and human nature, but of his relationship to society and community. Politics assumes a community, or at least a group of people sharing resources and decision-making. One’s intuitive sense of a community and their role in it evokes profound consequences for political thought.

Analyzing Thoreau’s view of community and society presents a number of difficulties. His work reveals a temptation to misanthropy, a love of autonomy that may militate against substantive social interaction and a preoccupation with an abstract Right threatened by historical circumstances. Thoreau’s concepts of human nature and moral excellence complicate his position in a community where politics take place, and a tension endures between what seems to be an apolitical Thoreau and his political legacy. By diving deeper into his understanding of

friendship specifically, we begin to see how the tension between the moral and idyllic imagination manifests itself in Thoreau's politics and in his view of society. We also discover tensions and disappointments that underlie Thoreau's environmental imagination to be discussed in Part II.

Why concentrate on friendship? Most Thoreau scholars focus on his understanding of the person as an individual. Thoreau tended to focus on the self, possessing little explicit regard for his associations and context in his writing. Yet if Thoreau's reflections are to be politically meaningful he must, at some point, consider human nature in the context of other humans. Politics may begin with the questions, "Who am *I*?" and "What am *I* doing here?", but these must be followed by, "Who are they/we?" and "How are we to live together?" Following Aristotle's example, a political thinker must consider the implications of friendship and its consequences for order, freedom and human nature. Emerson's essay on "Friendship" is an important example contemporary with Thoreau and likely shaped the latter's own disposition. There is significant continuity on this topic; both Emerson and Thoreau favor the idyllic imagination in their view of friendship.

The most striking element of Thoreau and Emerson's accounts of friendship is their tendency to value the *ideal* of friendship, or the friend in the abstract, much more than a friend in the concrete. Friendship is a sentiment, a dream and an inspiration. With Emerson in particular it is remarkable how much more he values friendship with a complete stranger than with a more familiar face. He describes, for example, the excitement of welcoming a stranger to a home and how the anticipation of the other's presence seems to inspire great desire and reflection:

For long hours we can continue a series of sincere, graceful, rich communications, drawn from the oldest, secretest experience, so that they who sit by, of our own kinsfolk and acquaintance, shall feel a lively surprise at our unusual powers. But as soon as the stranger begins to intrude his partialities, his definitions, his defects into the conversation, it is all over. He has heard the first, the last and best he will ever hear from us. He is no stranger now. Vulgarity, ignorance, misapprehension are old acquaintances. Now, when he comes, he may get the order, the dress and the dinner, - but the throbbing of the heart and the communications of the soul, no more.¹

As soon as we begin to listen and focus on the other, breaking down the strangeness and cultivating familiarity, the sentiment of friendship is no more. Emerson suggests that the importance of this unfamiliarity and sentiment is so important for friendship that it may be more appropriate for the “friends” to be separated. “Let the soul be assured that somewhere in the universe it should rejoin its friend,” he writes, “and it would be content and cheerful alone for a thousand years.”² The thought or idea of the friend is preferable to the presence of the friend and the inevitable impositions which such presence may require.

Emerson admits his preference for the friend-as-abstraction over the friend-as-concrete-person. “Friendship, like the immortality of the soul, is too good to be believed,” he writes, “The lover, beholding his maiden, half knows that she is not verily that which he worships; and in the golden hour of friendship we are surprised with shades of suspicion and unbelief.”³ He claims that “Friends such as we desire are dreams and fables.”⁴ Later, in a brief example of a letter he might write to a friend he observes that “[a]lmost all people descend to meet. All association must be a compromise, and, what is worst, the very flower and aroma of the flower of each of the

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson. “Friend” in *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 12 vols. Fireside Edition (Boston and New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1909). Vol. 2 *Essays. First Series*, p. 70.

2. Emerson, “Friend.” p. 70

3. Emerson, “Friend.” p. 71.

4. Emerson, “Friend.” p. 77.

beautiful natures disappears as they approach each other. What a perpetual disappointment is actual society, even of the virtuous and gifted!“⁵

Given this view of friendship, how might Emerson define love? It would seem that, for him, as the moral and physical effort of friendship increases, the amount of love in the relationship decreases. Early in the “Friendship” essay he writes, “Love, which is the essence of God, is not for levity, but for the total worth of man. Let us not have this childish luxury in our regards, but the austerest worth; let us approach our friend with an audacious trust in the truth of his heart, in the breadth, impossible to be overturned, of his foundations.”⁶ For Emerson, there is a tension between loving the truth of the heart of a particular man or woman and loving mankind in general. The moral imagination seems unlikely to emerge victorious out of this tension; he writes later that “[i]n the last analysis, love is only the reflection of a man’s own worthiness from other men. Men have sometimes exchanged names with their friends, as if they would signify that in their friend each loved his own soul.”⁷ The Christian teaching of “Love your neighbor as yourself” has become “Love yourself by loving your neighbor.” This is also why Emerson describes the composition of friendship as an equal combination of truth and tenderness. By “truth” he means that friendship allows for each individual to be as sincere as possible, but this is realized only in the *ideal* of friendship. As Emerson says, “Every man alone is sincere. At the entrance of a second person, hypocrisy begins.”⁸ By “tenderness” he means little more than a sentiment which no one appears worthy to feel:

5. Emerson, “Friend.” p. 72.

6. Emerson, “Friend.” p. 72-73.

7. Emerson, “Friend.” p. 77

8. Emerson, “Friend.” p. 73.

The other element of friendship is tenderness. We are holden to men by every sort of tie, by blood, by pride, by fear, by hope, by lucre, by lust, by hate, by admiration, by every circumstance and badge and trifle, – but we can scarce believe that so much character can subsist in another as to draw us by love. Can another be so blessed and we so pure that we can offer him tenderness? When a man becomes dear to me I have touched the goal of fortune.⁹

Tenderness is an element of friendship which only the self, the subject, seems worthy of.

As Emerson writes, “I do then with my friends as I do with my books. I would haw them where I can find them, but I seldom use them. We must have society on our own terms, and admit or exclude it on the slightest cause. I cannot afford to speak much with my friend. If he is great he makes me so great that I cannot descend to converse.”¹⁰ Friendship, when lived rightly, undermines itself. Its fulfillment results in its abandonment.

Emerson’s account of friendship is in sharp contrast to the classical tradition of Aristotle, for whom true friendship based on mutual love was rare but neither impossible nor abstract. Though lesser friendships might be motivated by utility or pleasure, true friendship was motivated by a desire for the other’s well-being. Friendship was love for the other simply for his or her sake, and formed the basis of a well-ordered political community. There was no distinction, for Aristotle, between a “friend” in the abstract and the actual friend that one encountered in everyday life. Conversation did not require condescension among friends and could even take place between a master and a slave. Aristotle was not as concerned with how friendship hindered or helped individual liberty and autonomy. Instead, the quality of a friendship was a product of mutual, selfless love for the cultivation of virtue and order. Thoreau would do little to remedy the idyllic slant of Emerson’s idea of friendship, but he seems to have,

9. Emerson, “Friend.” p. 74.

10. Emerson, “Friend.” p. 77.

at times, considered a more classical understanding. Nowhere is Thoreau's intuition of friendship so extensively developed as in his first published book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849).¹¹

In 1839 Thoreau and his brother, John, enjoyed a canoe trip on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. Ten years later Thoreau would publish his account and reflections on the journey in *A Week*. Written in a manner reminiscent of Goethe's *Italian Journeys*, *A Week* is not simple travel literature.¹² It is a fascinating reflection on topics as diverse as ancient European and modern New England history, poetry, friendship, philosophy, education, Eastern religion, literature, Christianity, community, language and much more. Though the book was a commercial flop and incurred a significant debt upon Thoreau, it ought not to live in the shadow of *Walden*. Indeed, the first drafts of both works were completed while he lived at Walden Pond. It is also colored deeply by John's untimely death in January 1842.

Given Thoreau's close relationship to John, it is little wonder that the longest digression, and perhaps the most dominant topic of *A Week*, is on the subject of friendship. Toward the middle of the "Wednesday" chapter, Thoreau observes that "No word is oftener on the lips of men than Friendship, and indeed no thought is more familiar to their aspirations. All men are dreaming of it, and its drama, which is always a tragedy, is enacted daily. It is the secret of the universe."¹³ Friendship, or at least what Thoreau understands to be *true* friendship, is mysterious and has, in his estimation, seldom been written about despite its ubiquitous presence in everyday

11. Henry David Thoreau. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Originally published 1849. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001) Hereafter, referred to as *A Week*.

12. Richardson rightly draws out this comparison with Goethe in his intellectual biography. See Robert D. Richardson Jr. *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*. (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California, 1986) p. 28-30, 156.

13. Thoreau *A Week*. "Wednesday." p. 171.

life. Like Emerson, though, Thoreau seems much more concerned with the *idea* of Friendship than with friends themselves: “We are continually acting a part in a more interesting drama than any written. We are dreaming that our Friends are our *Friends*, and that we are our Friends’ *Friends*. Our actual Friends are but distant relations of those to whom we are pledged. We never exchange more than three words with a Friend in our lives on that level to which our thoughts and feelings almost habitually rise.”¹⁴ The “tragedy” in the “drama of friendship” is that the ideal or dream of true friendship is seldom realized:

Of what use the friendliest dispositions even, if there are no hours given to Friendship, if it is forever postponed to unimportant duties and relations? Friendship is first, Friendship last. But it is equally impossible to forget our Friends, and to make them answer to our ideal. When they say farewell, then indeed we begin to keep them company. How often we find ourselves turning our backs on our actual Friends, that we may go and meet their ideal cousins. I would that I were worthy to be any man's Friend.¹⁵

The genuine ‘friendliness’ of Thoreau’s reflection is questionable. A tension remains between the desire and importance of friendship in the abstract and the tragic inability for it to be found in everyday life. Thoreau consistently prefers the ideal friend, who is the one of his memory and idyllic imagination.¹⁶ What is this ideal of friendship? Friendship for Thoreau would be a kind of mutual elevation of two persons in which the relationship and “purity” of true human intercourse would leave neither person unchanged. This intercourse must never be at the expense of freedom and sincerity. In his *Journal* he writes:

14. Thoreau *A Week*. “Wednesday.” p. 171-172.

15. Thoreau *A Week*. “Wednesday.” p. 172.

16. “What is commonly honored with the name of Friendship is no very profound or powerful instinct. Men do not, after all, love their Friends greatly. I do not often see the farmers made seers and wise to the verge of insanity by their Friendship for one another. They are not often transfigured and translated by love in each other's presence. I do not observe them purified, refined, and elevated by the love of a man.” Thoreau. *A Week*. “Wednesday.” p. 172.

Woe to him who wants a companion, for he is unfit to be the companion even of himself. We inspire friendship in men when we have contracted friendship with the gods. When we cease to sympathize with and to be personally related to men, and begin to be universally related, then we are capable of inspiring others with the sentiment of love for us.”¹⁷

Friendship, if it is not to impose on our freedom, is not a product of social and moral effort but a sentiment inspiring others by not making demands on them. We both love universal mankind and are a part of the universal mankind that is loved. It is a friendship of affinity and sentiment which theoretically does not undermine autonomy because it focuses on one’s relationship to humans in general rather than to specific humans. For a writer famous for his so-called “championing of individualism,” the disappearance of individuals in his concept of friendship is striking.

Another strange and often overlooked aspect of Thoreau’s concept of friendship is that it is “unwilled.” He writes in *A Week* that “The books for young people say a great deal about the *selection* of Friends; it is because they really have nothing to say about *Friends*. They mean associates and confidants merely.”¹⁸ If the youth and their books really understood friendship, it would be conceived more as something that simply *happens* to an individual with no consent required. “I never asked thy leave to let me love thee, – I have a right. I love thee not as something private and personal, which is your own, but as something universal and worthy of love, which I have found.”¹⁹ This is how friendship “happens” to people. Consenting to association with another would be less free and too personal. The universal would be corrupted

17. Henry David Thoreau. *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau: In Fourteen Volumes Bound as Two*. 2 Vols. Ed. by Bradford Torrey and F. H. Allen. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1962). Vol. II, Ch. 1, June 9th, 1850. p. 33.

18. Thoreau. *A Week*. “Wednesday.” p. 174.

19. Thoreau *A Week*. “Wednesday.” p. 174.

by the particular. We only consent to be ourselves and to love whomever we wish, and when we love, we love what is universal *in* the particular person. The person is, at best, incidental to love.

Thoreau continues in a strikingly romantic exclamation:

Oh, how I think of you! You are purely good, - you are infinitely good. I can trust you forever. I did not think that humanity was so rich. Give me an opportunity, to live. You are the fact in a fiction, - you are the truth more strange and admirable than fiction. Consent only to be what you are. I alone will never stand in your way. This is what I would like, - to be as intimate with you as our spirits are intimate, - respecting you as I respect my ideal. Never to profane one another by word or action, even by a thought. Between us, if necessary, let there be no acquaintance. I have discovered you; how can you be concealed from me? The Friend asks no return but that his Friend will religiously accept and wear and not disgrace his apotheosis of him. They cherish each other's hopes. They are kind to each other's dreams.²⁰

This passage could be read as very Aristotelian. Is Thoreau not calling for loving others as they are and not as we want them to be? Is this not loving the other for his or her own sake? The problem is that the very Friend to whom Thoreau pays homage cannot exist. The friend is a dream, void of any reality and subject to intimacy only in sentiment. David Robinson offers an alternative reading of this same passage, explaining that:

To love one another as 'something universal' is to love some power in which we too can participate and derive new identity. While Thoreau's language seems at first to idealize the loved one as theoretical or unreal,...his deeper purpose is to suggest that the love of another brings us a greater sense of our own unrealized capabilities for goodness, which we see exemplified in the one we love... [Thoreau emphasizes] how love grants us a larger perception and makes us more confident of our ability to enlarge ourselves morally and spiritually.²¹

Yet there is no evidence in the text to suggest that such a "larger" perception was ever intended for realization in concrete, moral effort. Thoreau's imagination of rightly-ordered

20. Thoreau *A Week*. "Wednesday." p. 174.

21. David M. Robinson. *Natural Life: Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ., 2004) p.66.

friendship is a self-centered emotionalism in which love for the other is ultimately love for no one except the self. Robinson himself admits this, writing:

The obvious danger of friendship conceived as the unwilling love of ‘something’ universal’ in another is that it threatens to transform the most intensely personal of inner drives into something coldly impersonal. While it may seem that we are drawn to a friend’s unique character, this desire for the particular qualities of the individual finally dissolves into a pursuit of something abstract or disembodied. This converts the inescapable passion that drives friendship into a means of moral aspiration.²²

We must still ask Thoreau what he means by love. While he has important remarks to make on love in *A Week*, his most explicit treatment of the topic comes in his letters to Harrison Blake. After Blake married one of his students in 1852, he wrote to both Thoreau and Bronson Alcott asking “how they thought a man and a woman could ‘help each other to be more truly solitary in the good [and] beautiful sense, to be more truly free, to be nearer the common Friend that we could be, apart?’”²³ Thoreau’s response was to illuminate a mysterious quality in love, its perfection in the abstract, the manner in which it is known more in its absence and in its participation in eternity. Love is primarily feminine and often at odds with wisdom and “good sense.”²⁴ At the same time, “Love must be as much a light as a flame,”²⁵ bringing discernment

22. Robinson. (2004) p.66. Thoreau admits this as well, writing in his journal, “The best men that I know are not serene, a world in themselves. They dwell in form. They flatter and study effect, only more finely than the rest. The world to me appears uninhabited. My neighbors select granite for the underpinning of their houses and barns ; they build their fences of stone; but they do not themselves rest on an underpinning of granite. Their sills are rotten. What stuff is the man made of who is not coexistent in your thought with the purest and subtlest truth? While there are manners and compliments we do not meet. I accuse my finest acquaintances of an immense frivolity. They do not teach me the lessons of honesty and sincerity that the” brute beasts do, or of steadiness and solidity that the rocks do.’ I cannot associate with those: who do not understand me.” Thoreau. *Journal*, Vol. IV, Ch. 1 May 13th, 1852. p. 46-47.

23. Quoted in Bradley P. Dean’s introduction to “Letter Eleven,” Thoreau to H.G.O. Blake, September 1852. *Letters to a Spiritual Seeker*. Ed. by Bradley P. Dean. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004). p. 67.

24. Thoreau himself never married, but he had once loved a visitor to Concord, Ellen Sewell, whom he unsuccessfully asked to marry. Ellen’s visit in the summer of 1839 seems to have caused most eligible bachelors in the town to court her. Both John and Henry proposed to her after returning from their trip down the Concord and

and sight to an otherwise blind heart. Love is also a “severe critic,” in that it requires much effort on the part of lovers, including an almost divine and comprehensive knowledge of the person which one loves. At the center of Thoreau’s essay to Blake, he offers one of his most explicit acknowledgements of imagination:

In love and friendship the imagination is as much exercised as the heart; and if either is outraged the other will be estranged. It is commonly the imagination which is wounded first, rather than the heart, - it is so much the more sensitive. *Comparatively*, we can excuse any offence against the heart, but not against the imagination. The imagination knows – nothing escapes its glance from out its eye – and it controls the breast. My heart may still yearn toward the valley, but my imagination will not permit me to jump off the precipice that debars me from it, for it is wounded, its wings are clipped, and it cannot fly, even descendingly...The imagination never forgets, it is a re-remembering. It is not foundationless, but most reasonable, and it alone uses all the knowledge of the intellect.²⁶

Thoreau has abandoned the primacy of the intellect over imagination as outlined in the Harvard essays discussed in Chapter One. He has learned to appreciate the imagination’s centrality and its role in love and will. Who or what one loves shapes the imagination, and the imagination shapes what one loves or does.

Returning to *A Week*, love and friendship must also exhibit a commitment to *truth*.

Thoreau writes that “...sometimes we are said to love another, that is, to stand in a true relation to him, so that we give the best to, and receive the best from, him. Between whom there is hearty truth, there is love; and in proportion to our truthfulness and confidence in one another, our lives

Merrimack rivers in early September. Thoreau had proposed to Ellen via letter, but her dad instructed her to decline. According to Richardson “he never again let himself fall in love with an eligible woman. Ellen was the one real love of his life, and whatever crusty remarks about women and marriage may have got copied down, he told his sister, when he was dying and the subject of Ellen Sewall came up, ‘I have always loved her.’” Richardson. (1986) p. 62.
 25. Henry David Thoreau. “Letter Eleven, Enclosure I” to H.G.O. Blake, September 1852 in Dean. (2004). p. 71.
 26. Thoreau. “Letter Eleven, Enclosure I” to H.G.O. Blake, September 1852. Dean, Ed. (2004). p. 71-72.

are divine and miraculous, and answer to our ideal.”²⁷ By *best* he means “most true” or sincere. Accommodating a friend or “being someone else” is a violation of true friendship. Furthermore, true friendship will cultivate great virtues and reform among society in a manner that hints of Aristotle’s influence:

Think of the importance of Friendship in the education of men. It will make a man honest; it will make him a hero; it will make him a saint. It is the state of the just dealing with the just, the magnanimous with the magnanimous, the sincere with the sincere, man with man...All the abuses which are the object of reform with the philanthropist, the statesman, and the housekeeper are unconsciously amended in the intercourse of Friends.²⁸

How does such cultivation take place? Thoreau’s friendship is an unwilling affinity for an abstraction, so cultivating or educating the will makes little sense. Just, magnanimous and sincere are qualities of character demonstrated by willing and practical action ignored by Thoreau’s concept of Friendship. “Friendship exists only as an ideal,” Jane Bennett observes of Thoreau, “its home is the imagination.”²⁹ As part of this ideal, friends must also be equal:

Friendship is, at any rate, a relation of perfect equality. It cannot well spare any outward sign of equal obligation and advantage. The nobleman can never have a Friend among his retainers, nor the king among his subjects. Not that the parties to it are in all respects equal, but they are equal in all that respects or affects their Friendship. The one’s love is exactly balanced and represented by the other’s. Persons are only the vessels which contain the nectar, and the hydrostatic paradox is the symbol of love’s law.³⁰

Because love of the abstract other is unwilling, there seems to be a kind of power or capacity for friendship that exists independently of the persons themselves. We all draw on this same source regardless of how *much* we say we love or *who* we are. The obligations and

27. Thoreau. *A Week*. “Wednesday.” p. 173.

28. Thoreau. *A Week*. “Wednesday.” p. 172-173.

29. Jane Bennett. *Thoreau’s Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994) p. 22.

30. Thoreau. *A Week*. “Wednesday.” p. 175.

expectations remain the same. Thoreau's concept of true friendship does not entertain obligations and expectations since the capacity for Friendship is equal irrespective of duty or the claims of others. In the same spirit, Thoreau writes, "It takes two to speak the truth, -one to speak, and another to hear..."³¹ One may be the speaker or the hearer, and the latter is likely only when the equality he just mentioned is violated:

Confucius said, 'Never contract Friendship with a man who is not better than thyself.' It is the merit and preservation of Friendship, that it takes place on a level higher than the actual characters of the parties would seem to warrant. The rays of light come to us in such a curve that every man whom we meet appears to be taller than he actually is. Such foundation has civility. My Friend is that one whom I can associate with my choicest thought. I always assign to him a nobler employment in my absence than I ever find him engaged in; and I imagine that the hours which he devotes to me were snatched from a higher society. The sorest insult which I ever received from a Friend was when he behaved with the license which only long and cheap acquaintance allows to one's faults, in my presence, without shame, and still addressed me in friendly accents. Beware, lest thy Friend learn at last to tolerate one frailty of thine, and so an obstacle be raised to the progress of thy love.³²

The sincerity of Thoreau's remarks on equality is questionable, because the equality he describes is entirely a product of Thoreau's imagination. The idealized friend – the only friend he willingly tolerates – is "better than thyself" merely because of the friend's association with Thoreau's own "choicest thoughts."

However, not all scholars interpret these writings as reflective of arrogance and abstraction. Jane Bennett writes that "Friendship is Thoreau's alternative to neighborliness and

31. Thoreau. *A Week*. "Wednesday." p. 173.

32. Thoreau. *A Week*. "Wednesday." p. 175-176. He is at least consistent, writing earlier in a similar vein of discouraging a concept of friendship that even includes kindness and friendliness: "Though the poet says, "'Tis the preeminence of Friendship to impute excellence," yet we can never praise our Friend, nor esteem him praiseworthy, nor let him think that he can please us by any behavior, or ever treat us well enough. That kindness which has so good a reputation elsewhere can least of all consist with this relation, and no such affront can be offered to a Friend as a conscious good-will, a friendliness which is not a necessity of the Friend's nature." Thoreau. *A Week*. "Wednesday." p. 174-175.

citizenship as models for intersubjective relations.”³³ Friendship is a way of making the people around us more *other* and is a means to resisting a “familiarity [that] breeds conformity.”³⁴

Idealizing friendship in the manner of Thoreau fosters freedom as a “technique of the self,” which describes practices Thoreau used to resist any influence of the “They,” anyone outside his own abstract, ahistorical conscience:

A Friend can foster individuality not only as a source of Wildness but also as a locus for one’s most divine thoughts. In Friendship each part becomes the site in which the other invests his or her highest aspirations. A Friend is the actual object around which one may spin the threads of one’s ideals...The choice of a friend is not something one deliberately plans. It is, rather, the spontaneous identification of one in whom it is possible to invest one’s ideals. You have a nose for them, are instinctively drawn there.³⁵

Friendship is a moment of vulnerability in which one’s freedom and self-understanding risk being undermined by the very existence of someone else. One may even be challenged by the other’s difference. It is no wonder then that Thoreau makes this deeply problematic comment:

Even the utmost goodwill and harmony and practical kindness are not sufficient for Friendship, for Friends do not live in harmony merely, as some say, but in melody. We do not wish for Friends to feed and clothe our bodies, - neighbors are kind enough for that, - but to do the like office to our spirits. For this few are rich enough, however well disposed they may be.”³⁶

Friendship brings order and truth to society because it is the only context in which truth can be spoken. But the equality he speaks of is less an equality of position, value or as under law, and is more a kind of *sameness*: a unison evoked by the word “melody.” Friends in harmony

33. Bennett. (1994) p. 22.

34. Bennett. (1994) p. 303.

35. Bennett. (1994) p. 20.

36. Thoreau. *A Week*. “Wednesday.” p. 172.

could work together in the same song and toward the same end despite not being in unison. Friends in melody discourage diversity as an obstacle to the ideal. The problem is that Thoreau's lofty expectations and ideals of friendship ultimately leave him lonely and isolated from the very people with whom he might speak truth. He laments this in his *Journal*, saying, "Here I am thirty-four years old, and yet my life is almost wholly unexpanded. How much is in the germ! There is such an interval between my ideal and the actual in many instances that I may say I am unborn. There is the instinct for society, but no society."³⁷ He is acutely aware of the impact of his intuition of friendship, but he continues to entertain the unrealizable dream of perfect friendship. He simply does not will for friendship that is anything less than ideal. "Clearly," Philip Cafaro observes, "Thoreau is not writing about friendship as it typically exists but about Friendship: an ideal that our particular friendships may more or less approximate."³⁸ The universal or the "form" of Friendship is primary. "We may and should sacrifice the real individual to the superior idealization."³⁹ What is unclear is how that "sacrifice" might take place.

Why not embrace friendship with others as they are and not as he wishes them to be? The answer, perhaps unsurprisingly, is friendship's potential threat to Thoreau's autonomy. In his *Journal* he writes candidly, "I hate that my motive for visiting a friend should be that I want society; that it should lie in my poverty and weakness, and not in his and my riches and strength. His friendship should make me strong enough to do without him."⁴⁰ The vulnerability of a

37. Thoreau. *Journal*, Vol. II, Ch. VI, July 19th, 1851. p. 316.

38. Philip Cafaro. *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue*. (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia, 2004) p. 129.

39. Cafaro. (2004) p. 129.

40. Thoreau. *Journal*, Vol. III, Ch. 5, February 14th, 1852, p. 304.

relationship terrifies Thoreau. Love may cost him his treasured autonomy. The following passage from the *Journal* shows well the tension he lives in between the moral imagination's desire for human interaction with persons as they are and the idyllic imagination's preoccupation with an unachievable ideal of a "true" and essentially sentimental friendship:

How far we can be apart and yet attract each other! There is one who almost wholly misunderstands me and whom I too probably misunderstand, toward whom, nevertheless, I am distinctly drawn. I have the utmost human good-will toward that one, and yet I know not what mistrust keeps us asunder. I am so much and so exclusively the friend of my friend's virtue that I am compelled to be silent for the most part, because his vice is present...I only desire sincere relations with the worthiest of my acquaintance, that they may give me an opportunity once in a year to speak the truth. They invite me to see them, and do not show themselves. Who are they, pray? I pine and starve near them. The hospitable man will invite me to an atmosphere 'where truth can be spoken, where a man can live and breathe.'⁴¹

Thoreau longs for what he intuitively knows only human friendship can offer, but he will not relent. He lacks the quality of will necessary to hold his idyllic dreams at bay and pursue friendship that is real. The same journal entry continues with the tragedy introduced in *A Week*. Unlike the masses of those speaking of friendship, Thoreau believes that he has achieved a truer definition. In his everyday life, though, he senses a significant disconnect between his imaginative vision of friendship and his experience of it:

How happens it that I find myself making such an enormous demand on men and so constantly disappointed? Are my friends aware how disappointed I am? Is it all my fault? Have I no heart? Am I incapable of expansion and generosity? I shall accuse myself of everything else sooner...Would not men have something to communicate if they were sincere? Is not my silent expectation an invitation, an offer, an opportunity offered? My friend has complained of me, cursed me even, but it did not affect me; I did not know the person he talked about. I have been disappointed from first to last in my friends, but I have never complained of them, nor to them. I would have them know me, guess at me. It is not petty and trivial

41. Thoreau. *Journal*, Vol. IV, Ch. 1, August 24th, 1852, p. 313-314.

relations that I seek to establish with them. A world in which there is a demand for ice-creams but not for truth! I leave my friends early; I go away to cherish my idea of friendship. Is not friendship a great relation? My friend so treats me that I feel a thousand miles off; like the greatest possible stranger, speaking a different language; as if it would be the fittest thing in the world for us to be introduced. Persists in thinking me the opposite to what [I am], and so shuts my mouth. Intercourse with men! How little it amounts to! How rarely we love them!”⁴²

After this passage, Thoreau compares himself to a cuttlefish, which clouds or darkens the water around it in order to hide, but through all this darkness there remains a peculiar light. Both Thoreau and Emerson acknowledge, though in no explicit or systematic fashion, that there is always more to a human person than what can be said about them. Thoreau comes close when he writes:

The language of Friendship is not words, but meanings. It is an intelligence above language. One imagines endless conversations with his Friend, in which the tongue shall be loosed, and thoughts be spoken without hesitancy or end ; but the experience is commonly far otherwise. Acquaintances may come and go, and have a word ready for every occasion; but what puny word: shall he utter whose very breath is thought and meaning?⁴³

There is something more to one’s friend than what can be written about or verified by the senses. In Emerson and Thoreau’s attempts to articulate an ideal friendship, they revealed in their own way what might be called a more “idealistic” friendship. They did not achieve a more comprehensive anthropology by outlining and clinging to an unachievable ideal, but their shortcomings exposed an instructive underlying awareness. Something transcendent in man – in the other and in one’s self – made others valuable and made themselves more valuable. This may have been why Thoreau and many others in New England opposed slavery as vehemently as they did and why Thoreau in particular spent so much time on the subject. Indeed, his brother John

42. Thoreau. *Journal*, Vol. IV, Ch. 1 August 24th, 1852. p. 313.

43. Thoreau. *A Week*. “Wednesday.” p. 176.

remained something of a friend long after the family had buried him. John, in life and death, was always more to Thoreau than what the latter could articulate. Perhaps this is why John, arguably the most important character (other than Thoreau) of *A Week*, is never described and barely mentioned.

* * * *

Friendship, as a concept, is not necessarily the same as “Society.” Presumably, one shares society with one’s friends, regardless of definition. But how can Thoreau have society with a myriad of abstractions whom he prefers to avoid? He begins to reflect on the importance of society in his first public lecture on April 11th, 1838 entitled, conveniently, “Society.”⁴⁴ Scraps of the lecture survive in his *Journal* from that same March. Thoreau begins by asking if the Aristotelian maxim that, “man was made for society,” has been corrupted from its original meaning. Alternatively, and “in order to preserve its significance,” Thoreau suggests that he “write it anew, so that properly it will read, Society was made for man.”⁴⁵ More precisely, Thoreau might argue, society was made for the *best* man instead of the lower sort to which it currently conforms: The mass never comes up to the standard of its best member, but on the contrary degrades itself to a level with the lowest. As the reformers say, it is a leveling down, not up. Hence the mass is only another name for the mob. The inhabitants of the earth assembled in one place would constitute the greatest mob.⁴⁶

44. This was also, significantly, around the same time that he began writing about Friendship, and many of the passages from these years found their way into the “Wednesday” chapter of *A Week*.

45. Thoreau. *Journal*. Vol. I, Ch. 2, March 14th, 1838 p. 36.

46. Thoreau. *Journal*. Vol. I, Ch. 2, March 14th, 1838 p. 36-37.

For Thoreau, what typically passes for “society” is something inauthentic, insincere, and more an exercise in conformity than in friendship among individuals. He writes that “despairing of a more perfect intercourse, or perhaps never dreaming that such is desirable, or at least possible, we are contented to act our part in what deserves to be called the great farce, not drama, of life, like pitiful and mercenary stock actors whose business it is to keep up the semblance of a stage.”⁴⁷ Friendship and society in any form less than the ideal invokes a sense of futility to which we tend to respond with complacency and conformity.

This first lecture is not necessarily intended as an attack on society or as the engendering of misanthropy. Thoreau is seeing *through* society, and longing for a truer society in which individual character and responsibility is neither consumed by nor tempted toward conformity. “Let not society be the element in which you swim, or are tossed about at the mercy of the waves, but be rather a strip of firm land running out into the sea, whose base is daily washed by the tide, but whose summit only the spring tide can reach.”⁴⁸ Like his concepts of political morality and freedom, though, his understanding of friendship and society render politics and even the most meager community nearly impossible. Though he longs for community, the society and friendship he ultimately desires is, at its core, idyllic. Community requires inconvenience, sacrifice, selflessness and dependency. Far from degrading humanity or eschewing sincerity, community finds its fulfillment by holding in tension the very elements Thoreau places at odds – the claims of the individual and those of the community. Instead of navigating such a tension, which emerges throughout Thoreau’s work, he would attempt to

47. Thoreau. *Journal*. Vol. I, Ch. 2, March 14th, 1838 p. 39.

48. Thoreau. *Journal*. Vol. I, Ch. 2, March 14th, 1838 p. 40.

“resolve” the problem with abstractions. When these same claims experience opposition from a government, though, something different is called for. If Thoreau’s ideal friendship and community could not be realized, what chance did any government have for legitimacy – especially for one which tolerated slavery? The next chapter begins to elucidate some of the consequences following from Thoreau’s idyllic vision of friendship. Then, in Chapter Five, Thoreau’s response to the disappointment with human community takes on a more radical significance: if the company of humans has failed to live up to his ideal, why not look to the non-human world instead?

CHAPTER IV

RESISTANCE AND RIGHT

The question is whether you can bear freedom. At present the vast majority of men, whether white or black, require the discipline of labor which enslaves them for their own good.

– Thoreau, *Journal*, 1 September 1853 –

Thoreau lives in a tension between the moral and idyllic imagination with a tendency to favor the idyllic. To better understand the political implications of this tension, I now move to address the more explicitly political themes of freedom, slavery, democracy, law and civil disobedience as considered in Thoreau's work. A closer look at these subjects illustrates the idyllic-moral tension within his intuition of political morality, friendship and human nature.

