

Thoreau & Patriotism

In Walden, Henry David Thoreau penned some of our most memorable words against patriotism, including these from the concluding chapter:

Every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but a petty state, a hummock left by the ice. Yet some can be patriotic who have no self-respect, and sacrifice the greater to the less. They love the soil which makes their graves, but have no sympathy with the spirit which may still animate their clay. Patriotism is a maggot in their heads. (321)

For Thoreau the individual self is greater than any state, and should never be sacrificed to it. Self-development and self-exploration should be our goals. Walden is the record of such self-exploration, deliberately cultivated far from the distractions of politics and the enervation of daily social contact.

The passage seems to set patriotism—a sentiment of love for one's country—in opposition to these goals. Patriotism, Thoreau tells us, eats away at our brains, like a maggot, slowly but persistently. Walden has argued that we must think our way toward a better life. Patriotism destroys this ability to think.

Here is a second passage, from the chapter "The Bean-Field":

When there was a military turnout of which I was ignorant, I have sometimes had a vague sense all the day of some sort of itching and disease in the horizon, as if some eruption would break out there soon, either scarlatina or canker-rash, until at length some more favorable puff of wind, making haste over the fields and up the Wayland road, brought me information of the "trainers" [Concord's militia, training]. It seemed by the distant hum as if somebody's bees had swarmed, and that the neighbors, according to Virgil's advice, by a faint tintinnabulum upon the most sonorous of their domestic utensils, were endeavoring to call them down into the hive again . . . But sometimes it was a really noble and inspiring strain that reached these woods, and the trumpet that sings of fame, and I felt as if I could spit a Mexican with a good relish,—for why should we always stand for trifles? (160-161)

Again we find thoughtlessness and abdication of self combined with social conformity, in the image of a swarm of bees. Such a swarm is dangerous, Thoreau suggests; difficult to control. It must be placated with honey and semi-domesticated, or turned loose on outsiders. Greed and aggression may combine to foster an attack on foreigners, as in the recently completed Mexican War. Thus a militaristic patriotism paves the way for the abdication of conscience (a maggot, eating away in our heads) and the perpetration of injustice. The state hands the soldier a gun and tells him who to use it against, demanding blind obedience. The "trifles" we then no longer stand for include morality itself.

Many similarly dismissive references to a militaristic, thoughtless patriotism can be found in Thoreau's political writings¹ and in his journal.² So it might seem perverse to call Thoreau a patriot, or to try to define a Thoreauvian patriotism. Nevertheless that is what I intend to do in this concluding section, for several reasons.

Treating Thoreau as a patriot underscores the inevitability of the role of citizen for any morally serious person. Thoreau hates the triviality and cant of politics; Jane Bennett has well remarked that he "disdains" conventional politics because it "cultivates skills and habits of mind inimical to a deliberate life." We have seen that his forays into politics usually involve protesting government actions, denouncing the moral indifference of the populace, or making political gestures designed to emphasize his superiority and separation from the polity. Still, he repeatedly returns to politics and social commentary, for the simple reason that he is not separate. He is inescapably implicated in the actions of his nation, responsible (to some unspecifiable but frustratingly non-trivial degree) for righting current wrongs and safeguarding the promise of America. Recent studies by Bennett and Robert Taylor argue convincingly that Thoreau's main political contribution has been to help Americans question their fundamental goals and to aim for higher ones. As Taylor puts it, "there has been no writer with more ambition for America than Henry Thoreau, nor one more deeply concerned with the future moral character of our political community."³

Recognizing this patriotic identity is also necessary to understand Thoreau's personal and intellectual achievements. Thoreau went to the woods in order to "live deliberately" and cultivate self-reliance. Yet the path he followed was one that tied him ever closer to the land, as his own true patria.⁴ He went to pursue self-knowledge—and came to see this as inseparable from knowledge of the society that had done so much to form him. Thoreau went to the pond a transcendentalist and returned one as well. But his path to higher truths wasn't through disembodied speculation; Thoreau attempted to anchor his farthest-flung speculations in his particular experience, and experience is always personal and local. Thus the pursuit of knowledge and right living tied him ever closer to his

¹See especially "Slavery in Massachusetts," 102-106, "Life without Principle," 176, and the first ten pages of "Resistance to Civil Government."

