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Author(s): David B. Raymond

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Henry David Thoreau and the American Work Ethic

David B. Raymond

From 1815 to 1845, the American economy underwent a dramatic transformation from a nation of small, independent farmers and artisans, who produced primarily for subsistence and/or the local markets, to one based on specialization of crops and products produced for a regional or national market. Driven by the insatiable hunger for profits, capitalists worked tirelessly to transform craftwork into machine labor, thereby increasing worker efficiency and productivity. In industry after industry, the process of production was broken down into separate tasks, each performed by an unskilled, inexpensive machine tender. Gone was the intimate and satisfying relationship between the craftsman and his tools and materials. Now the machine ruled the man, as each worker labored according to the machine's pace and rhythm. Gone, too, were the supposedly peaceful days of idyllic farm labor, of men and women working in harmony with nature to provide food, clothing and shelter for their families. Tempted by the same dream of wealth, farmers eagerly embraced the latest advances in labor-saving technology in order to extract a greater abundance from their fields to meet the demands of the burgeoning urban market.

The cultural fuel that fed the engine of economic productivity was the American work ethic. By the early nineteenth century, the American work ethic consisted of a number of widely held tenets that both embraced and justified this market revolution.¹ It was generally agreed that everyone had a moral duty to do some sort of useful or productive work that would benefit both the individual and society. Productive work was assumed to be an act of creativity and hence pleasurable to the worker, giving both satisfaction and profit at the same time. If one worked diligently at one's task and produced something of value to society, career success and wealth would follow. Conversely, if one were idle and did little or no work, then all forms of calamity would follow, leading to poverty, despair, and vice (Rodgers 9-14).

While there is little doubt that Thoreau did not share the materialistic assumptions of his day, one wonders how he made sense of his

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vocation. Scholars have traditionally equated Thoreau's vocation with his work as a writer, but the term avocation would more be more appropriate since Thoreau supported himself more by the sweat of his brow (as a teacher, handyman, surveyor, etc.) than by the ink of his pen. In recent years, scholars have taken two different approaches to the study of the Romantics and work. First, some have been concerned with the impact of the market on the work of writing. These studies have tried to discern how the need to sell a product influenced the literary craft of writing.² The other school of thought in recent scholarly work on the theme of work in the Romantic era has focused on the cultural meaning of work and how writers conceptualized their work in a society that increasing came to measure work's worth in terms of profitability.³ As useful as these studies are for understanding the cultural concept of work or the impact of the market on the task of writing in antebellum America, they do not deal with the question of Thoreau's philosophy of work, nor do they take his other work into consideration. The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of work in the life and thought of Henry David Thoreau, and in so doing to trace the shape and evolution of his philosophy of work.

Careful analysis of Thoreau's life and writings reveals that his philosophy of work emerged gradually over the course of a lifetime of work and reflection. In the first stage, from 1837 to 1845, Thoreau drifted from job to job in search of work that was worthy of his "calling" as poet-philosopher. While he found pleasure in much of his work (he was a good teacher, an innovative pencil maker, and a skilled laborer), he failed to see the significance of the task beyond the paycheck. Not wanting to squander his life in meaningless pursuits, he gravitated from job to job, lamenting the waste of life and postponing any serious engagement with a trade or profession. As a result, Thoreau found himself unemployed much of the time. This led to charges of idleness, which deeply affected the young Thoreau who knew that significant leisure time was necessary for the important work of self-culture. During the next phase of his life, from 1845 to 1849, Thoreau first retreated to Walden Pond, where he endeavored to put Emerson's advice to work by living a life in primary relation to nature as a bean farmer. While he did not succeed as a farmer, he did gain valuable insight into social dimensions of work. Not only did he demand that we find work we love, he also began to realize that the pleasure we derive from work is also dependent on the social conditions as well, such as employer-employee relations and the materialistic pressures of a consumer culture. In the final segment of his life, from 1850 to 1862, Thoreau became deeply engaged in a single profession for an extended period of time. It was only through the praxis of surveying that Thoreau

came to see that the way one works, and the quality of the product or service rendered by work, either adds or subtracts from the common good as well as the good of the individual worker. Hence, all work has great moral significance. How Thoreau arrived at this philosophy of work is the subject of this paper.

