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Individual communalism : Thoreau's time at Walden as rumination on and a personal reiteration of social reform

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INDIVIDUAL COMMUNALISM: THOREAU'S TIME AT WALDEN AS
RUMINATION ON AND A PERSONAL REITERATION OF SOCIAL REFORM

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Lauren Elizabeth Sewell has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Environmental Humanities.

Don Snow

Whitman College
May 13, 2015

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Chapter I: Transcendentalism as a Social Reform Movement

American Transcendentalism remains a movement with dendritic roots, causing it to span across vast arenas of thought. Myriad scholars have researched and analyzed Transcendentalism's multifaceted nature, its widespread theoretical origins, and its amorphous tendencies; even in their era, the Transcendentalists recognized the elusive and fickle nature of their movement inasmuch as their discussions rarely ended with a unanimous agreement (Shi 4, Bickman). Such vagueness and vastness requires Transcendentalism's many pupils and scholars to narrow their attention and to identify the specific roots from which it grew; under the movement's extensive title lies its origins in religion, philosophy, ethics, social reform, literature, education, and intellectualism, and each of those roots can be further split into several subsequent branches. Though the radices of Transcendentalism can become easily amalgamated, this introduction and thesis project shall focus on one of the many seeds out of which it developed: social reform.

On September 19, 1836, George Ripley hosted the first of many Transcendental Club meetings at his home in Boston, Massachusetts. In attendance were Amos Bronson Alcott, an educational reformer; Orestes Brownson, a social reformer who advocated for the rights of the working class; Theodore Parker, a recent graduate from The Harvard Divinity School; Ralph Waldo Emerson, an influential essayist and lecturer; and a few other elite intellects (Gura, "Transcendentalist Commotion" 50). The Transcendental Club arose out of a desire for semi-frequent conversations about theology and philosophy, and over the next four years, the group met nearly thirty

times. However, because the members were well aware of the scores of transformations occurring in New England and across the rest of the United States, they also conversed about societal changes and improvements (Gura, “Transcendentalist Commotion” 51). While they did discuss broad intellectual and theological subjects, the members of the Transcendental Club also were engaged citizens who deliberated over contemporary politics and social trends.

Indeed, national transformations were abundant; the effects of England’s Industrial Revolution had quickly spread across the Atlantic, and thus, during the period between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, the United States underwent intense social and economic renovation. First of all, the nation had adopted Smithian capitalism and improved its manufacturing technology, which subsequently led to harsh industrial working conditions and a number of labor protests and worker’s reform movements. Additionally, agricultural reformers began advocating for more effective and practical farming practices and initiated a broader discussion about the recently acquired by the Louisiana Purchase. Finally, many social reform movements gained momentum as a means through which citizens could express their dissatisfaction with society’s present state. Initiatives included the women’s rights movement, education reform, the temperance movement, prison reform, financial reform, abolitionism, and children’s aid, among others (Boller 99). All of these transformations and movements were growing as New England Transcendentalism was simultaneously budding, and thus, much of the work of the Transcendentalists was a direct response to these societal changes.

Many Transcendentalists—believing in the importance of social equality—partook in several of the new movements; Parker preached for the abolition of slavery, Margaret Fuller became a leader in women’s rights, and Alcott pioneered education reform. But despite this concrete activism, the fickle Transcendentalists still disagreed about ways in which one should participate in social reform. Some thought that society would benefit from cooperation and unity, from collective action and external behavior; with the combined effort of many individuals, they believed that they could shake deeply rooted systems from their foundations. Other Transcendentalists, however, thought that systemic social change could only occur if each individual—each constituent of society—acknowledged his personal duty to work toward internal improvement and spent time cultivating, understanding, and reforming himself. Thus, the Transcendentalists were split: should the “greatest good for the greatest number of people” be the first priority, or does social reform inherently require a preliminary dedication to personal reform?

It was the above question that prompted the idea for this thesis project. In the following pages, I shall explore two Transcendental living projects that emblemize this schism in thinking: the Transcendental commune at Brook Farm and Henry David Thoreau’s time at Walden. Brook Farm, a commune outside of Boston founded by George and Sophia Ripley, attempted to create a microcosm of ideal society by harnessing the power of the collective. Thoreau, however, went to the woods to embark on his own experiment in self-reform, and by doing so, he reduced the aims of Brook Farm to those of the individual—he embodied a microcosm of a microcosm. By using Brook Farm as a sort of contrasting framework through which I analyze Thoreau’s time

at Walden, this thesis argues that Thoreau's living experiment was a response to the intense socioeconomic factors that burdened the early nineteenth century, a deliberate attempt at personal reform, and, quite literally, his own individual commune.

Before exploring the dichotomous ways in which Walden and Brook Farm attempted social reform, however, we must first understand the social and economic milieu of the antebellum era and establish Transcendentalism as a social reform movement. What changes were occurring in New England and, more broadly, in the United States? How were the Transcendentalists responding to these changes, and in what ways, exactly, were they attempting to reform society? Additionally, what were the emergent social movements prior to the founding of Walden and Brook Farm? The answers to these questions prove integral to the rest of this thesis.

The Industrial Revolution, Labor Reform Movements, and Transcendentalism

Toward the beginning of the nineteenth century, New England's prevailing economic structures of foreign trade started to wither, and the first phases of industrial production and modern capitalism blossomed. Embargoes and wars plagued New England between 1808 and 1815, and negatively affected the region's commerce with overseas countries. Because of these barriers on trade, New England merchants began investing their capital in domestic production (Rose 18). Though foreign trade resumed after 1815, the timely "westward migration and improved transportation promised an expanding domestic market for manufactured goods," and thus began a new dedication to—and a necessity for—nationally produced merchandise (Rose 18). In turn, this

demand for domestic goods catalyzed an unprecedented number of social and economic developments in the northeast.

As foreign trade diminished, New England used the putting-out system (essentially cottage industry) as a sort of hybrid between mercantilism and full-fledged capitalism. The putting-out system allowed rural citizens to make goods, such as buttons or shoes, from the comfort of their own homes. Then, a business owner would sell those products in his shop and give some portion of the profit back to the menial laborers. Christopher Clark notes that these rural workers made a relatively decent living wage, earning approximately \$1.50 to \$2.00 per family per week—a pay comparable with other sources of income (Clark 184). Moreover, because of the necessary communication between laborers and merchants, the putting-out system engendered relative economic and political cooperation among the two occupations.

The New England putting-out system weakened as capitalism and factory systems grew. While the new dedication to capitalistic production seemed promising for many merchants, it was not implemented without negative effects. The competitive nature of capitalism demanded a ruthless pursuit of profit, and wealth began consolidating into the hands of business owners. Thus, the rift between the working class and the upper class expanded.

This major shift in economic systems altered the ways in which businesses operated and led to a variety of vicissitudes, including improvements in technology. Because businesses that invest in efficient equipment usually can produce their merchandise at a quicker rate and lower cost—and because producing at a lower cost allows businesses to make higher profits—businesses tend to desire increasingly cost-

effective machinery. Considering this, the United States' blossoming capitalistic society took advantage of the technology that was invented during Great Britain's Industrial Revolution: loom and textile technology became more efficient with John Kay's flying shuttle and James Hargreaves's spinning jenny, and James Watt's steam engine transformed transportation technology and industrial production by simply harnessing water vapor as a power source (Stearns and Hinshaw 111, 95, 273). While these inventions proved useful, Americans also began constructing a number of their own innovations and improving upon these already established technologies. In 1793, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, which increased the efficiency of cotton production; in 1802, Oliver Evans created a high-pressure steam engine that proved to be more effective than James Watt's; in 1844, Samuel Morse's first electric telegraph line opened up; and in 1846, the sewing machine was patented (Beard and Beard 194, Ware 5). These technologies increased manufacturing efficiency and created new means for communication, and antebellum life began advancing at a quicker pace.

The creation of the steam engine, specifically, stimulated a revolution centered on transportation technology (Licht 81). Canal-building boomed during the 1820s and 30s, and steamboats puffed along New England waterways. The construction of the Erie Canal, in particular, allowed New York City trade to expand westward and connect with the Great Lakes (Licht 82). These developments in transportation did not end with steamboats and canals, however; in 1828, U.S. railroad construction began with the laying of track for the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. By 1840, the nation had constructed 3,000 miles of railways, which exceeded the rail mileage of Great Britain (Licht 82). This revolution in transportation contributed to the growing domestic

economy inasmuch as it increased interstate commerce and augmented the circulation of information, goods, money, and people (Rose 83). This alacritous transportation system formed a symbiotic relationship with the era's innovative manufacturing technology; with these two forces feeding off of each other, the United States' market quickened, becoming increasingly competitive and increasingly cutthroat.

Concurrent with advancements in machinery and infrastructure, factories and mill towns begin sprouting up in antebellum New England. Industrial towns such as Lowell, Massachusetts, grew along the region's inland rivers, using the flowing water as their main source of power. Many factory townships, including Lowell, worked within the textile industry. They employed hundreds of hands to manage the looms—spinning, weaving, and processing cloth (Licht 27). At the time, however, land was cheap, and most citizens would have rather worked on their farms than in a textile factory. To account for this, the Lowell mill primarily employed young, unmarried women from “respectable New England farm families”; the female laborers stayed in company-owned boarding houses, made a decent wage, and participated in “wholesome recreational activities,” when not working, such as writing for and publishing their own literary magazine. Such benefits increased the appeal of working at Lowell, and mill work became so popular with this demographic that the females laborers were later named the “Lowell Mill Girls” (Licht 27-28, 59). During the 1830s and 40s, Lowell grew unprecedentedly, employing more individuals and subsequently producing more yards of cloth each week than ever before. As it grew, Lowell came to represent all things capitalistic: “a grand leap in business financial practices, the organizing of production, the application of technology, and the employment of labor”

(Licht 27-28). The mill town embodied an industrial model soon to be adopted by many businesses across the northeast.

The Lowell mill did provide benefits to its workers, and it took some care to ensure a decent workplace; yet simultaneously, the increasing competition of the New England textile economy demanded that Lowell and other mills reduce their production costs, which contributed to less-than-ideal labor conditions. Business owners were forced to consider augmenting the workday, decreasing wages, and intensifying individual duties—needing to do anything they could to cut expenditures (Licht 58). Hearing about these deliberations led to disdain and unrest among mill laborers, and in 1834, the Lowell Mill Girls organized and participated in the nation’s first industrial protest. On Valentine’s Day, they marched:

Eight hundred women workers, one-sixth of the entire female labor force of the city, took to the streets in a kind of massive demonstration that had not been seen in New England since the time of the American Revolution. (Licht 59)

The strike did not last long, but its effects reverberated throughout the community; the mill’s supervisors, as well as the rest of the town, were shocked by the ease with which the workers successfully and swiftly mobilized. The Girls turned their boarding houses into meeting centers for organizing, and their previous “appearances of harmony were deceiving” (Licht 59). Two years later, the Lowell Mill Girls protested again, speaking out against the increased room and board prices, and that strike led to the emergence of the Factory Girls’ Association, a 2,500-member organization created to coordinate action among workers (Licht 58-60). By calling for civil liberties in the workplace, the women of Lowell set a precedent for factory workers along the East Coast.

The Lowell Mill Girls' 1836 protest against room and board charges actually gained enough momentum and placed enough pressure on employers that the mill owners revoked their financial plan. Yet the 1834 protests ultimately proved unsuccessful. The business owners still cut their input costs by laying off workers, using machines to replace laborers, and demanding longer hours (Licht 59). These intensified work conditions at Lowell immersed the Lowell Mill Girls in another one of the era's growing reform movements: the measure for the ten-hour workday.

