HENRY DAVID THOREAU AS A SOCIAL CRITIC

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HENRY DAVID THOREAU AS A SOCIAL CRITIC

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PREFACE

Although most people once thought of Thoreau as a man who disliked society so much that he went to the woods and lived alone for two years in order to escape social influences, friends and critics of Thoreau are beginning to understand him much better now and to agree that he was not the misanthrope that many people once considered him. His interest in his fellowman is shown in his criticisms of the society in which he lived; and in this thesis I have attempted to show what opinions he held on the subjects of religion, economics, politics, government, and the most important political issues of his day. In the first chapter I have also attempted to show that Thoreau's criticisms were influenced by the particular time and place of his life, that his opinions, particularly on the subjects of religion, economics, and political issues, would probably have been altogether different had he lived in another section of the country or during another period of American history.

For the most part, this thesis was written when my readings on the subject consisted only of the writings of Thoreau. Chapters II-V were written before I consulted any secondary sources. After reading from the secondary sources, I added two or three quotations to the concluding chapter, but no
other changes were made in that chapter, and no changes at all were made in Chapters II-IV.

All references to the writings of Thoreau are made to the Manuscript Edition of *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, because this edition contains all of Thoreau's published writings, whereas other editions do not. In this edition, moreover, Thoreau's *Journal* is arranged exactly as he wrote it. In the footnotes, for the sake of clearness, I have referred to the first six volumes, which are the published works of Thoreau exclusive of the *Journal*, by titles instead of by volumes. The last fourteen volumes of the edition, which consist wholly of Thoreau's *Journal*, are referred to by volume numbers. There is a double system of numbering for these volumes; that is, Volumes Seven through Twenty of the *Writings* are also Volumes One through Fourteen of the *Journal*. In this thesis footnote references to the *Journal* are recorded under Volumes One through Fourteen.
CHAPTER ONE

BIOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND

In May, 1862, having lived a somewhat disturbed and disturbing life during a crucial period of American history, Henry David Thoreau died peacefully in Concord, Massachusetts. During his last few months he probably was more at peace with the government under which he lived than at any time since his birth forty-five years earlier. He certainly was less at war with it than at any time since he entered Harvard University in 1833, when both he and the Republic were comparatively young.

During the thirty-two years between the presidencies of Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln the young Thoreau matured and formed his opinions about the society in which he found himself a member; and it was during these same years -- years characterized by intense activity, violent controversy, bitter conflict, and stirring adventure on the national scene -- that the young America also grew to maturity.1 What were the conditions in America, in New England, in Concord, and in his own family circle that caused Thoreau to form the opinions that he held on the subjects of religion, government, and economics?

1Ralph Philip Boas and Katherine Burton, Social Backgrounds of American Literature, p. 71.
When Thoreau was born, the young country of his birth had defeated England in two wars, thus definitely establishing its independence. Most Americans and many foreigners agreed that the new country was on its inevitable way to becoming one of the greatest nations on earth. Perhaps it was this new feeling of political security that opened the way for the changes that were soon to be evident throughout the length and breadth of the land, changes that eventually brought about the "inevitable" conflict in which the nation was engaged at Thoreau's death.

One of the most significant of these changes was in the field of economics. When the American nation was very young, there was no extremely wealthy nor any extremely poor class in America; but for the most part every man owned his own land or his own little store. During the early years of the nineteenth century, however, the Industrial Revolution, which then had England firmly in its grip, made itself felt in America too. Soon manufacturing on a large scale was begun, most of the money in the nation was concentrated in the hands of a few people, and marked distinctions between capitalists and laborers arose where previously there had been no social distinctions. Of course, the country was becoming wealthy and of world-wide importance in shipping and manufacturing, many scientific improvements were being made, canals were being dug, roads were being built into the wilderness, and scientific farming methods were being introduced; but many people, peering beneath the external evidences of national wealth, saw some of
the effects of the relentlessly-pursued new economic policy. They saw thousands of people who had once lived on farms being crowded together around factories in the cities; they saw these people working long hours for someone else in return for wages; and some of them must have been wise and far-sighted enough to realize that, while the condition was perhaps unavoidable, these people were gradually giving up their economic freedom, which had been no small part of America's noble heritage.

The above changes characterized the North. The South was changing too, but in a different way. Cotton was replacing rice, sugar, and indigo to become the South's leading crop. Negro slaves were found to work well in the fields; hence many vast cotton plantations soon appeared, plantations whose existence and wealth depended as much upon slave labor as the factories in the North depended upon their machines.\(^2\) In both North and South, then, wealth was concentrating; but the methods by which the wealth was concentrated, being entirely different in the two sections, were destined to give rise to distinct, almost irreconcilable, differences between those who lived in the industrial North and those who lived in the slave-holding South.

Two other economic factors of this period were the great movements toward the hitherto little-explored West and the enormous increase in the number of immigrants arriving in the

United States annually from Europe. The call of the West was heard and answered by the most energetic and progressive of the New England farmers, causing them to move to Ohio or to western New York. Thanks to the Erie Canal, which joined the East and the developing West, New York was fast becoming the most important city in America; and to its growth Boston and Philadelphia were yielding. European immigrants, principally those from Ireland, were appearing throughout the East to do the work in the mills and the manual labor which the new roads, railways, and canals were demanding.3

Although economic conditions were undergoing the most evident changes in the country at the time of Thoreau's birth, the country was also changing in politics and in religion. The clustering of Irish immigrants and other poor people in the cities gave politicians a good opportunity to practice bribery among these people, who understood little about the operations of a democracy. Protests against these immigrants eventually led to the establishment of the Know-Nothing organizations, the first of which was established in Philadelphia. In the field of religion, the hold of the Congregational Church was gradually broken, church and state being separated in Massachusetts in 1833. Unitarianism was replacing the old Puritan theology, which had been dying for many a day.4

3Boas and Burton, op. cit., p. 58.
4Adams, op. cit., p. 158.
What a fool he must be who thinks that his El Dorado is anywhere but where he lives," wrote Thoreau in a letter to Harrison Blake. Thoreau's El Dorado, of course, was his native village of Concord, which he loved so much that tears reportedly came to his eyes when, in answer to his question of what he should do in life, his mother replied that he might buckle on his knapsack and roam abroad to seek his fortune. "Indeed, the devotion of Thoreau to his native town was so marked as to provoke opposition. 'Henry talks about Nature,' said Madam Hoar (the mother of Senator Hoar, and daughter of Roger Sherman of Connecticut), 'just as if she'd been born and brought up in Concord.'" The Concord village of Thoreau's birth contained some two thousand inhabitants, who lived in austere houses on long, tree-shaded streets. The village, originally a mill dam and the focus of converging roads, "merged into country on one side and lawns stretched to the river and the marshes on the other. Below the mill dam on the Concord River, was the old manse, and Doctor Ripley, ... and the bridge where was fired the shot heard round the world." The heart of the town of Concord is a river valley through which meander gentle streams. Thoreau once commented on the fact that the current

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of the Concord River was scarcely perceptible, saying that many people attributed the proverbial moderation of the inhabitants of Concord to the influence of the river.\footnote{A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (Vol. I of Manuscript Edition), p. 7. Hereafter, this volume will be referred to merely as A Week.}

When the Thoreau family was new in Concord, that village was still "one of those New England theocracies, with a single church, from which Doctor Ripley, a scholar, a gentleman, and a character, directed the morals of the town."\footnote{Canby, op. cit., p. 8.} Doctor Ripley knew everyone's grandparents, and he talked to backsliders in terms of family pride, of which there was much in Concord; for Concord was intensely conscious of its past, proud of its Revolutionary history, and zealous of its reputation for independence. "It was a town that had always stood on its own feet, made its own heroes -- a place of beginnings, not followings."\footnote{Ibid., p. 10.} Its villagers and farmers were deeply, almost fervently, religious; and later when many people forsook Trinitarianism for the new doctrine of Transcendentalism, in ethics the town never wavered in its Puritanism.\footnote{Ibid., p. 9.}

Although Henry Thoreau adopted Concord for his own, the Thoreaus had no ancestry or history there; for when Henry was born, people bearing the name of Thoreau had lived in Concord but one generation and in America but two."They
were Scotch, French, Tory in a community English to the core and the cradle of the Revolution.\textsuperscript{13} Into the proud old American village of Concord and into the new American family of Thoreau, Henry was born to John and Cynthia Thoreau. Cynthia Dunbar Thoreau was described by a kinswoman as being handsome, high-spirited, a sweet singer, and accomplished after the manner of her day.\textsuperscript{14} She was an incessant talker and as "emotional as a robin is emotional, cheeping or flapping over its nestlings or the cat. Her tongue dominated the home, and certainly helped drive Henry Thoreau to his Walden hermitage."\textsuperscript{15} Directly in contrast to his wife, John Thoreau was a grave and silent, but inwardly cheerful and social, person, who found no difficulty in giving his wife the lead in all affairs.\textsuperscript{16} One biographer accounts for Thoreau's sympathy with his father in the fact that the father was to the son a rock of silence in a world of flowing talk, Cynthia's, Emerson's, Channing's, Alcott's, and doubtless his sisters', his old maid aunts', and his mother's feminine boarders'. "It is not derogatory to say that Thoreau had the same affection for his father as for the inscrutable wood-chuck which let him stroke its head."\textsuperscript{17} Sanborn describes the Thoreau family relationships in the following manner:

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., pp. 3-4. \hfill \textsuperscript{14}Sanborn, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{15}Canby, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 19. \hfill \textsuperscript{16}Sanborn, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 25.
\textsuperscript{17}Canby, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 21.
The household of which they were loving and thoughtful members (let one be permitted to say who was for a time domesticated there) had, like the best families everywhere, a distinct and individual existence, in which each person counted for something, and was not a mere drop in the broad water-level that American society tends more and more to become. To meet one of the Thoreaus was not the same as to encounter any other person who might happen to cross your path. Life to them was something more than a parade of pretensions, a conflict of ambitions, or an incessant scramble for the common objects of desire. They were fond of climbing to the hill-top, and could look with a broader and kinder vision than most of us on the commotions of the plain and the mists of the valley. Without wealth, or power, or social prominence, they still held a rank of their own, in scrupulous independence, and with qualities that put condescension out of the question.18

In such an America, in such a Concord, and in such a family, Thoreau spent what all who knew him recognized as a happy, average childhood, at the end of which, unlike the average boy, he entered Harvard University. There he found himself a little out of place in that socially-stratified place. "When he heard the thrush singing in the college yard, Harvard ceased to exist, the examinations he was preparing for... Nothing remained but a dejected prisoner in his prison."19 Perhaps Thoreau was not even figuratively a prisoner at Harvard, but his college life was certainly not a particularly happy one; so it may be safely assumed that the twenty-year-old boy was quite happy when, in August, 1837, he was granted his B.A. degree and so could return to his boyhood haunts in Concord.

The America into which the young college student emerged was at that particular time engaged with a panic, which is recorded in history as the Panic of 1837. Today, however, that panic subsides into insignificance when compared with other events which had taken place and which were taking place in the country. The westward movement, stimulated by Horace Greeley's admonition to all young men to "Go West," had continued until people no longer thought of a western boundary marked by a line of forts. Texas had won her independence from Mexico and was petitioning for admission into the Union. Trade caravans from Independence to New Mexico were carrying men's minds toward California and the Southwest. Other lines leading up into Oregon and northern California were carrying men's minds in that direction.

Like a huge lobster's claws we were beginning to nip the Pacific Coast at north and south, with the Desert and the mountain ranges in between, and as yet but little regarded. In every direction the finger of fate had beckoned westward. Someone had coined the phrase "Manifest Destiny" and no one needed to be told that it meant inevitable expansion to the Pacific at any cost. 20

This expansion had helped to bring to the forefront a subject that Americans had tried to ignore: slavery. Even people in the North overlooked it for the most part, knowing that slave-labor was necessary to produce the cotton which they needed for their factories. People hoped that the Missouri Compromise of 1820 would settle the problem. By the 1830's, however, with Senator Hayne of South Carolina openly

declaring the right of a state to secede from the Union, with President Jackson thrilling the country with his Jefferson birthday dinner toast, "Our Federal Union -- it must be preserved," only to be met by President Calhoun's equally challenging one, "The Union -- next to our liberty, the most dear," and with William Lloyd Garrison beginning the publication of his fanatical abolition paper, in the first issue of which he warned, "I am in earnest -- I will not excuse -- I will not retreat a single inch -- AND I WILL BE HEARD," it was impossible to keep the problem in the background. Slavery, therefore, became a major problem, and a particularly dangerous one each time a new territory applied for admission into the Union, for neither North nor South desired the other to secure a majority of the new states.

Education expanded rapidly, the foundation for the present educational system being established in New England by 1850. This was also a period of religious revival. One of the greatest of the revivalists was William Miller, who in 1843 went through New England preaching the end of the world to religious enthusiasts, "who gathered in great numbers on camp grounds and abandoned themselves to orgies of religious ecstasy." The years from 1829 to 1861 constituted an era of reforms, and because of the fast growth of the country there were plenty of evils against which one could fight.

21Boas and Burton, op. cit., p. 95.
"To some men a greater evil than slavery was the heavy drinking of alcoholic liquors. It was a time when whiskey and rum were sold in every grocery store, when drunkenness in all classes was prevalent... Temperance lectures and anti-liquor literature flourished." Movements were also started for world peace and women's rights; imprisonment for debts was abolished; prisons were reformed, and the care of the insane was improved. Many people, dissatisfied with the social system as they observed it, dreamed of Utopian communities, where men could live together, work with their hands, and think high thoughts. The most famous such community actually established was Brook Farm, near Boston. Innumerable voices from the North advancing every sort of reform as a cure for all social ills were heard during these years. Out of that confused roar "three voices, all from Massachusetts, sound clearly above the clamor and give expression to three distinct traits of the period -- Emerson with his optimism and self-reliance, Garrison declaiming against slavery, Webster pleading for nationalism." Returning from college in 1837, Thoreau spent the next few years trying to find a means by which he could support himself. He tried teaching school, at which he was unsuccessful until he and his brother, John, opened their eminently successful school in Concord. The school was growing rapidly.

22Ibid., p. 91.  
23Adams, op. cit., p. 196.
and might have continued indefinitely had not John died sud-
denly, leaving a brother whose heart was no longer in his
work; so the school was closed.

Soon after his return from Harvard, Thoreau became a
friend of Ralph W. Emerson's, a friendship difficult to
understand because of the discrepancy in the ages and posi-
tions of the two men, but perhaps accounted for in that
Thoreau seemed to Emerson the

very man to put into practice a new study of nature in
its relation to man for which the scholar-idealists knew
he had neither energy, inclination, nor time. He had
indeed imagined a Thoreau before he met him, which is
enough in itself to account for the warmth of his wel-
come.24

At any rate, Thoreau and Emerson became close friends, Thoreau
even being a resident in the Emerson household from 1841 to
1843 and again from 1847 to 1848, just after his return from
Walden. Though many of Thoreau's earlier biographers seemed
to believe that Thoreau imitated Emerson to such an extent
that he actually looked like the older man, some later critics
reject this idea of extreme imitation. "... Thoreau might
have viewed Nature, man, and God in something the way he did
if there had never been an Emerson."25 More than sixty im-
portant references to Thoreau are found in Emerson's Journals.
Fewer than thirty significant references to Emerson are found

24 Canty, op. cit., p. 91.

25 John Brooks Moore, "Thoreau Rejects Emerson," American
Literature, IV (1932), 241.
in Thoreau's Journal. "Further, it ought to be noted, Thoreau's references to Emerson are often ironic and entirely lack the tone of discipleship. Emerson, however, ordinarily quotes a choice remark from Thoreau and commends it."\(^{26}\) At Emerson's home, however, Thoreau came in contact with many great people -- Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, George Ripley, Theodore Parker, and many others. There, also, Thoreau became a member of what was called, though not by the members themselves, the Transcendental Club.\(^{27}\) "Transcendentalism was only a nickname for the conversation of these ardent and enlightened seekers, whose first principle was freedom of thought so that the mind might breathe fresh air.\(^{28}\) Nevertheless, that was the time when Transcendentalism, whose American origin was in Concord, was at its height in the new world.

As has been pointed out, many of the reformers of the day were seeking relief in the new doctrine of Transcendentalism; and according to Sanborn there were two distinct ways in which that doctrine could be practiced: a Transcendentalist might be either social or unsocial. It was the latter which worried the aged Doctor Ripley and which Sanborn believed applied at least part of the time to Thoreau.\(^{29}\) The unsocial Transcendentalists were described by Emerson as

\(^{26}\)Ibid.  
\(^{27}\)Canby, op. cit., p. 83.  
\(^{28}\)Ibid., p. 84.  
\(^{29}\)Sanborn, op. cit., pp. 142-143.
people who "withdraw themselves from the common labors and
competitions of the market and the caucus, and betake them-
selves to a certain solitary and critical way of living,
from which no solid fruit has yet appeared to justify their
separation." They appeared to be repelled by the frivol-
ity and vulgarity of the society in which they found them-
selves members, and they withdrew from it, believing it
better to be alone than in bad company.