This chapter will focus primarily on what Bob Pepperman Taylor refers to as Thoreau's "polemical essays," which are distinguished by their more explicit references to politics. Pepperman Taylor reads these essays as rhetorical reactions to the times, and as responses to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act (1850), Thoreau's arrest for refusing to pay taxes in protest of the Mexican-American War and as a reaction to John Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry and his subsequent execution. While these historical moments provoke and inform all of these essays, referring to them more as distractions and rhetoric,¹ as Pepperman Taylor describes them, does not warrant isolating them as inconsistent with the rest of his work. Thoreau admitted

1. Bob Pepperman Taylor. *America's Bachelor Uncle: Thoreau and the American Polity*. (Lawrence, KS: Univ. of Kansas, 1996) p. 101.

deliberately overstating his case in some of these writings, but his imagination remained in the tension between the idyllic and the moral. His hyperbole and “rhetoric” may be indicative of what Thoreau actually believed, and a closer reading reveals that the more reserved Thoreau of *Walden* and *The Maine Woods* is the same passionate polemicist of “Slavery in Massachusetts.”

Thoreau’s essays, particularly “Resistance to Civil Government,” “Slavery in Massachusetts,” “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” and “Life Without Principle” provide more than the “unphilosophical” rhetoric Pepperman Taylor describes. Thoreau’s words may have been hyperbole to the reader, but not for Thoreau.

* * * *

Thoreau is perennially recognized as one of America’s great voices on the topic of liberty. James Mackaye called him the “philosopher of freedom” in recognition of Thoreau’s impressive focus and prolific writing on individual autonomy.² Following Emerson, Thoreau strives for a radical level of moral and intellectual autonomy in which one’s will, imagination and reason are free from “slavish” imitation.³ Unlike the other themes, however, Thoreau’s intuition of freedom evinces very little tension. His capitulation to a nearly unrestrained and idyllic concept of freedom provokes the tension in the imagination throughout his work. This is particularly true when taking a closer look at Thoreau’s influential concepts of the “Wild” and “Wildness.” Robert D. Richardson explains that:

2. James Mackaye. “Introduction” to *Thoreau: Philosopher of Freedom, Writings on Liberty by Henry David Thoreau*. Selected with an introduction by James Mackaye. (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1930).

3. As George Kateb writes, “Thoreau’s idea is that every obligation must be consciously and voluntarily assumed; and the only aim of a sense of obligation is to do the difficult right thing, the act that is determined or ratified by conscience. That is to say, one is obliged only to do the substantively right thing in each case of moral decision or when faced with some continuous situation that demands a moral response. Nothing commendable in the structured habitual or institutional background has any moral weight.” George Kateb. *Patriotism and Other Mistakes*. (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ., 2006) p. 265.

Thoreau is very explicit that for him, recovering the wild man means recovering our essential *freedom*, but it is also important to note that recognition of the wildness within has for Thoreau, as for its other champions, the vital, tonic effect of restoring man to emotional and cognitive awareness of his essential innermost self. The rediscovery of the wild is a process the opposite of alienation, restoring contact...between man and his best, most vital self.⁴

A preoccupation with alienation from one's "true self" was a ubiquitous theme in nineteenth century philosophy and political thought. Thoreau is no exception to this trend, but his emphasis on overcoming alienation by elevating the *wild* as a means to autonomy may have been quite novel at the time. The postmodern political philosopher, Jane Bennett, describes this equation of "wild" and "autonomous" in considerable detail, but even she recognizes hesitancy in Thoreau. There is a tension between the reality of living within an historical order and taking "wild" as "free" to its logical conclusion. Still, the move toward that more idyllic, radical sense of wildness is central to Thoreau's imagination:

Wild versus domestic, like I versus They, is an animating contrast for Thoreau. Domesticity is a state of mind appropriate to and evoked by ordinary social intercourse, civilized manners, and civic or political organization. All that is conventional, standard, and predictable is domestic. Domesticity, dwelling with the They, is necessary, and Thoreau aims not to eradicate it, but to avoid an existence wholly dominated by it. The Wildness of anything consists in its capacity to inspire extraordinary experience, startling metaphors, unsettling thoughts...Wildness is the unexplored, unexpected, and inexplicably foreign dimension of anything.⁵

"Wild," conceived as novel, mysterious and free, is simultaneously the absence of moral order, community and conformity. While Thoreau, as Bennett acknowledges, recognizes the necessity for some level of order and conformity, it must be minimal. Each individual ought to

4. Robert D. Richardson, Jr. *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*. (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California, 1986) p. 226.

5. Jane Bennett. *Thoreau's Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994) p. 18-19.

be as self-determined as possible. This “wildness” had been fundamentally denied to the enslaved blacks of the southern United States, and Thoreau’s passionate abhorrence of slavery grew out of his empathy for those deprived of such freedom.⁶

Thoreau’s most extensive remarks on slavery are found in his essay, “Slavery in Massachusetts” (1854). Delivered as a lecture on July 4th, the piece was, in part, a response to the recent passage of the Fugitive Slave Law and the efforts of Massachusetts to capture and return the runaway slave, Anthony Burns, to the South. The thrust of Thoreau’s argument was that the Fugitive Slave Act, and the Constitution which seemingly supported it, must be disobeyed. Right must be given precedence over Law. The people of Massachusetts, by obeying the law, were demonstrating their own enslavement to injustice.⁷ Northerners who celebrated the Battle of Lexington and Concord that began the War for Independence were deeply hypocritical to celebrate a liberty they did not share with blacks. Thoreau made it clear that he would not consent to be governed by any laws or individuals who upheld such injustice. He issued a warning to his fellow citizens who would choose to assert the rule of human law at the expense of Right, or the “Higher Law” as it relates to justice:

I wish my countrymen to consider that whatever the human law may be, neither an individual nor a nation can ever commit the least act of injustice against the obscurest individual without having to pay the penalty for it. A government which deliberately enacts injustice, and persists in it, will at length even become the laughing-stock of the world.⁸

6. There is much more to be said in regard to the concept of the “Wild” in Thoreau, but an extended discussion is better positioned in relation to his nature writing discussed in Chapters Five and Six.

7. Anthony Burns, the captured runaway slave subject to the Fugitive Slave Law in Massachusetts, was the last runaway slave to be returned to the South by Thoreau’s state.

8. Henry David Thoreau. “Slavery in Massachusetts.” in *The Higher Law: Thoreau on Civil Disobedience and Reform*. Ed. by Wendell Glick. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 2004) p. 96.

Despite Thoreau's diatribe against Northern hypocrites, he wonders if democracy may be the preferred remedy for this case. The laws and the representatives have no apparent interest in justice, but perhaps the voters will. "I would much rather trust to the sentiment of the people," he claims. "In their vote you would get something of some value, at least, however small; but in the other case, only the trammled judgment of an individual, of no significance, be it which way it might."⁹ Here, again, Thoreau unintentionally follows Rousseau's lead in stating that more direct democracy is offered as superior to representative democracy as a means to achieve fidelity to the Right. Something critical is lost when democracy is diluted by an "indirect" representative democracy. In "A Plea for Captain John Brown," Thoreau would write similarly: "We talk about a *representative* government; but what a monster of a government is that where the noblest faculties of the mind, and the whole heart, are not represented!...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."¹⁰ Thoreau hesitates to prescribe democracy always and entirely. A referendum on slavery would produce "something of some value," but he does not go so far to say that it would solve the problem. There is too much sympathy, as he sees it, for the law and injustice perpetuated by the North's complacency. In contrast to a more idyllic mode, Thoreau exhibits a modest level of realism in this regard by neither dismissing democracy nor absolutizing it, but it is important to note that his realism concerning democracy is not at the expense of a more idyllic concept of freedom. The answer to

9. Thoreau. "Slavery in Massachusetts." (2004) p. 97.

10. Henry David Thoreau. "A Plea for Captain John Brown." in *The Higher Law: Thoreau on Civil Disobedience and Reform*. Ed. by Wendell Glick. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 2004) p. 129

the problem of democracy is not leadership, positive law or order. A better democracy must be committed to an abstract Right accessed by conscience.

Thoreau then makes the striking claim that the very rule of law, and the faith Americans place in it, is an obstacle to liberty itself. “The law will never make men free; it is men who have got to make the law free. They are the lovers of law and order who observe the law when the government breaks it.”¹¹ People make law free by living according to a law and Right they would choose to impose on themselves. In the absence of fidelity to a Higher Law, there is no obligation to embrace man-made laws. Later he reinforces this anti-law sentiment after John Brown’s execution, writing, “Look not to legislatures and churches for your guidance, nor to any soulless, *incorporated* bodies, but to *inspired* or inspired ones.”¹² The *true* judge and the *true* law stand above those who sit on the Court bench. He who is most attuned to the higher, abstract truth of his own consciousness holds the court to a higher standard:

Among human beings, the judge whose words seal the fate of a man furthest into eternity is not he who merely pronounces the verdict of the law, but he, whoever he may be, who, from a love of truth, and unprejudiced by any custom or enactment of men, utters a true opinion or sentence concerning him. He it is that sentences him. Whoever can discern truth has received his commission from a higher source than the chiefest justice in the world who can discern only law. He finds himself constituted judge of the judge. Strange that it should be necessary to state such simple truths!¹³

At first, Thoreau’s objection to unjust laws moves in the direction of the individual as being a kind of legislature and judge to himself. Yet above the individual and the government, Thoreau places this “judge of the judge” – an individual faithfully attuned to Right whose lofty

11. Thoreau. “Slavery in Massachusetts.” (2004) p. 98.

12. Henry David Thoreau. “The Last Days of John Brown.” in *The Higher Law: Thoreau on Civil Disobedience and Reform*. Ed. by Wendell Glick. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 2004) p. 150.

13. Thoreau. “Slavery in Massachusetts.” (2004) p. 98.

character places him above human law. One is reminded again of Rousseau and his proposal in

On the Social Contract for a “Great Legislator” to shape the law impartially and in fidelity to

Right:

Discovering the rules of society best suited to nations would require a superior intelligence that beheld all the passions of men without feeling any of them; who had no affinity with our nature, yet knew it through and through; whose happiness was independent of us, yet who nevertheless was willing to concern itself with ours; finally who, in the passage of time, procures for himself a distant glory, being able to labor in one age and find enjoyment in another. Gods would be need to give men laws.¹⁴

Thoreau, like Rousseau, desires that politics and law favor only Right. Expediency, compromise and partiality corrupt the law and government. However, a pure and impartial individual is remarkably difficult to come by. It is to Rousseau’s credit that he, unlike Thoreau, recognizes that only gods could achieve the ideal of perfect laws and uncorrupt government. If laws cannot offer the reform and freedom that Thoreau prefers, then perhaps democracy could offer “something of some value” as Thoreau himself already mentioned. He has little hope in this regard, however; the men and women of principle are ultimately outnumbered by those who surrender to expediency and silence in the name of a misplaced patriotism. “I would remind my countrymen,” Thoreau warns, “that they are to be men first, and Americans only at a late and convenient hour. No matter how valuable law may be to protect your property, even to keep soul and body together, if it do not keep you and humanity together.”¹⁵ What does it profit Americans, Thoreau might ask, to gain the whole world and forfeit their souls?

14. Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *On the Social Contract*. Book II, Ch. VII in *The Basic Political Writings*. Trans. by Peter Gay. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987) p. 162-163.

15. Thoreau. “Slavery in Massachusetts.” (2004) p. 102.

The fault in Thoreau's imagination of freedom and its relationship to democracy and law is that, in place of just or unjust laws, Thoreau would insert abstractions and sentiments. In place of protecting the Constitution, he would call for judges and lawyers in particular to be "servants of humanity." "The question is," he asks, "not whether you or your grandfather, seventy years ago, did not enter into an agreement to serve the devil...but whether you will not now, for once and at last, serve God...or that of your ancestor, by obeying that eternal and only just CONSTITUTION, which He, and not any Jefferson or Adams, has written in your being."¹⁶ Thoreau never elucidates what he means by this CONSTITUTION. In keeping with the earlier essay, "On Resistance to Civil Government," it would seem that the Right, the good, true and beautiful are entirely subjective, abstract and ahistorical. While recognizing the possibility of universality, Thoreau is unwilling to consider the possibility of the good, true and beautiful being realized in man-made institutions or society. To achieve a synthesis between the universal and the particular is, in Thoreau's view, to effectively ignore the former and worship the latter:

But there is no such thing as accomplishing a righteous reform by the use of 'expediency.' There is no such thing as sliding up-hill. In morals the only sliders are backsliders...Will mankind never learn that policy is not morality, – that it never secures any moral right, but considers merely what is expedient? chooses the available candidate – who is invariably the devil, - and what right have his constituents to be surprised, because the devil does not behave like an angel of light? What is wanted is men, not of policy, but of probity, – who recognize a higher law than the Constitution, or the decision of the majority. The fate of the country does not depend on how you vote at the polls,-the worst man is as strong as the best at that game; it does not depend on what kind of paper you drop into the ballot-box once a year, but on what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street every morning.¹⁷

16. Thoreau. "Slavery in Massachusetts." (2004) p. 103 Emphasis in original.

17. Thoreau. "Slavery in Massachusetts." (2004) p. 104.

Though he has suddenly thrown out the democracy he recommended only pages earlier, Thoreau articulates very clearly that there is indeed a connection between the morality and character of the people and the character of its government. Still, his uncompromising idealistic morality cannot survive the historical reality of political life. He would dismiss policy as a moral statement or judgment, but what would he think of the *policy* freeing the slaves several years later? While policy may not, of its own accord, possess moral authority, it would seem that Thoreau would go so far as to evacuate it of any moral content whatsoever. Expediency, efficacy, plurality, necessity: these are the enemies of Thoreau's concept of freedom. That is, Thoreau's concept of freedom is an individual of conscience autonomously attuning him or herself to a universal, objective Right or principle, and eschewing recognition of, or allegiance to, any contingency or institution at odds with Right. Freedom is the will to the Right lived in resistance to a reality that would demand compromise.

Thoreau's politics of withdrawal and despair are unsurprising in light of such elevated and idyllic expectations, and anarchy may even be preferable. "Let each inhabitant of the State," he writes, "dissolve his union with her, as long as she delays to do her duty."¹⁸ Were he to find a State committed to "duty" and "Right," he would fight for it. After all, "The effect of a good government is to make life more valuable; of a bad one, to make it less valuable."¹⁹ But the America he finds himself in has demonstrably rejected such value by continuing to surrender to expediency and compromise, and by neglecting to remedy the injustice of slavery. Perhaps, he suggests, withdrawing from the country and politics is not necessary. The nation has already

18. Thoreau. "Slavery in Massachusetts." (2004) p. 104.

19. Thoreau. "Slavery in Massachusetts." (2004) p. 106.

abandoned him: “I have lived for the last month – and I think that every man in Massachusetts capable of the sentiment of patriotism must have had a similar experience – with the sense of having suffered a vast and indefinite loss. I did not know at first what ailed me. At last it occurred to me that what I had lost was a country.”²⁰ The United States is no longer, “Thoreau writ large,” if it ever was.

The combination of despair and withdrawal, however, is only one potential consequence faced by the individual who is committed to an idyllic political morality. Despair and violence may also emerge. “My thoughts are murder to State,” he writes ominously, “and involuntarily I go plotting against her.”²¹ It is little wonder that Thoreau would become one of the most vocal and passionate defenders of John Brown. In “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” he allows for a surprising flexibility regarding the use of violence in the defense of Right:

It was [John 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.* They who are continually shocked by slavery have some right to be shocked by the violent death of the slaveholder, but no others. Such will be more shocked by his life than by his death...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. We preserve the so-called peace of our community by deeds of petty violence every day.²²

In 1859, Brown was planning his attack on Harpers Ferry, which would take place in October. Thoreau and others had met him a year earlier when he visited the Greater Boston area campaigning secretly for arms, finances and fighters to launch a guerilla-style attack on the slave states. There is no evidence that Thoreau knew of John Brown’s violent intentions, but when

20. Thoreau. “Slavery in Massachusetts.” (2004) p. 106.

21. Thoreau. “Slavery in Massachusetts.” (2004) p. 108.

22. Thoreau. “A Plea for Captain John Brown.” (2004) p. 132-133. Emphasis added.

Brown made his move on a military arsenal in October 1859, Thoreau was clearly impressed. Brown had hoped to incite an insurrection of slaves, but was defeated by Robert E. Lee. Most of Brown's companions were killed, and Brown himself was executed for treason in December. Thoreau initially believed that Brown had died in the raid and he wanted to publicly defend his cause. He called for a lecture on October 30, when popular opinion in the North had begun to turn strongly against Brown. For Thoreau, Brown embodied a "life with principle" and faithfulness to Right. Violence was not always, in itself, desirable for Thoreau, but it was preferable to slavery. As Richardson summarizes:

Above all, Brown followed his own conscience. Thoreau's position is quite consistent, not only with his own 'The Service,' "Civil Disobedience,' and 'Slavery in Massachusetts,' but with the Jeffersonian position that when governments become destructive of the natural rights of the governed, the latter have a right to revolt, by violence if need be. A similar situation now existed, Thoreau thought. The problem Thoreau saw was that the 'government puts forth its strength on the side of injustice.' Therefore, the government should not longer be obeyed.²³

For all Thoreau's talk about elevating principle above expediency, his hagiography of John Brown is striking. While Richardson couches Thoreau's advocacy of Brown as a nod to political necessity and expediency, Thoreau seems to have little interest in such a narrative. Brown's actions were honorable precisely because they were unrestrained by convention, opinion and expediency. They were, in Thoreau's interpretation, entirely free, justified and principled. Expediency was never a part of Brown's concerns, according to Thoreau. Instead, those who vilify and condemn Brown betray an unwillingness to see the possibility of true heroism in Thoreau's day:

23. Richardson (1986) p. 371.

[John Brown] was a superior man. He did not value his bodily life in comparison with ideal things. He did not recognize unjust human laws, but resisted them as he was bid. For once we are lifted out of the trivialness and dust of politics into the region of truth and manhood. No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the *dignity of human nature*, knowing himself for a man, and the equal of any and all governments. In that sense he was the most American of us all. He needed no babbling lawyer, making false issues, to defend him. He was more than a match for all the judges that American voters, or office-holders of whatever grade, can create. He could not have been tried by a jury of his peers, because his peers did not exist...Do yourselves the honor to recognize him. He needs none of your respect.²⁴

Here may be the only place where Thoreau explicitly grounds his opposition to slavery in the priority of human dignity. Thoreau's opposition to slavery is, remarkably, almost never explicitly rooted in the dignity of the slaves themselves. He never asks if southern soldiers, citizens and slaveholders are also due the same human dignity, or if their participation in slavery is itself a forfeiture of that dignity. There is a profound tension between Thoreau's work and much of his actual life in this regard. In his writing, the slaves themselves seem almost incidental to his arguments against unjust laws and governance. In his life, however, he was well known for his compassion toward slaves, Irish immigrants, the disabled and to children. His love for his family was unwavering and reflected much more than mere sentiment. There is a tension between an abstract morality and an obsession with autonomy on the one hand, and with Thoreau's ability to demonstrate exemplary selflessness on the other. Though fiercely independent, this tension seemed to do little to dissuade him from living, and not merely feeling, his humanitarianism.²⁵

24. Thoreau. "A Plea for Captain John Brown." (2004) p. 125. Emphasis added.

25. Perhaps the absence of a more sophisticated attention to persons as inviolable is part of the reason that he would go so far as to defend John Brown and his violence. Thoreau would even warn the South at the end of "A Plea" that "revenge" was coming, hinting at the Civil War to begin in a little over a year. To be fair, though, one also recognizes today that there is something self-evidently wrong about slavery. Does Thoreau have an obligation to

Beneath the idyllic-moral tension in Thoreau's imagination of slavery and the limits of law and politics lies another aspect of freedom, which is described toward the end of "Slavery in Massachusetts." If laws and politics will not afford Thoreau the opportunity to realize his commitment to Right, and if violence or democracy cannot bring about the justice he longs for, then perhaps Nature would provide a better foundation and companion. He cannot despair entirely because Nature and nature's laws still speak to a hope in finding the purity and order that man longs for.²⁶ Thoreau desires to be as autonomous as possible, but the needs and enslavement of others impedes on his own freedom. Nature alone seems to offer solace in such desperate circumstances.

Thoreau actively opposes slavery, but he has seemingly written off politics and representative government as incapable of fidelity to the Right over the "expedient." He cannot conceive of a world in which a universal autonomy and Right could be realized in the particulars of politics and policy. One might find such character in the man of conscience and principle, but these individuals are rare. Yet this is the same Thoreau who gives public lectures, publishes his calls for self-reform in national periodicals and participates in the Underground Railroad. He is profoundly political and deeply involved in the greatest and most divisive issues of his day.

explain his objection systematically? Our very humanity finds it repulsive. Plus, there is something about the task of successfully understanding and writing about persons that must of necessity allude us. Had Thoreau rooted his objection to slavery in a more comprehensive account of blacks as persons, he would necessarily have fallen short precisely *because* blacks are persons. Thoreau could have offered a much better argument than the one found in these late essays and lectures. Indeed, it would seem that the slave's freedom is subordinate to Thoreau's own freedom to live in a "community" sympathetic to the Right. This aspect emerges in, "Life Without Principle," as well: "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." Thoreau. "Life Without Principle." in *The Higher Law: Thoreau on Civil Disobedience and Reform*. Ed. by Wendell Glick. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 2004) p. 174.

26. Thoreau. "Slavery in Massachusetts." (2004) p. 108-109.

The moral imagination is not completely absent from Thoreau, but the idyllic imagination regularly wins out in his discussion of law, government and freedom. He simply, and quite consistently, refuses to concede ground to concrete reality in the articulation of his moral and ethical philosophy. The claims of necessity and expediency, compromise and plurality are inimical to his understanding of freedom and the moral life. Proportion and prudence, to Thoreau, would likely seem more like excuses and obstacles than as elements of reality. Indeed, Thoreau moves dangerously in the direction of actually abandoning concrete morality altogether. In an attempt to articulate a radical concept of freedom and moral purity, he undercuts the grounds on which that morality might come to fruition in action. Still, his most famous political essay, “Resistance to Civil Government,” recommends a kind of *inaction* that, by design, provokes others to act politically.

Thoreau’s Imagination and Resistance to Civil Government

The great Thoreau has said that a worthy cause should not be deemed lost, that it is bound to triumph, so long as there is at least one sincere man to fight for it.

– M.K. Gandhi –

For all the significance that Thoreau’s ideas have had for American politics he was, himself, vehemently opposed to interaction with, even to the existence of politics. Human law and democracy ultimately disappointed him. He would likely have taken the title of “political thinker” as an insult. He writes in “A Natural History of Massachusetts,” that “[t]he merely political aspect of the land is never very cheering; men are degraded when considered as the

members of a political organization.”²⁷ Given his disposition, what are we to make of his most famous (or infamous) political essay, “Resistance to Civil Government”? Given his imagination of political morality, freedom and law, it is no surprise when he begins the essay by stating:

I heartily accept the motto, –‘That government is best which governs least;’ and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe, –‘That government is best which governs not at all;’ and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient.²⁸

Despite this frequently recited passage, Thoreau’s work ought not be conceived as apolitical. While he was no fan of the government, the essay itself was born in a rather conspicuous political act. In July of 1846, while living at Walden Pond, Thoreau was arrested for his refusal to pay the poll tax. He was detained in Concord jail for a single evening until someone (possibly Emerson or one of Thoreau’s Aunts, though precisely who is unknown) paid on his behalf and he was released. In response, Thoreau composed his “most often read – and taught – essay and one of the great Western statements on the importance of conscience.”²⁹ Rooting his argument in personal experience, Thoreau demonstrated and justified the principle (not original to him) of resisting force without the use of force. His position was timely and contradicts popular perceptions of Thoreau as indifferent to the issues and influences of his day. His fellow abolitionists were split on the use of force for ending slavery, and at the time of this writing Thoreau rejected violence as a means for emancipation.³⁰ The same position would later

27. Henry David Thoreau. “Natural History of Massachusetts” in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*. Vol. V, *Excursions and Poems*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1906) p. 104.

28. Henry David Thoreau. “Resistance to Civil Government.” in *The Higher Law: Thoreau on Civil Disobedience and Reform*. Ed. by Wendell Glick. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 2004) p. 63.

29. Richardson (1986) p. 175.

30. Thoreau was directly responding, agreeing and distinguishing himself from other writers at the time:

be championed by Mahatma Gandhi who, inspired by Thoreau, would significantly impact Martin Luther King, Jr's similar acts of nonviolent protest and disobedience.

Published in Elizabeth Peabody's *Aesthetic Papers*, "Resistance to Civil Government" eschewed cooperation, compliance and obedience to government on the grounds that it no longer represented the people, protected slavery, funded an unjust war with Mexico and ultimately abandoned the rule of conscience. Bob Pepperman Taylor observes that it would be inaccurate to say that Thoreau opposes all government or the U.S. Constitution. Thoreau objects only to an *unjust* government and *unjust* laws, and would gladly subject himself to a more principled regime.³¹ The problem is that, given Thoreau's intuition of an ideal political morality and freedom, the realization of a sufficiently just government is very unlikely. Thoreau did not appeal to religion, law, constitutions or even history to make his case for the supremacy of the "Higher Law;" indeed, such institutions might ultimately be obstacles to the triumph of an abstract Right. The government had forfeited, in the name of expediency, the collective will to that of one or a few privileged individuals. In the process, political leadership and administration exposed itself more as a useless obstacle to individual freedom than as a source of order, deliberation and protection:

Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed on, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage. It is excellent, we must all allow. Yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. *It* does not keep the country free. *It* does not settle the West. *It* does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all

"Raymond Adams has pointed out how Thoreau's basic championing of the individual over the state is similar to the position Emerson had just put forward in his essay on 'Politics,' how Thoreau's essay is cast as a reply to chapter three of book six of [William] Paley's *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, called 'The Duty of Submission to Civil Government Explained' and to a reform movement called Non-Resistance, associated with abolition, with William Lloyd Garrison, and with Adin Ballou." Richardson (1986) p. 176.

31. Taylor (1996) p. 113-114.

that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way. For government is an expedient by which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone; and, as has been said, when it is most expedient, the governed are most let alone by it.³²

Pepperman Taylor writes, “there is a tension in [Thoreau’s polemical essays] between the duties of citizenship and the liberty of the individual.”³³ The government has become an obstacle to the liberty of the people and must therefore be limited, if not eliminated. Thoreau is making, however, a decidedly Rousseauistic turn. His concept of government and democracy begins to sound very similar to the “General Will.” “The government itself,” he writes “...is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will...”³⁴ The tension between duties and liberty is reduced when those duties originate in individual liberty. A few paragraphs later, he unpacks the meaning of this concept whereby the will of the people is the expression of their individual consciences, which cannot be represented. If the government were more true to the Right and to individual conscience it would be the best government; in which morally free men are ruled only by those laws which they would have imposed on themselves. Thoreau claims that this need not result in anarchism, writing “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 a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.”³⁵ The rule of conscience or the rule of Right is achieved by expressing the law or order that one is willing to respect and obey. The precise means needed to express this consent or to resolve conflicts between competing consciences is

32. Thoreau. “Resistance to Civil Government.” (2004) p. 64

33. Taylor (1996) p. 114.

34. Thoreau. “Resistance to Civil Government.” (2004) p. 63.

35. Thoreau. “Resistance to Civil Government.” (2004) p. 64.

not mentioned. Thoreau seems to assume, like Rousseau, that if man is genuinely attuned to the Right by means of conscience, this Right will reveal itself uniformly among others of the same conscience and character.

Thoreau's idealistic expectations and disdain for government exemplifies the perennial call for the elimination of politics altogether. Benedetto Croce was well aware, and rightly critical, of the disposition. He writes:

Politics and filth are so frequently identified in the ordinary conversation of people that the thoughtful person is rather puzzled by the situation. Why should politics, one of the fundamental activities of man, one of the perpetual forms of the human spirit, alone enjoy homage of such contemptuous language? We never describe other forms of activity as essentially filth. We do not habitually think of scientific, or artistic, or social or moral activity, in any such terms of repugnance.³⁶

Croce's comments could easily apply to Thoreau, who holds politics to an ahistorical and idealistic standard it cannot meet. While we can agree with Thoreau that slavery is evil, that the Fugitive Slave Act was unjust and the Mexican-American War was highly objectionable and imperialistic, these do not render politics void of morality. Thoreau's very actions demonstrate well that political activity can be morally motivated and that politics ought not be abandoned. The very act of "civil disobedience" is quite meaningless without politics and without one to disobey. Yet with Thoreau it becomes clear that at issue is less the messiness of politics and more the threat which the rule of law poses to moral autonomy. Not only is law deficient in making men free; it even fails to make men just:

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. A common and natural

36. Benedetto Croce. "Disgust for Politics" in *The Conduct of Life*. Trans. by Arthur Livingston. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1924) p. 255.

result of an undue respect for law 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, aye, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart.³⁷

Despite moments in earlier works and his *Journal* which hinted at the culpability of the individual for his or her actions and the emphasis on one's freedom, Thoreau seems to believe that a government or law can override or overcome one's fidelity to Right. How is it that law cannot make man just, but it *can* make them unjust? The soldiers leaving for the Mexican-American War march "against their wills" as though their conscience and common sense was somehow detached from their practical action by law itself. Submission to the state and its laws is, for Thoreau, a virtual abandonment of one's very humanity:

The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, *posse comitatus*, etc. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt.³⁸

Yet later he asks, after describing his night in the Concord jail, "What force has a multitude? They only can force me who obey a higher law than I. They force me to become like themselves. I do not hear of *men* being forced to live this way or that by masses of men."³⁹ By emphasizing *men* he is distinguishing those who are seemingly more autonomous. Humans are, in a sense, though, always free. But that freedom is forfeit when we submit or order our will to something other than our consciences attuned to Right. Thoreau asserts that only those of heroic stature could achieve such a distinction: "A very few – as Heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in

37. Thoreau. "Resistance to Civil Government." (2004) p. 65.

38. Thoreau. "Resistance to Civil Government." (2004) p. 66.

39. Thoreau. "Resistance to Civil Government." (2004) p. 81.

the great sense, and men 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.”⁴⁰ The hero or the patriot would seemingly be willing to serve the state if the latter would align itself with the same Right as that of the hero’s conscience. Until the state submits to this objective “conscience” – presumably by abandoning slavery and the Mexican-American War – such cooperation on behalf of the hero is unacceptable. One’s very association with the American government is reprehensible, and so much evil pervades its action and inaction that revolution may be in order:

How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also. 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. But almost all say that such is not the case now...But when the friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are organized, I say, let us not have such a machine any longer. In other words, 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, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more urgent is the fact that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army.⁴¹

While his later essays on John Brown may prove otherwise, Thoreau here is not calling for a violent revolution but for an immediate, unqualified cessation of slavery and an end to the war with Mexico. He, like Emerson and the influential transcendentalist, Theodore Parker, was also adamant about accusing the Northern States’ complicity in the endurance of slavery by their commercial activities, cooperation with the Fugitive Slave Act and overall inaction on the

40. Thoreau. “Resistance to Civil Government.” (2004) p. 66.

41. Thoreau. “Resistance to Civil Government.” (2004) p. 67.

matter.⁴² This latter observation demonstrates a moment of moral imagination for Thoreau.

Acknowledging the very real interconnectedness of the North's inaction and commercial activity with the injustice of slavery may serve his more abstract ends, but it also demonstrates Thoreau's sense of the concrete, historical nature of the problem of slavery.

Thoreau also criticizes those who would rely only on elections to remedy the situation—those who demonstrate their tacit consent to slavery and the Mexican-American War through inaction. “Cast your whole vote,” he writes, “not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority 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.”⁴³ Despite these calls for citizens to become people of conscience, Thoreau explains that “It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous, wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support.”⁴⁴ Elsewhere he writes in a similar vein:

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. A man has not everything to do, but something; and because he cannot do *every thing*, it is not necessary that he should do *something* wrong. 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

42. “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 clown 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, and quietly read the prices-current along with the latest advices from Mexico, after dinner, and, it may be, fall asleep over them both...There are nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous man. But it is easier to deal with the real possessor of a thing than with the temporary guardian of it.” Thoreau. “Resistance to Civil Government.” (2004) p. 67.

43. Thoreau. “Resistance to Civil Government.” (2004) p. 76.

44. Thoreau. “Resistance to Civil Government.” (2004) p. 71.

should I do then ? But in this case the State has provided no way; its very Constitution is the evil.⁴⁵

How does this disposition resist the North's seeming indifference to slaves? Even if the North, by ignoring the Fugitive Slave Act and ending its commercial collusion in products of slave labor, helps advance abolition, then why not actively advocate for changes in policy and elect more sympathetic leaders? While the essay is not a comprehensive call to inaction, Thoreau leaves open the possibility of withdrawing from the problem altogether. This is especially true in his growing call for what amounts to little more than a revolution of abstractions. The moral imagination moves him to action, and the idyllic imagination reduces efforts to sentimental humanitarianism. Nevertheless, he claims that:

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; aye, it divides the *individual*, separating the diabolical in him from the divine.⁴⁶

While Thoreau rightly identifies in human persons a division between higher and lower potentialities, it is clear that his understanding of "higher" is the life of action which takes little-to-no account of historical circumstances or moral efficacy. Principle and fidelity to Right trump concrete, historicized morality. Since the existence of circumstances in which action from pure principle could succeed is unlikely, his call must inevitably lead to inaction or at least disobedience. "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly," he writes, "the true place for a just man is also a prison."⁴⁷ But an escapist and primarily sentimental morality is unlikely to

45. Thoreau. "Resistance to Civil Government." (2004) p. 74.

46. Thoreau. "Resistance to Civil Government." (2004) p. 72.

47. Thoreau. "Resistance to Civil Government." (2004) p. 76.

make a difference, and may not warrant the attention of the authorities at all. How could such a person actually pose a threat, except to his or her own cause?

