

Prophetic Excursions

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I. A TALL WHITE PINE

WHEN I WAS YOUNG AND LONGED TO WRITE, I WAS MUCH IN love with Henry D. Thoreau. I loved the plain declarative sentences and flat statements of belief from which he built his work: “Surely joy is the condition of life.” “We must look a long time before we can see.” “What is time but the stuff delay is made of?” “The bluebird carries the sky on his back.” “They are lovers of law and order who observe the law when the government breaks it.” “It is not indifferent to us which way we walk. There is a right way.”

I liked it that Thoreau sorted life into the sacred and the profane, the true and the trivial, the living and the dead. Take the opening paragraphs of his essay “Walking”:

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil,—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization: the minister and the school committee and every one of you will take care of that.

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks,—who had a genius, so to speak, for *sauntering*, which

word is beautifully derived “from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going *à la Sainte Terre*,” to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, “There goes a *Sainte-Terrer*,” a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander. They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean.

The man draws the line and makes a choice. The “merely civil,” “mere idlers”: lowlife surrounds us, but we needn’t be a part of it. That elevated tone I loved, and I loved the demands that followed on it:

We should go forth on the shortest walk . . . in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return,—prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as relics to our desolate kingdoms. If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again,—if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk.

I was in my early twenties when I read these essays, and I longed for someone to tell me what to do. My life was not what I wanted. I had quit graduate school in a late-adolescent huff. I wished to be a writer, but I wasn’t a writer. The country was at war; my best friend in jail. I was stuck in a bad marriage, having neither the wisdom to improve it nor the courage to leave. I was terrified of death, convinced my heart might stop at any minute. I lay in bed unable to sleep, rebuilding in fantasy a stone wall I had once built in childhood.

And I loitered near the cafe tables where old men were saying, “I believe,” and “We must look,” and “There is a right way.” “Believe,” “must,” “is”: what simple, beautiful verbs! I wanted to talk like that.

I did not know it then, but the voice that attracted me to these essays is rightly called prophetic. We have a tradition of prophetic literature that goes back to the Old Testament, of course, and though it is hardly the modern style, prophetic poems, even prophetic novels, can sometimes still be found. Whitman has this voice: he invites us to feel we are among the immortals, large-mannered, spanning continents. As for novels, E. M. Forster once gave a lecture on prophetic fiction, and his examples were Dostoyevsky, Melville, Emily Brontë, and D. H. Lawrence. I would add Flannery O'Connor: prophets offer revelation, and so did O'Connor; she designed her tales to induce in us that second sight by which we see the workings of an invisible world.

Poems and novels are not what concern me here, however. Here I want to offer a point of entry into Thoreau's essays, and reflecting on how he pitches his voice—especially in “Walking”—seems a good way to start. Before I begin, I should say that by “prophetic” I do not mean “telling the future.” The prophetic voice has a relationship to time, but telling the future is the least of it. The prophet does not say that the price of oil will go up in October, or that a comet will strike the earth in twenty years. Rather, *the prophet speaks of things that will be true in the future because they are true in all time*. In 1963, when Martin Luther King, Jr., said that if the “repressed emotions [of African Americans] are not released in nonviolent ways, they will seek expression through violence,” he was not predicting the race riots of the later 1960s; he was describing the nature of things no matter the decade. Sometimes a prophet's words do come true, of course, but that may have more to do with whether or not people are paying attention than with any prescience on the prophet's part.

The prophetic essay has several distinguishing marks. To begin with, it always has a person in it. The mock-modest demand that Thoreau makes at the beginning of *Walden* states the case well:

In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained. . . . [I]t is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were any

body else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience. Moreover, I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life . . . ; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land.

In the prophetic essay, a person comes forward and addresses us.* This person is not, however, the self-involved, moody, or obsessed first person who carries on in the journals we keep or the letters we address to estranged lovers. The prophetic first person speaks at the point where the personal touches what is in no way personal. When Dante says, “In the middle of the journey of our life, I found myself in a dark wood,” the shift in pronoun lets us know, if we needed the hint, that he is talking both about himself and about every human being. “In Dostoevsky,” says Forster, “the characters and situations always stand for more than themselves; infinity attends them. . . . Mitya is—all of us. So is Alyosha, so is Smerdyakov.” Similarly, in *Walden* and in the essays Thoreau implicitly claims he’s writing not about *his* life but about *the* life, the life each of us would lead were we communicants in the church of Nature. The prophetic voice may give a “simple and sincere account” of its story, but it does so in a way that makes us feel we are reading the story of the race, not the story of one man or woman.

The second thing about the prophetic voice is that it asks us to imagine being free of the usual bonds of time and space. In regard to time, the rhetoric of prophecy typically invokes daily and seasonal cycles rather than the straight arrow of chronology. “We had a remarkable sunset one day last November,” Thoreau tells us toward the end of “Walking”:

* I should here mark the fact that I am deriving my portrait of prophecy from Thoreau’s practice rather than beginning with an image and seeing if the practice matches. There are different styles of prophecy. In the Hebrew Bible, for example, prophets do not speak in the first person; God speaks through them. Self-abnegation was the precondition of their utterance, not self-reliant individualism. In Thoreau we find the prophetic voice in its American, Protestant mode.

It was such a light as we could not have imagined a moment before, and . . . [w]hen we reflected that this was not a solitary phenomenon, never to happen again, but that it would happen forever and ever, an infinite number of evenings, . . . it was more glorious still.

The conceit is typical: the prophet pushes off with a particular day and a particular year, only to swamp them both in eternity, wiping out large sections of history; one November is all Novembers, each evening all evenings.

The prophetic voice alters space as well as time, though here the technique is slightly different. An unobtrusive description at the beginning of Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa* sets a tone for the whole book: "The farm lay at an altitude of over six thousand feet. In the day-time you felt that you had got high up, near to the sun." Dinesen has a touch of the prophet, and these phrases should alert us to that fact, for the prophetic voice is spoken from high ground. Nothing in Concord stands at six thousand feet, but in "Walking" we find Thoreau climbing up whenever he can. He climbs a tall white pine and finds a flower his townsmen never saw. He climbs a hill and looks down on civilization in miniature:

The farmers and their works are scarcely more obvious than woodchucks and their burrows. Man and his affairs, church and state and school, trade and commerce, and manufactures and agriculture, even politics, . . . I am pleased to see how little space they occupy in the landscape. Politics is but a narrow field. . . . I pass from it as from a bean-field into the forest, and it is forgotten. In one half-hour I can walk off to some portion of the earth's surface where a man does not stand from one year's end to another, and there, consequently, politics are not, for they are but as the cigar-smoke of a man.

Spoken from on high, the prophetic voice strips the lowlands of their detail. Democrat and Whig, Sunday and Monday, Concord

and Charleston—distinctions that preoccupy us in the valley are flattened out as if drawn on a commemorative plate. From Thoreau's hill the woodchuck and the first selectman may as well occupy the same lodgings.

This does not mean, however, that the prophet is above it all. He may not be constrained by the place of his birth, but the high altitudes have their own, subtler constraints. Thoreau always liked to include a little fantasy about the solar system in his work ("the sun is but a morning star"), and "Walking" is no exception, for at one point he imagines himself higher even than that hill: "The outline which would bound my walks," he says, "would be . . . one of those cometary orbits which have been thought to be non-returning curves, . . . in which my house occupies the place of the sun." We are so high up now that Earth's gravity itself has been canceled. And yet the sun's remains. Solar gravity may be thinner or more delicate, but it still exerts its pull. "There is a subtle magnetism in Nature," Thoreau says, and we cannot feel it until we get up high. There we drop the accidents of time and place and feel only the constraints of what it is to be human. From high up, everything seems less personal and therefore less of a burden. To achieve the voice he wants, Thoreau ignores or erases his own particular sufferings. The sentence "Surely joy is the condition of life" was written three months after Thoreau's brother, John, had died of tetanus, and that death had thrown Thoreau into a depression, during which he suffered a full hysterical psychosomatic imitation of the symptoms of tetanus. No "sincere account" with details such as these is ever reported in the work, however; Thoreau pitches his voice above it. He had his familial losses and his disappointments in love, as we all do, but the house he offers in the work is a dwelling for those who wish to live deliberately, and serves to focus cometary orbits.

Extended thus in space and time, the prophetic voice speaks in declarative sentences. It does not debate or analyze. It does not say "several options face us" or "studies must be done." The prophetic voice dwells in the verb "to be," from which it draws the simple

syntax of belief. “This is the case,” it declares, or “I am I,” or “I am the Way.” Thoreau’s sentences are long and shapely, but they are grounded in such simplicity. “Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me.” “Every walk is a sort of crusade.” “In Wildness is the preservation of the World.”

In the prophetic essay, declarations of belief appear in the foreground, and this alone makes it different from most essays we now read in magazines. The television show *Dragnet* used to feature a cop named Joe Friday, whose interrogations were punctuated with the phrase “Just the facts, ma’am; just the facts.” Joe Friday is the ghost-writer of most of the essays written in my lifetime. The prophetic essay would never make it through the fact-checking departments of our finer magazines. “In Wildness is the preservation of the World”: There is no way to check that. It certainly does not follow from evidence the way conclusions in an analytic essay do. And yet that does not mean it is not true. Students are often disappointed to discover that when he lived at Walden Pond, Thoreau would go into town to eat meals with his family or the Emersons. It’s a fact: Thoreau was not a hermit. But the facts of the case are not the spirit of the case, and sometimes the spirit is primary. Thoreau did not need pure isolation to describe the solitude of our lives.

The prophet does not stoop to argue or to concede belief to the so-called facts, and these refusals bring us to the dangers, or at least the limitations, of this voice. All the marks of prophecy that I have touched on so far—the extended first person, the lifting of the particular into the eternal, the declarations of simple belief—imply that the divisions, confusions, and ambiguities marking our lives are illusory. Under the spell of the prophetic voice, we are led to believe that there is a simple unity toward which each of us might travel. But there are times we cannot or should not make the move toward unity, either in the self or in society.