But their solitary and fastidious manners not only
withdraw them from the conversation, but from the labors
of the world; they are not good citizens, not good mem-
ers of society. ... They are inactive; they do not
even like to vote. The philanthropists inquire whether
Transcendentalism does not mean sloth. They had as lief
hear that their friend was dead as that he was a Transcend-
entalist; for then he is paralyzed, and can never do
anything for humanity.

Other biographers believed Thoreau not to have taken the
new doctrine of Transcendentalism any more seriously than
did the outsiders, who were always prompt to ridicule it.
"Besides, he always had the resource of being a transcen-
dentalist in his own fashion. Let his friends seek for the
real and infinite as they chose; he was going to seek for it
first under the soles of his heavy boots." Perhaps this
conception of Transcendentalism accounts for Thoreau's fond-
ness for Concord and his lack of desire to see other parts

30 The Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, IV, 304.
31 Ibid., p. 308.
32 Ibid., p. 309.
33 Bazalgette, op. cit., p. 79.
of the world. At any rate, after reading Emerson's "Nature" and becoming good friends with Emerson himself, Thoreau became more and more convinced "that the secret of life could be learned by him and in Concord fields." 34

Thoreau's going to Walden once was almost universally considered the action of an unsocial Transcendentalist. Many critics, however, think of his two years in the woods in a different way. In going to Walden, Thoreau "was neither running away from life nor improvising a new panaceas. Even more than Emerson he showed only scorn for the reformers preoccupied with schemes for saving the world." 35 His stay there was a common-sense expedient. 36 Living quietly and economically, he edited A Week, gathered material for Walden, and earned his own living. He accomplished even more than that: "Thoreau came to Walden Pond a probing and perturbed youth; he left it a man profoundly aware of the working of both nature and the mind." 37

It was presumably in Emerson's library in 1841 that Thoreau began studying "The Laws of Menu" and reading other Hindu literature, there finding confirmation of ideas which had been his for a long while.

Now he discovered that great teachers, a great literature, a great race had seen beneath outward appearance.

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34 Canby, op. cit., p. 107.
36 Canby, op. cit., p. 205. 37 Madison, op. cit., p. 112.
They had purified their hearts in order to feel the presence of God in nature, they had learned simplicity of living and seen diamonds sometimes shimmer in the skies above their heads. They had penetrated the shell of external verisimilitude and felt reality behind. ... For the enlightened among them, happiness and success were merged into a longing for reality. Their asceticism was not the cold putting aside of New England Puritanism in its stale nineteenth-century phase, or the intellectual passion for moral perfectibility of the Transcendentalists, or even Emerson's confident faith in the superior strength of the ideal. It was a way of life and a search, rather than a doctrine of progress. ... *38

It seemed to Thoreau that Oriental philosophy approached loftier themes than modern philosophy, as the Orientals, he believed, gave full justice to contemplation as well as to action, while the philosophers of the West had not even conceived the significance of contemplation. *39* The Bhagvat-Geeta seems to have had a great influence on Thoreau's thinking, and he advised everyone -- even Yankees -- to read it with reverence, remembering always that it is the sacred writings of a devout people. *40* In his own mind Thoreau always associated great philosophy with the East, and he felt that many others did also. In comparison with the philosophers of the East, "we may say that Modern Europe has yet given birth to none. Beside the vast and cosmogonic philosophy of the Bhagvat-Geeta, even our Shakespeare seems sometimes youthfully green and practical merely.*41* Just as Thoreau adapted Transcendentalism to fit his own needs, so he did also with Oriental literature. Looking for evidences

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*38* Canby, *op. cit.*, p. 196.  
*39* A Week, p. 143.  
*41* Ibid., p. 149.
of Oriental influence upon Thoreau and Emerson, Christy
found Thoreau a practical exponent of civil disobedience,
whereas Emerson, Confucius, and Mencius all agreed on con-
formity... Emerson found in Confucius justification for
his remaining in the normal ways of men. Thoreau was
doubtless glad that his going to Walden was in accord with
the Bhagvat-Geeta, which he read after his decision to go
there, but "the Yankee did not become an Oriental. He
took the idea he needed, became a twice-born Yankee, but
remained a Yankee still." Christy concluded that "the
common denominator of all that Thoreau took from the Hindus,
Chinese, and Persians was a mystical love of nature."

After Thoreau left the Emkersons in 1847 for the second
time, he spent the remainder of his life variously employed.
He went to Canada and Maine and made several shorter excurs-
sions, lectured, visited friends, surveyed, helped his father
manufacture pencils, read, studied, and, of course, walked.
Events were taking place in the nation, however, that he
could not possibly ignore. In fact, the nation's support
of slavery had already forced him to cease paying his taxes
in support of such a government, thus waging, in effect, a
one-man war against what he considered evil. Other national

42 Arthur Christy, The Orient in American Transcenden-
talism, p. 195.
43 Canby, op. cit., p. 201.
44 Christy, op. cit., p. 199.
events also aroused Thoreau, who may have had a little of the fanaticism, intolerance, and dogmatism which Adams attributes to all men of Massachusetts, noting that "men of that State have never taken much trouble to understand the point of view of other sections of the country, even when they have known it at all, and have seldom questioned their own."\textsuperscript{45}

Whether this is true or not, it is true that Massachusetts was the center of the most violent abolition agitation in the United States, and Thoreau might well have been influenced by the disturbed atmosphere of his state when he wrote "Civil Disobedience," "Slavery in Massachusetts," and "A Plea for Captain John Brown," his most violently anti-government and anti-slavery writings.

Of course, the principal influences upon Thoreau at that time were the developments in slavery on the national scene. North and South were still vying with each other in the admission of new states to the Union. The rule of $36° 30'$, which had been applied to the Louisiana Purchase, broke down in the case of the Mexican Cession, as California had been admitted free, even though half of it is below that line; and it was probable that New Mexico and Arizona, both of which are almost wholly below that line, would be admitted free also. Then in 1856 came the struggle for Kansas, Northerners and Southerners fighting there until that territory became known.

\textsuperscript{45}Adams, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 253.
as "bleeding Kansas" before it was finally voted that slavery should be legal there. The next year the Supreme Court, having before it the Dred Scott case, handed down the momentous decision that a negro could not be a citizen of the United States and that Congress could not, without due process of law, deprive a citizen of his property, even when that property was slaves. "The South was winning only to lose."\(^{46}\) In October, 1859, occurred John Brown's raid, which some heralded as brave and daring and others called fanatical and insane. As the presidential election of 1860 approached, South Carolina announced that it would not remain in the Union if the Republican Party won. Nevertheless, the Republican Party, whose platform pledged it to no extension of slavery and to no interference with the states where it then existed, nominated and elected Abraham Lincoln. As had been threatened, on December 20, 1860, South Carolina passed her formal resolution of secession. Other southern states following in rapid succession, on February 9, 1861, not quite three weeks before Lincoln was inaugurated in Washington, Jefferson Davis was chosen President of the Confederate States of America. On April 12 the Southerners fired on and took Fort Sumter; so the Civil War, which was to last until another day in April four years later, had begun.

Even after the war had begun, Thoreau showed great contempt for the government and for the newly-elected President

\(^{46}\)Ibid., p. 247.
Lincoln, as late as April 10, 1861, writing to Parker Pillsbury that he did not so much regret the condition of things in the country as that he had ever heard of the country. He called "blessed" those who had not read a President's message and who had not read a newspaper.  

But, alas! I have heard of Sumter and Pickens, and even of Buchanan (though I did not read his message). I also read the New York Tribune; but then, I am reading Herodotus and Strabo, and Elodge's "Climatology," and "Six Years in the Desert of North America," as hard as I can, to counterbalance it.

Unfortunately, nowhere in his own writings does Thoreau show any change in his attitude toward the American government and its officers from the one expressed above; but it is reported that he did change, that "when the North rallied to an unreconcilable conflict and Lincoln took his stand, he forgot about nature."  

The next three chapters will show what opinions Thoreau, living in Concord, Massachusetts, from 1817 to 1862, formed on the subjects of religion, economics, government, and politics.

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47Familiar Letters and Index, pp. 378-379.

48Ibid., p. 379.  
49Canby, op. cit., p. 435.
CHAPTER TWO

RELIGION AND MORALS

Thoreau was willing to accept the good to be found in any faith or creed. He believed it would be a worthy project for someone to collect and print together all of the sacred writings of the various nations, the Chinese, the Hindoos, the Hebrews, the Persians, and others, calling this collective work the Scripture of Mankind. This book would help liberalize the faiths of men and would be the Book of Books to be carried by missionaries to the uttermost parts of the earth.¹

Certain attributes of the Greek divinities were more pleasing to Thoreau than were those of Jehovah. To him Jehovah seemed more absolute and unapproachable, but scarcely more divine, than Jove. Jehovah seemed not so much of a gentleman and not so gracious and catholic as many Greek gods. Too, Greek divinities surpassed Jehovah in the intimacy of their influence on nature. Thoreau would fear the inflexible justice and infinite power of a divinity who was wholly masculine, one who had no Juno, Apollo, Venus, or Minerva to intercede for man.²

¹A Week, p. 150. ²Ibid., p. 65.
The Grecian are youthful and erring and fallen gods, with the vices of man, but in many important respects essentially of the divine race. In my Pantheon, Pan still reigns in his pristine glory, with his ruddy face, his flowing beard, and his shaggy body, his pipe and his crook, his nymph Echo, and his chosen daughter Iambe; for the great god Pan is not dead, as was rumored. No god ever dies. Perhaps of all the gods of New England and of ancient Greece, I am most constant at his shrine.  

Modern people, according to Thoreau, seem to doubt that the civilized ancients accepted literally the mythology which people today read for its beautiful poetry. Thoreau, however, said one had only to be reminded of the kind of respect paid the Sabbath as a holy day in New England, and the fears New Englanders had for violating it, to be convinced that moderns are fully as superstitious as the ancients. He saw that superstition reigned then and now; Jehovah does not outrank Jupiter. New England farmers dressed in their Sunday clothes and going to church do not differ essentially from the Roman peasantry. They have merely changed the names and number of their gods. The "Christian fable" is merely an addition to the old mythology.

Thoreau considered all faiths and saw the good and bad points in each. The Hindoos, he believed, were more serenely and thoughtfully religious than the Hebrews, having a purer, more independent, and more impersonal knowledge of God.
Christianity, on the other hand, seemed to him to be practical, humane, and, to a certain extent, radical. He thought that Christ was the prince of all reformers and radicals, and that the practical texts of the New Testament, wherein Thoreau found everywhere a substratum of good sense, must come naturally to the lips of all Protestants. He regretted, however, finding in the New Testament no poetry, nothing to be regarded merely in the light of beauty.

The New Testament is remarkable for its pure morality; the best of the Hindoo Scripture, for its pure intellectuality. The reader is nowhere raised into and sustained in a higher, purer, or rarer region of thought than in the Bhagvat-Geeta... It is unquestionably one of the noblest and most sacred scriptures which have come down to us.  

Also, Thoreau found the New Testament too constantly personal and moral to content him, who was not "interested solely in man's religious or moral nature, or in man even." 8 To him the Golden Rule was not golden at all, "but the best of current silver. An honest man would have but little occasion for it." 9

Since he did not prefer one religion or philosophy to another, Thoreau felt no sympathy for the bigotry and ignorance of people who made distinctions between one man's faith and another's. "To the philosopher all sects, all nations, are alike. I like Brahma, Hari, Buddha, the Great

7Ibid., pp. 141-142.  
8Ibid., p. 74.  
9Ibid.
Spirit, as well as God.\footnote{Journal, II, 4.} Thoreau felt that Christians who objected to his naming Christ and Buddha in the same sentence as equals were ignorant and superstitious. \footnote{A Week, p. 68.} I am willing they should love their Christ more than my Buddha, for the love is the main thing, and I like him too.\footnote{bid., p. 66.}
There are many faiths because there are and have been many types of people. All people have gods to fit their own circumstances, and Thoreau implied that we might adopt any and all gods that would fit us, humorously adding that we might do without a certain Society Island god named Toahitu, who saved people from falling off rocks and trees, since \"we have not much climbing to do.\footnote{Journal, III, 257.}\"

Thoreau found himself repeatedly astonished by the coolness and bigotry with which some people appropriated the New Testament in conversations with him. \"It is as if they were to appropriate the sun and stand between you and it, because they understood that you had walked once by moonlight, though that was in the reflected light of the sun, which you could not get directly.\footnote{bid., p. 66.}\" He showed his own regard for the New Testament by the following illustration. He once saw two persons conversing at a tea-table, both lovers of the New Testament, and one of them a lover of all kindred expressions of the truth as well; and yet the other appropriated the New
Testament entirely for herself, and blindly took it for granted that the former neither knew nor cared anything for it.\textsuperscript{14}

Although Thoreau was prejudiced against the New Testament in his early days by the church and Sabbath-school, "so that it seemed, before I read it, to be the yellowest book in the catalogue,"\textsuperscript{15} he escaped the meshes, got the commentaries out of his head, tasted the Testament's real flavor, and found it good.

It would be a poor story to be prejudiced against the Life of Christ because the book has been edited by Christians. In fact, I love this book rarely, though it is a sort of castle in the air to me, which I am permitted to dream. Having come to it so recently and freshly, it has the greater charm, so that I cannot find any to talk with about it... I have not yet got to the Crucifixion, I have read it over so many times.\textsuperscript{16}

To Thoreau it seemed remarkable that, notwithstanding the fact that the New Testament was outwardly received, and even often defended with bigotry, there was no hospitality toward, nor appreciation of, the truths with which it deals. Because he saw that New Englanders did not use and appreciate the Bible as they should, he remarked that no other book is so strange, heretical and unpopular. "To Christians, no less than Greeks and Jews, it is foolishness and a stumbling block."\textsuperscript{17} Speaking ironically again, Thoreau wrote:

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{15}A Week, p. 72.
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 73.
There are, indeed, severe things in it which no man should read aloud more than once. "Seek first the kingdom of heaven." "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth." . . . "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?". . . Think of this, Yankees! . . . Think of repeating these things to a New England audience! thirdly, fourthly, fifteenthly, till there are three barrels of sermons who, without cant, can read them aloud? Who, without cant, can hear them, and not go out of the meeting-house? They never were read, they never were heard. Let but one of these sentences be rightly read, from any pulpit in the land, and there would not be left one stone of that meeting-house upon another. 18

Ministers of the church were the subject of much comment by Thoreau. Most of the comment was unfavorable, because Thoreau preferred strong, healthy, happy men always; and clergymen usually gave him the impression of effeminacy. 19 He seemed very much disgusted with some Sisters of Charity whom he saw in Montreal. They were dressed in black, wore Shaker-shaped black bonnets and crosses, had cadaverous faces, and looked "as if they had almost cried their eyes out, their complexions parboiled with scalding tears; insulting the daylight by their presence, having taken an oath not to smile." 20 Thoreau was unable to understand the singular infatuation that led men to become clergymen. He wanted to meet new men — men before whom he could stop short and from whom he could learn. But no clergymen appeared

18 Ibid., pp. 73-74.
20 Ibid.
to him to be an independent human nucleus, but appeared in connection with some indistinct scheme to which he had lent himself. No clergyman knows that one day is as good as another, that a man's creed can never be written, that there are no particular expressions of belief that deserve to be prominent. A clergyman dreams of a certain sphere to be filled by him, "something less in diameter than a circle, maybe not greater than a hogshead. All the staves are got out, and his sphere is already hooped." Thoreau wanted to know what great difference there was between him who was caught in Africa and made a plantation slave in the South and him who was captured in New England and made a Unitarian minister. Just because a man became a clergyman Thoreau saw no reason for this man's getting into a hogshead, thus narrowing his own sphere, nor for his putting his head in a halter. "Here's a man who can't butter his own bread, and he has just combined with a thousand like him to make a dipped toast for all eternity."

