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From Self Culture to Self Promotion:

An Interpretation of Henry David Thoreau's Walden as an Anticipation of America's post Civil War Cultural Transition From Transcendental Individualism to Institutional Professionalism

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Chapter 1: Context

Thoreau, and American Cultures of Institutionalism and Professionalism

In the 1840's, a young scholar from Massachusetts named Henry David Thoreau chose to use several years of his life as an experiment of simplified living. Thoreau was a close student of Emerson, yet he was also a staunch individualist in his own right, so he decided to take his teacher's Transcendentalist values and personally translate them into a lifestyle that was consistent with his philosophies. Thoreau retreated to the serenity of Walden Pond, just outside of Concord, Massachusetts, and set about conducting a case study in self-sufficiency by providing his material and intellectual needs mostly for himself. Walden is a record of Thoreau's life and thoughts during one whole year of living by himself at the pond¹. In Walden, Thoreau is simultaneously concerned with the many mundane chores that characterize his daily life in the woods, and with the higher ideals that have directed him on this course. In the midst of the very practical aspects of Thoreau's narrative, the reader is occasionally left wondering why Thoreau would bother getting bogged down with the more specific and banal details, especially in chapters like *Solitude*, *Visitors*, *The Bean-Field*, and *House Warming*, but it is important to remember that Thoreau's slowed down lifestyle was atypical even for his own time period. To Thoreau and his contemporary readers, the details of his living situation were still unusual enough that they seemed to merit commenting upon- the documentation of a radical methodology. As modern readers, it is easy to think of Thoreau's time, which was

¹ The book is loosely formatted as a journal, especially since chapters like *Winter Animals* and *Spring* imply a chronological organization. However, its adherence to this form is mostly stylistic, because it is actually structured much more by subject themes and philosophies, e.g. *Brute Neighbors*, and it does not list Thoreau's daily journal entries or ascribe a specific time to any observation.

without cell phones, internet, or the personal automobile, and imagine that the whole era was still untouched by the forces of modernity that are so pervasive in our present lives. The truth, however, is that the paradigm of modernity was just beginning to shift in a big way. To borrow some statistics from Burton Bledstein: there were 46,800 miles of main railroad track in 1869, versus 190,000 in 1899; the number of telephones went from 3,000 in 1876 to 1.3 million in 1900; urban population rose from 26 to 40 percent of overall U.S. population between 1870 and 1900; and the number of banks multiplied by six fold between 1870 and 1900².

The context given by these statistics is to show that Walden came at the leading edge of an American transition, hastened by the Civil War, toward modernity. This is why Thoreau was so attentive to his banal lifestyle of bean-field hoeing and cabin building. He would not have given these mundane details so much weight if he did not already perceive their preciousness in light of the fact that they were quickly becoming dated anachronisms. In opposition to these inevitable trends, Thoreau advocated closeness with nature at a time when the natural world was coming to seem more abstract than ever before, and he was a proponent of self-sufficiency at a time when the trend would always be towards increasing interdependence. But even though Thoreau is a figure who is intellectually and materially opposed to the new implications of modernity in America, I propose that he should not be interpreted strictly as a passive artifact from the preceding era. He lived and wrote in the midst of this great shift, and in certain ways he was actually an unintentional agent of the change, or at least an embodiment of its ideals. Parallel to the obvious material and economic changes that took place in latter 19th

² Bledstein The Culture of Professionalism pg. 46

century America, cultures of institutionalism and professionalism were on the rise. Prior to the Civil War, Thoreau's own transcendentalist peers, especially Emerson, largely set the general American stance on institutions. "Nothing stood in the way, many believed, but those inherited institutions which seemed devoted to the limitation and control of human aspirations, such as governments, authoritarian religious bodies, and what remained of traditional and patriarchal forms of social economic life."³ Obviously, this outlook was not compatible with the great material and economic changes that were to unfold by the end of the 19th century, or with the power structures that would be associated with the rising industries: factories, banks, railroads, etc. Something needed to occur to put the cultural values in harmony with the new modern life, so that individuals would be willing to enter the institutional structure that modern America was creating, and so that they would be eager to develop the types of professional careers that this new paradigm offered. Surprisingly, a close study of Walden reveals the presence of attitudes that anticipate and promote the emergence of cultures of institutionalism and professionalism. In particular, Thoreau's principles of *individualism* and *naturalism* are applied in Walden in a manner that legitimizes the newly forming cultures. This thesis is an exploration of the ways that individualism and naturalism, the two iconic tenets of Walden, can support something that intuitively seems to be their opposite: cultures of institutionalism and professionalism.

At the time that Walden was written, the attitude in America towards institutions was very hostile. Yet the anti-institutional nation was able to transition very quickly into a place that, to this day, is rife with hierarchies and institutional structures. For one

³ Fredrickson The Inner Civil War pg. 7

philosophy to so suddenly give way and be replaced by an opposite paradigm, it suggests that the previous anti-institutional outlook contained subtle elements that were susceptible, when pushed, to transmuting into their opposites. Walden, as a specific expression of the pre Civil War anti-institutional values, is potentially a good case study to apply to this assumption; it has strains that support institutionalism despite the fact that its conscious intent is clearly otherwise, and the same for professionalism. As I've already iterated, these transmutable strains in Walden are derived from Thoreau's commitment to individualism and naturalism. Naturalism comes into the fray as a tenet in support of institutionalism because institutions, in order to put on some degree of credibility, and in order to deflect attention from their constructedness, present themselves as *natural*. Their position has been naturalized to the extent that they are accepted as organic structures whose functions are determined by natural laws, like scarcity, competition, and the survival of the fittest – much like economics has argued its way into being called a series of “natural laws.” Meanwhile, a strong sense of *individualism* is a necessary part of what drives the professional worker to invest in his career track by specializing his skills. American traditions of individualism both enable and place into prominence the establishment of institutional organisms within society, and the pursuit of professional careers within those institutions. Walden, as a defining text in American individualism, has a part in promoting institutional organization and a culture of professionalism, even though its ostensible argument is against this.

The goal is not to attempt to delegitimize Thoreau, and I am not searching for inconsistencies solely for the sake of calling him a hypocrite. The point of showing that Thoreau legitimizes processes that he apparently opposes is to demonstrate just how

prevalent and, I would argue, coercive the forces of institutionalism and professionalism are in American culture. It is exactly because Walden makes such an incisive and eloquent case against mentalities of institutionalism and professionalism that its unintentional and implicit approval of those forces is so alarming. It is only because Thoreau is a respectable and valuable critic of these issues that it is so worthwhile to analyze his uncanny contradictions. If cultures of professionalism and institutionalism have an influence on, and are subtly promoted by, one of the staunchest anti-professional anti-institutionalists in American literary history, then we have an indication of just how widely their potentially insidious pulls are felt.