To begin with the social example: to the degree that the prophetic voice flattens out diversity, it is at odds with pluralist politics, for it has no model of contention. Or, to say this another way, it has

its politics, but they are not presented as such. “Walking” is a political essay (most patently in the way it endorses the westward expansion of the American empire), but Thoreau claims that is not so (the woodland dwellers he eulogizes “are of no politics”). And he seals his claim with a self-protecting rhetoric, saying that he is describing nature, not culture (thus Columbus discovered America with an instinct “akin to the migratory instinct in birds”), asserting that the territory under review is sacred (“the backwoodsman” in America is better situated than “Adam in paradise”), and subordinating all empirical evidence to the insights of sympathy and sempiternal memory. In these and other ways the prophetic voice puts the opposition beyond the pale of speech, or, should oppositional voices arise, it makes it seem as if they were opposed to nature, the sacred, and the wisdom of the ages.

To recast all this in terms of the self: the prophetic voice has little to say about those parts of our lives that are messy or prone to depression. At home on the mountaintop, it is silent about those valleys that are, by definition, “long depressions.” A Thoreauvian prophetic essay leads us on a redemptive journey—about which I shall say more below—but there is a redemption of the valley as well, one that comes from abandoning all hope of getting it together. If you need to come apart, you do not need to listen to the prophetic voice. Stop trying to be a hero. There is a time to fall to pieces, to identify with the confusion of your life as it is, confined absolutely to the present November sunset and your present apartment.

Finally, the prophetic voice lacks humor. Things in the valley may be more confusing than prophecy allows, but they are also funnier. E. M. Forster contrasts prophecy with fantasy, and the novel that is his prime example, *Tristram Shandy*, reminds us that the comedy of the valley includes digression, coincidence, and muddle. Thoreau has humor to be sure. (I have always wanted to hear the opening of *Walden* read with a laugh track, especially the bit about how his neighbors torture themselves as if they were penitential Brahmins “measuring with their bodies, like caterpillars, the breadth of vast empires.”) But Thoreau’s jokes typically have an upward thrust. We laugh at the mundane so as to move toward the eternal. We’re not

talking about Lenny Bruce or Richard Pryor here. Thoreau never jokes about sex, or about race relations, or about Christians and Jews. He lacks, in short, the humor of pluralism, of the particular, ambiguous, and tattered world—all those jokes that help us live our inexorable divisions in this body, time, and place.

Be this as it may, I listen up sharply when I hear the prophetic voice, for it offers something we cannot get from humor, analysis, or party politics. As I said above, there is a sort of redemptive journey in “Walking,” an “excursion” Thoreau would call it, and it has several stages. At the beginning, as in fairy tales that open with a wicked king and a famine in the land, all is not well in Concord. “Every walk is a sort of crusade,” Thoreau says, “to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels.” Evil days are upon us. A saunterer’s requisite leisure “comes only by the grace of God,” and few now have such grace. “Some of my townsmen . . . have described to me . . . walks which they took ten years ago, in which they were so blessed as to lose themselves for half an hour in the woods; but I know very well that they have confined themselves to the highway ever since.” Thoreau himself sometimes “walk[s] a mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit . . . , [t]he thought of some work” running constantly through his head.

The essay begins, then, reminding us of our “quiet desperation” in the fallen present. Thoreau wakes our dissatisfaction and uses it to lever us out of the present and into the heights, the second stage of this journey. Here, we see the world below with new eyes. The historian of religion Mircea Eliade once suggested that when evil days are upon us, the sacred survives by camouflaging itself within the profane. To recover it, we must develop the eyes—some sort of night vision or hunter’s attentiveness—that can discover the shapes of the sacred despite its camouflage. Prophets speak to us at the intersection of time and eternity, and if we join them there, we are given that vision, that sight. “It is much easier to discover than to see when the cover is off,” says Thoreau, but that is the job at hand. He means, I think, that it is one thing to disclose the world, quite another to

see what it means. The prophetic voice is apocalyptic: it doesn't just uncover the world; it uncovers the eyes. Then, as we walk, we see blossoms that we never saw before, though they were always there.

I have suggested that the prophetic voice is spoken in the extended first person. When we identify with such a speaker, we are led to imagine our lives differently. We have, for a moment, two lives, the one we actually lead and a concurrent imaginary one. The second is not imaginary in the sense of "invented," however. If the prophet is speaking of things that will be true tomorrow because they are true in all time, then that second life is real even if it isn't realized. The prophetic voice juxtaposes today and eternity to make it clear that the latter may inform the former. It sets the mundane against the imaginary so that we might see whether or not they match up. Where they are congruent, we discover the true value hidden in the everyday; where they are incongruent, we discover what we may abandon. In either case there is a reevaluation, a redemption. You look at your work, your loves, your children, parents, politicians, and, as at a funeral or birth, you see what matters and what does not.

In the final stage of his essay, Thoreau returns to home ground. He claims at the outset that the walker must be ready to leave home never to return, but nonetheless, in his final pages we find him sauntering home with the sun "like a gentle herdsman" at his back. A true walk changes the walker, not the walker's hometown. We read in books of some distant past when there were giants on the earth, or of some future when they will return. The prophetic voice seeks to have us see that the golden age is not in the past or the future. It is here. We who have been "saunterers in the good sense" return to find the Holy Land in the Concord we left behind. Where before we and all our townspeople looked like infidels, now we see that each might be a hero. "This [is] the heroic age itself, though we know it not."

There is yet another stage to the prophetic excursion, though it takes place after the prophet falls silent. The prophetic voice doesn't necessarily push us into action. It is more declarative than imperative, more revelatory than moralizing. And yet where revelation succeeds, we suddenly see paths that were obscure before. "It is not indifferent

to us which way we walk. There is a right way.” Most of us live in a world of almost paralyzing free choice. In America at least, it is difficult to buy the right brand of cell phone, let alone find the right way. But under the spell of the prophetic voice, we can, sometimes, sort the true from the false and begin to move. We find ourselves in a story that makes sense, and such stories engender action.

You quit graduate school, rent a room somewhere, and start to read in earnest. You hunker down in your pointless job and paint at night. You go back to the family farm and begin the fifty-year job of reclaiming the spent land. You leave a hopeless marriage or rededicate yourself to a good one. You resist an immoral war and go to jail. The heroic age will not be with us unless we will be its heroes. Great cold air masses gather over the North Atlantic and slide slowly toward the shores of America. Sometimes late at night you get an unexpected whiff of that salt air. You had forgotten that you live in a city by the sea, and now you remember.

II. IGNORANCE

IF THE PROPHETIC VOICE IS APOCALYPTIC, IF IT UNCOVERS AND opens the eyes, then what exactly is revealed? What do we see once the cover is off?

Just southwest of Walden Pond the Sudbury River widens to form Fair Haven Pond. In February 1851 Thoreau recorded in his journal a memory of things seen there:

One afternoon in the fall . . . , I saw Fair Haven Pond with its island and meadow; between the island and the shore, a strip of perfectly smooth water in the lee of the island; and two hawks sailing over it—(and something more I saw which cannot easily be described, which made me say to myself that the landscape could not be improved). . . .

Yet I do not know what these things can be; I begin to see such objects only when I leave off understanding them. . . . But I get no further than this.

How adapted these forms and colors to our eyes, a meadow and its islands! What are these things? Yet the hawks and the ducks keep so aloof, and nature is so reserved! We are made to love the river and the meadow, as the wind to ripple the water.

There is observation here, and description of things, and then some limit where description fails and, oddly, seeing begins.

Thoreau had a recurrent interest in such moments or, more globally, a concern with what might be perceived should we ever get beyond understanding and utterance. His first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, ends with an ode to silence (a book, he says, being but a rock “whereon the waves of Silence may break”), and in “Walking” he urges us to learn the value of “ignorance” (“We have heard of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. . . . Methinks there is equal need of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Ignorance”). This is a theme Thoreau also addresses in the opening pages of *Walden*, where he says that his neighbors are so busy that the laboring man “has no time to be any thing but a machine. How can he remember well his ignorance—which his growth requires—who has so often to use his knowledge?” A few pages later, he cites Confucius to the effect that true knowledge amounts to knowing what we do not know, then remarks, “When one man has reduced a fact of the imagination to be a fact to his understanding, I foresee that all men will at length establish their lives on that basis.”

That is an enigmatic declaration, I suspect, unless one has had a chance to learn the terms by which the American Romantics imagined human consciousness. In 1690 John Locke had published *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, arguing that all we know comes ultimately from the senses, from contact with the world, and not from any innate ideas, inborn intuition, or Platonic memory. The mind at birth is a blank slate that maturation slowly fills with the script of experience. A century later, in Germany, Immanuel Kant had replied to Locke, arguing that the mind must bring

certain things to experience (a sense of time, for example, or of cause and effect). In his ethics, Kant added “conscience” to his list: the feeling of right and wrong is a law of the heart, not something learned at school.

Kant’s portion of this philosophical argument eventually reached New England by way of an 1813 book on German culture by Madame de Staël and an 1829 American edition of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection*. Responding to Locke and following a somewhat muddled version of Kant, these writers imagined the mind as composed of two primary faculties, Reason and Understanding. Here is how Ralph Waldo Emerson explains the distinction in an 1834 letter to his brother:

Reason is the highest faculty of the soul—what we mean often by the soul itself; it never *reasons*, never proves, it simply perceives; it is vision. The Understanding toils all the time, compares, contrives, adds, argues, near-sighted but strong-sighted, dwelling in the present the expedient the customary.

Reason is spontaneous rather than willed, imaginative rather than empirical, poetic rather than practical. Intuitive and supersensuous, it transcends the senses so as to apprehend larger patterns and unities (it transcends the senses; thus those who value it are transcendentalists). “The senses give us representations of things,” Emerson elsewhere says, “but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell.” If one wishes to know what are those hawks at Fair Haven Pond, or to know the spiritual world, the purposes of life, the larger meaning of things, then one must nurture Reason.

In Thoreau’s version of this psychology, “Reason” does not much appear (happily so to the modern ear, for if “Reason . . . never *reasons*” it should have some other name). He speaks instead of “genius,” or of a demoniacal “wisdom,” or, most often, of “imagination”:

My genius makes distinctions which my understanding cannot—and which my senses do not report.