Ultimately, Thoreau demonstrates a disturbing and self-righteous arrogance, as well as a resistance to treating other persons as they are, opting instead for treating others as he wishes them to be. In keeping with his account of friendship, he would rather acquaint himself with the *idea* of a person than the actual person:

If I could convince myself that I have any right to be satisfied with men as they are, and to treat them accordingly, and not according, in some respects, to my requisitions and expectations of what they and I ought to be, then, like a good Mussulman and fatalist, I should endeavor to be satisfied with things as they are, and say it is the will of God. And, above all, there is this difference between resisting this and a purely brute or natural force, that I can resist this with some effect ; but I cannot expect, like Orpheus, to change the nature of the rocks and trees and beasts.⁴⁸

According to Thoreau, statesmen and legislators “are wont to forget that the world is not governed by policy and expediency...The lawyer’s truth is not Truth, but consistency, or a consistent expediency. Truth is always in harmony with herself, and is not concerned chiefly to reveal the justice that may consist with wrong-doing.”⁴⁹ In other words, and in keeping with a major theme of Thoreau’s entire argument, truth is ahistorical. Necessity and circumstances, what he calls “expediency,” cannot be accounted for in considerations of justice and right. He finishes the essay by writing:

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 accordingly. I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor ; which even would not think it

48. Thoreau. “Resistance to Civil Government.” (2004) p. 85.

49. Thoreau. “Resistance to Civil Government.” (2004) p. 87.

inconsistent with its own repose if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow-men. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen.⁵⁰

Thoreau's "truly free and enlightened state" is a city in speech and imagination only. The injustices of slavery and the Mexican-American War were rooted deeply in the indifference of the North and the government's enslavement to expedience. The evil was rooted in an abandonment of "conscience" and infidelity to Right. Yet, by the end of the essay, it would seem that the only answer is not – as Thoreau wrote earlier – a "better government," but rather its absence. Machiavelli was critical of a similar tendency to deal primarily with "imaginary states." In the following passage, Machiavelli warns against governance based on what man *ought* to be, as opposed to how they actually are. Though he flirts with an excessive cynicism, Machiavelli's reflection may be instructive for Thoreau:

And many have imagined republics and principalities for themselves which have never been seen or known to exist in reality, for the distance is so great between how we live and how we ought to live that he who abandons what is done for what ought to be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation; because a man who wants to make a profession goodness in everything is bound to come to ruin among so many who are not good.⁵¹

Thoreau need not have gone as far as Machiavelli, but he (and many others) failed to see the possibility of political solutions to the problems of slavery and the Mexican-American War. Instead of blaming expediency or necessity for injustice, why not consider their efficacy and the way in which they may be of considerable help? Why not pursue a compromise or policy that

50. Thoreau. "Resistance to Civil Government." (2004) p. 89-90.

51. Niccolò Machiavelli. *The Prince in The Prince and Other Writings*. Trans. by Wayne Rebhorn. (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003). Originally written in 1513. Ch. 15, p. 66.

undermines slavery, following the example of William Wilberforce and the British? Thoreau's idyllic imagination of political morality, human nature and government served as a roadblock to a more creative moral imagination which may have offered more efficacious means to abolition.

Hannah Arendt, commenting on "Resistance to Civil Government," also recognized that the legacy of Thoreau's civil disobedience renders the idea unpolitical and "fatally subjective." The "political" simply disappears. For Thoreau, "conscience is unpolitical. It is not primarily interested in the world where the wrong is committed or in the consequences that the wrong will have for the future course of the world."⁵² The sincerity of Thoreau's objections to slavery and the war with Mexico is evident, but his idyllic imagination could not conceive of a political solution to a problem that was also a product of politics. Heinz Eulau observed:

It appears that Thoreau could not fully discern that his metaphysical assumptions had to lead, almost necessarily, to ambiguous consequences when subjected to the test of practical politics. The essential weakness of the metaphysical premise is that it is absolutist as long as it deals with abstractions, just as it is relativistic when applied to unique and observable situations. Like his fellow idealists, Thoreau was incapable of recognizing those distinctions of degree which are politically decisive. He could not recognize them because he fell back, again and again, on the principle of individual conscience as the sole valid guide in political action.⁵³

Still, as Eulau recognized, it would be unfair to say that Thoreau himself did not realize the inevitable failure of his own political prescriptions. After all, the author of "Resistance to Civil Government" and advocate of "civil disobedience," is the same Thoreau who passionately defended John Brown's violent protest of slavery at Harper's Ferry. His idyllic imagination led

52. Hannah Arendt. "Civil Disobedience" in *Crises of the Republic*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1969-1972) p. 61.

53. Heinz Eulau. "Wayside Challenger: Some Remarks on the Politics of Henry David Thoreau." *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Winter, 1949), p 514.

him to disparage politics and provoked a considerable disdain for law and democracy. Yet by essentially abandoning “civil disobedience” for John Brown’s violence, he has not recovered the moral imagination. Brown’s actions and Thoreau’s defense still demonstrate a disdain for politics, law and democracy. Proportion and prudence, or the consideration of concrete, historical reality, is nowhere to be found in Thoreau’s prescription. The moral imagination may have alerted him to the evils of slavery and imperialism, but the idyllic imagination directed his response.

Reading “Resistance to Civil Government” through the framework of imagination, then, complicates the work of Len Gougeon, Walter Harding, and Michael Meyer, who see in Thoreau’s “reform papers” “a movement from a passive to an active stance.”⁵⁴ While this reading rings partially true, both the passive and active stance were motivated by the same idyllic imagination. Neither the complacency of the North nor the violence of John Brown put an end to slavery. The Union’s victory in the Civil War, though critical to the success of abolition, would eventually have to give way to the politics, laws and amendments necessary to free the slaves. Violence and civil disobedience are by no means inconsequential, and may indeed be necessary in the face of unjust laws. But Thoreau is unwilling to admit that, given the inevitable imperfection of all governance, politics and laws themselves may be preferable to civil disobedience.

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54. Lou Gougeon. “Thoreau and reform.” in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. by Joel Myerson. (New York: Cambridge Univ., 1995) p. 196.

Thoreau's political morality acknowledges the individual's struggle between the higher and lower will, and the grounds for holding one accountable remain intact most of the time. Unlike more extreme forms of the idyllic imagination, Thoreau is not abolishing morality in general, but he does essentially abolish *political* morality. "What is called politics," he writes in "Life Without Principle," "is comparatively something so superficial and inhuman, that, practically, I have never fairly recognized that it concerns me at all."⁵⁵ Fidelity to abstract principles and Right render even his most practical and influential idea of civil disobedience very limited. His notion of freedom as a radically absolute autonomy undercuts the very premises of participating in political community and his idealistic notions of friendship and society discourages even the most basic civic relationships. Despite his refusal to pay taxes in support of an unjust cause, his lectures and his participation in the Underground Railroad, the political morality he articulates does not correspond to his otherwise admirable actions.

A considerable amount of ink has been spilled in an effort to elucidate the manner in which Thoreau *sees* the world around him – especially his ability to observe the natural, non-human world. But this secondary literature often fails to appreciate Thoreau's imaginative vision and the corresponding will/desire evinced in his writing. He may perceive the injustices of slavery and the Mexican-American War or he may see a level of insincerity in society, but he does not wish to respond to historical circumstances as they are. He would prefer to change or even ignore the circumstances altogether. Morality that appeals to efficacy is a contradiction for Thoreau. If friends cannot be what you wish, then find companionship with a "person" in the abstract. If a government or politics cannot live up to the standard of Right and justice, then

55. Thoreau. "Life Without Principle." (2004) p. 177.

abandon these affairs and erect a “city in speech.” If human law is imperfect, then it need not be obeyed. If political and economic freedom and moral autonomy cannot be found in community or under human law, then one must seek such friendship in Nature or in a desperate withdrawal from, or violence toward, the very things that threaten this freedom.

In many ways, the moral imagination is not necessarily opposed to the means of civil disobedience or violence. The moral imagination resists generalizations like this. Instead, the moral imagination wills/desires to respond to the given historical circumstances as they are in the most efficacious way possible. At times, the circumstances may require violence and at other times, non-violence. Reform may best be achieved through politics, law, democracy or something entirely different. Thoreau is unwilling to allow for this more historically-minded political morality. The end cannot justify the means. For Thoreau, a life in which morality responds primarily to circumstances is a life without principle.

Thoreau’s moral imagination resisted tendencies to a permanent misanthropy and escapism. There are too many instances of Thoreau genuinely and actively caring for his family, the Emersons, slaves, immigrants, the disabled and others to dismiss him as the “sentimental humanitarian” Babbitt describes. But his disappointment with unrealized ideals and political expediency and his need for moral autonomy consistently moved him toward a preoccupation with the natural, non-human world. As Pepperman Taylor rightly observes, for Thoreau, “Nature...provides the resources that allow Thoreau not only the distance from which to be a social critic but the space to be a sort of political activist as well.”⁵⁶ What does Pepperman Taylor mean by this? “Nature first allows Thoreau to remove himself from political life, but it

56. Taylor (1996) p. 116.

then provides him with the means and the desire to reengage the political world...Nature is not an end in itself but rather a resource at Thoreau's disposal, a tool to be used in the task of exposing injustice and promoting justice."⁵⁷ The idyllic-moral tension identified in Thoreau's imagination of political morality then, (including his concepts of human nature, friendship, law, freedom and resistance) reinforces, and is reinforced by, the same idyllic-moral tension in his environmental imagination. The tension itself brings a unity to Thoreau's thought seldom recognized by other readers. Having considered this tension in regards to the more explicitly political elements of Thoreau's imagination we now turn to examine his environmental imagination.

57. Taylor (1996) p. 117.

CHAPTER V

ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINATION AND POLITICAL THOUGHT

Most revolutions in society have not power to interest, still less to alarm us; but tell me that our rivers are drying up, or the genus pine dying out in the country, and I might attend. Most events recorded in history are more remarkable than important.

–Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*–

When the history of the twentieth century is finally written, the single most important social movement of the period will be judged to be environmentalism

–Robert Nisbet, *Prejudices: A Philosophical Dictionary*–

Political theory is historically preoccupied with the nature of man, his place in order (or disorder), his place in history and with questions of morality, justice, property, rights, obligation and law. Thoreau was no strict political theorist in this regard, but he did write about politics and continues to play a significant role in the complex history of American political thought. His reflections on the natural, non-human world, however, constitute his deepest intellectual footprint.¹ He was not a political or cultural environmentalist in the manner of later “Greens” or activists; the very label, “environmentalist,” would not emerge until a century after his death. He

1. Lawrence Buell presents one of the most compelling descriptions of Thoreau’s extraordinary influence in this regard. As he observes, “A quick scan of Thoreauviana at almost any point during the last half-century bears out this claim. During one ten-year span from the mid-sixties through the mid-seventies, for instance, Thoreau was acclaimed as the first hippie by a nudist magazine, recommended as a model for disturbed teenagers, cited by the Viet Cong in broadcasts urging GI’s to desert, celebrated by environmentalists as ‘one of our first preservationists’ and embraced by a contributor to the John Birch Society magazine as ‘our greatest reactionary.’ American astronauts named a moon site after Walden; a Thoreau button was sold in San Francisco; several housing developments were named after him; the Kimberley-Clark Corporation marketed a new grade of paper as ‘Thoreau vellum’;” and so on. Lawrence Buell. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1995) p. 314.

did not leave an explicit political agenda in light of his musings on nature, and he was not a “proto-environmental political theorist.” Even the word “environment” was new.² His imaginative vision of nature provided an inspirational cornerstone for later environmentalists to build on.

Thoreau’s work on slavery, freedom, friendship, resistance to civil government and political morality were all intimations of preceding and contemporary thinkers. Even if he arrived at his conclusions independently, much of what he said would have reached Western ears without him. This may not be the case with his thoughts on nature. Environmentally prescient ideas and questions can be found as far back as Virgil, St. Francis of Assisi, the neo-Platonists, Rousseau and romanticism, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Thomas Jefferson, F.W.J. Schelling and in the writings of Emerson. But, as Lawrence Buell has shown, Thoreau is the cornerstone of what would become the environmental imagination.³ John Muir, Arne Naess, Aldo Leopold, Wendell Berry, Roderick Nash, David Brower – names synonymous with the tradition of Western environmental thought – were all explicitly influenced by Thoreau’s work. Rachel Carson, whose book, *Silent Spring*, was critical to the emergence of modern environmentalism, is said to have kept a copy of Thoreau’s *Walden* by her bedside.⁴ Annie Dillard, a contemporary American environmental author, wrote her doctoral dissertation on Thoreau. He has become something of a “patron saint,” an environmental sage and an integral part of the intuitive “furniture” that occupies contemporary environmental thought. If one is to understand the imagination that

2. The first recorded use of the word “environment” in the manner popular today, and in relation to the natural world, was provided by Thomas Carlyle in his essay, “Goethe.” *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*. New Edition. (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1873) p. 85. Article first published in *Foreign Review*, III (July 1828): 80-127.

3. See Buell. (1995). Especially Chs. 4, 10, 11, and 12.

4. Linda Lear. *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*. Reprint 1997. (New York: Mariner Books, 2009) p. 509n7.

shapes American environmental politics, science and policy today, one must account for Thoreau's imagination.

In order to fully appreciate Thoreau's contribution and importance, an examination of the environmental imagination more generally will be of considerable value. I will specifically describe what the environmental imagination is, how the moral-idyllic tension shapes it, how the moral and idyllic imagination shape environmental politics, and what role Thoreau plays in this tension. Environmental politics is a remarkably complex subsection of political life, and Thoreau is by no means the only voice inspiring the underlying moral and philosophical assumptions of environmentalism. Nevertheless, by considering environmental politics and imagination more broadly, we can begin to see that Thoreau's impact is impressive.

* * * *

Previous chapters have explored the tension in Thoreau's imagination regarding his views of morality, human nature, freedom, friendship and government. In many ways, these tensions were never resolved and may not need to be. Thoreau's openness to questioning what is good, true, beautiful, real, right and wrong make it difficult to place him in a fixed category, which helps explain his broad appeal across so many different cultures and perspectives and the way in which a number of social and political causes have taken him up. Readers see in his struggles their own struggles. Indeed, it is difficult to read Thoreau deliberately and not come face to face with one's self.

Reading and reflecting on Thoreau's work ignites a number of questions that are rare, though by no means absent, in the history of Western political thought. For centuries, political questions revolved around man's relationship to the divine or to other humans and only

occasionally to man's relationship to the natural, non-human world. "Nature" has always been a common word, and themes of man in, of and against the non-human world are ubiquitous. Not since the decline of what Eric Voegelin once called "cosmological civilizations,"⁵ however, has man's relationship to nature been subjected to the broad investigation Thoreau and others in the nineteenth century would shape. Thoreau's work specifically addressed the physical and scientific aspects of man and nature and united it with man's quest for moral, spiritual and social self-understanding. The possibility that the natural, non-human world might possess something akin to rights, that it could make moral demands or that the fate of humans and non-humans may be more interconnected than previously conceived called for significant changes in the way that ethics, beauty, liberty and equality were considered. Thoreau's navigation of these possibilities was striking and relatively new in American thought.

This profound re-orientation of Nature in relation to man was a necessary (though insufficient) element in the Western turn toward the possibility of environmental thought. Plants, animals and the landscape were no longer viewed exclusively through the lens of an older tradition but through a romanticized perception of non-humans' inherent value. This turn was not primarily a product of re-conceptualization or the reforming of scientific and philosophical reason. Instead, this re-orientation was fundamentally a product of imagination. Late eighteenth and early nineteenth century art and literature had begun to re-imagine and re-present the non-

5. See Eric Voegelin. *Order and History, Vol. I: Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State Univ., 1956). Especially the preface and all of Part I. For Voegelin, a "cosmological society" was one in which the ordering symbols of political life revolved around "society as a cosmic analogue, by letting vegetative rhythms and celestial revolutions function as models for the structural and procedural order of society." (p. 6). Though such a symbolization of order ultimately breaks down, many of its core ideas and symbols have endured. The cosmological civilizations looked not only to Nature, but the entire cosmos for meaning and as ways of ordering their attunement to being, to the divine and among each other.

human world and provided new concepts and visions to the West's self-understanding. Though Thoreau was one among many of those driving this turn, he continues to be among the most representative and influential.⁶

* * * *

Before diving into Thoreau's environmental imagination and its political importance, it is necessary to revisit what is meant by imagination and consider how it fits into a discussion of environmental political thought. Recall that the imagination is neither a passive faculty nor just decaying sense. It is creative and constitutive of our most basic sense of reality. It both shapes and is shaped by will/desire and is capable of a broad and qualitatively diverse range of intuition varying with orientations of will. Claes Ryn and Irving Babbitt refer to one manifestation of this tension as the "moral imagination." Such imagination incorporates moderation, order, prudence, proportion and the restraints of tradition and civilization. It encourages human freedom to be ordered according to tradition, civilization and historical particularity. On the other side of this tension is what Ryn and Babbitt label the "idyllic imagination." This side of the tension favors what is spontaneous, "wild," unrestrained and merely sentimental. It celebrates human freedom understood as opposed to the inhibitions of tradition, civilization and historical particularity. By referring to an "environmental imagination," I am identifying more a theme of imaginative perception rather than an entirely different faculty or power.

6. Ecologist Daniel Botkin, for example, describes Thoreau as "an icon of environmentalism," and his "life as a metaphor for the search for a path to nature-knowledge and a resolution of the questions inherent in humanity's relationship with the rest of the natural world." Thoreau "as one of the fathers of modern environmentalism" and "the protagonist for wildness." Daniel B. Botkin. *No Man's Garden: Thoreau and a New Vision for Civilization and Nature*. (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2001) p. xvi, 13, 121.

Babbitt, to his credit, recognized very early in the twentieth century how important the moral-idyllic tension had become for understanding man's relationship to the natural, non-human world. In *Rousseau and Romanticism*, he devotes an entire chapter to the Romantic view of nature and its importance for (and primarily as a threat to) Western culture. Babbitt's concerns in this regard are instructive and remain insightful. Few have captured the depth of the idyllic environmental imagination as well or as early as he did.

According to Babbitt, the Romantics of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as their heirs at the turn of the twentieth century, exhibited three primary tendencies in their reflections regarding nature. He refers to these tendencies as the "Arcadian Longing," the "pursuit of the dream woman" or the "ideal companion," and an "aspiration toward the infinite." Such temptations characterize the idyllic environmental imagination in many of its manifestations and could have unfortunate consequences for the imagination as a whole – even encouraging a kind of romantic misanthropy.

Babbitt first laments, though, that "one of the most disquieting features of the modern movement is the vagueness and ambiguity of its use of the word nature and the innumerable sophistries that have resulted."⁷ Though nearly a hundred years removed from the twenty-first century's circumstances, Babbitt's concern is no less true today. "Nature" can mean anything and risks irrelevance by its very ambiguity. In an older sense, drawing on Ancient Greece, Rome and Medieval Christianity, "Nature" could mean whatever the "normal" conception of *human*

7. Irving Babbitt. *Rousseau and Romanticism*. Originally published in 1919. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009) p. 268.

nature was at the time.⁸ Today, however, “Nature” is increasingly interpreted as what is *not* human. Babbitt observes that: “Any study of [Nature] must evidently turn on the question how far at different times and by different schools of thought the realm of man and the realm of nature...have been separated and in what way, and also how far they have been run together and in what way. For there may be different ways of running together man and nature.”⁹ This places the question of what one means by “nature” directly at the level of imagination and identifies the most fundamental issue as one that is not resolved purely by rightly ordered reason or will (though these certainly play an important part) but by a rightly ordered imagination. After all, the extent to which the “realm of man” and the “realm of nature” are run together occurs *first* in imagination. How humans understand the relationship between themselves and the non-human world is a product of the experiences, media, creative works of art, film and literature which inform one’s intuitive sense of reality. Given this formidable diversity of definitions, this study will, unless otherwise noted, use the word “nature” to mean the non-human world of plants, animals and all other tangible aspects of land, air and water.¹⁰ Babbitt’s description of the idyllic imagination relative to nature illustrates why the difficulty in defining “nature” is both challenging and, in the wrong hands, a potentially dangerous endeavor. To provide a context to the efficacy of Babbitt’s account, however, requires a brief look at the importance of the imagination for environmental thought and politics in general.

8. Babbitt. (2009). p. 268.

9. Babbitt. (2009) p. 269.

10. The difficulty of defining “nature” is a perennial problem confronted by a number of scholars. Among the more comprehensive and historical discussions of “nature” are Peter Coates. *Nature: Western Attitudes Since Ancient Times*. (Los Angeles: Univ. of California, 1998); Kate Soper. *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the non-Human*. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995) and Clarence J. Glacken. *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*. (Los Angeles: Univ. of California, 1967). As Emerson once observed, Thoreau never defined “nature” himself, though that may have been intentional.

* * * *

Humans' intuition or imagination of how man, and for many, the divine, fits into their overall view of reality typically dominates conversations on *politics* and the imagination. This is not to be discouraged, of course, since politics is itself humanity's participation in, cooperation with, resistance to, creation of and search for the order in which we find ourselves. Until the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the importance of the natural non human-world for politics was seldom acknowledged. Nature was a reservoir of resources and an obstacle to be overcome. With the emergence of industry and a movement toward urban life, a greater awareness developed of the non-human world's moral and spiritual importance. The alienation of man from the land provoked a sense of loss, as if a previously unacknowledged relationship between humans and non-humans had been broken. The idea of a "return to nature," and the sense that such an experience could be "restorative," was relatively new. Humans began to question the extent to which they existed within an environment and whether they possessed it or it possessed them. How would this awareness fit within the context of religion or in light of the explosion of the scientific revolution? Could one claim to "love" the non-human world? What about concepts of private property and rights; would these have to be revisited? The sense of loss and separation occurred at the level of imagination and became part of a distinctively "American" intuition and self-understanding.¹¹ The United States may not have yet possessed its own unique literature, architecture, music and art to rival European civilization, but it *did* have some of the most

11. A number of respected scholars have observed the significance of humans' relationship with nature and the distinctiveness of the American landscape as fundamental to the historical and cultural identity of the United States. See, for example, Hans Huth. "The American and Nature." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 13, No. 1/2 (1950), pp. 101-149; Leo Marx. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. 1964 Reprint. (New York: Oxford Univ., 2000); Perry Miller. *Nature's Nation*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ., 1967).

extraordinary landscapes and natural wonders ever seen. Recognition of this distinction inevitably made its way into a number of works of the imagination in nineteenth and twentieth century America.

While one could rightly argue that humans have always possessed some imagination/intuition of mankind's position relative to the non-human world, the complexity of this intuition had yet to be explored. Until the nineteenth century, there had not emerged a question of how politics and the non-human world might interact within one's imagination. Yet as Lawrence Buell rightly observed: "If, as environmental philosophers contend, western metaphysics and ethics need revision before we can address today's environmental problems, then environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imaging nature and humanity's relation to it."¹² Political theorists, however, have widely neglected to follow up on Buell's prescient observation.

The role the imagination plays in environmental politics emerges in a number of ways, and may best be observed in some peculiarities of modern policy-making. In one sense, this seems counter-intuitive. Would not environmental policy simply be the application of scientific knowledge to policy problems and questions? This view has recently been challenged in Robert Nelson's provocative book, *The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion vs. Environmental Religion* (2010).¹³ According to Nelson, and based on his own experience in the Office of Policy Analysis for the U.S. Department of Interior, modern arguments and differences regarding economic and environmental policy are less products of clashing rationality, data and reason and more products

12. Buell. (1995) p. 2.

13. Robert H. Nelson. *The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion vs. Environmental Religion in Contemporary America*. (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2010).

of conflicting public theologies. Without appealing to explicitly religious assumptions, public arguments over economics and environmental issues are less guided by disagreement over science and more by implicit and explicit “spiritual values” which may or may not serve to interpret that science. While Nelson is to be commended for drawing attention to the spiritual and religious aspects of policy-making in the U.S., narrowly focusing on “theology” may obscure the complexity and importance of his observations. Drawing on the work of the theologian, Paul Tillich, Nelson defines religion as “a person’s way of framing his or her basic perception of the world and its meaning...”¹⁴ Such a broad definition would be much more compatible with the working understanding of *imagination*, though, and might ultimately account for the influence of religion *among* a number of other elements.

One of Nelson’s best examples to illustrate the dynamics of economic and environmental “theologies” concerns the notion of “re-wilding” or “restoring” the natural order.¹⁵ Among policy-makers and environmental advocates alike there is a belief that due to mankind’s culpability in the creation of environmental *disorder*, that he is subsequently responsible for restoring the natural order to where it is supposed to be.¹⁶ Two problems immediately present themselves though. First, as Nelson observes, those who call for such restoration find themselves in an important contradiction. They want “natural evolution to occur without human impact and control” only to turn around and “propose that current human actions should set the stage for

14. Nelson. (2010) p. x.

15. The topic of “rewilding” is taken up further in Chapter Six.

16. “In 1999, Connie Barlow, an advocate for environmental causes, declared that the ‘rewilding [of nature] must be undertaken because, next to outright species extinctions, the most abhorrent outcome – the greatest crime against creation – human kind might effect would be survival for surviving lineages [of plant and animal species] to skew their future evolution substantially in response to us.’ She acknowledged that the human species in this case would not be acting according to Darwin’s model of competitive struggle. Rather, it was based on a ‘strong ethical, even religious appeal.’” Nelson. (2010) p. 220.

future evolution.”¹⁷ Environmentalists also regularly criticize past efforts of scientific management and intervention. Why would *this* moment in history be different? Why would the sins of a past intervention not be repeated? Nelson sees no other explanation than an appeal to pre-rational spiritual values.

A second problem is how to identify the natural order that must be restored. What does a “rightly-ordered” nature look like? In the context of the United States, some have suggested trying to acquire a kind of balance that preceded the arrival of European colonists. Immediately, though, one must cry foul at the blatant neglect of Native Americans, who did much to alter the landscape and intervene in nature in their own way. Then, even if one takes the question further and seeks an order prior to Native Americans, they will ultimately come up short on evidence or remarkably incomplete at best. Even if such circumstances were accessible, could any order ever have meaning without the presence of humans? Restoration to such a state is increasingly demonstrated as futile.¹⁸ Still one need not go *that* far to maintain a similar principle of “re-wilding.” After all, even at the beginning of the twentieth century large tracts of North America remained unsettled and relatively free from human “interference.” This is one reason why “The Forest Service has been searching actively for old photographs of forests prior to 1900.” Though as one might expect, “such evidence inevitably is in short supply.”¹⁹ It would seem, like much in

17. Nelson. (2010) p. 222.

18. The belief that the Americas, prior to Columbus’ arrival in 1492, was an unsettled wilderness has been challenged extensively by Charles C. Mann. *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*. 2nd Ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2011). Mann argues that Native American civilizations at the time of Columbus’ arrival were much larger, more sophisticated and had a more extensive impact on the natural environment than is commonly believed.

19. Nelson. (2010) p. 229.

the idyllic imagination, that the “ideal wilderness” man is meant to restore, is little more than a dream.

For Nelson, such fundamentally flawed ideas of environmental policy are products of misguided theology, yet such “impossible dreams” are not mere products of religious reflection. They are first and foremost products of imagination. Indeed, why is religion more important in these manifestations of idyllic imagination than say, the paintings of Albert Bierstadt and the Hudson River School? Why not consider the poetry of Wordsworth, John Muir’s nature writings or contemporary movies such as *Avatar*? Spirituality no doubt plays a role in all these things, but it is only a *part*. What Nelson has rightly recognized as a non-rational basis for economic and environmental policy and politics is less a product of religious departures from reality and more the manifestation of the idyllic imagination. Nelson asserts that tensions between economic and environmental “theologies” can only be resolved by theology itself. This dissertation argues alternatively that the moral imagination is the solution to the crises caused by idyllic imagination.²⁰

* * * *

Policy is not the only arena in which the importance of environmental imagination for politics emerges however. In the grassroots efforts of environmental groups, the imagination plays a critical role in the success and failures of political mobilization, lobbying and fundraising. Few have appreciated this importance as extensively, and to such great effect, as David Brower (1912-2000) and Greenpeace.

20. This is not to say that theology does not have a place – even a critical place – in the discussion of environmental imagination. But it is limited to a particular set of insights, and does not account for the totality of the problem.

Though John Muir founded the Sierra Club in 1892, David Brower gave the organization the character and history for which it is most remembered. Initially the organization was more of an elitist mountaineering and climbing club, and their objectives centered on enjoying the Sierra Mountains of California. Their focus then moved more toward environmental protection once David Brower became executive director in 1952.²¹ Brower is commonly considered among the most influential and effective environmentalists of the twentieth century. He quoted Thoreau throughout his writings and speeches, especially the dictum that “in wildness is the preservation of the world.” Thoreau was the capstone of environmentalism’s philosophical and spiritual foundations, as Brower understood them, and he shared Thoreau’s emphasis on the imagination.

Early in his career, Brower recognized the power of photographs, art, films and stories to effectively lobby support for his various causes. He made videos of various excursions into the Western wilderness, narrating his work with considerable pathos. His rhetorical strategy helped move environmental questions from a primarily economic conversation to one of ethics. Brower was particularly successful at opposing the cutting down of red wood trees and the construction of dams, such as one proposed in the Grand Canyon. He became close friends with the influential American photographer, Ansel Adams. Together, Brower and Adams used dramatic pictures of landscapes and natural wonders to move Americans to political action. Their photos and writings appeared in newspapers and magazines throughout the country and had a particularly sympathetic audience from First Lady, Lady Bird Johnson and other influential figures.

21. Brower would later be forced out of the Sierra Club by the board who found his rejection of a compromise as detrimental to the organization. He would then found Friends of the Earth and the Earth Island Institute before eventually returning as a board member for the Sierra Club in 1983.

Brower understood that the Sierra Club's success hinged less on their ability to acquire, disseminate and apply the latest scientific research than the need to win over the "hearts" of people as voters and consumers. He needed to cultivate the kind of ethical and even spiritual intuition that was friendly to the Club's ideas and which would have significant consequences for democratic politics. Brower's video of King's Canyon, for example, was sent to Congress and helped solidify the area's status as a national park. His efforts at shaping the American imagination's concern for the environment were so effective that the Sierra Club's perennial opponent, the dam-building U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, began making their own promotional videos to counter Brower's. He used these opportunities to paint vivid pictures of environmental issues as black and white or, as Brower's 1957 Sierra Club Handbook explained, as a "campaign between men of vision and the cash register men."²²

Though the efforts of Brower and other environmental leaders were significantly proactive, the desired change could often be slow. Despite his own reservations, Brower and other environmentalists knew compromise was often necessary. The impact of such compromise provoked a relatively small group of individuals to pursue a more radical environmental agenda and to defend ecological well-being directly and even violently if necessary. Few radical environmental groups have been as visible and enduring as Greenpeace, and few have recognized the importance of imagination as deeply.

The group that would become Greenpeace emerged in Vancouver, Canada in 1969 and had helped build an alliance between the ecology and anti-war movements. Inspired by Gandhi, they advocated more interventionist protests of various commercial activities perceived as

22. David R. Brower. Ed. *The Sierra Club Handbook*. (San Francisco: The Sierra Club, 1957) p. iii.

harmful to the environment. One of their earliest excursions was a confrontation with the Russian whaling fleet in which Greenpeace members unsuccessfully tried to place themselves in between Russian harpoons and giant sperm whales. Greenpeace immediately recognized how powerful footage and photos of these kinds of confrontations could be for raising awareness and funds for environmental causes. They dramatized and documented environmental problems around the world and they did as much as they could to make their work public. Early in the organization's history, a leader named Bob Hunter suggested the widespread use of what he called "mindbombs," that is, "using simple images, delivered by media, that would 'explode in people's minds' and create a new understanding of the world."²³ Hunter spoke of Greenpeace's efforts as a "storming of the mind."²⁴ These "mindbombs" attracted widespread media attention and ultimately did much to shape an environmental imagination, as well as create an intuition of what environmentalism itself is like.

Lawrence Buell has also characterized crises of poor environmental policy, the success and failings of grassroots movements and the declining environmental well-being as a crisis, not of religion, but of imagination. In his work, *The Environmental Imagination*, Buell offers the most influential reflections on the environmental imagination available. His work has sparked an entire sub-discipline of environmental literary studies, or "ecocriticism," and provoked a considerable awareness for how works of the imagination have both contributed to and resisted environmental disorder.²⁵

23. Rex Weyler. *Greenpeace: How a Group of Journalists, Ecologists and Visionaries Changed the World*. (Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2004) p. 73.

24. Weyler. (2004) p. 76.

25. See Jay Parini. "The Greening of the Humanities." *The New York Times*. October 29th, 1995.

It is somewhat unclear, however, exactly what Buell means by “imagination” beyond limited notions of “imaging” or perception and metaphor. He also argues “that environmental interpretation requires us to rethink our assumptions about the nature of representation, reference, metaphor, characterization, personae, and canonicity.”²⁶ The environmental imagination does not merely provide a *picture* then but also an interpretation. This interpretation, in turn, is realized in actions. More specifically, Buell explains, “we live our lives by metaphors...how we image a thing, true or false, affects our conduct toward it, the conduct of nations as well as persons.”²⁷ So he may ultimately agree with Ryn and Babbitt that the imagination, properly understood, participates in perception, conception and discrimination. Buell does *not* go as far as Ryn in developing the interplay of will, imagination and reason, though he hints at the importance. This is most apparent in light of what he calls “environmental doublethink,” understood as the curious problem in which “awareness of the potential gravity of environmental degradation far surpasses the degree to which people effectively care about it.”²⁸ It is, to play off of Babbitt’s phrase, a merely “sentimental environmentalism.” There is a breakdown in man’s willingness to *act* in light of environmental crises despite admitting the existence and severity of ecological disorder and expressing considerable sympathy for the natural, non-human world.

Buell’s recognition of the imagination in this regard is to be commended. He pioneered a number of influential and important ideas and connections in the history of American literature and has done much to elevate Thoreau’s importance for environmentalism’s self-understanding.

