

Anarchy and Individualism in American Literature:
From Walden Pond to the Rise of the New Left

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Introduction

Anarchy, Individualism, and American Literature

This dissertation tells the story of—or, rather, unfolds one intellectual history of—American individualism on the left. My purpose in telling this story is two-fold. One intention is to reexamine the liberal/conservative binary that stalks American political culture in light of the anarchist insight that the best society is the one that most respects individual liberty. My leading purpose, though, is to resuscitate Emerson and Thoreau from the suffocating influence of this partisan binary on American literary scholarship. In the last several decades, a good deal of American literary scholarship has insisted that individualism in American literature represents the forces of capitalism, elitism, and reaction, the agenda of white male elites, and the ideology of American empire. Thus, Emerson and Thoreau, prophets of American individualism, have become, for many scholars of American literature, unwitting co-conspirators of “the system.”

This understanding of Emerson and Thoreau has not always been assumed, however. In the Gilded and Progressive Ages (roughly spanning the years between 1880 and 1930), anarchists in the United States were arguing that Emerson and Thoreau were progenitors of their own political philosophy. The foremost public figure for this political philosophy was Emma Goldman, who belonged to a cohort of educated anarchist propagandists and agitators sharing the belief that Emerson, Thoreau, and much of the tradition of American individualism expressed an underlying anarchist ideology. Emerson and Thoreau, as far as radicals like Goldman were concerned, were branches in a larger anarchist family tree whose fruition would soon lead to a new order of society based on the anarchist principle of voluntary cooperation. Their reading and

understanding of Emerson and Thoreau forms the heart of this dissertation. They offer what one might call an “anarchist hermeneutic,” an anarchist way of reading classic, canonical American literature—a literature that is too easily dismissed today as reactionary.

Typically, anarchism is used in the English language to imply chaos and disorder, as if a world without government would devolve into dog-eat-dog violence. Amy Kaplan, an American Studies critic, uses it derisively in another sense: as the ideology of unregulated American capitalism that supports American empire. For Kaplan, anarchy refers to the consequences of American empire and capitalism, a definition that she borrows from W.E.B. DuBois.¹ Literally, however, the word “anarchism” means not chaos but no (“an-”) “rulers” (archy). The word’s Greek derivation harkens back to the Athenian roots of the idea, as it was an element of Stoicism, Cynicism (which will be discussed in chapter 1, in relation to Thoreau), and other philosophies and technologies of caring for the self. By anarchism, in this dissertation, I’m referring to four related political philosophies that generally follow the historical organization of the chapters. These are 1) individualist anarchism, 2) philosophical anarchism, 3) revolutionary anarchism, and 4) liberal anarchism. In all of these forms of anarchism, government is seen as the root of human evil and its abolition—or, in the case of liberal anarchism, its transformation—as the solution to human suffering.

Individualist anarchists usually hold that tending to one’s immediate environment and inner consciousness, that changing one’s individual relationship to the state and the markets that all states support, constitutes the beginning of such a revolution.

Philosophical anarchists tend to embrace anarchism as a critical philosophy of society but

typically offer no revolutionary plan of action, either internal or social. Revolutionary anarchists seek the immediate, violent overthrow of all existing governments to be replaced by a world without government. Liberal anarchists, meanwhile, tend to use anarchist tactics, such as individual protest and leaderless direct actions, to achieve essentially liberal aims: the overthrow of a “conservative” order to be replaced by a liberal order that focuses on individual wholeness and happiness as the aim of civil government.

Coloring this work is also a broader definition of anarchism that I believe applies in nations and cultures with strong republican traditions of individualism, limited government, and revolution. I call this anarchism “cultural anarchism.” Many Americans, for example, on the right and the left, share a basic libertarian understanding that government does bad things and must be restrained from doing these things in the name of individual liberty. This attitude, marked by a sound suspicion of corruption and the basic school-taught ideas of Thomas Paine and the “Sprit of ‘76,” spreads through the population and influences much of our political rhetoric and popular culture. When Emma Goldman spoke to American audiences, she did so with the hope of turning their generalized mistrust of government, their cultural anarchism, which she sensed was at the heart of American political culture, into an organized revolutionary anarchist plan of action.

My first two chapters examine Thoreau and Emerson essentially as cultural anarchists, though I borrow from others, discussed in this dissertation, in treating Thoreau as an individualist anarchist and Emerson as a philosophical anarchist. Broadly speaking, individualist anarchism—an idea expressed in the works of Thoreau and Emerson, Adin

Ballou, and Josiah Warren—is the idea, derived from Protestant ethics, that the divine individual conscious trumps government and law. This view has extended from obvious cases of government abuse like slavery to more subtle cases in the economic realm, such as government monopoly of money and government enforcement of property rights.

American individualist anarchists, in fact, saw, and still see, government monopoly of money as a bulwark of slavery and all forms of exploitation. In the nineteenth century, the culture was teeming with experiments designed to liberate the individual from the state and the dominant political economic, to help people live out the Jeffersonian ideal in the most radical spirit of Paine, to offer a path back to Rousseau's state of nature. What we usually think of as Thoreau and Emerson's individualism is really an expression of this cultural background of anarchism, an imminently social philosophy.

Chapter 1 explores, in particular, Thoreau's individualist ethics. These ethics did not remain dormant and self-enclosed at Walden Pond, as critics have complained of Thoreau since the nineteenth century, but expanded to include a critique of mercantilist capitalism and government corruption. Thoreau's experiment at Walden was indicative of his individualist anarchist political perspective, and was not merely a Romantic escape into independent living. Far from rejecting society, Thoreau was deeply engaged in finding solutions to the oppression of human freedom that American government in the expansionist nineteenth century represented for him. In Thoreau's worldview, these solutions began with one's personal ethos—or way of being in the world—and this ethos was informed by self-reflection. To take time out at Walden Pond, to limit one's habits of consumption, to reduce one's dependence on the state, was to remove oneself as far as

possible from the political economy: in other words, from both exploitative markets and from governments that rigged and enforced this exploitation.

Emerson, as chapter 2 explores, represents a stream of anarchism far more circumspect than that of Thoreau. Thoreau was a practical thinker, an engineer who invented a better pencil for his father's pencil factory and who sought to live in accord with literal nature and not just with Nature as a philosophical idea. Emerson's anti-government critique, by contrast, was more philosophical, and it was limited by the broadness with which he came to use the word "Nature" over time, a word that eventually meant for Emerson anything that demonstrated some kind of compensation, or spiritual balance, in the universe. In other words, in Emerson's philosophy, Nature came to mean most anything that was done anywhere. The Civil War thus became a great, just compensation for slavery, even as it subordinated the individual to the state.

Philosophical anarchism, as explained above, is a tradition of intellectual engagement with anti-government philosophy not tied to a given plan of action. In Emerson, this leads to an impasse: without a plan for cooperation between individuals in a nation governed by the morality of the slave-holder, without a plan for revolutionary action beginning at the individual and local level, Emerson is forced, by his own philosophy, to grant the validity of the state as a tool for moral guidance through education and, when necessary, force. Emma Goldman overlooked this face of Emerson, which anticipates the "liberal anarchism" I will describe in chapter 5. For Goldman, rather, the key to Emerson was his defense of the individual in "Self Reliance" and "The American Scholar," two rather standard canonical Emerson texts.

In fact, Emma Goldman's understanding of Emerson, along with that of most of her anarchist comrades described in chapter three, was more simplistic than this dissertation's. When immigrant anarchists spoke and wrote of the individualist anarchism of nineteenth century America for large public audiences numbering in the thousands per night on lecture tours, they did so largely for rhetorical reasons: they wished to defend their European radical ideal with reference to an American one. Nonetheless, they play a central role in this dissertation as interpreters of individualism in American literature. They offer an alternate lens through which to view individualism itself, not as a reactionary bourgeois ideology, but as a leftist ideal. Their understanding of Emerson and Thoreau was situated in their own historical circumstances, and yet their readings shed light, for us, on the array of meanings of individualism available in Emerson and Thoreau's time. In other words, they invite us, as I explore in chapter three, to read Emerson and Thoreau as expositors of an anti-capitalist, anti-government vision of individual liberty.

Together, chapters one, two, and three form a single, straightforward argument about Emerson and Thoreau: that Emma Goldman, Voltarine de Cleyre, Rudolph Rocker, and other public anarchists of the twentieth century were right in reading the individualism of these writers as radical rather than conservative, as anti-statist rather than complicit with the state. Taking the lead of the Gilded Age anarchists, using them as literary critics as much as writers in their own right, the first two chapters set out to contextualize the strains of individualist and philosophical anarchism in Emerson and Thoreau, to show why the intuitive sense the revolutionary anarchists had about these

writers was historically accurate before chapter explains explains their interpretations in detail.

Chapter four continues to follow this note through to the mid twentieth century, focusing again on canonical American writers, the Beats in particular. In this chapter, we view the Beats as inheritors of both a revolutionary and individualist anarchist tradition. The link in this chain of anarchist descent is not Thoreau or Emerson, this time, but Kenneth Rexroth, the “Grandfather of the Beat Generation,” who was himself a product of the anarchist twenties and thirties. Focusing on Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen, this chapter presents Beat Zen as revolutionary anarchism expressed in individualist terms. Snyder and Whalen, both disaffected by post-War American life, with its colonialism and run amok state capitalism, turned to the East to develop a plan that involved both inner transformation and outward communalism, both spiritual self discipline and social transformation toward a voluntarily communalistic—or revolutionary anarchist—society. Doing so, they placed Zen Buddhism in dialogue with revolutionary and individualist anarchism.

Chapter five, the final chapter of this dissertation, brings us closer to our own time by examining what I call “liberal anarchism.” Specifically, in chapter five, I explore the explicitly anarchist work of Lewis Mumford alongside the career of John William Ward, a college president who, alone among his presidential colleagues, decided to publically protest the Vietnam War. Behind Ward’s public act, which stirred up a great deal of public controversy and temporarily threatened Amherst’s alumni funding, stood his understanding of the importance of anarchism in American life as a philosophical and moral spur to direct action. Combining his scholarship on American literature with his

reading of revolutionary anarchist literature, Ward came to justify his individual act of protest, much as Goldman had her many dissident acts, with reference to American individualism.

As a liberal “establishmentarian,” however, Ward’s aims were not revolutionary but essentially liberal: he opposed the Vietnam War in general and Nixon’s bombing of Cambodia in particular. In protesting, he sought to change public opinion and affect government policy, not to fundamentally rearrange society along communist lines as the revolutionary and even the individualist anarchists had desired. He wished, much as Emerson had, for better individuals who, free to speak and dissent, could create better democratic institutions. His anarchism was liberal in the sense that he sought essentially liberal aims—a better society, not a new society, better government, not no government—through direct action inspired by anarchist individualism. In this sense, Ward stands out as representative of an early expression of liberal anarchism, an outlook that arose in the nineteen sixties and has become increasingly important in American civil life. From the anti-WTO protest of 1999, to demonstrations against the Republican National Committee, to the present Wall Street protests and Occupy movements, metaphors of anarchist organization abound today. Each of these protests for liberal aims include and express anarchists theories of decentralized organizational strategy and rely on direct action, causing many of their participants to identify as anarchists. The key to liberal anarchism—anarchist activism for liberal aims—can be found in the essentially liberal bent of Ward’s intellectual process, much as it can be found in Lewis Mumford’s anarchist vision for society, which actually leads toward expansion of government authority into the very consciousness of the individual.

Each chapter, as this intellectual history unfolds, also briefly discusses and tries to correct common academic critiques of American literary individualism. Chapter one addresses critiques of Thoreau's individualism as selfish and anti-social, an image of Thoreau that has become both a cultural and academic cliché. Chapter 2, on Emerson, attempts to correct the critical misconception of Emerson, also quite common, as an expositor of Jacksonian ideology, as a prophet of the frontier individualism of the pioneer. Chapter three, on revolutionary anarchist readings of Emerson and Thoreau, responds to a critical misapprehension of American literary individualism as the sole estate of white male privilege, showing how proletarian outcasts across national and gender lines came to relate quite personally to Thoreau and Emerson as forbears of their own tradition. Chapter four, on the Beats, responds to so-called Orientalist critiques of Beat religiosity, and shows how Snyder and Whalen, far from colonizing "the East" for individualist ends, as a new critical consensus contends, actually adopted their understanding of Zen from the rhetoric of Japanese nationalism. Finally, chapter five responds to a critique of American Studies itself as a discipline aligned with U.S. power and committed to individualism as a pro-nationalist policy.

Critics representing each of these viewpoints are briefly introduced in each of the chapters, and their critiques are addressed through a critical anarchist lens. Viewing American literary individualism through this lens, I demonstrate how a narrow understanding of the scope of American individualism leads to equally narrow conclusions about the role of "canonical" literature in American life. Broadly, each of the pessimistic criticisms of American literature I attempt to refute shares the conviction that individualism is bourgeois, white, and male and that the men who canonized American

literature were seeking to elevate individualism to protect their investment in the bourgeois, white, male status quo by supporting an ideology of American exceptionalism. To describe critics who share this underlying view, I refer to “New Americanist critics” or “New Americanists” in various places. I use this term as shorthand for contemporary postcolonial criticism of American literature and culture because it has been adopted by some of the key scholars behind this criticism, such as Donald Pease and Amy Kaplan, who inaugurated the Duke University Press “New Americanist” series in 1994.

Misreadings of American literature, of Emerson and Thoreau, of Snyder and Whalen, abound, and this “anarchist” reading may be yet another. However, without such a reading, we are destined, I believe, to flatten both American literature and American life, making the former a bizarre caricature of our two party political system. Binaries like individualism and collectivism are products of this system and, like comparable gender and race binaries, are social constructs rooted in language and ideology. Playing out the mundane politics of right and left in the sphere of American literature and American Studies is no more a corrective to the status quo than debating minimum wage, and it leads to no better understanding of American political, social, and cultural life. In a world where an individualist and communist can exist in the same person, where the social good and self-reliance are deemed inseparable, however, the horizons of both American literature and American political possibility emerge.

1. Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2005), 12–14.

Chapter 1

Henry David Thoreau's "Troubled Ocean"

For many of Henry David Thoreau's critics of the nineteen eighties and nineties, especially those emerging from what has been referred to as the New Americanist or postnationalist American Studies movement, Thoreau's place in the American literary canon has come to exemplify what Cecelia Tichi has called the transcendental ethos of "egocentric narcissism." This narcissism, implicit in the term "self-reliance," endorses, the story goes, "violence against the self and others" and reinforces bourgeois "American traditions of hard work and artisanship."¹ As critics in the eighties and nineties like Paul Giles argued, in the realm of the political unconscious, Transcendentalist self-reliance like Thoreau's also underwrote a hard-nosed individualism and celebratory Americanism during the cold war years, one that helped to justify anti-communism abroad and anti-progressivism at home. The ethicist Phillip Hallie, meanwhile, in his 2001 book *In the Eye of the Hurricane: Tales of Good and Evil, Help and Harm*, devoted a chapter to what he considered Thoreau's celebration of an uncompassionate and "unsentimental life of one's own."² For Hallie, Thoreau was "not unlike a lone, hairy wolf" who "loved nature more than man"³ and who turned his back on the core ethical issues of his day. For evidence, Hallie drew upon Thoreau's biting and cynical criticism of charity in his posthumously published *Cape Cod*.

What all of these currents in criticism share is a misapprehension of what Thoreau meant and understood by self-reliance, on the one hand, and by sentiment and charity, on the other. For New Americanist critics and for ethicists like Hallie, as well as for the sociologist Robert Bellah, discussed in the next chapter, the term self-reliance translates

to American individualism, with its supposed capitalist acquisitiveness and indifference to the suffering of others. For Thoreau, however, self-reliance implied a critique of this acquisitiveness, not a celebration of it. In *Cape Cod*, the work on which Hallie focuses his critique, Thoreau registers a consciousness intently aware of the rippling, global consequences of an individual's reliance on the world marketplace. In Thoreau and Emerson both, "individualism"—what he and Emerson actually called "self reliance"—denoted opposition to exploitation, not an endorsement of it.

