

Going Against and Beyond Conventions in H. D. Thoreau's Work

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Abstract

Nineteenth century New England "poet, philosopher, and naturalist" Henry David Thoreau has often been associated with New England Transcendentalism, a multi-faceted movement of the 1830s-1850s, oriented mainly towards the spiritual reformation of man. This reformation was to be achieved, among others, through a transgression of boundaries, a "going beyond" limits in all the aspects of life: religion, politics, morals, and social life. A transcendentalist would place himself on a high stand, "work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe", and dig deeper and deeper "till we come to a hard bottom of facts in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake." It was an attempt to look deep into the essence of things, at the very spring and bottom whence they emerged, and build new foundations upon that solid ground. This paper is a discussion of the specific ways in which H. D. Thoreau, in his major work Walden, and its prologue A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, shows some of the means to go past conventional behavior, by creating a hero who is not merely unconventional but outright anti-conventional. In so doing, the author aims particularly at determining the reader to perceive the existence of alternatives, to start looking at events from different perspectives, and learn to develop solutions that would be congenial to his or her own unique self.

If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away"
(Thoreau, 1985: 581).

Keywords

transcendentalism, transgression, identity, boundary, anti-conventional.

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was a New Englander, a poet, philosopher, naturalist, and Transcendentalist of the nineteenth century. He was also a pioneer, a non-conformist, an independent mind and a free spirit. In 1845, he decided to build himself a cabin by the shores of Walden Pond, in his hometown, Concord, Massachusetts. He did not live there the entire time, yet it was a place, his place, where he could be in close touch with the universe, watch the spring set in, closely survey and be immersed in the natural phenomena all year round. At Walden Pond, Thoreau was not pushed in life by any timetable, he needed no

clocks, had no formal job³³, no commitments unless he agreed to them. Two years later he left the cabin to be "a sojourner in the civilized world again". During the two years, he travelled a lot, went to Canada, journeyed around Concord with his friends, received guests, had his closest friend sleep over, and ate out almost regularly. He did not live the life of a hermit. Yet the portrait he makes of his hero in *Walden* seems to be that of a recluse.

Thoreau used his two-year experience to start a book. After going through seven drafts in nine years after the first "bulk", the book turned into a classic and a masterpiece and is still revealing its gems, inspiring readers today, in the cyber-era. Thoreau published the first edition as *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*; before his death, he asked his editors to drop the subtitle. He may have realized that the book was not about "life in the woods" but about a coming-out-of-the-woods, an emergence from darkness to light, from chaos to order, brightness, freedom, and the infinite.

Thoreau's *Walden* speaks about man "realizing" what life is, something different than mere existence. In telling the story of a man who, in the midst of turmoil, when everyone struggled to succeed materially - following the example of industriousness developed by Benjamin Franklin - spends his time in "apparent idleness" and contemplation, Thoreau makes a strong statement, urging men to stop and Be. In his Journal for 1839, Thoreau wrote, pointing to the essential difference between "to be" and "to exist": "Drifting in a sultry day on the sluggish waters of the pond, I almost cease to live and begin to be". In *Walden*, the feeling was transformed, and became

I have spent many an hour, when I was younger, floating over [the surface of the Pond] as the zephyr willed, having paddled my boat to the middle, and lying on my back across the seats, in a summer forenoon, dreaming awake, until I was aroused by the boat touching the sand, and I arose to see what shore fates had impelled me to; days when idleness was the most attractive and productive industry. Many a forenoon have I stolen away, preferring to spend thus the most valued part of the day; for I was rich, if not in money, in sunny hours and sunny days, and spent them lavishly; nor do I regret that I did not waste more of them in the workshop or the teacher's desk. (Thoreau, 1985: 475).

