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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

I have no private good, unless it be my peculiar ability to serve the public. This is the only individual property.

—Thoreau, *Journal*

HENRY THOREAU has never received much attention from political theorists and students of American political thought, and what attention he has received has not been very friendly. The greatest book ever written about the American political tradition, Louis Hartz's *Liberal Tradition in America*, does not mention Thoreau at all. When political theorists do take a look at Thoreau, they almost invariably become short-tempered or even peevish, as when Nancy Rosenblum declares that Thoreau's "view of political and social life" was removed "from everything concrete,"¹ or Philip Abbott claims that Thoreau's books "can be seen as pilgrimages in which America's social and political problems are treated as secondary, even epiphenomenal concerns, compared to Thoreau's egoistic obsession with self-discovery."² Thoreau appears either to have nothing to tell us about our public life or to hold such perverse views that he is important only as a curiosity or an illustration of a certain weakness in American political ideology.³ Richard Ellis has recently scolded Hartz and others for ignoring Thoreau in their portraits of American political culture, arguing that Thoreau represents a "worldview that recurs throughout American history." Ellis then, however, portrays Thoreau as a "voluntary recluse or hermit."⁴ If Ellis's is a fair description of Thoreau, it is not terribly surprising that other scholars conclude he has little value as a political thinker.

Thoreau's reputation among scholars might seem surprising in light of his importance in American protest politics. Everyone recognizes the contribution of "Civil Disobedience" to what Martin Luther King Jr. calls our "legacy of creative protest" (although not everyone would give it such an admiring label), and King is the greatest but certainly not the only American to be inspired in his struggle against injustice by Thoreau's prose.⁵ The scholarly literature's silences about and criticisms of Thoreau, however, convey two important implications. First, Thoreau's importance in popular culture and political movements seems to have little or no correlation with judgments of the intellectual value of his political thought. Even if Thoreau has moved giants like King or Gandhi and has spoken to countless citizens at moments of political decision, the secondary literature would lead us to believe that this does not mean he actually writes shrewdly or philosophically about political life. Second, Thoreau's ideas appear in this literature to be of more interest as a symptom of a problem in the American political tradition—an extreme individualism, say, and moral subjectivism—than as a rich, powerful, and helpful resource to inspire and guide us today.⁶

This scholarly view of Thoreau's political thought has remained remarkably stable over time. Within predictable boundaries, and with a few notable exceptions, students of Thoreau's thought have fallen roughly into two categories: those who believe that the importance and quality of Thoreau's political thought are sharply limited by his intellectual and ideological commitments, and those who flatly deny his qualifications as a political thinker and social commentator altogether.

The most extreme form of the latter view rests on the claim that Thoreau was mentally unstable at best, mentally ill at worst, and that his work can thus be understood almost entirely as a reflection of psychological problems and needs. Only three years after Thoreau's death, James Russell Lowell wrote, "Mr. Thoreau had not a healthy mind. . . . His whole life was a search for the doctor."⁷ Much more recently, George Hochfield, in a powerful contribution to the "anti-Thoreau" literature, suggests that Thoreau is too obsessively egoistic to be able to think clearly about other people at all, let alone evaluate society as a whole. Identifying what he believes is Thoreau's anger toward his audience, Hochfield writes: "A maggot in Thoreau's head is the source of this violence. It is an egotism so intense as to render him virtually incapable of comprehending, much less tolerating, the ordinary affairs of life as they are carried on by ordinary people."⁸ C. Roland Wagner is even more explicitly psychoanalytic in his claims,

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arguing that in Thoreau's political essays, "the infantile wishes begin to escape all civilized limits. There Thoreau's struggle for inward identity, his rage against the ideas of passive submission and apparently arbitrary authority, almost makes him lose contact with the real world and express his fantasies only."⁹ The content of Thoreau's political work need not be taken seriously, since it is the expression of a profoundly deformed personality. As Vincent Buranelli writes, "There is an excessiveness about Thoreau's personality that gives a radical distortion to his thought."¹⁰