Throughout *Cape Cod*, applying his individualist ethos this way, Thoreau references the unjust and dangerous practices of nineteenth century shipping interests and the charitable organizations they founded. In the process, his trip to Cape Cod offers Thoreau the occasion for an inward-searching, practical meditation on the heart of social man under modern global capitalism. Thoreau's meditation in *Cape Cod* included a rejection of charitable institutions, such as the Massachusetts Humane Society, which was formed by Massachusetts' elite to help shipwrecked sailors. Thoreau based his rejection of charity, though, not on selfishness and greed, as Hallie has argued, but on the grounds that charity failed to address the endemic problem of national reliance on cheap labor and goods that endangered the lives of sailors in the first place. In its stead, Thoreau affirmed the need for a positive self-reliance, one that rejected the very basis of the exploitative market in which shipping interests and 19th century consumers were entwined. As with his protest against the Mexican-American War on the grounds that it would expand the empire of American slavery, his contemplation of shipwrecks in *Cape Cod* express his rejection of America's capitalist expansion through an empire of global trade.

A recent literature on Thoreau's social context and political commitments has begun to correct the critical misapprehension of Thoreau as a politically disengaged misanthrope whose ideas underwrote first Jacksonian and, later, Cold War acquisitive individualism. As Sam McGuire Worley has argued, for instance, Thoreau used cultural criticism to "ironically explore the inseparability of the self and community" while "arguing for values and concerns" that he saw "unduly neglected or repressed" in nineteenth century culture.⁴ Worley holds, for example, that "The rhetoric of *Walden*" actually "offers a critical exposure of false oppositions of self and society" and "displays (but does not prescribe) the necessity of a reform that transcends the categories of liberal thought" with its emphasis on acquisitive, market-based individualism.⁵ This critical exposure becomes especially clear in Thoreau's exposition of "the perniciousness of private property" and the liberal state that "defines each of its members primarily as property holders." Against these classically liberal visions of individualism, Worley argues, "Thoreau's community is formed out of a more profound and intrinsic network of shared values."⁶ As Sandra Harbert Petrulionis has argued, Thoreau's criticism of his society, particularly its assent to slavery, emerged from a "civic context" that gradually put him in sympathy with Concord abolitionism, such that Thoreau's great abolitionist tracts may be read as the result of "years of persistent effort by determined neighbors around him," especially, Petrulionis underscores, the women of Concord.⁷ By locating Thoreau within the immanently social and largely female context of abolitionism in Concord, Petrulionis' work both traces the evolution of Thoreau's dissent against slavery and calls into question the popular image of Thoreau, often summoned by his critics, as an isolated and masculine individualist mostly indifferent to the social issues of his day.

Referring specifically to the subject of this chapter, meanwhile, Bob Pepperman Taylor has argued, in his exploration of Thoreau's social and political consciousness, that "Thoreau's task in *Cape Cod* is "not simply to debunk our charity and our histories" or to "prove that we should ignore or deny the need to serve" but instead "to suggest the need for reform and transformation" so that we can learn "how to best serve others."⁸ For Bob Taylor, "Thoreau holds that the most praiseworthy and meaningful solidarity will grow naturally among free and independent men and women."⁹ In other words, individual liberty, for Thoreau, implied a serious individual commitment to ethical, political, and social practices of freedom. This is the social strain of his thought that revolutionary anarchists would later emphasize.

Specifically, throughout *Cape Cod*, Thoreau registers an awareness of and explicitly nods to economic and social questions related to shipwrecks and coastal poverty, problems of which his readers would have been aware. Indeed, among the premier scandals of the mid-nineteenth century, as uncovered in *Harper's* and other journals, was the forcing to sea of unworthy vessels in unsafe conditions by investors in the shipping trade. In the text of *Cape Cod*, Thoreau repeatedly refers to two shipwrecks, that of the *St. John* and that of the *Franklin*, which would already have been associated in his readers' minds with social and economic scandal of literally global proportions. Thoreau's contemplative individualism as he considers these shipwrecks leads directly to a critique of *bourgeois* capitalism and the practices of charity that uphold and help to rationalize it. Further, Thoreau's invitation to contemplation, extended to middle-class readers who would have first encountered *Cape Cod* in *Putnam's* magazine, provided the occasion, like Thoreau's shorter works on civil disobedience, principle, property, and

alienated labor, for a call to social justice and to practical renewal of the democratic creed of self reliance.

The Individual and the Private

The stated purpose of *Cape Cod*, a purpose that arguably extends to all of Thoreau's work, was to critique human culture, particularly as he found it in Massachusetts, from the standpoint of an authorial immersion in nature. "I did not see why I might not make a book on Cape Cod," Thoreau announces in the book's first chapter, "as well as my neighbor on 'Human Culture.' It is but another name for the same thing, and hardly a sandier phase of it." While his neighbor, perhaps Emerson, goes about exploring "Human Culture" in the abstract, Thoreau promises to encounter it in its physical reality, in the landscape of the Cape and in the lives of its inhabitants. These lives and these landscapes alike, as the title of Thoreau's first chapter, "The Shipwreck," immediately signals, are literally and figuratively sedimented with sea wreckage, catastrophe, and death. We are steered in the first chapter immediately to a site of maritime destruction at Cohasset: "as we noticed in the streets a handbill headed, 'Death! one hundred and forty-five lives lost at Cohasset,' we decided to go by way of Cohasset,"¹⁰ he writes, describing a decision to examine the shipwreck firsthand, presumably agreed to with as much alacrity by his companion Ellery Channing.

The detached finality with which Thoreau decides to "go by way of Cohasset," apparently disguising any inkling of emotional engagement with his subject, signals that Thoreau will adopt a strategic stance of distanced objectivity in his description of what follows. This "objective" stance enables Thoreau to deploy a sharp critique of the global traffic in human beings, in this case refugees from the Irish potato famine, who had

become human bodies. “The brig *St. John*, from Galway, Ireland, laden with emigrants, was wrecked on Sunday morning;” Thoreau’s description of the first wreck in *Cape Cod* begins, matter-of-factly. According to accounts that would have been available to Thoreau, one hundred forty-five of the *St. John*’s passengers had died in the wreck. Of these, Thoreau describes himself drawn in particular to

one livid, swollen, and mangled body of a drowned girl—who probably had intended to go out to service in some American family,—to which some rags still adhered, with a string, half concealed by the flesh, about its swollen neck; the coiled-up wreck of a human hulk, gashed by the rocks or fishes, so that the bone and muscle were exposed, but quite bloodless,—merely red and white,—with wide-open and staring eyes, yet lustreless, dead-lights; or like the cabin windows of a stranded vessel, filled with sand.

If death, Thoreau asks in consideration of this mangled life, is the law of Nature, “why waste any time in awe or pity” observing the dozens of human bodies tossed up by the sea from the *St. John* and strewn upon the shore “as on the field of battle, till they no longer affected us in any degree, as exceptions to the common lot of humanity?” Instead of pondering crowds of corpses until the sight drives us to pity, he argues, “it is” or should be “the individual and private that demands our sympathy.”¹¹

Contemplating the individual and private details of a single death, of the particular person as distinct from the mass, Thoreau extends his consideration of the Cape outward to global questions of immigration, expatriation, and social justice. We are reminded of the social context and consequences of human traffic in people whose suffering serves to benefit “some American family” poised to exploit *this particular*

young Irish girl's expatriated labor. Thoreau leaves unspoken in this account the "Irish question" in general—his readers would have been aware of the mass exodus of Irish nationals to escape starvation and of their emergence in America's cities. Instead, he asks us to abandon the "awe and pity" we feel when we consider the mass in the abstract and to undergo a far less comfortable meditation on a single individual's embodied suffering. Only when we focus on the immediate, visceral, personal, and individual, Thoreau suggests, are we confronted with the local consequences of global injustice.

In the act of focusing attention on the realistic grotesque details of a single death, Thoreau, at the outset of his story, begins drawing his readers toward the social conditions that made that death possible. As Philip Fisher noted in "Realisms of Detail, State, and Voice," "Realism surprises us into unwanted moments of confronted sight" wherein "by means of the object" we "face what lies behind it."¹² For this reason, realism has often served as a useful rhetorical strategy for reformist writers like Thoreau. Close attentiveness to "detail" in pictorial realism such as Thoreau's allows us to "freight it with meaning," Fisher argues. Thus, "We race to supply the most radical kind of sense: allegory and all-embracing application." Linking the rise of realism with middle-class reform in such novels as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Fisher posits that "[o]ne goal of this new visibility" of realistic detail—which came about within "a new literature of witnesses and voices"—was "social change" that writers hoped could be brought about by "revolt on the part of the middle-class" once they were confronted with "stark depictions of injustice."¹³ Reaching such a middle-class audience in the June 1855 issue of *Putnam's Monthly* (where the opening chapter of *Cape Cod* was first published), Thoreau employed pictorial realism to extend a critique of trade and acquisitive capitalism.

Further, as Thomas Haskell has argued, objective description of the kind Thoreau brought to his depiction of the Irish servant “is compatible with strong political commitment” since objectivity decenters the subjective self, making one “more cognizant of life’s most seductive illusion, which is that the world centers around me.”¹⁴ For these reasons, realism and descriptive objectivity, far from betraying an inner cruelty, were consistent with Thoreau’s challenge, best expressed in *Walden*, that we “settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition . . . through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place which we can call *reality*.”¹⁵

Thoreau’s choice to begin his report of the various wrecks at Cape Cod with the *St. John*, carrying masses of Irish immigrants, also inserts Margaret Fuller’s memory into the text. Fuller had been, in numerous urban op-ed pieces, an unpopular defender of the humanity and dignity of Irish immigrants, and it was to discover her remains from the shipwreck of the *Elizabeth* that Thoreau made the first of four trips he took to the Cape.¹⁶ An article in *Harper’s* in 1861 describing Fuller’s death suggests the *bourgeois* cult of sentimentality that Thoreau, in his visit to the Cape, dismissed as inappropriate to a serious and realistic meditation on social injustice in the shipping industry. In mid-July of 1850, the *Elizabeth*, a brig carrying Margaret Fuller Ossoli, her son, and her husband, among other passengers and goods sailing from Italy, struck a sandbar a few hundred yards from a beach off New York’s Fire Island, where it was gradually submerged under the waves. Mistaking distant lights along the Fire Island sandbars for a lighthouse, the first mate of the *Elizabeth*, having taken charge of the ship at Gibraltar after its captain died of smallpox, accidentally grounded the vessel. Over the next twelve hours, from four

in the morning to four in the afternoon, Margaret Fuller, a key Transcendentalist, advocate of women's rights, and supporter, with her husband, of the Roman Revolution, is rhetorically transformed from a compelling public intellectual into a magisterial symbol of long-suffering womanhood. In its emotional eulogy for Fuller, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* underscored the "wonderful touches of tenderness and bravery in this twelve-hours' drama of agony."¹⁷ In this drama, Fuller's refusal to leave her child's side as the sea engulfed her was juxtaposed against crowds of "wreckers"—men who lived by gathering goods from wrecked ships—ashore, busily getting their living raking together the *Elizabeth's* valuable remains.¹⁸

In the *Harper's* account of Fuller's death, the presence of the Cape's wreckers beside the sentimental image of self-sacrificing womanhood suggests a tale of compassion and sacrifice over and against acquisitive greed. "Margaret's" final twelve hours aboard the *Elizabeth* were marshaled to remind readers of her "tenderness and bravery" as she wrapped her baby, Nino, "in such garments as were at hand and folding him to her bosom, sang him to sleep." Although encouraged to swim ashore, Margaret, sure that Nino could not survive the swim, "would take no merely individual chance." When at last the steward of the *Elizabeth* tried to save the baby, "both were thrown dead upon the beach." "In the final crash" "Margaret," last seen "seated at the foot of the foremast, still clad in her white night-dress, with her hair fallen loose upon her shoulders," "sank at once."¹⁹

"[T]his great loss [of Margaret Fuller], we have, probably, to charge," *Harper's* writer Henry Giles proposed, "not on the ravage of the sea, but on the cruel greed of men" who went about the business of gathering goods from the wreck even as those

aboard heroically, tragically, and compassionately lost their lives. In spite of their hardness of heart, though, at the sight of Fuller's drowned baby laid out, "washed and dressed in a child's frock" that had been found in Margaret's trunk, "even the callous wreckers were softened for the moment by a sight so full of pathetic beauty." So sentimental was the scene that "as the rescued seamen gathered round their late play-fellow and pet, there were few dry eyes in the circle."²⁰ The wash of tears and sympathy in this account of Fuller's death, matched only by the deluge of the sea, called on *Harper's* readers to consider the harsh social and moral conditions that perpetuated the wreckers' coldhearted search for wealth among the remains of "[t]he catastrophe of Margaret's Greek tragedy."²¹ Through identification with the figure of the emotionally converted wreckers suddenly weeping before an infant's swaddled body, readers are called to repent of their own uncharitability and to model, instead, the selflessness of Fuller's love for her child.

That Thoreau had been sent to New York to search for Fuller's remains and effects may have colored his severe critique of the causes and implications of shipwrecks and the injustices that sentimental charity hides. If *Cape Cod* will bring us to an exploration of human culture, as Thoreau promises, we must start, he suggests, by abandoning sentiment and locating "culture" in a network of interlocking human injustices traced along sea routes linking the "old" world to the new, and traced in ways that localize and personalize individual sites of suffering. Cape Cod—human culture—happens *here*, Thoreau suggests in his opening scenes, and the injustice of humanity's treatment of its individual members takes immediate form in a real body. Thoreau's representation of a young Irish girl as a site of human suffering resists the more

sentimental account in *Harper's*. Both authors remind us of particular moral failures endemic to modern conditions of commerce and trade, and both use female figures to drive the point home. One account, however, evokes sympathetic charity by painting Fuller in explicitly allegorical terms, transforming her into a consciously statuesque, Greco-Roman figure of tragedy while holding the wreckers ashore responsible for her death. Thoreau, by contrast, depicts a human body devoid of classical allusion whose associations with “culture” do not span backwards to ancient Athens and Rome, but move laterally in the immediate present from the coast of the United States eastward to Ireland and westward to some urban household awaiting its new servant. The *Harper's* account of Fuller's death transforms Fuller's sacrifice into a tale of human charity. Thoreau—wary throughout *Cape Cod* of the limitations of charity as a response to injustice—offers, by contrast, a naturalistic, even journalistic image of a shipwrecked body to evoke a sense of horror and outrage.

Thoreau's Ethical Sublime

The politics of Thoreau's emphasis on individual suffering in *Cape Cod* corresponds with his critique of the relationship between the nation and the individual in his essay on slavery and economy, “Life Without Principle,” which was printed in William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* in 1854, at the same time Thoreau was working on *Cape Cod*. In this essay, Thoreau contrasts the rights of individuals with the claims of the state and capital, arguing that the individual and particular should always take precedence over nationality and the nation. “Nations! What are nations?” he asks, rhetorically.

It is individuals that populate the world. Any man thinking may say with the

Spirit of Lodin,—

I look down from my height on nations,

And they become ashes before me; —

Calm is my dwelling in the clouds;

Pleasant are the great fields of my rest.”²²

The figure of Lodin, a mythic Icelandic voyager-God known for his heroic kindness, offered Thoreau an elevated perspective from which nations are turned to ashes. Since “individuals populate the world,” they, and not groups, crowds, and nations, were the proper object of concern.

This anti-nationalistic passage, linked with his individualism, identifies Thoreau as an individualist anarchist, as he rejects the authority of the nation and elevates the authority of the individual. Further, this political position was linked with Thoreau’s sense of the sublime, an esthetic category that Thoreau associated with (individual) contemplation and (social) justice. In “Sublimity,” written in 1837 while he still was at Harvard, Thoreau rejected Edmund Burke’s influential Romantic equation between the sublime and terror. If the sublime, Thoreau argued, were mainly terror, then even “brute” animals would have access to it. Something more—reflection—occurs in the human mind confronted with the sublime. As the human mind “sees cause for wonder and astonishment in everything,” one has “only to reflect that he may admire.” By contrast, “Terror avoids reflection, though reflection alone can restore calmness and equanimity.” Thoreau concluded this brief essay arguing, “The emotion excited by the sublime is the most unearthly and godlike we mortals experience.”²³ From the vantage of the “unearthly” observer, “Death itself is sublime” but with “the same sublimity that we

ascribe to the tumult of the troubled ocean.”²⁴ In *Cape Cod*, “the troubled ocean” and the shore become sites of a politicized sublime that calls into question the nationalistic ethics of global trade. The sublime that Thoreau encounters on the Cape, the death and destruction wrought by its troubled ocean and manifest in particular human bodies, invites readers, Lodin-like, to rise above merely national concern.