Deemed "sheer idleness" by his contemporaries, this was his way of connecting to the universe, and he was aware that, "if the birds and flowers had tried [him] by their standard, [he] should not have been found wanting" (idem). One of the reasons he had decided to live in the woods was the need to live life fully and deliberately, to take everything in, not to pass through life:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was

³³ H.D. Thoreau earned his living by writing, surveying, tutoring, and doing several other odd-jobs at R.W. Emerson's house. These however were not strictly scheduled, as jobs are today.

not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms. (Thoreau, 1985: 394).

The epitome of Thoreau's adversity to conformity, to his radicalism in going against (main)stream is encapsulated in the statement: "The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?" (Thoreau, 1985: 331).

In literature as well as in his political, social, and religious beliefs, Thoreau went against the current. Nevertheless, he made one thing clear: "I do not wish to quarrel with any man or nation. I do not wish to split hairs, to make fine distinctions, or set myself up as better than my neighbors. I seek rather, I may say, even an excuse for conforming to the laws of the land" (Thoreau, 1984: 221).

While living in what Mark Twain later called "The Gilded Age", Thoreau longed for the Golden Age, an age not of "noblemen but of noble-villages-of-men". The Golden Age is thought of as an age in the infancy of humankind when everything was good, when man's maximum potential had been reached, and the world was clean and pure. The age was believed to have produced the real heroes and reformers, Titans of the size of Prometheus, Achilles and Ulysses, brave men, demigods who were not afraid to go for their beliefs even when these were against the majority's belief, when they had to face punishment. Thoreau asked for such "extra-vagant" men, who went beyond and beside themselves. The extra-vagant is not he who merely seeks something elsewhere, but who, following his inner calling, goes against everything and anything, crosses all barriers and realizes his wish: "Extra vagance! it depends on how you are yarded. The migrating buffalo, which seeks new pastures in another latitude, is not extravagant like the cow which kicks over the pail, leaps the cow-yard fence, and runs after her calf, in milking time" (Thoreau, 1985: 580). It is only when you go against set behavior to follow your nature that you are extra-vagant in the way Thoreau wishes it.

Thoreau turns the tables on the reader, digging beneath prejudice, lifting up "the mud and slush of opinion", making way for "new channels of thought", drilling through the "cemented" fables that kept mankind stuck, scratching away the ballast of traditional forms which, if too strongly adhered to, keep mankind behind. Thoreau teaches doubt, guiding the reader toward a way of thinking in which he would always look for new ways of solving problems.

But alert and healthy natures remember that the sun rose clear. It is never too late to give up our prejudices. No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof. What everybody echoes or in silence passes by as true to-day may turn out to be falsehood to-morrow, mere smoke of opinion, which some had trusted for a cloud that would sprinkle fertilizing rain on their fields. What old people say you cannot do, you try and find that you can. Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new. (Thoreau, 1985: 329).

Believing in the endless possibilities of change and constant improvement, Thoreau suggests an attitude of flexibility and suspicion in the face of established customs and "cemented" modes of thought. Tradition is good in so far as it leads to something better, in so far as it is a step forward and a contribution to advancement. An open-minded person, in Thoreau's view, will constantly go back, check and revise the sayings of the old. "You may say the wisest thing you can, old man — you who have lived seventy years, not without honor of a kind — I hear an irresistible voice which invites me away from all that. One generation abandons the enterprises of another like stranded vessels" (Thoreau, 1985: 331).

Thoreau suggests that the cause for degeneration and ruin are conformity and lack of wisdom in choosing the means to provide for living, and to much trust in the old ways: a life lived "merely by conformity, practically as their fathers did" will never engender and create "a noble race of men". Many times, decisions are based on previous modes of thought, informed by old prejudice. Yet age is not a just and valid criterion, since years add hardness to doubtful beliefs in the same manner as to cement:

My bricks being second-hand ones required to be cleaned with a trowel, so that I learned more than usual of the qualities of bricks and trowels. The mortar on them was fifty years old, and was said to be still growing harder; but this is one of those sayings which men love to repeat whether they are true or not. Such sayings themselves grow harder and adhere more firmly with age, and it would take many bows with a trowel to clean an old wiseacre of them. (Thoreau, 1985: 514).