The Problem of Vocation, 1837-1845

Sherman Paul once wrote that Thoreau “never lived so harmoniously with himself or with nature as in the few years after leaving college and in the interval at Walden Pond” (57). This may have been so for his intellectual life, but when viewed from the perspective of work, the “apprentice years” were far from idyllic. From the time of graduation from Harvard to his exile at Walden, Thoreau struggled mightily with the problem of vocation. Heavily influenced by Transcendentalism, Thoreau believed that it was the duty of every person to perfect the self. All other aspects of life were subordinated to the act of self-culture (Stoller, “Thoreau’s Doctrine” 443-44). For nearly four years he had tried his hand at teaching but rejected it as too time consuming to be a suitable means of making a living. He was a good instructor, showed concern for his pupils and their learning, and was concerned that the parents received their money’s worth, but since he worked for livelihood more than the good of his students, his teaching was not fulfilling. Thoreau also tried earning his daily bread as a day laborer. He was skilled with his hands and seemed a natural at most manual labor. When the day labor market was slow, he fell back on his father’s trade for support. A skilled pencil-maker, Thoreau’s innovative mind led to significant advances in the production of pencils and substantial increases in the profits of the family business. Yet he quickly tired of the task and left as soon as another opportunity presented itself (Channing 13, 333; Dereleth 16; Lebeaux 75; Petroski 104-25). From 1841 to 1843, he worked as Transcendental handyman on Emerson’s farm, cutting wood, mending fences, maintaining the buildings, and tending the garden in exchange for room and board. From Thoreau’s perspective, this arrangement was ideal. It provided for his support, allowed much leisure time for writing and self-culture, and gave him a chance to work closely with his good friend and mentor. However, this was not a profession fit for a Harvard graduate and, despite his enjoyment of Emerson’s company, he did not stick with it for long.

Approaching thirty with no settled means of support, Thoreau was gaining the reputation as an idler (Paul 17). The comments and criticisms of the townsfolk stung Thoreau, wounding his sense of pride and self-worth. He often took refuge in his journal where he responded

to their looks and comments with entries of self-justification. Writing in his journal in the spring of 1838, he lamented: “What may a man do and not be ashamed of it? He may not do nothing surely, for straightway he is dubbed Dolittle—aye! christens himself first—and reasonably, for he was first to duck. But let him do something, is he the less a Dolittle? Is it actually something done, or not rather something undone; or, if done, is it not badly done, or at most well done comparatively?” (I:34). When he felt chastised for not being about in the fields or pastures doing productive work, he would reassure himself that the fields he tended yielded more valuable reward than grain or lumber, for he was working hard at the truly important work of self-culture. The fruits of their labors were fleeting but he was laying up treasure where moth and rust do not corrupt (*Journal* I:300, 312-14, 426-28; Miller 123, 151, 162, 184).

Thoreau’s journals also reflect his growing sense of frustration and bitterness over the need to get his living by working at tasks that were not worthy of his time. “Most who enter on any profession,” Thoreau wrote, “are doomed men” (*Journal* 1:241-42). The routine of life will soon overwhelm them, focusing their every thought and deed on their job, leaving no time for the important things in life. Thoreau lamented the fact that he was living a “tame life,” that his soul was settling down into a mindless routine (*Journal* I:115). He expressed concern that he would be thrown off the path of his true calling. “We can never afford to postpone a true life to-day to any future and anticipated nobleness. We think if by tight economy we can manage to arrive at independence, then indeed we will begin to be generous without stay. We sacrifice all nobleness to a little present meanness” (*Journal* I:241). Thoreau realized the need for work in the life of the scholar (“Great thoughts hallow any labor”), but he was unable to see how any job could justify much time away from the more important work of self-culture (*Journal* I:250).

Likewise, his correspondence during this time was filled with gloomy assessments of his work. In a letter to Mrs. Lucy Brown in the fall of 1841, he described himself as “unfit for any practical purpose,” and he goes on to liken his work in his father’s pencil factory to the forced service of Admetus to Apollo. Writing to Isaiah T. Williams in 1842, he confessed that he considers “the trades and professions as traps which the Devil sets to catch men in.” He wondered what Jesus, or Homer, or Socrates did for work and how much of their lives were given up to making a living (*Correspondence* 47, 68; Paul 21).

Thoreau was not alone in his struggles with the problem of work. As he was abandoning teaching as a profession, George Ripley, in March of 1841, approached Thoreau and asked him to join Brook Farm, the communitarian venture that placed the problem of vocation squarely

at the center of its endeavors. Even though there was much in Brook Farm's philosophy of living with which Thoreau would have agreed (voluntary choice of labor, living and working close to nature as self-sufficient farmers), he rejected their assumption that one could change the world by altering the social structure. True reform must begin with the individual, so he declined Ripley's offer.⁴

Insight into Thoreau's assessment of Brook Farm and other such communities can be gleaned from his review of J.A. Etzler's *The Paradise within the Reach of All Men*, published in 1843.⁵ In his book, Etzler outlines plans for a Fourieristic technological utopia where machines would produce all of the goods, relieve men of the drudgery of work, and free them to spend more time in self-development. Etzler saw this as the salvation of humankind, but Thoreau thought otherwise. He begins by pointing out that Etzler's reform (and all such communes) was fundamentally flawed because he erroneously believed that a change in institutions would lead to a change in people. Like Emerson, Thoreau believed that true reform begins with the individual and spreads outward to society. It is not the place or institution that makes the person but the person that makes the institution. Thoreau also took issue with Etzler's assumption that all work was a curse to be avoided. For Etzler, elimination of work meant paradise restored, but Thoreau sees this as a major fallacy. In the first place, Thoreau pointed out that it is folly to think that man could escape labor. Machines could be made to do the work of men but men will still have to tend the machines; or, as he liked to put it, someone will have to turn the crank. More importantly, Etzler overlooked the inherent innate value of work. Thoreau did not believe that work is a curse to be avoided; rather, he saw it as a necessary part of the human condition. Even though he had yet to find his own calling, Thoreau espoused the Emersonian view that each person must find his/her work and do it for its own sake (Fink 103). A person cannot be truly happy unless he/she has work that fulfills his/her talent. If we are able to eliminate labor, as Etzler suggests, then we will lose something vital to our humanity.