Thoreau’s topography of injustice at the opening of *Cape Cod*, in fact, echoes his critique of America’s expansionist project westward. Just as we are made aware of the coast as a site of personal suffering on a global scale, Thoreau reminds us that the frontier—that vast mass of land west of the Cape, beginning at the settlements of New England—had been overtaken by the types of people who would reduce a girl fleeing from famine to servitude. Thoreau’s general outlook on those who lived west of the Cape—those men and women of middle-class respectability who troubled his serenity in *Walden*—he had turned in “Life Without Principle” into a wholesale criticism of expansionist capitalism. “The rush to California,” he wrote a year before publishing the first chapter of *Cape Cod*,

and the attitude, not merely of merchants, but of philosophers and prophets, so called, in relation to it, reflect the greatest disgrace on mankind. . . . I know of no more startling development of the immorality of trade, and all the common modes of getting a living.”²⁵

For Thoreau, the “immorality of trade” was manifested in the very bases of modern capitalism—money and exploitation, or, in his language, “facsimile” and “appropriation.”

Along with Thoreau’s critique of the nation and elevation of the individual, Thoreau’s anti-capitalism identifies him as an individualist anarchist. In Thoreau’s view,

the liberty of the individual was given by God, and money took it away:

God gave the righteous man a certificate entitling him to food and raiment, but the unrighteous man found a *facsimile* of the same in God's coffers, and appropriated it, and obtained food and raiment like the former. It is one of the most extensive systems of counterfeiting that the world has seen.²⁶

As long as money continues to counterfeit God's birthright, the "unrighteous man," the exploitative profiteer, will continue to appropriate the natural birthright of the "righteous man" who labors without profit motive. The profit motive, meanwhile, makes God "to be a moneyed gentleman who scatters a handful of pennies in order to see mankind scramble for them."²⁷ While the proper "Godlike" perspective is the sublimity of Lodin that crumbles nations, capital turns God into a spectacle of *bourgeois* charity.

In forwarding *Cape Cod's* stark criticism of capitalism and the nation, Thoreau appealed to an audience that was immersed in one of the premier scandals of his generation: the practice of sending unsafe ships to sea, which was allowed by insurance underwriters and investors in the shipping trade. The nineteenth-century shipwreck epidemic, with its roots in acquisitive greed, was well known to Thoreau's middle-class *Putnam's* readers, who would have encountered it in the popular press as well as in *Cape Cod*. An article published in Britain's *Edinburgh Review* in 1835 proposing the reform of the insurance underwriting industry summarized for readers on both sides of the Atlantic the shipping practices that Thoreau was to make central to his individualist social critique in *Cape Cod*. According to the *Edinburgh Review*, the underwriting industry encouraged shipping investors to maximize their risks because they could earn greater profits from dangerous ships than from safer vessels. Underwriting "procures security, but at the same

time [is] apt to generate carelessness, and occasionally fraud.” Indeed, the *Review* continued,

it is in fact established by the records of our [England’s] judicial proceedings . . . that ships and goods have been sent to sea *in order that* they might be cast away, and a profit made at the expense of insurers.²⁸

Shipping investors could, and did, intentionally send unsafe ships to sea, packed with passengers and cargo, in order to defraud their insurers. Insurers, in turn, were willing to take high risks because “the premium depends partly on the condition of the ship,”²⁹ with an unsafe ship yielding higher profits should it survive its voyages. The appropriation of human life in such practices—human life risked so that investors and underwriters could better procure the “facsimile” of specie—underscored the need for political regulation. In 1858, the incessant shipwrecks along Cape Cod resulting from insurance fraud prompted the residents of Hull, Massachusetts to hold a protest, demanding, like the *Edinburgh Review*, regulation of the underwriting industry.³⁰ For Thoreau, however, the problem struck deeper than the need for regulation. Rather, it underscored the “immorality of trade” itself.

An 1874 article by *Harper’s* writer Charles Nordhoff titled “The Rights and Wrongs of Seamen” examined the evidence of three decades of underwriting and the shipping fraud that informed Thoreau in *Cape Cod*. “Do men consciously send ships to sea knowing them to be unseaworthy?” the article asked, answering in the affirmative: “There appears to be even a regularly organized business in sending to sea unseaworthy ships.” The article then listed nineteen different ships cited before an English investigating committee in 1873 that had been lost by a single Liverpool company in the

course of ten years. It continues:

. . . nowadays men buy ships as they get real estate, or set up a bank, or marry a wife even, on speculation, with no further interest or aim in the venture than simply to make as much money as they can in the quickest amount of time, and to run the greatest risks of loss to others compatible with a very great profit to themselves.³¹

Calculated risks included taking the chance that only one of three ships would arrive safely ashore with cargo intact, a practice that was also common among slave traders. As a result of such practices, seventeen percent of 4,069 American-built ships were lost between 1841 and 1845. Between 1868 and 1872, that number increased to forty percent of 4,387 ships: 2,177 American shipwrecks in four years. Nordhoff attributed this increase to the cheapness of vessels contracted by ever more money-conscious investors and to the “furious competition in trade which has affected all business since the great gold discoveries of California and Australia.”³² Like Thoreau, Nordhoff was incensed by trade that rewarded the acquisitive businessman who “owns coffins and sails them.”³³

Next to the wreck of the *St. John* with its cargo of men and women from Ireland, the wreck of the *Franklin* stands as emblematic in *Cape Cod* of some of the injustices inherent in antebellum global trade. In a scandal that Thoreau reminds his readers of throughout *Cape Cod's* chapters, the *Franklin*, much like the ships mentioned in Nordhoff's article, had been intentionally allowed to sink off the Cape for insurance money. “The reader may remember this wreck,” Thoreau addressed his audience in *Cape Cod's* fourth chapter, “The Beach,” “from the circumstance that a letter was found in the captain's valise, which washed ashore, directing him to wreck the vessel before he got to

America, and from the trial which took place in consequence.”³⁴ In a note found in the captain’s valise, one of the owners of the ship had written “Dear Sir this will be the *Eternal Making* of us all, if it will not damn us forever.”³⁵ Like the lives lost in the wreck of the *St. John*, the “nine or ten” lives lost in the wreck of the *Franklin* served to remind *Cape Cod’s* readers, that, in Thoreau’s words, “There are more consequences to a shipwreck than the underwriters notice.”³⁶

Charity, Capital, and False Consciousness

In light of the increasing global trade necessary to fuel American westwarding and the intensity of the newly expanding markets that created conditions dangerous to sailors but highly profitable for investors and insurance men, Thoreau’s view of charity and his stark criticism of it comes into focus. Thoreau foregrounded his criticism of charity in his “Stage Coach Views” chapter of *Cape Cod*, the second to be published in *Putnam’s* (in 1855), in which he contests the popular perception of *bourgeois* villages as beautiful:

I have no great respect for the writer’s taste, who talks easily about *beautiful* villages . . . where the green and white houses of the gentry [are] drawn up in rows . . . Such spots can be beautiful only to the weary traveler, or the returning native—or, perchance, the repentant misanthrope; not to him who with unprejudiced senses has just come out of the woods and approaches one of them, by a bare road, through a succession of straggling homesteads where he cannot tell which is the alms-house.³⁷

For Thoreau, the aesthetic of beauty of the village was undermined by the fact the village itself, its economic practices and its people, created the conditions necessary for an alms-

house. Thoreau rejected charity insofar as charity was directly undermined by the means that men, as he saw it, used to get their living. Describing the *Cape Cod Gazetteer*, Thoreau wrote that this austere monument to business culture

will uniformly tell you, under the head of each town, how many go a-fishing, and the value of the fish and oil take, how much salt is made and used, how many are engaged in the coasting trade, how many in manufacturing palm leaf hats, leather boots, shoes, and tinware, and then it has done, and leaves you to imagine the more truly domestic manufactures which are nearly the same all the world over.³⁸

In linking his sympathies with the shore and insisting that we attend to the local and “truly domestic,” Thoreau was drawing his readers’ attention to the ethical implications of their means of production and consumption.

In “Economy,” the opening chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau had already shown how charitable economic pieties masked the deeper injustices of chattel and wage slavery. “There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root,” he wrote there, “and it may be that he who bestows the largest amount of time and money on the needy is doing the most by his mode of life to produce that misery which he strives in vain to relieve.” These “thousands hacking at the branches of evil” included “the pious slave-breeder devoting the proceeds of every tenth slave to buy a Sunday’s liberty for the rest” and those who “show their kindness to the poor by employing them in their kitchens.” Addressing the slave- and servant-holders of Antebellum America who righteously performed charitable acts while exploiting the labor of others, Thoreau advised, “You boast of spending a tenth part of your income in charity; maybe you should spend the nine tenths so, and done with it.” Was charity, Thoreau asked, “owing

to the generosity of him in whose possession it is found, or to the remissness of the officers of justice?" Justice and philanthropy stood juxtaposed at opposite poles of the ethical compass because philanthropy "is greatly overrated; and it is our selfishness which overrates it." To return in the name of charity one tenth of another person's natural, deifically bestowed property was, for Thoreau, to cover up the greater sin of removing that property in the first place.³⁹

If hypocrisy and injustice lay behind acts of charity (though charity was due some praise), justice, in Thoreau's view, called for the constant cultivation of unconscious, impartial "goodness." For Thoreau, a person's "goodness must not be a partial and transitory act, but a constant superfluity, which costs him nothing and of which he is unconscious." This unconscious goodness Thoreau associated with justice. "I would not subtract anything from the praise that is due to philanthropy," Thoreau admitted in *Walden*, but "merely demand justice for all who by their lives and works are a blessing to mankind."

If there exists "a charity that hides a multitude of sins," Thoreau also held, this charity is bolstered by an aesthetic state associated with the emotion of sympathy. In the emotional state of sympathy, charity becomes the airy "atmosphere" of the philanthropist's personal sorrows: "The philanthropist too often surrounds mankind with the remembrance of his own castoff griefs as an atmosphere," Thoreau wrote, "and calls it sympathy."⁴⁰ For this reason, "There is no odor so bad as that which arises from goodness tainted,"⁴¹ whereas true goodness "is the only investment that never fails."⁴² The difference between these two personal practices that Thoreau examined throughout his work—the practice of cultivating "goodness" and justice and the practice of

undergoing a superfluity of charitable emotion to purge one's grief while recalling those individuals one has cast off in the rush to succeed—lies at the heart of Thoreau's sense of practical justice and informed his uses of the sublime in *Cape Cod*. Emotionality was necessarily self-centered, while consideration of the other required an objective awareness of how one's actions may cause suffering. To use the body of an Irish girl or the wreck of the *Franklin* as an opportunity for an atmospheric melodrama, as *Harper's* report on Fuller's drowning would do a few years after Thoreau published his chapters in *Putnam's*, would have, in Thoreau's view, resulted in a self-serving diversion from the immediate cause of injustice: oneself. Along with his anti-capitalism and anti-nationalism, Thoreau's view that social reform necessarily begins with the self is consistent with his individualist anarchist outlook.

In "A Plea for Captain John Brown," Thoreau extended his critique of charity to slavery, lauding and defending John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in contrast to the "philanthropy" of the slaveholder and those Northern capitalists who were implicated in Southern slavery. Audaciously, Thoreau writes, "I speak for the slave when I say that I prefer the philanthropy of Captain Brown to that philanthropy which neither shoots me nor liberates me."⁴³ To the extent that virtue was mediated by philanthropic money, Thoreau held, it obscured the object of social justice: "Absolutely speaking, the more money, the less virtue; for money comes between a man and his objects, and obtains them for him; and it was certainly no great virtue to obtain it."⁴⁴ The attaining of money—the means by which one got one's living and the attitude beneath that means—mattered, in practical terms, more than the ideological and aesthetic justification for excessive acquisition that charity excused. In place of charity, in his defense of John

Brown, Thoreau called for unmediated acts of justice, such as Brown's raid and the Underground Railroad, on which his cabin at Walden Pond, and his Aunt's house, was one stop. Thoreau's concept of goodness, in contrast to charitable benevolence, required, at minimum, that each person leave his or her fellows free to pursue "contemplation." "If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations," Thoreau argued in "Civil Disobedience," "I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders. I must get off him first, that he may pursue his contemplations too."⁴⁵

Contemplation as Revolutionary Practice

Thoreau offers a key to his practice of such "contemplations" in what Philip Hallie holds as the ethical heart of *Cape Cod*: his mediation on a humane house erected by the Humane Society of Massachusetts. The Humane Society of Massachusetts, America's first organized lifesaving institution, was created in 1792 in response to the hundreds of yearly shipwrecks along the New England seaboard. Among its varied activities, it was responsible for creating and maintaining "safe houses" along the Cape, huts in which shipwrecked sailors could take refuge until a storm passed. The charity collected funds to reward citizens on the Cape who braved its storms to rescue sailors and passengers, but its members were selected from the "respectable" classes of New England, the very classes Thoreau associated with the aesthetic ritual of "sympathy" and charity. Thoreau viewed this charitable organization as skeptically as he viewed all other charity. In addition to the underwriting scandals, the famines, and the greed that drove trade and made the Humane Society's humane houses necessary, Thoreau was aware that the members of the Humane Society were invested in maintaining the status quo.

According to the Humane Society's own history, "For a series of years, the most

respectable and influential of our citizens, in different parts of the Commonwealth, were enrolled among its [the Society's] members." In fact, the selection of Humane Society members virtually guaranteed the insularity of the organization, as members were "admitted only on the recommendation of a Trustee," thus ensuring relative "respectability" among its ranks. As a result of this arrangement, "only the most distinguished professional gentlemen, lay as well as clerical, were selected for its orators,"⁴⁶ and an agent for the Humane Society could simultaneously be, as one Provincetown man was,

moderator of town meetings twenty-eight years, selectman several years, seven years as representative in the legislature, and two terms state senator. He was agent for the Massachusetts Humane Society for about twenty-five years, several years agent for the Boston Board of Underwriters, and is now a director in the Provincetown National Bank.⁴⁷

One of the founding members of the Humane Society, James Bowdoin, was the governor of Massachusetts who ordered the suppression of Shay's Rebellion, the insurrection that Thomas Jefferson praised but that also helped to prompt the centralization of federal power in the Constitutional Convention.

In "The Beach" the fourth installment of *Cape Cod* and the last to be published in *Putnam's*, Thoreau approaches a Humane Society "humane house," which, in his words, "had neither sliding shutter, nor clap-boards, nor paint."⁴⁸ As Thoreau—along with his mate Ellery Channing—puts his eye to a knothole in the clapboard of the humane house to examine its contents, he transforms an observation of the physical house into a practical contemplation on the ethics of man under modern conditions of trade. "After

long looking” into the humane house, he wrote in his *Putnam’s* version of “The Beach,”

with the eye of faith, knowing that, though to him that knocketh it may not always be opened, yet to him that looketh long enough through a knot-hole the inside shall be visible,—for we had had some practice at looking inward,—by steadily keeping our other ball covered from the light meanwhile, putting the outward world behind us, ocean and land, and the beach—till the pupil became enlarged and collected the rays of light that were wandering in that dark, (for the pupil shall be enlarged by looking; there never was so dark a night but a faithful and patient eye, however small, might at last prevail over it,)—after all this, I say, things began to take shape to our vision,—if we may use this expression where there was nothing but emptiness,—and we obtained the long wished for insight.⁴⁹

“Turning our backs on the outward world,” Thoreau concluded, “we thus looked through the knot-hole into the humane house, into the very bowels of mercy; and for bread we found a stone. This, then, is what charity hides! Virtues antique and far away with ever a rusty nail over the latch.”⁵⁰ Concluding his meditation on the humane house, Thoreau again links charity with sentimentality, writing that

My companion had declared before this that I had not a particle of sentiment, in rather absolute terms, to my astonishment; but I suspect he meant that my legs did not ache just then, though I am not wholly a stranger to that sentiment. But I did not intend this for a sentimental journey.⁵¹

Reducing “sentiment” to a mere feeling in the legs, Thoreau pits charity and sentimentality against a serious and an inward-looking meditation that reveals not just the sparse furnishings of a charitable shack but the sparse offerings at the heart of charity

itself. In his account of this contemplation, Thoreau eschews sentimental charity and proposes a hard realism coupled with a practice of inward-searching meditation. In the context of *Cape Cod*, which links charity with middle class habits of consumption and bourgeois practices of trade, Thoreau here models for his readers the kinds of personal practices he had gone to Walden to perfect, ones by which an individual, through inward contemplation, comes both to critique and to refuse the kinds of economic exploitation that a cold, stony charity helps to rationalize.