* * *

I admit that it might seem like an improbable argument that Thoreau is a promoter of professionalism and institutionalism. Part of what prevents these aspects of Walden from standing out more clearly is simply the fact that Thoreau's writing and argumentation can tend to be self obscuring. The book operates on two levels simultaneously: on one it is a presentation of Thoreau's abstract theories, and on the other it is a handbook of those theories put into action. On the level of philosophical theory, Walden is neat and unqualified – it is on this level that the book seems wholly incompatible with my thesis. But on the level of direct observation and practical experience, Walden is full of ambiguity and compromise, and it is on this practical level that Walden reveals strains of institutional and professional legitimization in accordance with my thesis. I refer to the book as 'self obscuring' because the philosophical exclamations easily overshadow the practical observations, and it is the latter which are the basis of my argument. Walden is a text that is easy to read selectively – over

emphasizing its idealized aspects to the exclusion of its practicalities and nuances. Only exacerbating the situation is the fact that Thoreau is amazingly quotable; one stunning sentence in the middle of a passage can utterly overwhelm all of the discussion around it. In such moments, which are frequent, a charismatic sentence will come to stand for the meaning of a whole section. Here is one instance in which Thoreau makes a statement that is critically compelling, yet unspecific or even contradictory with regard to his practical goals at Walden Pond:

The very simplicity of man's life in the primitive ages imply this advantage at least, that they left him still but a sojourner in nature. When he was refreshed with food and sleep he contemplated his journey again. He dwelt, as it were, in a tent in this world, and was either threading the valleys, or crossing the plains, or climbing the mountain tops. But lo! Men have become tools of their tools. The man who independently plucked the fruits when he was hungry is become a farmer; and he who stood under a tree for shelter, a housekeeper (33).

Thoreau reaches back to the “primitive ages” and imagines the ways that life might have been preferable to his own contemporary world. Quotes like this are compelling and attention grabbing for their effectiveness at recognizing and articulating difficult to describe phenomena. For an American contemporary of Karl Marx, and one who is writing in a completely different field, to say that “men have become tools of their tools” is an impressive commentary. Consider the occupations of typing and stenography, for example, which epitomize a form of labor that is defined by and subservient to the tool that it uses. In 1870, the number of typists and stenographers in America was just 154, but by 1900 it had grown to 112,364⁴. This example of career field emergence comes a few decades later than Walden, but it demonstrates just how prescient he is. At the same time, the quote exploits a shallow rhetorical device; the “primitive ages” are a purely imagined idea whose vagueness has given Thoreau a blank canvas for complaining about

⁴ Bledstein pg. 37

the shortcomings of his own modern life. In their indefiniteness, the “primitive ages” do nothing for offering constructive alternatives.

Passages like this show that Thoreau’s rhetorical elegance can be incisive in its commentary, but at the same time these moments are very vague about matters of direct action. Yet direct action is exactly what Walden is all about; the effort to translate his philosophy into concrete lifestyle choices is what distinguishes Thoreau, what makes him something other than a reiteration of Emerson. For the sake of truly appreciating what makes Thoreau unique – his advocacy for direct action – it is very important to take these charismatic passages with a grain of salt, and not to miss the larger narrative that is going on all around them. When you do so, the Thoreau that emerges is one who is fraught with contradiction, but is all the more interesting because of it. It is also this second Thoreau who frequently, unintentionally, evinces strains of institutional and professional thinking, which is why I want to draw attention to him. The absolutes that stand out in the quotable statements – naturalism, individualism, anti-institutionalism – are aspects on which the practical Thoreau actually demonstrates an amazing degree of in-between-ness. Thoreau speaks eloquently about the value of nature and individualism, but in his own life he predominantly settles for navigating the middle ground of compromise: between nature and society, and between individualism and institutionalism. In contrast to the last passage, consider one of Thoreau’s explanations for what he hopes to accomplish at Walden:

... no doubt they have designs on us for our benefit, in making the life of a civilized people an *institution*, in which the life of the individual is to a great extent absorbed, in order to preserve and perfect that of the race. But I wish to show at what a sacrifice this advantage is at present obtained, and to suggest that we may possibly so live as to secure all the advantage without suffering any of the disadvantage. (28)

If this statement is taken seriously, then the preceding quote must be interpreted with some degree of complication. One now realizes that, even though Thoreau might rhetorically celebrate the advantages of the “primitive ages,” he does not actually present them as a practical model for modern man to reformat his life by. In reality, Thoreau recognizes the benefit of “making the civilized life of people an *institution*,” and he simply wants to figure out how to “secure all the advantage without suffering any of the disadvantage.” It is really quite hard to reconcile the popular myth of Thoreau with these words, yet he plainly says that he is not adamantly anti-institutional so much as he is institutionally wary, and that he would rather figure out a way to take the best of both worlds. Thoreau re-emphasizes this point when he says that “we are not so degenerate but that we might possibly live in a cave or a wigwam, or wear skins to-day, it certainly is better to accept the advantages, though so dearly bought, which the invention and industry of mankind offer”(35).

My intent in discussing Thoreau’s in-between-ness is not to undermine him or to call him a hypocrite. My motive is only to show that Thoreau’s actions in Walden place him somewhere in the interstitial realm between absolute self-sufficient individualism and total incorporation into society. This hybrid status applies to his relationship to nature as well, because although he lives with closer affinity to his natural setting, he is also in earshot of the train route to Boston, and he participates in not entirely natural activities like building a house and cultivating non-native crops. And because his true course lies somewhere between these oppositional domains, Thoreau is in a unique position to use the logic of one hemisphere as a means of explaining and rationalizing the order of the other. Thoreau looks upon nature with the gaze of a human who was brought up in the

social structure of human institutions. At the same time, he looks at his fellow men and describes them with the attributes that one sees in nature – in animals.

Though the tendency is to over-emphasize Thoreau's naturalness, to the point of leaving out the fact that his stated goal is actually picking and choosing the best parts of society at the same time as leaving the cons, Thoreau's popular association with naturalism is very telling of the power of his figure, which is that he is in a position to *naturalize* institutions that are, in truth, constructed. The process of *naturalizing* is an immensely persuasive, though subtle, discursive strategy that often is quite nefarious. By "naturalize," I mean looking at the qualities of something that is not necessarily organic, but to say that it's the way that it is because nature made it so. If your argument of naturalization is accepted, whether rightly or wrongly, then you have put the naturalized entity beyond critique. Nature is symbolic of everything that simply must be accepted as is, because ultimately there is no way of controlling it. When women are told that they belong in the home all day long because they are the natural child bearers, the purely social arrangement of being in the home or not is naturalized with biological arguments of reproduction, and thus (in some people's minds) put beyond dispute. Thoreau, because he is so predominantly accepted as a figure of naturalism, is in a potential position to naturalize whatever subjects he observes and talks about. Frequently, those subjects are social institutions. Since he weighs in so strongly on questions of individualism versus institutionalism, and labor self-sufficiency versus specialized professionalism, Thoreau is in a position to naturalize the social structures of institutionalism and professionalism – even while he seems to be arguing for their moderation.

* * *

Thoreau's Walden is the document of a practical pursuit of otherwise very abstract ideals laid out by Emerson- ideals of self-reliance, strict individualism, and closeness with nature. Unfortunately for Thoreau, he comes in range of hazards that Emerson himself neatly skirts, which has to do with the fact that problems and contradictions more often arise not in the statement of a theory (Emerson's field), but in the conversion of the theory into practice (Thoreau's project). Before we look any more at the perils of implementation, we'll look briefly at the source material- Emerson's seminal teachings.