As confident as he was that a communal approach to the problem of work would fail, he still had not solved the problem of vocation for himself. In all of his pursuits, with the possible exception of writing, his main concern was with the financial reward of the task. He never took the work seriously, never tried to master a trade or profession, never tried to find worth in the work itself. How could he when he saw all work as an obstacle to the real work of self-culture? Frustrated, Thoreau retreated to Walden Pond to suffer his "forty days in the wilderness" (Krutch 69). What he hoped to find there was a poetic way

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to make his living, for it was clear that if getting a living is not poetic then living could not be either.

The Work Ethic of Walden, 1845-1849

It is readily acknowledged that Thoreau's experience at Walden transformed him both personally and as a writer, but life at the pond also began to transform his philosophy of work. Emerson had long espoused that everyone should find work that suited his or her talent and do it, but until now Thoreau had never fully comprehended Emerson's point, for never before had he experienced the pleasure of doing good work. At Walden he spent the majority of his time writing, and this opened his eyes: he now could see that doing the right work, work that exercised one's talents, made it enjoyable and gave it meaning and purpose beyond the paycheck.

Less successful was his attempt to find a suitable means of support. Underlying his sojourn to Walden Pond was the belief that farming, which put the worker in primary relation to nature, was the ideal way to make a living. However, living close to nature and providing for his own needs by the work of his hands had a certain appeal on paper that it lacked in the field. Farming was time consuming, arduous work that demanded much and left little time for anything else, so after two years of subsistence living, Thoreau left the pond and the simple life behind to once again become Emerson's Transcendental handyman (Harding 179-87).⁶ From October 1847 to July 1848, Thoreau managed the Emerson household finances, tended the fields, repaired the buildings, played with the children, and generally acted as caretaker for Emerson's family while Emerson was away on literary business in England. Upon Emerson's return, Thoreau returned home to live with his parents. He worked at odd jobs until fall when his father suffered a serious loss in his pencil business. An order of wooden pencil casings was destroyed in a fire, and since his father did not have insurance, the loss caused a severe strain on the family's finances. Ever the family man, Thoreau remained at home to help with the pencil business while his father tried to recover from his losses (Harding 221-22, 233-35). Thus, by 1849, Thoreau's experiment in living off the land had come full circle and he remained a man without an occupation.

Signs of discontent and despair over work resurfaced again in Thoreau's correspondence. In an 1847 letter to Emerson, Thoreau reported on the work he had done on the farm before pausing to reflect on his usefulness in general.

I heartily wish I could be of good service to this household. But I, who have only used these ten digits so long to solve the problem of living, how can I? The world is a cow that is hard to milk—life does not come so easy But the young bunting calf, he will get at it. There is no way so direct. This is to earn one's living by the sweat of his brow. It is a little like joining a community, this life, to such a hermit as I am; and as I don't keep the accounts, I don't know whether the experiment will succeed or fail finally. At any rate, it is good for society, so I do not regret my transient nor my permanent share of it. (*Correspondence* 188-89)

Work was also a concern expressed in his correspondence with H. G. O. Blake. In a letter written in May of 1848, Thoreau informed Blake that how we earn our daily bread is one of the most important and practical questions we can ask. We must seek employment “honestly and sincerely, with all (our) hearts and lives and strength.” If we do, our labor will be pleasurable. A year later, he advised Blake to live a balanced life, “acceptable to nature and to God.” He goes on to confess, “These things I say; other things I do” (*Correspondence* 219-20, 247).

Despite these gloomy private musings, Thoreau had learned much about work during his brief stay at Walden Pond and he shared these insights with the readers of *Walden*. As for “the mass of men who are discontented, and idly complaining of the hardness of their lot,” he advised them to work less (16). The opening chapter, “Economy,” rails mercilessly against the sin of overworking.⁷ The obsession with having and getting more things has driven us to work ever more hours in pursuit of ever more money. The twelve labors of Hercules are a trifle compared to the amount of work done by the average citizen. We make ourselves sick earning and saving for a day when we might become sick. Our work habits are so overwhelming that we do not have time to be anything but machine. Our work is without end (*Walden* 3-5). We drive ourselves to work like a slave on a plantation, but the slave has the better of it. “It is hard to have a southern overseer; it is worse to have a northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself” (*Walden* 7). And to what end? This incessant work and its attendant materialism corrode our lives, cheapen our relationship with others, and undermine our morality. People are so concerned with their business and work that they will do anything to keep it. Out of fear that we will lose business or employment, we “cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men” for our “labor would be depreciated in the *market-place*.” We say and do whatever is needed to get a job or sell our wares. We do not have “leisure for a true integrity day by day,” we have “no time to be anything but a machine” (*Walden* 6). By working so much, so

miserably, and so dishonestly, men miss the finer fruits in life. Sadly, they think this is the only available option. We may not suspect that there is another way to live and get our living, but Thoreau did.