It is much easier to discover than to see when the cover is off. . . . Wisdom does not inspect, but behold. . . . He has something demoniacal in him, who can discern a law or couple two facts.

I witness a beauty in the form or coloring of the clouds which addresses itself to my imagination—for which you account scientifically to my understanding. . . . What sort of science is that which enriches the understanding but robs the imagination?

Such are the terms Thoreau prefers, at any rate, but it was always part of his artistry to go beyond the inherited nomenclature and evoke these things descriptively. It is in his imagistic elaborations of our faculties of mind that we shall get a fuller sense of what they were for him, and come back to what he means by “ignorance.” In “Walking,” having praised ignorance for both its use and its beauty, Thoreau writes:

The highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence. I do not know that this higher knowledge amounts to anything more definite than a novel and grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we called Knowledge before. . . . It is the lighting up of the mist by the sun.

Though this last image has its corollaries in mystic literature, Thoreau draws it from his own experience. When a young man, he once spent a night alone on top of Saddle-back Mountain, near Williamstown, Massachusetts. He woke early to see the sun rise, but as the day came on, he discovered himself to be above the clouds. The entire valley below was brimmed with mist, which, as the sun crossed the hidden horizon, slowly filled with light. “There was not a crevice left through which the trivial places we name Massachusetts or Vermont or New York could be seen. . . . I found myself a dweller in the dazzling halls of Aurora.”

Thoreau usually becomes aware of the insufficiency of knowledge by way of unusual kinds of light. In this case it is sunlight caught in a mist sufficient to erase the sun itself and all the “trivial” things that light would usually reveal. In other cases it is the light of the moon. For many years, whenever there was a full moon—especially in summer—Thoreau would walk for several hours at night, recording his impressions in his journal the next day. Here is an entry that follows the full moon of June 13, 1851:

After walking by night several times I now walk by day, but I am not aware of any crowning advantage in it. I see small objects better, but it does not enlighten me any.

And early in August of the same year:

As the twilight deepens and the moonlight is more & more bright, I begin to distinguish myself, who I am & where. . . . The intense light of the sun unfits me for meditation, makes me wander in my thought—my life is too diffuse & dissipated—routine succeeds & prevails over us—the trivial has greater power. . . .

I am sobered by the moon light—I bethink myself. . . . Nature broods us, and has not left our germs of thought to be hatched by the sun.

I introduce this image of Moonlit Knowing not so much for the ways it can be matched with Imagination or Reason but because Thoreau’s night walks are so suggestive of what may lie beyond such categories. If Sunlit Knowing encompasses the received conventions by which we understand our lives (all the social knowledge that is, in “Walking,” “an excess of informing light”), then going out by moonlight is an exercise in quitting those conventions so as to recover sight again.

There is a long tradition of seekers after knowledge who begin with exactly such refusals of the accepted sense of things. The anonymous fourteenth-century English author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*

was one such, his advice being to do what Thoreau had done on Saddle-back Mountain, that is, to get yourself into a mist sufficiently thick to obscure the things you thought you knew. A century later, in Germany, Nicholas of Cusa suggested that those who wish to know God should give up seeking Him directly and take instead the *via negativa*, the path by which one refuses, item by item, all the categories and ideas the Church has employed to describe the divine. Grace, predestination, original sin, omnipotence—drop all of it, forget it; it only makes you think you know something when in fact you don't. As Cusa wrote:

We may be compared to owls trying to look at the sun; but since the natural desire in us for knowledge is not without a purpose, its immediate object is our own ignorance. Nothing could be more beneficial for even the most zealous searchers for knowledge than this being in fact most learned in that very ignorance which is peculiarly his own.

But once we have become learned in this ignorance, what should we do? How shall we poor owl-eyed beasts come to see more fully? It would seem, to follow out the image, that we have several choices. We might try to improve the eyes we have or try to acquire new ones better fitted to their objects. Or perhaps we already have such eyes, which is to say we might search out some as yet undiscovered organ of sense or faculty of mind. Finally, if none of this will do, if there is no way to improve the dazzled owl, and if no better eyes are yet to be unlidded, then perhaps we can learn to look by indirection, as viewers of a solar eclipse look not directly at the sun but at its reflection in a pail of water.

My suggestion, in any event, is that it helps to read Thoreau under the assumption that his interest in ignorance draws him toward experiments such as these. He regularly gets himself into positions where he might see by indirection (lit mist and the moon both offer sunlight dilute enough for human eyes). He has a genius for perspective, for getting or imagining himself into situations where common things can be seen from uncommon angles.

In the first chapter of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, for example, he comes upon a dam across the Concord River and immediately assumes the fish's-eye view, considering how the thing must appear to the salmon, shad, and alewives that formerly migrated up that stream. ("Poor shad! where is thy redress? Still wandering the sea in thy scaly armor to inquire humbly at the mouths of rivers if man has perchance left them free for thee to enter.") Or, to give a second instance, what interested him in retrospect about his night in the Concord jail was the novel view it offered of his home ground. ("It was like traveling into a far country . . . , to lie there for one night. It seemed to me that I never had heard the town clock strike before, nor the evening sounds of the village.")

This urge to get outside the ordinary marks a large portion of Thoreau's pursuits. We see it in his endless reading of travel books, his interest in Native Americans, his temporal and spatial fantasies (imagining Concord by way of Rome, for example, or from some distant star), and above all in his going to nature, as this collection testifies from the first essay, where nature is salutary because it lies beyond "religion, literature, and philosophy," to the last, where we cannot *know* wild apples until we have eaten them in the fields and in the wind.*

If such experiments with altered perspective do not help us see what lies beyond our ignorance, then perhaps we must attend to the organs of perception themselves, purifying them or waking them up. Thoreau's walking by moonlight was, in addition to all the rest, an experiment in the renewal of sensation: "In the night the eyes are partly closed or retire into the head. Other senses take the lead. . . . The senses both of hearing and smelling are more alert." Despite his fabled bachelorhood, Thoreau was a great sensualist (note how, in "Ktaadn,"

* As might be expected, Thoreau's talent for perspective fails him sometimes. He seemed mostly unable to imagine what it must have been like to be an Irish immigrant to America in the 1840s; he never takes the woman's-eye view of things; public lectures especially seemed to draw his voice back to the community's underlying way of thinking ("Walking" is, among other things, a patriotic ode to manifest destiny, and in the John Brown essays he falls willy-nilly into stock comparisons of Brown and Christ).

he picks up the scent of a cornfield a third of a mile away), but his was a sensuality with a future tense, one that leaned on the promise of perception rather than its limitations. The five senses “are but the rudiments of what they are destined to become,” he once wrote. They are “divine germs” that we must “educate and develop.”

And should the education fail, should we be unable to purify the senses we have, then all that’s left is to become learned in our ignorance, front the world with it, and wait. Wait under the assumption that there are things to be known if we have cleared a space for knowing and that there are faculties of mind beyond understanding and imagination, ones that exist potentially, though we do not have them in fact.

One of Thoreau’s journal entries will help me explain what I mean. On October 26, 1851, Thoreau wrote out a long and complicated dream that ends with him walking in a meadow and meeting his friend Bronson Alcott. They fall to speaking lines of poetry to each other:

I quoted one which in my waking hours I have no knowledge of, but in my dream it was familiar enough. I only know that those which I quoted expressed regret, and were like the following, though they were not these, *viz.*:

“The short parenthesis of life was sweet,”

“The remembrance of youth is a sigh,” etc.

It had the word “memory” in it!! I And then again the instant that I awoke, methought I was a musical instrument from which I heard a strain die out—a bugle, or a clarionet, or a flute. My body was the organ and channel of melody, as a flute is of the music that is breathed through it. . . . I awoke, therefore, to an infinite regret—to find myself, not the thoroughfare of glorious and world-stirring inspirations, but a scuttle full of dirt.

Thinking back on what might have induced this dream, Thoreau remembers that he had been reading a book about the Northmen the night before and that as he read he felt “a fertile regret” and derived “an inexpressible satisfaction” from that feeling.

Here “memory” seems to be the name of the faculty of mind that, if purified, might know what we do not know and express itself in poetry or music. But it is not quite available, at least not in daylight. Each of us has had the experience of being on the verge of uttering a thought, then being distracted and forgetting what we had to say, then being madly haunted by the ghost of what was so clearly present a moment ago. Imagine living a life suffused with that feeling. Imagine having the sense that you have come here to say something only to find it has slipped your mind. Worse yet, imagine such is the case but that you do not even feel the loss. Thoreau finds his regret satisfying and fertile because it indicates some loss is felt and thus implies there was something to be lost. This “fertile sadness,” as he elsewhere calls it, contains a sort of backward promise, a hope that arises because something has been taken away. The literary critic Barbara Johnson writes that it was Thoreau’s great gift to wake us to “our own lost losses.” Not losses simply—we all have those—but the losses we do not even remember. This prophet speaks to wake his neighbors but not, once they are awake, to tell them any assertable truth. Wakefulness in Thoreau is not a perception of truth; it is a perception of ignorance and comes suffused with promising regret.

III. SIGNING OFF

THOREAU’S POLITICS MAY BE DESCRIBED AS AN EXPERIMENT IN seeing how far the *via negativa* might be extended to social life. In *Walden*, remembering the one time he thought of buying a farm, he writes: “My imagination carried me so far that I even had the refusal of several farms,—the refusal was all I wanted,—but I never got my fingers burned by actual possession.” This is a wry assertion of his creed, his constant questions being, How much of what the world expects might we simply refuse to do? How many obligations and inherited institutions might we drop so as to clear the field (for what?—well, for what has yet to be imagined)?

In public refusal, Thoreau exercises the political version of his talent for perspective, for finding a place to stand outside the

common frame. His critique of professional politicians is that they rarely think of quitting their jobs, which is the only way they could get in a position to imagine a fundamentally new world. Instead, they dwell inside their own assumptions and run in circles. As he writes in “Civil Disobedience”:

Statesmen and legislators, standing so completely within the institution, never distinctly and nakedly behold it. They speak of moving society, but have no resting-place without it. . . . [Daniel] Webster never goes behind government, and so cannot speak with authority about it.