Thoreau initially seems easy to place, and he lends himself to romantic idealization, partially because he pursues tenets that are very familiar thanks to their prominent and articulate expression by Emerson. The first of these values, and the aspect to which Walden is often reduced in interpretation, is the spiritual enlightenment of pursuing closeness with the natural world. When Emerson says that "[t]he first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature... Ever the winds blow; ever the grass grows... The scholar is he of all men whom this spectacle most engages,"⁵ it is easy to trace Thoreau's intellectual inheritance. These words contextualize Thoreau's determination, and it becomes clear why a promising and intelligent young man would decide to spend years in quiet observation of the passing seasons, and of the plants and animals that fill Walden Pond with life. Emerson's clout lifts up the pursuit of closeness with nature so that disciples like Thoreau can feel assured that their primitive endeavors are not mean, but on the contrary are the true end of

⁵ Emerson, The American Scholar pg. 55

scholarship and philosophy. Although there is at least one moment when Thoreau's eagerness for natural integration seems to falter, it is quickly ameliorated by the mysteriously blissful stimuli of the natural world. As he tiredly walks the long path to his cabin, he says: "my haste to catch pickerel, wading in retired meadows, in sloughs and bog-holes, in forlorn and savage places, appeared for an instant trivial to me who had been sent to school and college; but as I ran down the hill toward the reddening west... my Good Genius seemed to say, - Go fish... and rest thee by many brooks and hearthsides without misgiving"(184). So even Thoreau himself is affected by the compulsion to do things that are socially valued in accordance with the prestige that his education merits. However, these are external considerations, imparted by society, and Thoreau needs only to mind his "Good Genius" in order to remember as much.

But what is a "Good Genius," where does it come from, and how does it help Thoreau to overcome the persuasions of society's⁶ conventional logic? The answer to this is at the root of Emerson's advocacy for "self-reliance," which is the title of one of his essays. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson argues that every individual is spiritually endowed with a particular species of intrinsic awareness and instinct: "that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct... we

⁶ I cringe to throw around words like society and institution so loosely, because they are indicative of severe generalization. However, these are the terms that Thoreau himself uses, and I don't have any choice but to enter the conversation on the level that he sets. However, I *can* offer a quote of Emerson's that gives a decent enough working definition of "society" for our purposes: "[m]an is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier. In the *divided* or social state, these functions are parceled out to individuals, each of whom aims to do his stint of the joint work, whilst each other performs his."(54 The American Scholar). And this gives a sense of what Thoreau might mean by 'institution:' "But wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they can, constrain him to belong to their desperate odd-fellow society"(153).

denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions.”⁷ The most common condition of humanity, he says, is that in which this instinct is suppressed. Even among the educated, instinct is frequently ignored out of an intellectual preference for the printed genius of recognized luminaries. But no printed, spoken, or other representation of genius can ever come close to the experience of independently hearing and accepting one’s own innate genius. The refinement of sensitivity to your own genius is called self culture, and Emerson believes that it should be every individual’s first priority to develop self culture. Societal, academic, and practical convention should always come second to one’s intrinsic genius.

These two Emersonian tenets: first, that the truest form of genius is self directed, intrinsic, and spontaneous; it is not necessary to imbibe the genius of others in order to cultivate you own, and second, that nature should be the foremost influence upon the individual in fostering their own self culture, are absolutely central to Walden. They are so central, in fact, that it is tempting to interpret Walden more as an indirect product of Emerson than a unique work of Henry David Thoreau. The reason that doing so would be a mistake is that Walden, unlike Emerson’s works, is not purely a tract on principle- it is all about taking principles and implementing them into specific actions and modes of living. Thoreau documents very definite behaviors, and it is easy to infer that he is arguing, by means of example, that other people should emulate those behaviors in specific ways. It is very difficult to pin Emerson down to any specific critique, because he floats above it in a haven of abstraction and practical vagueness. But Thoreau, by taking up the task of defining specific habits, and then having the courage to promote

⁷ Emerson, Self Reliance pg. 155

those habits to others, makes himself vulnerable to numerous critiques. These are critiques that originate in Emerson, but can't really be discussed in a concrete way until they are related by Thoreau into the accessible, debatable, and occasionally objectionable words of Walden.

* * *

Walden was published just on the eve of the Civil War, which places it in the midst of a period of cultural flux: between a time when America subscribed predominantly to an Emersonian culture of individualism, and the subsequently emerging culture of institutionalism that was full fledged by the end of the Civil War. This is a broad paradigm shift that George Fredrickson attempts to explain in The Inner Civil War. In intuitive ways, the Civil War simply required a degree of material provisioning and organizational cohesiveness that necessitated the assembly of well structured institutional management. At the same time, there was a deeper intellectual shift that the war brought about, which can generally be summarized as a movement away from sentimentality.

“The hardships of war, one must conclude, could contribute to a very tough or ‘aristocratic’ attitude toward the ordinary sufferings of humanity, at least in the case of New England gentlemen who prided themselves on their ability to bear up under severe stress. It is noteworthy that De Forest and Holmes, the pioneers of ‘realism’ in their respective fields, literature and the law, should have demonstrated in their attitudes toward the suffering of war an early form of their contempt for the ‘soft’ and ‘sentimental’ way of reacting to what they considered as unavoidable conditions.”⁸

In the North, the traditionally elite classes came to the forefront as political and military proponents of the war. To maintain commitment to the cause despite the obvious and widespread human suffering that it incurred, it was necessary to become somewhat indifferent to hardship. The Civil War made Northeastern elitists callous to the sufferings of the common person, which ideologically prepared them for the cold, impersonal,

⁸ Fredrickson, The Inner Civil War pg. 87

efficiency of the institutional structure. Many Northerners entered the Civil War with a strong sense of ideological assurance, confident that their cause was founded on underlying principles whose harmony and righteousness were beyond question. To these starry eyed ideologues, the bloody reality of the war was a disheartening shock. They relinquished their faith in the possibility for ideological unity and resigned themselves to the institution. The new ideal soldier did not try to identify principles on which he fought, because to do so would only cause confusion. The new ideal soldier put ideological harmony out of his mind, and embraced his lot with complete fervor, just for the honorability of having a task and doing it well. In a world that no longer seemed to make sense, submitting yourself to an institutional role and fulfilling it dutifully was the highest ideal. This relationship between the individual and the institution persisted long after the soldiers had lain down their weapons, and it became the enduring institutional culture of peacetime America as well.

For the sake of making his case that the Civil War precipitated a movement towards institutionalism, Fredrickson positions individualism and institutionalism as direct ideological opposites. While I accept this stance generally, which is, after all, why I'm using Fredrickson's argument to contextualize institutionalism in 19th century America, I disagree with the assumption that individualism and institutionalism are inherently exclusive. They were certainly opposites in the abstract way that Emerson dealt with them, but within the messier context of its practical application by Thoreau, individualism becomes a guiding principle that is actually very conducive to an institutionalized professional ambition and value system. Fixation on individualism is critical to the professional worker, so that he can feel reassured in committing wholly to

the course that he charts through his institutions of employment. “The careerist was a person in flight, striving to realize the total resources of an inner nature, and moving aloft supported by that profound representation of natural power called character.”⁹ Even though the professional worker is constrained by the parameters of his institution of employment, or if he is an entrepreneur, by the more general institution of the professional-client relationship, self-interest, and therefore individualism, is still a driving force. This is true in more than a strictly pecuniary sense. The professional careerist gained, from the specific parameters of his position, a framework by which to understand his own true self and inner nature – to understand himself as a discrete entity, an individual.