Since employees frequently spent twelve to fourteen hours working, mill laborers across New England felt the burdens of unregulated hours, and Lowell quickly became the campaign center for the Ten-Hour movement (Licht 60). Rather than attempting to persuade individual mills to reduce their hours, the laborers fought for more widespread, regulated change, seeking legislative action and "laws that would uniformly impose shorter hours" (Licht 60). The activists sent a petition with over five thousand signatures to the state's legislative office, and they subsequently formed the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association—the largest reform organization of its kind (Licht 60). Despite their efforts, however, the Ten-Hour movement ultimately failed during the 1840s because influential companies had such a tight hold over the Massachusetts legislature (Ware 127). Though it was some time before regulated work hours were implemented, this movement eventually succeeded, catalyzed others labor reform measures, and contributed to the growing trend of collective action.

The organization of the Lowell Mill Girls and the Ten-Hour movement represent just a couple of attempts at labor reform that manifested out of the adversities of the capitalistic business model. Many more uprisings, protests, and labor movements

occurred, however; the displacement of the urban, working poor caused a penetrating public dissatisfaction, and 1834, in particular, was deemed “riot year” (Ware 123, Prince 1). Furthermore, the Panic of 1837 unearthed additional skepticism about capitalism: the crash resulted in an economic depression, placing additional monetary hardships upon the working poor, and it caused citizens to question the legitimacy of the prevailing economic system. If the market could be so fickle as to crash and cause extreme destitution, how could people be expected to trust it? Indeed, working-class citizens were the most afflicted by these issues, but public outcry against the detriments of factory-based capitalism surged from all socioeconomic classes.

Among the Transcendentalists, Orestes Brownson was the first to take an outspoken stance on the shift in economics and these early labor reform movements. He asserted many of his beliefs in lectures and in writing: in 1836, he gave a sermon titled “The Wants of the Times,” which predicted the imminent struggle between upper and lower classes, and that same year, he began editing for the *Boston Reformer*, a working-class newspaper (Myerson et al. 139-140). In 1838, Brownson decided to create his own journal, the *Boston Quarterly Review*, which was dedicated to the discussion of religion, philosophy, and politics. It was in this journal that Brownson published his most famous and most controversial essay, “The Laboring Classes,” a piece in which he prophesies the outbreak of a particularly *violent* class struggle (Myerson et al. 362). Those within the Transcendental sphere, as well as those outside of it, reacted to Brownson’s writings, and thus, he became well-known for his efforts in labor reform.

Though Brownson was relentlessly dedicated to the emancipation of the working classes, the radicalism that he openly expressed—particularly in “The Laboring Classes”—affected the public’s overall view of Transcendentalism. Because Brownson’s *Boston Quarterly Review* attracted over a thousand subscribers and included writings from other Transcendentalists including Parker, Alcott, Ripley, Elizabeth Peabody, and Fuller, the journal functioned as a “widely circulated Transcendentalist organ” (Gura 128). Upon the publication of “The Laboring Classes,” however, the public began viewing Brownson as an extremist, a radical; this negative opinion caused the quarterly’s subscribers to diminish substantially and subsequently tinged the Transcendental movement with perceptions of extremism (Gura, *American Transcendentalism* 128). The other Transcendentalists even ceased viewing the *Boston Quarterly Review* as an appropriate forum for their thoughts and discussions, and so they decided to create a new publication; in 1840, they released the first issue of the Transcendental magazine, *The Dial* (Gura 128). Though many of the same writers Brownson solicited for the *Boston Quarterly Review* also wrote for *The Dial*—and though *The Dial* also published progressive, reform-based articles—what set *The Dial* apart from Brownson’s journal was its emphasis on free expression and the discussion of ideas rather than the promotion of a certain political standpoint.

Thus, the Transcendentalists responded to the new labor reform movements on a gradient, with Brownson emblemizing the leftmost point. The entirety of that gradient, however, tended toward reformism. That is, other Transcendentalists generally held progressive ideals similar to Brownson’s—though perhaps less revolutionary—and each of them “sought to alter [the economy] in ways that would

make it more humane and conducive to the dignity and well-being of all people, especially the working class” (Myerson et al. 137). Parker, for instance, became increasingly outspoken about labor reform and poverty and gained a substantial following, and Alcott’s utopian commune, Fruitlands, emblemized an extreme denouncement of capitalism in order to create an egalitarian society. With New England industrialization and workers’ rights movements and protests underway, the Transcendentalists generally supported labor reform, and they further cemented themselves as social reformists by giving lectures, preaching at churches, writing articles, founding communes, and conducting their lives with a deliberate regard to their convictions.

The Great Antebellum Land Debate

Concomitantly, a social discussion surrounding land use emerged. New Englanders expressed dissatisfaction with their current agricultural system, and, according to Robert Gross, the frequent complaint was that New England agriculture was “slovenly, wasteful, inefficient, blindly ridden by ignorance and custom, [and] heedless of the long-term damage being done to the land” (Gross 3). At the time, farmers attempted to cultivate too much, working larger tracts of land than they had the resources for, and thus, many of them were physically and financially overextending themselves. This grim reality led many to desire a comprehensive reworking of the ways in which New England farmers managed their land. Gross reiterates what these agricultural reformers believed:

If farmers reduced their acreage, consolidated and perfected their methods according to the latest scientific advice of the agricultural improvers, carefully calculated their production by the demands of the market, and withal, continued to practice Poor Richard's virtues of honesty, industry, and thrift; if they did all these things, then they would easily meet the test of agricultural competition from the West and prosper under God. (Gross 4)

Though agrarian reformers critiqued the manner in which farmers cultivated their land, they still tended to favor small-scale farms and individual farming operations (Richardson 150). They valued the common man, the self-sufficient Yankee, and generational farming families, and they desired to restructure the management of these farms so that production was more efficient.

Because of the accumulation of millions of acres with the Louisiana Purchase and the subsequent expansion west, the attempt toward agrarian restructuring became implicated in a larger discussion of wealthy versus poor. Many of the land reform movement's founding members were New England clergymen, and among them was Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, political activist, and future politician (Richardson 149-50). During the spring of 1845, Greeley headed an organization called the National Reform Association (NRA). At the time of the NRA, other organizations and societies were suggesting giving the land out west free to any individual who wanted it—and each plot would consist of 160 acres; the NRA discouraged this idea, however, arguing that wealthy individuals would buy out land from lower classes and thus acquire private property rights to large tracts of land and thus create a monopoly (Richardson 150). According to Richardson,

The NRA proposed that land be sold, not given, to individuals, that it be made immune to seizure for debt, and that no one be allowed, now or later, to acquire more than a single quarter-section. This proposal, which would have kept the land in the hands of the small farmers, and would have made the bonanza

farming or agribusiness of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries all but impossible, was a gesture on behalf of the old Jeffersonian ideal of subsistence farming. (Richardson 150)

The NRA's proposal, however, never gained substantial support, and eventually succumbed to the 1862 Homestead Act, which granted free land to anyone (Richardson 149). Despite their defeat, the agrarian reformers attempted to combat potential agricultural inequities.

Though the Transcendentalists were less involved in agrarian reform, they still experienced the effects and reverberations of conversations surrounding land use and agriculture. Alcott, for instance, showed an interest in pragmatic, scientific agriculture promoted by the era's agricultural reformers; because Fruitlanders did not believe in the manipulation and exploitation of beasts of burden, the harnessing of the power of water through dams and irrigation intrigued Alcott (Rose 125). Furthermore, Transcendentalists promoted the merits of small-scale farming operations. According to Rose,

The Transcendentalists generally saw farming as the most favorable occupation to personal growth because of its distance from the market, proximity to nature, and promise of a subsistence to protect moral independence. (Rose 138)

Thus, though most of the Transcendentalists were not members of the NRA or other agrarian associations, they still were well aware of the era's farming trends, and they valued the relationship that a farmer had with his land.

Transcendental Involvement in Social Reform Movements

Along with labor and agrarian reform, the Jacksonian era became defined by a number of social reform movements. Women's rights, abolitionism, temperance, and

education reform all sprouted, gained followers and resisters, and engendered a variety of reactions across the country. Progressive thought collided with conservative thought, and ideologies clashed, causing increasing unrest and uproar often followed by violence. Though these reform movements often divided society, the desire for social improvement during this time period reached a sort of unprecedented zenith, with Lutherans, Quakers, Jesuits—and other sects of people—coming together and vocalizing and demonstrating their dissatisfaction with the present state of society (Frothingham 154). An extraordinary number of people were mobilizing, advocating, and dedicating themselves to improving the United States.

Among those who participated in and responded to these social reform movements were the Transcendentalists. Transcendentalism persisted as a movement with a foundational philosophy rooted in individualism, and thus, it revered personal freedom. Promoting ideals of self-sufficiency and self-culture, Transcendentalists emphasized a “personal ethic of material constraint and profound thinking” and held that “intuitive truths were ultimately more meaningful than empirical facts or entrenched conventions” (Shi 126-127). Because Transcendentalists saw a moral and spiritual capacity in everyone, they condemned social instances and social institutions that eroded the value of the self.

One of the primary movements in which many Transcendentalists were involved was abolitionism. Indeed, Transcendentalism blossomed during an era where discussions of slavery, equality, and the rights of men became increasingly common amongst citizens. Moreover, the group of elite philosophers was interested in related topics, including the notions of freedom, independence, and the oppressed individual.

Because slavery worked within an overtly hierarchical structure that placed the slave beneath his master, it degraded the value each slave's soul; thus, it did not align with Transcendental thought and their doctrine of equality. The Transcendentalist biographer Octavius Frothingham notes that "because [the Transcendentalist's] philosophy compelled him to see in the slave the same humanity that appeared in the master," he could not accept such debasing conditions as a moral way of life. Thus, many Transcendentalists began advocating for the eradication of slavery (Frothingham 155-156). Parker, in particular, led the crossover between the Transcendental and abolition movements, publicly condemning both southern slaveholders and northern businessmen for remaining complicit in the degradation of mankind.

As Transcendentalists became more involved in social reform issues such as abolitionism, more women became involved in Transcendentalism (Rose 99). Though initially the Transcendental Club's meetings followed the traditional custom of gender segregation, Emerson invited the local female reformers to one of their gatherings in Concord; thenceforth, the movement's male members became "more sensitive to issues of women's status and family structure" (Rose 99-100). Moreover, this inclusion led to females such as Elizabeth Palmer Peabody and Margaret Fuller becoming irrevocably established as Transcendental leaders.

During this era, the women's rights movement was gaining momentum in New England and nationally. Heightened by the unrest and successful organization of the Lowell Mill Girls, women began fighting for their civil liberties and demanding equality. Because the women's rights movement, like abolitionism, strived to combat culturally imposed hierarchical structures, the Transcendentalists sympathized with it.

Fuller, in particular, led the movement and became an influential figure. Concerned with women's education, Fuller initiated a series of conversations for females in and around Boston, which worked to edify and empower women and assist them in finding their voice outside of the domestic circle (Rose 101). Fuller also desired to see more women in leadership roles, and her competence as the editor-in-chief of *The Dial* demonstrated her own acute business and management skills (Rose 101). Her own writings additionally cemented her as a leader of movement, particularly her well-known book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. First published as an article in *The Dial*, Fuller eventually expanded *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* into a full-length work, and it was published by a New York press in 1845. The book gained notoriety quickly, influencing many and attracting a following of reformers, and thus, it elevated Fuller into the sociopolitical foreground (Gura, *American Transcendentalism* 172, Walker 459). Fuller's ambition, dedication, and achievements established her as an early leader of the women's rights movement.

