

Labor in Thoreau's *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

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Abstract. Henry David Thoreau plays a critical role in the development of transcendentalist thought and literature. In Thoreau's *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau reflects upon what labor means. As a parody of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, Thoreau expands and negotiates the meaning of labor. Thoreau elaborates the speculative philosophy of intellectual labor and the relationship between work and contemplation, wilderness and civilization. Labor, for Thoreau, has a constant and imperishable moral.

Keywords: Henry David Thoreau; labor; intellect; wilderness; civilization.

1. Introduction

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) is an American essayist, poet and philosopher. Thoreau is best known for his magnum opus *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854). In *Walden*, Thoreau writes, “men labor under a mistake” and “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” (Thoreau, 327). Thus, in the nineteenth century, what is the true meaning of “labor” for Thoreau? What are the characteristics of Thoreau's interpretation of “labor”? As a “sojourner” both in the woods and in the civilization, Thoreau reflects upon what labor means through his *Walden* experiment.

2. A Parody of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*

Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, regarded as the Bible of the middle class, is an early celebrity memoir and the only work written in America before the nineteenth century that has retained best-seller popularity since its release. Born a younger son of a Boston artisan, Franklin could not have expected to inherit any property from his family, and always knew he would have to make his own way in the world. Franklin's success demonstrates the possibilities of life in the New World through his own rise from the lower middle class in a state of Poverty and Obscurity to one of the most admired men of Affluence and Reputation. Furthermore, with his other self-fashioning essays like “The Way to Wealth,” Franklin asserts that he accumulated his fortune through a solid work ethic—industry (labor and diligence) and frugality. Apart from obtaining wealth, the self-improvement project contains “the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection” (Franklin 78). In *Autobiography*, Franklin puts forward thirteen moral virtues he had met with in his reading, including resolution, sincerity, justice and moderation. He also publishes an essay called “The Art of Virtue” with a decision to incorporate his moral program into his life story.

To a certain extent, Franklin's *Autobiography* is a reflection of eighteenth-century idealism and optimism. It acts as a guidebook or success manuals for young men to gain secular success and happiness. At the commencement of the age of enterprise, much emphasis is laid on the accumulation of wealth; the cultivation of moral virtues as a part of self-culture is Franklin's fervent wish to live without committing any fault at any time (Franklin 78). The *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin is also one of the four guidebooks in Thoreau's personal library. In his essay “Thoreau's Enterprise of Self-Culture in a Culture of Enterprise,” Leonard Neufeldt holds that *Walden* is a parody of success manuals for young men, such as Franklin's *Autobiography* (Neufeldt, 246). Neufeldt explains further that the strategy in Thoreau's serious parody is to deauthorize the success manual and its personae

while authorizing a new manual and persona (Neufeldt, 247-8). In other words, at the age of enterprise, Thoreau expands and negotiates the meaning of labor.

According to the socioeconomic studies, Thoreau's age represents an unprecedented transformation in American economic and social life—the beginning of industrial capitalism in American. A more appropriate characterization might be the age of enterprise. The economic historian George Taylor summarizes the chief signs of the new era as follows:

The rapid development of regional and national transportation networks, unprecedented technological advances, increased division of labor, greater specialization and interrelatedness of commercial, financial, and industrial activities, phenomenal land development, the development of corporations and rapid increase of money investors and investments, a society that regarded the economic developments as instruments for meeting regional and local needs, and laissez faire principles applied to corporations, companies and entrepreneurs in order to promote economic success and prevent the disastrous failures in many state enterprise initiatives in earlier decades (Taylor, 233).

By Thoreau's time, enterprise in its positive sense referred to an admirable risk-taking, a venturesome spirit, the shrewdness and diligence to conceive a design and follow through it (Neufeldt 236). Likewise, Thoreau identifies vocation with self-culture, or "the art of life." He registers business as a moral-aesthetic term, commerce as the profitability of resistance to mass culture, and profit as "virtue" and "extra-vagance" (Neufeldt 231).

It is deemed to be a paradox by Michael Gilmore that *Walden*, the modern text, starts out as a denunciation of modernity (Gilmore, 35). From Gilmore's point of view, at the heart of Thoreau's dissent from modernity is a profound hostility to the process of exchange, to what he calls the "curse of trade" (Gilmore, 36). In *Walden*, most men in the contemporary Concord are implicated in the market, thus, they have lost their intellectuality, independence, imagination and vitality. The mass of men is not living earnestly; instead, they lead lives of "quiet desperation" and they are "doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways" (Thoreau, 326-9). Thoreau expresses his sympathy towards the inherited young men in that they are not clear what field they are called to labor in and gradually they become "the serfs of the soil" (Thoreau, 326). However, the portionless, living for another's brass, find it labor enough to maintain a life. Therefore, Thoreau draws the conclusion that "men labor under a mistake" (Thoreau, 327). Under such circumstances, Thoreau's experiment of going to the woods offers other alternatives (many kinds of lives), for his intention is not "to write an ode to dejection," but "to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning" and wake his neighbors up (Thoreau, 389). Thoreau intends to present another mode of living to explore what true labor is and how to labor, for "the life which men praise and regard as successful is but one kind" and we should not "exaggerate any one kind at the expense of the others" (Thoreau, 338).