The professional worker, once settled into the comfortable narrowness of his own career niche, is able to imagine that he is as alone, empowered, and self-directed within this little role as Thoreau was within the tiny cabin of his own making. His pecuniary income, although a trite production compared with what Thoreau was trying to achieve, still feels like a sort of self-sufficiency. The money is rightly his, earned without anybody else’s help, and he has deserved it because of the unique professional role that he holds, in accordance with his own intrinsic nature. Although his intense specialization is quite the opposite of what Thoreau was practically advocating, he could rationalize the highly specific occupation as something whose values – of self-sufficiency and adherence to an intuitive, intrinsic nature – are somehow in agreement with Walden’s mythos. The material and economic reality of America after the Civil War took an inevitable trajectory towards institutionalism and professionalism. It seemed necessary to face the arduous

⁹ Bledstein The Culture of Professionalism pg. 112

task of refuting existing ideals and supplanting them with new ones, so that individuals could feel a sense of ideological agreement with their occupational realities. But Walden shows that the old anti-institutional mentalities, by virtue of their emphasis on naturalism and individualism, could be recycled and translated into the new ideal. The new paradigm, through some form of opportunistic perversion, usually has more continuity with the past than is immediately obvious. The cabin in the woods is transmuted into a cubicle, personal meditation on one's nature becomes the pursuit of a *profession* with a specific (therefore secure and lucrative) nature, and self-culture becomes self-promotion.

Chapter 2: Radical Individualism

How The Cult of Self-Sufficiency Can Deny Privilege and Justify Self-Interest

This chapter is devoted to demonstrating a very basic fact about Walden, which is that Thoreau is pretty much a self-obsessed snob; and this isn't just a point to be made flippantly – for meanness's sake. Self-centeredness is actually a very important quality of Walden. In the context of so much solitude, Thoreau has no choice but to make the book very much about himself. To read Walden is to become Thoreau: to make *his* observations with him, to look over his shoulder as *he* does his chores, and to reason through the theories that *he* finds most appealing. Thoreau's commitments to self-culture and self-sufficiency, which were fostered by Emerson, have transformed Walden into a book that is a surprisingly good example of egoism. This is an aspect of Walden that is worth commenting upon, and that we should be able to discuss without worrying that its acknowledgement entails a wholesale repudiation. Thoreau's sincerest intention is to help individuals with being happier and improving their lots in life, which is undoubtedly a

positive and respectable aim. But at the same time, Thoreau's good intentions do raise the question of why he should be entitled to give out all of this life advice, and the answer has a lot to do with the fact that Thoreau has a distinct streak of intellectual self-importance. He writes patronizingly, and with a sense of superiority, speaking down to the common reader from his own exalted, self-conferred, status as a philosopher.

Thoreau's critiques, though intended to be instructive towards the improvement of human lives, show through with deep disdain, and at these times his elitism is distinct. He says, "society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had time to acquire any new value for each other. We meet at meals three times a-day, and give each other a new taste of that old musty cheese that we are"(121). Thoreau does use the word "we," but the inclusion seems like it is only a superficial instance of self-criticism. After all, he has written a whole book about himself, so he clearly does not think that he is just a block of "old musty cheese." But the fact that he says so of social interaction in general makes him the epitome of antipathy. To him, it is not worth meeting another person unless they have had the time to "acquire any new value." In other words, interacting socially with a person simply for the sake of enjoying their presence is not sufficiently worthwhile to Thoreau. He requires the accumulation of the type of intellectual content that only time spent alone can provide. Since his sole interest in socialization is to acquire "new value" of an intellectual sort, the frequency of his aloneness shows that Thoreau does not consider his fellows to be a very rich source. He thinks that because he is willing to live according to a discipline of simplicity, and because he can read Latin and Greek classics in their original forms, he is of the highest intellectual caliber.

George Fredrickson positions the culture of Transcendentalism, which was the predominant Northeastern ideology before the Civil War, as the natural opposite of socially conservative elitism. With regard to Walden in particular, I tend to disagree with the soundness of this opposition. Summarizing the outlook of one prominent conservative from the 1850's, Fredrickson says:

Norton believed, in other words, that the cultivated class must seize control of society and give it practical directions. This elitist doctrine, heretical as it seemed in the America of the 1850's, was firmly rooted in the New England tradition. Norton was seeking a return to the Federalist era, when 'the intelligent and prosperous classes' had dominated New England society and molded its ideas.¹⁰

I would argue that Thoreau, despite being a student of Emerson, is substantially in line with this "elitist doctrine," and that he too shows signs of being "firmly rooted in the New England tradition" of elitism. Thoreau obviously does not believe that he is entitled to taking political authority over society in any way, but he clearly does regard himself as belonging to a more cultivated class. By writing Walden, Thoreau is making a direct effort to mold the ideas of his readership, and to impart enlightened ideals from the top down.

Elitism figures very interestingly with Transcendentalism, because although a transcendentalist like Thoreau is theoretically opposed to elitism if it is framed and enforced by institutional structures, his anti-institutional commitment to individualism, to himself, is predicated on the elitist assumption that he has no use for anybody else's input, that his own innate genius is more valuable than any socialization. For this reason, Thoreau's snobbishness, which we might more specifically refer to as intellectual elitism, is substantiated and encouraged by his most basic Transcendentalist views. In the tradition of Emerson, Thoreau focuses much too wholly on the self-sufficiency of the

¹⁰ Fredrickson, The Inner Civil War. Pg. 32

individual, to the point that he ignores the many constraints which are often placed on a person's agency. In his valorization of individualism, Thoreau denies the existence of privilege. This is conducive to the logic of institutions, and professional workers within those institutions, because it negates the possibility that institutional hierarchies might be a source of unfair privilege. To those who would seek to defend institutional structures and thinking, the success or failure of an institutional worker can thus be construed as a purely defensible matter of meritocracy, determined exclusively by the worker's own willingness and ability.

For the purpose of looking at the underlying tenets of Walden, it is instructive to turn back to Emerson, who so articulately lays out the principles by which Thoreau guides himself. Emerson very strongly emphasizes that self culture should be the preeminent ambition of every individual. This is potentially an equal-opportunity conception of the route to human value, because it asserts that every person contains genius within himself, and that he doesn't need anybody else's help in realizing it. Thus, it would seem that class, race, gender, and background can't interfere with any individual's ability of achieving greatness. Emerson says that "[t]he one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although, in almost all men, obstructed, and as yet unborn... The book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind, stop with some past utterance of genius."¹¹ Emerson adamantly downplays the importance of institution in equipping genius and potential. He says that books, colleges, and schools of art are ultimately trivial influences when it comes to the formation of genius, because they simply recapitulate

¹¹ Emerson, The American Scholar pg. 57

former instances of genius. What books, colleges, and schools of art all have in common is that they are not available to every level of society, so the diminishment of their importance could seem to offer consolation and opportunity to the people who don't have access to them. By rejecting an orthodox adherence to these institutional means of enrichment, Emerson seems to be a grassroots egalitarian.