As a female, Fuller embodied the feminist movement within the Transcendental sphere, but males including Emerson, William Henry Channing, and Parker also participated in the women's rights movement. The Boston Feminist Coalition welcomed men, and many of Fuller's male contemporaries attended. Fuller indisputably influenced all of them in their thinking, and while they may have disagreed on certain facets of femininity, they showed her respect and reverence (Myerson et. al 230-231). Fuller's influence grew in breadth and in depth: her teachings expanded across New England but also became more deeply engrained in the Transcendental school of thought.

Concurrent with the women's rights and abolitionist movements were conversations about and advocacy for mass education reform. During the early part of the nineteenth century, citizens advocated for an increased shift toward universal public schooling to replace the prevailing private schools (Katz 39). While these discussions infused New England, Transcendentalists Alcott and Peabody responded with an alternative form of education: in 1834, Alcott opened his Temple School—a progressive “School for Human Culture” located on the top floor of a Masonic Temple in Boston—and Peabody worked as Alcott's assistant from 1834-1836 (when she resigned, Fuller replaced her) (Gura, *American Transcendentalism* 86-89). The Temple School curriculum aligned with the Transcendental doctrine, for Alcott believed and taught that every child was born with “an innate capacity for virtue” and a “faculty for goodness” (Rose 62). He embarked to “teach the children they were spiritual beings closely connected to God” and accordingly saw teaching as a “task of spiritual awakening” (Rose 61-62, Gura, *American Transcendentalism* 87). His students spent time developing forms of self-expression in writing and oration, and they kept journals in which they noted their thoughts and observations. When Alcott published a compilation of his student's enlightened writings, however, the public reacted negatively, pressured him to close the school, and regarded his curriculum as crude and obscene. This reaction derived from his classroom discussions of mature physiology, such as sex and the Virgin birth, and the general consensus was that this form of education was too experimental (Gura, *American Transcendentalism* 87-90). Alcott's reputation declined, but the Temple School remains a primary example of an educational system that derived from Transcendentalist tenets; it stressed the internal

genius within each individual and infused its pupils with creative capacity and free-thinking skills.

Thus, though Transcendentalism was multifaceted, it was undoubtedly a social reform movement. The Transcendentalists, however, disagreed about the pragmatic methods of social change. One subgroup of intellectuals—pioneered by Ripley, Brownson, and Channing—maintained that effective social change could only occur if individuals united and worked together to strengthen the common good (Gura, *American Transcendentalism* xiv, Delano 26, 116). The other assemblage —pioneered by Emerson, Alcott, and Charles Lane—asserted that the qualities of self-reliance, self-awareness, introspection, and self-culture should serve as the guiding principles for social reform. They believed that if people worked toward becoming their best selves, an improved society would naturally emerge. While one subset of Transcendentalism emphasized the potential of a cohesive group, the other placed faith in the power of internal spiritual reform; one believed in a “trickle-down” approach to social reform, whereas the other believed in a “bottom-up” approach. Unfortunately, this theoretical schism led to the disintegration of Transcendentalism as a unified movement. On September 20, 1840, the Transcendental Club held its final meeting, as it became clear that “the inevitable development of their separate views would not permit them to meet any longer on common ground” (Delano 26). Though this division terminated the Transcendental Club, it helped stimulate other Transcendentalist projects, including the experiments in living at Brook Farm and Walden Pond.

Brook Farm and Walden Pond

As the philosophic rhizome of Transcendentalism expanded, its dendrites growing distant from each other, two specific experiments in living developed and came to emblemize this division in Transcendental thought. During the mid-1840s, George Ripley set about to attempt social reform through such a “trickle-down” approach with his commune at Brook Farm; concurrently, Henry David Thoreau set about to attempt to influence social reform from the “bottom-up” approach with his shelter at Walden Pond.

In the winter of 1840, George and Sophia Ripley purchased a dairy farm on 200 acres in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, set near the Charles River with varied topography and scenic surroundings (Swift 15-17). The following spring, a group of approximately sixteen individuals trekked to the farm to attempt an experiment in living communally. The Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education—as it was deemed in September 1841—strived to create a microcosmic society centered on agrarian self-sufficiency and improved education and to generate a harmonious balance between physical and mental work. Located approximately eight miles from Boston, the social experiment lasted six years, but in 1847, Brook Farm disbanded and closed its doors as a result of the financial and emotional consequences of a destructive fire (Rose 161). Though little remains of Brook Farm today, it was a well-established and relatively successful Transcendental commune.

Ripley was quite zealous about his idea of an idyllic farm, but his dream was not necessarily an original one during the antebellum era. Brook Farm became just one of many communes taking shape during this time period; in the United States, 37

societies formed between 1800 and 1840, and an additional 33 formed between 1843 and 1845 (Richardson 150, Delano 40). Along with Robert Owen's New Harmony, Adin Ballou's Hopedale, Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands, and various Shaker settlements, Ripley's Brook Farm sought to abandon the throes of traditional society and instead create an alternative one. What set Brook Farm apart, however, was its secular nature, its successful educational system, its ability to survive for six years, and, most significantly, its direct foundation within the Transcendental movement and its dedication to social reform.

On November 9, 1840, Ripley wrote a letter to Emerson in which he expressed the mission statement for Brook Farm; he intended the commune to "prepare a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life" (Sams 6). Furthermore, Brook Farm was also a concerted attempt to improve society. Peabody, a visitor but not a member of the commune, wrote about Brook Farm in *The Dial*, stating that "whoever is satisfied with society, as it is; whose sense of justice is not wounded by its common action, institutions, spirit or commerce, has no business with this community" (Sams 65). Thus, Peabody recognized some of the radical thinking that occurred at the commune. Brook Farm harnessed this attitude of reform by regarding the molecule as the magical unit of the universe; according to Richard Francis, the molecule, in this context, can be viewed as a "cluster of individuals interlinked in a common cause and able to transmit its composite virtue to the social fabric as a whole" (Francis 33). That is, Ripley believed that a commune comprised of open-minded, laborious, willing individuals

who were dedicated to equality and enlightenment had profound capacities to improve the grim state of society.

Thoreau, however, took an alternative stance on the best way to engage in social reform; he was intrigued by but morally opposed to communities such as Brook Farm. On Independence Day, 1845—an intentional metaphor—Henry David Thoreau ventured out to Walden Pond, inhabited his humble cabin, tended a field of beans, and spent a little more than two years by himself, cataloguing his thoughts and musing and eventually producing the renowned book that the world knows today. While Thoreau scholar Robert Richardson notes that Thoreau’s move to Walden may have been caused by his simple desire for independence, part of Thoreau’s determination to settle down in his cabin was to conduct an experiment in small-scale social reform (Richardson 152). Just as Ripley did, Thoreau questioned the era’s growing factory systems, competitive economy, and general indulgence and materialism, and thus, he sought to “see what Brook Farm or Fruitlands...meant, not for a group, but for a single person interested in the reformation of society, the reform of agriculture, and the attainment of greater simplicity in domestic arrangements” (Richardson 150). Thus, Thoreau disregarded the “molecule” theory presented in Brook Farm and instead focused on the significance of a single atom—himself. His social reform was one of a deeply personal nature.

The idea that Thoreau’s Walden was a restructuring of the Brook Farm experiment is not a new one, but it is, however, a frequently shallow, almost flippant association. Scholars including Richardson have compared Thoreau’s experiment in living to that of Brook Farm, describing it as a “commune of one” or an “individual

utopia” (Francis 34, Shi 128, Richardson 150). These oxymoronic phrases are thrown around in academic literature, but the idea of the “commune of one” is hardly dwelled upon; that is, later intellectuals present it as a weighty simile but fail to expand upon it and delve into its nuances. Because Brook Farm and Walden occurred concurrently, with Walden appearing four years after Brook Farm was founded, Thoreau’s time at Walden does “seem” like a direct response to the utopian communities—but to what extent was it? And to what extent was Thoreau literally embodying a “commune of one”?

This thesis project intends to delve into this question and propose that Thoreau did, in fact, create his own personal commune. By looking deeply into *Walden*, I shall attempt to unearth how Thoreau reiterates and redefines the notion of the individual, and how his time at the pond was a rumination on and literal restructuring of the economic and social systems that affected the era. Overall, this thesis shall use Thoreau’s project at Walden to assert that self-awareness and self-development serve as the means for personal *and* social reform.

Chapter II: The Multifaceted Nature of the Self and The

Sovereign Individual

“All that he could think of was to practise [sic] some new austerity, to let his mind descend into his body and redeem it, and to treat himself with ever increasing respect”
– Henry David Thoreau

The Conceptualization of the Self

Though Brook Farm and Walden promoted different units for social reform—the molecule as opposed to the atom, respectively—both projects were comprised of single individuals; the Brook Farmers constituted Brook Farm, and Thoreau constituted Walden. Regardless of their operational divergences, both projects respected individualism; influenced by the tenets of Transcendentalism, Ripley and Thoreau deeply revered personal development and individual freedom. However, while the two encouraged solitude and internal cultivation, they conceptualized the notion of “the self” or “the individual” in rather disparate manners.

Ripley and other Brook Farmers held a relatively simple view of the self. To Ripley, an individual was primarily a social actor who was defined by his environment; Ripley believed that an individual would absorb his identity through his social surroundings and his relationships with other individuals. Thus, if you could control those relationships—if you could manipulate your social arrangements in the most deliberate and advantageous way possible—then, Ripley believed, you could build a

more congruous community while simultaneously generating an improved version of yourself.

Indeed, Brook Farm was attempting to manipulate social arrangements in the most advantageous way possible. Ripley and the commune's participants generally regarded the antebellum era's intensely hierarchical societal structure—its inequalities in labor, class, gender, and race—as a negative influence, and they viewed these social divisions as detrimental to the development of the self. Thus, by creating a planned, microcosmic, egalitarian society dedicated to the melding of physical and mental labor, Brook Farm worked to reform society by breaking down such pervasive hierarchies. Inherently, this reorganization of society into that of an intentional community would yield enlightened and internally emancipated individuals.

Thoreau, however, challenged Brook Farm's external, passive, and participatory, conceptualization of the self. Rather than being simply a manifestation out of social factors, Thoreau regards the self as being an active, complex, and *complete* system with multiple parts working simultaneously. To Thoreau, the individual is not just the medium through which society transmits its influence, but rather, the individual is a sort of society in its own right; Thoreau holds that individuals have a multiplicity of inherent internal dimensions, and, if properly developed, these dimensions can produce a sort of intangible wholeness—a “society”—within the self. Thoreau maintains, unlike Brook Farm, that the self is the means as well as the end for social reform.

In *Walden*, Thoreau spends much of his time introspecting and reflecting on those inner properties within himself—his limits and capacities, his complexities and

simplicities, his contradictions and truisms. He ruminates deeply on the constituents of his soul, on the components of his being, and consequently, on the nature of the individual. Such ruminations, however, are so embedded that they become hard to extract—his subtext is so frequently obfuscated, furtive, and paradoxical, that the reader often feels unclear on how Thoreau regards the notion of the self. Thus, the purpose of the following chapter is to render Thoreau’s conceptualization of the self more transparent.

Moreover, before I delve into the mechanics of Walden Pond and look at the “commune of one” idea in operational terms, I believe that it is necessary to research exactly what Thoreau believed comprised an individual; if I am to show that Thoreau, indeed, attempted a “commune of one,” first I must establish the metaphysical properties of the “one,” so as to see how an individual self could actually be arranged as a commune. Thus, the subsequent section shall ruminate on the concept of “the self”—how its intricacies and contradictions manifest, the ways in which Thoreau can find and reconcile the thriving society within his own individuality, and Thoreau’s discovery of what means to be a *sovereign* individual.