26. Buell. (1995) p. 2.

27. Buell. (1995) p. 3.

28. Buell. (1995) p. 4.

But there are a few major problems with Buell's analysis which, though they do not warrant abandoning his work, encourage us to find ways to sharpen and expand what he has begun. This is evident in his four "tests" employed to establish the criteria for referring to a text as "environmental."

The first and the fourth tests for distinguishing an environmental text are essentially the same. The first test is that "*the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history,*"²⁹ and the fourth test requires that there be "*some sense of the environment as a process rather than a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.*"³⁰ The environment is a living historical reality but does not inhabit a history separate from humanity. It is not abstract but something we can taste, touch, hear, see, smell and experience. The environment is not merely a set-piece, a setting or a window through which human history is observed. Thoreau describes something similar in relation to Homer, writing in his "Walk to Wachussett", "But we will not leap at once to our journey's end, though near, imitate Homer, who conducts his reader over the plain, and along the resounding sea, though it be but to the tent of Achilles. In the spaces of thought are the reaches of land and water, where men go and come. The landscape lies far and fair within, and the deepest thinker is the farthest travelled."³¹ Man, as a historical being, participates in the environment and both influences and is influenced by this relationship. Such tests, by themselves, are welcome examples of the moral environmental imagination. They are ways of

29. Buell. (1995) p. 7.

30. Buell. (1995) p. 8

31. Henry David Thoreau. "A Walk to Wachussett" (1843) in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (Walden edition) Vol. V. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1906) p. 135.

reversing the old separation of man from the non-human world in history. Of course, the very recognition and practice of a natural history implies a historian and ultimately the subjective anthropocentrism Buell wishes to avoid.

The second test Buell enumerates is that in an environmental text, "*The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.*"³² This may be the most difficult test to pass, as well as the most controversial. Given that the author of the text is necessarily human, can the interests represented in a text ever *not* be subjective? Even if nonhuman "interests" are imaged or presented, can they have meaning apart from human interests, and if so how can we understand them at all? Buell is not suggesting that one set of interests be subordinate or superior to another. The recognition of an "interest" in the environment is itself an achievement, regardless of how these interests are ordered. Indeed, this test could be reworded alternatively to say that an environmental text recognizes that there is a possibility of order and disorder in the natural world and that humanity plays a role in that. The environmental text recognizes that environmental well-being is as legitimate a subject of discussion as man's well being. In this test, however, there is no expectation that the environmental text resolve tensions between conflicting interests of humans and the environment.

The third test is related to the second and requires that in the environmental text, "*Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation.*"³³ Humans might be rewarded or punished according to their interaction with the non-human world. The text's assumptions of what is right, wrong, good and true include, or apply to, the human-nonhuman

32. Buell. (1995) p. 7.

33. Buell. (1995). p. 7

relationship. Humans' participation in Nature is not merely scientific or physical. It is moral and spiritual. This might mean the text identifies particular moral obligations and even rights for the natural, non-human world.

Buell's goal is to elevate the importance of imagination for understanding environmental crises, and certainly the content of his tests and pages and pages of examples reinforce the suggestion that the imagination plays just as important (if not more important) a role as science in environmental thought and care. His tests and examples, however, betray a narrow view of the key tension that animates one's imagination. For Buell the tension is between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. If a text passes his four tests, it is likely ecocentric, if the text fails, it is probably the former.

Anthropocentrism or homocentrism, for Buell, is the practice of placing humans at the center of the imagination. Humanity's interests are superior to those of the non-human world. What does he mean by "ecocentrism?" Buell adopts a modified definition of Timothy O'Riordan who writes that "Ecocentrism preaches the virtues of reverence, humility, responsibility, and care; it argues for low impact technology (but is not antitechnological); it decries bigness and impersonality in all forms (but especially in the city); and demands a code of behavior that seeks permanence and stability based upon ecological principles of diversity and homeostasis."³⁴ Buell adds two additional points: "(1) that ecocentrism may in fact be antitechnological, and (2) that it need not adhere to a dogma of homeostasis."³⁵ It would seem, with this definition, that anthropocentrism and ecocentrism are not necessarily opposed to one another. The definition

34. Timothy O'Riordan. *Environmentalism*. 2nd Ed. (London: Pion, 1981) p. 1.

35. Buell. (1995) p. 425.

does not require the “dethroning” of man as the center of our imaginations *unless* it is assumed that anthropocentrism excludes the virtues of reverence, humility, responsibility and care mentioned above.

Buell nevertheless sees the imaginative tension as a pull between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. These are not, however, just different ways of imaging the world but different moral or ethical dispositions as well. The broadening of the imagination’s importance adds weight to his claim that environmental crises go hand in hand with crises of the imagination. The problem is that, for Buell, neither side of this tension nor the imagination itself need be grounded in reality. Unlike the working tension of idyllic and moral imagination, which requires an appeal to reality, Buell’s tension focuses on the extent to which one cares for the environment. This focus on care shows that Buell appreciates the role of will in the overall framework of environmental imagination, but his premises for the tension he works with are prejudiced toward a particular abstract idea and not toward historical circumstances. Buell seems unaware that even if an ecocentric disposition is achieved, the corresponding love or care may not be beneficial for the human or non-human world. Indeed, the idea of the environment and the sentiment of *care* are more important than the historical and ethical reality of the human–non-human relationship. Both anthropocentrism and ecocentrism are capable of tempting man away from his hold on life. This cannot be the *key* tension if reality and moral *efficacy* are to be included in how one evaluates the quality of the imagination as distinguished from ideologies and worldviews.

Identifying the imaginative tension in environmental thought as between the idyllic and moral imaginations yields a much more fruitful analysis and consideration of why Buell is right in saying that environmental crises are crises of imagination. How, for example, would Buell’s

ecocentric-anthropocentric tension expose the fundamental contradictions and problems involved with the “re-wilding” idea mentioned earlier? One would think, for example, that those championing the restoration of primitive wilderness were animated by ecocentric imaginations and virtues. Yet, these same people ultimately propose an anthropocentric solution to the problem by requiring humans to intervene. How are restorative actions “reverent” toward nature? How are they promoting permanence and stability? The anthropocentric-ecocentric tension can offer a way to distinguish different sets of values but not a way to distinguish how a given imagination corresponds to the complex historical reality of environmental problems. A truly moral imagination, in addition to offering its own positive recommendations, would likely recognize the contradictions in the notion of “re-wilding” long before millions would be spent attempting to come up with an idealistic restorative policy or primitive baseline. The idyllic imagination would have probably taken re-wilding even farther than current restorative efforts, encouraging a radical return to a primitive wilderness, the reality of which, even Thoreau admits, is little more than a dream. The moral imagination, of course, does not eschew human intervention in the environment, nor does it reject all ecocentric values. Indeed, of all the virtues that characterize the moral imagination, humility is the most important.³⁶ But the moral imagination wants to approach environmental crises from the perspective of reality, not fantasy.

The environmental imagination is more than simply a way of imaging or representing the natural non-human world. While the historical facts of nature’s interconnectedness and value and

36. Humility, understood as deference to a higher will and an allegiance to standards, is central to the thought of Claes Ryn and Irving Babbitt and critical to the moral imagination. Babbitt quotes Edmund Burke approvingly that “True humility, the basis of the Christian system, is the low but deep and firm foundation of all real virtue.” Significantly, especially for a study of Thoreau, Babbitt also asserts that “it is plainly not easy to be at once humble and self-reliant.” Irving Babbitt. *Democracy and Leadership*. Reprint 1924. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1979) p. 133, 192.

scientific descriptions of nature are readily available, these elements are not self-interpreting. The facts are also inescapably subjective and anthropocentric. Awareness of them does not automatically lend itself to environmentally beneficial behaviors. As the efforts of David Brower and Greenpeace demonstrate, an appreciation of the will and its interplay with imagination is necessary for a fuller examination of environmental imagination. Thoreau did much to re-present and re-image the natural, non-human world, but did he offer a corresponding intuition of morality, politics and human nature that lends itself to a more efficacious environmental ethics and politics? Did he exemplify the kind of philosophical reason consistent with the moral environmental imagination? Environmental politics and policy will continue to suffer from the “doublethink” Buell describes, from sentimental environmentalism, and will be tempted toward the more ideological policies and misplaced spirituality outlined by Nelson, without a corresponding moral environmental imagination to pull it back from the brink.

* * * *

Thoreau’s imagination of the natural, non-human world never explicitly connects politics to his intercourse with nature. His disgust with politics drives him more and more toward nature and away from society, which is why some have characterized Thoreau’s legacy for environmentalists as apolitical and incomplete.³⁷ William Chaloupka observes Thoreau’s seemingly apolitical legacy in the context of the mid-twentieth century environmental movement. Chaloupka notes that “when the Earth Day greens found him, Thoreau’s reputation

37. In all fairness for Thoreau, and slightly less so for Babbitt, it would have been difficult to conceive of environmental politics anywhere near the complexity that one encounters worldwide today. There were certainly cultural manifestations of the environmental imagination, but they had only begun to find an explicitly political expression at the turn of the twentieth century when Babbitt was writing. The notion of an “environmental politics” would have been almost inconceivable for most of Thoreau’s life as well.

as a literary and political figure was still in flux.”³⁸ In the century after his death, Thoreau’s place in American culture was still in question, but modern environmentalists found in him a relatable, imaginative vision. As Chaloupka observes:

What the greens found in Thoreau was an ethical gesture and a romanticism that deeply satisfied them. The Earth Day generation was drawn to Thoreau by his wilderness values and a spiritualism propelled by landscapes. As Earth day greens responded to Thoreau’s integrity, independence, and alternativeness to nature, they were also willing to embrace a predecessor who had rejected the American polity and whose political views were often immature and even contradictory.³⁹

It has long been a custom among Thoreau scholars to speak of “several Thoreaus.” Still, “The interaction of Thoreau and American environmentalism...was not tempered by a lengthy tradition of Thoreau readings or even a dominant reading against which contemporary environmentalists could rebel.”⁴⁰ In a way, there was no immediately obvious Thoreau, among all the various iterations, that was clearly relevant and beneficial to environmentalists.

One problem, as critics were quick to point out, was that environmentalism, unlike Thoreau, was elitist. Chaloupka describes environmentalists of the 1960s and 1970s as exhibiting a “nervousness about the American middle class...encouraged by a cultural conservatism within the ostensibly progressive green identity.”⁴¹ The greens were (and, in many ways, still are) a movement without a consistent self-understanding. While they willingly borrowed from cultural conservatism by fighting with the unions and being suspicious of change and the growth of technology, they also claimed to be progressive in their economics and preference for democracy. Indeed, were it not for Republicans’ historical alliances with business interests, the

38. William Chaloupka. “Thoreau’s Apolitical Legacy for American Environmentalism.” in *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. By Jack Turner. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 2009) p. 205.

39. Chaloupka. (2009) p. 206.

40. Chaloupka. (2009) p. 211.

41. Chaloupka. (2009) p. 212.

greens may have come to associate more with the American Right.⁴² According to Chaloupka, “The environmental movement’s reluctance to confront its own elite, conservative, moralist, pastoral, and white composition contributed to the odd political history environmentalism has compiled.”⁴³ This also doomed the movement in the long run because its contradictory impulses of being both radical and conservative opened it up to self-inflicted wounds and successful criticism from outside. By claiming to “speak for nature,” environmentalists thought they could, like Thoreau, skip over the more difficult political questions. Thoreau and the environmentalists sought to solve a political problem without politics.

Bob Pepperman Taylor observes a similar problem with Thoreau’s environmental legacy, distinguishing Thoreau’s “pastoral” and seemingly apolitical disposition from the more “progressive” standpoint of Gifford Pinchot, the first chief of the U.S. Forest Service.

The pastoral tradition [of environmental political theory], whose central figure is Henry David Thoreau, rebels against commercial and industrial society and calls for the simplification of life, tutored and informed by an appreciation and understanding of nature. The progressive tradition, whose central figure is Gifford Pinchot, emphasizes the wise technical administration of natural resources for the enhancement of material life and the support of distributive justice.⁴⁴

Pepperman Taylor does not find in Thoreau the thoroughly apolitical disposition that Chaloupka observes. Thoreau’s civil disobedience, public criticism and efforts at reform are meant both as an individual resistance and as an example for others. He also asserted the educative and moral influence which Nature might provide to the reform of the country. “Nature has the potential to tutor not only the philosopher, but also the nation as a whole. It teaches the

42. Chaloupka. (2009) p. 213.

43. Chaloupka. (2009) p. 213.

44. Bob Pepperman Taylor. *Our Limits Transgressed: Environmental Political Thought in America*. (Lawrence, KS: Univ. of Kansas, 1992) p. 4.

higher laws to which a genuine American patriot and revolutionary must appeal, and these laws provide the vantage point for criticizing both the superficiality and the downright evils of American society.”⁴⁵ Yet compared to the practical, scientific and administrative disposition of Pinchot, Thoreau’s pastoral tradition had little to offer concrete, everyday politics and policy.

Pepperman Taylor emphasizes the pastoral-progressive tension as the defining characteristic of the history of American environmental thought and politics. Unlike Chaloupka, who sees little in common between the “Earth Day generation” of 1970s environmentalism and the turn-of-the twentieth century conservationists like John Muir and Pinchot, Pepperman Taylor identifies a much older and overlooked tradition that adds greater historical depth to environmental thought. This, in turn, resists the tendency to focus on the alternative tension associated between anthropocentric and ecocentric imaginations that is associated with Buell. For Buell and others, the deeply anthropocentric disposition of more traditional environmental thinkers distinguishes them from the later, more ecocentric environmentalists who discover Thoreau in the mid-twentieth century. Pepperman Taylor rightly sees this distinction as less illuminating for political theory since it ignores the crucial questions that have animated environmental politics for the past century; namely questions “over the appropriate understanding of America political life and values and the role of nature in this political life.”⁴⁶ Both Thoreau and Pinchot have something to offer environmental politics and both share similar views of nature in the abstract, but they differ in how to incorporate those views into politics and governance.

45. Pepperman Taylor. (1992) p. 15.

46. Pepperman Taylor. (1992) p. 26.

While Pepperman Taylor moves the conversation away from the anthropocentric-ecocentric tension and toward concrete politics, he overlooks how views of nature or the imagination of nature could have a profound impact within pastoral-progressive traditions. Both Thoreau and Pinchot struggle between a moral and idyllic imagination and that tension has a greater impact on their political influence than their often-overlapping traditions.

Thoreau does not offer policy prescriptions and political principles in regards to the preservation of nature as explicitly as someone like Gifford Pinchot, but Pepperman Taylor is right to recognize in Thoreau a more politically significant legacy than Chaloupka allows. Still, Chaloupka recognizes that Thoreau did offer both a basis for a more ecologically sensitive culture and a “level of self-certainty” and “adamance” that environmentalists needed to assert that they “spoke for nature.”⁴⁷ The problem was that the “the environmental movement tended toward absolutism and utopianism, and in both respects, Thoreau’s moralism was helpful.”⁴⁸ Yet there is no reason to believe that such moralism, while politically problematic and potentially ideological, might not have profound consequences for democratic politics and public policy. According to Chaloupka, “the present dilemma of American environmentalism might well be understood as the long-delayed consequences of having been founded on such an odd and, finally, deficient political model.”⁴⁹ Ultimately, environmentalism had to adopt more concrete political ideas and attach the latest scientific research to the romantic legacy inherited from Thoreau. Chaloupka overlooks the fact that that these additional ideas and the science itself may

47. Chaloupka (2009) p. 219.

48. Chaloupka.(2009) p. 220.

49. Chaloupka (2009) p. 222-223.

be animated by the same problematic imagination which modern environmentalists struggled with upon “rediscovering” Thoreau.

The remainder of this dissertation looks to identify and describe that imaginative inheritance and its consequences for Thoreau’s environmentalist heirs. I will consider how the tension between the moral and idyllic imagination manifests itself in environmental politics and how Thoreau evinces both sides throughout his work. By focusing on Irving Babbitt’s three broadly-conceived tendencies of an idyllic imagination of nature – “Arcadian longing,” “pursuit of the ideal companion” and the “aspiration toward the infinite” – we will be better positioned to understand Thoreau’s complicated legacy in environmental politics and thought.

CHAPTER VI

THOREAU AND THE ARCADIAN LONGING

How much more living is the life that is in nature

– Thoreau, “A Winter Walk” –

No age ever grew so ecstatic over natural beauty as the nineteenth century, at the same time no age ever did so much to deface nature. No age ever so exalted the country over town, and no age ever witnessed such a crowding into urban centers.

– Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* –

Irving Babbitt provides a useful way to organize and describe the content of the idyllic imagination, and especially the Romantics’ disordered view of non-human nature. He places the content in three categories; the first of which, the “Arcadian long,” predominates in Rousseau:

The association of the Arcadian longing with nature is in part an outcome of the conflict between the ideal and the real. The romantic idealist finds that men do not understand him: his ‘vision’ is mocked and his ‘genius’ is unrecognized. The result is a type of sentimental misanthropy...He feels, as Lamartine says, that there is nothing in common between the world and him. Lamartine adds however, “But nature is there who invites you and loves you.” You will find in her the comprehension and companionship that you have failed to find in society. And nature will seem a perfect companion to a Rousseauist in direct proportion as she is uncontaminated by the presence of man.¹

One may protest what sounds like an assault on the common love humans have with spending time “out-of-doors.” Does Babbitt object to family vacations to Yellowstone National Park, to backpacking, camping or similar activities? Must humans have only a cold and “objective” encounter with nature? Babbitt, anticipating this objection, writes:

1. Irving Babbitt. *Rousseau and Romanticism*. 1919 Reprint. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2009) p. 279.

In its proper place all this refining on man's relation to the "outworld" may be legitimate and delightful; but that place is secondary. My quarrel is only with the aesthete who assumes an apocalyptic pose and gives forth as a profound philosophy what is at best only a holiday or week-end view of existence. No distinction is more important for any one who wishes to maintain a correct scale of values than that between what is merely recreative and what ministers to leisure. There are times when we may properly seek solace and renewal in nature, when we may invite both our souls and our bodies to loaf. The error is to look on these moments of recreation and relief from concentration on some definite end as in themselves the consummation of wisdom.²

The issue, then, is one of proportion. There is no reason to disparage a love for recreation and time spent outdoors. Babbitt even maintains the view prevalent in the late nineteenth century, and in Thoreau's work, that there is something fundamentally restorative about a "return to nature," though Babbitt's "return" is decidedly temporary. A temptation to turn these temporary retreats into a permanent escape remains. Nature offers the idyllic imagination not simply renewal but salvation and a permanent separation from other persons, moral effort, civilization and the cultivation of one's character. Alternatives to the "Arcadia" are viewed with disdain, as less real or even immoral. The challenges of everyday life outside of Arcadia are viewed as a deformation of the way things ought to be. The non-human world is loved over and above the human. There is no imperfection in the landscape except those introduced by mankind. One must seek out these remnants of Arcadia before humans corrupt all of it. Man lives an unnatural life in which he is "born free but is everywhere in chains," to quote Rousseau. Arcadia, on the other hand, accepts you as you are and allows you to be more free and natural. Humans belong in Arcadia instead of laying siege to it with the "vices" of civilization.

2. Babbitt. (2009) p. 289.

Throughout his life, Thoreau lived in a tension between being overcome by the Arcadian longing and resisting it. He was by no means alone as the population grew in rural Massachusetts and industrialization made its way to Concord.³ The inevitable sense of loss that came with economic and demographic changes (particularly due to the Great Irish Potato Famine of 1845-1852) was felt by Thoreau and his neighbors from all walks of life. Some individuals responded by establishing Utopian communities, such as Brook Farm and Fruitlands, which Thoreau never participated in. Thoreau did, however, respond in his own way; with regular afternoon hikes, by taking up a surveying business to explore the land around Concord, with multiple excursions to the forests of Maine and the shores of Cape Cod, and in his twenty-six-month sojourn to Walden Pond.

The Arcadian longing manifests itself early in Thoreau's work, making an appearance in his 1836 review of William Howitt's *Book of the Seasons* (1831). Thoreau writes that:

No one, perhaps, possesses materials for happiness in such abundance, or has the sources of contentment and pure enjoyment so completely under his thumb, as the lover of Nature. Her devotee is never alone; the solitary vale is as the crowded city, even there may he 'hold sweet converse' with nature; even, did I say? here is the most garrulous, most communicative; this her home – her *country-seat*, where she resides *all year round*. This love is universal, it is emphatically *natural*.⁴

The “lover of Nature” is not disappointed, and his love does not go unrequited. In an even clearer manifestation of the Arcadian longing, Thoreau observes at the end of the same paragraph that “We find that no region is so barren or so desolate as not to afford some human being a home. But Nature's home is everywhere, and in whatever clime, her devotee is at home

3. For more on these changes, see Jonathan Prude. *The Coming of Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1810-1860*. (Amherst, MA: Univ. of Massachusetts, 1999).

4. Henry David Thoreau. *Early Essays and Miscellanies*. Ed. by Joseph J. Moldenhauer and Edwin Moser, with Alexander C. Kern. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 1975) p. 27. Emphasis in original.

with her.”⁵ To use the word “home,” in this sense, implies a permanence out of proportion with a less idyllic vision of the natural world. Thoreau finds himself as an Arcadian exile while at Harvard and generally stays indoors, temporarily separated from the sanctuary where he truly belongs. Yet he also cautions against exaggerating the qualities of nature beyond what one actually encounters. “Nature is not made after such a fashion as we would have her. We piously exaggerate her wonders as the scenery around our home.”⁶ In apparent reverence we may elevate even our own yards to an Arcadia, but we must not forget that such “wonders” are not human creations, even if our imagination of them is.

Several years later, Thoreau completed his “A Natural History of Massachusetts,” which is less a conventional natural history than a mixture of observations and reflections on nature.⁷ Here we find one of Thoreau’s most explicit demonstrations of the Arcadian longing. He declares that “In society you will not find health, but in nature. Unless our feet at least stood in the midst of nature, all our faces would be pale and livid. Society is always diseased, and the best is the most so. There is no scent in it so wholesome as that of the pines, nor any fragrance so penetrating and restorative as the life-everlasting high pastures.”⁸ Nature is no longer viewed merely as a home for life’s resources, but is perceived as preferable to human society. In one of Thoreau’s infamous temptations to misanthropy, he finds nature to be superior to civilization. In a letter to his close friend Harrison Blake, he writes that “I visit some new hill or pond or wood

5. Henry David Thoreau. *Early Essays and Miscellanies*. Ed. by Joseph J. Moldenhauer and Edwin Moser, with Alexander C. Kern. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ., 1975) p. 28.

6. Henry David Thoreau. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Originally published 1849. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001) p. 123. Hereafter referred to as *A Week*.

7. Indeed, one wonders if any other work entitled a “natural history,” has contained original poetry.

8. Henry David Thoreau. “A Natural History of Massachusetts” (1842) in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*. Vol. VI: *Excursions and Poems*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1906) p. 105.

many miles distant. I am astonished at the wonderful retirement through which I move, rarely meeting a man in these excursions, never seeing one similarly engaged, unless it be my companion, when I have one. I cannot help feeling that of all the human inhabitants of nature hereabouts, only we two have leisure to admire and enjoy our inheritance.”⁹ He both recommends and practices an escape from society. However, he is willing to allow a companion to accompany him on these sojourns. Thoreau could not, despite popular perception (brought on partly by his own rhetoric), always “escape” alone. There was something about nature that must be shared, which should come as no surprise given Thoreau’s views on friendship. None of Thoreau’s peers in Concord offered a more sustained reflection on friendship than Thoreau and it would be difficult to maintain that *the* defining characteristic of his nature writings was a consistent misanthropy.¹⁰

A more distinctive theme in Thoreau’s nature writings, and parallel to the Arcadian longing, was his notion of “wildness” as a particular understanding of freedom. The “wild” is that which is novel, mysterious, and resistant to order and conformity. It is a quality of eschewing civilization, cultivation, domesticity and tradition in favor of a radical moral autonomy. “Whatever has not come under the sway of man is wild,” Thoreau asserts. “In this sense original and independent men are wild — not tamed and broken by society.”¹¹ The wild must be individual and uninhibited.

9. Henry David Thoreau. *Letters to a Spiritual Seeker*. Ed. by Bradley P. Dean (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004) Letter to Harrison Blake. November 20th, 1849. p. 49.

10. The tension between Thoreau’s affection for others and a tendency for misanthropy is discussed in a number of works. A helpful reflection in this regard is Mary Elkins Moller. *Thoreau in the Human Community*. (Amherst, MA: Univ. of Massachusetts, 1980), and especially chapter one.

11. Henry David Thoreau. *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau: In Fourteen Volumes Bound as Two*. 2 Vols. Edited by Bradford Torrey and F. H. Allen. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1962) Vol. II, Ch. 8, 3 September 1851 p. 448.

While the moral imagination, over time, would reign in and moderate Thoreau's more ambitious claims for wilderness and wildness, he nevertheless tended to place "Wild" on a pedestal above civilization, restraint and order. Freedom could not tolerate such things. In *A Week* his self-examination exposes his tendency toward the more idyllic imagination and an Arcadian longing. "There is in my nature..." he writes, "a singular yearning toward all wildness. I know of no redeeming qualities in myself but a sincere love for some things, and when I am reproved I fall back on to this ground."¹² He resists an excess of civilization and its characteristic subjection of moral autonomy to tradition and necessity. Native Americans, for example, are not "improved" by cultivation; nor is an agricultural "return to the land" sufficient for achieving the kind of independence which wildness provides. "It is true," he admits, "there are the innocent pleasures of country life, and it is sometimes pleasant to make the earth yield her increase, and gather the fruits in their season; but the heroic spirit will not fail to dream of remoter retirements and more rugged paths."¹³ In *Walden* he recommends that this resistance to civilization be made manifest by leaving tracts of the United States in a "wild" or "primitive" condition. This act, along with living an economically simpler lifestyle, would move America toward a greater authenticity and freedom:

But the only true America is that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without [the need to purchase food from someone else], and where the state does not endeavor to compel you to sustain the slavery and war and other superfluous expenses...I should be glad if all the meadows on the earth were left in a wild state, if that were the consequence of men's beginning to redeem themselves.¹⁴

12. Thoreau. *A Week*. "Sunday" p. 31-32.

13. Thoreau. *A Week*. "Sunday" p. 32-33.

14. Henry David Thoreau. *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) "Baker Farm" p. 252-253.

Thoreau's idyllic environmental imagination reaches its peak in his essay, "Walking," which was first delivered as a lecture at the Concord Lyceum on April 23rd 1851. This work has been pivotal to twentieth-century environmentalism and the wilderness movement.¹⁵ According to historian Roderick Nash, "Walking" "cut the channels in which a larger portion of thought about wilderness subsequently flowed."¹⁶ For centuries, "wildness" and "nature" were often associated with sin and what was lowest in man. Thoreau was turning this tradition on its head by pronouncing that which was wild and natural to be more free and good. He was also, in a way, departing from his fellow transcendentalists. A key belief for Emerson, in particular, was that the reality above and beyond natural objects was more real than the objects themselves. Nature's importance drew from its ability to point toward this higher reality. Thoreau, on the other hand, sought to appreciate Nature in itself – as something of value regardless of a transcendent reality it may or may not point to. While this moved him in the direction of the moral imagination's synthesis of the universal and the particular, it is not clear exactly what the universal is that nature participated in. This is, in part, why Thoreau tends toward a kind of pantheism and an "aspiration toward the infinite" as described in Chapter Eight. Whatever the universal was, "the wilderness, in contrast to the city, was regarded as the environment where

15. The late executive director of the Wilderness Society and the primary author of the Wilderness Act, Howard Zahniser, constantly carried the writings of Thoreau as he campaigned for the protection of wilderness areas. See James Morton Turner. *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics Since 1964*. (Seattle: Univ. of Washington, 2012) p. 17. For more on Thoreau's direct connection to the wilderness movement in particular see William Cronon "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Environmental History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Jan., 1996) pp. 7-28; Max Oelschlaeger. *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*. (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ., 1991); and Roderick Nash. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. 4th Ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ., 2001).

16. Nash. (2001) p. 84.

spiritual truths were least blunted.”¹⁷ As discussed in previous chapters, the world of politics and even friendship were disappointing at best. Community could hardly provide access to the universal. And as Nash observes, “[t]he development of Thoreau’s wilderness philosophy is most meaningful when juxtaposed to this sense of discontent with his society.”¹⁸ He finds in nature the freedom, companionship, resources and spirituality he fails to find in civilization. He begins “Walking,” claiming:

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil, - to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization: the minister and the school committee and every one of you will take care of that.¹⁹

The defenders of civilization need to be resisted or at least balanced by a defender of wildness as “absolute freedom.” Specifically, wildness is defended by “Walkers:” free, uninhibited individuals who roam physically, imaginatively and spiritually away from domestic life, society and the obligations of community. *Where* he or she walks though is better if it is not only wild, but shared:

In this vicinity, the best part of the land is not private property; the landscape is not owned, and the walker enjoys comparative freedom. But possibly the day will come when it will be partitioned off into so-called pleasure-grounds, in which a few will take a narrow and exclusive pleasure only, -when fences shall be multiplied, and man-traps and other engines invented to confine men to the public road, and walking over the surface of God's earth shall be construed to mean trespassing on some gentleman's grounds. To enjoy a thing exclusively is commonly to exclude your-self from the true enjoyment of it. Let us improve our opportunities, then, before the evil days come.²⁰

17. Nash (2001) p. 86.

18. Nash. (2001) p. 87.

19. Thoreau. “Walking” in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (Walden edition) Vol. V. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1906) p. 205.

20. Thoreau. “Walking” p. 216.

Boundaries and restrictions are sure to impede the Walkers. For now, Thoreau encourages walking in submission to Nature's "subtle magnetism...which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright."²¹ One does not walk simply anywhere, but everywhere that Nature would guide her. Given the vast opportunities to encounter large tracts of undeveloped land in America, the depths to which Nature may lead the Walker physically, intellectually and spiritually seem infinite.²² Then, when he is ready, the Walker will realize Thoreau's most influential dictum: "that in Wildness is the preservation of the World."²³ America grows and survives by means of its westward expansion, religious figures find inspiration in the wilderness and the very Roman Empire was founded by the wildness of Romulus suckled by a wolf. Rome fell when it abandoned its wild roots. "Life consists with wildness," he writes "The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him."²⁴ Civilization, meanwhile, represses life and limits human potential. Wilderness inspires poets and philosophers,²⁵ cultivates diversity,²⁶ enriches the best of literature and even sustained the great civilizations of the Western world.²⁷ "In short, all good things are wild and free."²⁸

For Thoreau, the tension between the moral and idyllic imagination continues to complicate his overall vision of the wild. As he observes, the natural does not aspire to the cultivation of the civilization nor does the civilization aspire to become wild. As an alternative,

21. Thoreau. "Walking" p. 216.

22. Thoreau. "Walking" p. 222-223.

23. Thoreau. "Walking" p. 224.

24. Thoreau. "Walking" p. 226.

25. Thoreau. "Walking" p. 229.

26. Thoreau. "Walking" p. 235-236.

27. Thoreau. "Walking" p. 229.

28. Thoreau. "Walking" p. 234.

civilization and the wild ought to achieve a seamless unity. Nature is civilized, and true civilization is at home in nature. Man's art is not the cultivation and perfection of nature, but submission to it. Perhaps this is why Thoreau would write in *Walden* that "The civilized man is a more experienced and wiser savage."²⁹ This is more than just a semantic game; Thoreau's play with "savage" and "civilized" carries a poignant message. For Thoreau, the promises of civilization have been shallow at best. Man improves his science and industry, but not his soul. Eric Voegelin once posed the question of how "civilization can advance and decline at the same time."³⁰ Nearly one-hundred years earlier, Thoreau had considered the same possibility:

While civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them. It has created palaces, but it was not so easy to create noblemen and kings. *And if the civilized man's pursuits are no worthier than the savage's, if he is employed the greater part of his life in obtaining gross necessaries and comforts merely, why should he have a better dwelling than the former?*³¹

This question, in part, explains Thoreau's purpose in living at Walden Pond and writing the account which effectively immortalized him. One would suspect this famous moment to be a quintessential example of an "Arcadian imagination." Thoreau's account of his stay, however, does not substantiate such a simple explanation. The Arcadian longing is a desire for a more permanent escape in Nature from everyday life, away from people and in the presence of a benevolent and loving natural environment. However, we find in this narrative less of this Arcadian temptation than we might expect. Compared to Thoreau's other writings, *Walden* has very little to say about Nature. It is, among many other things, an experiment, a cultural critique,

29. Thoreau. *Walden*. "Economy." p. 83.

30. Eric Voegelin. *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1952) p. 129.

31. Thoreau. *Walden*. "Economy." p. 77. Emphasis in original.

a moral philosophy and an autobiography. Thoreau regularly took walks into town and entertained a number of guests. As he writes in the “Visitors” chapter of *Walden*: “I think I love society as much as most, and am ready enough to fasten myself like a bloodsucker for the time to any full-blooded man that comes in my way. I am naturally no hermit, but might possibly sit out the sturdiest frequenter of the bar-room, if my business called me thither.”³² Still, the temptation to ascribe nonexistent qualities to Nature remains, even in this work:

I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very patterning of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which were are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and humanest was not a person nor a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again.³³

Here, the idyllic imagination briefly gets the best of Thoreau. His experiment of “fronting only the essentials of life,” of living simply and deliberately and inquiring what civilization’s advance has meant for the decline of the soul, are subordinated to the idealization of wild Nature as not simply Arcadia, but as a kind of ideal companion or as a parent.