Thoreau admitted, however, that if ministers did not openly and freely preach, it was only in accord with the desires of their congregations. Just as ministers were men of straw, so were congregations made of men of straw, and Thoreau in disgust asked them if they expected from their

21 Journal, IX, 283.  
22 Ibid., p. 284.  
23 Ibid.
clergyman a trumpet-sound that would train them up to mankind, or a nurse's lullaby. Knowing the answer, he bewailed the fact that there was no megnanimity nor grandeur of soul in men, but only an undertaking to patronize God and keep the mind within bonds. "I will not consent to walk with my mouth muzzled, not till I am rabid, until there is danger that I shall bite the unoffending and that my bite will produce hydrophobia."24

On looking through a clergyman's barrel of sermons, which were written from week to week, as his life elapsed, Thoreau could not see where the man could have had any time for laughter and smiles in the midst of so much sadness. "When I reflect that twice a week for so many years he pondered and preached such a sermon, I think he must have been a spleenetic and melancholy man, and wonder if his food digested well."25

Perhaps it was Thoreau's own disregard for money that caused him to speak harshly of some ministers whom he saw waiting to cross the ferry on Monday morning. He imagined many of them as reseeking their parishes with hired horses, sermons all read and gutted and forgotten in their valises, with a six-day vacation before them. Good religious men, he called them, "with the love of men in their hearts, and

24Journal, XI, 324.  
25Journal, I, 239.
the means to pay their toll in their pockets.\textsuperscript{26} Yes, even the priests, the so-called men of God, for the most part confess that they work for the support of the body.\textsuperscript{27} While the naturalist pursues his study with love, "the moralist persecutes his with hate. . . . We wait for the preacher to express such love for his congregation as the botanist for his herbarium."\textsuperscript{28}

Loud-speaking clergymen seem to have been Thoreau's chief aversion. Few things were to him more disgusting and disheartening than when he was walking the streets of a strange village on the Sabbath, "to hear a preacher shouting like a boatswain in a gale of wind, and thus harshly profaning the quiet atmosphere of the day. You fancy him to have taken off his coat, as when men are about to do hot and dirty work."\textsuperscript{29} Simplicity, sincerity, and quietness in clergymen were qualities appreciated by Thoreau. In writing to his sister Helen about hearing Lucretia Mott, a Quaker, preach, he spoke with appreciation of her deliberation, her self-possession, and the general thoughtful and decorous silence that greeted her words.\textsuperscript{30} However, his general attitude toward clergymen appears to be expressed in a letter

\textsuperscript{26}A Week, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{27}Familiar Letters and Index, p. 214.
\textsuperscript{28}Journal, I, 233-234. \textsuperscript{29}A Week, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{30}Familiar Letters and Index, p. 37.
written by him from Castleton to his mother. On Sunday, he wrote, "I heard Mr. Bellows preach here on the island; but the fine prospect over the Bay and the Narrows, from where I sat, preached louder than he, -- though he did far better than average, if I remember aright." 31

To Thoreau the narrowness and the superstition of ministers was such that "when one enters a village the church, not only really but from association, is the ugliest looking building in it, because it is the one in which human nature stoops the lowest and is most disgraced." 32 In such a manner did Thoreau express his sentiment toward churches as he observed them. Later Thoreau professed a liking for Notre Dame, a Catholic church which he visited in Montreal, and at the same time expressed the belief that the Catholic were the only churches he had ever seen which were not almost wholly profane. He liked Notre Dame because he came from the hurrahing mob and the rattling carriage without into the quiet, sacred, cavetlike atmosphere within. Though the day was not Sunday, Canadians in home-spun came in one by one and knelt in the aisle before the high altar. "As if you were to catch some farmer's sons from Marlborough, come to the cattle-show, silently kneeling in the Concord meeting-house some Wednesday! Would there not soon be a mob peeping in at the windows?" 33 Although Thoreau believed that the

31_Ibid., p. 105._

32_A Week, p. 77._

33_Excursions and Poems, pp. 12-13._
Catholics had fallen far behind the significance of their symbols, he was impressed by the quiet, religious atmosphere of the place.

It was a great cave in the midst of a city; and what were the altars and the tinsel but the sparkling stalactites, into which you entered in a moment, and where the still atmosphere and the sombre light disposed to serious and profitable thought? Such a cave at hand, which you can enter any day, is worth a thousand of our churches which are open only Sundays, hardly long enough for an airing, and then filled with a bustling congregation, -- a church where the priest is the least part, where you do your own preaching, where the universe preaches to you and can be heard.34

The bustling crowds and their noisy irreverence caused Thoreau to seek the quiet solitude of some mountain-top instead of the village church on Sunday mornings. To Harrison Blake he wrote of a walk to Asnebumskit, where he found a true temple of the earth. His definition of an ancient temple, which he probably felt modern churches should fulfill, was an open place with no roof, but with walls to shut out the world and direct one's mind toward heaven. Thoreau regretfully added that the modern church shut out the heavens and crowded the world into still closer quarters. He went on to give his description of a true physical church. It was best of all, he maintained, when the church was a mountain-top, and the worshiper had for his walls his own elevation and the surrounding ether. The partridge-berries covered with fresh mountain dews which he gathered there were more

34Ibid., pp. 13-14.
memorable to him than the words he last heard from the pulpit, and for his part he preferred to look toward Rutland rather than Jerusalem. "Rutland, -- modern town, -- land of ruts, -- trivial and worn, -- not too sacred, -- with no holy sepulchre, but profane green fields and dusty roads and opportunity to live as holy a life as you can, -- where the sacredness, if there is any, is all in yourself and not in the place." 35

Nature and the out-of-doors always seem to have preached louder to Thoreau than did ministers, for on hearing divine service in the Academy Hall he wrote: "From this window I can compare the written with the preached word: within is weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth; without, grain fields and grasshoppers, which give those the lie direct." 36 Thoreau thought the ringing of the church bells to be sweet and beautiful and remarked that the ringing of the bell was a more melodious sound than anything that might be heard within the church. 37 Later he again remarked on the sweetness of the sound of the bells, commenting on how much more religion was in their sound than they ever called men together to.

"Men obey their call and go to the stove-warmed church, though God exhibits himself to the walker in a frosted bush to-day, as much as in a burning one to Moses of old." 38 On still

35Familiar Letters and Index, p. 195-196.
36Journal, I, 53.
37Ibid., p. 39.
38Journal, IV, 445.
another occasion in the sound of the Sabbath bell Thoreau heard "many catechisms and religious books twanging a canting peal round the earth." 39

On other occasions Thoreau used metaphors in describing the church.

The church is a sort of hospital for men's souls, and as full of quackery as the hospital for their bodies. Those who are taken into it live like pensioners in their Retreat in Sailor's Snug Harbor, where you may see a row of religious cripples sitting outside in sunny weather. . . . One is sick at heart at this pagoda worship. It is like the beating of gongs in a Hindoo subterranean temple. In dark places and dungeons the preacher's words might perhaps strike root and grow, but not in broad daylight in any part of the world that I know. 40

Again Thoreau asked the question, What is the church but a graveyard? If it were not for funerals, he believed, the institution of the church would last no longer, but the necessity that men be decently buried would prevent the laying of violent hands upon the church. Also, if salaries were stopped, and men walked out of the world bodily at the last, the minister and the church would soon be gone.

"Imagine a church at the other end of the town, without any carrion beneath or beside it, but all the dead regularly carried to the bone-mill! The cry that comes up from the churches in all great cities in the world is, 'How they stink!' " 41

39A Week, p. 78. 40Ibid., pp. 77-78.
41Journal, III, 120.
In reading the writings of Thoreau one might at first get the impression that he was a hardened unbeliever, but then one notes that all of his criticism and his expressions of contempt and disgust are for what might be called man's abuse of religion. Above all he seems to have hated insincerity and stupidity. He despised the stupidity of the minister driving a poor beast to a meeting-house in New Hampshire who reproached Thoreau for walking on the mountaintop on the Sabbath instead of going to church. The superstitious minister believed there was a god on the watch to trip up men who followed any secular work on the Sabbath, not seeing that it was the evil conscience of the workers that did that, and not realizing that Thoreau would have gone farther than he to hear a true word spoken on that or any other day.\textsuperscript{42}

Of songs sung in churches Thoreau said: "Our hymn-books resound with a melodious cursing of God and enduring Him forever."\textsuperscript{43} Even the prophets and redeemers, he felt, had consoled the fears rather than confirmed the hopes of mankind, as nowhere did he find recorded a simple and irrepressible satisfaction with the gift of life or any great praise of God.\textsuperscript{44} Modern churchmen, he feared, were more like the

\textsuperscript{42} A Week, pp. 76-77.

\textsuperscript{43} Walden: or, Life in the Woods (Vol. II of Manuscript Edition), p. 87. Hereafter this volume will be referred to as Walden.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
savages than most people realized. While everyone knows that the savages regarded and worshiped only the evil spirits, which they feared, few people realize that the modern churchmen do exactly the same thing. The catechism instructs man to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Applying this instruction to God as he is seen in his works, Thoreau felt that man fell far short of fulfilment. As he sat and admired the beauty of butterflies fluttering about, he realized that men were not interested in butterflies and other insects as an ornament to the earth and a cheerer of men, but only in whether or not they were injurious to vegetation. Though thousands of harmless, beautifully colored butterflies and other insects people the air, the only glorification of God was recorded in such pamphlets as "Insects Injurious to Vegetation" and "Noxious Insects of New York."

"This is the way we glorify God and enjoy him forever. . . . This is looking a gift horse in the mouth with a vengeance. . . . Though God may have pronounced his work good, we ask 'Is it not poisonous?'"45

A neighbor of Thoreau's, honoring the completion of the Atlantic telegraph, illuminated his newly-built house and yard with large letters reading "Glory to God in the highest." Thoreau believed that the words expressed a sentiment to keep dark about. Feeling that a simple and genuine

45Journal, XII, 170-171.
sentiment of reverence would not emblazon those words as on a signboard, Thoreau felt a kind of shame for it and "was inclined to pass quickly by." 46

Of man's belief in God, Thoreau said that it seemed to him that the god commonly worshiped in civilized countries was not at all divine, though he bore a divine name, but that this god was "the overwhelming authority and respectability of mankind combined. Men reverence one another, not yet God." 47 Moreover, he believed that men lacked faith in God, were unwilling to trust themselves to God's care. Thoreau believed men could safely trust a great deal more. "How vigilant we are! determined not to live by faith if we can avoid it; all the day long on the alert, at night we unwillingly say our prayers and commit ourselves to uncertainties." 48 Thoreau thought that some people who frequently spoke of their belief in "an overruling power" or a "perfect Being," etc., as being the cause for their doing or not doing certain things were in habitual doubt and were only vainly trying to convince themselves and others of their belief.

Such a man's expression of faith, moving solemnly in the traditional furrow, and casting out all free-thinking and living souls with the rusty mould-board of his compassion or contempt, thinking that he has Moses and all the prophets in his wake, discourages and saddens me as an expression of his narrow and barren want of faith. I see that the infidels and skeptics

48 Walden, p. 12.
have formed themselves into churches and weekly gather together at the ringing of the bell. 49

In yet another instance Thoreau speaks ill of the so-called religious people of the world, but here again one feels that he is not speaking of those who truly believe, but of those who are insincere, because they do not believe.

Who are the religious? They who do not differ much from mankind generally, except that they are more conservative and timid and useless, but who in their conversation and correspondence talk about kindness of Heavenly Father. Instead of going bravely about their business, trusting God ever, they do like him who says "Good Sir" to the one he fears, or whistles to the dog that is rushing at him. And because they take his name in vain so often they presume that they are better than you. Oh, their religion is a rotten squash. 50

The professed Christianity of many cowardly New England towns was hateful to Thoreau. He had spoken in towns where it seemed to him that the townsmen were trembling in their shoes at the thought of the things he might say, as if they knew their weak side.

The devil they have covenanted with is a timid devil. If they would let their sores alone they might heal, and they could to the wars again like men; but instead of that they get together in meeting-house cellars, rip off the bandages and poultice them with sermons. 51

The modern New Engander seemed to Thoreau to be a man who had agreed to say all the prayers in the liturgy, provided he could go straight to bed afterward and sleep quietly. He had also consented to perform certain charities, after

51 Ibid., p. 325.
a fashion; but he did not want any new ones mentioned, and he did not want any new codicils added to the contract to fit the present time. "All his prayers begin with 'Now I lay me down to sleep.' . . . He shows the whites of his eyes on the Sabbath and the blacks all the rest of the week." 52

Thus it is seen that Thoreau found many faults with religious people and with their religion as they practiced it. Hearing a man preach against abuse of the Sabbath and recommend that people walk in the fields and dance on that day, Thoreau, of course, agreed heartily with the advice and hoped that it would take effect before long, but he was afraid that with the mass of men the reason was convinced before the life. "They may see the Church and Sabbath to be false, but nothing else to be true." 53 One feels, however, that this was not the case with Thoreau. He did certainly find the church and Sabbath to be false, but he appears to have found much else to be true. For example, he had a true and abiding belief in immortality. The best proof of this is found in his beautifully worded comments on a shipwreck off Cape Cod in 1849. He evidently had been very much affected by the sight of the bodies that were washed ashore.

Their owners were coming to the New World, as Columbus and the Pilgrims did; they were within a mile of its

52Journal, XII, 419. 53Journal, III, 119-120.
shores; but, before they could reach it, they emigrated to a newer world than ever Columbus dreamed of, yet one of whose existence we believe that there is far more universal and convincing evidence — though it has not yet been discovered by science — than Columbus had of this: not merely mariners' tales and some saltry driftwood and seaweed, but a continual drift and instinct to all our shores. I saw their empty hulks that came to land; but they themselves, meanwhile, were cast upon some shore yet further west, toward which we are all tending, and which we shall reach at last, it may be through storm and darkness, as they did. . . . The mariner who makes the safest port in heaven, perchance, seems to his friends on earth to be shipwrecked, for they deem Boston Harbor the better place; though perhaps, invisible to them, a skillful pilot comes to meet him, and the fairest and balmiest gales blow off that coast, his good ship makes the land in halcyon days, and he kisses the shore in rapture there, while his old hulk tosses in the surf here.54

As added proof of his belief in immortality, Thoreau was continually puzzled by the epitaphs he found over graves. Instead of covering the body with a huge monument and writing on the epitaph such words as "Here lies," and "Having come to the end of his natural life," Thoreau believed in having a monument point starward and in further expressing whither the spirit had gone by such words as "There rises" and "Having come to the end of his unnatural life."55

If Thoreau ever had any real doubts about immortality, and we have his own statement that if he could not doubt he could not believe,56 they seem to have been erased when he went out-of-doors. Walking in the meadows on the first day

54Cape Cod and Miscellaneous (Vol. IV of Manuscript Edition), pp. 12-13. Hereafter this volume will be referred to as Cape Cod.
55A Week, pp. 177-178.
56Journal, I, 346.
of spring, jumping from hummock to hummock, from willow root to willow root, seeing the woods and valley bathed in a pure, bright light, Thoreau needed no stronger proof of immortality. "All things must live in such a light. O Death, where was thy sting? O Grave, where was thy victory, then?"\(^{57}\) So it was that Thoreau seemed to find his real religion in nature. In a rainbow he saw a faint vision of God's face, and concluded that God cultivates flowers above while men cultivate them below.\(^{58}\) Sometimes, in a fluttering leaf, he wrote Mr. Lucy Brown, Mrs. Emerson's sister, one could hear all of her Christianity preached.\(^{59}\) Saying that many of the world's troubles originated in the house and from living indoors, Thoreau would have liked to undertake a crusade against houses, as he felt that Christianity preached to those who lived out of doors would be vastly different from that preached to the house-bred.\(^{60}\) Nature seemed to be continually stirring within him a feeling of religion and a meditative attitude never aroused by churches and ministers. The intense, almost conscious, stillness of a particular Sunday morning made him feel as if the day were a natural Sabbath, as if the morning were the evening of a celestial day.\(^{61}\) On hearing of the burning of Marston Watson's woods, Thoreau

\(^{57}\) Walden, p. 349. \(^{58}\) Journal, IV, 128.

\(^{59}\) Familiar Letters and Index, p. 37.

\(^{60}\) Journal, IX, 344. \(^{61}\) A Week, p. 45.
wrote a letter to him expressing his thankfulness that his ponds and sea could not be burnt also. Meditating on the fine prospect he once had from a hilltop east of Watson's house, he wrote that he was always inspired to sing or dance or say morning prayers of some kind there.62 Witnessing a sunrise, which seemed to Thoreau to outshine all previous ones, he was convinced that man should dawn as freshly and advance with equal promise and steadiness into the career of life, and with as lofty and serene a countenance move on through his midday to a fairer and more promising setting; for each person has a dawn, a noon, and a serene sunset within himself.63 The lilies which the young men, having bathed and then dressed in their best clothes, carried in their hands or wore on their bosom were associated in Thoreau's mind with the Sabbath and going to church, and he felt that the odor of the lilies would contrast with and atone for that of the sermon.64

Thoreau's own feelings seem to be expressed by his short description of the frogs that he saw from his boat one Sunday morning when he was beginning his voyage on the Concord River. To him it seemed that "the frogs sat meditating, all Sabbath thoughts, summing up their week, with one eye out on the golden sun, and one toe upon a reed, eying the

62 Excursions and Poems, p. 329.
wondrous universe in which they act their part . . . .

Thoreau may have had one eye upon the unrealized future, his sun; but he always had at least one foot firmly planted upon the ground, and he continually eyed with pleasure the wonderful universe in which he acted his part. He had little use for the man who was a believer in another world, but not in this one, who tried to put him off with Christianity. He found one grain of realization, of instant life, equivalent to "acres of the leaf of hope hammered out to guild our prospect." Had he been forced to choose between this and another world, he would surely have chosen this one.