A related complaint, less extreme and more common, is that Thoreau's writings are so youthful as to be immature. It is certainly true that Thoreau exhibits a young person's (and to some, annoying) rebelliousness. Emerson notes of Thoreau in his *Journal*, "He is a boy, & will be an old boy,"¹¹ and Henry James Sr. declares that Thoreau "was literally the most child-like, unconscious and unblushing egotist it has ever been my fortune to encounter in the ranks of manhood."¹² In our own time, Joyce Carol Oates writes that "Thoreau's appeal is to that instinct in us—adolescent, perhaps, but not merely adolescent—that resists our own gravitation toward the outer, larger, fiercely competitive world of responsibility, false courage and 'reputation.'"¹³ For some critics this young quality casts a serious doubt upon Thoreau's competence as a social and political commentator. Robert Louis Stevenson disapprovingly observes that "something essentially youthful distinguishes all Thoreau's knock-down blows at current opinion."¹⁴ George Hochfield is appalled by what he believes is the "relentless adolescent moralizing" of *Walden*,¹⁵ and Heinz Eulau complains about Thoreau's "political immaturity."¹⁶ As with claims about Thoreau's mental stability, the implication of these comments is that Thoreau never achieved an intellectual adulthood, and we therefore need not take the intellectual content of his work terribly seriously.

Perhaps the most common argument for dismissing Thoreau's social criticism out of hand, however, is to suggest that he was simply too inexperienced and unworldly and misanthropic to be knowledgeable about the social and public world. One contemporary reviewer of *Walden* makes the nasty suggestion that Thoreau's conception of domestic life is much too limited to allow for a useful discussion of the domestic economy: "Did he never people that bare hovel, in imagination, with a loving and beloved wife and blooming children, or did he imagine that to know what life is he must ignore its origin?"¹⁷ John Patrick Diggins believes that Thoreau's "strategy of disassociation may have been designed to make man unfit for society, but it also rendered his ideas unfit for social philosophy."¹⁸ Hubert

Hoeltje contends that Thoreau "cannot be accepted as a social critic" because he was simply too withdrawn from the social world to know what he was talking about.¹⁹ James Russell Lowell, still one of Thoreau's toughest antagonists, suggests that Thoreau's thought is completely perverted by a lack of knowledge of common, everyday people and social life: "A greater familiarity with ordinary men would have done Thoreau good, by showing him how many fine qualities are common to the race."²⁰ Another contemporary, Walt Whitman, has said, "Thoreau's great fault was disdain—disdain for men (for Tom, Dick and Harry): inability to appreciate the average life—even the exceptional life: it seemed to me a want of imagination."²¹ All these critics assume that what they believe is Thoreau's inadequate social experience and lifestyle and sympathy for other people cripples his effectiveness as a social observer. The "hermit of Walden Pond" may write knowledgeably, even profoundly, about the natural world, but he is out of his element when he speaks of society and public life.

These various beliefs about why Thoreau should be disqualified as a political writer are neither well informed nor persuasive, although their prevalence provides at least a partial explanation of why it is that Thoreau's political thought has received so little scholarly attention. There is absolutely no reason to believe that Thoreau was mentally ill; at any rate, the facts of his psychological life no more relieve us of the obligation to understand his writings on their own terms than we are relieved of the need to study *On the Social Contract* on account of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "personal problems." Accusations of immaturity threaten to beg the question in a similar manner, and hint as well of a dogmatic conservative impatience with critics of conventional society—the sense that such criticism seems, by definition, "unrealistic" and hence "immature." Finally, it is simply not true that Thoreau was significantly withdrawn from the human community. He was deeply involved with and committed to his family throughout his life; Taylor Stoehr refers to Thoreau's "inveterate domesticity," and Henry Seidel Canby rightly notes that "the life of this so-called solitary was indeed a family life to an extent not common in modern New England."²² He was thoroughly integrated into the village life in Concord, and was involved with abolition and other progressive politics as well.²³ There is simply no basis to the claim that Thoreau was a hermit, uninformed about public affairs, withdrawn from the world of men and women.²⁴ As will become clear in the following, Thoreau did seek a kind of disengagement from the common business of daily life, but this never included a literal seclusion from human society. And even if it were true

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that Thoreau lived a solitary life, this would by no means disqualify him as a social and political commentator. Seclusion might just as likely be a critical advantage, leading to a more dispassionate observation than is possible when one is entangled in the interests and battles of conventional affairs. As with the more extreme versions of the argument that we need not take Thoreau seriously as a social critic because of some disqualifying personal characteristic, the view that Thoreau was too ignorant about common life to be an informed critic is grossly misleading. Whatever our evaluation of Thoreau's personal life, such judgments can never relieve us of the obligation to carefully read his works if we are to provide a serious analysis of his ideas. When biography threatens to replace such a reading, the critic loses credibility.