Significantly, Thoreau never advocated a complete retreat from civilization: “I would not have every man nor every part of a man cultivated, any more than I would have every acre of earth cultivated: part will be tillage, but the greater part will be meadow and forest, not only serving an immediate use, but preparing a mould against a distant future, by the annual decay of

32. Thoreau. *Walden*. “Visitors.” p. 185.

33. Thoreau. *Walden*, “Solitude.” p. 177.

the vegetation which it supports.”³⁴ Instead, he believed the juxtaposition and moderation of both extremes – civilization and wilderness – was necessary for the fullest realization of human community and happiness. In *A Week* he observes that:

The wilderness is near as well as dear to every man. Even the oldest villages are indebted to the border of wild wood which surrounds them, more than to the gardens of men. There is something indescribably inspiring and beautiful in the aspect of the forest skirting and occasionally jutting into the midst of new towns...Our lives need the relief of such a background, where the pine flourishes and the jay still screams.³⁵

Juxtaposing the village with a surrounding wilderness, he disparages neither. The contrast seems *necessary*. Thoreau only emphasizes the wild because it has historically been neglected or misunderstood. It as if “Athens” and “Arcadia” require one another for a full self-understanding. “Arcadia” though, in an historical sense, was an idyllic place, but to describe it as “wilderness” may be a stretch. Thoreau blurs the lines between civilized and uncivilized, and turns the distinctions between “Athens” and “Arcadia” on their head. He offers a very similar perspective in *Walden*:

Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness...At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thunder-cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander.³⁶

34. Thoreau. “Walking” p. 238.

35. Thoreau. *A Week*. “Monday.” p. 108.

36. Thoreau. *Walden*. “Spring.” p. 366.

Man finds meaning and life in an awareness of his relative insignificance and limitations. Mystery gives meaning to knowledge, the unexplored gives value to the explored and the wild gives purpose to the civilization. Thoreau himself illustrated this in the “Bean-Field” chapter of *Walden*, describing his small plot of beans as “the connecting link between wild and cultivated fields; as some states are civilized, and others half-civilized, and others savage or barbarous, so my field was, though not in a bad sense, a half-cultivated field.”³⁷ The tension between wild and the civilized, which equates to the tension between the idyllic and moral, manifests itself in our towns, art, politics and culture. Most importantly, it occurs within each individual. “I found in myself,” Thoreau writes, “and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both I love the wild not less than the good.”³⁸

Can the wild be called *good*, though? Thoreau emphasized the notion of wilderness as a kind of “raw material” of life,³⁹ and disputed ancient traditions of equating the wild with sin. But when Thoreau journeyed to the vast, undeveloped wilderness of Maine, the encounter reminded him that civilization may not be entirely problematic. Once one encounters wilderness on this scale, Thoreau recognized, “one could no longer accuse institutions and society, but must front the true source of evil.”⁴⁰ As he ascends Mount Ktaadn, wildness seems to impose rather than liberate his thoughts. The encounter is disorienting, intimidating and humbling. Nature is neither the ideal companion nor the Arcadia that Thoreau wrote about from the comforts of Concord:

37. Thoreau. *Walden*. “The Bean Field.” p. 203.

38. Thoreau. *Walden*. “Higher Laws.” p. 257.

39. Nash. (2001) p. 88.

40. Henry David Thoreau. *The Maine Woods*. Ed. by Joseph J. Moldenhauer (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 2004) “Ktaadn.” p. 16.

Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, Why came ye here before your time. This ground is not prepared for you. Is it not enough that I smile in the valleys? I have never made this soil for thy feet, this air for thy breathing, these rocks for thy neighbors. I cannot pity nor fondle thee here, but forever relentlessly drive thee hence to where I am kind. Why seek me where I have not called thee, and then complain because you find me but a stepmother? Shouldst thou freeze or starve, or shudder thy life away, here is no shrine, nor altar, nor any access to my ear.⁴¹

Thoreau's imaginative perception of the wild has been challenged or even shattered. Yet he recognizes the irony that by invading the wilderness, the wildness is somehow corrupted. "Wilderness" is an abstract idea and implies a purity that man never actually encounters. The encounter itself would violate the very idea. Nature, and especially "Wild" nature, may not be the benevolent source of freedom and love he once imagined:

It is difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man. We habitually presume his presence and influence everywhere. And yet we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast and drear and inhuman, though in the midst of cities. Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden, but the unhandseled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor waste land... There was clearly felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man.⁴²

Thoreau's experience in Maine reinforced and reoriented the half-savage, half-cultivated ideal he had begun to articulate in earlier works. There was now more respect for civilization's possibilities and limitations, as there was a greater realization of the wild's limitations and mystery. As Simon Schama writes, "There have always been two kinds of arcadia: shaggy and

41. Thoreau. *The Maine Woods*. "Ktaadn." p. 64.

42. Thoreau. *The Maine Woods*. "Ktaadn." p. 70.

smooth; dark and light; a place of bucolic leisure and a place of primitive panic.”⁴³ The awesomeness of vast, undeveloped and mysterious land has a way of evoking humility and the moral imagination. Far from becoming an escape from human society, it reminds us that we require the presence of others. Still, Thoreau remained adamant about the possibilities of the wild. The idyllic and moral imagination required each other for their own awareness. Both affirm and resist one another, and sharpen that which they express.

In sum, the idyllic imagination tends toward an Arcadian longing that is characterized by a disproportionate love toward the natural, non-human world and specifically as an escape from disappointing human society. Nature, and specifically that which is *Wild*,⁴⁴ affords man a truer community and sanctuary. Time spent in the forest is more than merely restorative and inspiring; it is nearly heaven-on-earth. The meadow and the valley become Arcadian paradises, removed from the demands of moral effort and life among other persons. The moral imagination does not lose sight of Arcadia’s beauty and mystery, however. The encounter with Nature is still evocative, engendering creativity, curiosity and humility. The moral imagination requires, however, that such an encounter be subjected to proportion and an attentiveness to reality. In this way, the moral environmental imagination neither idealizes Nature as an Arcadia, nor dismisses the evocative encounter with nature as mere romanticism. Instead, the moral environmental imagination is prepared to encounter universal beauty and order in the particular landscape, place, animal, plant, body of water and so on. Finally, like Thoreau’s departure from Walden and

43. Simon Schama. *Landscape and Memory*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) p. 517.

44. Thoreau never explicitly defines “Nature” or “Wilderness.”

his intimidating experience on the top of Ktaadn, the moral imagination recognizes that man was not meant to remain in Arcadia forever.

* * * *

A major concern of this dissertation is how the actual and potential impact of the tension in Thoreau's imagination influenced environmental thought and politics. Beginning with the problem of the Arcadian longing and the concept of "Wildness," we move to consider the political consequences of Thoreau's imagination of the natural non-human world alongside his imagination of political morality, friendship, freedom, law and government.

A preliminary word about environmentalism is required. Since the turn of the twentieth century, American environmentalism has acquired a diversity of perspectives and personalities that is quite extraordinary. To speak of environmentalism as a consistently unified movement would be historically and philosophically dishonest. While concern for the natural, non-human world is its overall focus, the depth and intensity of that concern, its sources, the response to it and the corresponding beliefs about human nature, democracy, survival and religion lack consistency. This struggle for identity is in part a manifestation of the tension between the idyllic and moral imagination. Environmentalism lives in a tension between the idyllic and moral imagination, and it is Thoreau, more than anyone else, who has given that tension a vocabulary and a voice. Lawrence Buell observes that "no writer in the literary history of America's dominant subculture comes closer than [Thoreau] to standing for nature in both the scholarly and popular mind."⁴⁵ Though Thoreau was by no means the only major influence on modern

45. Lawrence Buell. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1995) p. 2.

American environmentalism, the movement's search for self-understanding will find, and has already discovered, considerable value in this peculiar man of Concord.

Wilderness and the Arcadian Longing

The problem of the "Arcadian longing" and Thoreau's concept of "wildness" have a number of significant parallels in modern environmental politics and thought, and especially in the wilderness movement of the mid-twentieth century. One of the first problems in Thoreau's legacy for the politics of wilderness is the appeal of "wildness" as the preferred characterization of freedom. The wild is uninhibited and uncivilized. There is little room for a restraining ethical will or for attention to expediency and tradition. Yet it is that same wildness which is at the root of threats to wilderness. Westward expansion in the nineteenth century United States, for example, was often characterized more by anarchy than by order. Uninhibited by a rule of law or by the trappings of the civilized society, great tracts of land were taken over, land was over-farmed or over-grazed, great herds of Bison were decimated, forestry was unregulated and many scenic landscapes and trails were exploited by local entrepreneurs. Undeveloped land was abused, fought over and under-valued. Such lack of restraint is characteristic of an idyllic imagination which rejects limitations and moderation. While wildness elevates an abstract autonomy, the moral imagination strives to navigate the difficult tension between liberty and restraint without abandoning either. Freedom, as such, is not the problem, but a freedom characterized by wildness drives the immoderate use and abuse of the very land that the wilderness movement seeks to protect. While Thoreau seems to recognize the need for restraint in his opposition to the Mexican-American War and his call in *Walden* for simpler living, the

elevation of wildness and his enthusiasm for John Brown's lack of restraint demonstrate a significant tension which would be inherited by later environmentalists.

Jack Turner observed a similar problem after noting how many writers have misquoted Thoreau as saying "In *Wilderness* is the preservation of the world." Turner worries "that mistaking wilderness for wildness is one cause of our increasing failure to preserve the wild earth."⁴⁶ Many readers interpret Thoreau as equating "wilderness" and "wildness" because they never stop to ask what Thoreau meant by "wildness" or even "world." Turner tries to remedy this confusion by looking closer at Thoreau's own etymology of "wild" and "world" and concludes that:

In the broadest sense we can say that Thoreau's 'In Wildness is the preservation of the world' is about the relation of free, self-willed, and self-determinate 'things' with the harmonious order of the cosmos. Thoreau claims that the first preserves the second. The problem is this: it is not clear to any of us, I think, how the wildest acts of nature – earthquakes, wildfires, the plagues, people being killed and eaten by mountain lions and grizzly bears, our lust, the open sea in storm – preserves a harmonious cosmic order.⁴⁷

This confusion emerges, in Turner's estimation, out of a lack of direct human experience with "wild, non-human nature." Contemporary discourse about "nature" and the "wild" lack the rich insight of distinct engendering experiences. Even those who read Thoreau, who often claim to have had such experiences, seem to be unaware of what he actually meant. Indeed, it is curious how little Thoreau writes about preserving the wild which he insists will preserve the world. Perhaps this oversight is due to the observation that those who live closest to the natural

46. Jack Turner. *The Abstract Wild*. (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona, 1996) p. 81.

47. Turner (1996) p. 82.

non-human world seem much less inclined to champion environmental causes than those who reside in urban areas:

What is equally confounding is that people who have led a life of intimate contact with wild nature...often oppose preserving wild nature. The friends of preservation, on the other hand, are often city folk who depend on weekends and vacations in designated wilderness areas and national parks for their (necessarily) limited experience of wildness. This difference in degree of experience of wild nature, the dichotomy of friends/enemies of preservation, and the notorious inability of these two groups to communicate also indicate the depth of our muddle about wildness. We don't know what we mean, and those who have the most experience with the wild disagree with what we want to achieve.⁴⁸

This conflict mirrors well the tension of the environmental imagination and the Arcadian longing. On the one hand are those from the cities with limited exposure to the natural, non-human world. Their view of nature is more abstract, rooted in sentiments inspired by brief periods of recreation and travel and by the experiences, art and stories of others. Those with a more direct experience of the natural, non-human world seem less likely to idealize the environment in their imagination. "Nature" is not an abstraction, but something they work with, in and, perhaps, against every day. In both instances, Turner believes something is missing which was *not* missing in Thoreau.

Yet most of us, when we think about it, realize that after our own direct experience of nature, what has contributed most to our love of wild places, animals, plants – and even, perhaps, to our love of wild nature, our sense of citizenship – is the art, literature, myth, and lore of nature. For here is the language we so desperately lack, the medium necessary for vision. Mere concepts and abstractions will not do, because love is beyond concepts and abstractions. And yet the problem is one of love...The conservation movement has put much thought, time, effort, and money into public policy and science, and far too little into direct personal experience and the arts. There is nothing wrong with public

48. Turner (1996) p. 83.

policy and science, but since they will not produce love, they must remain secondary in the cause of preservation.⁴⁹

Turner, like Lawrence Buell, appreciates the profound importance of a particular quality of imagination and will for the preservation of the environment. Creative works of imagination shape what we love, and that love shapes what we protect. Yet Turner, for all his resistance to abstractions, only moves toward a more radical abstraction of “merging” more into the “larger patterns” of wildness.⁵⁰ Instead of the perspective of tourist or farmer, we must, according to Turner, adopt a more indigenous perspective in which our subjectivity is absorbed by dwelling more intimately with nature. “We are left with the vital importance of residency in wild nature,” Turner asserts,⁵¹ and a visceral knowledge of that wildness, as the most practical means of preserving the wild.⁵¹ This is not the more moderate “loafing” and recreation Babbitt spoke of earlier, but is the dangerous movement toward running together the “realm of man” and the “realm of nature,” making them virtually indistinguishable. “What we need now is a new tradition of the wild that teaches us how human beings live best by living in and studying the wild without taming it or destroying it.”⁵² This is neither the forbidding nature of Thoreau’s *Maine Woods* nor the necessary contrast of “wild” and “civilized” he illustrates by his bean field at Walden Pond. Turner’s imagination is the idyllic imagination taken to a dangerous and politically impracticable level.

Turner wrestles with the difficult question of how to define wilderness itself. A remarkable number of studies have entered into the debate surrounding the usefulness of

49. Turner. (1996) p. 89.

50. Turner. (1996) p. 90.

51. Turner. (1996) p. 90.

52. Turner. (1996) p. 90.

wilderness as a concept, and several definitions have been offered. The most politically significant definition though, is that offered by the U.S Wilderness Act of 1964:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.⁵³

The definition of “wilderness” in the Wilderness Act is the Arcadian longing writ large, and it would not be a stretch to refer to the legislation as the “Arcadian Act.” In principle, the Wilderness Act would preserve those areas removed from both the presence and influence of man. Yes, humans can visit, but they are to do nothing that would seemingly upset the “forces of nature” or the wilderness area’s “primeval character,” “solitude,” and the earth’s “community of life.” The very existence of such a law is quite striking. Instead of viewing non-human nature as something to be managed and overcome, it was given value in and of itself. While instrumental arguments for wilderness preservation initially carried the Wilderness Act to its successful passage, its continued defense and the debate surrounding its implementation have moved toward claims of nature having “rights” and to other more allegedly “ecocentric” arguments.⁵⁴

53. *The Wilderness Act*. 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 1964. Public Law 88-577 (September 3rd, 1964). §1(c)

54. Nash (2001) p. 385-389.

The problem is that the entire concept of wilderness is premised on products of the idyllic imagination. That is, the wilderness act itself assumes a kind of primitive “balance of nature,” which operates as an ideal benchmark for environmental preservation and restoration. Like the “city in speech” of Socrates, the ideal of the wilderness movement and the Arcadian longing is an “ecosystem in speech” only. Eschewing both science and historical reality, the concepts of “wilderness” and a “balance of nature” have acquired considerable currency and influence in public policy, culture, nature writing and other works of the environmental imagination.⁵⁵ They are abstractions with a deeply entrenched ethical weight and legitimacy which often shield them from scrutiny.

The notion of a “balance of nature” dates back to antiquity, according to Frank Egerton.⁵⁶ For most of its history, however, it was tied more to theological and philosophical generalizations, and did not become the property of ecology and natural history until the late eighteenth century. Though historically lacking a consistent and precise definition, the “balance of nature” has become something of a context and assumption for the environmental imagination and politics. Its most important popularizer was Rachel Carson, whose book, *Silent Spring* (1962), ignited much of the American environmental movement. According to Carson:

The balance of nature is not the same today as in Pleistocene times, but it is still there: a complex, precise, and highly integrated system of relationships between living things which cannot safely be ignored ...The balance of nature is not a *status quo*; it is fluid, ever shifting, in a constant state of adjustment. Man, too, is part of this balance. Sometimes the balance is in his favor; sometimes – and all too often through his own activities – it is shifted to his disadvantage.⁵⁷

55. See, for example, Dennis E. Jelinski. “There Is No Mother Nature: There Is No Balance of Nature: Culture, Ecology and Conservation.” *Human Ecology*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Apr., 2005), pp. 271-288.

56. Frank N. Egerton. “Changing Concepts of the Balance of Nature.” *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Jun., 1973), pp. 322-350.

57. Rachel Carson. *Silent Spring*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962) p. 246.

Nature always seeks an equilibrium between life and death, abundance and scarcity, predator and prey, health and sickness. A precise outline of this balance would be historically impossible to pinpoint, but Carson asserts that the balance is real. Nature does its own part to manage this balance and, in the absence of human interference, would always succeed in achieving it. Man, however, with his distinctive free will and intellectual superiority, must choose whether to be a part of this balance or to disrupt it. The Arcadia of the environmental imagination is a delicate cosmion, susceptible to even moderate levels of consumption or selfishness.

While reading Carson, one wonders whether the only way to “balance” nature is to eliminate man altogether. While, at times, she is willing to admit that man can have a positive role in the “balance” of nature, he is more frequently guilty of acting on or within nature in ways that demonstrate considerable ignorance and impatience. Man is primarily destructive of the natural, non-human world and predominantly inclined to neglect instead of care. While Carson pays lip service to the potential benefits of technology, science and agriculture, a fuller picture of man’s positive role remains undeveloped. As Charles Rubin rightly observes:

[Carson’s] failure to tease out the various strands of that complexity is probably a net rhetorical gain. It makes it possible for there to be “man” and “destruction” on one side of the ledger, and “nature” and “danger” on the other side. Because there is no clear picture of when humans intervene properly in nature, Carson can maintain both her pessimism about a future ‘where no birds sing’ and her optimism that the right science and the right agricultural technology can provide many of the benefits of existing pesticides without their grave costs.⁵⁸

58. Charles T. Rubin. *The Green Crusade: Rethinking the Roots of Modern Environmentalism*. Reprint 1994. (Landham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998). p. 50.

Carson's rhetorical success is considerable; she understood the importance of imagination and placed the ecological crises she identified within a larger context of everyday life. *Silent Spring* contained no original research on her part, but it conveyed a particular imagination of an ecological problem – the harmful effects of DDT – that ignited a political and cultural movement. As Lawrence Buell noted, *Silent Spring* is the “least ‘literary’” of Carson's books, “but the creative imagination is central to its effect.”⁵⁹ Yet the *quality* of that imagination remains in the tension between the moral and idyllic. Carson's idyllic imagination tempts her toward a dangerous misanthropy and toward the misrepresentation of reality and previous research,⁶⁰ but the moral imagination prevents her from disparaging entirely of human intervention, science and environmental well-being.

The Arcadian longing's inspiration for wilderness, wildness and the idyllic “balance of nature,” have left formidable questions as to man's role in that balance. As a possible way to conceive humanity's position in this regard, a number of authors have recommended the concept of “rewilding.” If the wilderness act identified Arcadia, and the “balance of nature” conceptualizes Arcadia's character and justification, then rewilding brings all these pieces together in a radical rethinking of the way one lives. Rewilding officially entered the dictionary in 2011, but by then it was primarily associated with the reintroduction of plant and animal species to their native habitats or with the “rehabilitation...of entire ecosystems.”⁶¹ Today, in popular culture and marketing, the idea of rewilding is a way of overcoming one's alienation from the natural, non-human world by “resisting the urge to control nature and allowing it to find

59. Buell (1995) p.291.

60. Rubin (1998) 38-44.

61. George Monbiot. *Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea, and Human Life*. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 2014) p. 8.

its own way.”⁶² Nature “knows best,” and requires little “help” from us. Applied to human life, then, George Monbiot – one of the most vocal popularizers of rewilding – looks to Thoreau as an example and claims to see rewilding as a way not to abandon civilization, but to enhance it. Quoting Thoreau, Monbiot explains that rewilding “is ‘to love not man the less, but Nature more.’”⁶³ According to Monbiot, rewilding is not necessarily a return to primitive lifestyles and the abandonment of a complex economy, but rather a return to the “wildness” that Thoreau spoke of in “Walking.” It is a self-willed, radically autonomous disposition that orders freedom to the impulses of nature. What we interpret as constraints on our freedom for the sake of ecological well-being are re-imagined as freeing man from his tragically “unwilded” existence. While Monbiot is careful to avoid abstractions, misanthropy and ideology, his entire notion of rewilding is the epitome of the idyllic imagination and the virtual abolition of morality. Indeed, more traditional moral restraints appear to be the very agents of human “unwilding.” While part of this rewilding process is reintroducing native species back into the habitats where they once roamed, for man it means resisting the urge to control his own nature. Monbiot elaborates further explaining that “rewilding has no end points, no view about what a ‘right’ ecosystem or a ‘right’ assemblage of species looks like...It lets nature decide.”⁶⁴ Humanity is in nature’s way and must step aside to let nature take its course. Rewilding becomes an end in itself with little justification beyond the assertion that it is “natural.”

62. Monbiot (2014) p. 9.

63. Monbiot (2014) p. 10.

64. Monbiot (2014) p. 10.

Another recent work by ecologist Marc Beckoff goes further than Monbiot, arguing that we must “rewild our hearts”⁶⁵ According to Beckoff, “we humans – big-brained, big-footed, overproducing, overconsuming, and invasive mammals – have for a long time acted as if we are the only animals who matter.”⁶⁶ We have violently abused the planet and created problems that are too large for us to even understand. For Beckoff, the *feeling* that humans have created an ecological mess is far more authoritative than the data needed to prove its extent. Beckoff’s imagining of rewilding acknowledges that humans and non-human animals are due an equal amount of dignity and respect, and that compassion and empathy for non-humans is a moral obligation. Non-humans can have worldviews and complex emotions, and must be granted the same respect as humans. Following Babbitt’s description of the romantic view of nature, Beckoff writes:

When I mind animals...I practice what I consider “deep ethology.” That is, as the ‘seer,’ I try to become the ‘seen.’ When I watch coyotes, I become coyote. When I watch penguins, I become penguin. I will also try to become tree and even rock. I name my animal friends and try to step into their worlds to discover what it might be like to be a given individual – how they sense their surroundings, how they move about, and how they behave in myriad situations.⁶⁷

Beckoff claims that these moments of ecological empathy or “deep ethology,” can provide key scientific insights. To achieve even wider acceptance and environmental well-being, more of these moments are called for, as is a revolution and a movement “based on peace, compassion, empathy, and social justice.”⁶⁸ It is “sentimental humanitarianism” at the extreme.

Yet if this rewilding of our hearts were to become a movement, “There is [to be] no

65. Marc Bekoff. *Rewilding Our Hearts Building Pathways of Compassion and Coexistence*. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2014).

66. Bekoff. (2014). p. 3.

67. Bekoff. (2014). p. 7.

68. Bekoff. (2014) p. 7.

‘membership.’ Instead, we are all already members, as living, breathing human beings who move in circles of coexistence.”⁶⁹ It would be a movement of an undifferentiated mass. Individualism is disparaged, liberty is a problem and sentiment governs. In moments of doubt, those who can best achieve “deep ethology” and empathy will provide the best answers.

Beckoff’s proposal, despite its radical nature, does not sit on the fringes of the idyllic environmental imagination. “Rewilding” is an increasingly popular premise among conservation biologists. Extensive efforts by the Rewilding Institute and the U.S. and Canadian governments, for example, are trying to link up wilderness areas and large tracts of land that can support larger numbers of native predators. In contrast to Monbiot’s concept, Beckoff’s rewilding is more willing to intervene in nature, especially in human nature. But this intervention will be unsuccessful if man does not establish a more personal connection to wildlife. This is by no means a new idea; as Lawrence Buell observes, the notion of nature’s “personhood” may go back to antiquity.⁷⁰ Today, “rewilding” is used in countless ad campaigns for environmental groups, is argued for in environmental lawsuits and provides content for popular entertainment. The “running together” of the “realm of man” and the “realm of nature,” as Babbitt described, is ubiquitous in works of the creative environmental imagination. Beckoff is only making explicit a sentiment implicit in the idyllic imaginations of modern marketing and modern films like James Cameron’s *Avatar*.

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69 . Bekoff. (2014) p. 8.

70. See Buell. (1995) Chapter Six.

Not all environmentalists are persuaded by the more idyllic preoccupation with “wilderness” and “wildness,” particularly those who work in the burgeoning field of environmental history. One of the most visible and respected critics of the wilderness idea is environmental historian William Cronon. His 1996 article, “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature” offered a critical (if partially flawed) resistance to the more idyllic temptations of wilderness advocates, and set off a fiery debate among environmental scholars. Cronon argued that, far from being the antithesis of civilization, the notion of “wilderness” was entirely a product of civilization, and is itself fundamentally unnatural. This is not surprising, as the success of the wilderness idea “had to become loaded with some of the deepest core values of the culture that created and idealized it: it had to become sacred.”⁷¹ Wilderness became an object of reverence, and its defenders eschewed civilization in speech but retained much of the religious and cultural assumptions which characterize civilization itself. Far from preserving the wildness of wilderness, human sentiment and even worship of nature “tamed” the wild by giving it boundaries and definition. The movement that Roderick Nash emphasized, from the wilderness where Jesus was tempted to the “Cathedrals” of wilderness described by John Muir, did not make “wilderness” any more natural or less abstract and subjective. Cronon observes how the defenders of the wilderness idea tended to associate the wild with a kind of “frontier myth” of American origins and self-understanding, but this only exposed how little the wilderness idea was actually concerned with nature itself:

71. William Cronon. "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Environmental History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Jan., 1996) pp. 7-28. p. 10.

This nostalgia for a passing frontier way of life inevitably implied ambivalence, if not downright hostility, toward modernity and all that it represented. If one saw the wild lands of the frontier as freer, truer, and more natural than other, more modern places, then one was also inclined to see the cities and factories of urban-industrial civilization as confining, false, and artificial.⁷²

Instead of valuing wilderness in itself, the idea of wilderness followed Thoreau's idyllic imagination in celebrating the wild as that which is "not man" and "not modern." Furthermore, the wilderness idea was always more about preserving a *myth* than a place. This becomes clearer when one considers the wilderness movement's preoccupation with the notion of a "virgin wilderness," which ignored the importance of Native Americans and the considerable historical evidence contradicting the vision of pure and primitive America. For Cronon, the wilderness movement's paradoxical disdain for history is precisely what corrupts it:

But the trouble with wilderness is that it quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject. The flight from history that is very nearly the core of wilderness represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world. The dream of an unworked natural landscape is very much the fantasy of people who have never themselves had to work the land to make a living – urban folk for whom food comes from a supermarket or a restaurant instead of a field, and for whom the wooden houses in which they live and work apparently have no meaningful connection to the forests in which trees grow and die. Only people whose relation to the land was already alienated could hold up wilderness as a model for human life in nature, for the romantic ideology of wilderness leaves precisely nowhere for human beings actually to make their living from the land.⁷³

Cronon rightly realizes that efforts of rewilding and the preservation of wilderness as a kind of moral, and even religious, imperative, exposes a deeper misanthropy that suggests the removal of humans from nature—if not their complete elimination—in order to remedy their

72. Cronon (1996) p. 14.

73. Cronon (1996) p. 16-17.

contaminating presence. The preoccupation with wilderness also threatens to distract us from other areas, including our backyards, that warrant the same protection. Far from discouraging the preservation and protection of large tracts of land from economic development, Cronon would encourage such efforts to continue with a different mindset. Instead of conceiving wilderness in terms of separating man from nature, we must imagine man as a part of nature, while retaining a recognition that non-humans will have interests and value independent of man. Yet even here, in the midst of Cronon's critique, which is animated by moral imagination, we find an idyllic temptation to merge man and nature in problematic ways. He wants to "bring the wilderness home," but whether Arcadia is in a far off land or in one's own backyard, the idealization remains problematic. While Cronon's critique is to be commended for exposing the fundamental contradictions and ideological implications of the wilderness idea, his opposition to a man-nature dualism risks the same ideological temptations.

One of the figures Cronon quotes approvingly in support of his critique is the author, farmer and cultural critic Wendell Berry. Berry has long been associated with environmentalism, despite standing apart from its more dominant streams. His work tends toward a less idyllic view of nature, is less hostile to history and explicitly resists the misanthropy, radicalism and arrogance of the larger environmental movements. Though inspired by Thoreau, Berry's agricultural background, his faith and his preoccupation with community and tradition tend to moderate the more problematic elements of Thoreau's romanticism.

In his 1985 essay, "Preserving Wildness," Berry works to distance himself both from those who claim to "speak for nature" and those who wish to conquer it. He does not wish to abandon the "dualism" that Cronon laments, nor does he want to encourage the abuse of the

natural, non-human world. He seeks a middle ground between self-righteous “defenders of nature” and those who evince a more disenchanting, instrumental view of nature. One of the ways he accomplishes this is by redefining the wild in a manner more reminiscent of Thoreau’s experience on Ktaadn, and less in line with “Walking.” For Berry, the wild is that which is not under the control of human will. Despite the advances of science, this includes the majority of the world in which we find ourselves. That world can be dangerous and unpredictable, and the mystery of the wild far exceeds what we can claim to know about it. Living in harmony with the wild is possible and difficult, but overcoming the wild is not achievable, and attempts to do so threaten human well-being. “There is no escape from the human use of nature...human good cannot be simply synonymous with natural good.”⁷⁴ After all, “we can only live at the expense of other lives.”⁷⁵

Following Thoreau’s necessary dichotomy of civilized and wild, and in contrast to Cronon, Berry advocates thinking of the relationship between human nature neither as entirely separate nor entirely unified, but as both. Man is “in and not of” the natural world. Berry illustrates this reality by describing the human body as “half wild,” in that our very life “is dependent upon reflexes, instincts, and appetites that we do not cause or intend and that we cannot, or had better not, stop.”⁷⁶ While there are appetites and instincts that we can change and discipline, we do not will our hearts to beat, for example.

Berry agrees that the preservation of large tracts of “wild” uninhabited and undeveloped land is necessary, because the juxtaposition of civilization and wildness reminds humans of who

74. Wendell Berry. “Preserving Wildness” (1985). in *Home Economics*. (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1987) p. 139.

75. Berry (1985) p. 139.

76. Berry (1985) p. 140.

they are, and that they are always *becoming*. For Berry, humans do not begin as fully human, but the deer is always fully a deer, and the tree is always fully a tree. Men and women must seek a fuller humanity by means of tradition, culture and community. Part of that culture and tradition is learning how to live in harmony with the natural, non-human world – an insight that, prior to industrialized agriculture, was once more obvious to farmers than to others. Instead of rewilding, finding our place in a balance of nature or abandoning the distinction between man and nature, Berry argues for an environmental ethic that views the efforts of restraint, conservation, preservation and responsible stewardship of the land as fundamental to a fully realized humanity.

There is very little, if any, of the Arcadian longing present in Berry's imagination of the natural, non-human world. Like Thoreau on Ktaadn or in the bean field on the shores of Walden Pond, Berry sees in the wilderness both beauty and death. Yet even Berry is tempted by the idyllic imagination in his idealization of local communities, primitive technology, the agricultural lifestyle and a radically decentralized economy as the remedies for an "overspecialized," undisciplined and irresponsible American culture. While he never advocates for the kind of utopian communities that Thoreau eschewed, Berry asserts an ahistorical vision of community which may be unrealistic given human nature. While Thoreau asserts the individual attuned to right as the moral ideal, Berry proposes the local community attuned to right and tradition as his ideal. Though Berry's vision is moderated somewhat by attention to history, his vision is only slightly less abstract than Thoreau's.

The Arcadian longing that Thoreau exemplifies in *A Week*, "Walking," and other essays is resisted by his experience on the summit of Ktaadn. The abstract ideals of "rewilding," wilderness and a "balance of nature" are resisted by an awareness of historical reality and a

moral imagination attuned to actual human experience. As both Cronon and Berry demonstrate, the moral imagination is not the enemy of wilderness preservation and national parks, but these efforts will ultimately fail if they are grounded in the misanthropic and idyllic imagination animating influential sectors of modern environmentalism. A fully realized humanity is not “rewilded,” removed from nature nor entirely merged with it. It strives for harmony with the non-human world, and is rewarded by the restorative experiences of beauty, awe and wonder critical to the cultivation of humility and the moral imagination.

CHAPTER VII

THOREAU, THE ARCADIAN EXILE

How important is a constant intercourse with nature and the contemplation of natural phenomena to the preservation of moral and intellectual health!

— Thoreau, *Journal*, May 6th, 1851

I love Nature partly because she is not man, but a retreat from him. None of his institutions control or pervade her. There a different kind of right prevails. In her midst I can be glad with an entire gladness. if this world were all man, I could not stretch myself, I should lose all hope. He is constraint, she is freedom to me. He makes me wish for another world. She makes me content with this.

— Thoreau, *Journal*, January 3rd, 1853

A second characteristic of the idyllic environmental imagination, is what Irving Babbitt calls the “pursuit of the dream woman.” In a passage reflecting on this tendency in Rousseau, Wordsworth, Byron and others, he writes that “In his less misanthropic moods the Rousseauist sees in wild nature not only a refuge from society, but also a suitable setting for his companionship with the ideal mate.”¹ Babbitt recognizes that such an idea did not start within the romantic era; it goes back to the works of Virgil and Shakespeare. The difference is that “The Arcadian of the past was much less inclined to sink down to the sub-rational and to merge his personality in the landscape.”² The love of the non-human world becomes either a way of loving oneself or of loving a companion preferable to human community. By “expanding” this

1. Irving Babbitt. *Rousseau and Romanticism*. 1919 Reprint. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2009) p. 280.

2. Babbitt. (2009) p. 281.

community beyond humanity, one undermines the very relationships and traditions necessary for environmentally sound behavior.