In spite of the fact that Thoreau felt that a healthy man with steady employment, such as wood-chopping, and a camp in the woods would not be a good subject for Christianity; in spite of the fact that some people had their schemes of the universe cut and dried, and accepted as everlastinglingly settled such things as the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, things which were like the everlasting hills to them, but which were not so distinct to Thoreau as the delicate flower of a remote geological period on the coal in his grate; in spite of the fact that he felt that Christianity only hoped, that it had hung its harp on the willows and could not sing a song in a strange land, that it had

65 *Week*, p. 48.  
66 *Journal*, III, 263.  
67 *Week*, p. 74-75.  
dreamed a sad dream and could not yet welcome the morning with joy, still Thoreau went so far as to say to his Indian guide that he was a Protestant. That must have been a strange situation -- Thoreau being questioned regarding his beliefs by an Indian who had probably recently acquired his religion and who practiced it very much as did the whites who had taught him, who said his prayers night and morning, who told Thoreau it was wrong to travel on the Sabbath and so he could not accept money for his services on that day, but who did reckon in the Sundays in figuring out his wages, only saying "a particularly long prayer this Sunday evening, as if to atone for working in the morning." When such a person naively asked Thoreau if he were a Protestant, Thoreau "did not know what to say, but I thought that I could answer with truth that I was."

Thoreau refers frequently in his writings to morals and personal behavior. He believed that a man's life should be "a stately march to a sweet but unheard music, and when to his fellows it shall seem irregular and inharmonious, he will only be stepping to a livelier measure, or his nicer ear hurry him into a thousand symphonies and concordant variations." He believed, and practiced the belief, that

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63Ibid., p. 78.
it mattered not if friends misinterpreted his conduct; all
that was important was that his actions were right in the
sight of God and Nature.\textsuperscript{74}

Although Thoreau thus believed in independence and indi-
viduality of personal actions, he also believed that those
freedoms carried with them certain obligations. He believed
that we are all sculptors and painters, and that our mate-
rial is our own flesh and blood and bones. "Every man is
the builder of a temple, called his body, to the god he wor-
ships, after a style purely his own, nor can he get off by
hammering marble instead."\textsuperscript{75} Since man is the creator of
his own happiness, he should not complain of the disposition
of circumstances, for it must be his own disposition that
he blames. If his knees are weak, he must not call the hill
steep.\textsuperscript{76} He must remember that the obstacle is exceedingly
rare that the humblest man has not the faculties to sur-
mount.\textsuperscript{77} No matter how mean a person's life may be, he must
not shun it and call it hard names, but he must meet it and
live it, remembering that it looks poorest when he is richest.

The faultfinder will find faults even in paradise. Love
your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have some
pleasant, thrilling, glorious hours, even in the poor-
house. The setting sun is reflected from the windows
of the almshouse as brightly as from the rich man's abode;
the snow melts before its door as early in the spring.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{74}Ibid., p. 52. \textsuperscript{75}Walden, p. 245.
\textsuperscript{76}Journal, I, 25-26. \textsuperscript{77}A Week, p. 193.
\textsuperscript{78}Walden, p. 361.
No faculty in man was created for a useless or a sinister purpose. In the very meanest man are all the materials of manhood found in the best, but they are not rightly disposed. Since every man possesses every necessary faculty, and since all faculties given him are needed, Thoreau believed that he need pray for no higher heaven than a purely sensuous life, which the pure senses can furnish. He should realize that our present senses are but rudiments of what they are to become.

We are comparatively deaf and dumb and blind, and without smell or taste or feeling. Every generation makes the discovery that its divine vigor has been dissipated, and each sense and faculty misapplied and debauched. The ears were made, not for such trivial uses as men are wont to suppose, but to hear celestial sounds. The eyes were not made for such groveling uses as they are now put to and worn out by, but to behold beauty now invisible.

Thoreau believed that man should not, simply because he trusts God, lose one particle of his own vigor, as God is not one's ally when he shirks and neuter when he is bold. If trusting God made a man relax his vigor, Thoreau believed he should trust no more, as when one trusts he must not lay aside his armor, "but put it on and buckle it tighter." Thoreau found thrilling the thought that obedience to conscience and trust in God were really only a retreat to one's self and a reliance on one's own strength. He liked to

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79 Journal, I, 16.  
80 Cape Cod, p. 278.  
81 A Week, p. 408.  
82 Journal, I, 180.  
83 Ibid.
think of man as a cork which no tempest could sink, but which would at last float safely to its haven.\textsuperscript{84}

Thoreau believed that a man should walk in the world without learning its ways.\textsuperscript{85} His highest obligation should be only to live healthily the life the gods assign him.\textsuperscript{86} Thoreau personally felt that he should receive his life as passively as the willow leaf fluttering over the brook, that he should not be for himself but for God's work. Feeling that he could at any time resign his life \textit{and the responsibility of living into God's hands, and become as innocent, free from care, as a plant or stone,}\textsuperscript{87} he determined to wait patiently for the breeze, and so grow as Nature should determine.\textsuperscript{88} Thoreau's idea that we should grow as Nature may determine is important in connection with a statement that he later made regarding man's reverence for ancient statements of truth and his utter disregard for original revelation. It distressed him to observe men repress the divinity stirring within them to fall down and worship that which was dead without them. He had no sympathy with the so-called good man or woman who refused to listen to his free utterance of thoughts, which alone it was given to him to express, simply because his thoughts did not appear to

\textsuperscript{84}Ibid., p. 25. \quad \textsuperscript{85}Ibid., p. 300.
\textsuperscript{86}Ibid., p. 326. \quad \textsuperscript{87}Ibid., p. 327.
\textsuperscript{88}Ibid., p. 326.
coincide exactly with some uttered many years ago by Moses or Christ. Such people, he felt, did not love God at all, but simply his old clothes, which they made into scarecrows for the children.\textsuperscript{89}

It seemed to Thoreau that man's life was startlingly moral, with no truces between virtue and vice.\textsuperscript{90} When he wrote \textit{Walden}, he felt that this was as it should be, since "goodness is the only investment that never fails."\textsuperscript{91} When he was writing in his journal in 1840, however, he found fault with those who insisted that men always incline to the moral part of their beings. He reminded them that man's life is not all moral.\textsuperscript{92} His advice to man was to forget as quickly as possible all errors and misdemeanors, remembering that to go immediately and do otherwise lessens the wrong more than grieving for a past mistake.\textsuperscript{93} Moreover, he reminded man that he should not strive upward too long, "but sometimes drop plumb down the other way, and wallow in meanness. From the deepest pit we may see the stars, if not the sun. Let us have presence of mind enough to sink when we can't swim."\textsuperscript{94} He believed that man should not always heed his conscience, as man's conscience should not monopolize all of his life any more than his head or heart.

\textsuperscript{89}\textit{Journal}, III, 119.
\textsuperscript{90}\textit{Walden}, p. 241.
\textsuperscript{91}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92}\textit{Journal}, I, 140.
\textsuperscript{93}Ibid., p. 318.
\textsuperscript{94}Ibid., p. 146.
should. He spoke of having observed people whose consciences, evidently because of former indulgence, had come to be "as irritable as spoilt children, and at length gave them no peace. They did not know when to swallow their cud, and their lives of course yielded no milk." 95

Thoreau once made the statement that if he repented of anything it was very likely to be of his good behavior. "What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?" 96 This statement, however, is qualified by Thoreau's further statement that in his soul he believed to be bad the greater part of what his neighbors thought to be good. 97 In the first place, he disliked the type of morality and goodness which he felt was inculcated by the priests and which he believed helped the priests to rule the world very successfully as policemen. This morality was the type achieved by man's striving to be good without being good for anything. The strife was begun and the goodness attained simply because the individual concerned felt vaguely that thus it would be good for him in the end. 98

Probably another reason for Thoreau's derogatory statements about goodness arose from his observations of "tainted" goodness. He defined this by saying that if he knew for a certainty that a man was coming to his house with the conscious

95A Week, p. 75.  
96Walden, p. 11.  
97Ibid.  
98A Week, p. 75.
purpose of doing him good he would run as from a simoom, which is a dry, parching African desert wind which suffocates one by filling the mouth, nose, ears, and eyes with dust. He declared that he would rather suffer evil the natural way. A man was not a good man to him simply because he would feed him if he should be starving, or warm him if he should be freezing, or pull him out of a ditch if he should ever fall into one. "I can find you a Newfoundland dog that will do as much."\(^{99}\)

Thoreau probably felt from personal experience that it was difficult to bestow untainted goodness. Since several of his townsmen suggested that he should maintain a poor family, he thought seriously of it, but when he finally decided to indulge himself in that respect and lay their Heaven under an obligation by maintaining certain poor persons in all respects as comfortably as I maintain myself, and have even ventured so far as to make them the offer, they have one and all unhesitatingly preferred to remain poor."\(^{100}\)

Thoreau, therefore, concluded that a genius was required for charity and for doing good just as for anything else. Finding that these two virtues did not agree with his constitution, he decided to leave their performance to his fellow townsmen.\(^{101}\) He only hoped that his philanthropic townsmen

\(^{99}\)Walden, p. 82.  
\(^{100}\)Ibid., p. 80.  
\(^{101}\)Ibid.
would always be careful to give to the poor the aid that they most needed. If money was given, it should not merely be abandoned to the poor, but the giver's self should be given also.\textsuperscript{102} He should be sure that his philanthropy and goodness are not transitory acts, but a constant superfluity, which costs him nothing and of which he is unconscious.\textsuperscript{103} Above all, the philanthropist should impart courage, health, and ease. Too often he merely surrounds mankind with the remembrance of his own cast-off griefs as an atmosphere, and calls it sympathy.\textsuperscript{104}

As a final comment on morals and behavior, Thoreau's advice was that one should not judge his friends and acquaintances by what they appear to be on the surface. To Thoreau what a person did was not nearly so important as what he intended to do. Writing of his brother, John, who had recently died, Thoreau said that he did not want to see John ever again -- not the one who was dead. He wanted only to see the one whom John had wanted to be, of whom he was but an imperfect representative; \textsuperscript{\textup{105}}n for we are not what we are, nor do we treat or esteem each other for such, but for what we are capable of being.

\textsuperscript{102}Ibid., p. 83. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{103}Ibid., p. 85.
\textsuperscript{104}Ibid. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{105}Familiar Letters and Index, p. 42.
CHAPTER THREE

ECONOMICS

Thoreau believed that there would be some advantage in a man's living a primitive life, though in the midst of an outward civilization, if for no other reason than to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have been used through the ages to obtain these necessities.¹ By the words "necessary of life" Thoreau meant "whatever, of all that man obtains by his own exertions, has been from the first, or from long use has become, so important to human life that few, if any, whether from savageness, or poverty, or philosophy, ever attempt to do without it."² Noting that food is the only necessity of life for some animals and that none of them require more than food and shelter, Thoreau observed that human beings have four physical requirements -- food, clothing, fuel, and shelter -- that must be satisfied before they are prepared to "entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success."³

Food of some kind, of course, has always been a necessity for man as well as for all lower animals;⁴ also, all living creatures have from the very beginning sought some sort of

¹Walden, p. 12. ²Ibid., p. 13. ³Ibid. ⁴Ibid.
shelter, be it caves or stones and tile; but "man has invented, not only houses, but clothes and cooked food; and possibly from the accidental discovery of the warmth of fire, and the consequent use of it, at first a luxury, arose the present necessity to sit by it." The three more or less acquired necessities of man -- shelter, fuel, and clothing -- properly used allow the retention of the body's own internal heat, and so, detracting nothing from the body, are not harmful to life. Thoreau, however, seemed desirous of reminding men that food, clothing, fuel, and shelter are not ends in themselves, but only means to an end, and that only so much of them as is necessary to life should be used. When man is sufficiently warmed, clothed, and fed, what does he want next?

Surely not more warmth of the same kind, as more and richer food, larger and more splendid houses, finer and more abundant clothing, more numerous, incessant and hotter fires, and the like. When he has obtained those things which are necessary to life, there is another alternative than to obtain the superfluities; and that is to adventure on life now, his vacation from humbler toil having commenced.

Therein Thoreau found fault with the way people live, for all about him he found people who were not content to supply life's necessities, but who constantly strove for nothing more than a superfluity of those necessities, thus causing Thoreau to remark on how few people ever get beyond feeding.

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5Ibid., p. 31.  
6Ibid., p. 13.  
7Ibid.  
8Ibid., pp. 16-17.
clothing, sheltering, and warming themselves in this world and begin to treat themselves as human beings.

Most seem not to see any further, -- not to see over the ridge-pole of their barns, -- or to be exhausted and accomplish nothing more than a full barn, though it may be accomplished by an empty head. They venture a little, run some risks, when it is a question of a larger crop of corn or potatoes; but they are commonly timid and count their coppers, when the question is whether their children shall be educated.9

All about him Thoreau observed men striving to make more money than they needed to furnish their life's necessities, men who quite obviously and foolishly preferred "gold to that of which it is the symbol, -- simple, honest independent labor."10 To Thoreau the acquisition of a superabundance of any material possession seemed not only foolish, but also dangerous, to a person's life.

The problem of life becomes, one cannot say by how many degrees, more complicated as our material wealth is increased, -- whether that needle they tell of was a gateway or not, -- since the problem is not merely nor mainly to get life for our bodies, but by this or a similar discipline to get life for our souls; by cultivating the lowland farm on right principles, that is, with this view, to turn it into an upland farm.11

Many of the comforts and luxuries of life, which are acquired for the most part by money not needed for purchasing the necessities, Thoreau considered entirely dispensable; some of them he considered positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind.12

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11Familiar Letters and Index, p. 212. 12Walden, p. 15.
Paraphrasing a lesson from the Bible, Thoreau warned those who habitually labor and acquire against "laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before." A person's stock in life is not the material wealth -- houses, land, and other property -- that he accumulates, but it is the amount of thought which he has had in his life, which, for the most part, he has found time and place for only after indulging his physical necessities. Why, then, must people always strive to obtain more of the physical possessions of life, and not sometimes be content with less? "Shall the respectable citizen thus gravely teach, by precept and example, the necessity of the young man's providing a certain number of superfluous glow-shoes, and umbrellas, and empty guest chambers for empty guests, before he dies? Believing this unnecessary, Thoreau could not help being amused by some who found it necessary to spend their lives working in some unhealthy part of the globe to make enough money "in order that they may live, -- that is, keep comfortably warm, -- and die in New England at last. The luxuriously rich are not simply kept comfortably warm, but unnaturally hot; ... they are cooked, of course à la mode."
Believing that "the less you get, the happier and the richer you are," Thoreau had something to say about the relative values to a person of material wealth. Through his own experience he found nothing to be so truly impoverishing as wealth; by wealth he meant the command of greater means, though comparatively slight still, than a person had previously possessed. With his new wealth a person inevitably acquires a more expensive habit of living, and even life's necessities cost him more than formerly; thus, instead of gaining independence through wealth, he loses some that he already possesses; and if his income should be lessened, he would suddenly find himself very poor, though possessed of the same means which once made him rich. If you wish to give a man a sense of poverty, give him a thousand dollars. The next hundred dollars he gets will not be worth more than ten that he used to get. Have pity on him; withhold your gifts. Thoreau, who was once momentarily disappointed upon finding in a desk drawer thirty dollars that he did not know he possessed, proved the impoverishing effect of wealth in his own life. In 1856 he wrote that during the past five years he had, through the sale of some books and lectures, had the command of a little more money than previously; yet he was not any better fed, clothed,}

17Journal, XIV, 277.  
18Journal, VIII, 120.  
19Ibid., p. 121.  
20Journal, IX, 245-246.
warmed, or sheltered than formerly. Nor was he any richer, except that he was less concerned about his living, but perhaps my life has been the less serious for it, and, to balance it, I feel now that there is a possibility of failure. . . . Before, I was much likelier to take the town upon my shoulders. 21 Therefore, while Thoreau's friends and neighbors were under the impression that his added wealth was giving him a new feeling of independence, Thoreau knew that it was actually taking away some of that which he already possessed; 22 for, with his new dependence on society, he must have found it increasingly difficult to follow his own advice regarding man's relations to the world: "The fact is, you have got to take the world on your shoulders like Atlas, and 'put along' with it. . . . It may make your back ache occasionally, but you will have the satisfaction of hanging or twirling it to suit yourself." 23

Most of Thoreau's arguments against acquiring wealth are concerned with the welfare of those individuals who are, or who are likely to become, wealthy; but one important argument is concerned with the society which makes individuals rich. He saw that the wealth and luxury of one class is always counterbalanced by the indigence of another, there being an almshouse for every palace. "The myriads who built

21 Journal, VIII, 120-121.  
22 Ibid., p. 121.  
23 Familiar Letters and Index, p. 362.
the pyramids to be the tombs of the Pharaohs were fed on
garlic, and it may be were not decently buried themselves.
The mason who finishes the cornice of the palace returns at
night perchance to a hut not so good as a wigwam.\footnote{24} In
New England, notwithstanding the usual outward evidences of
civilization, Thoreau found the condition of a large part
of the inhabitants to be as degraded as that of savages.
He was referring specifically to the shanties along the
railroads,

where I see in my daily walks human beings living in
sties, and all winter with an open door, for the sake
of light, without any visible, often imaginable, wood-
pile, and the forms of both old and young are perman-
ently contracted by the long habit of shrinking from
cold and misery, and the development of all their limbs
and faculties is checked. It certainly is fair to look
at that class by whose labor the works which distinguish
this generation are accomplished.\footnote{25}

Having in mind the California gold rush, Thoreau also
criticized those who harm both themselves and society by
digging where they have not planted, hoping to be rewarded
with lumps of gold.\footnote{26} He could not understand the philoso-
phy of those who are thus willing, without contributing
anything to society, to command the labor of others less
fortunate than they; but he did see that the "philosophy
and poetry and religion of such a mankind are not worth the
dust of a puffball. The hog that gets his living by rooting,
stirring up the soil so, would be ashamed of such company." Digging for gold "makes God to be a moneyed gentleman who scatters a handful of pennies in order to see mankind scramble for them." Considering gold-digging a great satire on our institutions and ways of getting a living, Thoreau wrote that God gave to the righteous man a certificate entitling him to obtain all of life's necessities; but the unrighteous man found a facsimile of this certificate in God's coffers, appropriated it, and so obtained all the necessities just as did the former, thus creating one of the world's most extensive systems of counterfeiting.