²For example Journal 1, 164 (7/31/40) and Journal 4, 172 (11/9/51). This second entry is richly ambiguous. In it Thoreau refers dismissively to a newly dedicated monument in Acton to the heroes of the revolution: "It is the Acton flue to dissipate the vapors of patriotism in the upper air — which confined would be deleterious to animal and vegetable health." The monument was apparently of the soaring stone phallus variety. Thoreau opines that a truer monument would be "a doorstep to the townhouse." Yet does not this proposal imply a better patriotism; one which builds positively on the legacy of '76? The proposed symbol is not aggressive and abstract but passive and useful (one walks on it). It leads into the townhouse, where the descendants of those who had to fight for their independence may now govern themselves in reason and justice.

³Bennett, Thoreau's Nature, 5; Taylor, Bachelor Uncle, 13.

⁴Stanley Cavell makes the important point that for Thoreau, self-exploration can only occur in sitting and exploring our surroundings. Knowing ourselves means "placing ourselves in the world." The way to self-knowledge is neither a pure contemplation nor a disinterested scientific study of human nature, but rather the cultivation of connections to places. The very act of removing to Walden pond in order to begin a course of self-improvement suggests this. See The Senses of Walden, 53-54, 71-72.

surroundings and led to ever deeper investigations into the history of his community and country.⁵

Finally, I explore patriotism here because I believe it is a genuine, important, yet widely misunderstood virtue—one that progressives have rejected and conservatives have embraced too quickly. A special love and concern for our country and for those "near and dear" is good for us and good for them. While the dangers of patriotism are undeniable, so are its benefits, particularly in a world where people move ever more frequently and have less and less to do with the places in which they happen to find themselves. A patriotic concern can give people a sense of belonging and help combat the powerful economic forces that often fragment and damage our communities. For these reasons and others, a proper patriotism is a virtue.

Like courage, prudence, or indeed any virtue, patriotism is liable to a skewed development and to various kinds of misuse. Yet properly developed it is part of a good human life. Put another way, 'patriotism' is a necessary word, but one whose meaning we must retrieve. Recall Thoreau's words:

It would seem as if the very language of our parlors would lose all its nerve and degenerate into parlaver wholly, our lives pass at such remoteness from its symbols, and its metaphors and tropes are necessarily so far fetched. (244-245) Such has been the fate of 'patriotism,' a word coined by people who lived closer to the land than Thoreau's contemporaries, or ourselves. It has become a meaningless abstraction for many of us, in part through our mistaking abstractions for our true country. Walden suggests that we must retrieve the word by rethinking and reliving it. When we live closer to the land, strive to know it better and work to protect all its inhabitants, human and nonhuman—that is patriotism. Walden and Thoreau's whole career have much to tell us about how to achieve this.

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Let us look briefly at one leitmotif in Walden that bears on our theme of patriotism. The chapter "Where I Lived, and What I Lived for," reaches its crescendo in a famous passage singing the praises of self-development and self-knowledge: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life . . ." (90). It begins, however, piano: "At a certain season of our life we are accustomed to consider every spot as the possible site of a house" (81). The paragraph continues with Thoreau imagining himself traveling over the local countryside, "laying out" farms in various spots around Concord township. He might almost be any young man, planning to settle down.

Such settling is natural, "at a certain season." Young men and women have the strength and the opportunity to make new lives in settling. This

⁵"If your trade is with the Celestial Empire," Thoreau writes, "then some small counting house on the coast, in some Salem harbor, will be fixture enough. You will export such articles as the country affords, purely native products . . . always in native bottoms. These will be good ventures" (Walden, 20).

possibility is, or should be, exciting and encouraging (90). It necessitates choices.

Just as important as where to settle, we must decide what type of settlement to make. Before his experiment at Walden pond, Thoreau writes, he had come close to purchasing “the Hollowell place,” a remote farmstead in Concord. Nothing could have been more typical in mid-nineteenth century America than a local boy taking over a local farm and trying to “make a go of it.” We may imagine the close monetary calculations in deciding whether to buy, the attempt to drive the best possible bargain in the purchase. Then moving in; fixing up the buildings; clearing land; planting new kinds of crops, perhaps, or trying new agricultural techniques. The goal might be improved crop yields, generating more income for the farmer and comfort for him and his family. An ambitious, talented and hardworking young man—such as Henry Thoreau—might hope to make decent profits, add on to his house, buy adjacent property, and one day purchase a house in town.