Babbitt, unfortunately, does not develop a description of this problematic element as thoroughly as the other two, and does not seem to take this “pursuit of the dream woman” beyond a kind of temporary desire for nature to be a *setting* for love. The temptation to seek community and companionship among non-humans is deeper, however, and can manifest itself in radical and misanthropic ways. Chapter Six discussed Lamartine’s assertion that “‘nature is there who invites you and loves you.’ You will find in her the comprehension and companionship that you have failed to find in society.” Babbitt adds, “And nature seems a perfect companion to a Rousseauist in direct proportion as she is uncontaminated by the presence of man.”³ Tellingly, Thoreau writes:

I love Nature partly because she is not man, but a retreat from him. None of his institutions control or pervade her. There a different kind of right prevails. In her midst I can be glad with an entire gladness. If this world were all man, I could not stretch myself, I should lose all hope. He is constraint, she is freedom to me. He makes me wish for another world. She makes me content with this.⁴

Thoreau’s intercourse with nature allows him greater autonomy and provides a space for his escapism and withdrawal. As he writes elsewhere in his *Journal*, “By my intimacy with nature I find myself withdrawn from man. My interest in the sun and the moon, in the morning and the evening, compels me to solitude.”⁵ Such sentiments can add a seemingly more personal element to both the care and neglect of the non-human world, but it also introduces a number of

3. Babbitt. (2009) p. 279.

4. Henry David Thoreau. *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau: In Fourteen Volumes Bound as Two*. 2 Vols. Ed. by Bradford Torrey and F. H. Allen. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1962) Vol. IV, Ch. 9, 3 January 1853. p. 445.

5. Thoreau. *Journal*, Vol. IV, Ch. 3, 26 July 1852 p. 258.

profound consequences when taken to an extreme. Thoreau's idealization of the non-human world is not accompanied by moderation or qualification, and he neglects the implications that such a personification could have for notions of rights, equality, morality and ethics. Depending on one's moral and political assumptions, this neglect may be fortunate or problematic. Indeed, a number of debates emerging shortly after Thoreau's death consider the question of whether or not plants and animals could be granted the same moral and legal status as human persons. While mounting a full consideration of the increasingly complex defense of animal rights is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is striking how much of this movement within environmental thought is based primarily, if not entirely, on imagination. This tendency emerges most frequently when individuals assert knowledge of non-human spirituality and conscience for which there is no access, scientific or otherwise.

Relationships with other human beings, in contrast with non-human companions, require considerable work, patience and sacrifice, but such community is part of what makes us human.⁶ The companionship one has with a tree or a wild animal costs very little comparatively. Providing for the nutritional needs and survival of a non-human plant or animal does not require the kind of comprehensive moral and spiritual efforts that are necessary for human community. Community and friendship with other humans is bound to cost something, but the absence of that community often costs much more. As Ryn argues, our very humanity is at stake in the context of genuine community:

6. Claes Ryn describes community as "the moral goal for society," and explains that "Community is human association under the guidance of ethical conscience. Man's true humanity is realized by being shared." *Democracy and the Ethical Life: A Philosophy of Politics and Community*. 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: The Catholic Univ. Press, 1990) p. 83.

The moral goal for society to which all other goals are subservient and of which they are ideally supportive we may call community...Community can emerge only in a society where the forces of egotistical interests are tempered by concern for the common good. By disposing us against what is merely arbitrary and selfish, ethical conscience disposes against what separates us from others. It wills, not what is in the private interest of certain individuals or groups, but what is good for its own sake. That end is at the same time the good for the individual and the good for all...Community is human association under the guidance of ethical conscience. Man's true humanity is realized by being shared.⁷

Thoreau evinces considerable evidence of the idyllic imagination in his pursuit of an ideal companionship in nature. Despite his extensive writing on friendship, his "friends" existed more as ideas than as concrete persons. The disappointment with others' failure to live up to his ideal drove him to non-human nature in search of a companion. In a letter to Lucy Jackson Brown, Thoreau remarks, "I forget that you think more of this human nature than of this nature I praise. Why won't you believe that mine is more human than any single man or woman can be? that in it, – in the sunset there, are all the qualities that can adorn a household, –and that sometimes in a fluttering leaf, one may hear all your Christianity preached."⁸ And in another passage, while listening to the foxes near he and his brother John's camp, he asks, "Why should we not cultivate neighborly relations with the foxes? ...Is man powder and the fox flint and steal? Has not the time come when men and foxes shall lie down together?"⁹ In this play on Isaiah 11, Thoreau entertains the possibility that a kind of progress is realized when man's antagonism with non-humans is overcome.

7. Ryn. (1990). p. 83.

8. Henry David Thoreau. "Letter to Lucy Jackson Brown" *The Correspondence of Henry D. Thoreau, Volume I: 1834-1848*. Ed. by Robert N. Hudspeth. (Princeton Univ., 2013) p. 77.

9. Thoreau. *Journal*. Vol. I, Ch. 3, August 31st, 1839. p. 89.

Unlike the other manifestations of the idyllic environmental imagination identified by Babbitt, the moral imagination does not offer here an alternative side to the same coin. The moral imagination resists idealizing companionship with nature as equivalent to friendship between humans. Thankfully, Thoreau did not personify nature as often as later nature writers like John Muir or Aldo Leopold in his *A Sand County Almanac*.¹⁰ Companionship is an inescapably human need which only other humans can fill. As sociologist Robert Nisbet writes:

The family, religious association, and local community – these...cannot be regarded as the external products of man's thought and behavior; they are essentially prior to the individual and are the indispensable supports of belief and conduct. Release man from the contexts of community and you get not freedom and rights but intolerable aloneness and subjection to demonic fears. Society, [Edmund] Burke wrote...is a partnership of the dead, the living, and the unborn. Mutilate the roots of society and tradition, and the result must inevitably be the isolation of a generation from its heritage, the isolation of individuals from their fellow men, and the creation of the sprawling, faceless masses.¹¹

While pets have long been a part of civilized and uncivilized society, they cannot offer the depth of moral and spiritual intercourse of human-to-human relationships.¹² Regardless of how one values, respects or even loves non-humans, a plant or an animal cannot hold a human accountable, administer justice or, as in some religions, administer sacraments or offer forgiveness. Animals demonstrate an extraordinary amount of what humans can only identify as emotions and even a kind of “reason,” but they lack the unique moral and spiritual depth and freedom that are necessary in human communities.

10. Aldo Leopold. *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*. (New York: Oxford Univ., 1949).

11. Robert Nisbet. *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order & Freedom*. First published by Oxford Univ. Press in 1953. (Oakland, CA: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1990) p. 22.

12. A number of authors dispute this, including the Humane Society President/CEO, Wayne Pacelle in his book entitled *The Bond: Our Kinship with Animals, Our Call to Defend Them*. (New York: William Marrow/HarperCollins, 2011) and Marc Bekoff. *Rewilding Our Hearts: Building Pathways of Compassion and Coexistence*. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2014).

From children's stories like C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* to Disney's *The Lion King*, popular culture has found considerable utility in imagining community and companionship among non-human nature and between humans and non-humans. What the moral imagination finds disturbing, however, is when this personification and idealization of nature as a companion is viewed as preferable to human society, or when it becomes the basis for ascribing to nature a value equal to or above human beings. One might ask, for example, given this imaginative orientation, what is to prevent humans from being treated like animals instead of animals being treated like humans?

* * * *

Like Babbitt, Lawrence Buell observes this pursuit of companionship in nature as part of the environmental imagination, but Buell does not view the tendency as a fundamental problem. The desire for companionship with non-humans is preceded by the personification of nature. This practice is common in a number of works of fiction and non-fiction which, as Buell discusses, emerges throughout children's stories and modern films. The motivation for such imagination can vary, but "...one motive for the personification of nature" may be "to offset what might otherwise seem the bleakness of renouncing anthropocentrism."¹³ Once man has achieved a more "ecocentric" imagination, as Buell describes, he will sense a significant loss of companionship which the natural non-human world may be able to remedy. Another possible motivation is the sense in which humans feel a need to personify nature in order to attribute to it the dignity and rights that plants and animals seemingly deserve. This was particularly evident in

13. Lawrence Buell. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1995) p. 180-181.

one of the earliest calls for animal rights by Henry S. Salt, who also happened to be one of Thoreau's first biographers.¹⁴ Salt's *Animal Rights Considered in Relation to Social Progress*¹⁵ argued that man's fullest ethical development would necessarily include the expansion of natural rights to non-human nature. Distinctions in value between humans and non-humans were incoherent to Salt and ultimately degraded humanity's own ethical standing. To recognize animals' rights was itself, paradoxically, fidelity to our own humanity:

It is therefore not only our children who need to be educated in the proper treatment of animals, but our scientists, our religionists, our moralists, and our men of letters. For in spite of the vast progress of humanitarian ideas during the present century, it must be confessed that the popular exponents of western thought are still for the most part quite unable to appreciate the profound truth of those words of Rousseau, which should form the basis of an enlightened system of instruction: “[Men, be human! It is our first duty. What wisdom is there for you outside humanity?”]¹⁶

Salt claims that “the idea of Humanity is no longer confined to man; it is beginning to extend itself to the lower animals...”¹⁷ Expanding this “humanness” is a task to be taken up in a number of ways, but especially in education and by a literary, intellectual and social “crusade.”¹⁸ Salt also seems to recognize that this education is an education of imagination, and an interdisciplinary effort to shape society's very intuition of right, wrong, good, true and beautiful.

John Muir, a contemporary of Salt and one of the earliest environmental readers of Thoreau, was also moved to personify non-humans. Muir was a Scottish-born author, naturalist

14. Henry S. Salt *Life of Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. by George and Willene Hendrick and Fritz Oehlschlaeger. Originally published 1890. (Urbana, IL: Univ. of Illinois, 1993).

15. Henry S. Salt. *Animals' Rights Considered in Relation to Social Progress*. Originally published in 1892. (Clarks Summit, PA: Society for Animal Rights Inc., 1980).

16. Salt. (1980) p. 121-122. Translation mine. “Hommes, soyez humains! C'est votre premier devoir. Quelle sagesse y a-t-il pour vous, hors de l'humanité?”

17. Salt. (1980) p. 112.

18. Salt. (1980) p. 122.

and advocate of the creation of National Parks. He was a preservationist, a pioneering scientist and popularized many of the ideas that are synonymous with environmental activism and philosophy today. He founded the Sierra Club and influenced the likes of Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot and many twentieth-century American environmentalists.

Muir's most commercially popular work was *Stickeen* (1909),¹⁹ named after "an unprepossessing, standoffish, intelligent little mongrel dog...which followed Muir on an Alaskan glacier excursion that got progressively more grim and dangerous."²⁰ The story plays up the relationship between Muir and the dog as a parallel to the seemingly infinite possibilities which experience with the non-human world can reveal about animals and their personhood. Faced with considerable challenges, *Stickeen* demonstrates courage, curiosity and joy. The book's central moment occurs when Muir, after crossing a deep crevice in a glacier by means of a very narrow bridge of ice, is waiting for *Stickeen* to follow him. To Muir, *Stickeen* demonstrates "wonderful sagacity"²¹ by recognizing the danger of crossing the narrow path. He tries to "reason" with the dog, offering a kind of sermon on risk and death. Muir writes that *Stickeen*'s "voice and gestures, hopes and fears, were so perfectly human that none could mistake them; while he seemed to understand every word of mine."²² When the dog finally crosses, he writes that "Never before or since have I seen anything like so passionate a revulsion from the depths of despair to exultant, triumphant, uncontrollable joy."²³ Such description itself does not necessarily evince an idyllic imagination. Few would deny that animals, and especially dogs, can experience

19. John Muir. *Stickeen*. Originally published by Houghton-Mifflin, 1909. (Dunwoody, GA: Norman S. Berg, 1971).

20. Buell. (1995) p. 195.

21. Muir (1971). p. 57

22. Muir (1971). p. 61.

23. Muir (1971). p. 65-66.

and express something akin to human emotion. They can be affectionate, afraid, angry, disinterested and so forth, but the depth of these emotions and their precise nature remain a mystery. Muir is forced to describe the dog's behavior in a language which Stickeen cannot reproduce or validate. While Muir seems sympathetic to a more realistic perspective at the beginning of the story, by its conclusion the dog has persuaded Muir that Stickeen possesses much more personality than one could establish in a definitive sense.

Muir's personification of Stickeen is more sentiment than argument. While his story exemplifies the kind of emotional depth that an animal can possess, the dog could never achieve the kind of humanity Salt calls for and which Muir "discovers." The moral imagination resists this tendency on a number of grounds, the most important of which is that imposing humanness on animals fails to recognize the inability of animals to achieve the same kind of moral and spiritual *improvement* that humans are called to. Animals can physically grow, adapt and learn, but their capacity to acquire new virtues or moral wisdom, as Muir portrays in *Stickeen*, can only be speculative. Without a common language there is no way for humans to establish the moral and spiritual nature of animals.²⁴ Furthermore, as C.S. Lewis argued, those who are sympathetic to extending the "idea of Humanity" to non-humans tend to confuse sentience and conscience.²⁵

The fact that Stickeen evinces fear, wisdom and courage on the glacier is an example of

24. C.S. Lewis, however, was struck by how tempting it might be for humans to desire a deeper society with animals and nature in general. We rightly find beauty in the non-human world with which we long to be united, and so we personify it in order to achieve that unity. He writes, "We do not want merely to *see* beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. That is why we have people air and earth and water with gods and goddesses and nymphs and elves – that, though we cannot, yet these projections can enjoy in themselves that beauty, grace, and power of which Nature is the image." "The Weight of Glory" in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*. Reprint 1949. (New York: HarperOne, 1980) p. 42-43.

25. See C.S. Lewis. *The Problem of Pain*. Originally Published 1940. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996) Ch. 9, "Animal Pain."

sentience, but there is no evidence such a dog can stand “above” these experiences and identify them as experiences.

* * * *

Muir’s writings about his companionship with Stickeen (a dog whose existence is never mentioned in the journals from his actual trip to Alaska) only scratch the surface of his imaginative personification of nature. Indeed, Stickeen may have been the *least* personified of the non-humans mentioned by Muir. As Buell summarizes:

Muir spoke of ‘plant people,’ of beavers and wood rats as people, of gnats and mosquitos as people. This was not metaphor. Muir, one comes to believe, really did see glaciers as messengers, feel the daisies “beam with trustfulness and sympathy,”²⁶ approach the sugar pine “as if in the presence of a superior being,” and listen in Alaska to “the psalm-singing, lichen-painted trees.” For Muir, John Tallmadge rightly observes, “personification is the highest form of flattery,”²⁷ bespeaking reverence for nature and biotic egalitarianism.²⁸

Strictly speaking, Muir did not conceive of humans’ value as less than that of non-humans, but he also did not place man above plants, animals, mountains and rocks. The basis for this belief was grounded in the natural interconnectedness of all life and the reality of a common divine Creator. It was a deeply historical relationship which man shared with the environment; a profound interdependence and equality which rendered even the smallest creatures inviolable.²⁹

26. John Muir. *Travels in Alaska*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), pp. 93, 24; *Mountains of California* (1894; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1985), pp. 26, 12, 59, 112; *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, ed. Linnie Marsh Wolfe (1938; rpt. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1979), p. 170.

27. John Tallmadge, “John Muir and the Poetics of Natural Conversion,” *North Dakota Quarterly*. Vol. 59, No. 2 (Spring 1991) p. 73.

28. Buell (1995) p. 193.

29. Muir writes, “Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation? And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit - the cosmos? The universe would be incomplete without man; but it would also be incomplete without the smallest transmicroscopic creature that dwells beyond our conceitful eyes and knowledge. From the dust of the earth, from the common elementary fund, the Creator has made Homo sapiens. From the same material he has made every other creature, however noxious and insignificant to us. They are earth-born companions and our fellow mortals.... This

While Muir personified plants, dogs, bears and other animals, he did not go so far as to entertain a comprehensive legal and political expression for the equality he otherwise described between humans and non-humans.³⁰ While he did advocate for the preservation of undeveloped land and for conservation, and even for the “rights of creation,” the notion of “animal rights” or legal “standing” for trees does not seem to have crossed his mind. However, his idyllic imagination sowed the seeds of, and provided a vocabulary for, later animal rights activists. If works like *Stickeen*, Jack London’s *Call of the Wild*, or even *Moby Dick* could inspire one to think of morality and dignity in the natural non-human world, why not entertain the expansion of rights and responsibility to non-humans?

Historian Roderick Nash has considered the possibility of the rights of nature as a moral and inevitable advance of liberal principles. Appealing to the modern idea of a social contract and its corresponding attention to natural rights, Nash saw an opportunity in American liberal democracy where other environmentalists only saw antagonism. In *The Rights of Nature*,³¹ liberalism does not present an obstacle to environmental well-being, but instead provides the

star, our own good earth, made many a successful journey around the heavens ere man was made, and whole kingdoms of creatures enjoyed existence and returned to dust ere man appeared to claim them. After human beings have also played their part in Creation's plan, they too may disappear without any general burning or extraordinary commotion whatever.” (John Muir. *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*. Reprint 1916. in *The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books*. (Seattle, The Mountaineers, 1992) p. 160-161.) Muir based part of his reflection on the notion that both humans and non-humans were made from the dust of the earth in reference to the Creation narratives of Genesis. Yet there is no indication in the Bible that animals and plants were made from the same dust as man, and only humans were explicitly made in the image of God. The omission is critical for his argument, and for his ambivalence at the seemingly inevitable extinction of humanity.

30. Perhaps the most well-known and influential attempts at outlining such legal rights and ideas is found in Christopher Stone’s *Should Trees Have Standing? Law, Morality, and the Environment*. 3rd Ed. First edition published in 1972.(New York: Oxford Univ., 2010).

31. Roderick Frazier Nash. *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics*. (Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin, 1989).

very ideology needed for the cultivation of a comprehensive environmental ethic.³² Nash discourages environmentalism from assuming an excessively counter-cultural or subversive position against American liberal democracy because within liberalism one will find the "language of rights," – a tool which Nash believes many environmentalists overlook:³³

Few would disagree that liberty is the single most potent concept in the history of American thought. The product of both Europe's democratic revolutions and, following Frederick Jackson Turner's hypothesis, the North American Frontier, liberalism explains our national origins, delineates our ongoing mission, and anchors our ethics. Natural rights is a cultural given in America, essentially beyond debate as an idea. The liberal's characteristic belief in the goodness and intrinsic value of the individual leads to an endorsement of freedom, political equality, toleration, and self-determination. The most successful reform efforts in American history have occurred in the context of the liberal tradition.³⁴

For Nash, liberalism can be very environmentally friendly as long as it extends the concept of natural rights to include the non-human world. If a liberal regime expands the social contract to include plants and animals in the same way it once expanded to include women, slaves and Native Americans, then liberalism and the "Rights of Nature" will provide the

32. The argument that liberalism and environmentalism are inherently incompatible is ubiquitous throughout the literature on environmental politics, though a rather striking example is found in David Shearman and Joseph Wayne Smith's book, *The Climate Change Challenge and the Failure of Democracy*. (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007). A preference for environmental well-being, an awareness of the interconnectedness among humans and non-humans, and an appeal to science provide a very broad definition of environmentalism in a contemporary context. These features, however, do not readily correspond to one particular regime. It would seem, for Shearman and Smith, that authoritarianism could just as easily accommodate these three principles as could a liberal democracy. Indeed, Shearman and Smith have argued for a radical acceptance of a totalitarian regime in response to "catastrophic climate change." They conclude that "authoritarianism is the natural state of humanity," (p. xvi) and that liberalism is simply beyond repair. Rampant self-interest has created something akin to Thomas Hobbes' state of nature, and now, for the sake of our survival, we must consent to be ruled by a group of elite scientists committed to ecology over economy and to the "common good" over individualism. The transition from a liberal regime to the authoritarianism they advocate will be quite *natural* and more or less a conscious recognition of the reality in which we live at the mercy of corporations anyway. Shearman and Smith give preference to survival over liberty, and explain how as Darwinian evolutionists they foresee the possibility of scientifically overcoming shortcomings in human nature to protect against destructive rulers. A crisis of the environment, such as catastrophic climate change, will quite simply force us to accept such rule. But Shearman and Smith do not look on such a state as one of oppression, but as the necessary means for human survival.

33. Nash (1989) p. 10-11.

34. Nash (1989) p. 10.

requisite justification for more environmentally beneficial policy and behavior.³⁵ Animals and plants possess “inalienable rights,” just like humans, and are granted equal protection of their liberty.³⁶ This does not make Nash’s environmentalism any less radical,³⁷ but it does reorient the relationship between liberalism and environmentalism as one of cooperation instead of conflict. An expanded social contract may not eliminate the elements of capitalism, materialism and individualism that are at odds with the environment, but liberalism *does* seem to provide a limited *moral* framework and language useful for justifying many environmental policies.

In order to persuade others of this liberal environmentalism, Nash outlines a progressive history of ethics in which “ethical maturity” is defined by expanding notions of intrinsic value from the self, to other humans and to all material things. History is the story of increasing tolerance and expanding ethics to an ever-widening circle of human beings, breaking down barriers of race, gender, sexuality and national origin:

But “speciesism” or “human chauvinism” persisted and animal rights was the next logical stage in moral extension. By the 1970s there was growing support in Anglo-American thought for what Peter Singer was the first to call “animal liberation.” At the same time a lawyer raised the ethical stakes by proposing that humans give trees legal rights. Further expansion was almost inevitable. As early as 1867 John Muir proposed respect for “the rights of all the rest of creation.” Albert Schweitzer discussed “reverence for life” in 1915 and in the same year an American horticulturist, Liberty Hyde Bailey, urged ethical consideration of “the holy earth.” Demonstrating the impact of ecology on ethics, Aldo Leopold argued in the 1940s for a holistic, biocentric morality he termed “the land ethic.” More recently there have been calls for “the liberation of nature,” “the liberation of

35. Nash (1989) p. 10-12.

36. It is unclear whether or not the notion of animals having “liberty” makes any sense. If the ability to choose between two or more alternatives or things is the basis of such liberty, then perhaps animal liberty is possible. Yet, again, humans do not have access to the consciousness of animals. They appear to base much of their “choices” on survival of themselves or their species. But can they choose against this concern? How does one account for instinct and liberty? Ultimately, without a common language, such reflections can only be speculative at best.

37. Nash (1989) p. 11-12.

life,” “the rights of the planet,” and even defense of the right of the solar system and universe to be free from human disturbance.³⁸

The last sentence in the above quote implies that the rights of nature require the elimination of humans. Even if this elimination is resisted, however, Nash’s notion of rights emerges as a claim against human interference in the natural world – a position that is entirely impossible if man is to have the most basic needs of food, water and shelter. Furthermore, the rights of non-humans, as Nash describes, preclude the very environmentalism and policy he hopes to support. Conservation and preservation require interference in the non-human world. Ascribing rights to nature is ultimately little more than sentimental environmentalism and an excuse to neglect the environment at best, and to harbor a dangerous misanthropy at worst. Nash’s argument rests less on the practical realities of the “rights of nature” and more on self-evident assertions and an appeal to a kind of liberal nobility and egalitarianism:

As Americans have discovered frequently in their history, the denial of natural or ‘inalienable’ rights creates a sense of moral outrage that can escalate theory into action. When issues are defined ethically – phrase, that is, in terms of right and wrong – it is hard to remain indifferent. People seldom consciously compromise their ethical convictions, and in the context of American liberalism, “oppression” is among the cardinal sins. “Liberty” and “freedom” are sacred. Identify a minority that is oppressed by denial of its rights and you immediately create a strong argument for its liberation.³⁹

In other words, simply inspiring a sentiment of pity and outrage is itself an argument. Reason is abandoned and the idyllic imagination reigns. For Nash, it is so self-evident that non-humans are oppressed that a more sophisticated and systematic argument for their liberation and rights is unnecessary. The very existence of something and a corresponding sympathy toward it,

38. Nash (1989) p. 5-6.

39. Nash (1989) p. 161-162.

justifies a claim to rights and freedom. In the twentieth century, this ideology became powerful enough to motivate violent and non-violent acts of resistance to perceived injustices toward non-humans. From the Endangered Species Act to the sabotaging of logging operations and the sinking of whaling ships, the rights of nature have been defended and fought for almost entirely on the basis of sentiments and the idyllic imagination.

The idea of nature's rights is idyllic, in part, because Nash and similarly oriented thinkers fail to understand the reality of rights. As David Walsh rightly observes, "It was the Christian idea of the soul whose origin and destiny is transcendent that first made it possible for the individual to stand over against society and the world, as a reality that can never simply be contained by them. This was the source of individual rights. To this, Christianity added the related idea of the equality of all souls before God."⁴⁰ The presence of a soul and transcendence within animals and plants cannot be established by man because there is no language within the non-human world by which the existence of such transcendence can be identified and articulated. Any attempt by humans to establish this notion requires what Babbitt called the "pathetic fallacy." We may ascribe to nature emotions and experiences, but those can only be our own. No amount of empathy and sentiment can eliminate our subjectivity. Man's destiny is transcendent and allows us to stand over and against society and the world, as Walsh observed, but we do not transcend our own being. We can be conscious of our experiences *as* experiences, but we cannot abandon our unique physical and temporal location in existence. The mere existence of something, or one's feelings toward it, cannot justify its claim to a right or freedom beyond merely asserting it. In the process the animal or plant in possession of the right becomes an

40. David Walsh. *The Growth of the Liberal Soul*. (Columbia, MO: Univ. of Missouri, 1997) p. 28.

abstraction removed from its observable, historical existence. Like Thoreau's "friends," the idea of nature becomes more "real" than nature itself.

Treating the non-human world abstractly and as a source of companionship allows those with an idyllic imagination to escape the difficult task of genuine community and friendship. Since animals and plants cannot speak for themselves, man becomes, along with the Lorax⁴¹ of Dr. Seuss' invention, a "speaker for the trees." One then invents the moral and ethical obligations and demands that non-humans seemingly place on humans, and claim privileged access to the interests of mammals, insects, flowers and weeds. In practice, these inventions are ultimately claims made by one group of humans over another; the non-human world is incidental. Then, in the conflict between rights claims for humans and those for non-humans, there is little, if any, ground for a resolution beyond a self-asserted sentimental morality. Human dignity likely requires the abandonment of the conceived egalitarianism between humans and non-humans. Can claims of man and the claims of non-humans consistently achieve a political, ethical and economic compatibility? For some, such as the champions of population control, a preference for non-humans seems obvious. Since humans can will and achieve their own destruction, we have a responsibility to practice such control for the sake of other species. But on what grounds is this sacrifice called for? In a world where the mere existence of something gives it a claim to rights, there is no ground to which one can appeal when these rights are in competition. The "mature ethics" that Nash describes history moving toward risks disintegrating into lawlessness and rule by the strongest.

41. Dr. Seuss. *The Lorax*. (New York: Random House, 1971).

Thoreau does not take the personification of nature to the extremes of John Muir or of animal rights activists. While he does advocate for vegetarianism in the *Higher Laws* chapter of *Walden* and even hints at animals possessing a level of dignity, he did not conceive of the legal and political implications of this perspective. Thoreau's imagination of idyllic and abstract friendship, and his failure to ground even his opposition to slavery in the distinctive and transcendent element of human existence, left open the possibility of Henry Salt and much later, Peter Singer's, claims for animal rights and liberation.

Unlike the problem of the Arcadian longing, this "pursuit of the ideal companion" and the corresponding radical personification of nature does not suggest an alternative moral imagination. While common human experience with pets and other animals demonstrates that meaningful interaction, affection and limited levels of cooperation and problem-solving can occur between humans and non-humans, these are insufficient conditions for the full realization of society beyond humans. There is no comprehensive shared language between humans, plants and animals, no common destiny or sense of meaning. Non-humans, as far as is known, lack an historical sense, culture or an aesthetic. These distinctions neither justify cruelty to animals nor eliminate the possibility of their intrinsic value. But this reality of human and non-human differences significantly undermines claims to the companionship and society of humans with plants and animals.

Wendell Berry again provides something of a corrective to this problematic tendency of the idyllic imagination. The pursuit of companionship in nature and the fight for nature's rights often comes at the expense of the communities whose relationship to the land is central for environmental well-being. For Berry, it is the breakdown of true community among humans that

facilitates ecological crises. Achieving a greater harmony with nature is not a product of personifying land and animals or by ascribing rights to crops and livestock. Harmony is achieved by historical experience, knowledge of the land transmitted by tradition, by scientific investigation and by cultivating the moral imagination.⁴² While Berry can tend toward an idealization of small local communities at times, there is considerable precedent for the manner in which local communities are well equipped to identify and solve environmental problems. The tragedy of Love Canal is one example where a local community, recovering an intimate knowledge of their land and environment discovered a disturbing correlation between the presence of chemical waste and the increase in miscarriages and birth defects of local children.⁴³ Similar benefits of local knowledge and community are realized daily as generations of farmers pass down knowledge of their land with insights on crop rotation, water runoff, erosion and the dynamics of the local soil. The recent growth in “localism” attempts to reduce the distance between producers and consumers so that both the costs and benefits of production are realized in the same community. The late Elinor Ostrom, an influential political scientist, has also provided a compelling picture of how, in contrast to conventional models of managing natural resources (i.e. Garret Hardin’s “tragedy of the commons,” the “prisoner’s dilemma,” and Mancur Olson’s “logic of collective action”), more localized institutions emerging from the communities

42. See Wendell Berry. “The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity.” in *Another Turn of the Crank*. (New York: Counterpoint, 1995).

43. The community of Love Canal in Niagara Falls, New York discovered in 1978 that their homes and schools were constructed on top of a large deposit of poisonous chemicals buried by the Hooker Chemical Company. The chemicals were found to have contaminated the local soil and ground water, causing an unusual number of severe health problems in the children of Love Canal especially. Led by Lois Gibbs and the local Home Owners Association, the community mounted a grassroots effort to acquire government relief, evacuations, clean-up, healthcare and prosecution of the Hooker Chemical Company. See Philip Shabecoff. *A Fierce Green Fire: The American Environmental Movement*. Revised Ed. (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2003). p. 227-229.

themselves, instead of being imposed on them, are more effective at solving the kind of “commons problems” characteristic of environmental politics.⁴⁴

While a local, decentralized agrarian economy cannot solve all environmental problems, stronger human communities can make a profound impact on ecological well-being. When the victims of poor product development, the abuse of livestock and wildlife, toxic waste, polluted air and water and contaminated food have human names and faces in one’s own community, a profound sense of responsibility may grow out of those relationships. While community is no guarantee of environmental responsibility, a community’s memory, tradition and ability to hold other members accountable offers much more powerful tools to the environmentalist than personification and an invocation of nature’s “rights.”

44. Elinor Ostrom. *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. (New York: Cambridge Univ., 1990).

CHAPTER VIII

INFINITE ARCADIA

Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike. This natural beauty-hunger is made manifest in the little window-sill gardens of the poor, though perhaps only a geranium slip in a broken cup, as well as in the carefully tended rose and lily gardens of the rich, the thousands of spacious city parks and botanical gardens, and in our magnificent National parks - the Yellowstone, Yosemite, Sequoia, etc. - Nature's sublime wonderlands, the admiration and joy of the world.

– John Muir, *The Yosemite*

The mentalities that characterize the environmental imagination have not been radically overturned by the articulation of a coherent scientific frame for ecological issues. Rather, American environmentalism appears to have remained committed to the notion that human beings are ontologically independent of the biophysical world and that the well-being of the world presents humanity with a spiritual challenge irreducible to scientific, technical terminology. Even in the age of ecology we remain deeply indebted to our religious inheritance.

– Evan Berry, *Devoted To Nature*

Babbitt's third and most important observation of the idyllic imagination of nature is what he calls the "aspiration toward the infinite." By which he means the view that the natural, non-human world provides for the spiritual needs of humanity. "The association of nature with Arcadian longing and the pursuit of the dream woman is even less significant than its association with the idea of the infinite," Babbitt writes, "for as a result of this latter association the nature cult often assumes the aspect of a religion. The various associations may indeed...be very much

blended or else may run into one another almost insensibly.”¹ The idyllic environmental imagination debases religion by divinizing non-human nature and by subordinating moral effort to religious sentiment. “The romantic idea of the infinite,” Babbitt observes, “is an aid to the spirit in throwing off its limitations and so in feeling itself ‘free.’”² Spirituality rooted in an affection for non-human nature fuels the idyllic imagination’s abolition of morality. As Babbitt observes:

One of the reasons why pantheistic reverie has been so popular is that it seems to offer a painless substitute for genuine spiritual effort. In its extreme exponents, a Rousseau or a Walt Whitman, it amounts to a sort of ecstatic animality that sets up as a divine illumination. Even in its milder forms it encourages one to assume a tone of consecration in speaking of experiences that are aesthetic rather than truly religious.³

This “pantheistic reverie” is the essence of what Babbitt calls “sham spirituality.”⁴ Sham spirituality requires little or no moral effort, and gives primacy to sentiment. It is spirituality with no sacrifice or struggle, and it pursues no end other than self-gratification. The idyllic environmental imagination, as Babbitt observed, takes experiences that ought to remain aesthetic and transforms them into religious experiences. Religion, for example, is a frequent topic in Thoreau’s *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, where he exhibits a tendency toward sham spirituality:

Surely the fates are forever kind, though Nature’s laws are more immutable than any despot’s, yet to man’s daily life they rarely seem rigid, but permit him to relax with license in summer weather. He is not harshly reminded of the things he

1. Babbitt. *Rousseau and Romanticism*. 1919 Reprint. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2009) p. 282.

2. Babbitt. (2009) p. 284.

3. Babbitt. (2009) p. 286.

4. Babbitt. (2009) p. 287.

may not do. She is very kind and liberal to all men of vicious habits, and certainly does not deny them quarter; they do not die without priest.⁵

What enforced “laws” does Nature have at all, from Thoreau’s perspective? On what basis could the worshipper of this nature identify “vicious habits?” Thoreau asserts that nature accepts persons as they are, but it also never requires those persons to improve and grow. By ascribing to nature a level of divinity, he also gives a considerable legitimacy and authority to this virtual evacuation of moral responsibility. Nature may provide priests, but there will be nothing to confess to them.