How do we refrain from working too much? Thoreau's answer was easy: simplify, simplify, simplify. If we reduce our wants, we will reduce the hours that we need to work. To do so we must distinguish our needs from our wants. The basic needs in life are food, clothing, shelter, and fuel. Each of these can be satisfied in a simple or complex manner. For example, a diet of staples, simply prepared, satisfies our hunger and refuels our bodies. Should we complicate our meals, we complicate the cost and time for preparation, and the necessity becomes a luxury and a hindrance to living. To drive home his point, Thoreau reminds his reader that the cost of any item we purchase "is the amount of what I will call life," in terms of labor, we must give up getting it (*Walden* 11-15, 31).

Once we have lessened the number of hours worked, we can be more selective of the kind of work we do. "Let not to get a living be thy trade, but thy sport" (*Walden* 207). A Transcendentalist like Thoreau believed that each person had a unique talent that must be honored through work. More than a means to material ends, work should also be meaningful to the worker, an expression of his skills and abilities. Beginning with the construction of his house, Thoreau found pleasure in nearly all of the work that he did while at Walden Pond. Unwilling to "resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter" (*Walden* 46), he was fully engaged with his task, exercised his manual dexterity, enjoyed nature while he worked, and saw purpose and meaning in his project (Herreshoff 20-27). Thoreau's bean field provides another vivid example of joyful work. During his first summer at Walden, Thoreau planted two and a half acres of beans for the market. He learned to hoe diligently each morning, chase off woodchucks and squirrels, and keep a constant vigil against the beans' mortal enemy, the weed. By using hand tools rather than horse drawn implements, he became "intimate" with his beans, and over time he "came to love (his) rows" for they seemed to attach him to the earth (*Walden* 155). The beans were no longer a means to an end; they had become an end in themselves, a source of pride and satisfaction. Even a task as mundane as cutting firewood seems to have given Thoreau great pleasure. "Every man looks at his woodpile with a kind of affection," Thoreau wrote; "I loved to have mine before my window, and the more chips the better to remind me of my pleasing work" (*Walden* 251). This positive work experience at Walden Pond opened Thoreau's eyes to the pleasures of good work.

Aside from his own experience, Thoreau also recorded reflections on the work of others while at Walden. A good example of getting a

living by sport and not trade was Alex Therien, the Canadian wood-chopper. Therien was never in any hurry to do his work; rather, he sauntered to his task, determined to take his time and do the job right. A skilled chopper, he cut the trees close to ground for easy re-growth of the forest and to make it safer and easier for sleds and wagons to pass through the woods without damaging their undercarriages. Therien also seemed to confirm Thoreau's belief that we must enjoy our work and that work done right was innately satisfying. No matter what the conditions, the woodchopper was always in a good mood (*Walden* 144-48).

Not only did Thoreau demand that people find work that they enjoy, he also insisted that work be done morally. For Thoreau, the morality of work meant two things. First, one's work must be of good quality. All work should be conceived and completed as a craftsman or an artist conceives his work; it must be done for the sake of the craft or art and not for the sake of the market (Harding 140; Stoller, *After Walden* 50). Every worker, Thoreau believed, should "not be ashamed to invoke the Muse" when his work is done (*Walden* 330). To do less than a quality job demonstrates a lack of regard for the "higher laws" of work.

The other moral mandate was never to work at the expense of another. Since all need to follow their own path of self-culture, compelling another person to engage in work not of his/her choosing was not acceptable. If everyone provided for their own needs and did so with a concern for others, then there would be no need to exploit the labor of others to gain one's own support. If each person would work for the necessities of life and not the luxuries, no one would need or be able to get their living at the expense of another. "When men begin to do, not merely unnecessary or artistic, but luxurious and idle work, with their assistance, it is inevitable that a few do all the exchange work with the oxen, or, in other words, become the slaves of the strongest" (*Walden* 57). In this, Thoreau denounced Southern slaveholders, Northerner factory owners, and railroad executives for having greater concern for profits than for people (Matthiessen 172-73).

If his sojourn at Walden Pond was an effort to find work that was compatible with the good life by living out the Emersonian ideal of working at one with nature, then Thoreau's experiment must be judged a failure. Even so, he did gain valuable insight into the nature of good work. Enjoy your work. Do it well. Do it in an honest and agreeable manner. These were the lessons learned at Walden Pond. What was lacking was a profession or trade that would allow him to not only practice these virtues but also integrate his work into the common good.

Life (and Work) with Principle, 1850-1862

The 1850s were turbulent times for both Thoreau and Concord. Concord was at the height of an agricultural revolution that was transforming traditional patterns of work. Prior to the 1840s, the farmers of Concord were far from the materialistic workaholics that Thoreau derides in the early pages of *Walden*. Most were dependent on each other for labor and even the basic tools needed to perform their work. One third of Concord farmers did not own their own oxen, over half could not afford a plow, and three quarters lacked a harrow. Without the basic resources to conduct their trade, the vast majority were forced to barter with their neighbors, borrowing what they lacked and lending what they had. The growth of port and factory cities and the coming of the railroad changed their static but satisfactory (from Thoreau's perspective) lives. The growth of urban centers and port cities in the early 1800s created a large, competitive market for farm products such as eggs, butter, milk, and vegetables, and the railroad offered the means of transporting these perishable goods to market. With expanded opportunities for greater profits and the promise of greater material abundance, many farmers seized the chance to produce more crops for the burgeoning urban market. Production for the market led to a monetization of labor that virtually destroyed the old barter system. In need of additional workers to tend their expanded fields, farmers turned to day laborers and/or increased the number of hours worked personally (Gross 42-54). In this way, farming came to be more a way of making a living than a way of life. This trend greatly disturbed Thoreau.