However, the advantage of a privileged relationship to these institutions is undeniable. I will mention, but not dwell upon, the fact that Emerson and Thoreau were both products of prestigious American universities, and that this training probably equipped them to become the influential voices that they are. At a different time, Emerson even admits the benefit of formal, institutionalized schooling, saying "...[o]f course, there is a portion of reading quite indispensable to a wise man. History and exact science he must learn by laborious reading. Colleges, in like manner, have their indispensable office."¹² So there is, after all, an advantage attached to being from a class background that grants access to formal schooling (schooling is just the first of many advantageous institutions that a privileged person might pass through during his life). By so vocally downplaying the importance of institutional affiliation, Emerson could potentially obscure structural inequality. Speaking of the same problem with respect to race privilege, Richard Dyer writes:

Having no content, we [white people] can't see that we have anything that accounts for our position of privilege and power. This is itself crucial to the security with which we occupy that position. As Peggy McIntosh argues, a white person is taught to believe that all that she or he does, good and ill, all that we achieve, is to be accounted for in terms of our individuality. It is intolerable to realize that we may get a job or a nice house, or a helpful response at school or in hospitals, because of our skin colour, not because of the unique, achieving individual we must believe ourselves to be.¹³

¹² Emerson, *The American Scholar* pg. 59

¹³ Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Whiteness*, pg. 9

Strong individualism can be construed as egalitarian in some contexts, but overstating individualism is a mechanism for denial amongst the privileged. Emerson never quite descends far enough from the level of abstraction to reveal whether this problem would manifest itself in his practical values. But Thoreau, being the practical Emersonian, implements the doctrine of self-reliance in a way that ignores the importance of privilege. Thoreau is full of suggested lifestyle modifications for the people that he comes across, and he is usually indignant when they are not implemented right away, because he puts *all* responsibility on the individual, whose actual agency is less than Thoreau is capable of understanding.

* * *

There is a poor Irish family down the road from Thoreau, with the paterfamilias John Field at their head:

An honest, hard-working, but shiftless man plainly was John Field; and his wife- she too was brave to cook so many successive dinners in the recesses of that lofty stove; with round greasy face and bare breast, still thinking to improve her condition one day; with the never-absent mop in one hand, and yet no effects of it visible anywhere. (182)

Thoreau's condescension is quite evident, from romantically admiring the "honest, hard-working" values associated with simple folk, to commenting upon the "greasy face and bare breast" of Mrs. Fields. Even in his attempted compliment to Mrs. Field for being "brave to cook so many successive dinners," there is an implicit judgment – that the conditions are inhuman enough that merely cooking dinner for this family *is* an act of bravery. Thoreau immediately takes it upon himself to educate the simple lout with helpful tips on agriculture, diet, thrift, and employment. The advice, of course, is not immediately acted upon, and so Thoreau concludes "the culture of an Irishman is an enterprise to be taken upon with a sort of moral bog hoe"(183). Revealing significant

unawareness, Thoreau never recognizes that John Field has less of a margin for experimentation than himself, considering that John Field is stretched to provide for a whole family, and Thoreau for one person only. In one helpful observation, Thoreau comments that John Field could build his own home by his own hands in just several months time, and thus avoid paying rent. Somehow, Thoreau seems not to understand that several months is a long lapse to take from feeding your family, and that being eternally indebted to a landlord is a lesser evil than starving in the time that it would take to construct a home. Thoreau means to help John Field, and he is aware of the way that systems of wage labor and eternal indebtedness keep the poor farmer downtrodden. But Thoreau is very unfair for assuming that a moment of inspired decisiveness and clever self-reliance is all that John Field needs – all that prevents him from overcoming his predicament.

Thoreau lives to the same material standard as John Field (actually, he boasts that neighboring shanty dwellers, with their attachment to tea, coffee, and meat, live more lavishly than himself), but the fact that they live under similar conditions does not mean that Thoreau perceives any inherent equality of intellectual status between himself and his neighbor. While he is undeniably sympathetic to the hard working life of a farmer -- “... the inhabitants [of New England] have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways”(4) -- Thoreau is simultaneously quite dismissive. In Thoreau’s mind there is a critical distinction between himself and farmer John Fields: Thoreau’s material austerity is the result of a conscious and philosophically informed choice, while John Fields is simply poor and destitute because that’s the most that he can manage. The size of the gap that Thoreau imagines between himself and the common

farmer is evident in his definition of a philosopher: “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”(13). This is a very obnoxious statement of intellectual elitism-- that because his commitment to simple living is founded upon a love of wisdom, Thoreau is a philosopher, but his neighbor down the road, despite being just as materially modest, is not.

In an argument against the value of philanthropy, Thoreau says: “...often the poor man is not so cold and hungry as he is dirty and ragged and gross. It is partly his taste, and not merely his misfortune. If you give him money, he will perhaps buy more rags with it...”(66). Thoreau’s intended point is that a person’s condition is determined by pride, care, discipline, and cleverness more than the amount of money at his disposal. Thoreau used just as little money as the common pauper while he was living in the woods, but because he was industrious, restrained, and diligent, he was able to keep his tiny house always warm, his practical clothes always clean, and his stomach usually full, though only with common foods. But it is difficult not to read Thoreau’s comment without feeling that he is basically being unfair. The poor man makes such a piteous image because he is “dirty and ragged and gross,” which is due to his “taste, and not merely his misfortune.” If ever there were a red flag for snobbish elitism, it is the word “taste.” Taste is about choice- a person with good taste chooses good things, whether it’s art, wine, or friends. By saying that the poor man looks so grossly poor as a matter of taste is to say that the poor man had a choice for who he would be, and that it was through foolish selection that he came by such an unfortunate outcome. The problem,

obviously, is that people don't always have choices, and thus *taste* can have nothing to do with why they are poor.

To explain disadvantage as a matter of poor taste is essentially to deny the existence of privilege. If everybody were able to choose their outcome, but simply had played their cards poorly, then the upper class could rationalize their way out of feeling guilt or responsibility for society's inherent disparities. When the playing field is even, the victor is never obliged to show remorse. Although a doctrine of individualism is very liberal in the sense that it empowers self-directed intuition in the face of institutionalism, it can have the perverse effect of negating the roles that chance and privilege play in an individual's outcome. Individualism and the "taste" based outlook on poverty are closely related.