His neighbors, who live desperate lives, "honestly think there is no choice left", and know no better. Thoreau's task is to show that there *is* a choice left, there are always better alternatives. Readiness to find them, the disposition of the mind is all it takes. Unfortunately, while "There is an incessant flux of novelty into the world, [...] we tolerate incredible dullness" (Thoreau, 1985: 586).

Thoreau shows new and more efficient ways to live one's life, and rise up to one's full potential. He shows how man can, in Emerson's words, "build his own world", "create his own bible". The Christian Bible was considered by Transcendentalists like Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott a text of wisdom, comparable to the Bhagavad Gita, Vishnu Purana, and other Scriptures. In their view, each man could design his own book of principles according to which he would live his life, so that he would be "a man first and subject afterward". One way to achieve this is for man to look into Eternity, differentiate between essential and passing events, and live life according to this understanding. In this respect, the "Indra story" is useful.

Thoreau refers to Indra several times in *Walden*, and he once narrates an apparently out of place event, accompanied by an awkward commentary. The event is a war between two armies of giant ants, one red and one black. After minutely describing the battle, Thoreau remarks that wars between people are as meaningless, alluding to the Concord battle of 1775 - the first armed conflict between rebelling American colonists and the British army trying to restore

authority of the crown. The commentary is awkward because the battle of Concord and the "war" it started led to the Independence of the American colonies from the British authority, and freedom was one of the essential values for Thoreau. The point he tries to make with the story is another, which is revealed only if one knows who Indra was and how did *he* change his perspective on life.

According to the legend, narrated by Mircea Eliade in his book *Imagini și simboluri*, Indra was a vain warrior, the King of Gods, whom Vishnu gave a precious lesson in the difference between Reality and reality, Time and time. While Indra was urging the expenditure of incredible amounts of money and energy to have a huge palace build in his honor, he is suddenly shown a file of ants which out of nowhere had marched in the place where himself and Vishnu were having a conversation. Much to Indra's amazement and elucidation, Vishnu explains that the ants are as many previous Indras, just as Indra himself is a former - and most probably future - ant. It is then that the God understands the difference between eternity and history, and becomes aware of the existence of an infinite number of Cosmoses within which the present one is just one among the many. Indra achieved awareness in the illusory nature of life from an ontological perspective, while existence is nevertheless historically real. Without leading to the abandonment of life, awareness shifts perspectives, changes the way he looks at events and works for a purpose higher than mere present fame in historical time. Becoming aware means, Eliade points out, being "redeemed". (Eliade, 1994: 73-76; 85). While he is watching the *ants* at *war*, Thoreau himself gets associated to "Indra", just like any of the readers do, too.

Indra subsequently learned that he had to pay attention to the essentials facts, and leave the rest to settle by themselves, this being the wisest attitude for all men. The essential facts Thoreau discovers are "the Eternities", infinite freedom, the soul, harmony, "the humane law" - that which does not change from year to year. Opposed to these, he lists "the Times", social and cultural circumstances which become obstructions in the way of man's advancement, the artificial or "human law".

While the essences are permanent, the social, political, cultural and even religious values are relative and shifting. One feature of relative and unnecessary things is that they are not found in all cultures, irrespective of time and place: "Some things are really necessities of life in some circles, the most helpless and diseased, which in others are luxuries merely, and in others still are entirely unknown" (Thoreau, 1985: 330). Such things are shelter, clothing, eating habits, political system, vision on time. Generically called by Thoreau "fashions", these are in constant change, and if at one point one pattern is more fashionable than another, this is not due to its value but on the opinion of a majority: "every generation laughs at the old fashions, but follows religiously the new (Thoreau, 1985: 343); and, "of two patterns which differ only by a few threads more or less of a particular color, the one will be sold readily, the other lie on the shelf, though it frequently happens that after the lapse of a season the later becomes the most fashionable" (idem). Readers may understand the "fashions" as pointing strictly to

clothing, yet more diligent and careful readers understand that the "fashions" and "patterns" are manifest in all domains of life, spiritual, political and material.