Nature had early become Thoreau’s own favored “resting-place without.” Going to the woods was an experiment in removing himself from institutions so as to see them freshly and speak “with authority.” This is why, by the way, the present collection presents Thoreau’s essays in the order of their creation, abandoning the long-standing editorial practice of separating the political work from the natural history. That conventional division has always muted one of the things that makes Thoreau interesting: the way in which his various passions inform and influence one another. Thoreau’s “reform papers” are “excursions” and vice versa.

Thoreau’s earliest concrete political refusals can be dated to the early 1840s. He had graduated from Harvard College in 1837 and moved back to his family’s home in Concord; he had tried his hand at teaching in the local schools; he had developed a close friendship with his mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson and in 1841 had begun living in the Emerson household. Then, in 1842, when he was twenty-four years old, he stopped paying his taxes. Four years later—in 1846, the second year of his stay at Walden Pond—he was arrested for his continued tax refusal and spent a night in jail. That case has become the most famous example of Thoreau’s trying to get “behind government” by refusing to act, but a lesser-known case from 1841, mentioned in passing in “Civil Disobedience,” is in some ways more telling:

Some years ago, the State met me in behalf of the Church, and commanded me to pay a certain sum toward the support of a clergyman whose preaching my father attended, but never I myself. . . . I declined to pay.

We are now so used to the idea of the division of church and state that we forget it took decades to build the wall between them and that federal practice was distinct from the practice in individual states. Massachusetts in fact had an established church for many years after the Revolution, the state constitution of 1780 having authorized towns to support by taxation a “public protestant teacher of piety, religion, and morality.” The First Parish Church of Concord was supported in this way during most of Thoreau’s life. In 1834 the state moved to disestablish Massachusetts churches. By state law, however, citizens were still considered members of their parish church unless they formally resigned, and First Parish thus remained the Concord town church for decades after disestablishment. The town maintained the church building, it supplied the pastor with firewood, and it collected the parish tax. Only in 1855 did a town meeting formally declare that the “municipal corporation” would no longer do any “parochial business.”

Around the time Thoreau turned twenty-one, First Parish added his name to its rolls. A few years later, when the town sent him a church tax bill, Thoreau went to the town clerk and “signed off,” a common practice at the time. Thoreau’s mother and aunts had signed off when they had changed churches years earlier; many more had done so in 1834 when the church was disestablished. By the time Thoreau signed off, only a third of the town’s taxpayers were paying the ministerial tax.

While he may not have known it, signing off from First Parish made Thoreau part of one of the key social movements of nineteenth-century America, denominational Protestantism. The essence of denominationalism is voluntary association. In older church practice, men and women were simply born into a church and inherited its creed, rituals, and tradition. If they wished to leave, their family, their community, and

oftentimes the state would make sure they did not. In nineteenth-century America, however, it became more and more important that a member of a church had chosen to belong, had at best undergone a conscious conversion to a particular way of knowing and worshipping the divine, and then joined a community as the outward expression of this inner, and individual, experience.

Actually, it overstates the case to say that by signing off Thoreau became part of this movement, for the true denominationalist signs off, then signs on somewhere else, and Thoreau never took the second step. And yet in another sense it doesn't overstate the case, for there is no voluntary association without voluntary disassociation, and in the latter Thoreau is our patron saint. He keeps denominationalism alive by keeping himself ready for a church that does not yet exist. He is the great refuser by whose actions the rest of us know that we are choosing to do what we do. If just one family in town teaches its children at home, and the state allows it, then all who use the public schools are more clearly making a free choice; if just one draftee is allowed to be a conscientious objector, then all others must be conscientious assentors. In like manner, when Thoreau conducts the ritual of not joining, those of us who do join can rest assured we are not slaves to convention but masters of choice. Voluntary association does well to have one man or woman out there vigilantly exercising the right of refusal.

Paradoxes such as these imply that Thoreau's nay-saying may offer more aid to conformity than is usually thought. That is probably the case, at least in the sense that American ideology never objects too much to the kind of dissent that keeps us all talking of free choice even as we all do exactly as our neighbors do. Stepping outside the frame sometimes only serves to polish it up.

But that line of thought speaks more to the uses that might be made of Thoreau than to Thoreau himself. He never used refusal to burnish conformity. He never signed on to some other church in Concord, or to any political party (he never voted), or to any abolitionist committee, or to any of his friends' utopian communities. There was a great flurry of socialist experiments in the 1840s—more

than forty communities founded in that decade alone—and Thoreau, who had been raised in a boardinghouse, was never inclined to join: “As for these communities—I think I had rather keep bachelor’s hall in hell than go to board in heaven.” Most reformers, he thought, “want faith, and mistake their private ail for an infected atmosphere.” So doing, they set out to heal the world before they have healed themselves, like men crusading against the national debt when they themselves are bankrupt (“Paradise (to Be) Regained,” the third essay in this collection, is Thoreau’s amusing critique of one such reformer).

If reform has a positive meaning for Thoreau, it means the cure of the soul, not the cure of social ills. It means a practice like that of Christian monks in late antiquity who isolated themselves on bare and empty islands off Scotland, trying to see how far they could turn away from their own culture so as to face themselves and God. Reform by such enacted refusal is not necessarily antisocial; turning away from one’s culture is a cultural act—especially if you publish your results—one whose goal, in Thoreau’s case, is an exemplary accounting of whatever “ails” you have and, if possible, the healing, even the ripening, of the self.

But to do all that, one must live in a world that accepts the *via negativa*; politically speaking, one needs a government that will let you sign off and then leave you alone. At the end of “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau tries to imagine such a state. He recalls the historical progression from an “absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy,” and calls it “a progress toward a true respect for the individual.” His own experience with democracy, we gather, indicates that such progress had not come to an end. Beyond the democracy he knew he thus imagines a state that “would not think it inconsistent with its own repose if a few were to live aloof from it” (for example, not to pay their taxes). He pictures these men and women as a “kind of fruit” that the state would let “drop off as fast as it ripened.” Set apart from the state but nonetheless fulfilling “all the duties of neighbors and fellow-men,” these ripened souls, or rather the state that sanctioned them, “would prepare the way for a

still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen.”

This conclusion is admittedly a little vague and faraway, meaning we have come now to the public form of fertile regret. We are in an eschatological politics—not “the art of the possible,” as politics is sometimes said to be, but the imagining of what has never been seen before. But unseen ends are well fitted to the faith we are examining. After all, we *do not* know what lies beyond the known; we are ignorant of what we might become if we stopped being the things we are. Thoreau is arguably the original American ecologist, but he is original exactly because there was no ecology when he went walking in the Concord woods, or went to Maine (the terms didn’t even exist until a decade after his death). His day saw an aggressive cutting of the four-hundred-year-old white pines of Maine, and it disturbed him deeply, as he explained after the second of his trips into those woods:

A pine cut down, a dead pine, is no more a pine than a dead human carcass is a man. Can he who has discovered only some of the values of whalebone and whale oil be said to have discovered the true use of the whale . . . ? I have been into the lumber-yard, and the carpenter’s shop, and the tannery . . . ; but when at length I saw the tops of the pines waving and reflecting the light at a distance high over all the rest of the forest, I realized that the former were not the highest uses of the pine. It is not their bones or hide or tallow that I love most. It is the living spirit of the tree. . . . It is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still.

It is sometimes hard to know when one is outside the frame of the community, but in this case we have a nice proof, for when *The Atlantic Monthly* printed these remarks in 1858, the editor cut the final sentence (against Thoreau’s express wishes) as being too pantheistic or, as we might say now, as perceiving too well the interdependence of the species.

By moving from Thoreau's fantasy of a state whose "aloof" citizens drop like ripe fruits to his legacy for environmentalists, I mean to indicate that while he never signed on to one of the town churches, his refusals nonetheless gave rise to a world of action. As with my model of the "prophetic excursion," turning away may be followed by return. Thoreau was so clear about his nay-saying that his social side usually goes unnoticed, but it is there. He was an individualist, yes, but he also believed in public life, the unit of which was the town. In "Civil Disobedience" he says that there was one tax he was happy to pay: "I have never declined paying the highway tax, because I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject." What it means to be a neighbor is one of the great puzzles Thoreau poses for his readers; here we have a hint at the answer: it means chipping in to make the town work. This is in accord with one of the several ways in which Thoreau did in fact "sign on"—his lifelong involvement in the Concord Lyceum.

The lyceum movement was a nineteenth-century experiment in popular adult education, town lyceums being established throughout the Northeast to spread useful information by way of lectures and debates. The citizens of Concord started theirs in 1829, and twelve-year-old Thoreau joined immediately. When he was twenty, he gave his first lecture there. Shortly thereafter, for two years he served as the lyceum curator, arranging the lecture series and managing the details—the hall, the fuel, the lights, the fees. It was a central part of his life for decades. Ten of the essays collected here were first given as public lectures; two of them, "Walking" and "Life without Principle," were given many times over many years. One of the last lectures he ever gave was a version of "Wild Apples" delivered to the Concord Lyceum in 1860.

In this and other ways Thoreau was a communitarian. He was active in the group that produced the journal *The Dial* and edited one issue; almost against his own will, he constantly addressed himself to the fight against slavery; in his essays and journal he imagined and wrote stirring of the possibility of national parks—so much so that we have them today in part because people like John Muir read

Thoreau and took him seriously. Which is to say that, above all, we find Thoreau “signing on” by writing books and essays. Thoreau was an individualist, to be sure, but the complaint that he was anti-social has always seemed odd to me when publication is one of the most deliberate social acts we have.