Thoreau believes in a spectrum of inherent merit that ranges from his own exalted status as a "philosopher" down to the humbler dregs like John Field who, due to lack of "taste" and vision, *choose* to live to an inferior standard. His Transcendentalist valorization of "self-reliance" places too much emphasis on the directedness of an individual's will, thus eclipsing an adequate appreciation of the privileges that either enable or inhibit an individual's course towards self realization. Placing all of the onus on individuals, and watching whether they sink or swim without being cognizant of the numerous assets and burdens that shape their outcomes, the well-off are able to distance themselves from potential feelings of guilt or responsibility. However, the denial of privilege is not just a useful delusion for the upper class- it is also a necessary mentality for the rising professional class of post Civil War America. In The Culture of Professionalism, Bledstein writes that:

The middle-class American has traditionally rejected the idea that any classes and any permanent forms of privilege divide American society. On the one hand, he has believed that those ambitious individuals who take full advantage of their opportunities will be rewarded by society with a rising material standard of consumption.¹⁴

Thoreau, of course, does not support the middle-class's aspiration towards a rising material standard of consumption, but he does bolster the necessarily underlying conviction that privileges can be overcome with individual merit and audacious self-reliance. America's rising professional middle-class would never have had the courage to commit themselves to specialized career courses if they did not believe that social ascendancy was possible. The irony is that the middle-class could take a concept like self-reliance and interpret it in a manner that would mostly have been anathema to Thoreau. To both Thoreau and to the rising professionals, self-reliance meant that, through radical individualism, they could provide for themselves materially. For Thoreau, the radical individualism amounted to reducing his social dependencies through diversification of occupation, and providing for himself materially meant using his own hands. To the professionals, radical individualism meant enhancing the uniqueness of their social identities by choosing increasingly specialized professional career niches, and providing for themselves meant spending a comfortably earned salary whose continued supply was assured by the uniqueness of their professional occupations. Professionals needed to have a healthy sense of egoism in order to proceed undaunted, and Thoreau, despite disagreeing with just about every practical implication professionalism, is an uncannily eloquent proponent of egoism.

¹⁴ Bledstein, The Culture of Professionalism pg. 7

Chapter 3: Naturalism

Animal Hierarchies and The Organic Metaphor for Institutional Structures

There is some of the same fitness in a man's building his own house that there is in a bird's building its own nest. Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged?(40).

Thoreau's experiment in simplified living is, amongst other things, a quest to become more familiar with nature. The great lengths that he goes to in order to occupy a context that is conducive to natural communion could potentially suggest that Thoreau regards nature as an exotic externality – something that is detached and unknown to himself, but for this reason is mysteriously appealing and worth learning more about. However, it is very clear that Thoreau's naturalism runs much deeper than this, and that he is more than just a tourist observer in nature. Thoreau is drawn to the woods because he recognizes a fundamentally wild and natural element that is indigenous to his own being. He clearly thinks that man is descended from the wildness of animals, that savage men represent the transitional link between animal and civilized man, and that even the civilized man contains potent vestiges of his animalistic nature. In a less expected move, Thoreau reverses the direction of his lens and also sees the animals in his environment through the patterns of societal organization; he imagines that the animals socialize, abide hierarchies, cooperate, compete, and work, all on terms similar to those by which individual humans interrelate within society. To discuss humans as though they were animals, and animal hierarchies as though they were human institutions, turns out to be a compelling argument in defense of the institutional structures that Thoreau otherwise outspokenly deplores. It suggests continuity between the human realm and the natural,

animal world, which implies that human institutions, even in their oppressive manifestations, are a natural and inevitable occurrence.

Thoreau is much impressed with a woodsman who passes daily by Walden Pond en route to the timber stands in which he labors. Thoreau admires the simplicity, physical ability, and contentment of this workingman. "In him the animal man chiefly was developed. In physical endurance and contentment he was cousin to the pine and the rock... But the intellectual and what is called spiritual man in him were slumbering as in an infant"(131). Thoreau reduces the character down to two fundamental components: the spiritual man and the animal man. Thoreau seems to believe that each person is defined by the relative degree to which the spiritual/intellectual versus the animal man is activated. Even though he regards himself as a member of the intellectual elite, Thoreau is open enough to the existence of animal nature that he acknowledges its presence even within his own character. He says:

I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw... while I lived at the pond, I found myself ranging the woods, like a half-starved hound, with a strange abandonment, seeking some kind of venison which I might devour, and no morsel could not have been too savage for me. The wildest scenes had become unaccountably familiar. I found in myself, 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. (187)

The whole scene seems a bit odd coming from the same Thoreau who very seriously regards himself as a philosopher, and who elsewhere puts on airs about being able to read classics in Latin and Greek. But Thoreau's whole point is that the presence of a spiritual/intellectual temperament is not to the exclusion of the most basic animal nature, thus even Thoreau is occasionally struck with the urge to seize a wriggling woodchuck in his jaws and eat it raw. If all humans are directed by an ancestrally savage disposition, then Thoreau suggests that there is a certain powerlessness in the face of nature. At the

very least, Thoreau is saying that humans are partially governed by the same laws that dictate the interaction between animals: strength, competition, and productive capacity. These just happen to be the same laws that are used to justify the disparities inherent to any capitalist economy. These disparities, in turn, are fundamental to the pecuniary advantage aspired to by the rising and ambitious professional worker.

The blurring of the divide between humans and animals goes both directions at Walden Pond; just as often as humans are characterized as animals, Thoreau observes animals in terms that reference distinctly human and societal aspects. Ants prove to be an especially effective medium for this blurring, because they are distinctly not human, and yet they are a highly organized, socially specialized, colonial species whose hierarchy and division of labor are perfectly analogous to human institutions. Just outside of his own doorstep, Thoreau comes across a heroic, gory, war between ant species, to which he plays the enthralled and shocked spectator. He is absolutely fascinated by the severity of the struggle, and by the many parallels that he finds between insect combat and conflict on the human scale. The insects become “legions of Myrmidons”(204), and the two sides are “the red republicans on the one hand, and the black imperialists on the other”(204). As he hones in on one particular duel, Thoreau remarks that he “should not have wondered by this time to find that they had their respective musical bands stationed on some eminent chip, and playing their national airs the while, to excite the slow and cheer the dying combatants... [he has] no doubt that it was a principle they fought for, as much as our ancestors, and not to avoid a threepenny tax on their tea”(205).

This scene obviously evokes all of the disturbing and visceral traumas inherent to warfare on the human scale, which in itself feels like a sort of betrayal- that Thoreau

would break the innocence of his comfortable woodsy narrative by dwelling on such a brutal event. But there is also a deeply bitter irony that underlies his commentary. In the context of ant warfare, the idea of opposing musical bands standing in place to whip up nationalistic fervor gleams with a sense of absurdity. How silly the thought of ants holding little piccolos and drums; more significantly, how trite the musical bands seem for trying to “cheer the dying combatants,” and how callous it is to even attempt to interject cheer into dying moments. Of course, the poignant realization is that the more bitter inhumanities of this scene frequently *are* acted out by human combatants. That Thoreau uses the ants as an allegory for promoting his pacifist values is clear, but this does not mean that the comparison between man and animal is strictly contrived for a political point. After all, it is a comparison that literally presented itself at Thoreau’s doorstep, so the equivalences that he perceives between human institutions and animal hierarchies are the product of sincere observation. Thoreau has observed that man has an aspect of animal nature, and the ant warfare reveals that animals also have a tendency to exhibit distinctly human organization.

