

Walden: An Exercise in Awakening

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“To be awake is to be alive,” says Henry David Thoreau early in *Walden*. A large part of Thoreau’s book centers around this idea of awakening, of fighting off intellectual laziness (61). The question that he persistently addresses during his two-year stay at Walden Pond is “How does one go about waking up?” Thoreau believes part of the solution lies in reading the classics, the timeless works of philosophy and literature. Sherman Paul observes that Thoreau “did not abandon collective wisdom,” and despite his individualist attitude, “he applied the funded wisdom of man to his experiment on life” (356). Thoreau maintains that the classics are useful because they are “the noblest recorded thoughts of man” (68). In addition to passing on the wisdom of great thinkers, the classics also require that one “laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjuring a larger sense than we have” (Thoreau 68). The classics, then, provide a double benefit in both conveying wisdom and arousing the mind. This mental stimulation, Thoreau believes, develops a capacity for independent thought and helps an individual to shake off the conformist conditioning standing in the way of awakening.

Thoreau did not limit his scope to individuals, but also promoted social awareness through community development. He encouraged keen evaluation of what passed for social progress. In Thoreau’s time one of the most significant developments was the beginning of the industrial revolution, distinguished by increases in production speed and global shipping. Thoreau admired the expanded trade and industry in general, because it was self reliant, much like Thoreau himself, and “did not clasp its hands and pray to Jupiter” (80). In fact, Leo Marx remarks on Thoreau’s apparent tolerance of the railroad, saying that “for Thoreau...this machine is the type and agent of an irreversible process: not mere scientific or technological development

in the narrow sense, but the implacable advance of history” (384). However, if the changes the railroad represented were inevitable, why would Thoreau protest them for “nine long paragraphs” (Marx 382)? The answer lies in Thoreau’s Zen-like capacity for tolerating contradiction. Even while marveling at the dynamism of industry, he questions the increased life it produced, which he pegs as the “Railroad Fashion” (80). He wonders whether this acceleration is truly a step forward. Noticing the strict and rapid schedule of the railway travel, Thoreau asks ironically, “Have not men improved somewhat in punctuality since the railroad was invented? Do they not talk and think faster in the depot than in the stage-office?” (79). To Thoreau, “in an imperfect work time is a factor, but into a perfect work time does not enter” (218). In “Brute Neighbors” Thoreau makes evident an ideal of time based on natural rather than mechanical cycles in a discussion between the Hermit and the Poet. The Hermit is “concluding a serious meditation,” and asks his friend for more time to finish his reflection properly before they keep a planned appointment (Thoreau 150). The Poet gladly grants the extension. Thoreau did not consider time as a thing that should be ruled by a clock or schedule, but as something that must be given in accordance to the task at hand.

Thoreau also notes that inherent in industrial “progress” is the potential for exploitation. F.O. Matthiessen believes that Thoreau’s “revolt [against industry] was bound up with a determination to do all he could to prevent the dignity of common labor from being degraded by the idle tastes of the rich” (347). Indeed, Thoreau insists, “It is a mistake to suppose that, in a country where the usual evidences of civilization exist, the condition of a very large body of the inhabitants may not be as degraded as that of the savages” (23). Using Irish railroad workers as his example, Thoreau deplores what laborers must experience in the form of inadequate housing. He describes a location “where I see in my daily walks human beings living in sties, and all

winter with an open door...and the forms of both old and young are permanently contracted by the long habit of shrinking from cold and misery..."(23). It was appalling to Thoreau that a society with so much to offer the rich would do so little for the poor, and even deny them adequate shelter. "Instead of noblemen, let us have noble villages of men," says Thoreau, summarizing his philosophy that a society must maintain the well being of all of its members, and not cater to the rich (75).

Thoreau avidly read in many different fields and was one of the first American writers to be heavily influenced by philosophy and religions of the Far East. He enjoyed inspirational moments when "the pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges" (199). Thoreau saw himself merging American Transcendentalism with Indian Hinduism, especially as expressed in the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Some of Thoreau's ideas can also be said to mirror those of Zen Buddhism, although no evidence suggests any direct influence by Zen authors. Like Thoreau's Transcendentalism, Zen's basic premise is to produce an awakening, also referred to as "enlightenment" (Hiene, Wright, 3). In "Sounds" Thoreau explores the potential for learning without words and even asks readers, "Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer" (75)? By questioning the importance of speech and of written words, Thoreau touches on one of the main facets of Zen, the principle that there is more to enlightenment than words and that one dimension of learning can be approached by overcoming the need for language (Heine, Wright, 3). Indeed, Thoreau speaks of a language not limited to words, and says "no method nor discipline can supersede the necessity of being forever on the alert" (75). In his conclusion to *Walden*, Thoreau conveys thoughts parallel to those recorded by the eighteenth Zen master Hakuin. Thoreau comments on how "easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten path for ourselves" (215). Within this context he describes the desperate lives he

perceives his neighbors leading, assigning to their frame of mind a “brain rot which prevails so much more widely and fatally” and undermines original or awakened living (217). Hakuin, arguing against a particular method of Zen instruction that he deems unnecessary and foolish, claims that “[this method] is also a good example of falling into fixed views” (69). Hakuin’s cure for this illusion is “true single mindedness in [a student’s] practices,” and warns that following the accepted view is a high road to “absolutely nothing” (Hakuin 69). Much like Thoreau, Hakuin and his Zen Buddhist school embrace open-mindedness and a certain degree of skepticism.

Thoreau’s *Walden* is a deeply serious work written by a man who hoped to improve life for his readers, though he is often very critical of the world around him. When it comes to his neighbors and American society, Thoreau could seem unforgiving. His work is also given to Zen-like contradictions, as in his reverence and condemnation of the “Railroad Fashion” (80). His strong words, however, were not without purpose. Thoreau was optimistic about the future and only wished to make others aware of issues he observed from his vantage point as something of an outsider. Indeed in his epigraph Thoreau writes, “I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up” (1).

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