Yet Thoreau is skeptical of such settlement. He likes the Hollowell farm because it is relatively unimproved. He writes:

I was in haste to buy it, before the proprietor finished getting out some rocks, cutting down the hollow apple trees, and grubbing up some young birches which had sprung up in the pasture, or, in short, had made any more of his improvements. (83)

Rather, Thoreau loves its wilder aspects and accepts the farm as it is. Far from seeking to transform it, he writes: “I knew all the while that it would yield the most abundant crop of the kind I wanted if I could only afford to let it alone.” One crop he hopes to bear off is a closer relationship to the place itself.

This is not a settlement that seeks dominion over a place, or monetary profit from it. “I love to weigh, to settle, to gravitate toward that which most strongly and rightfully attracts me,” writes Thoreau (330). Settlement here means belonging to and celebrating a place. One builds on one’s connections and memories; the farm’s greatest attraction, Thoreau says, was “the recollection I had of it from my earliest voyages up the river” (83). Settlement means knowing the history of a place. Its past owners, yes, but also its flowers, racoons, and gnarled apple trees.

Too easily, our settling in life can become the mere getting of a living or the heaping up of possessions. We settle ourselves into an unthinking routine (4). At the same time and as a corollary, we set about unsettling the landscape, as in the improvements that Thoreau wishes to forestall by buying the Hollowell place. Such an anxious attempt to transform the world betrays both a mistaken idea of our higher human task, self-transformation, and a lack of faith in the goodness of the land itself.

This opening section concludes with Thoreau approvingly quoting Cato the Elder, the famous Roman patriot:

When you think of getting a farm, turn it thus in your mind, not to buy greedily; nor spare your pains to look at it, and do not think it enough to go round it once. The oftener you go there the more it will please you, if it is good. (84)
The passage juxtaposes a “greedy buying” with a pleased looking; a hurry to make a profit with a satisfaction in the place itself. To this passage Thoreau adds: “I think I shall not buy greedily, but go round and round it as long as I live, and be buried in it first, that it may please me the more at last.” The suggestion is that buying itself is greedy, putting us in a false position toward the land. Our satisfaction will dissipate if we buy greedily: not because we will buy a poor farm, but because we will make it poor, by missing what is most valuable there.

Thoreau’s wish to be “buried in” the land brings up obvious patriotic connotations: of sacrificing one’s life for one’s country; of mixing one’s flesh with sacred native soil.⁶ Thoreau here suggests that going round one’s land “as long as one lives” is as patriotic as dying for it. The land needs both defenders and appreciators; a patriot must live for his country. What this means is elaborated at greater length in the body of Walden, as Thoreau describes his settlement at the pond.

In seeking to re-define settlement, Thoreau touches on a deeply important national theme. The story of America is the story of our settlement; the finding of new lands and the making of new lives upon them. Western expansion was a cause for patriotic celebration in the nineteenth century, and in a famous passage in “Walking” Thoreau identifies with this grand national movement:

Eastward I go only by force; but Westward I go free . . . I should not lay so much stress on this fact, if I did not believe that something like this is the prevailing tendency of my countrymen.⁷

When the westering story is told we tend to emphasize certain heroic aspects of struggle and adventure, and the freedom to ditch old lives and old places. Yet this story is, or purports to be, a story of settlement. The trip is heroic, perhaps, but eventually we reach our homestead lands on the Great Plains or the Willamette Valley. Then must come commitment; the building of communities and the strengthening of ties. Then must come love and appreciation for where we are and who we are with. Failure to realize this means perpetual motion: the sort of rootlessness and heedlessness that are as much failures as a dull, conforming settlement.

Decades before the 1890 census officially marked the closing of the American frontier, Thoreau reminded his readers of the many “unexplored regions” remaining behind in the East, waiting exploration and settlement.⁸ He

⁶Similar references to burial and to the related “burrowing” and “mining” can be found throughout Walden, for example at 98, 321, 322.

⁷Thoreau, “Walking,” 105-106. The full passage makes clear that in our settlement the character of America is at stake; whether we will journey to the wild or tame ourselves. “Perchance there will appear to the traveler something, he knows not what, of laeta and glabra, of joyous and serene, in our very faces. Else to what end does the world go on, and why was America discovered? . . . As a true patriot, I should be ashamed to think that Adam in paradise was more favorably situated on the whole than the backwoodsman in this country” (111).