The Dimensions of the Self

Quite evidently does Thoreau’s project at Walden center around his experience as a single individual immersed in a specific place. Though his cabin was frequented by visitors, Thoreau spent the majority of his time in solitude, focused on his own personal and spiritual endeavors. He even begins *Walden* with a witty warning to the reader about his heavy use of the first person narrative, remarking that he “should not

talk so much about [him]self if there were anybody else whom [he] knew as well” (Thoreau 3). If nothing else, Thoreau’s time at Walden Pond was a rumination on the self, an exploration of the metaphysical traits that exist within one’s soul, a study on the principles and value of the individual.

Throughout *Walden*, however, Thoreau’s concept of “the self” remains paradoxical, complex, and ill-defined. For instance, at one point he says that he “never felt lonesome,” but then he goes on to describe a moment in which he found being alone to be “something unpleasant”; thus, the reader wonders what Thoreau actually feels and experiences when engaged in solitude (Thoreau 131). *Walden* overflows with these confusing ambiguities, but to Thoreau, the inherent nature of one’s multifaceted self allows these seeming disharmonies to coexist. That is, Thoreau subtly identifies two distinguishing components of the self: its ability to react to situations in inconsistent manners, and its ability to simultaneously contain conflicting and contradictory urges. Identifying these elements leads Thoreau to recognize and dwell on the specific dualities that exist within a single soul; he finds that an individual contains intrinsic higher and subordinate principles—the wild and the imaginative, the participator and the observer, the base and the elevated. While Thoreau finds such dichotomies inherent in the self, he also recognizes that these conflicting factors can be difficult to understand and reconcile. Yet, if a person devotes himself to self-awareness and self-respect and works toward balancing these internal fundamental contradictions, he will grow closer to becoming an honest, autonomous individual capable of personal—and implicitly, social—reformation.

In “Higher Laws,” Thoreau begins by describing a moment when a woodchuck crossed his path, and suddenly he felt a deep thrill and savage impulse to grab the creature and devour its raw flesh (Thoreau 210). He accounts similar experiences where he scoured the woods like a “half-starved hound” in search for venison, meat, blood—any scrap to nourish the ferocious beast inside of him (Thoreau 210). These unrefined urges and desires to consume flesh shock Thoreau, since he had lived quite comfortably and happily while abstaining from meat (Thoreau 61). Yet he seems to have no control over these moments of primitivism, and thus, he comes to understand the presence of a wild and instinctual essence within him—an essence that may be at rest for quite some time, but will occasionally stir, demanding to be fed and heard. According to Thoreau, this baseness exists in every individual, though it manifests itself in idiosyncratic ways (Thoreau 210-213). Some may feel its presence more than others, but a form of internal savagery festers inside all of us.

Though Thoreau recognizes the flesh-consuming, woodchuck-devouring spirit within him, in *Walden*, he seems to advocate for its extermination over time. As a young boy, Thoreau spent many of his days engaged by wild yet unsophisticated activities, such as hunting and fishing. Although slicing open a fish or shooting at a deer seems to encourage one’s barbaric senses and crude impulses for slaughter, Thoreau asserts that when children spend time out of doors, they begin to learn a reverence for the creatures and land that surrounds them; they begin to have intimate experiences in nature. Thus, the lessons that children learn out in the woods endow them with an invaluable and unique form of education. Yet, while killing a hare may instill certain principles within a child, Thoreau maintains that “no humane being, past

the thoughtless age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature, which holds its life by the same tenure that he does” (Thoreau 213). Therefore, as a boy transitions into adulthood, he should begin to understand the superfluousness of such bloodlust and abandon the shotgun and fishing rod for more ethical props, such as the pen, the microscope, or the book (Thoreau 213). Thoreau later reiterates the transience of the hunter stage by noting that “he is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day” (Thoreau 220). Our desire for savagery should be a fleeting one.

As this “hunter stage” fades away, Thoreau seems to suggest that it ought to be replaced by one’s “imagination” or “higher or poetic faculty” (Thoreau 214-15). Though these terms seem vague, in one instance, Thoreau explains them by discussing his diet and his relationship to fishing. Even though he went to the pond with his fishing rod and no moral opposition to killing fish, he begins to find animal flesh unclean and repugnant. Something within him begins to feel repulsed by the thought of consuming animal flesh, and he finds that upon indulging in it, it doesn’t “feed him essentially” (Thoreau 214). This doesn’t mean that meat did not fill him physically or give him energy, but rather that it lacked a nourishment of the mind. As Thoreau begins to have increasing moral qualms with eating fish, he consequently begins to gain more respect for and awareness of the virtuous, spiritual, creative ideals within him—his “imagination” and “higher poetic faculty” (Thoreau 214-215). He encourages others to abstain from meat and to listen to their enlightened instincts, for it is humanity’s imagination that separates us from animals, and Thoreau believes that an individual should work to cultivate his highest planes of thought.

Thus, on the surface, “Higher Laws” seems to be about recognizing, understanding, and then subsequently stifling our wild and primitive instincts as we work to develop more enlightened faculties. Thoreau’s writing seems relatively clear as he promotes an individual’s transition from hunter into sage (Thoreau 220). And yet, throughout the chapter, Thoreau also tends to contradict himself. At one point, he states that “the impure can neither stand nor sit with purity,” which aligns with his previous sentiments inasmuch as he asserts that one’s “impure” hunter phase cannot coexist with the purity of an enlightened individual—that a man cannot yield to his sensual desires and still remain spiritually virtuous (Thoreau 220). Paradoxically, however, Thoreau says that “there is never an instant’s truce between vice and virtue” (Thoreau 218). This statement implies the alternative—that “impure” and “pure” tendencies can and *do* coexist and that they are constantly grappling with each other in a battle of concomitance (Thoreau 218). With these opposing sentiments, Thoreau implicitly proposes two questions: what is the relationship between one’s higher and lower instincts, and how should an individual go about navigating them?

While his words seem contradictory and perplexing, what Thoreau actually affirms is that an individual’s higher and lower laws, her imagination and her wildness, can—and *should*—live harmoniously. Neither trait should solely occupy an individual with no room for its counterpart; Thoreau believes there is value in their juxtaposition. While at Walden, he recognizes his own internal dichotomy of vice and virtue, purity and impurity, and he works to understand both the meat-craving savage and meat-abstaining sage that exist within him. He writes,

I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage

one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good. (Thoreau 210)

Indeed, Thoreau's time spent within the tranquil environment endows him with the opportunity to work to reconcile the seemingly opposing dyad (Thoreau 210). And to Thoreau, reconciling a seemingly opposing disharmony leads to a much more fruitful coexistence. He asserts that "the harmony which results from a far greater number of seemingly conflicting, but really concurring, laws, which we have not detected, is still more wonderful" (Thoreau 290). Though finding equilibrium between the two planes is no easy feat for the individual, Thoreau maintains that the higher and lower laws within us demand our attention and demand reconciliation.

Thoreau further complicates his take on the nature of the individual by introducing another internal dichotomy: the idea of a double consciousness. He recognizes that within an individual, one part observes and oversees while the other participates and feels; thus, Thoreau distinguishes a second bifurcation of the self. He describes this dyad in writing the following:

I may be either the drift-wood in the stream, or Indra in the sky looking down on it. I *may* be affected by a theatrical exhibition; on the other hand, I *may not* be affected by an actual event which appears to concern me much more. I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another ... This doubleness may easily make us poor neighbors and friends sometimes. (Thoreau 135)

Thoreau explains this intrinsic dichotomy by ascertaining the idiosyncratic behaviors of men. At the performance of a play, an audience member may shed tears, laugh uproariously, become irate, or feel completely somber and contemplative; he may be emotionally affected by a complete farce, a deceptive appeal to the senses. Man may be the "driftwood in the stream," immersed and swept away by the power of an external

force. Yet, the same individual may attend a funeral of a very real friend and struggle to feel afflicted by the death of his companion. In that case, man is emotionally detached and removed—he is “Indra,” the Hindu god of sky and war who held the earth and the heavens separate (Brians et al). Thus, the lack of consistency within a single being leads Thoreau to conjecture that our consciousness changes and inhabits different metaphysical realms.

Though Thoreau does not ruminate on the idea of a split being for very long, he resurrects the image of a subconscious duality in the chapter “The Pond in Winter.” During the cold months, Thoreau attempts to find the bottom of the pond and record its depth, since many legends spread the idea that Walden Pond, in fact, had no lakebed (Thoreau 285). Upon spending so much time surrounded by ice, he would occasionally notice an interesting manifestation of light; “sometimes, also, when the ice was covered with shallow puddles, I saw a double shadow of myself, one standing on the head of the other, one on the ice, the other on the trees or hillside” (Thoreau 293). What Thoreau seems to be noticing is the physical phenomenon of refracted light as the sun illuminates his backside, but the image that he creates reverberates in a much less tangible or scientific manner. This image subtly reiterates the dualities that can—and do—exist within a single individual. For Thoreau, one of his shadows remains higher than the other, and thus, this “double shadow” exemplifies the internally elevated and the internally base—the distanced observer and the grounded participant.

The wild and the imaginative, the vice and the virtue, the “Indra” and the “drift-wood”—in *Walden*, Thoreau defends the existence of an intrinsic duality within an individual’s imagination (Thoreau 135). We are not just one self, but two—or perhaps

multiple selves; we have not just one working mind, but many. Scholar Ruth Lane recognizes this motif throughout Thoreau's work as well, noting that, to Thoreau, there is a "multiplicity of an individual's psychological components" and moreover, that an individual contains "multiple dimensions of mind and body" (Lane 287, 296). Thus, with the presence of this "doubleness" or "multiplicity," the concepts of solitude, the individual, and isolation become less clear. To Thoreau, physical isolation can be achieved effortlessly, but, because of the imagination's multifaceted nature, spiritual isolation tends to be much more difficult.

This duality certainly complicates the notion of the individual soul, but it also complicates what it means to be part of a "community" or a "society." A community implies the presence of more than one physical being, but Thoreau's argument can be extrapolated to show how within a single physical being exists a spiritual, subconscious *society*. When he discusses solitude, society, and proximity, he writes:

If we would enjoy the most intimate society with that in each of us which is without, or above, being spoken to, we must not only be apart, but commonly so far apart bodily that we cannot possibly hear each other's voice in any case. (Thoreau 141)

With the phrase "so far apart bodily," Thoreau argues that the constituents of an "intimate" community do not necessarily have to exist near one another; a family or township can diverge and yet still feel spiritually united. (Thoreau 141). For instance, the philosophers of the Transcendental Club rarely spent time in the same room but spent years in the same cognitive realm. Thus, this passage seems to suggest that Thoreau defines the most "intimate society" as one with physical breadth but mental concomitance. And yet, the passage remains ambiguous, for the most intimate society could also be one of solitude. According to Thoreau, to achieve this "intimate society,"

bodies must be physically apart, and so far apart that one could not hear anyone else's voice (Thoreau 141). If a person is isolated physically and completely removed from the thoughts, voices, and opinions of others, then is she not engaging in solitude? This equivocal passage hints that for Thoreau, the most "intimate society" is one comprised of a single individual.

Furthermore, Thoreau suggests that the presence of these subconscious dyads allows an individual to lead an ethical life. If one can stand "remote" from herself and remove some subjectivity and bias, she then has the means to scrutinize and evaluate her behavior. That is, Thoreau believes that even when an individual is overcome by emotion—perhaps when yelling at a friend or arguing uncontrollably—she still can judge herself from a higher plane. By doing so, she can affect a moral code upon herself; she can distinguish right from wrong, understand her mistakes, and seek to improve her manner of living. Thoreau notes the presence of his own observational spirit, his elevated "Indra" consciousness:

However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you. (Thoreau 135)

He regards that observational presence as "no more I than it is you" to expose its objectivity—this part of him becomes so removed from his own knowledge and internal character that anyone could be providing criticism for his behavior (Thoreau 135). When looking down on his actions, no essence of subjectivity remains.