The gold-digger in the ravines of the mountains is as much a gambler as his fellow in the saloons of San Francisco. What difference does it make whether you shake dirt or shake dice? If you win, society is the loser. The gold-digger is the enemy of the honest laborer, whatever checks and compensations there may be. It is not enough to tell me that you worked hard to get your gold. So does the Devil work hard.

In 1856, however, Thoreau expressed satisfaction at seeing some holes where men had dug for money, since it reminded him that some men are dreaming still like children, dreaming of finding money, and trying to make their dreams come true, proving that men "live Arabian nights and days still."

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27 Ibid., p. 463.  
28 Ibid., p. 464.  
29 Ibid.  
Thoreau preferred that "they should have that kind of faith than none at all." 32

Observing people all about him who had worked all their lives to acquire ownership of a house or of some other material object, Thoreau concluded that most of them were not the richer, but the poorer, for their labors, since frequently it was not they who had got the houses but the houses that had got them. 33 Whereas the Indian stood free and unconstrained in nature, Thoreau believed that the civilized man, having acquired the habits of the house, finds himself confined and oppressed, not sheltered and protected in his house.

He walks as if he sustained the roof; he carries his arms as if the walls would fall in and crush him, and his feet remember the cellar beneath. . . . It is rare that he overcomes the house, and learns to sit at home in it, and roof and floor and walls support themselves, as the sky and trees and earth. 34

Thoreau had observed one or two families who were "world-ridden," 35 that is, they were attached to and completely tied down by their houses. Although they had for almost a generation desired to sell their houses in the outskirts and move into the village, they had not been able to make the sale, and Thoreau realized that only death would set them free. 36 Thoreau pitied others of his townsmen whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more

32 Ibid., p. 169.
33 Walden, p. 27.
34 Journal, I, 253.
35 Journal, IX, 362.
36 Walden, p. 37.
easily acquired than got rid of. . . . Who made them serfs of the soil? Why should they eat their sixty acres, when man is condemned to eat only his peck of dirt? Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born? They have got to live a man's life, pushing all these things before them, and get on as well as they can. How many a poor immortal soul have I met well-nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and wood-lot! The portionless, who struggle with no such unnecessary inherited encumbrances, find it labor enough to subdue and cultivate a few cubic feet of flesh.37

Perhaps that is why Thoreau "walked over each farmer's premises, tasted his wild apples, discoursed on husbandry with him, took his farm at his price, at any price, mortgaging it to him in my mind . . . and withdrew when I had enjoyed it long enough, leaving him to carry it on."38 Believing that it "makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail,"39 Thoreau preferred to own his farms in imagination only, and in imagination to live on each one in succession for an hour, a day, a winter, or a summer, according to his own desires. Consequently, with this type of ownership, when he desired to move on he never found himself tied to a place that had nothing else to offer him; however, as in the case of the Hollowell farm, which he came very near purchasing at one time, he always retained the landscape and "annually carried off what it

37Ibid., pp. 5-6.  
38Ibid., p. 30.  
39Ibid., p. 93.
yielded without a wheelbarrow." Thus, while Thoreau's fingers never got "burned by actual possession" of a farm, most of his neighbors were; and Thoreau, looking out his windows, was frequently amused to observe a man busily dividing and staking off his separate little domain, and he thought that God, too, "must smile at his puny fences running hither and thither everywhere over the land." 

In this connection Thoreau had some rather unusual comments to make about the ownership of cattle and horses, since he believed that "men are not so much the keepers of herds as herds are the keepers of men, the former are so much the freer." If men and oxen are considered to exchange necessary work only, it seemed to Thoreau that the oxen were better off than the men, especially during the haying season when men quite obviously work for the oxen. Thoreau concluded, therefore, that no nation of philosophers would ever make so great a blunder as to use the labor of animals; nor would Thoreau, for fear of becoming merely a horse-man or herds-man, ever have broken, tamed, and boarded horses or bulls for the work that they might have done for him.

Thoreau saw at least one big advantage which the primitive man enjoyed over the modern man in his relations to the

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40Ibid., pp. 31-32. 41Ibid., p. 31. 42Journal, I, 380. 43Walden, p. 62. 44Ibid.
world. The simplicity of the life of the primitive man caused him to be a sojourner, a traveler, in nature. After being refreshed with food and sleep, he was again ready for his journey.

He dwelt, as it were, in a tent in this world, and was either threading the valleys, or crossing the plains, or climbing the mountain-tops. But lo! men have become the tools of their tools. The man who independently plucked the fruits when he was hungry is become a farmer; and he who stood under a tree for shelter, a housekeeper. We now no longer camp as for a night, but have settled down on earth and forgotten heaven.\textsuperscript{45}

Hence Thoreau believed the acquisition of wealth and property to be a distinct disadvantage, rather than an advantage, to the success of one's life. Accordingly, when he met an immigrant tottering under a huge bundle that contained all of his worldly possessions, he pitied the man, not because that was all he had, "but because he had all that to carry."\textsuperscript{46}

Nations also came under Thoreau's theory of ownership of superfluous property, for England reminded him of an old gentleman traveling with a great number of foolish possessions, kept in a great trunk, small trunk, bandbox, and bundle, which he has acquired during long years of housekeeping and which he has not the courage to burn. Thoreau's advice was to "throw away the first three, at least. It would surpass the powers of a well man nowadays to take up his bed and walk, and I should certainly advise a sick one to lay down his bed and run."\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{45}Ibid., p. 41. \textsuperscript{46}Ibid., p. 74. \textsuperscript{47}Ibid.
Thoreau evidently considered farming to be the most desirable pursuit that one may follow in life. This was partly because he had observed the occupation of day-laborer to be the most independent of any, since from his own experience he found that he could support himself for a year by laboring only thirty or forty days,\textsuperscript{48} thus leaving the remainder of the time free for him to use as he desired. George Minott, a neighbor of Thoreau's, probably came nearer being what Thoreau considered the ideal farmer than did any other person. Minott did nothing with haste and drudgery; but, taking infinite satisfaction in all that he did, he seemed to love his leisurely-accomplished labors. He never looked forward to the sale of his produce, nor did he trouble himself if the crops were poor, for he derived his payment from the constant satisfaction which his labor yielded him. Farming was an amusement which lasted him longer than hunting and fishing, and he would have no hired man to rob him of his amusements. He knew every nail and board in his barn; and if another shed needed to be floored, he leisurely selected a pitch pine tree, cut it, and hauled it to the mill himself; and so he knew the history of his barn floors. Every ear of his corn meant as much to him as playthings mean to a child, and "he might well cry if it were carried to market."\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{48}Ibid., p. 78. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{49}Journal, III, 41-42.
He loves to walk in a swamp in windy weather and hear the wind groan through the pines. He keeps a cat in his barn to catch the mice. He indulges in no luxury of food or dress or furniture, yet he is not penurious but merely simple. If his sister dies before him, he may have to go to the almshouse in his old age; yet he is not poor, for he does not want riches. He gets out of each manipulation in the farmers' operations a fund of entertainment which the speculating drudge hardly knows. With never-failing rheumatism and trembling hands, he seems yet to enjoy perennial health. Though he never reads a book, -- since he finished the "Naval Monument," -- he speaks the best of English. 50

Israel Rice was another farmer friend who seemed to Thoreau to have learned the rare art of living, for he got more out of life than do most others, and life appeared to cost him less. He and his son worked when they pleased, hunted when they pleased, and fished when they pleased; but their crops always got planted; and in the fall their fields invariably yielded enough to stock the Rice cellar, with some left over to sell. They hitched their Dobbin to go harvesting in the very same spirit in which they hitched him to go fishing or spearing through the ice, "and thus their life is a long sport and they know not what hard times are." 51

Thoreau realized, however, that farming is not always an ideal occupation, because men who are farmers frequently misuse and abuse their occupation. Farmers usually lose part of their freedom simply by being farmers only and forgetting all else; thus, the farmer's muscles becoming rigid and stiff, he can do one thing for a long while, but not many

things well. Consequently, Thoreau did not consider the farmer to be the healthiest of men, as he is usually poetically acclaimed. "Health is the free use and command of all our faculties, and equal development. His is the health of the ox, an overworked buffalo. . . . It would do him good to be thoroughly shampooed to make him supple." He disliked seeing farmers work so hard that they had neither time nor inclination to enjoy the beauty of the passing days. He wondered if the haymaker whom he watched raking hay would know when he reached home that it had been a beautiful day and if the men trimming the willows on the Sudbury causeway were aware of the splendor of the day. "The mass of mankind, who live in houses or shops, or are bent upon their labor out of doors, know nothing of the beautiful days which are passing about and around them."

Thoreau was disappointed that Hosmer, an intelligent Concord farmer, having accumulated enough property for his use, talked of renting his farm and spending the rest of his days in an easier and better style, yet Hosmer could not "think of any method of employing himself but in work with his hands; only he would have a little less of it. . . . He has not even planned an essentially better life." He saw that the introduction and use of railroads, steamboats, and

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telegraphs was having its ill effects upon the farmer as well as upon tradesmen, that with all milk-farms and fruit-farms becoming just so many markets "the old pious, stable, and unenvied gains of the farmer are liable to all the suspicion which only the merchants formerly excited," and that the farmer, endeavoring to solve the problems of a livelihood by a formula more complicated than the problems themselves, was speculating in herds of cattle to get his shoe strings and setting his trap with great skill to catch comfort and independence and then getting his own leg caught in the trap as he turned away. Perhaps it was all these abuses that caused Thoreau to admit to the farmer's restless son that he might "go round the world before the mast, but not behind the plow." 

Although Thoreau thus found quite a number of things wrong with the occupation of farming as it is practiced, he still found it preferable to engaging in trade and commerce, as he believed that continued business dealings would make one hard, coarse, and prosaic and would give one a heart that would make the heart of a rock seem soft by comparison. Trade having always been regarded by Thoreau as a questionable mode of earning a living, it became even more odious

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56 *Journal*, VI, 108.  
58 *Journal*, IV, 226.  
57 *Walden*, p. 36.  
53 *Journal*, V, 506.  
60 *Journal*, VI, 106.
to him when he noted how it was bringing crowds of men together in great cities to live in a state of degradation undreamed of elsewhere. Remembering the good practice that the Romans had observed of dividing the year so that they could attend to town affairs on the ninth day only and have the other eight days free to cultivate the fields, Thoreau remarked that the city today is beginning to get six days, leaving at most only Sunday and the nights for the country.

In a Yankee's estimation, it is perhaps the greatest satire on a New England country village to say that it has an air of quietness which reminds him of the Sabbath. He loves the bustle of a market, where things are bought and sold, and sometimes men among the rest. The boys swop jack-knives on Sunday, and their fathers, perchance, barter their own souls.

While searching for some means of making a livelihood, Thoreau once considered taking up some trade, but he soon discovered "that it would take ten years to get under way in that, and that then I should probably be on my way to the devil." He once thought very seriously of picking huckleberries, for the capital required for such a project would be small, and the profits would surely be sufficient to satisfy his wants.

While my acquaintances went unhesitatingly into trade or the professions, I contemplated this occupation as most like theirs; ranging the hills all summer to pick

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61 *Journal*, XIII, 272.
62 *Journal*, VI, 111-112.
63 *Walden*, p. 77.
the berries which came in my way, and thereafter carelessly dispose of them; so, to keep the flocks of Admetus.64

Once he even considered gathering wild herbs or evergreens and carrying them by hay-cart loads into the city to sell to those desiring to be reminded of the country, but he never realized those dreams; for, learning that everything touched by trade is cursed and "though you trade in messages from heaven, the whole curse of trade attaches to the business,"65 he decided that it would be better to starve than to lose his innocence getting his bread.66 Unwilling to receive the curse of trade upon himself and not desiring to spend his days indoors engaging in business, Thoreau was willing to give tradesmen and shopkeepers credit for at least one thing: he believed credit to be due them for not committing suicide long ago.67

National trade and commerce appeared both foolish and costly to Thoreau, particularly so after he observed a wrecked vessel with her cargo of "rags, juniper berries, and bitter almonds... strewn along the shore."68 The lives lost in the wrecked ship made him decide that it was hardly worth while to tempt the dangers of the sea for a load of juniper berries and bitter almonds, yet he realized that

64Ibid.  
65Ibid.  
66Journal, V, 454.  
67Excursions and Poems, p. 208.  
68Cape Cod, p. 479.
there are many philosophers and statesmen even who are so blind as to think that progress and civilization depend on precisely that kind of interchange and activity, -- the activity of flies about a molasses-hogshead. He saw that men in general think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether they do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain.

Regardless of a person's occupation, Thoreau believed that those whom he observed spending the greater part of their lives making a living committed the greatest possible blunder; but he observed many men making just that blunder -- men who were learning all sorts of trades except how to make men of themselves, men who were so taken up with the cares and rude practices of life that they had no time to pluck life's finer fruits, and men who were making themselves sick so that they might put something away for a sick day. Noticing that men were always in a desperate hurry to succeed in some desperate enterprise, Thoreau could but compare the equanimity of nature with the impatience and bustle of

69 Ibid. 70 Walden, p. 102. 71 Cape Cod, p. 461. 72 Familiar Letters and Index, p. 380. 73 Walden, p. 6. 74 Ibid., p. 7. 75 Ibid., p. 358.
man, 76 and desire that every man spend one day as deliberately and calmly as nature, "and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails." 77 Instead of finding men striving to achieve the calmness of nature, 78 Thoreau observed them rushing madly about their work, determined to be starved before they were hungry, taking a thousand stitches today to save nine tomorrow. 79 Moreover, Thoreau firmly believed that some of them, if there were a precipice outside their door, would jump off today for fear that they might tomorrow. 80

Believing that every man's life should have a motivating purpose, 81 that the value of every man's life is that which he would give you for living, 82 Thoreau feared that most people whom he knew could not put high values on life because they did not live their lives "out and full," 83 because they were working too hard and becoming mere machines in order to acquire wealth. 84 Observing a man working a horse in the fields, Thoreau wrote:

> There was the horse, a mere animated machine, -- though his tail was brushing off the flies, -- his whole existence subordinated to the man's, with no tradition,
perhaps no instinct, in him of independence and freedom, of a time when he was wild and free, — completely humanized. . . . The more I considered, the more the man seemed akin to the horse; only his was the stronger will of the two. For a little further on I saw an Irishman shovelling, who evidently was as much tamed as the horse. He had stipulated that to a certain extent his independence be recognized, and yet really he was but little more independent.85

Perhaps it was because Thoreau believed most people to be deluded into accepting less than life's best that he spent two years living simply at Walden. At any rate, that seems to be the purpose that he himself gave for living there:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.86

Thoreau did not advise others to try his simple mode of living at Walden,87 a mode of living that left much time free for walking and thinking. Perhaps his reason for this is found partly in his explanation of the difference between the simple life of the savage and the simple life of the

philosopher. He believed that savages live simply through ignorance, idleness, or laziness; so their simple lives have their accompaniment of vices. The philosopher, however, lives simply through wisdom, and his simplicity is accompanied by the highest employment and development. Thoreau concluded that it would be better for the savage and for the mass of mankind to spend their time planting, weaving, and building than to do nothing, but that it would be better for the philosopher and the men loving wisdom to cultivate their highest faculties and spend as little time as possible planting, building, and weaving. He did believe, then, that some people should work all of their lives, not stopping when they have obtained life's necessities, because he believed work necessary to police and discipline their lives. "If the Irishman did not shovel all day, he would get drunk and quarrel. But the philosopher does not require the same discipline; if he shovelled all day, we should receive no elevating suggestions from him."88

Admitting that the coarse, boisterous, money-making man who was going to build a wall along the edge of his meadow needed the discipline of this labor, and that the powers had probably put such a project into his head to keep him out of worse mischief, Thoreau was only sorry that other people could not realize that he, Thoreau, knew when he declined to

88Journal, V, 410-411.
help the man build the wall that he refused because he knew
that he did not need the police of meaningless labor to keep
him out of mischief. He realized that if he had accepted
the employment he would have been commended for being an
industrious, hard-working man; but if I choose to devote
myself to certain labors which yield more real profit, though
but little money, they may be inclined to look on me as an
idler." 89 Perhaps he knew that nothing else was to be ex-
pected in a bustling business world in which a man could
not even walk in the woods without being called a loafer, 90
or pause for a moment from his work in the fields without
an observer taking it for granted that he had paused to
calculate his wages. 91 At any rate, Thoreau did not choose
to exchange his life for money, 92 and he felt that if both
his forenoons and afternoons were to be sold to society life
would not be worth living. 93

Although Thoreau believed that no more time than is
absolutely necessary should be occupied with making a living,
he thought that the time so consumed may be both profitable
and pleasurable, as he was convinced by both faith and ex-
perience "that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a
hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely. . . .