3. The Relationship Between Labor and Intellect

For Thoreau, labor not only denotes "labor of the hands," but also "labor of the heads." However, in the "restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century," people in United States, whether actively or not, are busily involved in trade and commerce (Thoreau, 584). Lack of life and vitality, their lives are in a state of stagnation and "quiet desperation." Thoreau disappointedly discovers the truth that "the millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred million to a poetic or divine life" (Thoreau, 394). In this case, Thoreau thinks highly of intellectuality. He is firmly convinced that men should be awakened from somnolence by the "Genius" and the "force and aspirations from within" (Thoreau, 393). In fact, at the very outset of *Walden*, Thoreau boldly declares his undertaking: "when I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only" (Thoreau, 325). Labor of the hands is obviously

meant to encompass intellectual as well as physical labor, as Thoreau introspects his past, “my head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it” (Thoreau, 400).

In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* which is published in 1849, especially in the chapter named “Monday,” Thoreau elaborates the speculative philosophy of intellectual labor and the relationship between work and contemplation, wilderness and civilization. In this chapter, Thoreau speaks highly of the workmen, he believes that “on every hand we observe a truly wise practice, in education, in morals, and in the arts of life, the embodied wisdom of many an ancient philosopher (Thoreau, 101). Thoreau is indifferent to manifold institutions and reforms. Sometimes he even criticizes the reformers, because he thinks that the nature of reform is but “to establish another durable and harmonious routine” (Thoreau, 103). Thoreau argues that countless reforms are put forward because “society is not animated, or instinct enough with life” (Thoreau, 106). Thus, Thoreau advocates the contemplation of the Oriental. He makes a comparison between the Oriental and the Occidental. The former has nothing to do in this world; the latter is full of activity. Thoreau concludes that there is a strife between the Oriental and the Occidental in every nation (Thoreau, 114).

In the Eastern land, such as Arabia, Persia, and Hindostan, contemplation is of great significance. Deep in contemplation, all anxiety and stated toil will be becalmed in the infinite leisure and repose of nature (Thoreau, 102). Thoreau affirms that contemplation is the antithesis of politics in that the political state becomes unreal, incredible, and insignificant to one who habitually endeavors to contemplate the true state of things. The best of the Hindu Scripture is for its pure intellectuality. However, the oriental rumination also has its limitations. The contemplative philosopher’s dwell on the inevitability and unchangeableness of laws and their end is an immense consolation and eternal absorption in Brahma. As their speculations never go out of themselves, so infinitely wise, yet infinitely stagnant, they deal not with buoyancy, freedom, flexibility, variety and possibility (Thoreau, 110).

Christianity, on the other hand, is humane, practical and radical. The New Testament is remarkable for its pure morality. Thoreau confirms that Christ is the prince of Reformers and Radicals. The Occidental attaches much importance to “the practicalness of life (Thoreau, 113). Through his personal experience, the most glorious fact in the trivial things is a transient thought, or vision, or dream. There exists transcendence in the two polarities of work and contemplation.

Thoreau has found an intermediate position between work and intellect. In “Monday,” he illuminates two vivid models. The first one is the cultivated wilderness. Thoreau describes the old villages which are surrounded by the border of the wild wood. He thinks that these villages are indebted to the wilderness rather than the civilization. A middle ground—cultivated wilderness thus is created:

There is something indescribably inspiring and beautiful in the aspect of the forest skirting and occasionally jutting into the midst of new towns, which, like the sand-heaps of fresh fox-burrows, have sprung up in their midst. The very uprightness of the pines and maples asserts the ancient rectitude and vigor of nature. Our lives need the relief of such a background, where the pine flourishes and the jay still scream (Thoreau, 138).

Another good model—the Aeolian harp moment, can clearly account for the relationship between labor and intellect. For Thoreau, music is the symbol of the universal laws and it is the only assured tone. Travelling on foot very early one morning, when Thoreau reaches the railroad in Plaistow, he hears at some distance a faint music in the air like an Aeolian harp, which he immediately suspects to proceed from the cord of the telegraph vibrating in the just awakening morning wind, and applying his ear to one of the posts he is convinced that it is so. Thoreau imagines that it is the telegraph harp singing its message through the country, its message sent not by men, but by gods. All things have their higher and their lower uses. At this moment, Thoreau thinks that he hears a fairer news than the journals ever print: “it told of things worthy to hear, and worthy of the electric fluid to carry the news of, not of the price of cotton and flour, but it hinted at the price of the world itself and of things which are priceless, of absolute truth and beauty” (Thoreau, 143). An intellectual transcendence has reached its highest point through contemplation in labor.