Not only were the early 1850s economically turbulent times for Concord, they were economically trying times for Thoreau personally. By the end of the 1840s, his literary career appeared to be taking off. He was in demand as a lecturer, a few of his lectures were finding their way into print with some of the major periodicals, and he had published his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, in 1849. Before the year ended, however, Thoreau's rise to modest fame took a precipitous fall. His essay "Resistance to Civil Government" was subjected to either benign neglect or severe criticism in the literary press, and sales of his book failed to materialize, leaving him in debt for the bulk of the publication costs. Out of his personal failure and anxiety came a decade of reflection that sharpened his perspective on work. For thirteen years, Thoreau had labored at work that he was ambivalent about to support his avocation of writing and self-culture. He never committed himself to one particular job for more than three years at a time, nor was he compelled to work on anything approaching a regular basis. Having meager wants and generous friends and family, Thoreau was always able

to earn enough money to create the illusion of self-support. Now, forced to work more than ever before, Thoreau struggled to find meaning and purpose in his work.

Out of his financial need, Thoreau stumbled upon a vocation that was both suitable to his talent and capable of supporting his avocation with minimal effort: surveying. His first encounter with surveying was as a schoolteacher, when he bought a combination leveling instrument and circumferentor to illustrate the practical use of mathematics. On good days, he took his class outside and taught them how to apply their math skills to the practical problem of surveying. After abandoning teaching, he did not survey again, aside from an occasional job for friends or family, until he took up the tools of the trade to pay his publication debt to James Munroe & Company. In the fall of 1849, he drafted a handbill to advertise his services and, using his old tools and a compass and chain borrowed from Cyrus Hubbard, he began surveying in earnest. By the fall of 1849, he was busy enough to begin keeping a notebook on his work. By the spring of 1850, he could justify the purchase of a better set of instruments and surveyed steadily the remainder of his life (Harding 83-84, 235, 274-77; Emerson 19).

Surveying proved to be an ideal job for Thoreau in number of ways. First, it put him in close relation with nature. Surveying property gave him a perspective on nature that differed from that of his leisurely saunters. As he noted in his journal, a man at work in the fields or the woods is the best observer of nature. "A man can hardly be said to be *there* if he *knows* that he is there, or to go there if he knows where he is going. The man who is bent upon his work is frequently in the best attitude to observe what is irrelevant to his work" (*Journal* III:123). In addition to heightening his appreciation of nature, surveying also complemented his avocation as writer.

Hard and steady and engrossing labor with the hands, especially out of doors, is invaluable to the literary man and serves him directly. Here I have been for six days surveying in the woods, and yet when I get home at evening, somewhat weary at last, and beginning to feel that I have nerves, I find myself more susceptible than usual to the finest influences, as music and poetry. The very air can intoxicate me, or the least sight or sound, as if my finer senses had acquired an appetite by their fast. (*Journal* III:126)

Finally, surveying provided a steady source of income in the most agreeable way. Even though he did not charge much more than handyman's wages, Thoreau could still easily earn enough money for his support in less time than required by either teaching or pencil making

(Harding 274-77; 325-27; Canby 301-03; Meltzer 168-71; Chura 36-64). Given these obvious advantages, it is somewhat remarkable that it took him so long to realize that surveying was his ideal vocation.

Having found his right vocation, Thoreau's appreciation for work began to grow. Prior to 1850, Thoreau made few entries in his journal about work, and the few that he did make were either highly critical of work in general or guilt-laden rationalizations for his lack of gainful employment. Once he entered the job market on a semi-regular basis, he began to record his reflections on work with increasing regularity. From 1850 to 1854, his journal musings were of two types. For the first time in his life, Thoreau regularly recorded a large number of positive entries on work. In particular, the entries made in the early 1850s include a significant number of approving accounts of work and its benefits. Here we can find admiring portraits of men gathering hay, threshing corn, clearing fields, or cutting lumber as well as several reflections on the value of labor to the laborer.⁸ No longer did he see all workers leading lives of quiet desperation. Instead, he found in these steady hardworking New Englanders models of diligence and integrity. What urged them on in their endeavors was a sense of vocational purpose that Thoreau had previously overlooked in his observations of work life in Concord.