Thoreau acknowledges the benefits of having this distanced moral presence, as it prompts personal renovation and growth. Yet, if harnessed improperly, the remote consciousness also can prompt personal degradation; Thoreau notes that "by a

conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent” (Thoreau 134). Though Thoreau’s tone in this passage does not contain a particularly negative air, the reader can infer the problems that might arise from detaching oneself from one’s “actions and their consequences”—this aloofness may allow indifference, callousness, and the status quo to prevail (Thoreau 134). If an individual attempts to separate himself too much or too often, he may tend to excuse poor behavior.

This shift in blame—this detachment and aloofness—certainly occurs within all forms of communities. Scholar Robert Richardson describes it by introducing the notion of “social determinism”:

[Thoreau’s] clever barbs and funny remarks are aimed not against society itself but against what may be called “social determinism.” The danger in setting society at a higher value than the individual, the trouble with encouraging people to identify themselves primarily with some group, was that it then became easy to transfer the blame for one’s own shortcomings to that of the group. If one looked to society for one’s identity and one’s satisfactions, then surely society should be held accountable for one’s dissatisfactions, lack of identity, alienation. (Richardson 34)

Richardson notes how when one identifies and engages in some form of a community—a political party, a church, an educational system, or a family—the individual tends to place blame upon the group, rather than acknowledging his own faults. Thus, the individual constituents of a community may diminish their responsibility to the group instead of working to improve the state of the family through betterment of the individual. A person in a group tends to remain “aloof from [the group’s] actions and their consequences,” which in turn hinders the community’s ability to thrive (Thoreau 134). Richardson asserts that this sort subconscious shift in

blame permeates societies, and indeed, it can be seen in Brook Farm—and most likely in all utopian societies, to some extent or another.

While Thoreau never refers to it as “social determinism,” his findings resemble Richardson’s: individuals tend to blame external factors before recognizing and attempting to improve their own flaws. Thoreau states that “most think that they are above being supported by the town; but it oftener happens that they are not above supporting themselves by dishonest means, which should be more disreputable” (Thoreau 328). That is, one may reject the help of community and instead replace it with the assistance of internal dishonesty. To Thoreau, this sort of deception degrades the worth of the individual, for “shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous” (Thoreau 95). He condemns the ways in which people tend to engage in self-deception when they instead should be working to become more grounded in self-awareness and personal honesty.

Lane asserts that this sort of self-deception is detrimental to the Thoreauvian concept of individual self-governance. It is worth noting that self-governance and *individual* self-governance remain distinct: a community such as Brook Farm or Fruitlands can be “self-governed” inasmuch as residents establish their own codes of conduct and manners of internal organization, but only a solitary person can engage in *individual* self-governance. Lane believes Thoreau’s definition of individual self-governance means that “an individual has higher responsibilities that take precedence over assistance to or care for others. Help to one’s neighbor consists primarily in the leading of one’s own life well” (Lane 286). While on the surface this definition may seem a little self-centered, Thoreau firmly believes that the individual person has more

significance and remains more earnestly political than the state itself. He regards personal autonomy as intensely integral to a greater social democracy (Lane 287). The primary asset of a sovereign individual, then, is his or her freedom to take pleasure in everyday life—to not be a slave to labor or a prisoner of economy, but rather, an enlightened and self-aware being (Lane 293). To Thoreau, this facet of the individual has resounding significance.

But for one to achieve such freedom, one must be mature, attentive, and courageous. According to Lane,

If all the different components of the self are not aware of one another, response will be inadequate, for what is hidden cannot be well assembled, or well governed. Courage is therefore a major component of individual self-governance for Thoreau. (Lane 293)

Lane acutely recognizes how Thoreau warns against behaviors such as self-deception, which become harmful for an individual's honest development and his prospects for authentic and meaningful self-governance (Thoreau 98). Thus, Thoreau reiterates the valor associated with deeply and genuinely knowing *one's self*. Without acknowledging one's deep flaws, severely engrained prejudices, inherent contradictions, and conditioned habits, one cannot develop into a liberated, autonomous individual.

To make the notion of the sovereign individual more tangible for his reader, Thoreau relies on the presence of a symbol: his cabin. In March of 1845, Thoreau borrowed an axe, purchased an old shanty and tore it apart for its boards and nails, cut down a few tall white pines for framing material, and began constructing a ten-by-fifteen-foot one-room cabin on Emerson's lakeside property (Thoreau 49, Shi 145). Made out of the timber, stones, and sand he claimed by squatter's rights and boards and

shingles that he purchased, the cabin contained all of the essentials—a closet, two windows, a front door, a cellar, and a fireplace and chimney. By mid-April, Thoreau raised the frame of the house, and thus, rather quickly and frugally did Thoreau make a dwelling in which he could live simply and comfortably but not luxuriously (Robertson 148-151, Thoreau 42). This dusty shack on the pond's shore provided Thoreau with a meager shelter, but it also serves as a metaphor for the complex entity of the self and the path toward personal enlightenment and sovereign individuality. For instance, Thoreau physically must construct a suitable house from jumbled, used fragments before he can take up residency. Thus, metaphysically, he must also engage in a complete reconstruction—a reiteration—of the self, taking all of his internally muddled pieces and mounting them together to create something useful. Thoreau's reader can extrapolate that the haphazard boards and broken shingles signify Thoreau's idiosyncrasies and flaws—they are the random and weathered pieces of a half-lived cabin, a half-lived life. To rebuild the physical cabin, he must confront these materials and learn to make the most of them, and thus, the construction of the cabin represents Thoreau's internal confrontation of his weaknesses and his attempt at personal renovation. Before he can even begin trying to live a more productive and enlightened life—before he can become a sovereign individual—he must embark on a sort of journey of personal rebuilding.

Yet Thoreau's journey of personal rebuilding does not cease once the cabin is constructed. Thoreau does not reach "sovereign individuality" simply by completing a cabin or simply through introspection. To the contrary, throughout *Walden*, the shelter demands care and upkeep, construction and maintenance, and it acquires new flaws

that require fixing. Moles inhabit the cellar, the wood-pile near the window waits to be chopped, plaster needs to be applied and reapplied, and the installation of a chimney demands Thoreau's attention and keeps his days occupied (Thoreau 240-253). Thoreau, as the sole inhabitant and caretaker of the house, thus becomes responsible for repairing each minor imperfection. The hindrances that emerge signify the difficulty of attaining sovereign individuality: no matter how hard one works at maintaining the harmony between higher and lower laws, new internal demands will arise—plaster will need reapplication and wood will need chopping. Thus, Thoreau implies that one must always be under construction of an improved self. A cabin's hearth must be stoked and tended to for warmth and survival, and similarly, personal and moral reform must be continuously fueled.

It is worth noting, however, that without the help and generosity of others, Thoreau's cabin—and thus, Thoreau himself—would not have been able to be improved. To build his shelter, Thoreau had to borrow the axe of an acquaintance, as well as purchase the remnants of James Collins' old shanty for useable boards (Thoreau 40-43). Thoreau recognizes this dependency, acknowledging that “it is difficult to begin without borrowing, but perhaps it is the most generous course thus to permit your fellow-men to have an interest in your enterprise” (Thoreau 40-41). By recognizing the integral role that his peers played in the construction of his house, he implicitly recognizes the integral role his peers played in the reconstruction of his self. While the sovereign individual may depend upon the development his own soul, it is not without external influences and assistance. And despite his vibrant respect and reverence for the individual, he also realizes that the world in which he lives is a social

one; Thoreau understands that a man's character changes and grows with regard to how others impact him, for he could not have built his shelter without the help of benefactors. Moreover, Thoreau asserts that borrowing can lead to fortified relationships inasmuch as the people from whom one borrows often become intrigued by and invest in one's physical or spiritual projects (Thoreau 41). All disguised as a discussion of his cabin, Thoreau briefly and subtly debunks the notion that the self exists in a vacuum.

Thus, with the construction of his cabin, Thoreau acknowledges that he exists in an inherently social civilization, and his deep and profound emphasis on the individual does not work to reject society altogether (Thoreau 46). Despite many critics' readings of *Walden*, Thoreau is nothing of a misanthrope and is hardly a hermit (Anderson 19-22). In fact, Thoreau highly regards and admires the race of mankind, and he places immense faith in his peers. He makes this apparent by the way in which he praises those who helped him raise his cabin's frame, stating that "They are destined, I trust, to assist at the raising of loftier structures one day" (Thoreau 45). Though the "loftier structures" to which he refers remains vague, presumably, Thoreau implies that these neighborly men have the capacity for internal growth and that their presence can assist the development of society. Moreover, Thoreau reveres humanity's capacity for moral progress, stating "I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor" (Thoreau 90). Thoreau places deep trust in every man's potential for personal reformation, and he believes that individual improvements prompt societal improvement.

Indeed, he acknowledges society's potential ability to improve, but because he cannot account for anyone but himself, he chooses to emphasize personal development (Thoreau 3). Rather than denouncing all things communal, Thoreau and his time spent at Walden work to reveal the ways in which a part can become a whole—one single unit of society, if properly nourished, can transform into a complete working system. Thoreau's experiment in living is an attempt to reconcile the conflicting aspects of the self, to remain honest to one's character, and to gain internal sovereignty—and all of these attempts lead to the establishment of a metaphysical “commune of one.”

Chapter III: Walden as a “Commune of One”

I might have resisted forcibly with more or less effect, might have run “amok” against society; but I preferred that society should run “amok” against me, it being the desperate party –Henry David Thoreau

To some extent or another, Thoreau’s personal ruminations on the dimensions of the self were triggered by the contrasting *public* rumination on the notion of the community. Thoreau was skeptical toward the fast-paced social and economic milieu, and moreover, he was skeptical the consequent trend to enroll in a commune or partake in movements. During his time at Walden, Thoreau challenges these trends toward the collective and further interrogates them, demanding to know what, exactly, are the constituents of a community? At the simplest level, a community is just a conglomeration of people. However, because Thoreau maintains that a single individual can have multiple dimensions, he subverts the idea that a community must be comprised of several physical bodies. Then, Thoreau recognizes that for a community or society to be self-sufficient, it must contain operational systems, such as an economy or agricultural structure. But again, Thoreau destabilizes the expectation for these structures to only exist in a social environment, for at Walden, he creates his own personal economic, agricultural, and philanthropic arrangements.

An Economy of One

One of the primary economic factors to which Thoreau implicitly responds in his experiment is the burden of occupation. For instance, Thoreau notes that at the

time, the average cost of a neighborhood house was approximately eight hundred dollars, a financial encumbrance that would take the era's common laborer anywhere from ten to fifteen years to pay off (Thoreau 31). He expresses a disdain for such materialistic indebtedness and frequently compares it to digging one's own grave or nailing one's own coffin (Thoreau 48). Thoreau finds this sort of monetary servitude so unappealing and so detrimental because the individual becomes a slave to both finances and time, and to repay the bank, the worker not only sacrifices money but many valuable years. He fittingly writes that "the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to exchange for it," and thus, ten to fifteen years—the regular price of a house—is much too high (Thoreau 31). Thoreau reveres the personal growth that comes with labor, but he also reveres the personal growth attained in leisure.

Despite Brook Farm's desire to escape the materialism and problems of competitive urban capitalism, the commune was an expensive venture, and thus, Ripley quickly found himself amid the sticky throes of monetary indebtedness. When he began the project, Ripley anticipated spending \$50,000—a huge amount for the era; later, however, he determined that \$30,000 would suffice (Swift 16). Though the school at Brook Farm was the most consistent factor contributing to the commune's capital success, Ripley quite consistently owed some semblance of money. For instance, a report released on November 1, 1843 showed a deficit of nearly \$2,000, not including \$12,000 worth of mortgage debts, and, because of the continuous construction of new buildings and facilities, "the insurance and interest on stock and mortgages were furthermore ever present problems" (Swift 24). Even with decreases in spending and increases in profit, Brook Farm's successes and failures were still defined

by money, and eventually, these deeply rooted financial problems contributed to the commune's demise. The Brook Farm community worked within a capitalistic system, and Ripley's attempt to account for the demands of many individuals engendered an overleveraged enterprise.