For those who rightly assume that we need to come to some understanding of the actual content of Thoreau's views, there is a near consensus in the literature that Thoreau is committed to values that prevent him from fully appreciating and understanding the political world, or that he is intellectually or ideologically handicapped in his political thinking in some other important way. The overwhelming conventional wisdom is that Thoreau is an anarchist—as Vernon Parrington writes, "He was not political minded"²⁵—and therefore rejects political life outright. This view is shared, significantly, by most of Thoreau's friends and critics alike. Emma Goldman praises Thoreau as "the greatest American Anarchist,"²⁶ and Henry Miller approvingly claims that Thoreau "was not interested in politics; he was the sort of person who, if there were more of his kind, would soon cause governments to become non-existent."²⁷ Jane Bennett, who has recently written the most extensive study of Thoreau by a political theorist, admires Thoreau as an "artist of the self," but she is nervous about what she believes is his rejection of politics and his "distaste for the identity of 'citizen.'"²⁸ If these friends of Thoreau's conclude that he is an anarchist, it is not surprising that a consensus emerges across the spectrum that Thoreau has nothing positive or constructive to say about public life; rather, he merely condemns it and promotes a withdrawal into privacy. Philip Abbott captures this view when he writes that "Thoreau as a political theorist is a remarkably antipolitical writer; as a reformer he is openly disdainful of reformers; as a revolutionary he refuses to accept the personal burdens of a revolutionary."²⁹ Thoreau's supposed anarchism appears to incapacitate him as a political thinker.

This anarchism is additionally thought to grow from an extreme individualism that further impairs Thoreau's political judgment.³⁰ A contem-

porary reviewer of *Walden* criticized Thoreau for being a member of "the class of transcendentalists who lay the greatest stress on the 'I,' and knows no limitation on the exercise of the rights of that important pronoun."³¹ Francis Dedmond concludes that the result of this individualism is that "Thoreau wished to live above law, above government, above restraint. He wished to be circumscribed only by the dictates of his conscience."³² For Richard Ellis, Thoreau's jealousy for his own autonomy produced a "haughty aloofness," a hermit's "disdain for the multitude,"³³ and Heinz Eulau claims that truth, for Thoreau, is "reduced to being a matter of individual taste."³⁴ Thoreau is not only a political anarchist but a moral and philosophical anarchist as well. There is no solid foundation left for a significant common life with others. As Nancy Rosenblum says, Thoreau's "militant conscience inspires self-assertion and antagonism [toward others], but inspiration is incompatible with establishment and takes no notice of justice or public order."³⁵

In fact, for Rosenblum, Thoreau's individualism takes on a Nietzschean quality, in which "the noble soul is exclusive" and "enjoys no society and recognizes few peers."³⁶ Like Emerson, she believes that Thoreau is committed to an autonomy that experiences exhilaration only in opposition, in the discord experienced by "heroic spirits" with society at large.³⁷ Rosenblum's ominous suggestion is that Thoreau worshiped the struggle alone, caring for others only as opponents of his own will: "It is an amonic and amoral Nietzschean vision, and there is good reason to think he would have accepted the consequences of personal freedom gained at the expense of others."³⁸ Although Vincent Buranelli does not portray Thoreau as a Nietzschean amoralist,³⁹ he agrees with Rosenblum that Thoreau's extreme individualism can have potentially tyrannical ramifications. It produces an "unbending moralism and incorrigible self-righteousness" that tilts the "mind in the direction of fanaticism".⁴⁰

There is no more insidious political theory than this. When consciences conflict—and antagonism is never worse than when it involves two men each of whom is convinced that he speaks for goodness and rectitude—what then? . . . Thoreau's theory has overtones of Rousseau's Legislator who can do what he pleases with the people under his control because he alone can fathom the holy intentions of the General Will. It points forward to Lenin, the "genius theoretician" whose right it is to force a suitable class consciousness on those who do not have it, and to the horrors that resulted from Hitler's "intuition" of what was best for Germany.⁴¹

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Buranelli is perhaps the most apoplectic of Thoreau's critics, but he is just an extreme example of the many who believe that Thoreau's individualism blinds him to any sensible understanding of a possible or a just political order. The suspicion is that it promotes at best an antipolitics and at worst a perverse and dangerous politics.⁴²