89 Cane Cod, pp. 456-457. 90 Ibid., p. 457.
91 Ibid., p. 456. 92 Familiar Letters and Index, p. 303.
93 Cane Cod, p. 461.
It is not necessary that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow, unless he sweats easier than I do. He could not understand the men whom he saw seeking relief from excessive toil or from idleness in artificial amusements, which amusements he considered rarely elevating and frequently debasing. To such people Thoreau suggested the never-failing amusement of earning a living, moderately indulged in, of course.

I know of no such amusement, -- so wholesome and in every sense profitable, -- for instance, as to spend an hour or two in a day picking some berries or other fruits which will be food for the winter, or collecting driftwood from the river for fuel, or cultivating the few beans or potatoes which I want. Theatres and operas, which intoxicate for a season, are as nothing compared to these pursuits. And so it is with all the true arts of life. Farming and building and manufacturing and sailing are the greatest and wholesomest amusements that were ever invented (for God invented them), and I suppose that the farmers and mechanics know it, only I think they indulge to excess generally, and so what was meant for a joy becomes the sweat of the brow.

Thoreau believed that a laborer should be recompensed by his labor more than by any compensation received from his employer, since his employer may give him nothing more than money, or its equivalent. Thoreau disliked money because he found it both hard and heavy. Because money is hard, he concluded that it is not to be eaten, and because it is heavy he saw it effectually strangling men. He

\[94\textit{Walden}, \textit{p. 75.}\]  
\[95\textit{Journal}, \textit{X, 145.}\]  
\[96\textit{Journal}, \textit{I, 157.}\]
wondered, therefore, how men could possibly pride themselves in a wealth consisting of money.

As if one struggling in mid-ocean with a bag of gold on his back should gasp out, "I am worth a hundred thousand dollars." I see them struggling just as ineffectually on dry land, nay, even more hopelessly, for, in the former case, rather than sink, they will finally let the bag go; but in the latter they are pretty sure to hold and go down with it.97

Thoreau believed, therefore, that the laborer receiving only the wages paid him by his employer was cheated,98 that his real wages should be his own personal satisfaction at having performed his task well,99 and also the elevating thoughts that he may have had while performing manual labor.100 In surveying land in his neighborhood, Thoreau always got more out of the surveying than did his employers;101 and one day, because great thoughts hallow any labor, he "earned seventy-five cents heaving manure out of a pen, and made a good bargain of it. If the ditcher muses the while how he may live uprightly, the ditching spade and turf knife may be engraved on the coat-of-arms of his posterity."102

Moreover, Thoreau believed that the truly efficient laborer would not crowd his day with work, but would "saunter to his task, surrounded by a wide halo of ease and leisure, and

97 *Familiar Letters and Index*, pp. 318-319.
98 *Cape Cod*, p. 458.
100 *Journal*, I, 250.
101 *Journal*, IV, 252.
102 *Journal*, I, 250-251.
then do what he loves best. . . . Though the hen should sit all day, she could lay only one egg, and, besides, would not have picked up materials for another.\textsuperscript{103}

Above everything else, Thoreau found it a joy and pleasure to help himself. He would rather collect his own driftwood and bring it up from the river on his back than to have a farmer haul a load of wood for him, for he enjoyed cutting and splitting the wood; and while he was burning it during the winter, he liked to recall his adventures in getting it.\textsuperscript{104} He admitted that men ordinarily are cheated out of the pleasure of splitting their wood, "for while they are buying it an Irishman stands by with his sawhorse on his back, and the next thing I see him in their yards -- him and his understrapper -- sawing for dear life and two shillings a cut."\textsuperscript{105}

Thoreau suspected that most of his neighbors did not object to being cheated thus, for most of them could not seem to understand why he was so insistent on performing such tasks for himself. In despair of making them understand, Thoreau feared that "the world will never find out why you don't love to have your bed tuck'd up for you, -- why you will be perverse."\textsuperscript{106} Preferring to drink his water at a spring rather than out of a goblet at a gentleman's table, Thoreau

\textsuperscript{103}\textit{A Week}, p. 110. \textsuperscript{104}\textit{Journal}, VII, 502.

\textsuperscript{105}\textit{Journal}, VIII, 12. \textsuperscript{106}\textit{Journal}, VII, 503.
liked best the bread which he had baked, the fuel which he had gathered, and the shelter which he had constructed.\textsuperscript{107}

Deciding that he would "rather keep bachelor's hall in hell than go to board in heaven,"\textsuperscript{108} and hoping that even in heaven he would be allowed to bake his own bread and clean his own linen,\textsuperscript{109} Thoreau could not understand the philosophy of life indicated in the broker's method of gathering his wood for the winter.

Postponing instant life, he makes haste to Boston in the cars, and there deals in stocks, not quite relishing his employment, -- and so earns the money with which he buys his fuel. And when, by chance, I meet him about his indirect and complicated business, I am not struck with the beauty of his employment. It does not harmonize with the sunset. . . . For if I buy one necessary of life, I cheat myself of the pleasure, the inexpressible joy, which is the unfailing reward of satisfying any want of our nature simply and truly.\textsuperscript{110}

Most of Thoreau's criticisms on the subject of economics concern the way man lives his life and earns his livelihood. Thoreau's belief was that when a man is young he has something tender and peculiarly divine about him, because he is not an assured inhabitant of the earth. "The young man is a demigod; the grown man, alas! is commonly a mere mortal."\textsuperscript{111} The young man, "prompted by the reminiscence of that other sphere from which he so lately arrived,"\textsuperscript{112} does many things which are meaningless to his worldly seniors.

\textsuperscript{107}\textit{Ibid.} \quad \textsuperscript{108}\textit{Journal, I, 227.} \quad \textsuperscript{109}\textit{Ibid.} \quad \textsuperscript{110}\textit{Journal, V, 444-445.} \quad \textsuperscript{111}\textit{Journal, XIII, 35.} \quad \textsuperscript{112}\textit{Ibid.}
It takes him forty years to accommodate himself to the carapax of this world. This is the age of poetry. Afterward he may be the president of a bank and go the way of all flesh. But a man of settled views, whose thoughts are few and hardened like his bones, is truly mortal, and his only resource is to say his prayers. Sometimes, however, Thoreau recommended other resources. When a man pauses after earning four or five thousand dollars, wondering whether he has enough to feed, clothe, and shelter himself for the rest of his life, Thoreau, seeing no reason for his continued existence, recommended that such a man use his money to found some good institution and then cut his throat. "If such is the whole upshot of their living, I think that it would be most profitable for all such to be carried or put through by being discharged from the mouth of a cannon as fast as they attained to years of such discretion." Believing as he did that man is sent into the world for a higher purpose than to earn money, Thoreau had no sympathy with the discretion that causes the middle-aged man to conclude to build a wood-shed with the materials collected by the young man to build a palace or a temple on earth.

113 Ibid.  
115Journal, IV, 227.
CHAPTER FOUR

GOVERNMENT, POLITICS, AND POLITICAL ISSUES

Thoreau agreed whole-heartedly with the motto, "That government is best which governs least." He wished to see that motto acted upon and executed so that it would soon amount to the motto, "That government is best which governs not at all."1 Although he had hopes that the government would some day become so well administered that the private citizen would hear nothing about it,2 that there would, in fact, be no government at all when men were prepared to live without a government,3 he realized that the mass of men are not yet ready for that step, but still need to hear the din of complicated machinery to satisfy their idea of government;4 therefore Thoreau was not a no-government man, but he did demand, and at once, a better government, since he realized that life becomes more valuable under a good government and less valuable under a poor one.5 If every man would make known what kind of government would command his respect, Thoreau thought that that would be an important step toward obtaining such a government.6 He appeared to think that

1Cape Cod, p. 356.  
2A Week, p. 134.  
3Cape Cod, p. 356.  
4Ibid., p. 357.  
5Ibid., p. 405.  
6Ibid., p. 357.
the best government is the one that is the most adept at keeping out of men's way. He claimed that it was not the American government that keeps the country free or educates the people, but that it was the character inherent in the American people that accomplishes those worthy objects, and it seemed to Thoreau that the American people might have done somewhat better if the government had not sometimes got in their way.7

Although Thoreau believed most institutions, such as the American government, to have had a divine origin, he felt that what is seen of them prevailing in society today is nothing but the shell of the original, all the life and divineness having long ago departed. These lifeless institutions continue to exist solely because reformers and defenders of the divine, who usually have no understanding of the original divinity, arise from time to time to champion these institutions and attempt to reinstate their divinity. Thoreau thought that he could safely assure all such prospective champions a ready audience, as he had frequently been amazed to observe the readiness with which a group of men will hear a man discuss a subject about which he knows nothing.8 The tenacious manner in which men cling to old institutions long after the life has departed from both men and institutions reminded Thoreau of a certain kind of

7Ibid. 8Journal, II, 403-404.
monkey which clings by its tail to the limbs, even dead limbs, of a forest and hangs suspended there out of the hunter's reach long after it is dead. The institutions of living men were not so disagreeable to Thoreau as were the institutions of the dead. "I love man -- kind, but I hate the institutions of the dead unkind. Men execute nothing so faithfully as the wills of the dead, to the last codicil and letter. They rule this world, and the living are but their executors." Thoreau did not believe that these dead political institutions should be given precedence over individual liberty, but such he found to be the case. He had never known a state to sustain a citizen's demands for individual liberty, and the living officer of the state he found to be no better than the dead institution; for an officer, as a living man, "may have human virtues and a thought in his brain, but as the tool of an institution, a jailer or constable it may be, he is not a whit superior to his prison key or staff."

Thoreau made several other statements to show the relationship existing and the relationship which he believed should exist between the American people and the American government. Through his own personal observations Thoreau decided that Americans serve their country in one of three ways. He believed that the greater part of them have become,

9Ibid., p. 401. 10A Week, p. 135. 11Ibid., p. 136.
as a natural result of an undue respect for law and order, like a file of soldiers marching in perfect order over hill and dale to fight a war which is against their wills, common sense, and consciences. They do not refuse to fight, however, because they are peaceably inclined. Thoreau did not believe that such individuals serve the government as men at all, but are simply "small movable forts and magazines, at the service of some unscrupulous man in power." He believed that others -- such as politicians, legislators, lawyers, ministers, and office-holders -- serve the state solely with their heads, rarely making moral distinctions. Therefore they are as likely to serve the devil unintentionally as to serve God. Then there are a few -- such as patriots, heroes, and martyrs -- who serve their government with their conscience as well as head. Since they are influenced by conscience, they are ordinarily treated as enemies of the state, because for the most part their consciences force them to resist the government. Thoreau appeared to believe that the last-mentioned class best serve their government and to want to fulfil all the requirements for admission into that group. It may be assumed that he did not find this fulfilment particularly difficult, since resistance, one of its principal requirements, he found to be a "very wholesome and delicious morsel at times."

12Cape Cod, pp. 358-359.  
13Ibid., pp. 353-360.  
14Journal, I, 179.
When Thoreau, obeying his conscience, refused to pay his poll tax and so was imprisoned, he realized that, though the law holds fast the thief and murderer, it lets itself go loose.\textsuperscript{15} He could not keep from laughing to himself at the preposterous action of the state officials when they locked him up. They regarded him as mere flesh and bones that could be confined behind thick walls and an iron grating.

I could not but smile to see how industriously they locked the door on my meditations, which followed them out again without let or hindrance, and they were really all that was dangerous. As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body; just as boys, if they cannot come at some person against whom they have a spite, will abuse his dog. I saw that the State was half-witted, that it was timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it, and pitied it.\textsuperscript{16}

Therefore Thoreau, who was not born to be forced, but to breathe after his own fashion, concluded that the state never intentionally confronts a man's intellectual or moral sense, but only his body; and Thoreau could be forced only by someone who obeyed a higher law than that which he obeyed.\textsuperscript{17} Thoreau seemed to be afraid that he might reach the point where he, like his fellow countrymen, would conform to the government's demands and pay his taxes, simply because conformity is always easier than resistance. He admitted that, seen from a low point of view, the Constitution, the laws of

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{A Week}, p. 135.  \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{16}\textit{Cape Cod}, pp. 375-376.
\textsuperscript{17}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 376.
the land, and even the American government appeared to him to be admirable in many respects; but seen from a higher view they were as unjust and as unsatisfactory as he had always thought them to be; and he wondered if, viewed from the highest point, they would even be worth looking at or thinking about at all.18

Although Thoreau had little use for the American government, a short visit to Canada made him decide that the government under which he lived was, in at least one important respect, more desirable than the Canadian government. That was mainly because he believed that an American could live without remembering the institution of government oftener than once a month or once a year, there being so much less government in the United States than in Canada. Concluding that a private man in Canada was not worth so much as in the United States, he advised anyone whose wealth in any measure consists of manliness, independence, and originality to remain in the United States. "How could a peaceable, freethinking man live neighbor to the Forty-ninth Regiment?"19

The highest demand which Thoreau made upon a government was that it must have the consent of the governed. Thoreau seemed to apply the phrase "consent of the governed" individually, for he wrote that the state could have no pure

18Ibid., p. 383. 19Excursions and Poems, p. 82.
right over him to which he did not concede. He appreciated the progress made toward achieving these individual rights by the change from an absolute monarchy to a limited monarchy and from a limited monarchy to a democracy, but he did not believe a democracy as he observed it to be the last possible step in government. He envisioned a government which would recognize each individual as a high and independent power from which it derived all of its powers, which would be just to all men and treat them as friendly neighbors, and which would not object if a few individuals lived apart from it, not meddling with it, but fulfilling all the duties of good neighbors. "A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen."

Some of Thoreau's most unfavorable comments on specific phases of government are concerned with majority rule and elections. Since the majority rules because it is physically strongest, Thoreau believed that a government in which the majority always rules could not be based on justice, and Thoreau recognized only that government which establishes justice in the land, never that which establishes injustice. He wondered if it would not be possible to have a government

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20 Cape Cod, p. 387.  
21 Ibid., p. 356.  
22 Ibid., p. 430.
in which conscience, not majorities, would decide right and wrong, in which majorities would decide only such questions as may be determined by the rule of expediency. Regardless of legislatures and majorities, Thoreau felt obligated to do at any time only what he believed to be right. Thinking that a person should be a man first and a subject afterward, he believed that it was not so desirable to cultivate a respect for the law as for the right, and that one should begin serving God "by obeying that eternal and just CONSTITUTION, which He, and not any Jefferson or Adams, has written in your being." 

Thoreau was disgusted with those whom he saw blindly and willingly accept the verdict of the majority, even though they knew that verdict to be false and had themselves voted against it. Such people he recognized as followers of the rule of expediency; that is, they were choosing the course with fewest obstacles, a down-hill one. Such people appeared to think that they could safely slide down-hill a little way and that they would eventually come to a place where they could slide back up. Thoreau, in thorough disgust at such ideas, said that "if the majority vote the devil to be God, the minority will live and behave accordingly, and obey the successful candidate, trusting that, some time or other, by some speaker's casting-vote, perhaps, they may

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23Ibid., p. 358.  
24Ibid., p. 402.
reinstate God. Such expediency caused Thoreau to remark that all voting is "a sort of gaming, like checkers or backgammon, with a slight moral tinge to it, a playing with right or wrong, with moral questions; and betting naturally accompanies it." He emphasized the fact that merely voting for the right is not actually doing anything about it; at most it amounts to no more than expressing a feeble desire that right prevail; a wise and brave man does not find such feeble expressions satisfactory.