If the loose narrative motions of *Cape Cod* offer what Mitchell Robert Breitweiser has called “a traveling through symbols of the distance between sentiment and the intuition of the sublime,”⁵² Thoreau’s humane house meditation stands as the central symbol of the book. Its centrality is established by Thoreau’s recognition that the virtue of charity to which sentiment gives rise stands diametrically opposed to the non-sentimental act of inwardly meditating on one’s own place in a hierarchy of human injustice. Though Thoreau’s meditation here involves “turning our backs on the world,” it also involves, in the body of Thoreau’s work, daily disciplines as mundane as working in one’s own kitchen. To begin moving in the direction of positive action, Thoreau held, we had to first reject the aesthetic emotion of sentiment, replacing it with an honest, self-searching realism turned both inward and outward. With such a gaze, in Thoreau’s view, we—like his nineteenth-century readers—might learn to practice the democratic art of self-reliance, an art of self-discipline that, in practice, denies one the right or opportunity to sit in a state of domination “upon another man’s shoulders.” Such contemplations as those Thoreau entered at the Humane House require, for Thoreau, a measure of self-reliance necessary to leave others free: to tend one’s own garden, to reduce one’s

consumption, to “Simplify! Simplify! Simplify!”

The Virtue of Cynicism

Even as Thoreau rejected the aesthetic emotion of charity in *Cape Cod*, *Walden*, and his anti-slavery essays, he was formulating a positive practice of freedom in the Western tradition of what Michel Foucault called “the care of the self,” a practice associated in Thoreau’s work with democratic self-reliance. For Foucault, “ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection.”⁵³ In Western democratic ethics, we are continually faced with the choice between enforcing total “states of domination” in our interactions with others and encouraging the interplay of “relations of power.” The latter of these two, for Foucault, were positive, ethical states coeval with personal freedom and responsibility. In Foucault’s words, “relations of power are possible only insofar as the subjects are free,”⁵⁴ and subjects are free only to the extent that those who might otherwise dominate them instead practice control over themselves. Suggesting the very critique of selfish acquisitiveness that Thoreau launched at slaveholders, shipping interests, and *bourgeois* employers, Foucault held that “the risk of dominating others and exercising a tyrannical power over them arises precisely when one has not taken care of the self and has become the slave of one’s desires.”⁵⁵ For Foucault, the care of the self—the practice of self-governmentality—was key to constructing an engaged political ethics because, in his words, “it is true after all that there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself.”⁵⁶

As Foucault notes, the notion of the care of the self as a political praxis manifested in a number nineteenth century writers and philosophies, including “Stirner,

Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, dandyism, Baudelaire, anarchy, [and] anarchist thought.”⁵⁷ The care of the self as a practice of political resistance has its Western roots, as Foucault traces them, in Greek Cynical philosophy, especially that of the Cynic philosopher Diogenes of Sinope. It involves the contemplation of oneself as an object one’s own knowing. The aim of such contemplation is to “eliminate the dependencies introduced by culture, society, civilization, and so on” that hinder a “natural life.”⁵⁸ Having eliminated such dependencies, Foucault argued, one could go about the politically engaged business of *parrhesia*, or radical truth-telling.

For Diogenes of Sinope, the first Cynical philosopher and a student of Plato’s, the care of the self involved stripping himself of all but the barest minimum of possessions—a toga, a bowl, a walking-stick—and living as a squatter out of a single empty barrel in the bustle of Athens, begging for his livelihood. What Foucault calls Diogenes’ “Cynic *parrhesia*” (i.e., Cynic “truth-telling”) emerged directly from his rejection of materialism and manifested in an ironic and witty reversal of accepted values and disrespect for cultural authority. When, as a young man, Diogenes asked Apollo’s oracle “What shall I do?,” the Oracle replied, “Deface the currency,” which meant literally to counterfeit money and figuratively to deface that which Greek society held most valuable, that which was merely current. Once, when asked whether it was true, as Plato held, that man was a “featherless biped,” Diogenes produced a plucked chicken. In another episode, one that Foucault discusses in detail, when approached by the Emperor Alexander, Diogenes asked the emperor to step out his patch of sunlight. Such episodes underscore the Cynic’s “self-sufficiency or independence” while targeting the pride and cultural conditioning of the Cynic’s interlocutor.⁵⁹ By reversing the accepted order of cultural values (i.e., a man

is a chicken, an emperor is not like the sun but in fact blocks the sunlight), Cynic *parrhesia*, using irony as its primary weapon, aims at speaking truth to power. The Cynic was foremost a critic of society, enacting and verbalizing what the anarchist historian Daniel Guérin has called the “deconsecration” of all that is sacred in a “visceral revolt” against oppressive value systems.⁶⁰ For this reason, anarchists like Guérin trace to Western roots of anarchist thought back to Diogenes, whose spirit informs Thoreau’s individualist anarchism.

For many eighteenth and nineteenth century radicals, the image of the Cynic, of the free Diogenes, represented man liberated from the constraints of culture and returned to a state of nature. The figure of Diogenes of Sinope, appearing in iconography and literature during this period, suggested such Enlightenment, democratic ideals as “freedom from prejudice and open criticism of secular and religious authorities” and the “autonomy of the individual and the separation of morality from religious constraints.”⁶¹ Diogenes also came to represent the cause of labor against capital, the cause of the people against the state, and the cause of nature against the law. For the eighteenth and nineteenth century adopter of classical Cynicism,

The Cynic’s harshest criticism attacks the rich, the drones of society. Protected by the civil constitution and its institutions, they acquire and increase their property by exploiting the labor of others. And the order of the state even protects property against the demands of those who created it in the first place. But the civil constitution is not identical with natural law; for natural law does not know slaves by birth. By nature, the worker is not distinguished from the master, but all are equal.⁶²

In Thoreau's nineteenth century, in other words, to be "Cynical" was to be politically enlightened, democratic in the broadest sense, and, more importantly, a radical in one's critique of the relationship between culture and acquisitive capitalism.

When reading Thoreau, as Holbrook Jackson has noted, "It is impossible to avoid comparing him with Diogenes."⁶³ In 1854, Charles Frederick Briggs, writing an article about Thoreau titled "A Yankee Diogenes," made the same comparison. As a figure of Diogenes, Thoreau's aim, Briggs held, "was the very remarkable one of trying to be something, while he lived upon nothing; in opposition to the general rule of striving to live upon something, while doing nothing." In this sense, Thoreau was pushing against the current of "The New England Character [which] is essentially anti-Diogenic" because New Englanders were typically committed to "bettering their condition by barter."⁶⁴ An 1857 review of *Walden* for *Chamber's Journal* titled "An American Diogenes" described "Henry D. Thoreau, the American Diogenes, if we may presume to term him so— assuredly we mean no offence—" as "a graduate of Harvard university, a ripe scholar, and a transcendentalist of the Emersonian school, though he goes much further than his master; his object, apparently, being the exaltation of mankind by the utter extinction of civilization."⁶⁵

While both of these reviews—especially the latter—are critical of Thoreau, they help to contextualize Thoreau's practices of contemplation and *parrhesia*. Thoreau's source for the old anarchist Diogenes was Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. Translated "the tailor retailed," *Sartor Resartus* was a highly influential book among the New England transcendentalists. It tells the story of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, a philosopher of things in general who endeavors to develop a unifying theory of human life by writing an

autobiographically-based cultural and philosophical history of clothes. Having been abandoned in a wicker basket as a baby and educated in nature among the Scottish Highlands, Carlyle's Diogenes learns his earliest life lessons from direct observation of nature, "encircled by the mystery of Existence; under the deep heavenly Firmament; waited on by the four golden Seasons." Thus educated, "in the destitution of the wild desert does our young Ismael acquire for himself the highest of all possessions, that of Self-help,"⁶⁶ or of what Emerson and Thoreau would call self-reliance.

Diogenes' self-sufficiency, his education in nature, and his prophetic name all set the stage for his future career as a "philosopher of things in general" and Cynical observer of human nature. When, in adolescence, Carlyle's Diogenes leaves the highlands to pursue his career at a "Nameless University" in a "Nameless Capital," he finds himself "all rigorously fenced in" and longing for "a certain bosky wilderness where existence is still possible," yet he is forced by necessity to pursue "that Monodrama" of modern life: "No Object and No Rest."⁶⁷ Meanwhile, his relations with others are strained, since he "regarded men with an excess of both love and fear." Like Thoreau, he finds himself accused, "blamed, and by half-strangers hated, for my so-called Hardness (*Härte*), my Indifferentism towards men; and the seemingly ironic tone I had adopted as my favourite dialect in conversation." Diogenes' sense of irony, in fact, becomes his distinguishing characteristic and marks him as a pariah, since "[a]n ironic man, with his sly stillness, and ambuscading ways, more especially an ironic young man, from whom it is least expected, may be viewed as a pest to society."⁶⁸

To the "quackery," "fatuity," and "falsity" of the calculated life under modern systems of acquisition and expenditure, "in Contradiction to much Profit-and-Loss

Philosophy.” “Nature says, when it comes to *her* to speak, eternally No!”⁶⁹ Indeed, “The foundation from which Cynicism sprang among the Greeks is . . . an irresistible urge to say ‘no’ to the world that human beings have constructed, because, in the light of *reason*, such a world is built on faulty foundations.”⁷⁰ In Carlyle, the force of this “no” is backed by contemplation of nature’s beneficence. Compared to this beneficence, in Diogenes Teufelsdröckh’s words, “the universe was all void of life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility; it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me from limb to limb.”⁷¹ “So true it is,” in the view of Carlyle’s nineteenth century Cynical parrhesiac,

that *the Fraction of Life can be increased in value not so much by increasing your Numerator as by lessening your Denominator*. Nay, unless my Algebra deceive me, *Unity* itself divided by *Zero* will give *Infinity*. Make thy claim of wages a zero, then [and] thou hast the world under thy feet.⁷²

Having abandoned the delusional and ultimately destructive treadmill of personal desire for material acquisition, one should begin to follow “the God-given mandate, *Work thou in Welldoing*.”⁷³ As Carlyle wrote in *Past and Present*,

Nature and Fact, not Redtape and Semblance, are to this hour the basis of man’s life. . . . The question is asked . . . not, How do you agree with Downing Street and accredited Semblance?, but, How do you agree with God’s universe and the actual reality of things?⁷⁴

To “work in well-doing,” in other words, was to actively reject the core gospel of capitalism, the accumulation of money and goods.

In his review “Thomas Carlyle and His Works,” written during his sojourn at Walden, Thoreau paid particular attention to Carlyle’s ironic humor and its social aims. For Thoreau, Carlyle’s “constant run upon his neighbors, and upon church and state,” in its “lawless range,” “is always subordinate to a serious purpose.”⁷⁵ That purpose was to “wake up” a sleeping humanity lulled to sleep by what Thoreau calls in *Walden* “little reading,” which he here associates with lyrical poetry and the culture of sentiment:

One would think that all books of late had adopted a falling inflexion. “A mother, if she wishes to sing her child to sleep,” say the musical men, “will always adopt a falling inflexion.” Would they but choose a rising inflexion, and wake the child up for once.⁷⁶

Carlyle’s “rising inflection” and irony, Thoreau wrote, comes across in his “eminently colloquial” tone, which resounds with “emphatic, natural, lively, muttering tones, muttering, rattling, exploding, like shells and shot with like execution.”⁷⁷ Using imagery suggestive of the French Revolution and the American Revolutionary War, Thoreau leaves no doubt that in his view literature serves a revolutionary purpose, one that, in its embattled ardor, parallels in *belles lettres* John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry.

A Radical Program of Self Reliance

Far from underwriting a masculine ethos of acquisitive individualism, in *Cape Cod*, as in his other works, Thoreau offers an instance of the democratic “care of the self” and radical truth-telling—resistant to the sentimental ethics that rationalized nineteenth century acquisitive capitalism—of precisely the kind Foucault locates in Cynic philosophy. For Thoreau, ethical contemplation, anathema to charity and sentimentality, was a corollary to the “truly domestic manufactures” of the self-reliant life. And self-

reliance was the refusal to allow one's own freedom to rely upon the exploitation, the degradation, and the enslavement of others. Post-colonial and New Americanist criticism in the nineteen eighties and nineties asked us to reconsider Thoreau's position, among others, in the literary canon as an oppositional critic of the marketplace and instead to historicize him as embedded in and, in fact, complicitous with this marketplace. Such criticism, however, overlooks the profound critique of systematic injustice explicit in Thoreauvian self-reliance in *Cape Cod* and throughout Thoreau's work.

Leo Marx has argued that the pastoral mode, for which Thoreau is most well known, contains within it "nascent left wing ideology" in the figure of the idealized herdsman whose "interrupted idyll" underscores the liminality of the middle landscape and comports with a dialectical mode of perception."⁷⁸ This ideology, in Thoreau, is not so much "left wing" as individualist and anarchist. Thoreau's stated conception of government, his anti-government individualism, was at once revolutionary and practical. He believed in practical terms that men and women were not yet prepared to live without government, but also believed that it would be better if they were so able. If they were not ready, this was due to the continuing interference by government in the development of the individual character: "The character of the American people has done all that has been accomplished," as he wrote in "Civil Disobedience," "and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way."⁷⁹

When government regulates and legislates the individual conscious, Thoreau believed, it impedes the development of a citizenry, and so it must progressively wither, leading to a "free and enlightened State" that "comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived,

and treats him accordingly.” Such a State “can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor.” In a “really free and enlightened State,” those who chose would be free to live aloof from government while “fulfilling” in themselves “all the duties of neighbors and fellow men.” This claim, from “Civil Disobedience,” points to another element of Thoreau’s individualist anarchism: its voluntarism. Even if the state existed, it should only exist for those who chose to submit to its authority. As the State gradually bore the fruit of self reliance, men would be prepared to live without government entirely: “a still more perfect and glorious State, which also,” Thoreau writes, “I have imagined.”⁸⁰

As an individualist, Thoreau had no collective, administered program for social renewal, so he was certainly no revolutionary anarchist. Yet he famously revised Thomas Paine in “Civil Disobedience,” writing, “That government is best which governs not at all,”⁸¹ a statement that renders the very idea of government meaningless. At the same time, Thoreau also spoke “as a citizen,” who, “unlike those who call themselves no government men,” aimed “not for at once no government, but *at once* better government.”⁸² This new kind of government, Thoreau hoped, would gradually give way to a Stateless State—a citizenry without government—as the State progressively reduced its interference with the individual conscious and character. A fully developed citizenry, informed by contemplative practices such as those Thoreau recorded in *Cape Cod* and during his sojourn at Walden, would become ethically self-reliant the more the state gave way to the communal and just yearnings of the individual conscience.

But who were Thoreau’s “no government men?” Thoreau and Emerson, as the next chapter examines, were both surrounded by a network of radical abolitionists who

believed that the American government would, and should, meet its end over slavery. Abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison and Adin Ballou held that they should reject a government that was “systematically oppressing not only the Negro, but dark-skinned people throughout the Western Hemisphere.”⁸³ As Garrison, Ballou, Thoreau, Emerson, and many others began to globalize their sense of responsibility for slavery, they attempted to throw off the mantle of the United States entirely. William Ellery Channing captured the radical cosmopolitanism of this anti-government abolitionism when he wrote, “Man is not a mere creature of the state. Man is older than nations and he is to survive nations.”⁸⁴ Thus Thoreau, summarizing this sentiment in just a few words, described Cape Cod near the end of the book as a place a person can stand and “Put all American behind him.”⁸⁵

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1. Cecelia Tichi, "American Literary Studies to the Civil War," in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Studies*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: Modern Language Association, 1992), 218.
 2. Phillip Hallie, *Tales of Good and Evil, Help and Harm* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 129.
 3. *Ibid.*, 114.
 4. Sam McGuire Worley, *Emerson, Thoreau, and the Role of the Cultural Critic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), x.
 5. *Ibid.*, 87.
 6. *Ibid.*, 92.
 7. Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, *To Set This World Right: The Antislavery Movement in Thoreau's Concord* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 3–4.
 8. Bob Pepperman Taylor, *American's Bachelor Uncle: Thoreau and the American Polity* (Lawrence Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 93.
 9. *Ibid.*, 73.
 10. Henry David Thoreau, *Cape Cod* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 4.
 11. *Ibid.*, 7.
 12. Philip Fisher, *Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000), 199.
 13. *Ibid.*, 196.
 14. Thomas Haskell, *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 150.
 15. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 142.
 16. Jack Morgan, "Thoreau's 'The Shipwreck' and the Female Embodiment of Catastrophe," *New Hibernia Review* 7, no. 4 (2003): 47-57.
 17. Henry Giles, "Margaret Fuller Ossoli," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, July 1861, 220–29.

18. For scholarly accounts of the wreck of *The Elizabeth*, see Robert D. Richardson, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 210–13, and Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 277–79.

19. Giles, “Margaret Fuller Ossoli,” 222.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 208.

23. *Ibid.*, 98.

24. *Ibid.*, 93–94.