IV. SLAVERY IN MASSACHUSETTS

THE MOST IMPORTANT SOCIAL MOVEMENT OF THE NINETEENTH century was the fight against slavery, and four of the essays here testify to Thoreau’s involvement in that struggle. Behind all of these lie what was then a national debate: about whether slavery would be extended into the territories being settled in the West. In 1817, the year Thoreau was born, the Union consisted of twenty-two states, half of them prohibiting and half allowing slavery. Thereafter, however, this balance of power was regularly threatened, mostly because the Louisiana Purchase had opened vast new areas to settlement. Over the ensuing decades, each time one of the western territories applied for statehood the same questions would arise: Would this state be “Free-Soil” or not, and what then would happen to the balance of power in Congress?

The first of such debates resulted in the Missouri Compromise of 1820. When the slaveholding Missouri Territory applied to enter the Union in 1818, Northern lawmakers insisted that its admission be contingent on its abolition of slavery. Southerners refused, and the petition stalled. A year later, when Maine applied for statehood, a compromise allowed Missouri to enter as a slave state and Maine as a Free State. Moreover, and most important for the decades that followed, the compromise prohibited future slavery in any part of the Louisiana Purchase north of latitude 36°30'. Almost all of Missouri lies north of this line. So does what are now Kansas and Nebraska—though why that mattered would not become apparent for thirty-four years.

This compromise quieted things for many years, but the power struggle resurfaced as soon as new land was opened for settlement

beyond the Louisiana Purchase. This territory became one focus of Thoreau's most famous political essay, "Civil Disobedience," first delivered as a lecture in 1848, his question there being why a citizen of Massachusetts should, in any way, help the government acquire the land in question. Thoreau's opening paragraph speaks of "the present Mexican war," a conflict whose roots went back to 1836, when Texas seceded from Mexico and declared itself an independent (and slaveholding) republic. In 1845 Congress annexed the territory as a new state, and in the spring of the next year the Mexican army attacked American troops on the Texas border, Mexico never having accepted Texas's independence in the first place. The subsequent war lasted a year and a half, and by the end of it Mexico had lost not only Texas but California and all of what are now the states of the Southwest.

When Texas had first been considered for admission to the Union, abolitionists blocked the proposal, fearing that several new slave states might be created from the territory. When Texas was finally admitted and fighting broke out, Thoreau and other abolitionists opposed the war on the same ground: winning would be a victory for slavery, not for freedom.

At the close of the Mexican War, American holdings finally reached to the Pacific, and the struggle over slavery in the West played out its final acts. In 1849 California sought to join the Union. If it was to enter as a Free State, the slave states wanted something in return, and what they got was another series of torturous trade-offs. Under the Compromise of 1850, California entered as a Free State, but slavery was allowed to continue in the District of Columbia (though the slave trade itself was outlawed there), and the South got a new Fugitive Slave Law lending increased federal power to the capture and return of slaves seeking freedom in the North.

Nor was this the last attempt to legislate a balance of power before the Civil War. By the time we get to Thoreau's 1854 essay "Slavery in Massachusetts," we find him speaking of the repudiation of "the compromise compact of 1820" and the North's concern for "the destiny of Nebraska." In the spring of 1854 Congress had broken the promise of the Missouri Compromise by passing

the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which turned the question of slavery in those territories over to the settlers themselves. Rather than quieting the issue, this “popular sovereignty” provision prompted each side to send armed settlers west, and before long “border ruffians” from Missouri and Free-Soilers from the North were fighting a civil war in Kansas. One of those Free-Soilers was a man named John Brown, recently emigrated with his sons from Ohio.

In sum, every decade of Thoreau’s adult life saw westward expansion exacerbating the division between North and South and rekindling the slavery debate. Moreover, by the mid-1850s it seemed to New Englanders that every case had ended in a compromise with slavery (always in the name of saving the Union), so that compromise itself appeared less and less like wise statecraft and more and more like dealing with the devil.

Still, as long as the devil in question did his dealing several thousand miles away, many in New England were content to leave him be. It wasn’t just that the Union should be preserved; New England textile factories depended on Southern cotton, and many merchants saw no need to pick a fight with their suppliers. When the Compromise of 1850 was passed, nine hundred wealthy Bostonians signed a public letter praising Massachusetts senator Daniel Webster for his eloquent support of the measure.

Soon, however, a key part of the compromise that Webster helped negotiate brought the distant devil to the streets of Boston (and goaded Thoreau, who had been polite about Webster before the compromise, into calling him a “dirt-bug”). Since the first days of the Republic, there had been no good resolution to the problem of how the Free States should deal with escaped slaves. In this regard, in fact, the U.S. Constitution itself might well be called the Compromise of 1787, for its promise of liberty was regularly cut with concessions to slavery. The delegates had agreed, for example, to count each slave as three-fifths of a free person and to let the slave trade continue for at least twenty years. More important for the Compromise of 1850, they had agreed that fugitive slaves must be returned to their masters, even if they had managed to get themselves to the North.

A paragraph in Article IV spelled this out in euphemistic language, allowing that any person “held to service or labor in one State . . . , escaping into another, shall . . . be delivered up on claim of the party, to whom such service or labor may be due.” In 1793, shortly after the Constitution was ratified, an early Fugitive Slave Law had fleshed out this clause by articulating the procedure for seizing and returning escaped slaves.

Northern states bridled at the way this law took judicial matters out of their hands, and consequently many of them enacted “personal liberty laws” meant to limit the federal law. (These laws gave slaves the right to a jury trial, for example, which the federal law denied.) The result was fifty years of dissatisfaction on both sides. In some cases escaped slaves were captured and returned to slavery, angering the North; in others they found safe haven, angering the South. It was at the insistence of the South, then, that the Compromise of 1850 included a new and more stringent Fugitive Slave Law, one that not only denied jury trials to runaways but prohibited them from testifying on their own behalf, levied heavy penalties against anyone who came to their aid, and allowed for enforcement by federal troops and marshals.

In the short term the law was often effective, but in the long term it backfired, for in response to each slave captured and returned, a thousand Northern hearts were hardened against slavery, the South, and the North’s complicit public servants. Just as in the Vietnam era, when the military draft forced young men to make personal decisions about a distant conflict, in the early 1850s the Fugitive Slave Law forced local functionaries in New England to make personal—and public—decisions about what had recently been a hateful but distant practice. Before the 1850s Boston’s Cotton Whigs—those conservative merchants who praised Webster’s acceptance of the Fugitive Slave Law—had the luxury of saying that while they personally opposed slavery, it was more important to preserve the Union than to solve a problem that didn’t exist at home. But then came a series of cases in which local blacks—men and women with families, with jobs, with ministers who cared about them—were being captured by slave hunters and held at

the Boston Court House, their faces staring through the bars at citizens passing on the street. Under these conditions, more and more Boston Brahmins found themselves able to imagine joining their abolitionist neighbors and breaking the federal law.

The first of the fugitive slave cases that caught Thoreau's attention was that of Thomas Sims. Having fled from Georgia, Sims was captured on April 3, 1851, in Boston and sent back to his master on April 12. Thoreau filled pages of his journal with scornful complaint about the servility of the newspapers and the complicity of the state. As for how the law itself should be tested, the journal entries express his doubt that any court was in a position to decide the case:

It has come to this, that the friends of liberty, the friends of the slave, have shuddered when they have understood that [Sims's] fate has been left to the legal tribunals, so-called. . . . The people have no faith that justice will be awarded in such a case. The judge may decide this way or that; it is a kind of accident at best. It is evident that he is not a competent authority in so important a case. I would not trust the life of my friend to the judges of all the Supreme Courts in the world put together, to be sacrificed or saved by precedent.

Ideally, in American jurisprudence grave legislative attacks on liberty could be blocked by appeals to the Constitution, and it is likely that Thoreau is thinking of the history of such appeals when he doubts the power of "precedent" to save poor Sims.

The problem was that legislation involving slavery was a special case in constitutional law. The Sims case proved the point, for those who appealed to the law to stop his return to Georgia found themselves met and turned back exactly on constitutional grounds. Lemuel Shaw, chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court (and, by the way, Herman Melville's father-in-law), ruled not only that the Fugitive Slave Law was constitutional but that the United States itself would never have come into existence had the Constitution not allowed for slavery. In a decision that let Sims be sent back to Georgia, Shaw wrote:

Slavery was not created . . . by the Constitution; it existed before; it would have existed if the Constitution had not been made. The framers of the Constitution could not abrogate Slavery, or the rights claimed under it. They took it as they found it, and regulated it to a limited extent.

The Constitution . . . was the best adjustment which could be made of conflicting rights and claims, and was absolutely necessary to effect . . . the general pacification, by which harmony and peace should take the place of violence and war.

Similar decisions came down from the U.S. Supreme Court whenever it was faced with questions about slavery. In the 1857 Dred Scott case, for example, the Court found that it had no legal obligation toward slaves because they were not actually citizens, having been viewed as belonging to an inferior order when the Constitution was written.

For many in the North such legal sophistry did nothing but reduce respect for law itself and give new currency to the transcendentalist creed that written law should always be held accountable to the higher law inscribed in human conscience. Thoreau's aphoristic assertion "They are the lovers of law and order, who observe the law when the government breaks it" comes from "Slavery in Massachusetts," his published attack on the Fugitive Slave Law, where we also find what must be his answer to Shaw's ruling in the Sims case:

The question is not whether you or your grandfather, seventy years ago, did not enter into an agreement to serve the devil, . . . but whether you will not now, for once and at last, serve God . . . by obeying that eternal and only just constitution, which He, and not any Jefferson or Adams, has written in your being.

In the course of denying slaves any constitutional refuge, Justice Shaw had tried to highlight the virtues of compromise, speaking grandly of "harmony and peace" replacing "violence and war." Within

a few years, however, his ruling proved instrumental in a reversal of that logic. In May 1854 an escaped slave named Anthony Burns was arrested in Boston, and his master began the proceedings to return him to Virginia. The hearing to determine if Burns was in fact the man his master said he was (the only question open to review under the Fugitive Slave Law) threw the city into turmoil. Abolitionists, having learned from Shaw that legal arguments would not help their cause, resolved to rescue Burns from the Boston Court House, where he was being held, and speed him off to Canada. Thus two days after Burns was arrested, and following an inflammatory rally at Boston's Faneuil Hall, a woefully disorganized mob attacked the courthouse, battering down the door and killing a deputy U.S. marshal before being beaten back.