Such indebtedness, however, did not crush Ripley's spirit, for he maintained a devout faith in labor. In Elizabeth Peabody's article, "The Plan of the West Roxbury Community," which was published in *The Dial* in January 1842, she asserts that "it is not more true that 'money is the root of all evil' than that *labor is the germ of all good,*" and Ripley certainly infused Brook Farm with a similar sentiment (Sams 66). However, the commune's emphasis on labor contributed to another form of indebtedness; those heavily involved with Brook Farm, particularly toward the beginning of its reign, sacrificed much of their time and effort, overdrawn by the cause. To plan and establish Brook Farm as a working business, Ripley and the sixteen founding members spent six months just setting up the area—building the farm, grooming the land, acquiring the necessary materials; over the first two years, not much was accomplished other than tilling the soil (Swift 16, 39). Moreover, since Thoreau notes that an 800-dollar house costs ten to fifteen years of labor, then undoubtedly, the 30,000-dollar venture demands many more years. Thus, even though Brook Farm was an attempted idyll away from the burdens of capitalistic labor, the success of the experiment relied on a stable income, and because it relied on a stable income, it still worked within the prevailing market system.

In *Walden*, Thoreau does not condemn this system of debt without offering an alternative. Because of the extreme cost of formal housing units and the tax which it

places upon one's soul, he promotes man's creation of his own shelter (Thoreau 31).

Thoreau reiterates that the worker who spends a decade chopping away at debt is in no way a sovereign individual, but counters that by asserting that the worker who builds his own house very well could become one. He states,

There is some of the same fitness in a man's building his own house as there is in a bird building its own nest. Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged? (Thoreau 46)

The key phrase in this passage is "poetic faculty" (Thoreau 46). Because one's poetic faculty can be considered one's "imagination" or "higher law," Thoreau maintains that the building of one's house—and the self-sufficiency that goes along with it—can engender enlightened thought (Thoreau 210). Moreover, he compares building a house to building a nest, and thus he implies that it is natural for humans—as wild creatures—to create our own dwelling. Why should we suppress our natural tendencies by hiring a builder? Are we not all builders ourselves?

Swiftly and slyly, Thoreau transforms his discussion about self-sufficiency into a discussion about the division of labor. Thoreau rather enjoyed his time as the carpenter and architect of his house, and so he questions modern civilization's attempt to restrain the varied talents and interests that exist within an individual to a single occupation. He writes,

Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter?... Where is this division of labor to end? And what object does it finally serve? No doubt another *may* also think for me; but it is not therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself. (Thoreau 46)

To express his disdain for the strict division of labor and to show the seriousness of the matter, he uses a sort of grave hyperbole: he expands the definition of "labor" to

include the ordinary act of thinking. One may call to a plumber to fix a sewage problem; one may call to a banker to apply for a loan; one may call to a chef for a gourmet meal—and these workers receive their sustained income from their occupational specialties that are immersed within system of stratified labor. Moreover, because bankers and plumbers and chefs receive specified career training and collect distinctive skill sets, the average person cannot perform such occupational duties with dexterity. Thus, the division of labor implicitly excludes the common man from learning a multitude of tasks, understanding different perspectives, and experiencing diverse manners of livelihood. If thinking were to become a specialized career path, then inevitably the vast majority of people would not be “professional thinkers,” and they would be *excluded* from the assets that come with being a “professional thinker.” In typical Thoreauvian fashion, he discusses a serious topic with an air of humor, but also with a deep skepticism toward the predominant socioeconomic systems.

Thoreau, however, does not rely simply on literary devices such as hyperbole to criticize stratified labor divisions. His entire manner of living at Walden exemplifies the complete obverse of a single-career occupation; his lifestyle inherently combats systemic professional separation. When at the cabin, Thoreau relied on himself to grow or purchase and subsequently cook his own food, to chop his own firewood, to build his own furniture, to clean his own house, to entertain his own body, and to school his own mind. He becomes his “commune’s” carpenter, architect, teacher, housekeeper, chef, farmer, woodcutter, naturalist, and writer. Moreover, because he no longer owes a rent or a mortgage payment to anyone but still inhabits a dwelling, he becomes the landlord as well as the tenant, the controller and the controlled. Indeed, in his lifestyle

at Walden, Thoreau questions the procedures of Smithian economics, and Thoreau proves that an individual has the capacity to balance multiple tasks, interests, and occupations.

In contrast to Thoreau, the Brook Farm economy did divide its labor, tasking its members with particular duties. The commune, however, allowed its members to choose their type of work, and in doing such, Ripley hoped that this individual freedom of occupation would lead to a melodious combination of strengths. That is, Ripley hypothesized that attendees would choose tasks that they were passionate about or tasks they were already trained in—a teacher would decide to work in the schoolhouse, a farmer in the field, and a homemaker in the living space—and this would lead to a naturally organized community. Ripley viewed all labors as sacred, and in an attempt at creating an egalitarian community, the farm paid all laborers the same amount (Sams 64). Even though Ripley adhered to the division of labor, the farm’s mission was to promote the cooperation of diverse individuals—Ripley wanted the philosopher to work alongside the farmer, the farmer to work alongside the housemaid, and the housemaid to work alongside the artist.

However, the structure of Brook Farm and its dedication to stratified labor caused inequities and displeasure. For instance, certain social constructs, such as gender norms, infused the farm: it felt normal to have the females work in the kitchen, the house, or the schoolroom, tending to stereotypically “feminine” and “maternal” work, while the males were more often the physical or intellectual laborers (Gura, *American Transcendentalism* 159). Additionally, even if the occupational divisions were treated “equally,” general displeasure appeared simply because labor was too

strongly emphasized. For instance, Hawthorne wrote to his fiancé, Sophia Peabody, that

In a little more than a fortnight, thy husband will be free from his bondage—free to think of his Dove—free to enjoy Nature—free to think and feel!...Oh belovedest, labor is the curse of this world, and nobody can meddle with it, without becoming proportionably brutified. (Sams 30)

Thus, Brook Farm's collective nature demanded long hours of labor from each individual—during the warmer seasons, the participants often worked ten hours each day, and they would work eight in the winter (Swift 41). Averaging sixty hours each week, the work grew tedious and overbearing and led to an exhaustive environment.

Even though Thoreau took on a multiplicity of jobs, he, unlike the Brook Farmers, found himself with ample time for leisure. In *Walden*, he hypothesizes that working six weeks out of the year's fifty-two should allow a man to live freely and comfortably enough (Thoreau 69). While Thoreau acknowledges that some individuals seem to love labor for its own sake, he blames the trade industries for demanding excessive labor; humorously, he writes "it is not necessary that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow, unless he sweats easier than I do" (Thoreau 70-71). Thus, Thoreau attempts to create his own *economic system* in which he serves a number of working roles, and yet, to maintain a contented life, he finds that he does not need to spend each hour of each day slaving over tasks and duties.

Furthermore, Thoreau's opinions on labor and leisure connect to his ideologies of freedom and spiritual enlightenment. He writes that,

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that. Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; his labor would be

depreciated in the market. He has not time to be anything but a machine.
(Thoreau 6)

In a few sentences, Thoreau critiques the nature of capitalism and its tendency to transform men into machines, while also expressing his belief that a life of constant labor *excludes* the possibility for an elevated existence. Humans need time to reflect and focus on personal growth in order to become moral beings, and so Thoreau regards a time-demanding, labor-centric economy (as was somewhat embodied at Brook Farm) as disadvantageous. He reiterates his position by stating that the “labor of the hands, even when pursued to the verge of drudgery, is perhaps never the worst form of idleness” (Thoreau 157). The labor of the hands—of factories, of machines, or even of demanding agriculture—may have its merits, but he still considers it a form of idleness when it is *only* a labor of the hands. Thoreau stresses untapped potential in each individual’s intellect; in doing such, he rejects the era’s and subtly promotes his own personal economy.

Thoreau even uses the cabin as a lens through which he analyzes and critiques the era’s oppressive system. Thoreau gives the reader a copy of the cabin’s invoice, reporting the cost of the boards, the nails, the windows, the screws—all of which come to a total just above twenty-eight dollars (Thoreau 49). Francis suggests that this \$28.12 signifies the amount that Thoreau invested to liberate himself from the “miserable cycle” of economics—the vicious progression of Smithian supply-and-demand capitalism that engendered many of the era’s inequities (Francis 228). That is, Thoreau no longer owes rent nor mortgage payments to anyone; he does not have a landlord or overseer to whom he must report; moreover, he liberates himself from his previous dependency on his family (Richardson 152). After purchasing the materials

and constructing his own house for a relatively minimal cost of resources and time, Thoreau becomes the landlord of himself—both literally and figuratively. By building his own home so cheaply and so rapidly, Thoreau subtly subverts the era’s excessive demands for laborers and solidifies himself as the sole economic actor.

To many analyzing Thoreau at a surface level, he seems like an anarchistic hermit living in the woods to escape the parameters of conventional economy and society, and he rather overtly dismisses the free-market system and its undesirable consequences, such as time-intensive labor, indulgence and materialism, and lack of freedom and leisure. Thoreau and Adam Smith’s ideologies, however, actually share some noteworthy similarities. At their origins, both economic arrangements emphasize the development of personal liberation. Birch and Metting demonstrate these similarities:

Although Thoreau rejected Adam Smith’s theory of value, the division of labor, and his definition of wealth, the *Wealth of Nations* and *Walden* embody remarkably similar themes: both emphasize the link between individual freedom and growth (and the associated distrust of public regulation) within their respective economies. (Birch and Metting 594)

This statement subverts the idea that Thoreau’s time at Walden represents the obverse of free-market capitalism. Though Smith’s and Thoreau’s ideologies manifest in dissimilar practices, Birch and Metting assert that they actually stem from the same root: a root that promotes an individual’s “pursuit of private self-interest” (Birch and Metting 594-5). They both believed that a dedication to self-involvement actually benefits society and that it adds to rather than detracts from the success of a group. Thus, with his experiment at Walden, Thoreau does not intend to “uproot” prevailing economics, but rather, he attempts to unearth the commonalities in order to

“synthesize, modify, and develop” (Birch and Metting 594). Though Thoreau works in a sort of obverse to classical economics, deemphasizing the value of one’s labor and reemphasizes the value of one’s leisure, he also believes, like Smith, that the freedom and self-engagement of the individual creates a more meaningful society.

Thus, during his time at Walden, Thoreau works against the tendencies of a competitive capitalistic market and instead attempts to engage himself in a self-sustaining economy of one. Thoreau becomes a master reductionist, needing only his mind and body to perform the necessary tasks of existence. Of this, Francis writes,

If the individual is the fundamental unit of the human world, and therefore Thoreau can be seen to replace that world; if the hut is the fundamental unit of the community, and therefore can be seen to replace that community; then this invoice is the fundamental unit of economics, and can be seen (in conjunction with the details Thoreau gives of his earnings from crops and surveying) to replace the whole complex tissue of commerce that has created and sustained civilization itself. (Francis 227)

Francis notes how, to create self-sufficiency, Thoreau reduces the unit of civilization: he replaces the world, because he is the only one in his; he replaces the community, because internally, he *is* a community; and Thoreau replaces the economy by creating his own means of living effectively.