Thoreau advised a minority which knows that it is right and that the majority is wrong not to cast a mere scrap of paper, but to cast its whole vote and influence. "A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight." Reminding a timid minority that the brave and good are never in the majority, he asked the minority if it must always wait to correct a wrong until the majority is brought over to its side. Considering that any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one, Thoreau did not believe such waiting to be necessary. As a final word on voting Thoreau remarked that what this country needs is not men of expediency, but men who recognize and follow a higher law than the Constitution or

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25Ibid.  26Ibid., p. 363.  27Ibid.
23Ibid., p. 371.  29Ibid., p. 432.  30Ibid., p. 369.
the decision of the majority, as the fate of the nation
does not depend on what kind of paper a man drops into the
ballot box once a year, where the worst man's vote is as
strong as the best, but on what kind of man he drops from
his chamber into the street every morning.\textsuperscript{31}

Thoreau also had a word to say about the selection of
political candidates. Opposed to political conventions as
a method for choosing candidates for the presidency, he de-
cried those who blindly wait for the conventions to choose
two or three candidates and then select as their own one of
the men named by one of the conventions, as if the two or
three men named were the only available men in the coun-
try.\textsuperscript{32} Thoreau reminded such followers of expediency that
the available candidate is invariably the devil and warned
them that they need not be surprised when the devil does not
behave like an angel of light.\textsuperscript{33}

Thoreau, believing that "the ring-leader of the mob
will soonest be admitted into the councils of state,"\textsuperscript{34} had
no good words for politicians. One of his most unfavorable
descriptions of politicians is his picture of some whom he
observed while in Maine.

At Passadumkeag we found anything but what the name
implies, -- earnest politicians, to wit, -- white ones,
I mean, -- on the alert to know how the election was
likely to go; men who talked rapidly, with subdued

\textsuperscript{31}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 403. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{32}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 364.

\textsuperscript{33}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 403. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{34}\textit{Journal}, I, 116.
voice, and a sort of factitious earnestness you could not help believing, hardly waiting for an introduction, one on each side of your buggy, endeavoring to say much in little, for they see you hold the whip impatiently, but always saying little in much. . . . One man, a total stranger, who stood by our carriage in the dusk, actually frightened the horse with his assen-
erations, growing more solemnly positive as there was less in him to be positive about.35

Thoreau spoke frequently of the American press in connection with politics. During the years before the Civil War he felt that the press was, almost without exception, corrupt, and that it exerted an even more pernicious influence than did the church. Because of the wide popularity enjoyed by newspapers, they being the American bible read morning and evening by all classes, Thoreau realized the great opportunity afforded the press for exerting a good influence; but in 1850 he wrote that according to his own convictions, and also the testimony of many intelligent foreigners, America, through the editors of her periodical press, was then ruled by a meaner, more servile, and more mercenary class of tyrants than ever ruled any other country in the world.36 He doubted that slavery could suggest a more complete servility than that exhibited by some of the journals. Especially was that true of the Boston Herald, in which, "when I have taken up this paper with my cuffs turned up, I have heard the gurgling of the sewer through every column."37 It might be added here that Thoreau wrote

37 Ibid., pp. 399-400.
the above statements soon after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law; and he was angry because all newspapers except the Liberator and the Commonwealth supported the law, which law, of course, Thoreau considered despicable. In writing about the press in 1858 Thoreau believed that, while most editors were still tame and servile regarding religion and would doubtless have suppressed the opinions of Christ in reporting the dispute between Christ and the doctors, most newspaper editors were not afraid to publish what they thought about the state and politics, this being a free government.38

Most of Thoreau's comments on specific phases of the government are concerned with the legislative and the judicial branches of government. It seemed to him that the truest and most respectable congress that ever assembles in the United States is the one in which farmers in some obscure country town come together to express their opinions on some subject which is vexing the land.39 For the most part, he held the belief that legislators -- and, in fact, all statesmen -- stand too completely within the institution to behold it clearly. Although he conceded that many of them have experience and discrimination and that some of them have given the world some useful schemes, all their usefulness seemed to him to lie between rather narrow limits, preventing

their realization of the fact that the world is not governed by policy and expediency. Even Daniel Webster apparently relegated all questions to policy and expediency, thus causing Thoreau to conclude that Webster's words might be "wisdom to those legislators who contemplate no essential reform in the existing government; but for thinkers, and those who legislate for all time, he never even glances at the subject."\(^{40}\)

In Thoreau's opinion men with a genius for legislation were rare in the world's history, and not one had ever appeared on the American scene. He admitted that there had been thousands of orators, politicians, and eloquent speakers, whose eloquence was enjoyed for its own sake; but it seemed to him that none of the legislators had learned the comparative value to a country of freedom, of union, or of free trade. None had a talent for such comparatively humble questions as commerce, agriculture, finance, and taxation. They were incapable to such an extent that Thoreau believed that if the world were left solely to the management of the legislators, and not corrected by the "seasonable experience and the effectual complaints of the people, America would not long retain her rank among the nations."\(^{41}\)

Speaking specifically of the General Court of Massachusetts, Thoreau referred to it as a deserters' camp. He

\(^{40}\)Ibid., p. 384.  \(^{41}\)Ibid., p. 386.
explained the significance of this accusation by saying that in early days in Massachusetts a settler forfeited his rights to a town by deserting when the Indians came, but in the nineteenth century Thoreau observed that a man could desert the fertile frontier territories of truth and justice, which are the State's best lands, for fear of far more insignificant foes, without forfeiting any of his civil rights therein. Nay, townships are granted to deserters, and the General Court . . . is but a deserters' camp itself.  

Thoreau indirectly gave his opinion of the Massachusetts and other New England congressmen when he was defending John Brown on charges of insanity.

What have Massachusetts and the North sent a few \cite{42} representatives to Congress for, of late years? -- to declare with effect what kind of sentiments? All their speeches put together and boiled down -- and probably they themselves will confess it-- do not match for manly directness and force, and for simple truth, the few casual remarks of crazy John Brown. . . .  

After reading some speeches made in Congress concerning the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, Thoreau wrote: "What trifling upon a serious subject! while honest men are sawing wood for them outside. Your Congress halls have an ale-house odor, -- a place for stale jokes and vulgar wit. It compels me to think of my fellow-creatures as apes and baboons,\cite{44}

Responsibilities which Thoreau desired legislative assemblies to assume are illustrated by two examples. The

\cite{42}A Week, p. 115. \cite{43}Cape Cod, pp. 456-457. \cite{44}Journal, VI, 129.
rising waters at the Lincoln Bridge near Thoreau's town had caused the death of several men by sweeping them from the railway cars. Thoreau reflected that, while the Fitchburg Railroad had evidently signed a bond agreeing to give up one employee each year, such sacrifices could be stopped by holding the water back only four feet from where it then stood. Such an undertaking would require but little resolution on the part of the legislature, but it seemed to Thoreau that the legislature preferred to pay the tribute. 45

On another occasion while in Maine Thoreau saw a project completed by the legislature of that state which pleased him very much and which he wanted to see imitated in Massachusetts. By the roadside he occasionally noticed troughs filled with water, and his companion informed him that three dollars annually was granted to one person in each school district to provide and maintain the troughs for the convenience of travelers. That piece of intelligence was as refreshing to Thoreau as the water itself, and he remarked that the legislature enacting such a law did not sit in vain. 46

Most of Thoreau's criticisms of judges and courts were made in connection with cases regarding slaves. While the country was awaiting the verdict of the judge in the Anthony Burns case, Thoreau impatiently stated the opinion that the verdict would be absolutely worthless when received. He

felt the man's very existence as a judge to be as impertinent as the gnat that settled on his paper. "We do not ask him to make up his mind, but to make up his pack. Why the United States Government never performed an act of justice in its life!"47 Thoreau felt that it was not he alone, but all friends of justice, who had no faith that justice would be awarded the slave. He believed that not precedent, but the sentiment of the people, should determine the case. Expediency seemed to him to be a very low and incompetent standard by which to try a case. He saw that judges did not consider whether a law, such as the Fugitive Slave Law, was right, but whether or not it was constitutional; and he thought that where important moral questions were concerned it was just as impertinent to ask whether a law was constitutional as to ask whether it was profitable. He reminded the judges that the question was not whether they, or their grandfathers seventy years ago, had entered into an agreement to serve the devil, but whether they would now, in spite of past mistakes, begin to obey their own inner consciences.48

Thoreau, however, was afraid that judges were not prepared to do what they knew to be right, as he doubted that

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47Journal, VI, 313. The notes found here were used in writing "Slavery in Massachusetts," in which lecture Thoreau was not quite so vehement in his remarks. He entirely omitted the last sentence quoted above.

48Cape Cod, pp. 401-402.
there was a judge in Massachusetts who was prepared to resign his office whenever it should be required of him to pass sentence under a law that was merely contrary to the laws of God. Therefore, judges seemed as much like tools to him as did the marine who would discharge his musket in any direction he was ordered to. 49 Thoreau reminded people that slavery was not the peculiar institution of the South, but that it exists wherever a man allows himself to be made a tool and surrenders his inalienable rights of conscience and reason. "I never yet met with, or heard of, a judge who was not a slave of this kind, and so the finest and most unfailing weapon of injustice. He fetches a slightly higher price than the black man only because he is a more valuable slave." 50

Thoreau wondered if it would not be possible for an individual to be right and the government to be wrong. Admitting that a murderer's conscience always tells him that he is justly punished for his crimes, Thoreau knew that that was not the case when an innocent slave was returned to slavery; and he denied the right of any government to punish a man without the consent of that man's conscience. He asked if laws were to be enforced simply because they were made, or declared good by any number of men when they were not good. Were judges to interpret the law according to the letter,

49Ibid., p. 401.  
50Journal, XIV, 292.
not the spirit? In other words, was it ever the intention of the law-makers that the good be punished? 51 Believing a lawyer’s truth to be "not Truth, but consistency or a consistent expediency," 52 he decided that lawyers should be employed in trivial cases only, because "in cases of the highest importance, it is of no consequence whether a man breaks a human law or not." 53 He thought the judge to be altogether incompetent in the highest cases, his verdict being at best a kind of accident; consequently Thoreau decided that, rather than trust the life of his friend to all of the judges of all of the highest courts in the world, to be sacrificed or saved by precedent, he would rather trust to the sentiment of the people. There, at least, he would have something of some value, however small; but he saw nothing valuable in the judges’ verdict. Any judge’s verdict always meant to Thoreau only "the trammelled judgment of an individual, of no significance, be it which way it might." 54 He reminded judges that in the final analysis the judge whose words seal a man’s fate furtherest into eternity is not the one who merely pronounces the verdict of the law, but the one who, from a love of truth, and uninfluenced by any enactment of men, utters a true opinion concerning that man.

"Whoever can discern truth has received his commission from

51Cape Cod, pp. 437-439. 52Ibid., p. 384.
53Ibid., p. 438. 54Ibid., p. 395.
a higher source than the chiefest justice in the world who can discern only law. He finds himself constituted judge of the judge."\(^55\)

The above opinions of Thoreau's concerning courts and judges were made in connection with cases arising from the Fugitive Slave Law, but his own experiences with courts and lawyers did not change his opinion. On the contrary, when he consulted a lawyer in regard to having impounded an Irish neighbor's free-roaming horse and cow and was informed by the lawyer that city laws were hard to enforce, that he had never known a complainant in a case such as Thoreau's to win if the defendant contested the case, and that Thoreau could not, in any case have stray animals impounded on Sunday -- the day on which most of Thoreau's neighbors turned out their cattle for free grazing, Thoreau decided in disgust "that the law is really a 'humbug,' and a benefit principally to lawyers."\(^56\) No, the judges whom Thoreau heard at a party casually discussing over their nuts and raisins the efficacy of the courts and law could "mumble forth the decision that 'substantial justice is done!'\(^57\) if they pleased, but Thoreau decided that what they actually meant was that they did "really get paid a 'substantial' salary."\(^58\)

Most of Thoreau's detailed statements of opinion regarding government and governmental functions are found in

\(^{55}\)Ibid., p. 396. \(^{56}\)Journal, XI, 208.

\(^{57}\)Ibid., pp. 207-208. \(^{58}\)Ibid., p. 209.
his lecture entitled "Civil Disobedience," but perhaps the casually expressed opinions on politics, legislators, governors, etc., found mixed with pages of nature study throughout his writings, best express his true feelings toward government. Standing on a hill in October and looking down upon the brilliantly-colored sugar maples, Thoreau decided that the maples were worth all and even more than they had cost, even though not the least part of the cost had been the life of one of the selectmen, the selectman having taken cold while setting them out. Musing on the fact that different people usually get widely different impressions from the same scene, Thoreau wondered what a New England selectman would see if he were set upon the highest hill in the neighborhood and told to look carefully and report what he saw. Instead of seeing the ground covered with bright fallen leaves of the sugar maple and scarlet oak and noting with pleasure all the other autumnal signs, Thoreau was afraid that the selectman would see nothing more than several churches and that somebody ought to be assessed higher than he is, since he has so handsome a wood-lot. He was also afraid that the governor and his council could never forget their dignity and age sufficiently to remember the pond where as boys they went fishing. The legislators might think of the pond occasionally, but they would remember it chiefly to regulate the number of hooks to be used

59 Excursions and Poems, p. 272. 60 Ibid., p. 287.
there; "but they know nothing about the hook of hooks with which to angle for the pond itself, impaling the legislature for a bait."61 Once on muster day when the governor reviewed the troops, Thoreau saw him on horseback, with his hat off, listening to a chaplain's prayer. Remembering that he had not seen or heard the governor during the Sims case, however, Thoreau decided that he could manage to get along without one. "If he is not of the least use to prevent my being kidnapped, pray of what important use is he likely to be to me? When freedom is most endangered, he dwells in the deepest obscurity."62 In 1851 Thoreau became more closely associated with a governor, this time hearing one speak before the local lyceum. The governor wore no badge of office, and Thoreau believed that not even his brass buttons were official, but were perhaps worn out of respect for his station. Thoreau found the governor quite democratic, but would have liked him still better if he could have divested himself a little more completely in his tone and manner of the sense of dignity which belonged to his office.63 On reflection, however, Thoreau felt a kind of sympathy for a governor, especially when the governor becomes the ex-governor and is trying to readjust himself to his old life.

61Walden, p. 236.  62Cane Cod, p. 290.  
63Journal, III, 190.
His ex-honorableness-ship stands seriously in his way, whether he is a lawyer or a shop keeper. He can't get ex-honorated. . . . A man who has been President becomes the Ex-President, and can't travel or stay at home anywhere but men will persist in paying respects to his ex-ship. It is cruel to remember his deeds so long. When his time is out, why can't they let the poor fellow go?  

Thoreau was disgusted when he read that the courts of New Hampshire were trying to determine the ownership of the top of Mt. Washington. In the first place, he believed that the courts had no jurisdiction over such a case; and, in the second place, he did not think that the top of Mt. Washington should be private property; "it should be left unappropriated for modesty and reverence's sake, or if only to suggest that earth has higher uses than we put her to." Suspecting that no state official appreciated nature for its true value, Thoreau admitted having a desire to ask the tax assessors the value to Concord of a blue mountain range in the northwest horizon, "and see if they would laugh or seriously set about calculating it." An interested spectator at an ant battle, Thoreau wondered if any battle in American history could compare with that of the ants in so far as the display of heroism and patriotism was concerned. He did not doubt "that it was a principle they fought for, as much as our ancestors, and not to avoid a three-penny tax on their tea. . . ."  

64*Journal, VIII, 82-83.  65*Journal, XIV, 305.  66*Journal, IV, 263-264.  67*Walden, p. 255.
monument that had been erected in Acton to commemorate the Battle of Concord, Thoreau did not think it as appropriate as would have been a large, flat stone, which "might have been a doorstep to the Town House..." He thought of the tall monument as the "Acton flue, to carry off the vapors of patriotism into the upper air, which, confined, would be deleterious to animal and vegetable health." By far the most prominent political issue of Thoreau's day was slavery, and into that controversy Thoreau entered whole-heartedly. His greatest alarm was that the majority of the people of the United States did not appear to comprehend the true meaning of slavery or to realize the seriousness of the condition existing in the United States during the years before the Civil War. Americans, as they proved in 1775, believe in the right to refuse allegiance to a government whose tyranny and oppression are unendurable. In 1849, however, most Americans did not appear to find their government unendurable, a fact which was very surprising to Thoreau. Realizing that all political machines are invariably accompanied by a certain amount of friction and evil, he believed that he could endure a government which put a tax on certain foreign commodities, as he could live without those commodities; but when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and

69Ibid.
a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. 70

Speaking before an anti-slavery convention in 1854, Thoreau attempted to make clear the fact that most people did not realize what slavery really is by telling them of a curious inconsistency which he had observed in Concord three years before. April 19, 1851, just one week after the authorities of Boston had assembled to send a negro back into slavery, the inhabitants of Concord assembled to fire cannon and ring bells to celebrate their liberty and the courage and love of liberty of their ancestors who had fought at that bridge.