⁸Thoreau, The Maine Woods, 81-83.

referred here not just to the still uncut forests of Northern Maine, but also to the woodlots and half wild fields of Concord township. These are places, waiting for patriots. True, they might not be spectacular places:

The scenery of Walden is on a humble scale, and, though very beautiful, does not approach to grandeur, nor can it much concern one who has not long frequented it or lived by its shore. (175)

But the point is that these humble places are in fact wonderful (full of wonders) and are well worth our devotion. Thoreau's patriotism is a local patriotism; his country is first and foremost the fields and forests of Concord and environs. To talk about "Massachusetts," much less "America," is to engage in abstractions, to an extent.⁹ Such talk threatens to become empty, because it is only through our relationships with particular people and places that we can meaningfully know Humanity or America. We may be patriots of a state or nation, by way of local mediation. But there is no shortcut to real settlement, for even grand places "cannot much concern" those who do not stay to explore them and look again and again.

An adventurous, inward exploration, leading to an appreciation of particulars, consists with a true patriotism. It is to be contrasted with an outward adventurousness, which leads to either trivial sightseeing or worse, foreign wars. Love, looking, conscientiousness—all bespeaking a certain thoughtfulness—frame a Thoreauvian patriotism. A thoughtless patriotism, which Thoreau always despised, threatens to rest its love in poorly understood abstractions and abdicate the form of its devotions to outside forces. It is this sort of patriotism that is most easily channeled into militaristic aggression.

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As we have seen, Thoreau hated politics. In an 1840 journal entry, he writes:

If want of patriotism be objected to us, because we hold ourselves aloof from the din of politics, I know of no better answer than that of Anaxagoras to those who in like case reproached him with indifference to his country because he had withdrawn from it, and devoted himself to the search after truth— 'On the contrary' he replied pointing to the heavens, 'I esteem it infinitely.'¹⁰

Thoreau was a young man when he wrote those words. Over time, he moved toward a more earthbound search for truth in the particularities of natural history and the nuanced exploration of American history. The search continued, but unlike Anaxagoras, it took him ever deeper "into place." And as we have seen, a concern for the land and its people meant that he could not remain completely aloof from politics.

Again, Thoreau hated the blind obedience that so many in his time and ours equate with patriotism. "I love mankind I hate the institutions of their forefathers," he wrote, in another early journal entry. But the problem is not so

⁹A point made by Robert Richardson, Jr., who tends to view Thoreau's "Americanness" as less important than I do (see Richardson, Henry Thoreau, 287-290).

¹⁰Thoreau, Journal I, 164 (7/31/40).

much the institutions themselves, as the unthinking way people accept them. In "Resistance," after criticizing those who join the military and "serve the State . . . as machines," he writes that "a very few, as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men, serve the State with their consciences also." Note the positive reference to patriotism here, the key being a thoughtful, critical service to the state. Another key would be a genuine concern for the people themselves, rather than a foolish love for the state, which after all only has value as a tool for safeguarding and improving the well-being of its citizens.¹¹

As both his own intellectual growth and political developments taught Thoreau, we cannot completely escape from politics. This is our country—our history—our people—our land. We can refrain from acting, but others will act in our name. Something new will be made of America and we will feel proud or ashamed: in any case, implicated. For this reason, we must speak out when actions are done which endanger our country or besmirch its good name. There is no escape from this duty, as Thoreau had imagined in his starry-eyed transcendentalist journal entry. Nor is there an escape from these patriotic connections into our moral duties, the kind of solution to political degeneration that Thoreau explores in "Resistance." For even if Thoreau could have effectively forsworn his allegiance to the state, his connection and concern for his country would have remained.

But it isn't just the negative aspects that tie us to our country; we depend on patriotic connection for sustenance. Thoreau found strength in his ties to the Concord earth. In a similar way, he found strength in American traditions and ideals—sometimes in opposition to them, it is true, but more often in rallying his fellow Americans to extend them and live up to them. We have already seen, for example, his high valuation of freedom, both as a personal and a political ideal. Very American, this, as were his warnings against overvaluing wealth and neglecting the things of the spirit—although this part of the American tradition seems considerably subdued in our own time.