In *Walden*, these transcendental moments occur frequently. Thoreau recollects that so many autumn and winter days, outside the town, he is trying to hear what was in the wind, to hear and carry it express (Thoreau, 336). When Thoreau is hoeing in the bean-field, he finds some implements of war and hunting mingled with other natural stones. When his hoe tinkles against the stones, that music echoes to the woods and the sky, and is an accompaniment to his labor which yields an instant and immeasurable harvest. At that moment, it is no longer beans that he hopes, nor he that hoes beans; it is transcendental (Thoreau, 449).

4. The Connecting Link Between Wilderness and Civilization

In “The Bean-Field,” experimenting by himself, Thoreau supplies a best model of labor at the age of enterprise—his bean-field as the connecting link between wilderness and civilization. In other words, it is a half-cultivated field. As Thoreau has little aid from farm implements, he becomes much more intimate with his beans than usual. His intimate labor stays far away from agriculture capitalism and mere imagination. He builds his own house and grows his own food; he concentrates only on the necessities of life and renounces luxuries. In a word, he minimizes his dependence on others and removes himself as far as possible from the market economy. By avoiding all trade and barter to the fullest, Thoreau is “more independent than any farmer in Concord” (Thoreau, 366).

Through Thoreau’s study of ancient poetry and mythology, he states, “husbandry was once a sacred art; but it is pursued with irreverent haste and heedlessness by us, our object being to have large farms and large crops merely” (Thoreau, 454). Thus, Thoreau makes a point of his laboring in the bean-field in the traditional way and differentiates it from his neighbors who know Nature but as robbers. He writes, “by avarice and selfishness, and a groveling habit, from which none of us is free, of regarding the soil as property chiefly, the landscape is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives” (Thoreau, 454). On the contrary, Thoreau finds the earth has a certain magnetism in it which is full of life and is the logic of all the labor (Thoreau, 451). Gilmore argues that, for Thoreau, commercial agriculture has an impact on the physical world which is just as devastating as its effect on the farmer (Thoreau, 37). In the chapter “The Ponds” he repudiates a pond named by a farmer Flint who thinks only of the money value. Thoreau writes of Flint:

I respect not his labors, his farm where everything has its price; who would carry the landscape, who would carry his God, to market, if he could get any thing for him; who goes to market for his god as it is; on whose farm nothing grows free, whose fields bear no crops, whose meadows no flowers, whose trees no fruits are not ripe for him till they are turned to dollars (Thoreau, 479).

Farmers are respectable and interesting to Thoreau in proportion as they are poor in that it is poverty that enjoys true wealth. Likewise, a model farm is under a high state of cultivation, being manured with the hearts and brains of men (Thoreau, 479).

Labor, for Thoreau, has a constant and imperishable moral and it is regarded as “some must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day” (Thoreau, 451). In *Walden*, as a figure for self-reliant labor, the bean-field plays the role of an independent middle ground where Thoreau can withdraw from the political arena and the commercial marketplace. As far as Gilmore is concerned, along with the degradation of the physical object in exchange there occurs a shriveling of the individual (Thoreau, 38). It is the individual that connects work with intellect. If an individual loses his independence, the link is interrupted. Men in the marketplace do not relate as persons but as something less than human; they commit violence against their own nature in their incessant anxiety to induce others to buy their products or their labor. “The finest qualities of our nature,” in the opening chapter Thoreau writes, “like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves or one another thus tenderly” (Thoreau, 327). To earn a living, he has to suppress his individuality and become a mechanical thing; “Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be anything but a

machine” (Thoreau, 327). Exchange brings about the ultimate alienation of man from himself. Engaging in buying and selling is not merely to debase the self but to extinguish it, to hurry into death. Therefore, Thoreau sees the marketplace not as a discipline in self-reliance, an arena where the man of enterprise can prove his worth, but rather as a site of humiliation where the seller has to court and conciliate potential buyers to gain their custom. When the locomotive gets to the woods with the countrymen’s groceries, no man is so independent on his farm that he can refuse them (Thoreau, 414). The interactions of exchange, in Thoreau’s view, brings up not independence but servility.

Thoreau’s insistence on self-reliance and independence can be traced back to the agrarian or civic humanist tradition. Civic humanists considered the economic autonomy of the individual as the basis for his membership in the state. The self-sufficient owner of the soil, in their view, was the ideal citizen because he relied on his own property and exertions for his livelihood without seeking to profit themselves at the expense of others. Commercial enterprise, in contrast, endangered liberty for it fostered dependence on others and, by legitimating the pursuit of private interest, undermined devotion to the common good. Gilmore writes that Jeffersonian agrarianism, the American development of this tradition, retained its anti-market bias and its stress on freedom from the wills of others. In Jefferson’s own formulation from the Notes on the State of Virginia, commerce is productive of subservience, and the independent husbandman uniquely capable of civic virtue (Gilmore, 36).