Thoreau’s spirituality and religious sympathies have been the subject of a number of studies and scholarly discussions. Emerson said of Thoreau, “Whilst he used in his writings a certain petulance of remark in reference to churches or churchmen, he was a person of a rare, tender and absolute religion.”⁶ Though Thoreau was never explicit about any religious commitments, he was rather blunt in his distaste for Christianity. “[T]he New Testament,” he writes, “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, in man even.”⁷ The Bible is incomplete and inadequate for Thoreau. It does not admit enough moral autonomy, is rarely followed by those who read it and is seemingly too otherworldly. It is striking, but not unexpected, then, when he writes:

Christ was a sublime actor on the stage of the world. He knew what he was thinking of when he said, ‘Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.’ I draw near to him at such a time. Yet he taught mankind but

5. Henry David Thoreau. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Originally published 1849 (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001) p. 19. Hereafter identified as *A Week*.

6. Ralph Waldo Emerson. “Thoreau” in *Nature and Selected Essays*. Edited by Larzer Ziff. (New York: Penguin, 1982) p 410.

7. Thoreau. *A Week* p. 44.

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.⁸

Many of Thoreau's own prescriptions eschew the realities of this world, but his concern here hints at why he would emphasize nature over traditional religion as a source of spirituality. A spiritual encounter with the natural non-human world added layers and concreteness to the way he imagined nature and avoided the excessive otherworldly tendencies of Christianity. Nature provoked in Thoreau a sense of a divine and embodied universal. His religion was less a faith and more an experience with something indefinite and mysterious:

I see, smell, taste, hear, feel, that everlasting Something to which we are allied, at once our maker, our abode, our destiny, our very Selves; the one historic truth, the most remarkable face which can become the distinct and uninvited subject of our thought, the actual glory of the universe; the only fact which a human being cannot avoid recognizing or in some way forget or dispense with.⁹

The precise identity of that "Something" is never made explicit, but this indefiniteness may be intentional. According to Christopher Dustin, Thoreau's religion is an encounter with that which is fundamentally indistinct, mysterious and infinite.¹⁰ This vague "Something" is the source of Thoreau's moral freedom and constantly reminds him of the limits of knowledge. The divine or the infinite is always out of reach, but is nevertheless sought in the encounter with nature.

Thoreau never defined Nature in any static or scientific sense; he sought to understand the non-human world on its own terms. The *mystery* of Nature was the most distinctive

8. Thoreau. *A Week* p. 44.

9. Thoreau. *A Week* p. 109.

10. Christopher A. Dustin. "Thoreau's Religion." in Jack Turner. Ed. *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 2009).

characteristic of his intuition of the non-human world, and his non-dogmatic spirituality resisted a definitive, closed doctrine of “nature as divine.” Thoreau remained open to further revelation and enlargement, and he does not give the natural world the status of *the* deity. He speaks of an “everlasting Something” in nature, but that “Something,” is never fully incarnate. It is an unnamed presence, but it is never a person or a particular something which participates in and reveals a universal Something. Irving Babbitt also recognized the mystery of this unidentified universal presence in nature:

The fact is that we do not know and can never know what nature is in herself. The mysterious mother has shrouded herself from us in an impenetrable veil of illusion. But though we cannot know nature absolutely, we can pick up a practical and piecemeal knowledge of nature not by dreaming but by doing. The man of action can within certain limits, have his way with nature.¹¹

This mysterious disposition of both nature and the divine is the reason for the importance of imagination for the development and endurance of religion. Rituals, saints, parables, scriptures, art and idols, architecture, music and ceremonies have provided a means by which to facilitate humans’ relationship with the divine and the supernatural. Beliefs are reinforced and brought to life by explicit and implicit “liturgies.” James K.A. Smith defines liturgies, in a general sense, as “*rituals of ultimate concern.*”¹² A liturgy is more than an assigned set of scriptural or responsorial readings, habits and routines. A liturgy is a narrower *set* of practices and rituals “that are formative for identity, that inculcate particular visions of the good life, and do so in a way that means to trump other ritual formations.”¹³ Liturgies shape, and are shaped by,

11. Babbitt. (2009) p. 300-301.

12. James K.A. Smith. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Vol. 1 of *Cultural Liturgies*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009). p. 86.

13. James K.A. Smith. (2009) p. 86

that which we most desire. One might also consider such liturgies to have parallels in the rituals of primitive societies and tribes. Dolores LaChappelle recognized this writing that “Western European industrial culture” desperately needed to recover the primitive emphasis on ritual if the ecological crisis is to be averted:

Ritual is essential because it is truly the pattern that connects. It provides communication at all levels – communication among all systems within the individual human organism; between people within groups; between one group and another in a city and throughout all these levels between the human and the non-human in the natural environment. Ritual provides us with a tool for learning to think logically, analogically and ecologically as we move toward a sustainable culture. Most important of all, perhaps, during rituals we move toward the experience, unique in our culture, of neither *opposing* nature or *trying* to be in communication with nature; but of *finding* ourselves within nature, and that is the key to sustainable culture.¹⁴

The moral imagination’s resistance to the idyllic imagination’s divinization of nature, then, is not an attempt to abandon religion. Instead, it seeks to reorient the liturgy so as to order the will and imagination away from emotionalism and the idealization of the non-human world toward a more genuine religion that affirms moral effort. Babbitt’s opposition to the idyllic imagination’s “aspiration toward the infinite” is an objection to a disordered liturgy animated by escapism and the pursuit of divinity in that which is not divine.

The moral imagination prefers an alternative liturgy that requires sacrifice, devotion, moral effort, an acknowledgment of mystery and the synthesis of the universal and the particular. It draws on tradition and experience in order to facilitate humanity’s relationship with the divine while maintaining humility, an awareness of mystery and faithfulness to reality. This faith looks to the supernatural without neglecting the natural. Perhaps the best word to capture what the

14. Dolores LaChappelle. “Appendix F: Ritual is Essential.” in Bill Devall and George Sessions. *Deep Ecology*. (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 1985) p. 250.

moral imagination offers in this regard is “sacramentality,” which is defined by the recognition of something in concrete historical experience that is mysterious and sacred by virtue of its participation in the universals of goodness, truth and beauty. The imagery of a sacrament conveys a depth of experience that mere sentiment is unable to capture. Faithful administration of, and participation in, a sacrament requires obedience, openness, an historical sensitivity, humility and a desire to be more fully human by being attuned to the source of humanity and order. Irving Babbitt incorporates this sacramentality into his notion of the “higher will.” As Ryn summarizes:

Babbitt readily grants that the higher will is external to man in the sense of his “ordinary” or “natural” self. But our humanity, Babbitt argues, is not just man’s “ordinary” self. To be human is to be able to impose order on the flux, most importantly to give moral structure to life. Traditional Christianity – particularly Protestantism – maintains that it is by God’s grace that man is able to rise out of sin. Babbitt makes it clear that within the context of Christianity the doctrine of grace is indispensable to the moral life. When speaking within that framework, he even equates his notion of the higher will with grace. The idea of grace is a special Christian theological formulation of the experience of a higher power inspiring human action.¹⁵

Instead of a sham spirituality which works to remove order and views moral improvement as the rejection of restraint, a spirituality of the moral imagination appeals to order and a synthesis of the universal and the particular without sacrificing one for the other.

Thoreau lived in a tension between the moral and idyllic imagination, and he anticipated many of the same spiritual questions and struggles that environmentalism would face in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Environmentalism has long resisted the charge that it is more

15. Claes G. Ryn. *Will, Imagination, and Reason: Irving Babbitt and the Problem of Reality*. Originally published in 1986. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997) p. 37.

a religion than a political or ethico-cultural movement,¹⁶ but it has often relied on a kind of liturgy that is characteristic of more traditional religions. Thoreau can be said to have inspired elements of this liturgy, and he cultivated the ideas and inspiration for its development by his twentieth-century heirs. He provided later environmentalists with a liturgical language and scripture in *Walden*, “Walking” and other texts. Lawrence Buell observes that “*Walden* seems to define itself as aspiring literary classic in the form of self-reflexive personal testament.”¹⁷ Like the Gospels of Christianity, Thoreau’s account of nature reads like a deeply personal, eyewitness account of the divine’s activity. He then responds in a manner similar to later religious orders and faithful adherents, seeking the divine in his careful observations and reflections on nature in his almost daily excursions and hikes, his retreat to Walden Pond and his passion for preaching abolition. He even argues for a more vegetarian diet, eschewing the consumption of meat *not* on strict nutritional grounds, but because it served his need to “preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition.”¹⁸ While Thoreau is not to modern environmentalism what Jesus is to Christianity or Muhammad to Islam, he remains a spiritual inspiration for modern “green”

16. Thomas Dunlap observes that “Environmentalists do not, generally, believe the movement constitutes a religion (and in conventional terms it does not), and they are uncomfortable with religious terms, but they ask religious questions: what purpose do humans have in the universe, and what must they do to fulfill it?” Thomas R. Dunlap. *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest*. (Seattle: Univ. of Washington, 2004). p. 13. Also see James Murray. “Environmentalism is Not a Religion.” *Guardian*, June 26th, 2012.

<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2012/jun/26/climate-change-skeptic-religion>.

17. Lawrence Buell. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1995) p. 371.

18. Thoreau. *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. Intro by Michael Myer. (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) “Higher Laws” p. 262. He writes earlier that “no human being, past the age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature which holds its life by the same tenure that he does.” (p. 260) but he then admits that “The practical objection to animal food in my case was its uncleanness; and, besides, when I had caught and cleaned and cooked and eaten my fish, they seemed not to have fed me essentially. It was insignificant and unnecessary, and cost more than it came to” (p. 261). His position is more complicated then, but he ultimately believes that “it is part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilized.” (p. 263)

religions and for adherents of traditional religions looking for exemplars. It is no surprise, then, that the great preservationist John Muir made his own “pilgrimage” to Walden Pond¹⁹ when he visited Concord in 1893.

Thoreau can be said to have laid the foundations of a more religious environmentalism. While he reluctantly referred to himself as a pantheist, he did not set out to found a new religion or order. Saints and rituals, doctrines and creeds did not appeal Thoreau, but these religious elements would nevertheless emerge to give structure to a growing environmental liturgy. Much of this development would come in works of fiction, film and art, inevitably exposing the liturgy to the tension between the moral and idyllic imagination. Following Thoreau’s example and inspiration, later environmentalists have found themselves in the same tension.

A number of recent works have begun to shed light on the religious character of environmentalism and its historical roots in traditional religions.²⁰ Scholars have shown that elements of environmentalism’s religious character preceded Thoreau, as did the moral-idyllic tension, but he remains a critical turning point in environmentalism’s spiritual development. Thomas R. Dunlap, for example, observes how much of modern environmentalism’s history was more than a response to scientific revelation and romantic musings.²¹ Environmentalism has long evinced considerable parallels with many religious traditions by asserting moral imperatives and addressing “ultimate questions” of identity, purpose and destiny. For some, this religious

19. Buell (1995) p. 316-318.

20. Two excellent works showing how Protestantism, in particular, gave rise to American environmentalism are Evan Berry. *Devoted to Nature: The Religious Roots of American Environmentalism* (Oakland, CA: Univ. of California, 2015) and Mark R. Stoll. *Inherit the Holy Mountain: Religion and the Rise of American Environmentalism*. (New York: Oxford Univ., 2015).

21. Thomas R. Dunlap. *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest*. (Seattle: Univ. of Washington, 2004).

character provides grounds for rejecting environmentalism. Dunlap argues alternatively that environmentalism should embrace its religious roots and personality, and that a failure to do so may close the movement off to a full self-understanding and valuable rhetorical resources. Environmentalists have long recognized that their task is more than the development and application of scientific information. As Dunlap explains, their task is more comprehensive:

Environmental degradation certainly accounts for a lot of [environmentalists'] passion...But the dangers to humans do not account for all of the environmentalists' passions and actions. The environmental movement demands more than natural beauty, preserving human health, or even building a sustainable society – demands more, even than reform...It asks not just that we change our policies or even our habits, but that we change our hearts...Finally, it invokes the sacred, holding some areas and species in awe and finding in wilderness the opening to ultimate reality.²²

To affect such a change, however, requires considerable moral and spiritual effort.

Traditional religions have structured this effort in the forms of liturgy and spiritual discipline, but Dunlap describes an environmental religion as a spirituality that eschews liturgy and institutions. “Out in the woods” Dunlap writes, “names and creeds vanished, leaving me with sensations and experiences that did not easily map back into formal knowledge.”²³ In one sense, this less structured and unrestrained spirituality is exactly what Babbitt feared. In another sense, Dunlap illustrates, the encounter with mysterious nature is precisely what resists scientists’ tendency to reduce the world to mere materiality and system:

The culture divided “science” from “religion,” “knowledge” from “faith,” and “reason” from “emotion.” Science held that humans could understand the universe, while religions believed some things were beyond humans – “mysteries.” Science saw “wonder,” some mixture astonishment and admiration, as our proper reaction to the beauties of the world, while creeds asked for “awe,”

22. Dunlap (2004) p. 4.

23. Dunlap (2004) p. 9.

reverence and a touch of dread in the face of what was beyond human beings. But the neat divisions broke down. Science, as a matter of policy, denied mystery. Officially, it held, as definitely as a fundamentalist preacher cleaving to the Word of God, that human reason revealed all and that everything was only matter. In practice, scientists, particularly field biologists and physicists, smuggled mystery in the back door, for they had a sense of wonder about their subjects that shaded into awe. Science officially excluded talk of ultimates, but scientists used science to that end.²⁴

Religion and science, in other words, need not be antagonistic. If environmental religion has appreciated the immaterial reality of nature, it has also undervalued the order that science and a more liturgical tradition might provide. Dunlap overlooks this important aspect, and casts religion more as a rhetorical, moral and emotional phenomenon than as a comprehensive articulation of reality – of what is good, true and beautiful. To be fair, as a historian he does recognize the need for exemplars to bring this environmental spirituality and faith to life. Thoreau provides these spiritual examples to environmentalism the way the lives of saints inspire Christianity. He is admired by Dunlap for disparaging neither nature nor civilization, and for offering a middle ground before the extremes of deep ecology (discussed in the next section) and a strict materialistic environmentalism even existed.

While Thoreau provides a kind of liturgical order to help navigate an environmental religion, Dunlap and other environmentalists' resistance to more institutionalized and structured religiosity – an aversion which also has its source in Thoreau – risks the fall into the idyllic imagination which Babbitt feared. An idyllic environmental imagination emerges throughout environmental thought's engagement with its religious character, and especially in so-called "deep ecology," the notion of "deep green religion" and in environmental apocalypticism. The

24. Dunlap (2004) p. 9-10.

moral environmental imagination, however, does not respond to this tendency by abandoning religion. Instead, it strives toward a liturgy and order that pulls religion away from an unrestrained emotionalism, sham spirituality and a fatalistic or apathetic apocalypticism.

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Deep ecology is among the most controversial manifestations of environmental thought, and one of the clearest examples of the idyllic environmental imagination. Deep ecology draws attention to what it identifies as the more *fundamental* problems behind humanity's improper attitude toward, or misuse of, the non-human world. While its primary adherents do not use the word "imagination," they often speak of their efforts as a reshaping of intuitions and perceptions. Deep ecologists do not want to simply focus on fighting pollution, for example; they desire to confront the philosophical, psychological, cultural, economic and spiritual context and disposition underlying pollution. This concern with more fundamental problems informs its self-designation as "deep," as opposed to the supposedly more "shallow" environmentalisms whose supposed "central objective [is] to fight against pollution and resource depletion in order to improve the health and affluence of people in developed nations."²⁵ Shallow environmentalism or ecology is more self-serving and anthropocentric, while deep ecology professes a more altruistic "biocentrism."

The central tenets and practices of deep ecology, as well as the nature of "shallow" ecology are disputed, but the movement generally centers around the work of the Norwegian

25. J. Edward Steiguer. *The Origins of Modern Environmental Thought*. (Tuscon: Univ. of Arizona, 2006.) p. 186.

philosopher, Arne Naess (1912-2009).²⁶ "In [1972, Naess] wrote an essay entitled 'The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement,'" setting into motion what "would also become the most controversial branch of environmentalism."²⁷ Naess coined the term "deep ecology," and he spent the last four decades of his life developing and defending the characteristics and principles of the movement. Along with Gary Snyder, George Sessions, Bill Devall and others, Naess and his followers have worked to identify the fundamental problems of Western culture and thought which place humans at odds with the well-being of the non-human world. In general, "most deep ecology movement theorists now identify the movement with [what they call] the deep questioning process, the eight-point platform, and the need for humans to identify with nonhumans and the wild world."²⁸ The first point of relative agreement centers on an "eight-point platform" outlined by Naess and George Sessions in the 1980s:²⁹

1. Both human and nonhuman life forms have intrinsic and inherent value independent of their usefulness to humans.
2. Richness and diversity of life have value in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except for vital needs.
4. The flourishing of human and nonhuman life requires a substantial decrease in human population.
5. Human interference in the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
6. Future economic, technological, and ideological policies must be deeply different from those of the present.

26. An interesting account of why this particular strain of environmental philosophy emerged in Norway is suggested in Peter Reed and David Rothenberg. Eds. *Wisdom in the Open Air: The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology*. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 1993).

27. Steiguer. (2006) p. 185.

28. George Sessions. "Deep Ecology: Introduction" in Michael E. Zimmerman. et al. Eds. *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, 2nd Ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1998.) p. 173.

29. Bill Devall and George Sessions. *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*. (Layton, UT: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985.) p. 70. I use Steiguer's summary or restatement cited below. These eight points are actually somewhat of a revision and clarification of seven characteristics enumerated in Arne Naess' seminal article "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement: A Summary." *Inquiry*, 1973. Vol. 16, pp. 95-100.

7. The needed ideological change is mainly that of appreciating quality of life rather than economic growth.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation to implement the changes.³⁰

As J. Edward Steiguer observes, two major summative themes can be identified in the platform of deep ecology: biocentrism and self-realization.³¹ Biocentrism is the controversial "catch-word" on which much of deep ecology orients its understanding of the relationship between the human and the non-human. It ostensibly opposes the frequently cited problem of "anthropocentrism," which Naess and others define as a peculiarly Western tendency to derive the value of everything –human and non-human – by its value to humans. It is the explicit or implicit locating of human experience, desire and need at the center of all existence and, subsequently, the subordination of the corresponding needs of all non-humans. Deep ecology's critique of anthropocentrism can often lean in a corresponding misanthropic direction when it identifies the human side of the relationship with a kind of ecological "chauvinism" to be, in some instances, aggressively confronted by population control.

In contrast to anthropocentrism, "Biocentrism is the belief that 'all things in the biosphere have an equal right to live and blossom.' The key to attaining a biocentric point of view is to realize that 'there are no boundaries and everything is interrelated.'^{32,33} How biocentrism is made practical for politics, culture and everyday life however, remains somewhat obscure, though this ambiguity appears to be intentional.³⁴ Prior to enumerating the eight points, Naess and Sessions

30. Steiguer. (2006) p. 188.

31. Steiguer. (2006) p. 188.

32. Devall and Sessions. (1985) p. 67.

33. Steiguer. (2006) p. 188.

34. Naes does write, however, that "No real progress toward solving the ecological crisis would be made unless ecological problems were seen as questions of policy." "Politics and the Ecological Crisis: An Introductory Note."

say that "readers are encouraged to elaborate their own versions of deep ecology, clarify key concepts, and think through the consequences of acting from these principals."³⁵ Followers of deep ecology realize the biocentric life in their own individual way, guided by these eight general principles. As a result, Naess suggests, individuals develop an environmental philosophy, or "ecosophy," which possesses the authority of "wisdom" as opposed to environmentalism's "shallow" dependence on the authority of science.³⁶

Underlying this "ecosophy" is the idea of "self-realization" initiated by what Naess calls a "deep questioning process." Naess wanted followers of deep ecology to abandon the traditional Western anthropocentrism and instead rely on what he, Sessions and Devall call "self" to define new values. "Science, we are told, is not needed for self-realization. Neither are logic, deductive reasoning, specific concepts, nor clarity of meaning. All that is required is meditative thinking, local governmental control (the most local being the 'self'), and intuition about what ought to be."³⁷ Naess' ecosophy is based on a kind of "self-generated wisdom," uninhibited by reflection and reason, and is the means by which humans acquire full self-realization and their own personal "guide" for respecting the environment in their own lives. Though rarely made explicit, the parallels between this "self-realization" and Thoreau's emphasis on autonomy and Right are striking. Unlike Thoreau, however, deep ecologists contend that this self-realization is no different than similar notions of the world's religions, except that deep ecology is apparently more "mature:"

in *The Selected Works of Arne Naess Volume X: Deep Ecology of Wisdom*. Ed. by Harold Glasser and Alan Drengson. (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2005). p. 191.

35. Devall and Sessions. (1985) p. 70.

36. Naess. (1973) p. 99.

37. Steiguer. (2006) p. 190.

But the deep ecology sense of self requires a further maturity and growth, an identification which goes beyond humanity to include the non-human world. We must see beyond our narrow contemporary cultural assumptions and values, and the conventional wisdom of our time and place, and this is best achieved by the meditative deep questioning process. Only in this way can we hope to attain full mature personhood and uniqueness...This process of the full unfolding of the self can also be summarized by the phrase, 'No one is saved until we are all saved,' where the phrase 'one' includes not only me, an individual human, but all humans, whales, grizzly bears, whole rain forest ecosystems, mountains and rivers, the tiniest microbes in the soil, and so on.³⁸

Naess has asserted that true followers of deep ecology will embrace these principles of biocentrism and self-realization as a call for political activism, which many of the more radical ecological movements have taken quite seriously. United primarily by an aversion to chauvinistic anthropocentrism, groups such as PETA, Earth First! and Green Peace make headlines for doing their part to “save” non-humans in a manner reminiscent of evangelical Christians’ efforts to save non-believers from hell. Naess once led this ideology by example when “in Norway,...[he] once tied himself to the cliffs of a fjord until authorities promised to abandon their plans to build a dam there.”³⁹

Deep ecology, in one sense, is not the anti-moral “aspiration toward the infinite” which Babbitt was worried about. It demands considerable moral effort and sacrifice. But the ethic of “biocentrism” is contradicted by Naess’ emphasis on self-realization. The radical moral autonomy achieved by “self-realization” is characteristic of the same anthropocentrism which deep ecology laments. Biocentrism violates the moral autonomy and self-realization from which it supposedly arises, because it acts as an external standard. There is no obvious reason, though, why the self-realized individual would choose to be biocentric.

38. Devall and Sessions (1985) p. 67.

39. Steiguer (2006) p. 186.

Deep ecologists might respond and explain that, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau's general will, biocentrism is a natural moral intuition which will emerge when the restraints of civilization are removed and moral autonomy is absolutized. "If everyone achieved this 'self-realization,' they would be biocentric," they might say. Yet the actual failure of the majority of people to achieve this realization means that only an elite few can claim privileged access to this "deep ecology" and moral intuition. And if this morality possesses authority akin to religion, why not proselytize it or even enforce it? Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, explained that those standing outside the general will ought to be "forced to be free." If biocentrism is the best outcome for the self-realized person, why not force anthropocentric individuals to be biocentric? While an "imposed biocentrism" may seem extreme, the idyllic environmental imagination of deep ecology lacks the restraints of a moral imagination to prevent these more ominous suggestions from arising. It is no surprise, then when Naess himself writes:

Within fifty years, either we will need a dictatorship to save what is left of the diversity of life forms, or we will have a shift of values. A shift of our total view such that no dictatorship will be needed. It is thoroughly natural to stop dominating, exploiting, and destroying the planet. A 'smooth' way, involving harmonious living with nature, or a 'rough' way, involving dictatorship and coercion – those are the options.⁴⁰

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40. Arnes Nass from a 1982 interview quoted in *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*. Edited by George Sessions (Boston: Shambala, 1995) p. 28. To be fair, Naess long foresaw accusations of a "fascist" potentiality in deep ecology. In an essay entitled, "Antifascist Character of the Eight Points of the Deep Ecology Movement," he reiterates deep ecologists' commitment to non-violence (Gandhi is a major influence), tolerance, democracy, inclusiveness and the intrinsic value of all living things. But he also remains committed to notion of human population control that is ultimately antagonistic to these same claims. At its heart, Naess concedes that deep ecology is more about a *feeling* which a diverse number of people have, but how those feelings are ordered remains undefined. Arne Naess. "Antifascist Character of the Eight Points of the Deep Ecology Movement." in *The Selected Works of Arne Naess Volume X: Deep Ecology of Wisdom*. Ed. by Harold Glasser and Alan Drengson. (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2005).

Bron Taylor, who studies the intersection of religion with environmentalism, ecology and nature, has helped define new fields of inquiry and inspired influential interdisciplinary research regarding the centrality of imagination to understanding environmental thought. According to Taylor, Thoreau blazes a trail for what he calls “dark green religion,” defined as a “religion that considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care.”⁴¹ Taylor claims that his description of “nature spirituality” is not the same as deep ecology, and he avoids the term to circumvent association with “Arne Naess and the politics of radical environmentalism, and because some proponents of deep ecology reject the idea that it has anything to do with religion.”⁴² Like deep ecology though, dark green religion has no institutions, sacred texts, no formal clergy or hierarchy and, in theory, no sacraments or liturgy. Yet Thoreau is so important for Taylor that he suggests reorienting the Western calendar to AHDT (After Henry David Thoreau) instead of AD (*anno domine*, “In the Year of Our Lord”).⁴³ Much more explicitly than the deep ecologists, Bron Taylor makes it quite clear Thoreau is the foundational figure for dark green religion.

Bron Taylor specifically reads Thoreau as laying the groundwork for eight major themes found in most manifestations of dark green religion which read like a definition of the idyllic imagination. First, Thoreau celebrates the “*simple, natural and undomesticated (free) life*.”⁴⁴ Yet this is more than a suspicion of technology and modern economics. It is, for Taylor, a rejection of civilization itself, and a preference for non-human nature over the trivialities of human

41. Bron Taylor. *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*. (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California, 2010). p. ix.

42. Bron Taylor (2010) p. 224.

43. Bron Taylor (2010) p. 58.

44. Bron Taylor (2010) p. 51. Emphasis in original.

society. Second, Thoreau emphasizes the “*wisdom of nature*” in that he “embrace[s]...his animality and the basis of his epistemological sensuality.”⁴⁵ In contrast to more positivistic sciences, Thoreau sought a deeply *personal* relationship with nature. Third, Thoreau’s way of thinking and acting demonstrated his own “*religion of nature*”⁴⁶ by submitting himself to nature’s possession and evincing a more pantheistic or even pagan imagination. He did not embrace a conventional notion of an afterlife, according to Taylor, but he looked forward to death as a reunification with the non-human world. And, like dark green religion in general, Thoreau’s faith in nature came at the cost of whatever authority Christianity may once have held over him. As Dunlap’s account and deep ecology demonstrate, this environmental religion is often in deliberate resistance to the doctrines, institutions and structures that make traditional religions what they are.

The fourth foundational theme for “dark green religion” was Thoreau’s tendency to relate notions of justice back to the natural order. Slavery and American imperialism, for example, were evil and unjust because they violated a law of nature. This concern with justice contrasts minimally with the fifth theme of Thoreau’s apparently “*ecocentric moral philosophy*,” which de-centers human interests in favor of living things in general, and essentially rehashes Naess’ “biocentrism” under a synonym.⁴⁷ Underlying these themes was the sixth, in which Taylor lumps together loyalty to nature and recognition of interconnectedness. Thoreau, like other dark green religionists, recognizes both man’s place in nature and the seemingly implicit moral demands

45. Bron Taylor (2010) p. 51. Emphasis in original.

46. Bron Taylor (2010) p. 51. Emphasis in original.

47. Bron Taylor (2010) p. 52. Emphasis in original.

such a reality places on the individual.⁴⁸ The seventh theme, then, was a belief and a hope (albeit, a reluctant one) that such a moral philosophy, awareness and loyalty could be taught to the otherwise corrupted descendants of European civilization. Finally, Thoreau evinces what Taylor refers to as “*ambivalence and enigma*.”⁴⁹ By this he is attempting to describe Thoreau’s apparent inconsistencies and complexity due, primarily, to the tension Thoreau experiences between his spirituality and scientific sympathies.

This theme of “ambivalence and enigma” may be one of the reasons for significant disagreements throughout the literature on Thoreau regarding his spirituality and his latent sympathies for paganism, pantheism and his complicated relationship with Emerson’s transcendentalism. Conventional readings describe Thoreau as anticipating deep ecology, biocentrism and an environmental religion. Others see a more anthropocentric Thoreau or, as Lawrence Buell observed, someone who lived in a tension between the ecocentric and anthropocentric.⁵⁰ While Taylor is not prepared to claim Thoreau as *the* founder of dark green religion, he is open to the possibility. Thoreau’s eventual embrace of Darwin, according to Bron Taylor, indicated a move away from his transcendental neighbors and toward a more naturalistic spirituality. Regardless of where Taylor places Thoreau religiously, however, his influence on dark green religion remains remarkably important:

More important than these conjectures is how Thoreau has been understood by thinkers and activists during and since his own time. Thoreau has become something of a Rorschach test for people – he is taken as an exemplary social-justice advocate, antiwar crusader, abolitionist, conservationist, deep ecologist,

48. Bron Taylor (2010) p. 53.

49. Bron Taylor (2010) p. 54. Emphasis in original.

50. For the purposes of this dissertation, a substantive, politically-significant difference between “biocentric” and “ecocentric” is *not* assumed.

radical environmentalist, and even as an anarchist. These interpretations are often a projection by the interpreters who wish to consider him one of their own. One thing is clear: many who have been engaged in the production of and spread of dark green religion have taken inspiration from Thoreau and consider him an ecospiritual elder. Certainly deep ecologists and radical environmentalists have enthusiastically embraced him.⁵¹

Like Buell, Bron Taylor notes that a trip to Thoreau's Walden Pond is something of a pilgrimage for deep ecologists, radical environmentalists and others who are inspired by Thoreau's work.⁵² Taylor observes that Thoreau's influence has been less that of an "intellectual elder" and more as a spiritual sage or saint of environmentalism.⁵³ Texts such as *Walden* and "Walking" have taken on a role akin to sacred scriptures, while Thoreau's hikes and canoe trips, habits and idiosyncrasies have become like the spiritual disciplines and liturgy which are eschewed by deep ecology and dark green religion. Bron Taylor recalls in his monograph that, "On a number of occasions in green enclaves I have heard activists speak of Thoreau's writings as sacred texts; writings by others evoke similar reverence, typically those by John Muir and Aldo Leopold but also increasingly those of Rachel Carson, Joseph Wood Krutch, Edward Abbey, Loren Eiseley, and a number of others."⁵⁴ It is little surprise that these latter "environmental saints" owe a considerable debt to Thoreau.

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Naess' deep ecology and Bron Taylor's dark green religion represent explicit manifestations of the idyllic environmental imagination's "aspiration toward the infinite" and the temptation toward sham spirituality. Such imagination has a number of consequences for politics

51. Bron Taylor (2010) p. 57.

52. Bron Taylor (2010) p. 57.

53. Bron Taylor (2010) p. 58.

54. Bron Taylor (2010) p. 57.

which further expose the idyllic environmental imagination and its tension with the moral environmental imagination. Among the most pervasive and politically consequential of these consequences is an enduring apocalypticism.

A fundamental assumption of many environmentalists is that the non-human world is vulnerable. Even if one adopts Barry Commoner's dictum that "nature knows best," and that, left to its own devices, non-human nature will manage and repair itself, the sense remains that modern man's interference in nature violates a larger order and purpose that humans either do not understand or deliberately neglect. An impending sense of doom, instability and failure colors ecological prescriptions, narratives of environmental disorder and the corresponding works of imagination in film, art and literature. Popular metaphors of the natural order as a machine, a circle, a "chain of being," a body or a web leave open the possibility that this order can be corrupted. A circle or a chain can be broken, a body can be afflicted by a disease or a machine can malfunction. The possibility of an end to the existence of living things, or at least to humans, gives urgency to the cause of environmentalists and has become one of the environmental imagination's most potent images. Buell describes apocalypticism's importance writing:

Just as the metaphor of the web of interdependence is central to the ethical force of the contemporary ecocentric critique of anthropocentrism, so is the metaphor of apocalypse central to ecocentrism's projection of the future of a civilization that refuses to transform itself according to the doctrine of the web. Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal. Of no other dimension of contemporary environmentalism, furthermore, can it be so unequivocally said that the role of the imagination is central to the project; for the rhetoric of apocalypticism implies that the fate of the world hinges on the arousal of the imagination to sense of crisis. It presupposes that "the most dangerous threat to our global environment may not be the strategic threats themselves but rather our perception of them, for

most people do not yet accept the fact that this crisis is extremely grave.”⁵⁵ Some go even further and argue that environmental concern will be activated only by actual apocalypse.⁵⁶

Buell notes how this apocalypticism and its pervasive influence speak both to the significance of imagination generally and the importance of an apocalyptic vision for the environmental imagination. The very notion of an “apocalypse” is entirely imaginative, in the sense that it is a creative metaphor constructed to provoke some kind of action. This is not necessarily the same as eschatology or as a kind of prophetic willing toward final perfection. Instead, for some environmentalists, the apocalypse offers a description of the final, devastating consequences should humans fail to successfully ameliorate environmental disorder. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* serves as a key illustration of apocalypticism; arguing that the failure to eradicate harmful pesticides will result in the gradual extinction of song birds and lead to extensive human health problems.