25. Henry David Thoreau, “Life Without Principle,” in *The Essays of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Louis Hyde (New York: North Point Press, 2002), 208. For a discussion of Thoreau’s interest in and uses of James Macpherson’s controversial *The Works of Ossian*, see Ernest E. Leisy, “Thoreau and Ossian,” *New England Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (1945): 96–98.

26. *Ibid.*, 203.

27. *Ibid.*, 202.

28. “On the Frequency of Shipwrecks,” *Edinburgh Review*, January 1835, 340.

29. *Ibid.*, 341.

30. For a narrative account of the Hull gathering, see Hallie, *Tales of Good*, 135–38. Not attentive to the ironies of power and justice addressed in *Cape Cod*, Hallie looks no further into the relationship between the charity houses and the shipping interests who were causing the wrecks but instead opposes the Hull residents’ sense of cooperation and Thoreau’s individualism. As a result, Hallie criticizes Thoreau’s suspicion of charity while overlooking important contradictions and hypocrisies of which Thoreau and his readers (not to mention the irate people of Hull) would have been aware. This oversight likely emerges from Hallie’s Manichean cosmology, in which Thoreau must be evil and harmful.

31. Charles Nordhoff, “The Rights and Wrongs of Seamen,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, March 1874, 557.

32. *Ibid.*, 561–62.

33. Ibid., 557.

34. Thoreau, *Cape Cod*, 83.

35. Mitchell Robert Breitwieser, "Thoreau and the Wrecks on Cape Cod," *Studies in Romanticism* 20, no. 1 (1981): 19.

36. Thoreau, *Cape Cod*, 190.

37. Henry David Thoreau, "The Beach," *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science and Art*, August 1855, 23.

38. Thoreau, *Cape Cod*, 31–32.

39. Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, 119–20.

40. Thoreau, *Walden*, 120.

41. Ibid., 117.

42. Ibid., 266.

43. Henry David Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown," in *The Essays of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Louis Hyde (New York: North Point Press, 2002), 276.

44. Ibid., 133.

45. Ibid., 131.

46. Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *History of the Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts: With A Selected List of Premiums Awarded by the Trustees, From Its Commencement to the Present Time, and a List of the Members and Officers* (Boston: Press of T. R. Marvin & Son, 1876), 5. University of Michigan: Making of America Books. <http://www.hti.u-mich.edu:80/m/moa/>.

47. James Hopkins, "Town of Provincetown," in *History of Barnstable County, Massachusetts*, ed. Simeon L. Deyo (New York: H. W. Blake & Co., 1890), 999. <<http://capecodhistory.us/Deyo/Provincetown-Deyo.htm>>.

48. Thoreau, "The Beach," 163.

49. Ibid.

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50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., 163–64.
52. Mitchell Robert Breitwieser, “Thoreau and the Wrecks on Cape Cod,” *Studies in Romanticism* 20, no. 1 (1981): 10.
53. Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 284.
54. Ibid., 292.
55. Ibid., 288.
56. Michael Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France 1981-1982* (New York: Picador, 2005), 252.
57. Ibid., 251.
58. Foucault, “Ethics of the Concern for the Self,” 120.
59. Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Santa Monica, CA: Semiotexte, 2001), 119-133.
60. Daniel Guérin, *Anarchism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 13.
61. Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting, “The Modern Reception of Cynicism: Diogenes in the Enlightenment,” in *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, ed. R. Brach Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 335.
62. Ibid.
63. Holbrook Jackson. *Dreamers of Dreams* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Company, 1950), 123.
64. Charles Frederick Briggs, “A Yankee Diogenes,” *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science and Art*, October 1854, 443–48; Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods, “Walden: Contemporary Notices and Reviews,” *Walden Woods Project*, last modified April 30, 2009, <http://www.walden.org/Institute/thoreau/writings/walden/Reviews/Putnams%20October%201854.htm>

65. Chamber's Journal, "An American Diogenes," November 1857, 330-332, The Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods/The Walden Woods Project, "Walden: Contemporary Notices and Reviews,"

<http://www.walden.org/Institute/thoreau/writings/walden/Reviews/Chambers%20Journal%202021%20November%201857.htm>.

66. Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 88.

67. *Ibid.*, 95.

68. *Ibid.*, 100.

69. *Ibid.*, 30.

70. Luis Navia, *Classical Cynicism: A Critical Study* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 29.

71. Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 127.

72. *Ibid.*, 145.

73. *Ibid.*, 140.

74. Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 30.

75. Henry David Thoreau, "Thomas Carlyle and His Works," in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Early Essays and Miscellanies*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer, Edwin Moser, and Alexander C. Kern (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 236–37.

76. *Ibid.*, 226.

77. *Ibid.*

78. Leo Marx, "Pastoralism in America," in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 36–39.

79. Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," in *The Essays of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Louis Hyde (New York: North Point Press, 2002), 126.

80. *Ibid.*, 145.

81. Ibid., 125.

82. Ibid., 126.

83. Staughton Lynd, *Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 130.

84. Ibid., 148.

85. Thoreau, *Cape Cod*, 319.

Chapter 2

Habits of the State

The anti-government philosophy of Emerson, like that of Thoreau, was rooted, as this chapter will show, in the antebellum radical Left. In spite of this, Emerson, also like Thoreau, has come to be regarded by many as America's profit of acquisitive, frontier capitalism. As John Updike argued in a 2003 *New Yorker* review on the bi-centennial of Emerson's birth titled "Big Dead White Male," Emerson was part of the "Jacksonian revolution" in American ideas. As Alan Trachtenberg has shown, one of the central problems of nineteenth century America was the problem of the incorporation of American society and culture via the "significant increase in the influence of business in America, corresponding to the emergence of the modern corporate form of ownership," a process that began with Western expansion and culminated in the Gilded Age.¹ For Updike, Emerson was part of this pro-business zeitgeist because his sense of self-reliance was politically useful to the larger national project of expansion and incorporation: "A country imposed on a wilderness needs strong selves," Updike argued. "Whether American self-assertiveness fits into today's crammed and touchy world can be debated. But Emerson . . . sought to instill confidence and courage in his democratic audience."²

In a similar vein, in his highly influential *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah argues that "the culture of individualism" for which Emerson has been a central spokesperson in American philosophical ethics "has made no small contribution" to the ideology of capitalist individualism.³ New Americanist academic critics, meanwhile, have argued that Emersonian individualism, in the words of Cecelia Tichi, is "hostile to human interests and pernicious in its effects." Individualism represents, Tichi argues,

“egocentric narcissism;” it endorses “violence against the self and others;” and it exemplifies the patriotic image of the “democratic common person, recommitting himself to American traditions of hard work and artisanship.”⁴

In a World With Anarchists

To imagine Emerson in this light is to imagine Emerson in a world without anarchists, in a world of left/right political dualities and clean distinctions between conservative individualism and liberal collectivism. Such a world did not exist in antebellum America, however, and the anti-government fervor that swept abolitionism directly informed Emerson’s ethic of self-reliance, as it did Thoreau’s. For both Emerson and Thoreau, self-reliance was not a capitalist value, but the radical solution to a government that supported slavery. As Lewis Perry has shown, for abolitionists, “Slavery was the paradigm of authority between man and man and thus very clearly opposed to anarchy in the good sense of self-government.”⁵ Slavery came to mean, in other words, far more than chattel slavery among antebellum radicals. Instead, it signified the basic relationship between subjects and the state wherever the state supported systems of oppression, including systems of profit. Beneath the question of slavery, for radical abolitionists such as Adin Ballou, whose core values Emerson reflected in his work, was the question of divine sovereignty, the question of who had the right to determine the Christian conscience of a human being.⁶

The radical abolitionist rejection of government was based on belief that the individual conscience guided by God takes moral precedence over the earthly power of government. The origins of this idea date to the Antinomian controversy, a term that Martin Luther used to describe the heretical doctrine that the elect are no longer bound by

Mosaic Law. The Antinomian controversy appeared on American shores with arrival of Ann Hutchinson in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and her subsequent expulsion in 1637. Asserting her right to dissent against reigning Puritan orthodoxies and to preach as a woman, Hutchinson invoked the Covenant of Grace and the experience of personal revelation, the authority of God over the authority of the established government. In what Eunice Minette Schuster sees as paralleling Emma Goldman's expulsion from the United States, in response to Hutchinson's heresy, the Colony passed the first Alien Act in the United States, banning from immigration anyone considered dangerous to the Commonwealth, a law directed specifically against Hutchinson's family and friends.⁷

Daily, with the perpetuation of slavery and United States aggression against Mexican territory, radical abolitionists came to believe that the government of the United States violated the Biblical injunction against violence and that they were called by God to act in accordance with divine law by resisting this government. Calling themselves non-resistors, because they refused to either acknowledge or use force against the existing government, these abolitionists held that "Christians had to renounce all manifestations of force, including human government."⁸ As Garrison wrote in the Declaration of Sentiments adopted by the Massachusetts Peace Convention, a predecessor to the abolitionist Non-resistance Society founded in the same year, 1838,

We cannot acknowledge allegiance to any human government; neither can we oppose any such government by a resort to physical force. We recognize but one King and Lawgiver, one Judge and Ruler of mankind. We are bound by the laws of a kingdom which is not of this world, the subjects of which are forbidden to fight; in which Mercy and Truth are met together, and Righteousness and Peace

have kissed each other; which has no state lines, no national partitions, and no geographical boundaries; in which there is no distinction of rank, or division of caste, or inequality of sex; the officers of which are Peace, its exactors Righteousness, its walls Salvation, and its gates Praise; and which is destined to break in pieces and consume all other kingdoms.⁹

Nonresistors were emphatically anti-nationalist and anti-patriotic, arguing, as William Lloyd Garrison did, that “Our country is the world; our countrymen are all mankind. . . . Hence, we can allow no appeal to patriotism to revenge any national insult or injury.”¹⁰ For William Lloyd Garrison, all forms of slavery were linked to the problem of nation and state, to the anti-Christian will to violent domination that earthy governments inevitably represented.

Adin Ballou, a signatory to Garrison’s Declaration of Sentiments and to the Constitution of the Nonresistance Society, summarized the goals of the society by stating, “it is the object of *this Society* neither to purify nor to subvert human governments, but to advance in the earth that kingdom of peace and righteousness, which supersedes all such governments.” Speaking at the founding of the abolitionist and peace society, Ballou defined government as a construct “exercising absolute authority over man, by means of cunning and physical force. It may be patriarchal, hierarchical, monarchical, aristocratic, democratic, or mobocratic—still it answers to this definition. It originates in man, depends on man, and makes man the lord—the slave of man.” In contrast to man-made governments, which were governments of slaves, slaveholders, war, and violence, nonresistors sought only “the divine government . . . the infallible will of God prescribing the duty of moral agents, and claiming their primary undivided allegiance.”¹¹ Considering

himself both a Christian and a socialist, Ballou founded the Hopedale community in Milford, Massachusetts as an experiment in living under the government of God. His home for Christian nonresistants lasted from 1841 to 1876, with three hundred members at the peak of its success in 1856.¹²

In comparison with the government of God, Ballou posited the “unavoidable” conclusion “that the will of man (human government) . . . has no intrinsic authority, no moral supremacy, and no rightful claim to the allegiance of man. It has no original, inherent authority whatsoever over the conscience.” In addition to rejecting government, Ballou argued, nonresistors have “nothing to do with nations, states, and bodies politic,” but address themselves only “to individuals, who have both soul and conscience, and expect to affect organized masses of men only through their individual members.”¹³ Yet Ballou rejected the term “anarchism” to describe the political doctrines of nonresistance: “We are no Jacobins, Revolutionists, or Anarchists,” he argued, “though often slanderously called such.” Ballou rejected these terms, however, on the grounds that they were “considered tantamount to an attempt for the violent subversion of human government,” whereas the equally anti-government philosophy of nonresistance “depends for success wholly on the use of Christian means.” For Ballou, nonresistance could be distinguished from “anarchism” by its pacifism, its peaceful reverence for the Sermon on the Mount, and its assumption that change toward a world without government would occur through personal revelation rather than social revolution. However, Ballou rejected only revolutionary anarchism, not the broader anarchist principle of living without rulers; he rejected the social connotations, not the denotative meaning, of the word.

To the critics who called nonresistance “anarchism” and “no-governmentalism,” among whom Thoreau could be counted, nonresistors rejoined, also much like Thoreau, that they did not seek no government, but the inauguration on earth of “the one true and effective government, the government of God.”¹⁴ Under such a government, to use Ballou’s words, “overruling love” becomes “the imperishable heritage of every soul who obeys willingly Christ’s word: ‘Resist not evil.’”¹⁵ Thus, nonresistors presented a paradox, one evident in “Civil Disobedience” as well as in Emerson’s evolving conception of government. As Lewis Perry explains, “They were anarchists—or more properly we would call them anarchists—because they detested anarchy. In their categories, human government was synonymous with anarchy and antithetical to the rule of Christ and moral principle.”¹⁶

For nonresistors, anarchy in this negative sense of the word referred to the consequences of coercive government: government, not moral conscience, caused destruction, chaos, and bloodshed. Under the government of God, to invoke Thoreau, government would “govern not at all.” God, the inner light, the voice of the conscience guided by scripture—among which Transcendentalists included the world classics of literature, religion, and spirituality—would comprise the rule of law. The government that antinomians sought was a government-without-rulers, a Stateless state, a positive anarchy guided by Christian brotherhood and global solidarity. As men and women gained in spiritual wisdom, Ballou believed, they would “cease to put their trust in the wisdom of man for guidance, or in the arm of flesh for protection.” Was there anything, Ballou asked, “so horrible, so dangerous, so alarming in all this?”¹⁷

Antinomianism and Reform

If there was a political unconscious informing Emerson's individualism, it was this: his works express the antinomianism latent in the abolitionist political culture of the nonresistors with whom he surrounded himself. For Emerson, this anarchism, which was purely philosophical, took the form of antinomianism stripped of its religious language. His word "self-reliance" (he never used the word "individualism" to describe his philosophy), seen in the light of an antebellum world *with* anarchists, refers to principles drawn not from acquisitive and expansionist Jacksonian populism but from anti-government currents among Massachusetts radicals. These currents of antinomianism and nonresistance are clearly outlined in Emerson's 1841 lecture/essay "Self Reliance":

No law can be sacred to me but that of my own nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong is what is against it. A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition as if every thing were titular and ephemeral but he. I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions.¹⁸

The law, for Emerson, emerges from one's sacred nature. Breaking the law of the state in order to follow the higher law of the conscience was, therefore, central to self-reliance as an ethical system. Self-reliance, more than "mere antinomianism," was "the abiding law of conscience." over and against the state, and was, in Emerson's early years, pacifist in nature.¹⁹ Emerson's early pacifism, as can be inferred from his reference here to "mere" antinomianism, would wane with the approaching Civil War and the rise of a cult of Lincoln.

Emerson believed that society, in contrast to self-reliance, imposes a fatal conformity on the moral conscience of individuals. This is because the institutions that shape society are, ethically speaking, bankrupt. Their corruption “makes them,” as Emerson writes of the church, “not false in a few particulars, authors of a few lies, but false in all particulars.”²⁰ At the heart of this falseness, for Emerson, lay the corrupting influence of Property on American life and institutions: “The reliance on Property,” Emerson writes, “including the reliance on governments which protect it, is the want of self-reliance.” He continues,

Men have looked away from themselves and at things so long, that they have come to esteem the religious, learned, and civil institutions, as guards of property, and they deprecate assaults on these, because they feel them to be assaults on property. They measure their esteem of each other, by what each has, and not by what each is.”²¹

As it was for many radical abolitionists, who found themselves linking slavery to systematic injustices throughout the American system of government, property was the foremost threat to freedom.

Emerson’s contemporary, Orestes Brownson, in an 1850 article for *The Boston Quarterly Review* titled “The Laboring Classes,” echoed several of Emerson’s critiques of property and society, suggesting how deeply embedded class consciousness was among the Transcendentalists. Brownson’s essay, which espouses a socialist program for the reorganization of labor, opens with the question,

Is there a reasonable chance that any considerable portion of the present generation of laborers shall ever become owners of a sufficient portion of the

funds of production, to be able to sustain themselves by laboring of their own capital, that is, as independent laborers?²²

For Brownson, whose business, in his words, was to “emancipate the proletarians”²³ from the wage system, such a reasonable chance existed, but not without a massive social upheaval. The entire social system, he held, was corrupted. “The evil we speak of,” he wrote, the evil of wage slavery, “is inherent in all our social arrangements.” Therefore, he concluded, “You must abolish the system or accept its consequences.”²⁴ Extending radical abolitionist rhetoric to include abolition of corporate government, Brownson insisted that “The system must be destroyed. On this point there can be no misgiving, no subterfuge, no palliation. The system is at war with the rights and interests of labor, and it must go.”²⁵ The social joint stock company must be rent asunder for true self-reliance to burst forth unimpeded.