Finally, there are many who simply question Thoreau's consistency or rigor as a thinker. Some critics make claims about the (in)coherence of his social and political thought, such as when Laraine Fergenson argues that "his writings, taken as a whole, are a tissue of self-contradiction,"⁴³ or when Buranelli holds that Thoreau's individualism is incompatible with his obvious dependencies on others, and he thus "contradicted himself . . . without realizing it."⁴⁴ Others argue that Thoreau is inconsistent in his basic political commitments, holding opposing opinions in such essays as "Civil Disobedience" and "A Plea for Captain John Brown."⁴⁵ Still others find Thoreau's use of exaggeration⁴⁶ and paradox exasperating, as when Eulau storms, "Paradox may serve the purpose of literary construction. In political theory it is self-defeating."⁴⁷ For one reason or another, many critics believe Thoreau is too extravagant and undisciplined a thinker to develop a significant political commentary.⁴⁸

In short, a review of the literature discussing Thoreau's social and political thought leaves one with two strong impressions. First, overall the literature is quite sparse, which suggests that many students of American political thought simply do not believe Thoreau's political ideas are interesting, sophisticated, or coherent enough to bother with in the first place. Second, when Thoreau is evaluated as a political thinker, he is thought to be too anarchistic or individualistic or incoherent to be compelling. While there are a few scholars who have objected to this conventional portrait,⁴⁹ Thoreau is, on the whole, the political thinker scholars of American political thought love to either ignore or hate.

IT IS THE BURDEN of the chapters that follow to demonstrate what I think is the full range, power, and message of Thoreau's political thought and to explain why I believe our conventional understandings of Thoreau's political ideas are wildly inaccurate and misleading. When we develop a more satisfactory understanding of what Thoreau actually has to say to and about the American political community, I am convinced we will find in his work one of the strongest, most compelling, and most important voices

in the American political tradition. I hope to show that if we will hear him, Thoreau speaks to us as a critic whose primary concerns are the health of the democratic community we profess to value and the integrity of the citizenry upon which any decent democratic community must be built.

Before I turn to Thoreau's public writings to defend this thesis, however, consider the following passages from the *Journal* in which Thoreau discusses the tasks he sets for himself. In May 1851 Thoreau writes:

We are enabled to criticize others only when we are different from, and in a given particular superior to, them ourselves. By our aloofness from men and their affairs we are enabled to overlook and criticize them. There are but few men who stand on the hills by the roadside. I am sane only when I have risen above my common sense, when I do not take the foolish view of things which is commonly taken, when I do not live for the low ends for which men commonly live. Wisdom is not common. To what purpose have I senses, if I am thus absorbed in affairs? My pulse must beat with nature.⁵⁰

In this passage Thoreau is considering his chosen vocation. His concern is to find a moral space, to "stand on the hills by the roadside," so as to partially disengage himself from the conventional world. Only then will he have the distance from daily affairs required for evaluating those affairs critically and dispassionately. Finding such a moral space, however, is no small task. It requires the strength to reject the conventional temptations of society, and the discipline to find an alternative moral baseline—Thoreau finds his in the natural world, and thus his "pulse must beat with nature." By cultivating an aloofness he can cultivate a superiority not in all things but in a "given particular," to "men and their affairs." Only in this way can he earn the right and gain an appropriate perspective from which to criticize his neighbors and contemporaries. Only in this way can he become a social critic. "You might say of a philosopher that he was in this world as a spectator."⁵¹

There are two significant dangers in this role, however. The first is that by standing aloof, the critic may find him- or herself on hills from which no human road can be clearly seen, thereby losing sight of human affairs altogether.⁵² The second is that the critic may become so preoccupied with his or her own virtue that the rest of the world may recede into insignificance, becoming something to be transcended rather than loved, embraced, and criticized. Thoreau wrestled mightily with both temptations, sometimes overcoming them, sometimes succumbing. He had written a decade

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earlier, "I don't like people who are too good for this world,"⁵³ but two months after writing the passage about cultivating an uncommon virtue, Thoreau's *Journal* finds him so preoccupied with himself that it is hard not to wonder if he is losing sight of his original project:

That I am better fitted for a lofty society to-day than I was yesterday! To make my life a sacrament! What is nature without this lofty tumbling? May I treat myself with more and more respect and tenderness. May I not forget that I am impure and vicious. May I not cease to love purity. . . . May I so live and refine my life as fitting myself for a society ever higher than I actually enjoy. . . . May I be to myself as one is to me whom I love, a dear and cherished object. . . . The possibility of my own improvement, that is to be cherished. . . . I love and worship myself with a love which absorbs my love for the world.⁵⁴

At this moment Thoreau's obsession with his own moral worthiness leads him to a level of self-absorption that makes him look more like a narcissist than a social critic, his claim that such self-love leads him back to the world to the contrary notwithstanding. Although it is true that he admits his moral imperfection, the passage ends on such a self-congratulatory note that we are not entirely unjustified in feeling some skepticism about the self-criticism. Here we find Thoreau at his most morally perfectionist and egoistic.