If the object was to rescue Burns, the attack was a grave mistake, for by morning an overwhelming force of federal troops and state militia had secured the building. A week later, when Burns was finally remanded to Virginia, he was led to a ship in Boston Harbor surrounded by a guard of U.S. marshals carrying pistols and drawn cutlasses. In front of these guards marched a company of U.S. Marines, a company of U.S. infantry, and—on horseback—a company of Boston's National Lancers. Behind the marshals marched another company of marines, followed by artillery officers with a horse-drawn cannon. In short, for a week in the spring of 1854 Boston—which had long imagined itself the cradle of liberty—was an occupied city, with local law suspended and federal law carried out by force of arms. Harmony and peace seemed then quite distant, and even Thoreau, whose earlier essay on disobedience was a model of civility, found himself imagining violence and war: “My thoughts are murder to the State.”

V. “SUPPOSE BLOOD SHOULD FLOW”

BECAUSE “CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE” SO DEEPLY INFLUENCED BOTH Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., the impression has arisen that Thoreau himself was an advocate of nonviolent resistance. That is, in fact, a plausible reading of “Civil Disobedience,” for Thoreau's action in the instance he describes was almost wholly passive.

He simply didn't pay his taxes. He did not announce his case beforehand and force the state to act; he did not organize fellow tax resisters; he did not lie in the streets to interfere with the business of the town. Though his position on taxation was considered and deliberate, his actual arrest arose because he was simply going about his business when the state stood in his way. Nor was Thoreau himself a violent man. There are no famous stories of his prowess with a gun.

Still, "Civil Disobedience" contains hints of Thoreau's more aggressive side, one that would become patently evident a few years later. The essay's original title, "Resistance to Civil Government," is one indication. At the time he wrote, Thoreau was well aware of a national debate between resisters and nonresisters, the latter being the ardent Christian pacifists of the nineteenth century. Men like William Lloyd Garrison and Adin Ballou called themselves nonresisters because they believed, as Ballou wrote, in the "non-resistance of injury with injury—evil with evil." A declaration that Garrison wrote in 1839 spelled out the consequent positions: nonresisters refused all physical force and coercion; they would submit passively to enemies and thieves and forgive rather than punish them; they would countenance no prisons, no retaliation, no retribution, no revenge; they would suffer "insult, outrage . . . , even death," for after all "so they treated the Messiah."

As early as 1841 Thoreau had apparently dissented from such sweeping pacifism, for in a debate at the Concord Lyceum he had taken the affirmative on the question "Is it ever proper to offer forcible resistance?" The later essay takes the affirmative again, though mutedly. Other than the title, the only passage where we find a brief flash of the possibility of confronting injury with injury is this:

When the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished. But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a man's real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now.

Thoreau begins here with his preferred politics, revolution by signing off, and when he turns to an imagined alternative, it is not a little figurative, but nonetheless there it is: it would be better to shed blood than to compromise a matter of conscience.

This metaphoric blood has become literal by the time of Thoreau's next overtly political essay, "Slavery in Massachusetts." There we find a reference to the "heroic attack on the Boston Court-House," a phrase that deserves to be underlined so as to see the progression of Thoreau's thought. "Slavery in Massachusetts" is primarily a response to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and to the Anthony Burns affair, which, as I have said, included the storming of the courthouse where Burns was being held and the death of a deputy U.S. marshal. That assault, that political murder, is the "heroic attack" to which Thoreau refers.

Thoreau and his fellow transcendentalists had always had an interest in heroes and bravery. Thoreau's earliest journal contains long entries on bravery ("We do all stand in the front ranks of the battle . . . ; where there is a brave man there is the thickest of the fight"), and a youthful essay, "The Service: Qualities of the Recruit," is an ode to the martial spirit. One gathers that this side of Thoreau came forward most fully in debate and argument. As Emerson said at Thoreau's funeral:

There was somewhat military in his nature not to be subdued, always manly and able, but rarely tender, as if he did not feel himself except in opposition. . . . He . . . required . . . a roll of the drum to call his powers into full exercise.

Every greeting-card shop in America now has something to remind us of that line from *Walden* about marching to "a different drummer," but as a recent biographer points out, it is mostly soldiers who march to drums.

Again, the military side of Thoreau is spiritual rather than physical, but his metaphors predispose him to assent when anyone appears actually willing to join heroic conscience with physical action. Such,

he thought, were the men who attacked the courthouse trying to free Anthony Burns (the fact that in doing so they killed a man is not mentioned in the essay, only the “heroic attack”). Such, above all, was John Brown, who later led an attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia.

I shall have more to say about Brown below, but for now I want simply to mark the last phase in the evolution of Thoreau’s relationship to violence. In his lectures on John Brown, Thoreau clearly is a resister, not a nonresister. It was John Brown’s position, he says, “that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder, in order to rescue the slave. I agree with him.” “[F]or once the Sharps’ rifles and the revolvers were employed in a righteous cause. The tools were in the hands of one who could use them.” This from a man who worried all his life about a culture dedicated to producing “improved means to unimproved ends.” Here the improved end is the abolition of slavery, and the old means—rifles and revolvers—serve very well.

What had changed in the decade between “Civil Disobedience” and the John Brown essays such that bloodshed and armed insurrection would replace passive resistance and simple signing off? The pivotal moment is recorded toward the end of “Slavery in Massachusetts.” I earlier mentioned Thoreau’s genius for perspective, his great ability to get himself outside the common frame of reference. On that ground, as I noted, “Civil Disobedience” contained his critique of traditional politicians who “speak of moving society, but have no resting-place without,” who “never [go] behind government, and so cannot speak with authority about it.” But once the Fugitive Slave Law began to be enforced in Massachusetts, Thoreau found that he himself no longer had a “resting-place without”; not even nature allowed him to get “behind.” Thus he writes in “Slavery in Massachusetts”: “I walk toward one of our ponds, but what signifies the beauty of nature when men are base? . . . The remembrance of my country spoils my walks.” There was a time when he had imagined that his life might be conducted in a space between heaven and hell, but now he found that no matter where he went he was “*wholly within* hell.”

“My old and worthiest pursuits have lost I cannot say how much of their attraction . . . since Massachusetts last deliberately sent back an innocent man, Anthony Burns, to slavery.”

It wasn't just that the politics of slavery had penetrated to “our ponds,” either; it was the humiliation that went along with it. For years the slaveholders had managed to draw the line against Northern abolitionists, and to do so with physical force and violence. In 1844, when Thoreau's neighbor the former congressman Samuel Hoar was sent to South Carolina to advocate for free Massachusetts blacks who were being jailed in Charleston without cause, a mob unceremoniously rode him out of the city. In 1851 several hundred federal troops helped ship Sims back to Georgia, and there his master had him publicly whipped almost to death. This display of cruelty was meant more for Yankee eyes than for the poor remanded slave, a point made clear by the date chosen for the whipping: the anniversary of the Battles of Lexington and Concord.

Men in the North took each of these events as a blow not just to their self-esteem but to their manhood. When Thoreau read the news account of those who tried to prevent Sims from being carried back to the South, he was proud to find a citizen of Concord “represented in that tea-party,” but then his feelings turned to doubt and shame because the man in question was a relative newcomer and “because the *men* of Concord in recent times have done nothing to entitle them to the honor of having their town named in such a connexion.” The emphasis on men here is a sign that Thoreau counted himself as a grandson of the men who wrote the Constitution, a patriot in a revolutionary patriarchy on guard lest the nation's store of manhood run out. Those early notes on “bravery” equate manhood with virtue, noting the “virility” that is the etymological link between the two.

An easy way to mark the virile strain in Thoreau's work is to contrast his slavery essays with another work written as a consequence of the Fugitive Slave Law, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The characters in Stowe's novel weep on almost every page (and the author constantly urges the reader to join them); at the

end, in answer to the question what must be done to rid the world of slavery, Stowe asks her audience *to feel* and *to pray*. Thoreau would not necessarily argue with Stowe, but his methods are not hers. Surely there are few who weep while reading Henry Thoreau. In writing about Anthony Burns, Thoreau would never think to wring our hearts with images of what young Burns's mother must be feeling. There is feeling in Thoreau, yes, but it springs more from conscience than from sympathy, and it moves toward direct action, not prayer. He is out to stiffen the back and draw the line, not to evangelize for a religion of the heart. Like Frederick Douglass, Thoreau takes resistance to be an exercise in recovering manhood. Responding to the murder of the U.S. marshal in Boston, Douglass had written: "Every slavehunter who meets a bloody death in his infernal business, is an argument in favor of the manhood of the race." Such was Thoreau's position for white manhood, too, at the end of the 1850s. What he liked about John Brown was that the man did what men should do. Faced with years of humiliation at the hands of slaveholders, he didn't go to law; he bought weapons and attacked the enemy.

VI. A LITERAL GIDEON

IN OCTOBER 1859 JOHN BROWN AND TWENTY-ONE MEN attacked the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, hoping to incite a slave insurrection and start a guerrilla war against the South. Though the raid revealed that the South was deeply anxious about possible slave revolts, and though it so polarized the nation that it arguably helped spark the Civil War, in the short term it was an utter failure. Although five escaped, Brown and the rest of his men were all killed or captured within forty-eight hours. Brown himself was hanged six weeks later.

After Brown was captured, and again after he died, Thoreau spoke out in defense of his actions. He had met Brown twice in Concord in the years just before the raid. In each case Brown had recently come from Kansas, where he and his sons were involved in the civil war brought on by the Compromise of 1850. Before

immigrating to Kansas in 1855, Brown had been involved in a series of business ventures in New England and Ohio; he had been a tanner, a land speculator, a wool grower, and a wool merchant. Each of these enterprises had failed, most of them ending in lawsuits and bankruptcy. Brown had married twice (his first wife having died) and fathered twenty children. By the time he moved to Kansas, he had seen nine of these children die and fifteen businesses ruined. He was an unlucky man, but also stubborn, private, and self-involved, refusing to take advice from anyone and more willing to join himself to a scheme or grievance than to give one up.