Brownson, like Emerson, saw the problems of labor as emanating from three inter-related institutions—the church, the state, and property—and saw the abolition of these institutions as necessary to the emancipation of the proletariat. Brownson offered a four-step program for accomplishing the emancipation of labor from “the system.” First, since “we are disposed to seek the cause of inequality of conditions of which we speak in religion,” he asked, “[w]hy not abolish the priestly office?” Following the abolition of organized religion, which would be replaced by the gospel of the Kingdom of God on Earth, Brownson proposed the limitation of government: “The first act of government we want, is a still further limitation of itself,” and the second act of government, a repealing of all laws “which bear against the laboring classes.”²⁶ Government, Brownson argued, was merely a monopoly that represented “the interests of the business community in

opposition to the laboring community” working “under control of the banks.”²⁷ For this reason, following the abolition of religion and the limitation of the state, Bronson argued on behalf of “the destruction of the banks.” Finally, in a proposal that echoed Thomas Paine’s advocacy of the inheritance tax,²⁸ Bronson called for the abolition of “the hereditary descent of property.” Since “we have abolished hereditary monarchy and hereditary nobility,” Bronson argued, “we must complete the work” by abolishing hereditary property.²⁹

While Bronson shared Emerson’s goal, that of emancipating all labor from state-enforced conditions of both chattel and wage slavery, Bronson, as a socialist, was critical of Emerson’s individualism. For Emerson, as David M. Robinson has argued, and as was also true for Thoreau, social change was predicated upon “a radical shift in perception and consciousness,” while Bronson, envisioning “the social consequences of that reconciliation in a coming age of perfected human society,” described “less the change that would happen to particular individuals than the perfected world in which these individuals would find themselves.” Robinson concludes that “Bronson’s work was far more typically utopian than Emerson’s”³⁰ because its primary aim was toward social rather than individual transformation. Bronson, as “The Laboring Classes” suggests, sought revolution, an overturning of the social order to be replaced by a new social order, while Emerson sought the soul’s inner light, seeing individual emancipation as the basis of any social order that might emerge.

The primary limitation of Emersonian self-reliance, for Bronson, was its emphasis on the self as humanity’s definitive ethical touchstone. “If any man will analyze the moral sentiment as a fact of consciousness, he will find,” Bronson wrote in his

review of Emerson's "Divinity School Address," "that it is a sense of obligation" and "voluntary obedience to moral law" that guides ethical behavior, and these were lacking in Emerson's thought.³¹ Further, Bronson argued, moral law derives from an eternal source rather than from a finite and individual soul. Emerson, Bronson believed, "proposes nothing higher than our own individual good as the end to be sought." Asking the question "Are all things in the universe to be held subordinate to the individual soul? Shall a man take himself as the centre of the universe?", Bronson concludes that Emerson's "individualism" is "a deification of the soul with a vengeance," "nothing but a system of transcendental selfishness," and "pure egotism."³²

The flaw that Bronson detected in Emerson—that self-reliance leads back to a system of selfishness—is quite possibly present in Emerson himself, though usually in an ironic context. In "New England Reformers," for example, an 1844 lecture, Emerson acknowledged his attraction to the pro-business *Boston Globe's* caption "The World is Governed Too Much."³³ Indeed, the caption was so attractive, Emerson confesses, that he didn't bother to read the articles beneath it. They were irrelevant, Emerson argued, because the true expositors of the anarchist spirit of the age lay not in capitalists but in "non-resistance." It was nonresistors who tended to "realms more important than trade and economics" where the few "who throw themselves on their reserved rights . . . reply to the assessor, and to the clerk of the court, that they do not know the State." Trade and Property, by contrast, "constitutes false relations between men."³⁴ The true spirit behind *The Globe's* caption, Emerson believed, should have been one of "man's equality to the church, of his equality to the state and of his equality to every other man."³⁵

Against Property

In addition to rooting his philosophical anarchism—that is, his anarchism without a program—in the individual’s equality to the state and church, Emerson, like the anarchist immigrants who would follow him, rejected the capitalist system of property. As he wrote in “Man the Reformer” (1841), his response to the Transcendentalist Brook Farm experiment, the laws protecting our “whole institution of property supports a “system of selfishness,” a “system of distrust, of concealment, of superior keenness, not of giving but of taking advantage.”³⁶ For Emerson, self-reliance, individual “self-help,” was the cure for, not the cause of, selfishness, greed, envy, and property. “Can we not learn the lessons of self-help? Society is full of infirm people, who incessantly summon others to serve them.” Was it necessary to have servants, to enslave others to fulfill one’s wants? Would it not be better, Emerson asked, “to have few wants and to serve them one’s self, so as to have somewhat left to give, instead of being always prompt to grab?”³⁷ Rather than protecting the moral toxicity of property, true government, Emerson believed, should be guided by “the sentiment of love” and “the equitable rule” that “no one should take more than his share.” If we were to “Let our affection flow out to our fellows” in this way, we may see, Emerson believed, “the greatest of all revolutions” in which “all men will be lovers,” “every calamity will be dissolved in the universal sunshine,” and “every child that is born must have a just chance for his bread.”³⁸

Defining liberty in terms of political economy, Emerson’s critique of slavery as a broad social state sought to cut the mentality of master and slave off at the source. If this mentality was rooted in other-reliance on property, church, and state, it was also rooted, Emerson believed, like Thoreau, in the evils of paper currency. For Emerson, as he wrote

in his 1855 essay “American Slavery,” paper currency introduced an original form of slavery because it instituted a system of profit that stole the fruits of labor. Just as Thoreau held that a misguided faith in “specie” leads to exploitation and suffering on a global scale, Emerson argued that “Paper money is good only so far as it represents real labor.”³⁹ Paper currency as it actually exists, however, always represents a combination of real labor and unearned labor, exploitation, and profit. “My political economy is very short,” Emerson stated: “a man’s capital must be in him.” In other words, the meaning of liberty was the right to own the fruits of one’s labor, to live a self-reliant life. Emerson’s Americans, Emerson believed as late as 1862, in his “American Civilization,” accepted slavery because they were already hardened by a parallel system of economic exploitation, one in which “[b]anknotes rob the public, but are such a daily convenience that we silence our scruples, and make believe they are gold.”⁴⁰

Emerson’s criticism of the relationship between currency and slavery, like many of his social critiques, echoes popular antebellum political sentiment. As Eric Foner has noted, both Jacksonian Democrats and Lincoln Republicans criticized speculation and banking on the basis that it produced profit without labor. For a Jacksonian like Emerson, who eventually migrated to the new Republican party behind Lincoln and the War, practically the only people not counted as “laborers” were bankers, investors, and absentee owners. At a time when forty percent of the population of the North was self-employed, men who owned factories and shops were counted among the laboring classes. Indeed, as Foner argues, “political anti-slavery” in part served as “an affirmation of the superiority of the social system of the North,” given “the dignity and opportunities which it offered the average laboring man.”⁴¹ Although it was opposed to speculation,

mainstream political rhetoric never attacked the basic bourgeoisie principle of profit. For anti-government radicals and for socialists, however, all profit, not just profit from “speculation,” was a form of slavery and one of the baser motives of human life, one that must be disposed of entirely before freedom and self-reliance could dawn.

Josiah Warren’s Individualist Anarchism

In the eighteen forties, Emerson exhibited a distrust of the state based on the principle of self-reliance far closer to that of his contemporary Josiah Warren—whom Crispin Sartwell argues could have been “an Emersonian avatar” had the two actually met rather than simply “emerged in the same atmosphere”⁴²—than to that of the Jacksonians. Warren, who moved from an obscure background in Massachusetts West to the Ohio Valley in 1818, found himself by 1826 among the founding members of Robert Owen’s New Harmony Community of Equality in Indiana. Owen, the Scotland-based Welsh social reformer, had found and expounded upon the principles of what he called “environmentalism,” or what we might call “social determinism.” Believing that heredity and the social environment determined an individual’s will and actions, Owen founded New Harmony on the socialist principle of shared ownership of property. For Warren, however, Owen’s socialist solution would prove itself a failure. At New Harmony, Warren witnessed interpersonal turmoil and the gradual dissolution of the community of much the same kind that Emerson had witnessed among his contemporaries at Brook Farm.

Warren came to the conclusion that while Owen’s environmental determinism was correct, his socialist vision of a cooperative society was in error. For Warren, Owen’s experiment suffered from the ills of what he called “combination.” As personal

ownership disappeared, personal responsibility waned. All the while, rather than creating cooperation, communal property enforced such an oppressive intellectual conformity that the mere expression of difference would seem to threaten the entire commune. “It appeared,” Warren concluded after his sojourn in one of America’s many nineteenth century socialist utopias, “that it was nature’s own inherent law of diversity that conquered us.”⁴³ In order to achieve true harmony, Warren decided, “Society must be so converted as to preserve the SOVEREIGNTY OF EVERY INDIVIDUAL inviolate,” leaving “every individual at all times at liberty to dispose of his or her person, and time, and property in any manner in which his or her feelings or judgment may dictate.”⁴⁴

To a large extent, Warren’s “sovereignty of the individual” and Emerson’s “self-reliance” are interchangeable terms. The “sovereignty of the individual” was, in Warren’s nearly Emersonian language, “*itself the great Divine law of true order* which no one *can* raise himself above.” Warren held to the antinomian principle of “self-sovereignty raising us above law”⁴⁵ along with Emerson. For Warren and Emerson alike, as for Garrison and Ballou, “Those rules, laws, or institutions that demand obedience against the inclination of the subject, subordinate or *enslave* man.”⁴⁶ Government, to be just, must recognize the “*Sovereignty of every Individual* in his or her own sphere,” for only this sovereignty “places all mankind upon the only possible plane of political Equality.”⁴⁷ As to Government, Warren believed, it had “properly, but one (*Individual*) function, which is to resist or restrain encroachments upon the rights of Individuals.”⁴⁸

Although Warren sought a minimal state and absolute individual liberty, Warren was not, as Dan DeLeon argues in his extension of Robert Bellah’s work, a “right libertarian” who believed that capitalism best promoted the “sovereignty of the

individual.”⁴⁹ Warren, like Emerson, saw capitalism as the practice of profiting from a system of slavery rooted in an exploitative economic system made possible by government. For Warren, as for other “anti-government men,” the system of bank note money was “THE ORIGIN OF ALL SLAVERIES”⁵⁰ because it robbed every person of a portion of his or her labor. Whereas “A dollar represents nothing in particular” except “fluctuation and uncertainty,”⁵¹ the value of actual time spent in labor was universal: an hour’s work was an hour’s work (with some adjustment for what Warren called the “repugnance” of some work) and should be traded in kind. Bank notes, by separating value from labor, introduced the profit motive. “Driven to work for whatever money-holders choose to give,” the laboring classes “take the pittance rather than starve, and starve when they cannot get the work or the pittance.”⁵² Such profiteering and speculation, Warren believed, was “CIVILIZED CANNIBALISM,” and “what is called ‘*society*’ resembles a large basket of slimy worms, each one wriggling and struggling to get at the top rather than to be crushed at the bottom.”⁵³

To counter this system of “civilized cannibalism,” after leavening New Harmony, Warren opened the first of two stores based on the alternative economics of what he called “Equitable Commerce.” At his Cincinnati Time Store, which he founded in 1827, the prices of all the items were based on a literal application of Adam Smith’s labor theory of value. Items in the store were valued at the number of hours spent producing them, and members of the store exchanged labor notes instead of bank currency, with each labor note denoting a specified period of labor exerted. By making profit obsolete, so that the capitalist could no longer enslave the worker, such a system would create cooperation through individual sovereignty. Warren’s system was designed to maintain a

respect for property in the person—that is, for the ownership of oneself and one’s own work—while eliminating the profit motive. A society that honored labor by banning profit but also respecting property would become the kind cooperative society that the socialists and communists sought, but one created through the correct means. That correct means was a “simple justice—Cost the Limit of Price,” which “would make necessary for everyone to *earn* as much as he consumed, and would irresistibly abolish every form of slavery under the sun.”⁵⁴

In Warren’s moral philosophy,” “All men, women and children have an equal right to the free use of all the elements existing in a state of nature” and “All men, *women* and *children* have a right to own, enjoy, or consume whatever is produced by his or her own labor, or an equivalent when exchanged.”⁵⁵ What Warren sought was a transfer of the value labor back to the laboring classes, to all “men, women, and children.” This could best be accomplished with the abolition of the paper money system. Once the circulating medium, Warren argued, is “issued only by those who labor,” “those who did not labor . . . would suddenly become poor and powerless.”⁵⁶ Warren closed his Time Store three years after it opened, satisfied, after having driven down the prices of neighboring shops, that his experiment in equitable commerce had succeeded. He went on to resuscitate a failing Foureurite phalanx on the principles of self-ownership and trade in Utopia, Ohio, and to establish his Modern Times community with Stephen Pearl Andrews, whom Warren considered the best expositor of his ideas and with whom Emerson, like many Boston liberals, was quite familiar.

Warren’s anti-government individualism, like that of the nonresistors and Emerson, regarded slavery as a product of the state, and, like Emma Goldman and other

anarchists after him, Warren believed that slavery, whether wage or chattel, resulted from the state's monopoly on violence. Unlike Emerson, however, Warren was never able to support government intervention through the Civil War. "Government, strictly and scientifically speaking, is a *coercive force*,"⁵⁷ Warren wrote in his newspaper with the nonresistor titled *Peaceful Revolutionist*, advocating much the same philosophy of government as antebellum Emerson. Warren's ultimate goal was to create systems of living "without government," and thus "without *surrender* of any 'portion' of the natural liberty of the individual."⁵⁸ To accomplish this, we must have "A Union not only on paper but rooted in the heart."⁵⁹ Such a union, Warren believed, could not come about through the coercive force of war, and so he believed that the Civil War was "of barbarian origin," growing out of a sense of "clanship, or tribeism"⁶⁰ rather than from inner conviction. To declare the necessity for war was tantamount to "saying that the Union (or clanship) is more sacred than persons, or property, or freedom."⁶¹ Warren was also prepared to accept that the "Civil War was a battle over tariffs encouraged by war profiteers and supported by a consenting press."⁶²

Warren conceived of the Civil War in terms of individual rights as they related to the right of secession and believed that if both the right of secession and the rights of individuals were acknowledged, slavery would come to an end without bloodshed at the hands of the state. To the South, Warren noted that the natural right of succession implied the natural rights of slaves. If both were upheld consistently, "The right of self-sovereignty in every human being, which gives you the supreme right to leave us without asking our leave, gives to your slave the same right to leave you," and it gave every American in the North and South the right "to sympathize with and assist the distressed

or oppressed wherever they are found as the greatest and holiest mission of life.” After all, the right to secede gave “a full and complete warrant for any one of your citizens to place himself above all your legislation” and appeal to the world for protection.⁶³

Warren believed that the source of the Civil War lay not in slavery per se but in the “communistic legislation in favor of enslaving colored people,” first instituted by the Three-Fifths Compromise, which led to “the most unqualified despotism that exists on earth!”⁶⁴ Communism, for Warren, was any combination interests not based on the principle of individual ownership. Thus, the Union becomes, in Warren’s writings, an exemplar of the disastrous results that Warren believed communism, here practiced on a national scale, yielded. Warren treated corporations with the same disdain, writing that such communistic combinations have “have no souls, that is, *no responsibility*, for there is no responsibility until it becomes Individual, disintegrated from communism.” In order to achieve true liberty, Warren argued, “Society will have to dissolve its imaginary masses and combinations and RESOLVE ITSELF INTO INDIVIDUALS.”⁶⁵ For this reason, both the dissolution of the union and the revolutionary, but voluntary, overthrow of slavery were immediate necessities.

If any force were exerted to enforce the union, it should be only that force allowed to government under the conditions of individual liberty. Instead “of sending our troops to compel our neighbors to appropriate a portion of their property contrary to their feelings or judgment,” Warren wrote, “should we not have sent it to protect every individual in the ‘*free management of their industry?*’” To do so would have freed the slaves for just reasons having nothing to do with the preservation of the union or with profiteering, but focused entirely on the preservation individual liberty. Since the “free

management of industry” applied equally to everyone, the presence of a police force in the South to ensure this right would have protected the slave, who was clearly not property by nature, and any southerner who worked for himself.