A Philanthropy of One

Thoreau ends his discussion of economy by delving into the concept of philanthropy. To place philanthropy in a humorous and relatable context for the reader, he tells an appropriate anecdote. During the winter months, he pitied the raggedly dressed Irish ice cutters who worked out on the pond, and he mentions that, because of the freezing weather, he felt inclined to endow them with some act of charity (Thoreau

75). Subsequently, one of the ice cutters slipped into the pond and came into Thoreau's cabin to warm himself, whereupon he removed his wet, "dirty," and "ragged," clothes only to reveal three pairs of pants and two pairs of stockings (Thoreau 75). While noticing the ice cutter's ample layers, Thoreau realizes that he had been shivering in his neat and clean garments, even within the warmth of his own home (Thoreau 75).

Despite the unkempt appearance of his outfit, Thoreau realizes that the ice cutter needed no charity:

[The ice cutter] could afford to refuse the *extra* garments which I offered him, he had so many *intra* ones...Then I began to pity myself, and I saw that it would be a greater charity to bestow on me a flannel shirt than a whole sloop shop on him. (Thoreau 75)

Thoreau uses the term *extra* to emblemize the external nature of philanthropy; donating garments, food, or money only attends to a surface-level problem in that someone who may have been cold can now be warm, hungry now satisfied, poor now momentarily rich. But because external philanthropy fails to account for the state of one's soul, it can be deceptive—for instance, though the ice cutter looks externally cold, Thoreau realizes that he is internally warm. With his use of the word "*intra*," Thoreau refers to the inner layers that the ice cutter wears beneath his outward ones, but he also refers to the notion of interior warmth; Thoreau implies that the ice cutter's fire of personal integrity is thriving, and thus, he does not need the additional poking or prodding of external charity. Thoreau then becomes the one needing an additional flannel, as well as additional introspection (Thoreau 75). This anecdote exposes another common Thoreauvian reversal: he questions the nature of philanthropy and asks why philanthropy is inherently centered on the exterior; should we not be just as concerned with our philanthropic cultivation of ourselves?

Though philanthropic impulses often derive from respectable intentions, Thoreau stresses that when one engages in charitable acts, he often circumvents his own personal reform inasmuch as he allows himself to focus on the needs of another individual or group. Moreover, Thoreau maintains that this circumvention can situate a philanthropist within a vicious cycle: by suppressing the necessity for self-awareness and individual reform, a philanthropist may consequently immerse himself in an occupation or livelihood that actually *leads* to increased misery for others. While he works, he sees that the augmented depression of others appeals to his emotions, and in turn, it causes him to donate to the very cause that he helped create (Thoreau 76). For example, a factory owner may give thousands to a world hunger each year, but concurrently, he may be employing his workers at a wage that leaves them malnourished (Thoreau 76). Thoreau acknowledges that the charitable philanthropist may simultaneously exist as the perpetrator of larger iniquities.

Moreover, Thoreau makes the notable distinction between an individual *being good* and an individual *doing good*; a philanthropist (as well as a Newfoundland dog) can *do good* by saving a man from starving or freezing, but only a man can *be good* by constantly working to improve his internal condition and by effecting a moral code upon himself (Thoreau 74). Because philanthropy is viewed as a gracious, selfless act, society expects to benefit from these “do-gooders,” these Good Samaritans, these charitable benefactors; society tends to perpetrate the notion that with enough money and positive action, iniquities such as slavery and poverty can be ameliorated. However, rather than donating to a cause or giving a shivering man flannel, an individual can create more meaningful philanthropy internally.

Thoreau also identifies philanthropy as a fleeting action. An individual can easily give a lump sum of money to a cause and feel sincere in her donation, but that act of charity dissipates as soon as it is received. Thoreau consequently argues that an individual's goodness "must not be a partial and transitory act, but a constant superfluity, which costs him nothing and of which he is unconscious," and thus, he criticizes philanthropy and its tendency to be a *performance* rather than a state of being (Thoreau 77). Rather than engaging in transitory moments of self-aggrandizement, Thoreau promotes and attempts to achieve the truer form of philanthropy—one's *inherent* goodness.

Further, Thoreau discusses how the world's "spiritual fathers and mothers"—the artists, writers, scientists, and political philosophers such as Shakespeare, Newton, Bacon, and Milton—are ranked beneath a few well-known philanthropists, or "the kind uncles and aunts of the race" (Thoreau 76). Indeed, Thoreau acknowledges that Shakespeare did not spend his time donating to the needy in the typical sense, but by spending all of his efforts writing, Shakespeare produced works that best illuminate the woes and merits of the human condition; is that gift to humanity not the worthiest philanthropic cause? Thoreau regards Shakespeare's works as a more charitable endowment to mankind than any donation of money or food.

Thoreau's opinion on philanthropy concerns the enlightenment of the self much more than it concerns the eradication of widespread evils. According to scholar Philip Cafaro,

Thoreau asserts that we have not merely a right, but a duty, to pursue self-development. Philanthropic activities may be a shirking of this duty; routine acts of kindness to others may be easier to undertake than difficult projects of self-improvement. (Cafaro 30)

Cafaro's statement connects with Richardson's idea of "social determinism"; both philanthropy and communalism tend to allow for excuses and for the evasion of an individual's duty (Cafaro 30, Richardson 34). Thoreau, however, subverts such tempting evasion and shirking by confronting the self. He defies these notions inasmuch as he understands that personal philanthropy trumps charity, that external kindness does not necessitate internal goodness.

Brook Farm, as opposed to Walden, embodies a venture that is philanthropic in its nature. Prior to the founding of the farm, Ripley desired to "do good" for the world, and he was dedicated to doing so, even at the expense of his own personal development (Thoreau 76). In one of his letters to Emerson, Ripley writes that he "has a passion for being independent of the world, and of every man in it...But [he] feel[s] bound to sacrifice this private feeling, in the hope of a great social good" (Sams 7). Ripley may have preferred a life of solitude and independence, but his dedication to social improvement caused him to suppress his natural state of being. Just as a philanthropist sacrifices resources, money, or time to contribute to the welfare of others, Ripley sacrificed his own sense of self. While his intentions for the commune likely derived from a compassionate place, Ripley failed to harness the value of internal philanthropy at Brook Farm.

External philanthropy can easily and swiftly engender social hierarchy, insofar as the act of charity creates a stratified power dynamic: one person becomes the giver and the other becomes the receiver, the benefactor and the beneficiary. In the same letter sent to Emerson during the conceptual stages of Brook Farm, Ripley further demonstrates his tendency toward philanthropy, but he also reveals his feelings of

superiority toward working-class citizens. He speculates and probes Emerson about admitting men and women of lower socioeconomic status to Brook Farm, writing,

I should like to have a good washerwoman in my parish admitted into the plot. She is certainly not a Minerva or a Venus; but we might educate her two children to wisdom and varied accomplishments, who otherwise will be doomed to drudge through life. The same is true of some farmers and mechanics, whom we should like with us. (Sams 8)

In this passage, Ripley defends the idea of allowing individuals from all economic classes into the commune—a seemingly egalitarian notion—and yet, he still writes with a condescending tone toward washerwomen, farmers, mechanics, and other working-class citizens. He contrasts a washerwoman with the Roman goddesses Minerva and Venus—goddesses of poetry, medicine, and wisdom and love, beauty, and prosperity, respectively—and thus, Ripley implies that, because she works a less-than-lucrative occupation, the washerwoman inherently is of less value. He sets himself up as the philanthropist, and subsequently, as someone higher value than a washerwoman.

Furthermore, as a philanthropist, Ripley takes pride in his plans for Brook Farm, expecting the commune to educate and elevate lower-class citizens and their children, and expecting to help break the vicious cycle of poverty. But while the farm intended to “lift up” all types of labor, the commune’s academic milieu and the substantial membership cost contributed to an environment of elitism. Because Brook Farm, especially at first, attracted primarily educated, middle- and upper-class citizens, conducts of charity, pity, and superiority toward lower-class attendees infused the commune. For instance, in a letter to her family, attendee Sophia Eastman noted that “There is an aristocracy prevailing here...They all appear uncommonly interested in

my welfare. Why it is I cannot tell.” (Sams 80-82). Sophia seems to be a victim of charity, and yet, she also contributes to the hierarchy by calling other attendees “dull and backwards” (Sams 80). Furthermore, some of the elites at the commune tokenized tasks that, outside of Brook Farm, were typically performed by the lower-classes. In his letters to his wife and sister, Hawthorne speaks of the farm work—milking cows, hauling manure, planting potatoes—as a sort of quaint novelty, a sort of rustic charm, and he relishes the opportunity to forgo his elite academic chamber for the unique and unusual milking station (Sams 14, 18). Thus, even though Brook Farm derived from desires of egalitarianism, philanthropy and prejudices furthered the schism between classes.

The external philanthropy that Thoreau warned against was apparent in Brook Farm. Ripley’s perspective toward working-class citizens was one of charity—he pities them, and he aggrandizes himself into the position of a social benefactor, a well-meaning philanthropist. Indeed, Ripley became an actor in the problem that he wished to exterminate—he subtly contributed to social divides in an attempt to achieve social harmony and equality. While his intentions may have been compassionate throughout the Brook Farm experiment, they were somewhat stained with an aristocratic viewpoint. Thoreau recognizes the fruitlessness of Ripley’s philanthropy—of “doing good”; he writes that “there are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking the root” (Thoreau 75). In his “commune of one” at Walden, Thoreau attempts to strike the root.

An Agriculture of One

Upland from the cabin, Thoreau planted about two and a half acres of beans (and some corn, peas, potatoes, and turnips) in a field filled with blackberry bushes, johnswort, cinquefoil, and other weeds (Thoreau 155). Though Thoreau discusses agriculture in many places throughout the book, “The Bean Field” works as his response to the agricultural controversy and reform movements that grew during the antebellum era. The reformers of the day stressed agrarian pragmatism, harnessed the ideal of a perfectly cultivated field, and were provoked by the notion of the “model farm,” whereas Thoreau regarded agriculture as a much wilder, more natural process. Gross stresses the extent to which Thoreau detested model farms, and he argues that “the bean field was no innocent agricultural experiment, whose success would be freely tested by the practical results,” but rather was an enormous hoax, “a wonderfully malicious parody of agricultural reform literature, executed with a completely straight face” (Gross 6). Gross’s argument provides a useful launching point when analyzing Thoreau’s agrarian tendencies; taking Thoreau’s chapter as a satire helps illuminate his conceptualization of the self in agriculture. In his satirical subversion of social and cultural agricultural expectations, Thoreau also emphasizes a more natural harmony between cultivating a field and cultivating one’s self.

The evidence of satire appears in a few different places. First of all, Thoreau plants his bean field in an attempt to “earn ten or twelve dollars by some honest and agreeable method, in order to meet [his] unusual expenses” (Thoreau 54). At the time, however, the common white bush beans were a completely useless and unprofitable crop to try to cultivate, especially in Concord. For a farmer to make a living in New

England, he would plant grains such as corn and oats, he would cut wood, he would milk cows, or he would produce English hay, but he would not find substantial monetary value in cultivating beans (Gross 6). And Thoreau does not just cultivate a couple of bushels for sheer novelty—he ends up harvesting twelve bushels of beans. Gross notes how unusual this is for a Massachusetts farmer, explaining how in 1850, only four out of sixty Concord farmers produced as many as twelve bushels (Gross 6).

Another hint at satire is Thoreau's final account of his agricultural inputs and outputs; during his first year at the pond, he earned \$8.71. When comparing Thoreau to his contemporary bean farmers, Gross writes that Thoreau's work "emerges [as] a sorry record of paltry results" (Gross 8). The best bean farmers in Massachusetts could produce 35 bushels per acre and the average farmers yielded approximately 20 (Gross 8). Thoreau produced somewhere between seven or eight bushels per acre, at best. Furthermore, for such a low yield, Thoreau used an astronomical amount of seed. Most bean farmers needed around one and a half quarts of seed per bushel of beans. For each bushel Thoreau produced, he needed four quarts of seed (Gross 8).