Two things ran parallel in Brown's life during his years of hapless struggle: a devout Christianity and a hatred of slavery. Brown was an old-school Calvinist of the sort who believes not just that we are "sinners in the hands of an angry God," as Jonathan Edwards put it, but that we have an obligation to bring that wrath to bear against the sin, which in practice can mean against ourselves and our loved ones. When Brown was a small boy, his father whipped him for the most minor of crimes (for stealing three pins, for example). Brown used this style of discipline on his own children (once beating his three-year-old son, Jason, for "lying" when the boy insisted that a dream he'd had was real). It wasn't so much about particular transgressions as about the sin each of us inherits; one time while beating another son, he astonished the boy by handing him the switch and having himself beaten until the blood began to show on his back. Severity was the mark, from first to last, of John Brown's religion. His final communication to the world was a note handed to a jailer on his way to the scaffold: "I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with Blood." He was fond of a verse from Hebrews: "Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins."

From his youth onward, Brown joined his Calvinism to a conviction that slavery was a sin against God, a position he had inherited from his father and from the sermons of Jonathan Edwards, Jr. At a prayer meeting in Ohio he had publicly vowed to consecrate his life to the abolition of slavery; once he had been expelled from a church

for insisting on sharing his pew with black families. Many abolitionists were themselves racists, hoping to end slavery by returning American blacks to Africa, but not John Brown. He had many black friends, he treated them as equals, he called them by their surnames, and he shared his table with them. Five of the raiders on Harpers Ferry were black.

These and other parts of John Brown's mind and method are well illustrated by his organizing a group called the United States League of Gileadites. This was early in 1851, in Springfield, Massachusetts; the Fugitive Slave Law had recently been passed, and Brown and his friends in the black community were exceedingly anxious that slave hunters would come to town and carry fugitives away. Brown thus gathered his friends and urged them to join together in a league pledged to mutual armed resistance. Forty-four men and women signed on.

Brown had taken his inspiration from a story in the Bible. In the Book of Judges we read that in the generation after Joshua, the Israelites had forsaken God, who therefore gave them over into the hands of the Midianites for seven years. At the end of these years God called on Gideon to redeem His people. Gideon at first protested ("How can I deliver Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest . . . , and I am the least in my family"), but God prevailed and soon Gideon had gathered an army of more than thirty thousand men. God then announced that the army was too large; if the Israelites were to win, they might praise themselves and not the Lord. So Gideon thinned his troops until only three hundred remained. These then scattered the Midian armies, many thousands strong: "When they blew the three hundred trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his fellow and against all the army; and the army fled."

In Springfield, the League of Gileadites never set its swords against an enemy—slave hunters did not in fact arrive—but its formation was an uncanny foreshadowing of Harpers Ferry and offers a glimpse of how Brown imagined himself. To begin with, Brown thought he saw providential purpose even in such apparent evils as the Fugitive Slave Law ("It really looks as if God had his hand in this wickedness," he wrote to his wife). And why might God have allowed an unjust majority to pass evil laws against the will of

a righteous minority? To punish the faithless, first of all, but also, come the turning point, because God does not work by the carnal arithmetic of majority rule. He prefers small numbers so that His hand might be all the more evident.

In the Calvinist reading, apparently, God's favorite number is one: one righteous man. This had been Thoreau's position in "Civil Disobedience": "if one honest man" resisted slavery and got locked up in jail, "it would be the abolition of slavery in America." John Brown said the same thing to the gathered Gileadites, only Brown's position was a touch more resistant and a touch more violent. He imagined "one bold and to some extent successful man . . . , defending his rights in good earnest," then being put on "trial for life," finally to be "hanged, if [he] must," all of which would "arouse . . . sympathy throughout the nation," for "nothing so charms the American people as personal bravery."

We have here not just the literalizing of prophecy; we have also one nineteenth-century political form—or rather an apolitical form, for the final thing to note about how Brown imagines his world is that it centers on a small, unaffiliated group or, even better, on a single hero. Brown himself never joined any of the antislavery societies. There is no politics in the story of the League of Gileadites, just good against evil, a threat of violence, and the hope of heroic charm. Similarly, Brown's style, once he had arrived in Kansas, was to work alone and in secret, never showing any interest, for example, in working with others involved in the struggle to make Kansas a Free-Soil state. In fact, by the time he went west in the spring of 1856, he had become what we would now call a terrorist.

The initial and most striking case of John Brown at work in Kansas has come to be known as the massacre at Pottawatomie Creek. Tensions were high in southeastern Kansas in the early months of 1856. Pro-slavery settlers had murdered six Free-Soil settlers in a variety of confusing situations. A pro-slavery army had attacked Lawrence, Kansas, burning the governor's house and destroying the presses at Free-Soil newspapers. In this context, Brown and four men (two of them his sons) took it upon themselves to murder five

pro-slavery settlers near their cabins along Pottawatomie Creek, about thirty-five miles south of Lawrence.

One victim was James Doyle, a poor white farmer who had left Tennessee because he'd decided that slavery was "ruinous to white labor" but had staunchly defended the pro-slavery faction once he got to Kansas. Brown's band came to Doyle's cabin about eleven o'clock at night and—with Mrs. Doyle weeping in the door—took the man and his two older sons out onto the road, where Brown's sons hacked them to death with broadswords. One of Doyle's sons had his arms cut off. Brown himself shot Doyle in the forehead to make sure he was dead. He later declared the killings to be "decreed by Almighty God, ordained from eternity." If so, God wanted war, for soon southeastern Kansas, "Bleeding Kansas," was plunged into chaos; armed bands roamed the countryside, one of them led by Brown. More than two hundred died before the fighting abated.

Not much detail about these matters, or about Brown's early days, reached Concord. Thoreau knew nothing of all those disappointments in business (his "Plea for Captain John Brown" makes the baseless claim that the man had "great common sense"). As for the terror on Pottawatomie Creek, Thoreau had heard of it but had no reason to believe the story: exaggerated claims were being made on all sides, Brown himself lied about his actions, and the two New York newspapermen who had actually met Brown in Kansas got the story wrong. Beyond this, as Robert Penn Warren has argued, Brown had a gift for creating compelling stories after the fact. From all accounts, he was a persuasive and charismatic man. He stood only five feet nine inches, but everyone in Boston called him tall. People who knew him ended up speaking of him in the terms he himself had invented: his first biographer, James Redpath, happily called him one of the Gideons; after his death, so did the pacifist William Lloyd Garrison!

It was more than the old man's fire and fabulations that fed Thoreau's enthusiasm, however. Beyond all that, and beyond the arch individualism, there was John Brown's impatience with words and his drive toward action. By 1859 many abolitionists had tired of talk and were ready for a fight. They had been humiliated too long. Most

recently, a few days before the Pottawatomie massacre in fact, a senator from Massachusetts, Charles Sumner, had been beaten on the floor of the U.S. Senate by Representative Preston Brooks of South Carolina. Objecting to a Free-Soil speech by Sumner, Brooks had approached Sumner at his Senate desk and thrashed him with a cane so furiously that the cane shattered and Sumner, blinded by his own blood and trying to rise, ripped the bolted desk from the floor.

The beating of Sumner was merely the latest in a decades-old string of insults. As I've mentioned, there had been the bullying of Thoreau's neighbor Samuel Hoar in South Carolina; there had been the removal from Boston and the public whipping of Thomas Sims; there had been the occupation of Boston for the remanding of Anthony Burns. Some eight months after the beating of Sumner, John Brown visited the recuperating senator in Boston and asked to see the coat he had been wearing when attacked. Sumner limped to the closet and brought out the garment, stiff with blood. Brown held it silently, Sumner reported, his eyes shining "like polished steel." No wonder they loved him in Concord. Whoever was casting this melodrama had at last found someone who would stop arguing about the Constitution and arm himself.

Unfortunately, the ensuing events never rose to the restorative ending we expect from melodrama, at least not on the carnal plane. Even this, however, the proximate failure of the Harpers Ferry raid, appealed to Thoreau. To see why, let's go back to the story of Gideon and the Midianites, where weakness and small numbers signified the Lord's presence and the warriors' virtue. Gideon did not fail, of course, so here we must turn from the Book of Judges and concentrate on Brown's retelling of the tale, for note that the solitary hero he conjured up for his friends was not a "bold and successful man" but, oddly, a "bold and to some extent successful man." In retrospect, the fable Brown spun the day he gathered his league nicely prefigured what was to happen at Harpers Ferry eight years later: a tiny army, sure they were summoned by God, were "to some extent successful" in their enterprise, though hanged in the end. That, at any rate, gives it the kind of literal-prophetic reading Brown himself preferred. A more

temporal reading of that modifying clause, “to some extent,” would take it as an echo of Brown’s actual fortunes at the time and a suggestion that apparent failure might be a sign of virtue yet to be disclosed.

Regardless of how we understand what Brown does with Gideon, Thoreau was quick to assert the promise hidden in the Harpers Ferry fiasco. Reversals of this sort were Thoreau’s stock-in-trade—we travel by staying home, heaven is beneath our feet, poverty makes us rich—and for similar reasons: figuratively they point to the spiritual world (by jerking the mind away from the literal), and literally they help assuage whatever limits and losses he himself had suffered. In Brown’s case, then, Thoreau is quickly scornful of the newspapers that “talk as if a man’s death were a failure” and scornful too of a neighbor who asks (“Yankee-like”) what Brown hoped to gain by his action:

Such a one has no idea of gain but in this worldly sense. . . .
 [I]f he does not get a new pair of boots . . . it must be a failure. “But he won’t gain any thing by it.” Well, no, I don’t suppose he could get four-and-sixpence a day for being hung . . . ; but then he stands a chance to save a considerable part of his soul.