In the same line of thought, Thoreau admits the democratic system of government as "comparatively" better than the imperialistic one, that is, "it could have been worse". He bluntly accepts it as temporary, saying "that government is best which govern least" and predicting change.

Thus, in the era of Jacksonian "mob democracy", Thoreau spoke of the rights of the individual with a consciousness, of the man marching on his own rhythm, be it "however measured and far away". He spoke of the heroic man, a modest man yet one who lived according to his own consciousness - with the cost of freedom or even life - because going against oneself already meant a death of the soul: "is he not already dead?". Even thieves (like Mirabeau, or Robin Hood) and murderers (like John Brown³⁴) are valued, because in their action they follow their principles: "It is said that Mirabeau took to highway robbery 'to ascertain what degree of resolution was necessary in order to place one's self in formal opposition to the most sacred laws of society'". While agreeing with the will-power demonstrated, Thoreau however rejects Mirabeau for the lack of high principles as the foundation for opposition and aims even higher: "A saner man would have found himself often enough 'in formal opposition' to what are deemed 'the sacred laws of society' through obedience to yet more sacred laws". Not mere opposition for opposition's sake, but constant focus on higher laws, being against because better sights can be seen at the horizon, this is the attitude Thoreau encourages: "It is not for a man to put himself in such an attitude to society, but to maintain himself in whatever attitude he find himself through obedience to the laws of his being" (Thoreau, 1985: 579).

There is an image frequent in Thoreau, speaking of the way in which uniformity in society resembles drilled, will-free soldiers; it is the image of the sole soldier marching on the music only he hears, "however measured and far away", that is, slower than the fast paced social rhythm of a "St. Vitus' dance", and distant because far from commonly entertained beliefs. Thoreau discusses the machine-like drilled soldiers in Canada, who seem to have no mind of their own.

we saw a large body of soldiers being drilled [...] The problem appeared to be how to smooth down all individual protuberances or idiosyncrasies, and make a thousand men move as one man, animated by one central will. [...] They made on me the impression, not of many individuals, but of one vast centipede of a man, good for all sorts of pulling down. (Thoreau, 1984: 265-266).

He asks men to listen to their own consciousness even when this means going outside the line, interrupting the perfect pattern of military -or other types of -drills.

Thoreau rejects "democratic majority" in favor of a "democracy of one", which is infinite in its freedom, possibilities, and common-sense. High numbers do

³⁴ John Brown.

not in themselves authorize decisions, but morality and conscience, which alone are essential, do.

But a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? — in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? (Thoreau, 1984: 204).

Thoreau not only demolishes but comes with solutions. He suggests means for improving the mean, mending life by thinking of different solutions ahead of him: mythology, the Augean stables were cleaned by Hercules by diverting the course of the river rather than toiling in the usual way; the cutting of Hydra's heads was a success because, instead of incessantly cutting off heads at the neck whence other heads came out, they put a hot iron at the root; the solution is that men should block evil at the root. However,

The twelve labors of Hercules were trifling in comparison with those which my never see that these men slew or captured any monster or finished any labor. They have no friend Iolas to burn with a hot iron the root of the hydra's head, but as soon as one head is crushed, two spring up (Thoreau, 1985: 326).

Moreover, it is even better to avoid "the beginnings of evil" rather than have to fight it off. Each of the time, Thoreau's solution implies detachment from everything that is cemented by convention, by tradition. "But men labor under a mistake", "with blind obedience", following the old ways when there are better. If you know how to look, "what old people say you cannot do you try and find out that you can" (Thoreau, 1985: 329).

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