The men that Thoreau admired most were the backwoods country farmers such as George Minott, Reuben Rice, George Melvin, Sam Barrett, Cyrus Hubbard, and others who exemplified with their lives, and not just their words, the simple life he sought to live. "How I love the simple, reserved countrymen, my neighbors," he wrote. "[S]incere and homely, as I am glad to know, is the actual life of these New England men . . . and doing the indispensable work, however humble" (*Journal* IX:151, XI:379). Men of quiet, stoical integrity, they lived their lives by the higher law of morality. For example, McKean (first name unknown) is seen as one who "never says anything, hardly answers a question, but keeps at work; never exaggerates, nor uses an exclamation, and does as he agrees to" (*Journal* III:197). Likewise, Thoreau singles out Cyrus Hubbard for praise as a man who is superior to the ideals he tries to live by. An eminently honest man, the particular Thoreau labeled him a kindred spirit (*Journal* IX:144-45). Rueben Rice is admired by Thoreau as one of the few men who has learned "the rare art of living." He does not dwell in "untidy luxury," does not succumb to the temptation to become a mere caretaker of his possessions, living off the income from his investments. All work that needs to be done on his property Rice does himself in a slow but steady fashion, enjoying both the act of work as well as its product. Nor is he obsessed with working. If the spirit moves him, he is as likely to go fishing with his son as he is to head for the field to hoe his crops, for Rice is determined to live life to its fullest

(*Journal* VIII:26-27; IX:289). What drew Thoreau to these men was the fact that they were not swayed by the lure of great luxuries; rather they had learned to content themselves with the simple pleasures of life. Thoreau also admired the fact that they knew what their talents were and followed them without deviation. George Melvin was respected because he persisted in “follow(ing) his own bent” by hunting instead of farming (*Journal* IX:148). Finally, these men were men of nature who knew how to handle a team of horses, hunt game, or wield an axe and do it with minimal harm to the environment. Laboring naturally and with great pleasure, these simple country men lived the ideal life (*Journal* III:230, IX:148-49, 151).

For Thoreau, a return to a simple, self-reliant lifestyle, focused on acquiring only the essentials of life (food, clothing, and shelter) in an independent and self-sufficient way, would create a society where all could enjoy their work. Although farming is considered one of the noblest and most satisfying ways of making a living, a farmer with the wrong motive (a profit motive) could end up making this good work bad (Dean 312-18). For farming to be a way of life, it must be for self-support, not for profit. To Thoreau, Minott represented the ideal or poetical approach to farming.

Minott is, perhaps, the most poetical farmer—who most realizes to me the poetry the farmer’s life—that I know. He does nothing with haste and drudgery, but as if he loved it. He makes the most of his labor, and takes infinite satisfaction in every part of it. He is not looking forward to the sale of his crops or any pecuniary profit, but he is paid by the constant satisfaction which his labor yields him. He has not too much land to trouble him,—too much work to do,—no hired man nor boy,—but simply to amuse himself and live. He cares not so much to raise a large crop as to do his work well. He knows every pin and nail in his barn. If another linter is to be floored, he lets no hired man rob him of that amusement, but he goes slowly to the woods and, at his leisure, selects a pitch pine tree, cuts it, and hauls it or gets it hauled to the mill; and so he knows the history of his barn floor.

Farming is an amusement which has lasted him longer than gunning or fishing. He is never in a hurry to get his garden planted and yet [it] is always planted soon enough, and none in the town is kept so beautifully clean.

He always prophesies a failure of crops, and yet is satisfied with what he gets. His barn floor is fastened down with oak pins, and he prefers them to iron spikes, which he says will rust and give way. He handles and amuses himself with every ear of his corn crop as much as a child with its play-

things, and so his small crop goes a great way. He might well cry if it were carried to market. The seed of weeds is no longer in his soil.

He loves to walk in a swamp in windy weather and hear the wind groan through the pines. He keeps a cat in his barn to catch the mice. He indulges in no luxury of food or dress or furniture, yet he is not penurious but merely simple. If his sister dies before him, he may have to go to the almshouse in his old age; yet he is not poor, for he does not want riches. He gets out of each manipulation in the farmers' operations a fund of entertainment which the speculating drudge hardly knows. With never-failing rheumatism and trembling hands, he seems yet to enjoy perennial health. Though he never reads a book,—since he has finished the "Naval Monument"—he speaks the best of English. (*Journal* III:41-43)

Here is a portrait of the ideal "working man," a man at peace with himself, his work, and nature. These simple farmers served as an inspiration for Thoreau in his quest for simple living, and as ideal types by which to measure the success of his work and that of others.

Conspicuously absent from Thoreau's musings on poetic living are his peers and/or mentors in the Transcendentalist movement—Emerson, Carlyle, Brownson, or Channing—who had written extensive treatises on the subject of work. While they may have influenced Thoreau in theory, they had little to offer when it came to the practical problem of making a life as well as a living. In his 1847 review of Carlyle's works, Thoreau turns Carlyle's rhetoric against him. In his classic work *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle expressed his admiration for two types of men: the "toilworn craftsman" and the "Artist." The former toils that we may have food for the body, the later so that we may have food for the soul. Better still is the man who is able to labor for both ("Thomas Carlyle" 243-45). Thoreau wholeheartedly agreed with Carlyle's views but found no living examples of the "peasant saint" who combines the two (245, 251-52). As much as he admired Carlyle and Emerson, he believed they were content to produce work that is accessible only to the middle class. Speaking the elevated language of literature and philosophy, they obscured their message for the common people. What the working man needs is someone who can translate the wisdom of philosophy and literature into the language of daily labor (Paul 206-11; Gilmore 14; Bromell 81-85). This Carlyle and Emerson knew but did not do. The only way to bridge the gap between the "Artists" and the "toilworn craftsmen" is to find a man who can live both the life of the body and the life of the mind. Thoreau believed he was that man. He lived the life of a poet-philosopher and was conver-

sant with the wisdom of the ages. At the same time, he lived the life of a working man, making pencils, teaching school, and doing day labor.