Thus in addition to weakness and small numbers, failure in this world becomes a sign of virtue, for it implies a relative lack of self-interest. Surely the motive must be high when a man acts with no idea of gain. Such, at any rate, was not only how Thoreau cast Brown but how Brown presented himself to the world after his capture. If he couldn’t be one of the triumphant Gideons of this world, then he would be one of the dying Christs who show us all that failure in one world is high success in another. In this way did the state of Virginia, by its sentence of death, get old Brown out of the Hebrew Bible and into the New Testament at last. The Lord once saw fit to send him into battle armed; now, Brown wrote from his jail cell, “Christ . . . saw fit to take from me a sword of steel . . . , but he has put another in my hand (‘The sword of the Spirit’).” Brown had a sense of narrative,

and if he had to die, he knew what the form required. Before his hanging, he wrote consolingly to his family: “Remember, dear wife and children all, that Jesus of Nazareth suffered a most excruciating death on the cross as a felon.”

The story itself demanded this Christlike death. Without it, how could steel be converted into spirit? How could the seed of virtue be winnowed from the husk of failure? At his trial Brown declared, “If it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice . . . , I say let it be done,” and after his conviction, when friends plotted to free him, he told them not to: “I am worth inconceivably more to *hang* than for any other purpose.” Nor was Brown the only one who felt the plot must end in death. The journalist James Redpath said as much; so did Henry Ward Beecher, and so did Thoreau, making his plea for the still-living Brown in a rather chilling past tense: “I see now that it was necessary that . . . [he] be hung. . . . I *almost fear* that I may yet hear of his deliverance, doubting if a prolonged life . . . can do as much good as his death.”

The fear Thoreau articulates here belongs to democracy in its American, Protestant form. Thoreau had spent a good deal of his intellectual energy trying to escape the fences of his Christian town, but when the fight against slavery drew him to the ground of actual politics, and especially when he was speaking to his actual Christian neighbors, he reverted to the local type, for whom the martyrdom of Christ is the greatest story told, now in its New World version, which promises that a majority of one might stake a transcendental claim, and then triumph by dying. That is to say, the John Brown story points toward otherwise obscure connections among the mathematics of majority rule, acts of conscience, and failure. Democratic practice has long been haunted by the fear that majority rule might bring a new form of despotism, kingship replaced by the mob. As Thoreau puts it in “Civil Disobedience,” “A wise man will not . . . wish [the right] to prevail through the power of the majority. There is but little virtue in the action of masses of men.” The warning to Gideon—that large numbers will obscure the hand of the Lord—is God’s version of this point. Useful, then, is the trick of spiritual reversal by which the weak

are strong and the finest proof of good conscience is that the crowd will not believe in it. Thus when some fundamental change is needed, some change that the majority by its very nature cannot see, the spiritual politics of Christian democracy must call out a martyr, one whose death becomes the symbolic event by which the dissident position acquires its political life. That is why Thoreau can say, in the speech read over the dead man's grave, that John Brown "is more alive than ever he was," that he "*had not died.*"

VII: THE NICK OF TIME

I MYSELF PART COMPANY WITH THOREAU WHEN HE GETS TO John Brown. Except for the clarity of Brown's stand against slavery, and for his ability to form friendships in the black community, I find little to recommend him. I don't like the willful violence. I don't like the refusal of organized politics and collective action. I am put off by what a friend of his called "his God idea," especially when joined to his "imperial egotism."

And because Thoreau seems not to feel, or at least never expresses, any such reservations, I find that I hear a number of things differently when I turn back to the earlier essays with the Brown case echoing in my ears. When first describing the prophetic voice, I mentioned in passing that it has its dangers, and the difference I now speak of is probably best described as another version of that point. I pause more now when Thoreau proclaims his love of heroes. I am cautious before his grandiosity, his mythmaking, his manliness. His solitude and his refusals still stir me, but I am more aware of the political registers that they exclude. Moreover, as one born in a century that brought both the horrors of ethnic cleansing and the insights of psychoanalysis, I can no longer hear Thoreau's longing for "purity" without hearing as well an undertone of potential cruelty in it—the threat, that is, to whatever the purist hopes to purge, be it (in Thoreau's case) the appetites of his own body and the imperfections of his friends, or (in Brown's case) the sins of unwitting children and the imperfections of "this guilty land." (Perhaps it is exactly this—the

potential cruelty of good conscience—that led Gandhi and King to insist on nonviolent action, a tactic that is latent in the early Thoreau but then abandoned, not developed.)

It often turns out, once we get some specific cases before us, to be difficult to translate prophetic idealism into actual practice. At the close of the first section of this essay, I made it sound simple: “You resist an immoral war and go to jail.” You quit, you hunker down, you go back, you leave: it seems so easy when put so briefly. And I meant it to seem easy: Thoreau is a master at calling out our optimism, and I was there happily joining my voice to his in hopes of casting the old spell. In that can-do mode, one might similarly have said, in 1859, “You see the wrong of slavery, attack the slave holder, and put an end to it.” But at this distance in time, at least, the turmoil and carnage that followed John Brown should make us pause to reflect on the territory between seeing the wrong and putting it right.

Not all slaveholding societies, after all, resorted to violence to bring an end to slavery. None, I think, had to suffer the kind of civil war we had to suffer. The British, for example, slowly ended slavery in the West Indies by converting slaves into “apprentice laborers” who had to give a good portion of their income to their masters for four years before becoming fully free. The British also reimbursed West Indian planters for the capital they had invested in slaves; the government essentially bought the slaves to free them. They spent twenty million pounds to do so, a significant sum of money in 1834, the year of West Indian emancipation.

Similarly in the United States, several Northern states ended slavery by slow and compromising measures. In 1804 New Jersey passed an act for gradual abolition. As of July 4 of that year, the children of slaves were born free, though they had to remain servants of their mother’s owner until they came of age. In 1846, the state abolished slavery entirely, though again by a gradualist formula: the children of slaves were now wholly free at birth, but slaves themselves were converted to “apprentices” whose condition combined continued involuntary servitude with legal rights that slaves had never had before. In 1850 there were 236 such apprentices in New Jersey; in 1860 there were two.

It is an open question whether this sort of approach would have ever been acceptable to Southern elites, who by the 1850s had become increasingly strident and uncompromising in their defense of slavery. Certainly no such middling solutions would have been welcome to “all or nothing” men like Thoreau and Brown. For one thing, gradualist strategies mean accepting that there might be such a thing as property in persons (the British, that is, could not buy West Indian slaves without recognizing slavery as a legal fact). Compromise solutions require dealing with the devil and staining the conscience, and purity of conscience is Thoreau’s point of departure, the ground on which he stands.

Against such otherwise noble resistance I here imagine a pragmatist who might point out that purity of conscience has its own risks. It may seem anachronistic to invoke pragmatism here and yet, as Louis Menand has argued in *The Metaphysical Club*, the territory I am describing was in fact the seedbed of pragmatic philosophy in America. Pragmatism arose, that is, in a generation of thinkers who had suffered the Civil War in their early manhood—Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. is Menand’s most convincing example—and left that conflict determined to reclaim the practice of virtue from the blindness and excess of abstract ideals. The pragmatic point, in any event, would be that refusing to work with slavery as it actually existed meant inviting a conflict that only war could settle, and war surely is the devil’s playground. Might not a man also stain his conscience by insisting that its price can only be reckoned in the currency of military dead? Emerson once called John Brown “a pure idealist,” and, noting Brown’s love for the Golden Rule and the Declaration of Independence, recalled that he had once said in regard to these: “Better that a whole generation of men, women and children should pass away by a violent death, than that one word of either should be violated in this country.” There is a grim confusion here between figurative eloquence and literal statement. A whole generation? By violent death? Really?

Yet the moment we take the times themselves into account it becomes harder to dismiss Brown’s prophetic stance, his chilling

pronouncements notwithstanding. The more I try to image what it was like to live in Concord in the 1850s, the less emphatic is my resistance to the transcendentalist endorsement of Brown. Emerson, after all, did not speak of Brown on some infinitely recurring November evening. He spoke on November 18, 1859. John Brown was two weeks away from the scaffold, and the failed fight against the Fugitive Slave Law was a decade old. For a decade, the opponents of slavery had found politics as usual to be a dead end. The South controlled the Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Presidency. There is an earlier Emerson who, in 1844, offered the British in the West Indies as a model for how America might abolish slavery, as there is an earlier Thoreau whose image of disobedience was more “civil.” Thoreau in the 1840s is usually content to let his readers figure out what action might be called for; he clears the ground, then leaves us to our own devices. But such detachment does not survive the 1850s. By the end of the decade he comes before us drawn into the most temporal of matters and, with John Brown, attached to an actor and an action. The late political essays are the fruit of a prophetic temperament, but they themselves are not prophetic; they are time-bound and they need to be read, first of all, with as much sense of the historical moment and its constraints as possible.

Thus my response to Thoreau’s engagement with Brown ends as it began: in ambivalence. I do not follow Thoreau in his praise for Brown, but I realize that my reservations are bred in a luxury of time. On the one hand, at the present moment, it is not hard to know why any call to prophetic action—especially violent action—should be met with rigorous skepticism; on the other hand, there are times—the late 1850s in New England, surely—when the impulse to embrace such action may be the best response to intractable and intolerable circumstances.

So, as I say, I end where I began. But rather than end exactly there, let me end with a reflection on ending itself. Ambivalence, plainly stated, makes a poor conclusion, perhaps an un-American conclusion. I mentioned “melodrama” earlier; almost all American movies are melodramas. They urge us to rise above or erase the

doubleness and confusion of this time-bound world. They teach us that it is better to reclaim our innocence, however falsely, than to suffer under the mixture of good and evil that is ordinary life. In this line, I would say that the ending of “Slavery in Massachusetts” is melodramatic—I mean that passage in which Thoreau, having said that his “thoughts are murder to the state,” adds two paragraphs invoking the purity of the white water lily that blooms in June on the Concord River. It is melodramatic because it holds out the hope of a retreat to Nature’s simplicity and purity when in fact that hope was gone by 1854. Thoreau both knew that and resisted it. One of the things that makes *Walden* so great is the way in which Thoreau gets the various registers of his voice working together—practical, lyrical, symbolic, moral, mystical—but after the Fugitive Slave Law he seems to me less and less able to find the old harmonies. There was no easy way to join Time and Eternity in that decade. That impasse, that aporia, led to events like those associated with John Brown. It also led to the Civil War. No wonder it is difficult to find the right note to end on.