But as well as the ant war demonstrates institutional social structure within the animal realm, the leap that it takes to connect ant organization to human structure is not very wide. For this reason, the scene on its own might not be sufficiently compelling for showing what is actually a consistent tendency of Thoreau – conveying animals in social terms, and thus establishing an organic metaphor to attach to human institutions. The argument is more convincing when re-examined in relation to a much less obviously social animal- the fox. “Sometimes I heard the foxes as they ranged over the snow crust... barking raggedly and demonically like forest dogs... if we take the ages into

account, may there not be a civilization going on among brutes as well as men? They seemed to me to be rudimental, burrowing men, still standing on their defence, awaiting their transformation”(243). The foxes’ barking is what compels Thoreau to imagine that some form of “civilization” is “going on among brutes as well as men,” because it indicates that the animals communicate and coordinate. What is striking about this quotation is just how explicitly Thoreau states his point. Elsewhere, there are subtle insinuations that convey Thoreau’s mapping of human social hierarchies onto animal behavior, but in this instance he says it quite plainly: he suspects that animals operate with their own sort of ancient civilization. This view is based on a strange evolutionary outlook, which is that animals, including foxes, are in a coarser state of development “awaiting their transformation” into men. Humans are a fully refined form of the raw animal state, and animals have a yet unrealized human potential. Thoreau’s conflation goes both directions – animals to men and men to animals – but the combined effect is to show that there is a basic continuity between the animal realm and the human realm, because they are all creatures of nature. Since man and animal have the same natural origins, they are allowed to exhibit the same behaviors with the same lack of accountability. Nobody blames the fox for eating the rabbit, because it is in the fox’s nature to hunt his prey, and because nature endowed the fox the claws and fangs, making him the superior being. And if foxes are participants in civilization, because they are themselves unrefined beings suspended in their progression towards the highest state of all – humanness – then man is equally entitled to exploit the natural superiority that he was given over the lesser beings. This entitles humans on the one hand to exploit the natural world as a cache of resources and a dump for wastes, and on the other hand it

rationalizes the dominance that some humans hold over others as a naturally acceptable consequence of innate superiority.

Because they are his day-to-day neighbors, Thoreau becomes very familiar with the animals around Walden Pond. The relationship is one of affection, but it is also characterized by a paternalistic tone. In the wintertime when natural food supply is scarce, Thoreau takes pleasure in feeding the animals from his put up stores. “In the course of the winter I threw out half a bushel of ears of sweet-corn, which had not got ripe, on the snow crust by my door, and was amazed by watching the motions of the various animals which were baited by it”(243). In their turn, rabbits, red squirrels, jays, chickadees, and tit-mice all come to feed off of the food that Thoreau has put out. His description of the animals ascribes a unique order and characteristic by which each animal species come to take their portion of corn, which is in accordance with their particular animal natures; certain animals come at certain times of day, or feed in certain ways, and certain animals are relegated to gleaning the overlooked kernels left behind by the superior animal species. Within this feeding community, there is a definite spectrum of animal nature and power, but the animal who presides over all of them is Henry David Thoreau himself. The entire feeding spectacle originates from Thoreau’s decision to toss out corn, and the reason that he has access to such abundance at a scarce time of the year is because he had the industrious foresight to plant corn in the spring, tend it all summer, harvest it in the fall, and then store it for the winter. Thoreau is in the position to be the keystone provider of his animal community because he has the intelligence to understand the benefit of industry, investment, and saving. In a surprising way, Thoreau’s

paternalistic interaction with the animals puts a high valuation on these very conservatively capitalistic behaviors.

Thoreau probably did not *intend*, when describing his interactions with the natural world, to convey the idea that human institutions are reiterations of organic hierarchies, or the consequent conclusion that privilege and disparity are actually the justifiable result of natural competition according to naturally assigned intrinsic qualities. However, it is a fact that the emerging post Civil War culture of professionalism in America was actively exploiting these organic metaphors, in order to form a seemingly legitimate image of the world that they were creating. In the midst of this widely utilized rationalization, Walden had to be an opportune narrative to employ in favor of the nascent professional culture. There was something about Thoreau's domestic residence in the woods, close to animals and close to nature, that allowed him to be associated with overarching organic metaphors. Being a simultaneous representation of intellectual man and animal man, Thoreau was in the perfect position to capture organic metaphors and make them available for direct application to structures and institutions that exist within the human realm. Professional culture presented the career as a commodity whose reward and promise were in accordance with the individual's willingness and ability to fight for it. Americans "cultivated a new vision, a vertical vision that compelled persons to look upward, forever reaching toward their potential and their becoming, the fulfillment of their true nature."¹⁵ The idea that every individual had a "true nature" was absolutely central, because it represented the different positions within a stratified institutional society as extensions of the innate qualities possessed by the people in those positions. In

¹⁵ Bledstein Culture of Professionalism pg. 105

other words, what income level you filled was just a matter of figuring out whether you were a fox or a rabbit, and since those are naturally assigned identities, there was no need for the fox to regret the rabbit's vulnerability.

Burton Bledstein describes the ideology around the culture of professionalism in Mid-Victorian, post Civil War, America. In particular, he comments upon the concept of an intrinsic "nature" within the individual's character:

Every person was bound by his 'nature' in the everyday world. By uncovering and defining one's particular nature, every person became conscious not only of his ability but of his limitations. By freeing one's nature, by releasing one's inborn capacities, by being one's real self, a person became aware of the boundaries that circumscribed common abilities and talents. In the innermost self, in one's natural gifts and inheritance, a person recognized the restrictions of individual life... One of the deepest dualities of middle-class America was its simultaneous potential for determinism and acquiescence, self-control and self-knowledge within liberty; the potential for fate within freedom.¹⁶

Speaking in a broader cultural generalization, Bledstein actually gives a very nice articulation of the conflicting duality that I find specifically in Thoreau's naturalism. Bledstein points out that the emphasis on the "nature" of character causes the individual to have a heightened awareness of his abilities, but also his limitations, which can be a form of "fate within freedom." The possibility for this duality explains how Thoreau could advise his readers to convene more closely with nature and their natural selves, meaning only that they should distance themselves from institutional structures if anything, yet he also frames an outlook that potentially legitimizes these very structures. Commuting with nature is a worthwhile undertaking, he says, because it puts you in touch with your animalistic vestiges – the inheritance of your savage natural ancestry. This is a part of yourself, Thoreau believes, that social institutions can neither comprehend nor corrupt; he only sees the "freedom" that a concept of nature entails. The

¹⁶ *ibid.* pg. 54-55

culture of professionalism, on the other hand, takes the nature and turns it into “fate,” into career niche determinism.

The most basic assertion of this argument has been that Thoreau unintentionally *naturalizes* social institutions, thus legitimizing the disparities that they set up, and justifying the extreme specialization of the professional roles within them. This all builds off of the observation that Thoreau queers the duality between savage and intellectual states, establishing a continuum from animal to man. When social entities get conflated with basic natural forces, the artificiality of the social entity is rebuked by means of an organic metaphor, because nature is held up as the irrefutable trump card. I acknowledge that there might be some reluctance to accept that Thoreau blurs animal and man, or that this in any way justifies institutionalism. After all, Thoreau clearly did not *intend* to legitimize institutions, especially when he was writing about nature. Perhaps the fact that he crosses the language over from one realm to the other is merely a matter of expression, which doesn't in itself amount to either a contradiction or even fertile grounds for opportunistic professionals to *misinterpret* his meaning. However, Thoreau gives good reason to believe that his most basic philosophy relates all things in the world to one another, because he perceives a single animating origin for all things, big or small. This origin could be called “nature” or it could be called “God,” but the point is that recognizing a continuity between man and animal is no radical thing, because Thoreau sees continuity between all earthly things.