Just as Franklin’s moral program, Thoreau not only sows the seeds of beans and corn, but also plants the seeds of morals: sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the like. However, Thoreau is obliged to tell the readers the bad results—either worm-eaten or lost their vitality. Via this experience, Thoreau reflects that, the New Englander, instead of paying too much attention to the present harvest, should concern about the new generation of the men, especially the intellectual level. Thoreau writes: “we should never stand upon ceremony with sincerity. We should never cheat and insult and banish one another by our meanness, if there were present the kernel of worth and friendliness. We should not meet thus in haste” (Thoreau, 453).

In *Walden*, the structure of the whole book involves two important lines—reality and imagination. In the chapter “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” Thoreau enthusiastically tells the Reader, “let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward [...] till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we call reality” (Thoreau, 400). Meanwhile, he writes, “time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sand bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars (Thoreau, 400). Thoreau’s labor of building a house and planting beans and corns is his action of getting downward to the bottom of reality. Yet imagination is indispensable for labor. In imagination Thoreau has bought all the farms in succession without involving in the commercial exchange. The imagination carries Thoreau so far that he even has the refusal of several farms. Besides, through imagination, the poet can preserve the most valuable part of the farm in rhyme (Thoreau, 387-8).

In the chapter “The Bean-Field” Thoreau records his experience of digging the bean-field as well as digging the history:

As I drew a still fresher soil about the rows with my hoe, I disturbed the ashes of unchronicled nations who in primeval years lived under these heavens, and their small implements of war and hunting were brought to the light of this modern day. They lay mingled with other natural stones, some of which bore the marks of having been burned by Indian fires, and some by the sun, and also bits of pottery and glass brought hither by the recent cultivators of the soil (Thoreau, 449).

By means of imagination, Thoreau catches a glimpse of the ancient Indian life and enjoys the transcendental moment when the tinkle of stones echoing to the woods and the sky. “When I paused to lean on my hoe,” Thoreau continues, “these sounds and sights I heard and saw anywhere in the row, a part of the inexhaustible entertainment which the country offers” (Thoreau, 449). Obviously, imagination is in an intermediate position between senses and transcendence. Imagination brings about variety and vitality to the sensuous world. While his contemporaries spend their summer

vacation on fine arts or on contemplation, Thoreau devotes his summer days to husbandry. He declares his intentions of cultivating the bean-field as follows:

Not that I wanted beans to eat, for I am by nature a Pythagorean, so far as beans are concerned, whether they mean porridge or voting, and exchanged them for rice; but, perchance, as some must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day (Thoreau, 451).

With imagination, Walden Pond and the bean-field become metaphors which evince rich symbolical meanings. Thoreau considers his laboring in the bean-field as a trope for self-sufficiency and self-culture. Thus, imagination integrates labor with intellect and mediates between civilization and wilderness.

Gilmore compares Walden and Thoreau's well-known essay "Civil Disobedience." He discovers that "Civil Disobedience" calls for resistance to the government, while Walden retreats into the self. This change can be seen in the book's structure, its transition from "Economy" to "Conclusion," from Concord and Thoreau's neighbors to the inwardness of self-discovery. Thus, Gilmore asserts that a mood of withdrawal totally dominates the end of the book, as Thoreau urges his readers to turn their backs on society and look inside themselves (Thoreau, 44). The image left is of solitary individual pursuing his own development, cultivating his own consciousness, in utter indifference to the common good. Gilmore holds that such an image is not only radically at odds with the tone of Walden's beginning; it also amounts to a distorted reflection of the laissez-faire individualist pursuing his private economic interest at the expense of the public welfare. Gilmore further explains that Thoreau's unwitting kinship with social behavior he deplores can be seen in his effort to create a myth of his experience (Thoreau, 44). In Walden, Thoreau compresses his more than two years' experiment in the woods into one year—the cycle of the four seasons. He aspires to make a timeless and universal legend.

From my point of view, the paradoxes, ambivalences and limitations which Gilmore state will not impair Walden's greatness. In the very beginning, Thoreau emphasizes that he is just a sojourner, whether in civilization or in wilderness. In the chapter "Where I Lived, and What I Live For" Thoreau illuminates the ends of his experiment:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it has to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived [...] I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion (Thoreau, 394).

He is not completely independent from the commercial market and society. By experiencing different modes of living by himself, Thoreau has left the invaluable treasure of thoughts: independence, imagination, intellectuality, vitality, self-reliance, self-culture, sincerity, and variety.

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