As if those three millions had fought for the right to be free themselves, but to hold in slavery three million others. Nowadays, men wear a fool's cap, and call it a liberty-cap. I do not know but there are some who, if they were tied to a whipping-post, and could but get one hand free, would use it to ring the bells and fire the cannons to celebrate their liberty. So some of my townsmen took the liberty to ring and fire. That was the extent of their freedom; and when the sound of the bells died away, their liberty died away also; when the powder was all expended, their liberty went off with the smoke.

The joke could be no broader if the inmates of the prisons were to subscribe for all the powder to be used in such salutes, and hire the jailers to do the firing and ringing for them, while they enjoyed it through the grating. 71

Thoreau warned his countrymen of the mistake they were making when they sent an innocent black man, and one whom they knew to be innocent, back into slavery, and advised them that it

70 [Cane Cod, pp. 360-361.]
71 [Ibid., pp. 392-393.]

mattered not who the man was, -- "whether it was Jesus Christ or another, -- for inasmuch as ye did it unto the least of these his brethren ye did it unto him." He asked them if they thought Christ would have lived on earth in freedom and let the black man, who did not assert the right to govern himself, but simply the right to run away and stay away from his prison, go into slavery in his stead.73

Not even legislators seemed to have a clear understanding of the implications of slavery. Thoreau believed that if he seriously proposed to the Congressmen who passed the Fugitive Slave Law that they make men into sausages they would smile at the proposition; or if they took his proposal in earnest, they would think that he proposed something worse than anything that they had ever enacted. Thoreau, however, defied anyone to prove to him that making a man into a sausage would be any worse, any less sensible, than making him into a slave.74 Having heard a few of his countrymen speak of trampling the Fugitive Slave Law under their feet, Thoreau responded:

Why, one need not go out of his way to do that. This law rises not to the level of the head or the reason; its natural habitat is in the dirt. It was born and bred, and has its life, only in the dust and mire, on a level with the feet; and he who walks with freedom, and does not with Hindoo mercy avoid treading on every venomous reptile, will inevitably tread on it, and so

72Journal, II, 175.  
73Ibid.  
74Cape Cod, p. 394.
trample it under foot, — and Webster, its maker, with it, like the dirt-bug and its ball.\textsuperscript{75}

After the Anthony Burns case in 1854 Thoreau became more conscious than ever before of the evils of slavery and more vehemently opposed to a government that would tolerate such an evil institution. He had previously felt that, under the American government, his life was passed somewhere between heaven and hell, but after the Burns case he could not persuade himself that his life was not passed wholly within hell. It was as if someone who had built for himself a comfortable villa should suddenly discover that the villa together with all of its contents was located in hell.\textsuperscript{76} Thoreau was astonished to observe his neighbors going about their business as usual, apparently unaware that anything momentous had occurred. He could but conclude that they had not yet heard the news: otherwise the man whom he had just met who was looking for his stray cows would not look anymore,

since all property is insecure, and if they do not run away again, they may be taken away from him when he gets them. Fool! does he not know that his seed-corn is worth less this year, — that all beneficial harvests fail as you approach the empire of hell?\textsuperscript{77}

Thoreau admitted that there were thousands of people in the United States who were opposed to slavery, but they were opposed to it in opinion only. While they regretted

\textsuperscript{75}Ibid., pp. 394-395. \textsuperscript{76}Ibid., p. 406. \textsuperscript{77}Ibid.
the condition of the slaves, talked about it, and sometimes even petitioned the government regarding it, they did nothing in earnest to remedy the evil.\footnote{Ibid., p. 363.} Nor were they sympathetic when others attempted to do so. After John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, which was an inspiring feat to Thoreau, Thoreau noted that the "brutish, thick-skinned herd, who do not know a man by sympathy, make haste home from their ballot-boxes and churches to their Castles of Indolence, perchance to cherish their valor there with some nursery talk of knights and dragons."\footnote{Journal, XII, 405.} He said that people did not appreciate Brown's attempt simply because it was a failure. They preferred their Arthur and other imaginary heroes who, because they were imaginary, never failed.\footnote{Ibid.} Not even the abolition journals or the Republican editors expressed approval for Brown's courage and valor. Thoreau was surprised to read that Brown and his followers were "insane," "crazed," and "mistaken men." "Did it ever occur to you what a sane set of editors we are blessed with? -- not 'mistaken men'; who know very well on which side their bread is buttered!"\footnote{Ibid., p. 407.}

Thoreau had some advice for his countrymen in regard to achieving the abolition of slavery. In the first place, he advised the ordinary individual that, if he could not devote himself to the eradication of a wrong, his least duty
was to wash his hands of that wrong, and to do that he must cease giving it his practical support. Thoreau could see little difference between the soldier who marched off to help put down a slave insurrection and the man who glibly dared the state to force him to help subdue slaves, but at the same time supported the government with his money.\textsuperscript{82} Thoreau refused to pay his own poll tax simply because he did not wish to trace the course of his dollar till it bought a man or a musket with which to shoot one.\textsuperscript{83} He advised those who were abolitionists to withdraw their support from the government of Massachusetts, not waiting for a majority of one, since "it is enough if they have God on their side, without waiting for that other one."\textsuperscript{84}

Thoreau believed that the only true place in Massachusetts for a person free of spirit was in prison, since that is where states always keep those who are against them.\textsuperscript{85} Thoreau believed that if one honest man in the state of Massachusetts, ceasing to hold slaves, were to withdraw his allegiance and support from the government and be locked up in the jail, that action would be the abolition of slavery in America. "For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be; what is once well done is done forever."\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{82}\textit{Cape Cod}, p. 365. 
\textsuperscript{83}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 280. 
\textsuperscript{84}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 369. 
\textsuperscript{85}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 370-371. 
\textsuperscript{86}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 370.
Thoreau was perhaps one of John Brown's most ardent supporters, classing him as one of the Puritans, who "did something else than celebrate their forefathers' day, and eat parched corn in remembrance of that time." He felt that Brown, having an old-fashioned respect for the Constitution and for the Union, saw that slavery is opposed to both and determined to crush it. When Brown was hanged, Thoreau called his death the other end of a chain that had its beginning with the crucifixion of Christ. Thoreau felt particularly sorrowful about the death of Brown, because he felt that few people, only a half-dozen or so since the world began, had ever died, since no more than that had ever really lived. "Franklin, -- Washington, -- they were let off without dying; they were merely missing one day."

Calling John Brown the representative of the North, Thoreau said that anxious politicians might prove that only seventeen white men and five negroes were involved in Brown's enterprise; but he felt that their very anxiety to prove that might perhaps suggest to themselves that all was not well. If they would cease dodging the truth, they would realize that at least a million of the free inhabitants of the United States would have rejoiced if Brown had succeeded and that many men, though they wore no crepe, had had their

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87Ibid., p. 412.  
88Ibid., pp. 410-411.  
89Ibid., p. 438.  
90Ibid., p. 435.  
91Ibid., p. 424.
day spoiled for other thinking by the thought of Brown's fate. 92 He did not think that the politicians' worries and fears were foolish ones, for Brown's death was as symbolic to him as that of another man who had taken up his life and laid it down for his fellowmen; and he warned that "the same indignation that is said to have cleared the temple once will clear it again." 93

Notwithstanding the fact that Thoreau frequently seemed vitally concerned with the affairs of government, remarks throughout his writings show how little, actually, he felt the influence of government. When he was released from prison after someone else paid the tax which he refused to pay, he completed an errand, then joined a huckleberry party, and was soon in a huckleberry field on a very high hill two miles from town, "and then the State was nowhere to be seen." 94 He advised those who wish to enter the political world to walk along the great road behind the market-man, keeping his dust in their eyes; in that way he promised that they would be led straight into the land of politics. Thoreau, however, could "pass from it as from a bean-field into the forest, and it is forgotten." 95 In a half-hour he could walk off to some part of the earth "where a man does not stand from one year's end to another, and there,

92 Ibid., pp. 416-417. 93 Ibid., p. 434.
94 Ibid., p. 380. 95 Excursions and Poems, p. 213.
consequently, politics are not, for they are but the cigar-smoke of a man."\textsuperscript{96} Rather than the political world Thoreau always preferred nature, described by him as a room which he had all to himself beyond the jurisdiction of human governments. "Pile up your books, the records of sadness, your saws and your laws. Nature is glad outside, and her merry worms within will ere long topple them down. There is a prairie beyond your laws."\textsuperscript{97} Even slavery, which caused Thoreau more anxiety than any other political issue, which caused his thoughts to be "murder to the State,"\textsuperscript{98} could not keep him in a state of despair when he beheld the first lily of spring: "What confirmation of our hopes is in the fragrance of this flower! ... It suggests what kind of laws have prevailed longest and widest, and still prevail, and that the time may come when man’s deeds will smell as sweet."\textsuperscript{99}

\textsuperscript{96}\textit{Ibid.} \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{97}\textit{Journal}, IV, 446. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{98}\textit{Cape Cod}, p. 407. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{99}\textit{Ibid.}
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study has been to determine what opinions Thoreau held on the subjects of religion, economics, government, and politics. A study of Thoreau's comments on religion quite naturally leads to the question, Was Thoreau religious? Most of Thoreau's biographers say that their subject was a devoutly religious man. Sanborn, who knew Thoreau intimately during the last seven years of Thoreau's life, said that "though often ranked as an unbeliever, and too scornful in some of his expressions concerning the religion of other men, Thoreau was in truth deeply religious. Sincerity and devotion were his most marked traits."\(^1\) Moreover, Emerson, who perhaps knew and understood Thoreau better than did any other person, said that "whilst he used in his writings a certain petulance of remark in reference to churches or churchmen, he was a person of a rare, tender, and absolute religion, a person incapable of any profanation, by act or by thought."\(^2\) These two statements follow a grammatical pattern which biographers

\(^1\)Sanborn, op. cit., p. 299.

\(^2\)The Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, III, 398.
evidently found convenient when Thoreau's religion was under discussion: the statement that Thoreau was religious is introduced by a clause of concession in which the writer admits, in effect, that Thoreau's religion was different from that of his neighbors—so different, in fact, that his associates were sometimes led to doubt that it was a religion at all. However, in addition to the fact that those who knew Thoreau best reported that he was truly religious, we find in his writings occasional statements indicating his love of God, his devotion to the Bible, and his belief in immortality. Some people may "believe" in God because it is the social thing to do, but the harshest critic would surely never accuse Thoreau of that. "No opposition or ridicule had any weight with him. He coldly and fully stated his opinion without affecting to believe that it was the opinion of the company. It was of no consequence if every one present held the opposite opinion."3

Assuming, then, that Thoreau was religious, why did he make the apparently heretical remarks that are found with such frequency in his writings? An examination of these remarks reveals that Thoreau was not critical of true religion nor of people who are sincerely religious both in thought and in action; but he was bitterly critical of those who he knew did not really believe in God and the Bible, but

3Tbid., p. 385.
who, consciously or unconsciously, affected such a belief simply for the sake of conformity. They were the ones who crowded themselves into hot, stuffy churches for an hour or so every Sunday in order to be near God, yet who were critical of one who found his religion and his nearness to God on mountain-tops or in sunny fields -- not only on Sunday, but on every day of the week. To such a diviner of truth as Thoreau, theirs must not have seemed a religion at all, but a mere expedient conformity, than which nothing seemed to Thoreau so degrading. It probably would have been immaterial to Thoreau whether or not these people were aware that their religion was a sham. Thoreau, who discerned truth more readily than do most people, saw that it was such and did not for a moment hesitate to say so. He wanted a quiet, devout, unpretentious religion; and he despised the loud, profane, pretentious substitute with which he so frequently came in contact.

Most of Thoreau's criticisms on economics may be traced directly or indirectly to what he observed occurring at that time in the field of economics in America. With the industrialization of the country it began to be possible for the first time in America to amass huge fortunes, and many Americans became "money-mad." When Thoreau observed thousands of his countrymen working furiously year after year in order to accumulate gold, that must have seemed a great farce to him, who knew that man is not sent into the world under
obligation to make a fortune, but only to obtain the necessities of life. When he has done that much, he has fulfilled his obligations, and the rest of his time is his to use for his own advancement. To a person with that belief, the California gold rush must have seemed altogether vain and foolish. Why should people leave their homes and scamper across a continent to gamble for their livelihood when they may obtain all that they need much more easily, safely, and honestly at home? Thoreau could not understand why anyone should engage in unpleasant work, such as digging for gold, since earning a living should be a pleasant sport. Perhaps that is why Thoreau preferred the life of a farmer to that of a tradesman: a farmer lives near nature and obtains first-hand many of the necessities of life; moreover, he is not nearly so likely to be cursed with wealth as is the tradesman. Above all, Thoreau disliked seeing the nation change from a land of quiet, manly labors to one of bustling, unscrupulous activity.

The political events of Thoreau's time caused him to make the extremely harsh remarks that he made about the Constitution and the American government and its officers. If he had lived during a politically-insignificant period of American history, he probably would have lived and died without ever feeling it necessary to declare war against the state under which he lived, but would have paid his taxes and contented himself with ridiculing the foolish little mistakes
made by the government. Most of the time he would have lived and walked in nature, seldom being aware that governments exist. Unfortunately, however, Thoreau did not live during a politically-insignificant period. He lived during a crucial period in American history, when enormous mistakes were being made; and a seeker after truth could not be silent.

Thoreau believed earnestly and sincerely that slavery is wrong, and from that fervent belief arose his most ardent denunciations of government and politics. Thoreau did not believe in obeying laws indiscriminately; he believed in obeying them only if they were right. And by "right" he did not mean "constitutional." He believed that just as nature has its unwritten laws, which are laws because they do actually exist and are true, and not because they are expedient, so also laws for men should be. If a man-made law was wrong in the sight of God and nature, that law was also wrong in the sight of Thoreau, no matter how many courts declared it to be constitutional; and a government which made and enforced such a law was despicable. Thoreau lived when the government was up-holding slavery. Remembering that the American Revolution was fought that men might be free, he saw that the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence were a "humbug" so far as most Americans of his day were concerned. As in the case of religion, Thoreau's criticisms of government arose from what he considered a misuse of it. Of course, he probably would never have been an ardent
supporter of any government, but he certainly would not have been so vehemently opposed to it had he not been thoroughly convinced that the one under which he lived was entirely false and wrong. The members of Congress, the President, the Justices of the Supreme Court — all seemed to him to be engaged in perpetuating wrong.

Then came the Civil War. Biographers report that when the government ceased making compromises and Lincoln took a firm stand against slavery, Thoreau became an eager reader of newspapers and an enthusiastic supporter of the war. However that may be, it is certain that Thoreau was not so enthusiastic about the beginning of the Civil War as he had been about the exploit of John Brown. Of course, there may be explanations for that. In the first place, Thoreau was ill, and all of his journal entries were becoming increasingly brief and sketchy by 1861. Perhaps that accounts for his failure to note the beginning of the war; however one is inclined to reject this explanation when he remembers Thoreau's excited enthusiasm over John Brown. Perhaps the explanation is found in a statement which Thoreau made in "Civil Disobedience" regarding voting. He saw but little virtue in the action of masses of men, and he believed that when the majority should at length vote for the abolition of slavery, it would be because they were indifferent to slavery, or because there was but little slavery left to be abolished.

4Canby, op. cit., pp. 435-436.
by their vote. Therefore, when one man waged a war against slavery, Thoreau was so impressed that he believed that some day the Harper's Ferry scene would be immortalized in paintings just as have been the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the landing of the Pilgrims; but when the majority of the nation was at last willing to wage war, Thoreau showed little interest.

Thoreau adversely criticized religion, economics, government, and politics because of the falseness that he found in them, a falseness arising from men's misunderstanding and misuse of them. He saw that men believe "that that is which appears to be," that "shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous." If men would steadily observe and respect only that which is inevitable and has a right to be, and not allow themselves to be deluded by shams and appearances, then men who, "rather than love, than money, than fame," desire truth, would be happy and uncritical; for then life would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights' Entertainments, and music and poetry would resound along the streets.

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5 Cape Cod, p. 363-364. 6 Ibid., p. 440.
7 Walden, p. 107. 8 Ibid., p. 106.
9 Ibid., p. 384. 10 Ibid., p. 106.
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