Slavery, War, and Emerson’s Socialist Nationalism

Emerson initially rejected the Civil War, like Warren, on pacifist and individualist grounds, but gradually came to embrace it as the only possible solution to “the Rebellion.” Emerson’s 1855 “American Slavery” marks a pivotal point in his gradual shift from an anti-statist to a statist stance, as he attempts to work through the contradiction the war imposed on his system of philosophical anarchism. Emerson acknowledged, in the decade after writing “Self-Reliance” and delivering his Harvard Divinity School address, that “whilst I insist on the doctrine of the independence and the inspiration of the individual, I do not cripple but exalt the social action.” Patriotism and public opinion came to have “real meaning,” and, acknowledging this, “[a] wise man delights in the powers of many people.” Throughout “American Slavery,” Emerson tries to square his individualism and antinomianism with what he came to see as the need for collective social action. He still looked out on Americans and celebrated “how little Government has to do with their daily life, how self-helped and self-directed all families are.”⁶⁶ But he had also come to believe that, in accord with Nature, “certain societies of men, a race, a people, have a public function, a part to play in the history of humanity,” and that the State best represented this function.⁶⁷ He regarded abolition as “a right social or public function which one man cannot do, which all men must do.”⁶⁸

In “American Slavery,” seven years before Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation, Emerson was already becoming less an anti-statist as he was in the

eighteen forties, even as he clung to his original individualism. His initial solution to slavery, one that would somewhat better preserve the sovereignty of the individual than, was for the North to collectively back slaves with surplus revenues from the state, private contributions from citizens, the excess wealth of the church, and a sacrifice of middle class comforts such as “our coaches, wine, and watches.”⁶⁹ Emerson’s justification for this solution was pacifist. Like Warren and like the nonresistors, Emerson believed that the North was culpable for slavery and that using violence to excise a system of violence would only reinforce the hegemony of the State. Slavery and war, however, continued to confront Emerson with the limits of his individualism.

Personal liberty, Emerson gradually came to believe, could sometimes only be guaranteed with government intervention, not on a limited scale, as the no-government men argued, but on a massive one. Slavery was a clear violation of a larger, broadly libertarian negative principle of liberty: the “limitation of my liberty by yours,” which allows for “the largest liberty to each compatible with the liberty of all.” This negative liberty, Emerson wrote, “is justice, which satisfies everybody,” but it was evident that the slave owner, in claiming the right to his “property,” was “denying a man’s right to his labor.”⁷⁰ With the original admission of slavery into the Union, along with other antebellum radicals, Emerson believed that the fundamental, individualist principle of “American justice was poisoned at its fountain,”⁷¹ and that the entire current system of government was therefore discredited. Given the enormous violation of self-reliance that state-sponsored slavery entailed, however, the state must now act to correct the problem it had created. To do so would require expanding the power of the state, thus decreasing self-reliance everywhere. Warren addressed this contradiction by insisting that consistent

libertarian principles be enforced in the South with all-volunteer army present only to safeguard self-ownership. Emerson, however, as early as 1850, came to believe that he would no longer “find an American people able to leave government behind.” Such a people needed the guidance of a few “illustrious men”⁷²—Emersonian “representative men”—like Lincoln, whose moral guidance would purify the nation.

By 1862, when Lincoln issued his Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, Emerson held that the War, although it should be fought only to free the slaves and not to preserve the Union, was an inevitable consequence of what he called “Nature’s rectitude.”⁷³ The Civil War was to become part of Nature’s great compensation for slavery, and we must accept that, as a manifestation of Nature, it will “punish us” “with burned capitals and slaughtered regiments.” The main feature of the war, for Emerson, was now its “inevitableness,”⁷⁴ and Americans must trust that the “virtues of a good magistrate” could “undo a world of mischief.” Through war, “Our hurts are healed” and “the health of the nation is repaired.”⁷⁵ The next year, in his 1863 “Fortunes of the Republic,” Emerson’s earlier proposal for a state tax to buy slaves had become a proposal for a blood tax, and blood, Emerson believed, would elevate both the nation and the national character. War brings out heroism and “reinforces manly power a hundred and thousand times.”⁷⁶ War “always ennobles an age,” and it was clear to Emerson that “one generation might well be scarified . . . that this continent be purged, and a new era of equal rights dawn on the universe.” This great sacrifice would reveal “the eternal effervescence of nature,”⁷⁷ and victory in the War would entail “the planting of America,”⁷⁸ “the great charity of God to the human race.”⁷⁹ At this time, “Nature says to the American: You are to imperil your lives and fortunes for a principle.”⁸⁰

The shift in Emerson's political thought from philosophical anti-government individualism to full-blow statism actually germinated from his conception of Nature as an equalizing force, as an abstract entity and state of consciousness rather than a physical place. Nature was central to Emerson's philosophical anarchism during his anti-government phase in the eighteen forties. As he wrote in his 1841 "Compensation," reflecting his equation of Nature with his dissident politics, "Nature hates monopolies and exceptions," but deeply respects the individual soul, which is "not a compensation, but a life."⁸¹ In spite of Nature's respect for the individual soul, however, it speedily punishes "[i]nfractions of love and equity in our social relations." These infractions, Emerson wrote, "are punished by fear," such that when I come into conflict with my neighbor over a question of individual justice, "there is war between us."⁸² In this way, when necessary, Nature's compensation—the "absolute balance of Give and Take, the doctrine that everything has its price"⁸³—would avenge "[a]ll the old abuses of society, universal and particular, all unjust accumulations of property and power." Fear, force, and power become driving forces behind the "natural balance," and only "after long intervals of time are "[t]he compensations of calamity . . . made apparent to the understanding."⁸⁴

Emerson was not alone among the anti-government radicals of the antebellum age to concede some role to government. Ballou, for instance, believed that while government was unnecessary for those living under God's guidance, it was necessary for those who refused to live by God's commands and Jesus' example. It was among the "irrevocable ordinations of God that all who will not be governed by Him shall be governed by one another; shall be tyrannized over by one another, that 'they who take the

sword shall perish with the sword.” Comparing government to a doctor, Ballou argued that “medicine is a necessary evil . . . to those who will not be in willing subjection to the divine.”⁸⁵ Stating this principle in different terms, Emerson held, even in his most individualist phases, that “morality is the object of government,”⁸⁶ that education, taxation, and, when necessary, war were all legitimate roles for the State.

As early as 1844, Emerson had already signaled his nascent statist by pronouncing himself a socialist. In “The Young American,” an address delivered to the business and merchant classes of the Boston Mercantile Library Association that year, Emerson argued that business had done much to overthrow feudalism, which itself had overthrown that “patriarchal form of government,” Monarchism, which “readily becomes despotic.” “The uprising and culmination of the new and anti-feudal power of Commerce,” according to Emerson, “is the political fact of most significance to the American at this hour.” At the same time, however, “Feudalism is not ended yet” since “[o]ur governments still partake largely of that element” insofar as trade has overrun the state, rendering the proper function of government—its duty to the masses—“insignificant.”

Trade

converts Government into an Intelligence-Office, where every man may find what he wishes to buy, and expose what he has to sell, not only produce and manufactures, but art, skill, and intellectual and moral values. This is the good and this the evil of trade, that it would put everything into market, talent, beauty, virtue, and man himself.

Government, as a result, had become a fossilized impediment to the mind of mankind rather than “a plant” growing organically in accord with Nature. Thus, Emerson

concluded, “We have feudal governments in a commercial age.” “Trade,” Emerson concluded, was only “one instrument” in humankind’s struggle for freedom, “and must give way to something broader and better, whose signs are already dawning in the sky.”⁸⁷

Emerson then passed to speak “of the signs of that which is the sequel to trade,” signs which seemed to “concur of a new order,” one that would overthrow the tyrannies of commerce. These signs included “the Communism of France, Germany, and Switzerland; the Trades’ Unions; the English League against the Corn Laws, . . . the blouse, the badge of the operative” that “has begun to make its appearance in the saloons” of Paris, and “the spectacle” of socialist Communities like Brook Farm “which have within a very short time sprung up within this Commonwealth.” These worldwide socialist revolutions, Emerson believed, had arisen in response to “a feeling that the true offices of the State, the State had let fall to the ground; that in the scramble of parties for the public purse, the main duties of government were omitted,” a feeling that Government’s primary duties were “to instruct the ignorant” and “to supply the poor with work and with good guidance.”⁸⁸ To achieve these just ends, “We must have kings, and we must have nobles . . . only let us have the real instead of the titular.” The “real” king and the “real” noble alone could justly attend to the business of governing the “mediation between want and supply.”⁸⁹

Benjamin Tucker and Antebellum Anarchism

Writing in the Gilded Age, the American-born Anarchist Benjamin Tucker would argue, along similar lines, for labor reform; but the Civil War, Tucker came to believe, proved that the state would always act as an agent of property. In his self-described anarchist journal *Individual Liberty*, Tucker explained that “nearly all Anarchists

consider labor to be the only basis of the right of ownership” and that anarchism “contemplates a time when social sanction” of property rights “shall be superseded by a unanimous individual sanction” of the right to earned ownership, “thus rendering enforcement [of property rights] needless.”⁹⁰ The primary, unethical function of government, in Tucker’s view, was to protect the privileges of property owners against the rights of property earners, and the Civil War had not actually changed the nature of government.

“What are the ways by which men gain possession of property?” Tucker asks *Individual Liberty*. “Not many,” he continues. “Let us name them: work, gift, discovery, gaming, the various forms of illegal robbery by force or fraud, usury. Can men obtain wealth by any other than one or more of these methods? Clearly, no.” Of these methods, usury—defined as “interest on money, rent of land and houses, and profit in exchange”—gains its power from “the monopoly of land and the monopoly of credit” enforced by the state. “Ground-rent,” for instance, “exists only because the State stands by to collect it and to protect land-titles rooted in force or fraud” and “Interest and house-rent exist only because the State grants to a certain class of individuals and corporations the exclusive privilege of using its credit and theirs as a basis for the issuance of circulating currency.”⁹¹ The primary methods of collecting unearned property, then, in Tucker’s view, were all subsidized by the state, leaving little remaining for either the laborer who earns capital, or the needy who require aid. Of the profiteering classes, Tucker wrote, while “[t]hose people get some wealth . . . labor can spare them the whole of it, and never know the difference.”⁹² In a view that he shared with Emerson and the antebellum

radicals, Tucker believed that genuine self-reliance excludes reliance on state-supported capitalism.

For Tucker, though, the notion of a revolution in values enacted through the state, in the style of Emerson, entailed an irreconcilable contradiction since collective action runs directly counter to individual liberation. The means did not justify the ends. “What relations should exist between the State and the Individual?” Tucker asked. “The general method of determining these relations,” he continued

is to apply some theory of ethics involving a basis of moral obligation. In this method the Anarchists have no confidence. The idea of moral obligation, of inherent rights and duties, they totally discard. They look upon all obligations, not as moral, but as social, and even then not really as obligations except as these have been consciously and voluntarily assumed.⁹³

Externally imposed moral obligation served the purpose of upholding the state’s usual function as an “instituted social power to enforce the right of ownership.”⁹⁴ Defining government as “the subjection of the non-invasive individual to an external will” and the State as “the embodiment of the principle of invasion in an individual, or a band of individuals,” Tucker found free citizens and any form of government to exist in a relationship of natural enmity. “As to the meaning of the term . . . ‘individual’” in this context, he wrote, “I think there is little difficulty.”⁹⁵ The individual alone has an inherent right to exist. Government should be abolished, after which “property would . . . have no existence simply because of the absence of any institution to protect it. Now, in the view of the Anarchists,” Tucker concluded, “property would then exist in its perfection.”⁹⁶

The problem with government, for a consistent anarchist like Tucker, was a

problem of means and ends: a just end could never be reached by force and coercion, which were the inherent offices of government. There were two principles at stake—the principles of “*Authority* and [of] *Liberty*—and therefore a clear moral choice between State Socialism and Anarchism. The former was “*the doctrine that all the affairs of men should be managed by the government, regardless of individual choice;*” the latter, “*the doctrine that all the affairs of men should be managed by individuals or voluntary associations, and that the State should be abolished.*” Given this dichotomy, Tucker chose to follow the path of Warren his contemporary, the French anarchist Pierre Proudhon, who, rather than “socializing the ownership of capital,” sought “to socialize its effects by making its use beneficial to all instead of a means of impoverishing the many to enrich the few.”⁹⁷

Emerson, Individualism, and the State

Emerson was no revolutionary anarchist, but neither was he an apologist for capitalism, as some of his critics claim. Both Emerson’s antebellum writings and his writings in support of the war are at bottom anti-capitalist, but they show him developing from a philosophical anarchist to a state socialist. His “individualism”—that is, his self-reliance—was part of a larger cultural critique of tax-and-distribute corporate capitalism with roots in the anti-government antebellum Left. To understand Emerson in this light, as a philosophical anarchist whose belief in individual liberty for the slave and whose definition of Nature as a compensating force ultimately led him to a collective, socialist conclusion and glorification of war, is to understand both how closely Emerson reflected his times and how little this reflection had to do with acquisitive, Jacksonian capitalism. For a true capitalist, one need look not to Emerson, a philosophical anarchist whose

system turned him into a state socialist, but to Andrew Carnegie, for whom the “Socialist or Anarchist who seeks to overturn present conditions is to be regarded as attacking the foundation upon which civilization itself rests.”⁹⁸

Emerson, at different points in his life and to varying degrees, held to both individualist and state socialist views of government. The revolutionary anarchists who came to the United States during the Gilded Age, discussed in the next chapter, overlooked Emerson the state socialist in favor of Emerson the individualist and philosophical anarchist, focusing on his early canonical essays, especially “Self-Reliance.” Yet their understanding of Emerson was enough to convince them that anarchism was inseparable from American traditions and thus lead them to identify Emerson as a philosophical forbearer of revolutionary anarchism. Emerson’s self-reliance, they came to believe, contained the essence of American anarchism.

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Chapter 3

Anarchy and the American Prospect

In the 1917 verdict in the trial of two anarchists, Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman, for disseminating anti-conscription literature and holding rallies that opposed U.S. involvement in World War I, Emma Goldman invoked Thoreau and Emerson to justify her individual liberty to dissent. “But never would I change my ideas because I am found guilty,” she argued. “I may remind you of two great Americans, undoubtedly not unknown to you, gentlemen of the jury; Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.”¹ The court, however, did not defend Goldman’s “masculine,” “rugged individualism” as a core American value to be protected and upheld. Rather, it defended the authoritarian collectivism that war, including cold war, engenders. “We have no place in this country,” presiding federal judge Julius Mayer argued before sentencing Goldman and Berkman each to two years imprisonment,

for those who express the view that the law may be disobeyed in accordance with the thoughts of an individual. I am expressing not my view alone, I am expressing the view of what we in America understand to be the views of a true democracy and a true republic.²

“We have no place in this country,” the institutional voice was proclaiming in 1917, “for Henry David Thoreau and civil disobedience, for Emersonian self-reliance, for Emma Goldman and her literary interests.”

For Goldman, a Jewish immigrant from Russia, as for Voltairine De Cleyre, a second-generation American descendent of French radicals, and Rudolph Rocker, a German anarchist exiled from his native Germany, the individualism of Emerson,

Thoreau, and other American radical thinkers proved that anarchism was native to the United States. In a period in which the anarchist presence in the United States came under official scrutiny and the very citizenship of immigrant anarchists was a stake, Goldman, De Cleyre, and Rocker called on the spirit of Emerson and Thoreau to argue that both anarchism and immigrant anarchists belonged in the United States. In the process of arguing on behalf of Emerson and Thoreau as harbingers of the spirit of anarchism, these three writers hoped to “naturalize” anarchism in an American context.

Noam Chomsky has called anarchism of the kind that Emma Goldman espoused—revolutionary communist anarchism—“the libertarian wing of socialism.”³³ This summation suggests both the challenge and aspirations of anarchist thought, and points to the dual philosophical requirements of the anarchist social arrangements that Goldman and her comrades proposed. A just society cannot impede the full development of the spiritual and creative faculties of its members. Since the state, liberal or not, inevitably represents systematic divestment of individual liberties, programs of state reform that are divorced from the centrality of the individual inevitably fail to address the libertarian demands of anarchist socialism, its emphasis on the individual. Faced with twin desires—the desire for social justice and the desire for a society conducive to economic self-reliance—American anarchists at the turn-of-the-century launched a broad propaganda campaign against the rugged individualism of the industrial capitalist class. As part of this campaign, Emma Goldman, Rudolf Rocker, and Voltairine de Cleyre argued for an emphasis on the core principle of individualism in any social arrangements, including, and especially, anarchist ones.