The voice of the “peasant saint,” uttering lofty thoughts made plain by the practical application of making a living to the problem of vocation, can be found in Thoreau’s famous essay “Life without Principle.”⁹ More than preachment, this essay speaks with the voice of experience and relies on examples drawn from Thoreau’s everyday work experience, making his message accessible to all. Some critics have labeled it a more caustic version of *Walden*, but it is much more than a mere rehash of Walden ideals (Richardson 332; Schneider 133-35). “Life without Principle” retains the virtues of *Walden* while adding a significant social critique through a more exacting application of morality to both the individual and social aspects of work. In keeping with the wisdom of *Walden*, Thoreau begins his essay with an anti-materialistic condemnation of the profit motive (the pursuit of money “almost always without exception lead[s] downward”), warns the reader against working too much, and urges his audience to find pleasure in their work, for “if getting a living is not [inviting and glorious], then living is not” (“Life without Principle” 158, 160).

More than personal satisfaction (or a paycheck), the “aim of the laborer should be, not to get his living, to get a ‘good job,’ but to perform well a certain work” (“Life without Principle” 159). Thoreau believed that all of life, including work, must be governed by the “higher laws” of morality. Based on his experience as a surveyor, Thoreau was convinced that there was an honest way to work that entailed not only forthrightness in marketplace relations but also integrity in the way one worked. To support his claim, Thoreau offers two examples. As a surveyor, he knew that the ideal survey was the one that was most accurate, but some of his clients were not content with this kind of good work. They did not care whether he used the best, most accurate methods in doing his work; all they were concerned with was getting the most money for their land, or land for their money. If an accurate survey furthered their ends, then they urged him to be accurate; if not, then a measure that was less than accurate was good enough for them. A more blatant example of dishonesty involved the sellers of firewood. Firewood was the main source of heating fuel in New England and was sold by the cord. A cord is a stack of wood that measures four feet wide by four feet high by eight feet in length. To facilitate the measure of a cord, Thoreau devised a rule for accurately measuring cordwood, but when he presented it to the firewood sellers, they quickly rejected it for they “did not wish to have their wood measured correctly” if it meant a loss of profits (156, 159).

Through his work as a surveyor, Thoreau came to realize that the moral integrity of one's work is closely related to the ideal of "getting your living by loving." As Joseph Wood Krutch has put it, "genuinely useful work is joy-giving, and therefore also an end in itself" (151). The man who loves his work will always do a better job because he holds it in high regard and will never violate the integrity or ideal of the task. The man who does it for the money has only a fleeting connection to his work and will do it in a manner that minimally satisfies the customer while maximizing his wages. So, "Do not hire a man who does your work for money," Thoreau advised, "but him who does it for the love of it" ("Life without Principle" 159).

Thoreau also came to a clearer understanding of the social dimension of work. He insisted that the work we do must add something of value to the common stock. To gauge the rightness of one's work, Thoreau developed a standard of usefulness to measure the moral worth of any task. For any economic transaction to be moral, both parties must receive something (goods or services) of value. Next, the goods and services involved in the deal must pass his test of functionality—do they serve one of the basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter? A good application of this criterion comes from the story of Lord Timothy Dexter. One morning, Thoreau observed a neighbor and his team of horses drawing a heavy load of hewn stone to town, "one of the sacred band, doing the needful but irksome drudgery." At first glance, Thoreau was impressed with the "honest, manly toil" and silently heaped praise on the laborer, for he assumed, wrongly, that the stone was to be put to good use in building a house or barn for some worthy citizen. Here was the model of good work, a man engaged in honest toil, supporting himself by his labor and contributing something of value to others (transportation of building materials) in exchange for his wages. Later that same day, Thoreau discovered that the granite hauled by the teamster was to adorn the home of one of the local notables. Suddenly all the dignity departed from the labor and Thoreau's praise turned to censure. For a good or service to be morally acceptable, it must be useful to the producer as well as to the recipient. Production of granite slabs to decorate a rich man's lawn served no useful purpose and therefore Thoreau deemed the teamster's work but useless toil, unworthy of his earlier praise ("Life without Principle" 157-58).

By the end of his life Thoreau had articulated one of the most balanced and coherent philosophies of work ever devised by an American. The culmination of a lifetime of reflection, "Life without Principle" is the most complete statement of Thoreau's philosophy of work. To be fully human one must have time to read and think, to walk in and commune with nature, and to reflect on the meaning of life.