One final implication that "The Bean Fields" chapter is satirical—and perhaps one of the reasons that Thoreau earned such a pathetic profit—is that he rejected all common farming knowledge. Though he participated in a society that was quite interested in effective and sensible farming methods, Thoreau acted contrarily to popular advice: he did not manure or add any fertilizers his crops; he worked and hoed early in the morning when the dew was still on the leaves; he planted crops in thin, sandy soil; he established his rows of plants too far apart; he placed seeds in the ground when others were hoeing weeds; and he let the hungry woodchucks freely munch on

his beans (Gross 7, Thoreau 157). In general, his farming tactics were calculatedly unwise and imprudent.

All of these impracticalities become a deliberate mocking of agricultural science and pragmatism, of popular farming pamphlets and manuals, of growing farm technologies. By allowing weeds to permeate and woodchucks to destroy his crop, Thoreau subverts the notion of the “perfectly cultivated acre” and the clean-cut farms of Concord (Gross 5). “The Bean Field” ridicules the “sober literature of agricultural improvement, with its spiritually deadening obsession with crop rotations, manures, turnips, and tools,” and rather than improving the agricultural viability of a piece of land, Thoreau actually degrades it (Gross 8). He uses his literary acuity to scoff at manure and sneer at crop rotations, and Thoreau creates his own system of “agricultural reform” by executing the exact opposite of what was in fashion.

While this chapter is satirical and a clever parody of the pervasive agrarian culture, it also helps illuminate Thoreau’s ideologies about the natural world. Through his rejection the era’s materialistic and market-based agricultural trends, he alternatively promotes the cultivating hand of nature (Thoreau 158). For instance, one of the reasons that he allows the woodchucks and weeds to persist is because he feels unjustified in their removal; he asks “what right had I to oust johnswort and the rest, and break up their ancient herb garden?” (Thoreau 154). That is, Thoreau questions his own power as a farmer—as a manipulator of nature—and reveres the landscape that has already been cultivated in his midst.

Thus, Thoreau undermines the agrarian reform movement and instead promotes a more harmonious cooperation between man and nature. Gross elaborates on this idea, writing,

As a symbolic project of self-culture, the bean field inverted agricultural reform for Thoreau's radical, individualistic purposes. Henry Colman urged farmers to reduce their acreage, improve their methods, participate in markets, all for the sake of preserving a traditional, deferential way of life. Thoreau agreed on the need to cut back, but as a means of freeing farmers from the market and thereby enabling them to approach Nature as a source of spiritual growth. (Gross 9)

Therefore, because Thoreau established his own "economy of one," he is not completely reliant on the land for a steady income, and thus, unlike most farmers, he can cultivate his beans in such an odd and impractical manner. It is this odd and impractical farming method that allows for the presence of nature; his bean field, with its blackberry bushes and nibbled leaves, is a "half-cultivated field," serving as an intermediary between husbandry and the surrounding environment, between manmade structure and wilderness (Thoreau 138).

Gross' respected analysis clearly lays out how Thoreau was responding to the agricultural tendencies of the era. However, even though he drops terms such as "self-culture" and "spiritual," Gross' essay fails to develop fully how Thoreau's chapter about the bean field—his satire of current agricultural trends—also connects back to the notion of the individual (Gross 9). While Thoreau clearly mocks the prevalent farming culture, the chapter is also a deeply personal rumination on the self. Thoreau does not desire reformation of the land, per se—not an improvement in tactics or in machinery—but a reformation in personal and transcendental development, a change in perspective, and a reiteration of what "agricultural reform" actually is. The bean field, for Thoreau, becomes an externalization of his soul, a place of meditation, of

introspection, and thus, his agricultural endeavor transforms into one of spiritual, personal reform.

Moreover, Thoreau's concept of the "half-cultivated field" parallels Thoreau's understanding of the self, inasmuch as man is half-cultivated; he is both instinctual and intellectual, and he must balance these factors. Thoreau is wary of too much refinement, both in agriculture and in personal development, and his attempt at growing beans subtly shows that. A good farmer should allow a few wild woodchucks to wander in his intellectually refined fields (for what else shall he eat when he gets an urge for meat?).

How, then, does Thoreau's bean field help to establish his time at Walden as a "commune of one," as a venture in personal reform? What Thoreau's agricultural project does is to give new meaning to the term "sustenance"; the bean fields provide physical sustenance, since Thoreau eats some of the beans that he produces and sells the rest to purchase other varieties of food. Growing the beans provides him with the resources to subsist on his own, ensuring a self-sustaining cycle of physical nourishment. However, Thoreau's beans do not solely represent physical sustenance, but mental nourishment as well. When hoeing the field, Thoreau becomes more "intimate" with his beans, and subsequently, more intimate with himself (Thoreau 157). He shifts the discussion to one centered on a metaphysical nutrition:

I will not plant beans and corn with so much industry another summer, but such seeds, if the seed is not lost, as sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the like, and see if they will not grow in this soil, even with less toil and manurance, and sustain me. (Thoreau 163-164)

Thus, he challenges the cycle of agriculture and emphasizes internal reform; he places the concept of cultivation onto a higher abstract plane of self-improvement.

Thoreau likely would have looked upon the heavily labored fields at Brook Farm with skepticism, unconvinced of that working the field engendered any heightened spirituality, any mental sustenance. Even though Brook Farm's mission statement encouraged the merging of physical labor and intellectual refinement, their agricultural design was not unique or particularly conducive to any sort of spiritual refinement. Contrarily, most of their farming successes and failures were influenced by the most infamous soul-degrader—money. For instance, the Brook Farmers usually did not fertilize or manure the farm, not because they believed, like Thoreau, that Gaea was the most natural cultivator, but rather because they could not afford such products. Unfortunately, the piece of property on which they lived and worked used to be a dairy farm, and so the soil ended up being less than ideal for fruit and vegetable production. Thus, the tillage of the farm was tedious and expensive, and the Brook Farmers consistently ran into problems with it. Furthermore, they did produce a large output of hay, but it was not high quality, and so even though hay was a desirable crop, it did not bring in much money (Swift 41). Finally, many of the laborers found the days exhausting and the work tedious, which hindered the potential for any mental enlightenment. Thus, the agricultural system at Brook Farm turned into one with monetary objectives and increasing futility.

Thoreau would have likely viewed the Brook Farmers' most successful collaboration of agriculture and spirituality as their semi-intentional promotion of a minimalistic, vegetarian diet. As outlined previously, Thoreau and many other New Englanders regarded a vegetarian diet as a pure one, and flesh consumption was frequently seen as vile and dirty. Because the Brook Farmers produced fruit,

vegetables, and milk on the land, they often consumed the majority of what was produced. That is, they established a sort of self-sustaining, antiquated “Farm-To-Table” system, and their diets then tended to lack meat (Swift 41). In his memoir about his time spent at Brook Farm, John van der Sears confirms that most of the commune’s members identified themselves as vegetarian, many of them seeming to have a “Hebraic aversion to pork” (Sears 116). These vegetarians sat at the Graham table, which was named after the renowned dietary reformer, Sylvester Graham, and they were generally respected by their omnivorous counterparts (Swift 49). Though many vegetarians attended Brook Farm, the promotion of a vegetarian diet, however, may not have been completely intentional. Sometimes fresh meat was too expensive and just “not to be had”; their diet was rather bland and sparse, and sometimes they simply subsisted on milk and brown bread (Swift 47, Sears 51, 58). Yet, the reason why the Brook Farmers did not eat much meat may not matter, inasmuch as a vegetarian diet was seen as beneficial and nutritious for an individual’s soul.

Thus, Thoreau’s “The Bean Field” works not only as a reaction to New England’s agricultural conversation, but as a reiteration and reminder to his reader that his journey at Walden was one of self-reform. He fosters the rows of tangible beans, but he simultaneously fosters innumerable intangible relationships within himself. Moreover, because he relies on physical, mental, and spiritual sustenance, he further embodies a “commune of one,” or an “agriculture of one,” and he proves capable of a perpetual dynamic independence. When contrasted with a literal “commune of many,” Brook Farm appears underdeveloped, unsuccessful, and too busy attempting to remain afloat financially; they are obstructed by external factors from truly dedicating

themselves to impassioned, enlightened agriculture. Thoreau, the master reductionist that he is, minimizes such external factors in order to create a vibrant community within.

Conclusion

Reform is purification, forming anew, not forming again. – George William Curtis

Despite its use by serious scholars, the phrase “commune of one” is so oxymoronic that it is difficult to take seriously; “commune” implies plurality, whereas “one” implies singularity. But is there a way—can there be a way—for plurality and singularity to coexist? Whether he intended it or not, Thoreau’s experiment at Walden proves, that, indeed, they can. His time at Walden seems like the antithesis of a community, and yet, Thoreau flips the paradigm and turns the part into the whole, the atom into the molecule, the fraction into the integer. Because the individual inherently has multiple, reconcilable selves that work to create single coherent self, Thoreau regards the most “intimate society” as that of a single soul, and he establishes the metaphysical “commune of one” (Thoreau 141). However, does Thoreau’s time at Walden physically and literally prove that he has the capacity to embody communal systems? Indeed, he mimics, redefines, and restructures the organization of a community, and, through tangible actions, he blurs the distinctions between the communal and the individual.

What intrigues me about Walden, particularly in comparison to Brook Farm, is that Thoreau—both his experiment in living and the writing that he produced there—will not disappear from the public discourse anytime soon. Brook Farm never quite ensnared the attention of multiple generations, but Thoreau persists in classrooms and in lecture halls everywhere. What is it, precisely, that distinguishes Thoreau’s living

project from Ripley's, or any other alternative lifestyle? While the answers to that question could yield a subsequent thesis, personally, I believe it to be Thoreau's confrontation with solitude.

Not only was Thoreau, like the Brook Farmers, courageous enough to act upon his ideals, but he challenged—he subverted—societal expectations for social reform by venturing to the woods alone. As citizens flocked to communes in unprecedented numbers and as they began identifying as participants in political movements, Henry believed that building himself a humble cabin was a more effective method of social reform. In *Walden*, he uproots, sardonically lampoons, and questions the growing trends, and in doing so, he adopted a deeply intimate spirit of self-reformation. Because of this, Thoreau may have been the truest “Brook Farmer”; he adhered to his personal convictions, he attempted to improve society, and furthermore, his quiet cabin in the woods, his “commune of one,” established him as quite possibly most radical of all of the Transcendentalists.

While this project remains grounded in historical and literary research from 175 years ago, its implications can reverberate into the present. By analyzing an era in history that was defined by its changing movements and its radical responses to industrialism and capitalism, the present strategies for social reform can be elucidated and better understood. Just as the Transcendentalists' convictions and goals changed and grew into sub-movements, modern-day social change movements are malleable and unconfined. Amidst constantly changing communal and societal movements, we

need individuals dedicated to internal self-awareness, self-respect, and moral and spiritual improvements.

As persuasive as Thoreau may seem, reading his words should not convince citizens to mimic his lifestyle—it should not demand that we all purchase a cabin in the woods and embark on an expedition of personal reform. Rather, Thoreau recognizes that the drive for self-improvement must arise internally and that it proceeds in idiosyncratic ways. He tells the reader such on the very first page, writing

I would not have any one adopt *my* mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own* way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead. (Thoreau 71)

With every individual comes another mode of living—a unique way of striving for sovereign individuality. And thus, by attempting our own exploration of the self, and the inequities of the world may slowly disappear, and we can come to terms with our inherently flawed but inherently capable selves.

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