In fact, Thoreau makes a point of opposing a true patriotism to a concern for moneymaking. The true patriot, like old Cato, is a "poor farmer," Thoreau says, living close to the land and avoiding superfluous possessions. Walden's vision of a life in place within nature, a true nativity, is the fruit of settlement. It is available, Thoreau suggests, to all those who will cultivate as he has cultivated. But travelers hurrying past his bean-field on the Lincoln road have trouble making sense of the work of this "home-staying, laborious native of the soil" (157). He should plant "corn for fodder," they advise; it is more valuable than beans on the open market. He should fertilize his field to increase its yield. Such travelers cannot correctly estimate his life, or the value of the fields and forests through which they hurry. They do not belong there, and pass quickly on.

Absent, too, from real settlement are the Middlesex county militiamen drilling nearby, whose "martial strains" Thoreau hears faintly as he rests on his hoe (160-161). The juxtaposition is well chosen. The irregulars of Lexington and Concord have a well-known and honorable place in American history. The militia also has a legitimate purpose: to protect "the liberties of Massachusetts and our

¹¹Thoreau, Journal II, 262-263 (after 6/20/46); "Resistance," 66.

fatherland,” and the free labor and honest possessions of their fellow tillers of the soil. Yet how easily may this necessary precaution become an end in itself and a militaristic patriotism be diverted to foreign fields, as those of Mexico or Iraq! Meanwhile the true patriot remains working in his proper field.

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Love of country is a human possibility, which can be part of a fulfilling life. This possibility can also be ignored or misused. One of the worst misuses involves substituting a love of the state for a love of our land and fellow citizens. Just as pernicious, some balance love of their own lands and people with hatred of others. Partly for these reasons, American intellectuals often see patriotism as a refuge for the simple-minded. Yet the principled understanding and retelling of our history is anything but simple. An honest patriot must wrestle with those aspects of our history of which we are ashamed. A compassionate patriot will remember history’s losers, its dispossessed and despised, as Thoreau did in Walden.

In “Slavery in Massachusetts,” Thoreau writes angrily of the use of his state’s militia to return the fugitive Anthony Burns to Virginia and slavery:

I have lived for the last month,—and I think that every man in Massachusetts capable of the sentiment of patriotism must have had a similar experience,—with the sense of having suffered a vast and indefinite loss. I did not know at first what ailed me. At last it occurred to me that what I had lost was a country.¹² As latter generations have often been reminded, our institutions of government may become instruments of injustice. But it is not only the threat to our own lives or happiness that moves us to fight injustice. We act because this is our country. We are ashamed of its injustices as we would be of our own and concerned for what sort of country we are leaving our children.

Previous generations of Americans fought to end slavery and imperialist aggression. Thoreau argues that we must similarly fight to end the war against nature going on in our midst, and redefine our nation to include all its inhabitants. In a posthumously published essay, he describes the sugar maples set up on Concord common as a “perfectly living institution”:

They are worth all and more than they have cost,—though one of the selectmen, while setting them out, took the cold which occasioned his death,—if only because they have filled the open eyes of children with their rich color unstintedly so many Octobers . . . No annual training or muster of soldiery, no celebration with its scarfs and banners, could import into the town a hundredth part of the annual splendor of our October. We have only to set the trees, or let them stand, and Nature will find the colored drapery,—flags of all her nations.¹³ Here is an institution Thoreau can wholeheartedly believe in; a benison to all, including future generations. Here, in the person of the anonymous selectman planting trees for his community, is the necessary political complement to the much grander John Brown: an unobtrusive service and incrementalism more

¹²Thoreau, “Slavery in Massachusetts,” 106.

¹³Thoreau, “Autumnal Tints,” The Natural History Essays, 160, 163, 165.

suited to our own time. Here is a patriotism that is fully grounded yet expansive, not drawing lines defensively and saying "us or them," but widening our typical circle of moral concern and inviting in nature. Here is a patriotism that is truly a virtue.¹⁴

There is ample scope for exercising such patriotism in planting trees, working to create new national parks, or teaching children the names of the trees towering above them and the flowers at their feet. Most important, perhaps, is learning the stories of the places we inhabit and meeting the many "original settlers" with whom we still share this country. Not all the lessons learned are pleasant, of course. Nature is not all sunshine and ripe huckleberries, and some of the original settlers are gone for good. Attempts to effect political change are complicated and frustrating. Still we must strive to know the land and create living institutions; institutions in the service of Life. The alternative to such patriotic efforts is the loss of our country.

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¹⁴I develop the argument that modern environmentalism is our true patriotism in Philip Cafaro, "Thoreauvian Patriotism as an Environmental Virtue," Philosophy in the Contemporary World 2 (1995): 1-9.