Therefore, the amount of work should be kept to a minimum so that you have adequate time for living. The way to limit work is to live life simply, working for your needs and not your wants. Get as much pleasure from earning your daily bread as eating it. Work with integrity, for all of life, including work, must be governed by the “higher laws” of morality. Make sure that your work “add(s) to the common stock.” Work that does not provide something of value to both buyer and seller is immoral and should not be done. Finally, never live off the labor of others. Every person must be free to pursue his/her own talent and happiness, and to restrict one person’s freedom by taking a portion of the profit of their labor for yourself is wrong. The more materialistic the person, the greater the temptation, which brings us back to the virtue of a simple lifestyle.

Conclusion

Only in the final years of his life did Thoreau come to terms with that eternal struggle over how to make a life while trying to make a living. Instead of embracing the dominant views of the day, Thoreau developed a modified version of the American work ethic, embracing what was acceptable (work as a creative act that is pleasurable and good for the worker, and the social good of adding something of value to the common stock), modifying what was not (work as a mere means to wealth and idleness as a waste of one’s life), and adding what was missing (all of work has a moral integrity of its own which must be obeyed if the work and the worker are to be moral). In some respects, Thoreau’s philosophy of work was rather conservative, hearkening back nostalgically to an idyllic past where work and leisure were held in right balance (Rogers 1). On the other hand, his vision of work as a means of personal fulfillment was quite radical. Not content to see work as a mere means to an end, he anticipated the alienated workers of the twentieth century, victims of the profit-driven work ethic of the nineteenth century, who demanded from their work greater personal fulfillment. Thoreau’s philosophy of work was recognized by the labor movement as a vision of good that could liberate them from the lives of quiet desperation that was their lot in industrial society (Matthiessen 171). The time has come to add the title of philosopher of work to Thoreau’s reputation as man of nature, a first-rate writer, and a political visionary.

NOTES

¹ For an historical overview see Charles Seller, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991). On the impact

of the market revolution on the American work ethic see Herbert Applebaum, *The American Work Ethic and the Changing Work Force: An Historical Perspective* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1998), 61-128.

² Francis B. Dedmond, "Economic Protest in Thoreau's Journals," *Studies Neophilologica*, 76 (1953-54), 65-76; Leo Stoller, *After Walden: Thoreau's Changing Views of Economic Man* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1957); Leonard Neufeldt, *The Economist: Henry Thoreau and Enterprise* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989); Jesse Bier, "Weberism, Franklin, and the Transcendental Style," *New England Quarterly* 43 (June 1970), 179-91; Thomas D. Birch and Fred Metting, "The Economic Design of *Walden*," *New England Quarterly* 65 (December 1992), 587-602; Herbert F. Smith, "Thoreau among the Classical Economists," *ESQ* 23 (2nd Quarter 1977), 114-22; John Patrick Diggins, "Thoreau, Marx, and the 'Riddle' of Alienation," *Social Research* 37 (Winter 1972), 571-98; Reginald L. Cook, "Looking for America: A Binocular Vision," *Thoreau Journal Quarterly* VIII.3 (July 1976), 10-17. The pernicious impact of capitalism is the focus of Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985); Steven Fink, *Prophet in the Marketplace: Thoreau's Development as a Professional Writer* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992); David Dowling, "Commercial Method and Thoreau's Economy of Subsistence Writing," *The Concord Saunterer: A Journal of Thoreau Studies*, N.S. 16 (2008), 84-102.

³ Discussions of the role of vocation in Thoreau's writing may be found in Sherman Paul, *The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1958), 142-43; Robert Milder, "An 'Errand to Mankind': Thoreau's Problem of Vocation," *ESQ* 37.2/3 (1991), 89-139. Other cultural influences are examined by Michael Newberry, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997); Nicholas K. Bromell, *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993); Robert F. Teichgraber III, *Sublime Thoughts/Penny Wisdom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995).

⁴ Thoreau eventually visited Brook Farm in December of 1843 but seeing did not lead to believing. See Sterling Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 2004), 133-34. For an analysis of Thoreau's views on communes, see Lance Newman, "Thoreau's Natural Community and Utopian Socialism," *American Literature* 75.3 (September 2003), 515-44. Anne C. Rose provides a good summary of the Transcendentalists' attempts to reform the economy in her book *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830-1850* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981), 124-40.

⁵ For an in-depth analysis see Robin Linstromberg and James Ballowe, "Thoreau and Etzler: Alternative Views of Economic Reform," *Mid-continent American Studies Journal* II (1970), 22-29; Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 201-04.

⁶ See also Leo Stoller, "Thoreau's Doctrine of Simplicity," *New England Quarterly* 29 (December 1956), 443-61.

⁷ Philip Cafaro argues this point in his study of Thoreau's ethics but fails to consider fully the significance of pleasure in finding meaning and purpose in work. See *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2006), 97-105.

⁸ See Journal II: 452-53; III: 193, 329; IV: 246-47, 483; VI: 422-23, 486-87.

⁹ This essay began as a lecture, "What Shall It Profit?" that Thoreau delivered a number of times to local lyceums from 1849 to 1852. For the background of this lecture, see Bradley P. Dean, "Reconstruction of Thoreau's Early 'Life without Principle' Lectures," in *Studies in the American Renaissance*, ed. Joel Myerson (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1987), 285-364.

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