This is not the end of the story, however. Thoreau continues to fight with himself in the passages that follow. Five days after declaring his worship of himself, he remembers that the moral life cannot be "too good for this world" when he writes, "Let us not have a rabid moral virtue that will be revenged on society."⁵⁵ The task he set for himself is morally perilous, and his execution of the task is marked by human imperfection. But Thoreau never appears to have lost sight of these failures, or to fool himself for long about his own moral character.

Just as Thoreau struggles with maintaining an appropriate balance between engagement with and distance from human society, so he struggles to establish an appropriate relationship with nature, the medium within which he hopes to nurture a critical independence from social affairs. On the one hand, the retreat to the natural world must be undertaken for the sake of the human world. "It is narrow to be confined to woods and fields and grand aspects of Nature only. The greatest and wisest will still be related to man."⁵⁶ On the other hand, Thoreau's alienation from society and his sensual love for nature ("I love it as a maiden"; "All nature is my bride"⁵⁷) constantly conspire to draw him away from human

concerns. "This is a common experience in my travelling. I plod along, thinking what a miserable world this is and what miserable fellows we that inhabit it, wondering what it is tempts men to live in it; but anon I leave the towns behind and am lost in some boundless heath, and life becomes gradually more tolerable, if not even glorious."⁵⁸ When this happens for an extended period, however, Thoreau always begins to find himself dissatisfied, morally empty. "I have become sadly scientific," he writes to his sister, at a time when he is unable to consistently focus on the moral character of his naturalism.⁵⁹ Thoreau's withdrawal to nature, like his attempt to establish an aloofness from society, was a difficult balancing act. He was not always able to maintain that in-between position, apart from society but not entirely withdrawn into nonhuman nature. This was clearly, however, the position he sought and struggled to achieve.

In one of the most striking and disturbing passages in Thoreau's *Journal*, written a month after his ecstatic declaration of love for his own virtue and three months after describing his project as a social critic, we see the tensions of this balancing act erupt in a terrible spasm of pain. He begins calmly, feeling gratitude for the beauty of nature he had experienced on his walk: "I thank you God. I do not deserve anything, I am unworthy of the least regard; and yet I am made to rejoice. I am impure and worthless, and yet the world is gilded for my delight and holidays are prepared for me, and my path is strewn with flowers. . . . Oh, keep my senses pure!"⁶⁰ This sense of joy and unworthiness, however, is followed by something very different. He stops at "Nut Meadow Brook" and drinks.

I mark that brook as if I had swallowed a water snake that would live in my stomach. I have swallowed something worth the while. The day is not what it was before I stooped to drink. Ah, I shall hear from that draught! It is not in vain that I have drunk. I have drunk an arrowhead. It flows from where all fountains rise.

How many ova have I swallowed? Who knows what will be hatched within me? There were some seeds of thought, methinks, floating in that water, which are expanding in me. The man must not drink of the running streams, the living waters, who is not prepared to have all nature reborn in him,—to suckle monsters. The snake in my stomach lifts his head to my mouth at the sound of running water. When was it that I swallowed a snake? I have got rid of the snake in my stomach. I drank of stagnant waters once. That accounts for it. I caught him by the throat and drew him out, and had a well day after all. Is there not such a thing as getting rid of the snake which you have swallowed when young, when thoughtless you stooped and drank at stagnant waters, which has

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worried you in your waking hours and in your sleep ever since, and appropriated the life that was yours? Will he not ascend into your mouth at the sound of running water? Then catch him boldly by the head and draw him out, though you may think his tail be curled about your vitals.⁶¹

There is obviously a great deal going on in this passage, some of which appears to be deeply personal and psychological; but much can be understood in light of the tensions generated by walking the moral tightrope he has placed himself on as a result of his self-assumed social role.⁶² Thoreau begins these reflections with a sense of humility, unworthiness, and gratitude. He is then seduced by his life in nature. He draws nature within himself, attempting to become a natural creator himself. The initial pride and success this brings him soon turns to shame: the nature reborn in him is monstrous. It is now clear that the snake did not come from the healthy, briskly running waters but from water that is unhealthy and stagnant. Having inflated his own importance, he is captivated by the potential of his own "seeds of thought" and forgets his initial reason for turning to nature. Instead of nature's student and admirer, he tries to become nature's equal. Rather than accepting his life as a man, he attempts to become a god. When he comes to his senses and realizes that this hubris can only generate monsters, he understands that the only option is to pull the snake out, even if it threatens his "vitals." Here we see some of the complexities and dangers of Thoreau's relationship with nature. He retreats to the wild in order to establish a critical distance between himself and society, but in doing so he is tempted to forget his original purpose and worship his own creative powers.