According to Buell, the use of the apocalyptic metaphor can be characterized by five ingredients. First, is the “dramatization of networked relationships: environmental reality seen and mapped in terms of the web and its cognates.”⁵⁷ In other words, the interconnectedness and dependence of human and non-human nature implies that apocalyptic events will be experienced by everyone, regardless of culpability. The second ingredient is what Buell and others refer to as “biotic egalitarianism.” The reality that the apocalypse will not discriminate, in a sense, implies a leveling of value and position between humans and non-humans. The third and fourth ingredients are under-developed by Buell, but they are more closely related to Thoreau’s influence. As he

55. Albert Gore. *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992) p. 36.

56. Buell (1995) p. 284-285.

57. Buell (1995) p. 302.

explains, “Two related modes of Thoreauvian perception are involved here, both Emersonian legacies: the aggrandizement of the minute and the conflation of near and remote.”⁵⁸ These ingredients seem counterintuitive in one respect. The fear of an impending apocalypse would likely bring certain elements of life into greater focus, creating a resistance to triviality and an emphasis on what is nearest and at hand. Buell suggests, however, that the environmental apocalypticism inspired by Thoreau both provokes biotic egalitarianism and undermines the notion that anything which is equal could at the same time be trivial. Recognition of an ecological interconnectedness and a common fate would also reduce the distance between the “near and remote,” temporally and physically. The fifth ingredient, however, is the least Thoreauvian, as the sense of “imminent environmental peril” may not have been on Thoreau’s radar.⁵⁹ Thoreau was well aware of local deforestation and threats to biodiversity, but a fear of pending ecological disasters such as catastrophic climate change were understandably non-issues for him.

Climate change has provided innumerable opportunities for environmental apocalypticism to take on new significance and creative energy. Popular narratives of climate crises warn that rising sea levels will swallow small island states and an increase in temperatures will result in mass extinctions, increased desertification and depleted crop yields leading to “climate refugees” and wars. These threats are regularly held over the heads of world leaders who are desperately trying to address carbon emission standards and other problems related to climate change. Yet all these scenarios must remain, for now, material for the imagination and

58. Buell (1995) p. 304.

59. Buell (1995) p. 305.

as a foundational narrative for the way in which environmentalism understands itself and what is ultimately at stake in their efforts. This apocalypticism takes on a curious form of dystopianism which, Buell observes, typically has three characteristics: “(1) the vision of exploitation leading to ‘overshoot’ (excessive demands on the land) or interference producing irreversible degradation; (2) the vision of a tampered-with nature recoiling against humankind in a kind of return of the repressed, and (3) the loss of all escape routes.”⁶⁰ These elements, far from being relegated to movies and science fiction, have now become the intuition shaping environmental policy, public debate and scientific research.

Bron Taylor has also observed the importance of apocalypticism for his own articulation of dark green religion and for contemporary manifestations of radical environmentalism. More explicitly than Buell, Taylor recognizes the political implications of the apocalyptic metaphor:

What often makes religions politically rebellious and sometimes violent is a millennial or apocalyptic expectation, which is often combined with a belief that it is a religious duty to resist or usher in the impending end, or to defend sacred values in the face of an unfolding cataclysm. Thus, what separates radical environmentalism from many other forms of dark green religion is apocalypticism. But it is an apocalypticism that is radically innovative in the history of religion – because it is the first time than an expectation of the end of the known world has been grounded in environmental science.⁶¹

Bron Taylor’s identification of this new apocalypticism as scientifically authoritative means that an apocalypse has, for some, moved beyond mere metaphor. For figures such as James Barnes, there is even an element of hope to an otherwise disconcerting future; at least “there is hope – but not for us.”⁶² Humanity’s inability to restrain their materialism and

60. Buell (1995) p. 308.

61. Bron Taylor (2012) p. 84.

62. James Barnes. “Dieback: A Vision of Darkness.” *Earth First!* Vol. 17, No. 8 (1997) p. 13.

reproduction has already passed a tipping point. The demise of humans is inevitable and necessary, but Barnes and Bron Taylor find comfort in these predictions. “Nature’s laws will eventually reduce the numbers of organisms, like humans, who consume too many calories or produce too much waste.”⁶³ Similar to the eschatology of traditional Christianity, which awaits God’s complete redemption of a fallen reality, dark green religion’s apocalyptic side waits for nature to redeem and renew itself. Unlike Christianity, however, this redemption involves neither a divinity nor humanity.

Fatalism, misanthropy and ambivalence open the door to the idyllic environmental imagination. Bron Taylor observes that “[r]adical environmental apocalypticism, then, is deeply ambivalent about catastrophe. Disaster is imminent, it involves the desecration of a sacred world, and it must be resisted. Yet the decline of ecosystems and the collapse of human societies may pave the way back to an earthly paradise.”⁶⁴ On what grounds, then, should a human base any reverence for nature if our efforts to restore ecological order will be futile? What meaning does a world without human beings have? Like deep ecology’s emphasis on self-realization and dark green religion’s sham spirituality, environmental apocalypticism has the potential to discourage the very moral effort required to avert disaster. While fear of catastrophic climate change or the spread of diseases caused by pollution may motivate individuals to action, the overwhelming size of the problems and the constant failure to get everyone on board with ecologically sustainable lifestyles, may breed a fatalism like the one expressed by Barnes.

63. Bron Taylor (2012) p. 85.

64. Bron Taylor (2012) p. 85.

Alternatively, if one has hope in the redemption of earth by means of divine intervention, there may be a temptation, not for fatalism, but for apathy toward the ecological crisis.

Anticipation for the destruction or the resurrection of humanity risks relegating environmental causes to the political periphery. Thankfully, an imagination of what the future holds for humans and non-humans alike need not be the enemy of moral effort. As one of many examples, the Anglican theologian N.T. Wright has pushed back against those within Christianity who discourage care for the non-human world on the basis of dispensationalist eschatology. In his recent book, *Surprised by Scripture*, he writes:

One day God will renew the whole created order, and according to Romans 8, he will do this by setting over it, as he always intended, his image-bearing creatures. They will reflect God's glory into his world and bring God's saving justice to bear, putting the world to rights and making the desert blossom like the rose. And if we are already in Christ, already indwelt by the Spirit, we cannot say we will wait until God does it in the end. We must be God's agents in bringing, at the very least, signs of that renewal in the present. And that must mean we are called in the present to search out every way in which the present, groaning creation can be set free from at least part of its bondage and experience some of the freedom that comes when the children of God are glorified because, in Christ and by the Spirit, we already are. To deny a Christian passion for ecological work, for putting the world to rights insofar as we can right now, is to deny either the goodness of creation or the power of God in the resurrection and the Spirit, and quite possibly both.⁶⁵

While Wright's admonition may be too anthropocentric for mainstream environmentalism, and might carry little authority beyond his fellow Christians, his thoughts are instructive and resist apocalypticism and the idyllic environmental imagination. Whether the future holds infinite joy or disaster for humanity our efforts toward ecological well-being matter *now*. After all, the future must necessarily be mysterious until it becomes the present. Predictions

65. N.T. Wright. *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues*. (New York: HarperOne, 2014) p. 95.

fail, variables are overlooked and changes come unexpectedly. Even if one embraces a scientifically grounded apocalypticism, there is always the chance that the science is imperfect.

While Thoreau's reflections never reached the level of dystopia or even full-fledged apocalypticism, he did inspire the kind of imagination that sparks these visions. The fate of non-human nature and the fate of man were deeply implicated in one another, and should man fail to fulfill his obligations to the environment, he may not become extinct, but he will be treated as mercilessly as the bloated bodies washed ashore, which Thoreau describes following a ship wreck on Cape Cod. He writes:

On the whole, it was not so impressive a scene as I might have expected. If I had found one body cast upon the beach in some lonely place it would have affected me more. I sympathized rather with the winds and waves, as if to toss and mangle these poor human bodies was the order of the day. If this was the law of Nature, why waste any time in awe or pity? If the last day were come, we should not think so much about the separation of friends or the blighted prospects of individuals. I saw that corpses might be multiplied, as on the field of battle, till they no longer affected us in any degree, as exceptions to the common lot of humanity. Take all the graveyards together, they are always the majority... Yet I saw that the inhabitants of the shore would be not a little affected by this event. They would watch there many days and nights for the sea to give up its dead, and their imaginations and sympathies would supply the place of mourners far away, who as yet knew not of the wreck... Why care for these dead bodies? They really have no friends but the worms or fishes... I saw their empty hulks that came to land ; but they themselves, meanwhile, were cast upon some shore yet further west, toward which we are all tending, and which we shall reach at last, it may be through storm and darkness, as they did.⁶⁶

Thoreau saw in the aftermath of the shipwreck a reminder of man's common fate. He will die, though, like Wright, Thoreau is optimistic this life is not all there is. The picture Thoreau paints however, provokes a sense that man's fate will still be at the hands of the same Nature that provided Thoreau with an ideal companion and Arcadian refuge.

66. Henry David Thoreau. *Cape Cod*. First published 1865. (New York: Penguin Books, 1987) p. 13-14.

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Babbitt's term, "aspiration to the infinite," is meant to characterize the romantic or pantheistic tendency to ascribe divinity to the non-human world and to infuse one's affection for nature with a spirituality and religious vocabulary incongruous with non-human nature as it is actually experienced. This tendency also corresponds to the desire to remove the moral restraints of tradition and institutions. This is why, Babbitt observes, that "no age ever grew so ecstatic over natural beauty as the nineteenth century, at the same time no age ever did so much to deface nature. No age ever so exalted the country over town, and no age ever witnessed such a crowding into urban centers."⁶⁷ Though an unprecedented amount of work has been done toward the end of environmental well-being and ecological order, the twentieth century could hardly claim to have improved on the nineteenth in this regard. Deep ecology, dark green religion and other forms of environmentalism that are rooted in the work of the romantics and transcendentalists of the nineteenth century have found larger and more diverse audiences, but widespread environmental crises persist. Whether it is the rhetorical religiosity of Dunlap or the emotionalist spirituality of deep ecology, a religion without order or something akin to liturgy, remains ill-equipped to meet environmental challenges. A moral, more sacramental environmental imagination provides a framework for a religious environmentalism that is not fatalistic, apathetic, escapist or misanthropic.

The moral imagination, as described thus far, has not discouraged affection toward the non-human world, the appreciation of natural beauty or the causes of conservation. Instead, the moral imagination appeals to proportion, tradition, humility, responsibility and restraint as

67. Babbitt (2009) p. 301.

fundamental to what makes men and women fully human. The moral imagination also elevates the very virtues which discourage overconsumption of natural resources, pollution and animal cruelty. In contrast to attempts to “disenchant” the natural world or to dismiss nature’s importance for religion, the moral imagination seeks to identify a role for religion that is appropriate relative to humans’ actual, concrete experience of the natural world. The moral imagination resists extremes, emotionalism, ideology and romantic idealism, but religion need not be complicit in any of these problems. Indeed, it is to the credit of many environmental thinkers, including Thoreau, for recognizing the spiritual implications of environmental issues and questions. If, as both Buell and Babbitt assume, that environmental crises are also crises of imagination, then religious questions *must* be attended to.

In light of the moral imagination and the importance of religion, how does the tension between the moral and idyllic play out? Another way of framing this tension is to place what Babbitt calls “an aspiration toward the infinite” and “sham spirituality” in direct contrast with a sacramental spirituality.

The first task for the moral imagination’s resistance to sham spirituality is to establish that there is no need to invent an entirely *new* religion and to dismiss older spiritual traditions and doctrines in order for an environmentally friendly faith to emerge. The amount of scholarship demonstrating how Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and the many Native American faiths are compatible with environmental concerns is impressive and compelling. These faiths provide ready-made means by which the environmental imagination may be cultivated in light of, not in spite of, the particular religion. Starting over with an entirely

new religion would potentially cut adherents off to important resources while also cultivating “sham spirituality.”

Within the context of sham spirituality, the escapist eschews acting on sentiments or *living* one’s religion because he or she views emotion as sufficient for demonstrating a commitment to a given cause or desire. Imagining or feeling something is adequate for this type of adherent. The fanatic, on the other hand, has no intention of restraining his or her emotions or actions. The spirituality of the fanatic affirms his or her impulses and holds nothing back, ignoring historical reality along the way. Emotion and desire legitimize action, and external authority is not accepted as a counterbalance or boundary.

Sacramental environmental thought, on the other hand, is characterized by historically sensitive action, humility and a preference for human dignity. Sacramentality is the synthesis of the universal and the particular, and is diametrically opposed to sham spirituality. It is a disposition which neither disparages the material nor neglects what is beyond it, and it resists, in a sense, both naturalism and supernaturalism without abandoning the natural or the supernatural. The non-human world is experienced as something more than material, but is not itself divine. The manner in which the material participates in and reveals the immaterial, however, is precisely what gives nature value and meaning.

Sacramentality is also characterized by “historically sensitive action,” which is defined as an awareness of the reality of the world we find ourselves in and a willingness to face circumstances and the contingencies of human nature with courage and creativity. Humility is a necessary condition for this sensitivity, in that it allows one to admit the limits of knowledge and the inability to stand outside historical circumstances. Humility also allows for the reverence and

mystery which sustains the synthesis of universal and particular and resists escapism and fanaticism as well as fatalism and apathy. It resists the notion that finite human imagination can know the universal without the particular and vice versa. The importance of a tradition further reinforces humility by cultivating a kind of intuition which recognizes this sacramentality while acting as a check against an imbalanced appreciation for universal or particular.

Perhaps the most critical aspect of the sacramental environmental imagination is an emphasis on the dignity of other human persons. Humility reminds us that non-human nature is something that is shared across time and through communities and families, and it recognizes that of all the fixtures in the material world, human beings inhabit a unique and elevated role as participants in an immaterial or universal order. In contrast to Thoreau's friends of the idyllic imagination and the elevation of sentimental environmentalism and sham spirituality above human dignity, the moral imagination conceives of distinctive, individual persons differentiated by an inexhaustible complexity. This dignity, grounded deeply in world religions, need not materialize at the expense of the environment. As Pope Francis has preached, human dignity is respected precisely by actively caring for the environment. He writes in his encyclical, *Laudato Si*, "Human beings too are creatures of this world, enjoying a right to life and happiness, and endowed with unique dignity. So we cannot fail to consider the effects on people's lives of environmental deterioration, current models of development and the throwaway culture."⁶⁸ Pope Benedict XVI was similarly convinced that the choice between human well-being and

68. Francis, *Laudato Si* (On Care for Our Common Home). Section IV.43. Vatican Website http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

environmental well-being was a false choice. In his “Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace” (January 1st, 2007) Benedict wrote:

Alongside the ecology of nature, there exists what can be called a ‘human’ ecology, which in turn demands a ‘social’ ecology. All this means that humanity, if it truly desires peace, must be increasingly conscious of the links between natural ecology, or respect for nature, and human ecology. Experience shows that *disregard for the environment always harms human coexistence*, and vice versa.⁶⁹

The environmental visions of Francis and Benedict have a number of parallels in Protestantism and Islam, and they all draw on the timeless resources of their traditions and liturgies to navigate the many difficult questions provoked by environmental crises. While the idyllic-moral tension is by no means absent from world religions in other areas, they continue to find the resources to resist temptations toward sham spirituality, escapism and environmental apathy and to affirm mankind’s responsibility for environmental well-being.

69. Benedict XVI. “The ‘Ecology of Peace’” in *The Environment*. Collected and Edited by Jacquelyn Lindsey. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012) p. 28.

CONCLUSION

Reading Thoreau's political thought through the framework of imagination has opened a new window on the complexity and nature of his legacy. The tension between the moral and idyllic imagination both frees Thoreau from, and accounts for, the imposition of the preconceived ideologies and political allegiances with which he has often been identified. His importance for American thought and culture has made him a useful ally for a number of causes; even if he himself may not have agreed to such alliances. An honest conclusion regarding Thoreau's politics and imagination does not place him in a particular ideological camp or in any single intellectual tradition. His extensive intellectual footprint testifies to his versatility and confirms the degree to which his readers share his imaginative tensions and sympathies.

This study of imagination and political thought has not been merely a descriptive enterprise. Thoreau is being evaluated according to which type of imagination he favors. Identifying the moral-idyllic tension has helped explain the complexity and significance of his work, but it has also subjected him and his work to a critical assessment according to a particular standard. Claes Ryn's theory of imagination offers a compelling means of ascertaining whether a particular kind of will and imagination is ethically admirable or not.¹ The criterion for doing so is experiential reality itself. The moral, aesthetical and philosophical life involves a constant struggle between becoming attuned to reality and revolting against or evading it. Neither Thoreau nor any finite human being is exempt from this struggle, and everyone is free to choose

1. Claes G. Ryn. *Will, Imagination, and Reason: Irving Babbitt and the Problem of Reality*. Originally published in 1986. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997). p. xix.

their quality of imagination. To read Thoreau's work as exhibiting the idyllic-moral tension is a way of acknowledging his humanity.

Given Thoreau's deeply human struggle between the idyllic and moral imagination, how might current and future readers prepare themselves for an encounter with his thought? What are the idyllic elements one should resist? What moral and political insights of Thoreau's recommend themselves? On questions of political morality, friendship, freedom and nature, how closely should one follow him? As the analysis has shown, he tends to favor the idyllic imagination on many accounts, but he is never entirely or permanently on one side or the other. His reputation and interest in his work are only increasing, but his readers would benefit from recommendations and admonitions before diving deeply into his writings.

Contemporary and former scholars of Thoreau's work may accuse me of setting a trap. The very definition of the idyllic imagination seems taken from a biographical sketch of Thoreau, and the moral imagination favors the virtues and standards of Western Civilization – especially its classical and Christian foundations – which Thoreau spoke vehemently against. In my treatment, it would seem that Thoreau never had a chance. Under the standard of the moral imagination and the higher will, though, there will always be room for improvement. Thoreau's struggle is our struggle, but how we confront our own idyllic-moral tension is shaped by the encounter with his imagination and that of others. At different times and places and on different questions, individuals and groups may favor a particular imagination over another. If the moral imagination is to predominate, however, one needs exemplars and traditions for encouragement, guidance and warnings. Thoreau is for many individuals and groups such an exemplar to which they continue to turn, but they will not always find in his work something commendable.

Thoreau's idyllic imagination should be resisted while looking to his moral imagination for salutary examples. In what follows, I will review what can and cannot be recommended.

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Thoreau was shown in earlier chapters to imagine persons as subordinate to an abstract and ahistorical notion of "Right" and to an idealistic vision of friendship. Historical contingency, traditions and conventions, as well as the obligations of human community, threatened his autonomy and risked undermining fidelity to a "Higher Law." His opposition to slavery and imperialism may have been admirable, but his intuition tended toward misanthropy, escapism and a naive political morality. While Thoreau could recognize an element of the universal in particular persons, humanity in general increasingly exasperated him. The same could be said of his view of government. He may have accurately identified limitations of democracy and law, but he left little room for a more positive conception of government to emerge. His critique of political life did not offer a concrete alternative to unjust regimes; instead, he nearly advocated the abolition of government altogether.

A number of problematic elements in Thoreau's work have been identified, but it will be helpful to focus on three major aspects of his imagination that are troubling and idyllic, and which are difficult to reconcile with what has here been called the moral imagination

First, the moral imagination resists Thoreau's idyllic political morality and understanding of freedom. The cornerstone of Thoreau's moral philosophy was fidelity to an ahistorical, abstract notion of an objective Right or the "Higher Law." Taking practical efficacy and historical circumstances into account would violate the purity of Thoreau's moralism. This disregard of actual situations renders even his most mature political writings impractical and

naive. He is even resentful of the contingencies of human life. This unrealistic moralism coincides with Thoreau's problematic notion of freedom. He asserts freedom almost exclusively in a negative way and connects it to the desire for autonomy and a preference for "wildness." Thoreau's freedom is not defined merely by the ability to choose or do whatever one wills; his freedom lacks external sources of order. He may appeal to "Right" or a "Higher Law," but it is difficult to find any definite meaning in these notions. Thoreau's concern for autonomy is taken to the extreme of eschewing tradition and the influences of others, although they might provide critical access to evidence of a "Higher Law." He objects to conformity of any kind, except to the moral imperatives that he generates for himself. Given this disposition, how could Thoreau know and follow Right without violating his notion of autonomy? Ultimately, his assertion of freedom as a lack of order and radical autonomy undermines the order which makes that freedom possible, because he makes freedom an end in itself. As David Walsh writes, the idea of freedom as an ahistorical end may be self-defeating:

As an "idea" freedom of choice is a contradiction in terms, since the alternatives are always given from somewhere outside of ourselves. But as an Idea, freedom of choice makes eminent sense because it is not simply an abstract choice between options, but the living process by which we make the possibilities our own. Freedom is not the end; it is rather what freedom makes possible. Then we see that the truth of freedom is the necessity of bending itself toward what is necessary. The truth of freedom is disclosed in action, not by thought in advance. If there were such a prior grasp of the necessity of the outcome, the action would, as even Kant recognized, not be free. Instead, freedom is the movement that can never grasp itself fully because it is never fully there, although it can disclose the necessity by which it is constituted.²

2. David Walsh. *The Modern Philosophical Revolution: The Luminosity of Existence*. (New York: Cambridge Univ., 2008) p. 114-115.

The second major pitfall in Thoreau's idyllic imagination concerns his abstract notion of persons and friendship. Too few in his time were as adamant as Thoreau in their opposition to slavery, but he offered little in the way of an understanding of persons that would convincingly support his position. His disappointment with human society and relationships led him to an imagination of friendship in which the *ideal* of persons was more real than concrete persons. His frustration led him toward an Arcadian longing and the pursuit of an idealized companionship with non-human nature characteristic of the idyllic imagination. He castigated community for its failure to live up to his moral ideals and found society and solace among non-humans. Though not thoroughly and consistently misanthropic, he had a desire for autonomy and fulfilling relationships that drove him away from the very social interaction that might have offered him the more human and more authentic community he longed for. While he did at times demonstrate profound selflessness in his care for slaves, children, the disabled and Irish immigrants, the imagination expressed in his writings potentially inspires a much less admirable disposition. His distaste for actual, as opposed to ideal, community also undermines his legacy for environmentalism, which often relies extensively on strong communities to maintain environmentally sustainable lifestyles and to achieve political effectiveness.

Finally, Thoreau's tendencies toward "sentimental environmentalism" and an idyllic spirituality potentially complicate efforts to protect both human dignity and environmental well-being. Thoreau's latent misanthropy and disappointment with human society led him away from community and toward an escapist longing for an idyllic "Arcadia." Nature was imagined as divine, generous, benevolent and ultimately in control. The non-human world could provide moral imperatives and answers to life's ultimate questions. Yet this elevation of the non-human

world often took place at the expense of human traditions and a sense of history. For example, Thoreau did not look for ways in which traditional religions might support or accommodate the concern for environmental well-being. His reflections functioned as replacements for the faiths that surrounded him, and for Christianity in particular. The disregard of a more explicitly down-to-earth wisdom and community risked the neglect of other actual humans – including the slaves and others he fought to protect.

While the idyllic environmental imagination, characterized by an Arcadian longing, the pursuit of an idealized non-human community and the divinization of nature are not Thoreau's only environmental legacy, they do seem to dominate the environmental imaginations of his twentieth and twenty-first century heirs. As a number of scholars and authors have observed, for example, contemporary environmentalism is often characterized by political naiveté, an uncompromising and absolutist disposition and an attraction to ideology.

To lay all these failures of environmentalism at the feet of Thoreau would be inaccurate and inconsistent with his complex legacy. He has had, for example, considerable influence on the sentimental environmentalism of Arne Naess and so-called "deep ecology," but he has also provided a foundational inspiration for the more historically-minded and traditional Wendell Berry. Thoreau was a muse for the eccentric John Muir, but also motivated the likes of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. These individuals and others might have exhibited the tension between the idyllic and the moral imagination even without Thoreau, but his example and imagination provided a critical point of reference for how they navigated that tension.

* * * *

Irving Babbitt, like many culturally conservative thinkers, may be accused of asserting a merely negative understanding of morality. Instead of commandments and obligations, the conservative seems obsessed with a list of “thou-shalt-not’s.” T.S. Eliot, a student of Babbitt’s, once wrote in exasperation, “What is the higher will to *will*...? If this will is to have anything on which to operate, it must be in relation to external objects and to objective values.”³ Eliot desired a more concrete morality or a set of norms by which to identify both what the higher will resists and what it affirms. For Babbitt, as Eliot well knew, the higher will was supposed to be a “will to civilization,” but Eliot failed to recognize exactly what Babbitt meant by “civilization.” In some ways, this lack of definition on Babbitt’s part may be intentional. As Ryn explains, “[Babbitt’s] actual theory is that morality has two aspects: the renunciation and the affirmation of impulse. They form part of one and the same effort to realize the good. In its relation to impulses that are destructive of our spiritual unity and hence of our happiness, the higher will is felt as a check; the moral purpose is advanced by censuring what is opposed to it.”⁴ In other words, this renunciation or “inner check,” as Babbitt calls it, has an affirmative aspect. Eliot notes how Babbitt’s inner check identifies a “habit” of will with a preference for civilization, while leaving open the precise content of what this habit of will *wills* – a notion that Eliot finds unsatisfactory. Ironically, Ryn explains, Eliot’s interpretation is precisely what Babbitt had in mind, but Eliot did not understand that Babbitt’s explanation answers his question of what the will *wills*:

Babbitt wholeheartedly agrees that civilization is marked by the diversity of emphasis and perspective of those who contribute to it. Those who will civilization can indeed be said to be joined by “a habit in the same direction.”

3. T.S. Eliot. *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960) p. 425 (emphasis in original). Quoted in Ryn. (1997) p. 33.

4. Ryn. (1997) p. 32.

Babbitt would say that it is a habit which brings unity into a multiplicity of activity. Eliot's mistake is opposing this "habit" to what Babbitt calls "the will to civilization." What Eliot has not understood is that civilization, as Babbitt understands it, is defined in its most important dimension by the special quality of will that brings it into existence, namely, "the inner check." This unifying ethical ordering can be described adequately also as "a habit in the same direction."⁵

The *quality* of the higher will is always the same but the *specifics* of what needs to be done depend on the circumstances of the moral actor. At times, Thoreau seems to recognize the possibility of cultivating this kind of habit or "inner check," that is in a manner consistent with the "will to civilization." Are there, then, elements of moral imagination in Thoreau's vision of life that recommend him?

Despite the impractical nature of Thoreau's moral philosophy, he did evince tendencies more compatible with the moral imagination. This is especially true of his recognition that who a person is, and especially what he or she loves, is critical to what one sees, hears and understands. Imagination and will are critical to how persons live in, and come to know, the world around them, and this character and imagination manifests itself in politics. Thoreau recognizes, along with Plato, that the political community is "man writ large." Thoreau also does not abandon the traditional notion of a higher and lower will within man. There is good and evil and mankind is capable of either. Though he did not embrace a conventional doctrine of sin, he held a relatively realistic view of humanity's moral predicament and the need to favor that which is higher.

Notwithstanding humanity's moral predicament and tendency to make a mess, Thoreau did not abandon the centrality of freedom. A consistent theme throughout his life and writings

5. Ryn (1997) p. 34. Additionally, as Ryn explains, "It should be made explicit that in viewing the inner check as the unifying principle of civilization, Babbitt takes it for granted that there are other aspects of the work of civilization than moral effort. But to him the final measure of progress is the extent to which the various pursuits of society, such as science, art and politics, advance the moral end of goodness." (Ryn (1997) p. 35.

was not so much that freedom was always license or a problem, but that freedom was fundamental to a full, “deliberately-lived” human life. By denying slaves their freedom, the Southern slaveholders and complacent Northerners were not simply exploiting blacks’ labor; they denied them an opportunity to fully realize their personhood. Still, Thoreau’s moralism and imagination of freedom as wildness risked undermining this central purpose and his quest for freedom, and tended to make freedom an end in itself, coming up against the recognition that freedom as a means to greater ends. The higher will *wills* civilization, but that will must be free to will civilization, community and the good life. As Ryn explains:

Freedom can be adequately understood only in conjunction with the moral worth of chosen goals, so that a person is free in the most profound political sense only to the extent that by his actions he enriches and fulfills his life. Community being the highest value, happiness lies in the widest possible sharing of the good life with others. Freedom, therefore, is properly the ability to act with concern for what promotes the spiritual well-being of all affected. In the strictest sense, a people can be said to be exercising freedom in governing itself only when it is genuinely trying to realize the conditions of community.⁶

Thoreau does not share Ryn’s prioritization of community, but he does demonstrate a profound concern for spiritual well-being and a fulfilling life. In *Walden*, for example, Thoreau wishes to draw persons away from a life of “quiet desperation”⁷ and toward a life lived deliberately and animated by wonder and conviction. Community, as an aspect of freedom properly understood, according to Ryn, is not, for Thoreau, necessarily a source of a richer life for the individual.

6. Claes G. Ryn. *Democracy and the Ethical Life: A Philosophy of Politics and Community*. 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: The Catholic Univ. Press, 1990) p. 164-165.

7. Henry David Thoreau. *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) p. 50.

A final aspect of Thoreau's imagination to recommend concerns his intuition of the natural non-human world. He may indeed overstate the association of the divine with nature, but he moves us toward a sacramentality akin to that of the moral imagination. As Lawrence Buell has shown, Thoreau is important because he provided a language by which humans could express the immateriality of nature without abandoning its materiality. Despite his shortcomings, Thoreau inspired a type of environmental imagination by asking the right questions about humanity's place relative to the non-human world, by exploring how human beings were implicated in and impacted by natural history, and by considering what humanity might lose should the "tonic of wilderness" be diminished. His interrogations of his experience with nature were both unique and timely; at the time of his death, environmental well-being had begun to be threatened as never before by industrialization, civil war and ill-conceived agricultural practices. In the wake of Thoreau, individuals, armed with his kind of imagination, were ready to resist the unchecked march of environmental destruction which had accelerated after the Civil War. Figures such as John Muir, John Burroughs, Henry Salt and others found Thoreau to be very useful in these times. And while they may have inherited some of his vices, they also frequently embraced Thoreau's virtues.

* * * *

The tension between the moral and idyllic imagination has profound implications for politics. How rulers and the ruled intuit what is good, true and beautiful shapes who and what they love, how they behave, how citizens vote and live in community, what individuals and groups believe about meaning and spirituality and how they care for the natural environment. This importance of imagination and its relationship to will and reason gives tremendous power

and responsibility to those who influence the content of our intuitions, namely artists, directors, authors, musicians, the mass media, marketing strategists, educators and so on. The individuals and groups who take this responsibility seriously need to cultivate the kind of imagination that resists idyllic imagination and the lower will.

Edmund Burke, whom Babbitt offers as a prime exemplar of moral imagination, once referred to its sources as the “bank and capital of nations and of ages.” An ancient and evolving heritage is critical to the development of moral imagination, as well as to a corresponding just and free society. In contrast to the French Revolution’s dictum that “the dead should not rule the living,” Burke believed that the dead – embodied and immortalized in traditions and a historically informed reason – should help guide the living.⁸ Thoreau, by contrast, made considerable efforts to resist the influence of others. His imagination of genuine freedom as wildness and autonomy often closed him off to valuable sources of tradition. He once wrote, in a tone reminiscent of the French Revolution, “I love man-kind, but I hate the institutions of the dead unkind. Men execute nothing so faithfully as the wills of the dead, to the last codicil and letter. *They* rule this world, and the living are but their executors.”⁹

As much as he resisted the influence of others, Thoreau demonstrated considerable debt to Emerson, Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Charles Darwin, ancient Rome, Coleridge and

8. As C.S. Lewis writes, “Each generation exercises power over its successors: and each, in so far as it modifies the environment bequeathed to it and rebels against tradition, resists and limits the power of its predecessors. This modifies the picture which is sometimes painted of a progressive emancipation from tradition and a progressive control of natural processes resulting in a continual increase of human power...the later a generation comes – the nearer it lives to that date at which the species becomes extinct – the less power it will have in the forward direction, because its subject will be so few.” *The Abolition of Man*. Originally published, 1944.(San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001) p.56-57.

9. Thoreau. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Originally published 1849. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001) p. 81-82.

German idealism. One way of resisting some of the more problematic aspects of his legacy and to recover his neglected virtues, is to evaluate and supplement these historical sources. This is particularly true in regards to Thoreau's relationship to Christianity. He was not an orthodox Christian and resisted it in many ways. Yet by abandoning the Christian tradition as a resource of moral and historical insight, he neglected ideas and examples which may, at minimum, have deepened his opposition to slavery, ordered his notion of freedom, and discouraged his abstract moralism and misanthropy. He may have found the Bible and Christian tradition considerable allies in his quest to understand and care for the natural non-human world as many Christians in the twentieth-century discovered. Pope Francis and the Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI, for example, have written extensively on the environment. Francis has gone so far as to release an encyclical drawing on scripture and centuries of Church tradition to make the case for confronting climate change.¹⁰ While Christians in Thoreau's day were virtually silent on questions of environmental well-being and ethics (and mostly remained silent until the late twentieth century) a Thoreau more sympathetic to Christianity could have conceivably remedied this oversight.

Examining the moral-idyllic tension in which Thoreau lives may prove fruitful to scholars interested in untangling the contested and complex nature of his literary style, aesthetics, moral philosophy and the many aspects of his life and thought not covered in this dissertation. The findings of this dissertation offer promising possibilities for examining this tension as it emerges in later environmentalists and others who have inherited Thoreau's legacy.

10. Francis. *Laudato Si* [Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home]. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2015). Also see Benedict XVI. *The Environment*. Collected and edited by Jacquelyn Lindsey. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012).

One can imagine, for example, fruitful studies of the idyllic-moral tension in the environmental imaginations of Rachel Carson, John Muir, David Brower, Aldo Leopold, Wendell Berry and others. The attention to the imagination could shed significant light on the moral crises and “doublethink” identified by Lawrence Buell, offer insights into and resistance to the eco-totalitarian impulses lamented by Charles Rubin, and expose the often strange and failed environmental policies and laws described by Robert Nelson.

Thoreau will continue to be an important part of the conversation on political morality and environmental imagination for as long as humans wrestle with problems of freedom, civil rights and civil liberties, law, pollution, diminishing bio-diversity, climate change and deforestation. Even more important, Thoreau will warrant attention because he asked timeless questions about what it means to be fully human, why freedom is so central and why the natural, non-human world was always more than mere materiality. He did not always provide laudable answers to these questions, but, as Babbitt once said of Rousseau, “it is no small distinction even to have asked the right questions.”¹¹

11. Irving Babbitt. *Democracy and Leadership*. 1924 Reprint. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1979) p. 24.

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