His view of continuity is most beautifully evident when he walks along the railroad bank in the springtime. He observes “the forms which thawing sand and clay assume in flowing”(270). As the sun strikes the frozen bank, the clay and sand turn liquid

and seep out into grotesque vegetal formations. “As it flows it takes the forms of sappy leaves or vines,” in which Thoreau recognizes the shapes of “lichens... coral, of leopards’ paws or birds’ feet, of brain or lungs or bowels, and excrements of all kinds.” Thoreau launches into a spate of meditations on the significance of the forms that he is seeing. Overwhelmingly, his conclusion is that these flowing patterns are leaves, and that the leaf is the single basic design element of which everything else in the world is some type of reiteration. He really gets excited by this idea, and turns to etymology as proof of his belief that everything is descended from an authentic, well patterned origin, just as English words are variations of Latin and Greek.

No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labours with the idea inwardly. The atoms have already learned this law, and are pregnant by it. The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype. *Internally*, whether in the globe or animal body, it is a moist thick *lobe*, a word especially applicable to the liver and lungs and the *leaves* of fat (λεῖβω, *labour*, *lapsus*, to flow or slip downward, a lapsing; λoβoσξ, *globus*, lobe, globe; also lap, flap, and many other words), *externally* a dry thin *leaf*, even as the *f* and *v* are a pressed and dried *b*. The radicals of lobe are lb, the soft mass of the b (single lobed, or B, double lobed, with a liquid *l* behind it pressing it forward. In globe, *glb*, the guttural *g* adds to the meaning the capacity of the throat. The feathers and wings of birds are still drier and thinner leaves. (271).

It is really quite striking the extent to which Thoreau has taken this one natural observation and elaborated it into an entire philosophy. He observes a physical similarity (though I find it hard to picture) between the seep of the thawing bank and the leaves of the trees. The seeping clays come to stand for the internal composition of the earth, which shows that the interior is composed of the same basic element of design as the exterior, the leaf. This leads to the conclusion that internal organs also are leaves, as are the fat and flesh that are stacked on a person’s body, as well as the wings of birds and bugs – physically, everything is a leaf. But Thoreau goes onto evince even greater faith in the harmony of design when he describes how English words for leaf parts and bodily organs have Latin and Greek origins. The original words have core meanings that correlate to the

intrinsic, natural, essence of the things they describe. Just as the leaf is an almost methodically consistent physical design element on the planet, language is structured with harmonious patterns that extend back to their etymological patterns. With a poet's appreciation of assonance, Thoreau remarks on the way that even the physical experience of pronouncing a word is logically linked to its meaning.

On the most basic philosophical level, Thoreau believes that the world is just a reiteration of basic forms and patterns. This consistency of design crosses over from the physical composition of the natural world to the qualities that give meaning to language. "Thus it seemed that this one hill-side illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature. The Maker of this earth but patented a leaf"(273). If Thoreau reads such intentionality and repetition into the compositional elements of the earth, ranging from railroad banks to ancient languages, then it is no stretch whatsoever to say that institutional professional hierarchies are but one iteration of a design pattern that began in nature; the stratified ranking of animal species according to their intrinsic and natural characteristics. The continuity between man and animal, thus between man made institutions and animal hierarchies, is no more than a modest and logical application of the leaf principle.

Conclusion:

In this project, I have taken somewhat of a contrarian stance; I have chosen to read Walden in a light that is counter to the predominant interpretation of this extremely well known and seminal American text. By social and historical considerations, Walden just happened to be published at an extraordinarily significant time in America, the decade before the Civil War. Thoreau lived and wrote right in the midst of significant material

and historical changes that would change the very structure of American society, including its economy, industries, employment, and even its human and physical geography. It has been observed that meaningful cultural changes accompanied this historical juncture, because the new economic and material paradigm was expanded to a scale that absolutely necessitated institutional hierarchy. Likewise, the worker was decreasingly characterized by self direction or improvisation, and more so by highly specialized and formally trained labor within a structured arrangement, an institution, whose larger aim the professional worker was subservient to. Thus, cultures of professionalism and institutionalism arose, to match and facilitate the inevitable historical, material, economic transitions that were taking place.

To the extent that I have been a contrarian, it has only been against the easy assumption that Thoreau's Walden is completely antithetical to the changes taking place around it and after it, or that it should be interpreted sentimentally as a precious relic of the old paradigm. Thoreau was obviously very aware of the changes of modernity that were taking place around him; and, although it may not have seemed so, it has been out of a sort of respect for Thoreau's complexity that I have assumed that Walden contains elements of the difficult historical changes in its midst, rather than simply treating it as a flat refutation of them. I have argued that Thoreau's commitments to individualism and to naturalism are ideologically transmutable tenets, which in a way became the raw material for the nascent cultures of professionalism and institutionalism in America.

Professionalism and institutionalism are so fundamental to our current American culture, and Walden is so basic to our identity and our self-sufficient, pastoral mythos, that the two big players simply have to have met. If there were not some sort of subtle

ideological compromise between the two seemingly opposite outlooks, then modern American consciousness would have a dramatic and troubling rift between some of its most central influences. And as I have argued, I believe that there is indeed some common ground. What is still not entirely clear is where or when to define this common ground as having emerged. Thoreau obviously did not intend to write a book whose naturalism and individualism promoted institutionalism and professionalism. But was it an unconscious manifestation on Thoreau's part, because even he was not able to expunge the powerful influences of these rising cultural forces from his narrative? Or was it a subsequent manipulation on the part of the rising professional institutionalists, who constructed their new creed out of an unlikely reinterpretation of the previous philosophies? Or is it a connection that has been cemented decades later as the significance of Walden and the cultures of professionalism/institutionalism have slowly grown distant enough that the modern mind, for the sake of evading contradiction, has fudged them into the same camp?

This is a question that is very difficult to answer. That Walden contains elements which support and legitimize institutionalism/professionalism is clear, and for more reasons beyond what I have had the time or the skill to articulate. However, it is almost impossible to know how to place this cultural connection, or when or where to attribute causation. But I would like to suggest that even in this matter, Thoreau himself provides a very satisfactory answer. While hoeing his precious bean fields, Thoreau remarks "as I drew still fresher soil about the rows with my hoe, I disturbed the ashes of unchronicled nations who in primeval years lived under these heavens, and their small implements of war and hunting were brought to the light of this modern day"(141). There is no

beginning in time, and there is no such thing as untouched nature; every bit of dirt holds the remnants of influence – nothing is unspoiled, and for this reason nothing is truly spoiled either. Walden and professionalism/ institutionalism are difficult to relate with a definite sense of motive, but the fact is that they contain elements which have been plowed, stirred, and returned to dust many times over. The interaction between the two is only the most recent episode in a continual process of human understanding.

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