In all these remarkable passages from the late spring and early summer of 1851, Thoreau was struggling with the implications and difficulties of his chosen vocation. These struggles grow out of and are directly related to the structural dilemmas created by his role as a social critic. It is also clear that Thoreau was deeply aware of these dilemmas and fought himself fiercely in the attempt to maintain his critical integrity as one who was both engaged and disengaged, virtuous but not perversely self-absorbed or "too good for this world." That he often failed to live up to these ideals is hardly surprising, given the moral gymnastics required to maintain an equilibrium between such opposing forces. Thoreau never claims any absolute success for himself; he insists only on the importance of his struggle and the ideals they represent.⁶³ What should interest us are Thoreau's successes more than his failures, and these successes are indeed

impressive to consider. My contention in this book is, first, that Thoreau's social and political criticism, far from being confined to a few political essays ("Civil Disobedience," "Slavery in Massachusetts," and "A Plea for Captain John Brown"), was a lifetime project that informed virtually all his writings; and, second, that Thoreau succeeded in this criticism to a rare and largely unappreciated degree. Thoreau is one of America's most powerful and least understood critics and political thinkers.

Thoreau's understanding of his relationship to the American polity is symbolically captured in another 1851 entry to his *Journal*. He is discussing a passage from a work of natural history by Agassiz and Gould, who write, "the working bees . . . are barren females. The attributes of their sex . . . seem to consist only in their solicitude for the welfare of the new generation, of which they are the natural guardians, but not the parents." Thoreau then comments, "This phenomenon is paralleled in man by maiden aunts and bachelor uncles, who perform a similar function."⁶⁴ The imagery is striking, coming from a man who was himself childless and probably died a virgin, and who lived in a family in which none of the children married or appear to have been at all sexually active. Thoreau's chosen vocation, as critic of American society and politics, is that of a "bachelor uncle." His concern is less for his contemporaries than for the values and institutions that will nurture and mold future generations; as he writes in "Life without Principle," "It is our children's children who may perchance be really free."⁶⁵ It is the legacy of American citizenship that Thoreau ultimately aims to influence. In attempting to establish this influence, it is perhaps inevitable that he appears odd, eccentric, like a "bachelor uncle," especially to his own generation.⁶⁶ In order to appropriately evaluate Thoreau's career, it is essential to understand that his political ambitions were not defined by influencing the specific political events in his own day: Thoreau was obviously not a political activist in any recognizable sense of the word, and his impatience with such "reformers" is famous.⁶⁷ Instead, he hopes to encourage his fellow citizens to seriously consider the moral development of the nation and their own participation in this development.

When Emerson writes that Thoreau "chose, wisely no doubt for himself, to be the bachelor of thought and Nature," he encourages an understanding of Thoreau that significantly misconstrues his friend's lifelong project.⁶⁸ For Emerson, when Thoreau became the "bachelor of thought and Nature," he abandoned the human world: "I think the severity of his ideal interfered to deprive him of a healthy sufficiency of human society."⁶⁹ Emerson clucks his disapproval and claims that Thoreau lacked ambition,

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so “instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry-party.”⁷⁰ These comments, however, reveal much more about Emerson’s conventionalism than about Thoreau’s relationship to America.⁷¹ In Thoreau’s view, what America needs are not social engineers but prophets, critics who force us to confront the gulf between our ideals and our practices. Thoreau embraced the role of a bachelor but not in the sense Emerson suggests.

Contrary to Emerson’s evaluation, I believe 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. As he saw it, addressing this character was his Socratic task. Before we can evaluate Thoreau’s success or failure as a political thinker, it is first essential that we be open to the possibility that he was indeed a political thinker in the deepest sense of the term. In *The City of God* Augustine argues that a political community is defined by the objects loved in common within that community.⁷² When Thoreau, America’s “bachelor uncle,” writes, he almost invariably forces us to confront our political life in this most essential and fundamental sense. Contrary to those who would understand Thoreau as little more than an egocentric individualist, a “bachelor of thought and nature,” Thoreau is one of the most deeply committed political writers in our tradition. It is time to try to understand him as such.