Emma Goldman's Communist Individualism

Peter Kropotkin, among the most influential anarchist thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, provided many of the philosophical foundations of communist anarchism in the United States and worldwide. A naturalist and Russian prince who gave up his royal station to join the cause of labor worldwide, Kropotkin viewed the acquisitive individualism of the capitalist class as false individualism, one that had been justified for nineteenth century capitalists by the doctrine of Social Darwinism, which imagined human community as a war of individuals in which only the fittest survived. Writing in his *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, originally written as a series of articles for the journal *The Nineteenth Century* in response to the social Darwinist T.H. Huxley, Kropotkin asserted that survival in the animal kingdom was rooted not in competition for survival of the fittest but in communal cooperation.

Kropotkin argued that although one could find in nature instances of all-out warfare *between* species, “there is, at the same time, as much, or perhaps even more, of mutual support, mutual aid, and mutual defense among animals belonging to the same species or, at least, the same society.”⁴ Indeed, Darwin himself, Kropotkin pointed out, had offered observations to suggest that “competition is not the rule either in the animal world or in mankind.” More often, instead, “[b]etter conditions are created by *the elimination of competition* by means of mutual aid and mutual support.” In other words, “natural selection continually seeks out the ways precisely for avoiding competition as much as possible.”⁵ What was true of the animal kingdom was likewise true of the human species: Its greatest leaps in evolution, Kropotkin argued, originated in the cooperative,

social instinct of humankind for mutual protection against an external threats to communal and individual self-reliance.

Taking a dialectical view of human history, Kropotkin posed the history of civilization as a progressive structuring and dismantling of “Mutual Aid intuitions,” beginning with the tribe and followed by the village community, the guilds, and the medieval city. Each of these institutions was formed by groups and bands of individuals for the mutual benefit of all the individuals within it, and led to “a new life of freedom.”⁶ The medieval city in particular was born of the ideals of “[s]elf-reliance and federalism, the sovereignty of each group, and the construction of the political body from the simple to the composite.”⁷ Over time, however, each of these Mutual Aid institutions developed its own kind of despotism from within or without, either in the form of authoritarian personalities who sought to form and command a state or invading armies from other states. Against the invasion of cooperative communities “by parasitic growths”⁸ whom Kropotkin called “robber knights,”⁹ individualism in the form of dissent and self-defense must continually assert itself. Such individualism, however, was not that of the capitalists—“the petty unintelligent narrow-mindedness, which, with a large class of writers, goes for ‘individualism’ and ‘self-assertion’”¹⁰—but was instead an assertion of individual dissent on behalf of the free, voluntary, and cooperative community. Individuals acting on behalf of the mutual self-interest of members of the community were the driving force, Kropotkin held, behind human cultural evolution.

In many ways, Kropotkin was, as David Drinnon argues, “Emma Goldman’s true teacher and inspiration.”¹¹ Both of their idealisms emerged from a shared Russian background of populist and socialist anti-czarism,¹² and Goldman adopted Kropotkin’s

basic view that voluntary socialism would best maintain the natural sovereignty of the individual. Goldman, however, having moved to the United States in 1885 at sixteen years old, came of age in an American social context marked by progressive feminism and influenced by a tradition of American individualism with roots in nineteenth century anti-government philosophy and rhetoric. Goldman, as she mastered English, read broadly in American and European libertarian traditions, drawing on such sources as Max Stirner and Frederick Nietzsche, who Benjamin Tucker published from his press, in addition to Thoreau and Emerson. Her journal *Mother Earth* included excerpted passages from these writers along with selections from Mary Wollstonecraft, Flaubert, Gorky, Tolstoy, Theodore Dreiser, and Charlotte Perkins Gillman, suggesting the range of Goldman's interests and the broad progressive and individualist social background against which her anarchism formed.¹³ Anarchism, Goldman believed, was far more than a movement for the emancipation of labor. Rather, its aim was "the most complete development of individuality combined with the highest development of voluntary association in all respects, in all possible degrees, for all imaginable aims."¹⁴

As a result of the various interests and influences on her, Goldman was both inspired by Kropotkin's libertarian vision for humankind and at times frustrated by his conventional morality as a married man who did not understand her progressive emphasis "on liberating personal life from the social constraints of religious morality, marriage, and convention."¹⁵ If the purpose of any social system was to preserve the sovereignty and dignity of the individual, whose primary enemy was the state, the individual should be freed not only from capital but also from all anti-individualistic morality, according to Goldman. Liberty of the mind and body were one with liberty from capital. As she wrote

in her journal of art of politics, *Mother Earth*, the preservation of human individuality, “the genius of man” and “the true reality in life,” was the only genuine purpose for organizing society. The individual, Goldman argued, in language echoing Emerson, is “A cosmos in himself” and

does not exist for the State, nor for that abstraction called “society,” or the “nation,” which is only a collection of individuals. Man, the individual, has always been and necessarily is the sole source and motive power of evolution and progress. Civilization [meanwhile] has been a continuous struggle of the individual or groups of individuals against the State and even against “society,” that is, against the majority subdued and hypnotized by the State and State worship.

Since the very basis of true society, for Goldman, was the individual, who “remains the most fundamental fact of all human association, suppressed and persecuted yet never fully defeated,”¹⁶ the only legitimate social arrangements were those that allowed the full maturation and expression of the actualized self. The aspiration for this state of non-government was, she argued, contained in literary works that, as she attempted to do at her anti-conscription trial, could be deployed to awaken Americans to the anarchist radicalism inherent and implicit in their best works of republican literature and philosophy.

The kind of individualism that Goldman propagated was clearly not the “conservative” individualism of free market ideology. Indeed, like Kropotkin and many of her peers, she was careful to distinguish between capitalist individualism and that of anarchism, using the term “individuality” to refer to what she meant when she wrote and

spoke of the individual in opposition to the state. “Individuality,” which she defined as “the consciousness of the individual as to what he is and how he lives,”¹⁷

is not to be confused with the various ideas and concepts of Individualism; much less with the “rugged individualism” which is only a masked attempt to repress and defeat the individual and his individuality. So-called individualism is the social and economic *laissez-faire* . . . the straight-jacket of individuality. It has converted life into a degrading race for externals, for possession, for social prestige and supremacy. Its highest wisdom is “the devil take the hindmost.”¹⁸

Such “rugged individualism” “has meant all the ‘individualism’ for the masters, while the people are regimented into a slave caste to serve a handful of self-seeking ‘supermen.’”

Under the guidance of rugged individualism, “the brute struggle for physical existence is still kept up . . . though the necessity for it has entirely disappeared.”¹⁹ The “rugged

individualist” agenda of capital accumulation depended for its success of the suppression of individuality through an enforced and suffocating uniformity sponsored by the state.

Naturally, then, “[t]he interests of the State and those of the individual differ fundamentally and are antagonistic.”²⁰ Indeed, Goldman believed that this “constant incessant conflict” between the individual and the State “has been the history of mankind.”²¹

In Goldman’s view, the difference between the individualism of Emerson and Thoreau and the individualism of the *laissez faire* marketplace was both stark and self-evident. Where the former directed its ends to the greater good of all, the latter sought only self-satisfaction. Emerson’s message, in her view, was anarchist because it

represented the correct balance between self and society. Where Emerson emphasized the self, he also emphasized “truth,” and “truth,” she believed, was always socially directed:

“The one thing of value in the world” says Emerson, “is the active soul; this every man contains within him. The soul active seeks absolute truth and utters truth and creates.” In other words . . . it is the true soul that sees and creates the truth alive, out of which is to come a still greater truth, the re-born social soul.²²

As Goldman’s comrade Max Baginski, also writing for *Mother Earth*, held, such “Truth and beauty. . . are enthroned upon the necessity of procuring the means of existence in a co-operative and organized manner.”²³ Although “the State Socialists love to assert that at present we live in an age of individualism,” in fact, Baginski argued, “individuality was never valued at so low a rate as it is today.” America was not a society of individualists, but a culture of adaptive conformity in which “[i]ndividual thinking and feeling are [considered] encumbrances and not recommendations on the paths of life.”²⁴

For Goldman, the image of the individual as one in opposition to the state was mirrored in works of art, particularly the modern drama, but also in modern literature more generally. Literature, as she argued in her essay “The Significance of the Modern Drama,” had something to teach radicals in the United States. The average radical, she held, was “hidebound” by Marxist clichés like “bloated plutocrats,” “economic determinism,” and “class consciousness,” and thus the “radical” had become “as the man devoid of all ideas.” Spouting clichés like these, the Marxist Left too often missed the broader social import of literature, which “sounds meaningless to those whose hearing has been dulled by the din of stereotyped phrases.” Insofar as it embraces “the entire gamut of human emotions” and “mirrors the complex struggle of life,” literature, she

believed, can act as “the dynamite which undermines superstition, shakes the social pillars, and prepares men and women for the reconstruction.”²⁵ Writers in the canons of American literature whom she admired and called on in her own defense preserved the core value of individualism in works whose very subtlety and complexity could undermine propaganda. Among these, Thoreau, she believed, was “the greatest American anarchist” because he used his talent to make plain that “the keynote of government is injustice.” In her words, “A close examination of the machinery of politics and its achievements will bear out the logic of Thoreau.”²⁶

By 1917, the year of her trial and deportation, Goldman had been, for the span of three decades, a nationally known activist and speaker on behalf of anarchism, so that her references to Thoreau sought to sway a sizable audience to her position on the place for anarchism in American life. As Alice Wexler has noted, Goldman, for all intents and purposes, was a national celebrity. In a single speaking tour of the U.S. in 1910, she gave 130 lectures across the country to a combined audience of about 40,000 people, and five years later she gave 325 lectures to audiences totaling as many as 75,000 attendees.²⁷ She often spoke on pressing political questions, such as the draft, political violence, family planning and choice (Margaret Sanger, whose pro-birth control newspaper *The Woman Warrior* adopted the anarchist slogan “No Gods, No Masters,” was among her friends), and the rights of workers to organize. Just as commonly, she spoke on “The Relation of Anarchism to Literature,” the title of a lecture she delivered to the Chicago Press club in 1915, during which she told an audience of reporters “There is no such thing as a free man among you.”²⁸ She appeared in both appreciative and derisive newspaper articles, was a constant target of police harassment, and was known as a compelling firebrand

speaker and brilliant publicist. All of this prompted constant harassment by the state and a series of attacks on her very citizenship. If her ideas were but an extension of Thoreau's, she could appeal to Americans on behalf of her own natural citizenship in a country she had come to call home.

Given Goldman's history in America, her rhetorical task—to convince Americans that anarchism belonged in their country—was somewhat hopeless. She was most prominently known for her involvement in two of the most sensational acts of political violence of the Gilded Age: the assassination attempt, in 1892, of Andrew Carnegie's partner Henry Clay Frick and the successful assassination, in 1901, of president William McKinley by Leon Czolgosz, an anarchist who claimed to have been inspired by one of Emma Goldman's speeches. Both of these acts—the former planned between Goldman and Alexander Berkman, then Goldman's lover, in retaliation for Frick's decision to call on Pinkerton detectives to quell a steelworker strike for higher wages in Homestead, Pennsylvania, and the latter hatched by a lone assassin—made national headlines and helped launch Goldman to prominence as a defender of political violence as well as a spokesperson for women's emancipation, the abolition of marriage, sexual liberation, and prison reform, as well as for the radical stain in American literature. It was ultimately the revolutionary conclusions to which she brought the individualist and philosophical anarchism and Thoreau and Emerson that prevented the American people from embracing her message.

Race, Gender, and Terrorism

Alexander Berkman conceived of his attempt on Henry Clay Frick's life in Homestead, Pennsylvania as “the first terrorist act in America,”²⁹ one that would awaken

the workers to the tyranny of the ruling classes. In this, however, he was disappointed. He not only failed to kill Andrew Carnegie's right-hand man—shooting Frick in the shoulder and then trying repeatedly to stab him as Frick's carpenter wrestled Berkman away from his intended victim—but he failed to awaken the proletariat to the value of terrorism and assassination, two cornerstones of revolutionary anarchism, as a means to the end of liberation. For his attempt on Frick's life, Berkman was sentenced to fourteen years in prison. What Berkman learned almost immediately in prison was that Americans were unprepared for the kind of propaganda—propaganda of the deed—that anarchists born in monarchies found politically expedient. Indeed, soon after his incarceration, an imprisoned Homestead worker asked Berkman how much he was paid for the assassination attempt.

Deeply troubled by the failure of the prisoners he encountered to apprehend the meaning of his act, Berkman bemoaned what he considered the lack of class consciousness on the part of American working people. “Oh,” he recalled thinking at the time, “if labor would realize the significance of my deed, if the worker would understand my aims and motives, he could be aroused to strong protest, perhaps to active demand. But when,” Berkman asked, “when will the dullard realize these things?”³⁰ Americans, Berkman came to believe, were too entrenched in the democratic process to accept violent revolution as a method for bringing about political change. Against the objections of Goldman, who aggressively defended Berkman to an anarchist community divided on the issue of political terrorism as well as to outraged Americans, Berkman ultimately rejected the expedience of violent direct action, or propaganda of the deed, in the United States. Goldman and Berkman both, however, made national headlines through their

collusion, and Goldman used her media platform to agitate for the emancipation of workers and prisoners. Indeed, at the time, these concerns were intertwined, as prisons were literal workshops in which inmates produced goods, under the guise of “training,” for companies that contracted with the prison system.

Goldman’s rise to national prominence, born on a wave of public reaction to anarchist violence, was accompanied by a fascination with the significance of her race and gender to her radical ideology. If, after all, her apparent inability to grasp the genius of American governance could be explained away by her “foreignness” and her limited “female” intelligence, it need not be taken seriously. A pseudo-scientific analysis of her face published in the *Phrenological Journal of Science and Health* in 1895 served to illustrate the gendered and racialized context in which she was speaking. According to this journal, though she seems to speak like “cultivated professional men,” her peculiar foreign features—the shape of her forehead, the set of her mouth, the “very considerable development in the rear of the crown”—point to “a want of observation, precision, accuracy and specification in her collection or application of data” and explain her stubbornness and aggressive commitment to her cause. Although there appeared to be nothing particularly Jewish in the features of this woman who “professes to be a Russian Jewess,” her physical features certainly seemed to deviate from the Anglo-Saxon norm presented in phrenological charts of the ideal head. If Goldman’s anarchism emerged from an irrationality associated with her features, it could be dismissed as the aberrant illogic of an otherwise admirably tenacious mind.

Goldman’s gender also helped to explain away her politics, even among other anarchists. In one of their encounters, when Goldman was a young anarchist of twenty-

four and Kropotkin was three decades her senior, the two debated the centrality, for Goldman, of “the sex question” in anarchist propaganda. Kropotkin considered Goldman’s emphasis on gender equality and free love a distraction from the aims of anarchism, while Goldman insisted that free expression should extend to “love relations” as to any other phases of life. The two amiably agreed that their differences might have come down to a question of age, with Goldman arguing that “when I will be your age the sex question may be settled for me” and Kropotkin concluding that “Youth cannot consider what is most practical or impractical for propaganda.”³¹

Even sympathetic profiles of Goldman could not help but associate her virtues with male rationality while focusing obsessively on her female physical features. A cover page profile in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch Sunday Magazine* for October 24, 1897, for example, asking Goldman “What is there in Anarchy for woman?” turns repeatedly to her “feminine” charms and features as Goldman responds to interview question. As “pretty miss Goldman” finished her answer, which was that anarchy meant “More to woman than to anyone else” since it offered “everything which she has not—freedom and equality,” a “delicate flush mounted to her cheek” when she was asked whether she intended to marry.” She was, according to the *Post-Dispatch Magazine*, in language echoing the phrenological pronouncement that Goldman had the intelligence of a man of business, “in every respect a womanly looking woman, with masculine mind and courage,” who “laughed as she explained that there were fifty police at her lecture”³² the previous Wednesday..

These unofficial, popular obsessions with Goldman’s “deviant” features and underlying sexuality were echoed, with more serious consequences, in the government

and press response to William McKinley's assassination. On the afternoon of September 5, 1901, William McKinley, the twenty-fifth president of the United States, delivered an optimistic message of free market prosperity, technological advancement, and American democracy to delegates and tourists gathered to hear him outside the Hall of Music at the Pan-American exhibition in Buffalo, New York. Nine days later, he lay dead of gangrene, having been shot with an assassin's bullet. McKinley's assassin—Leon Czolgosz—was the working-class son of a Polish immigrant mining family who, explaining his act in a signed confession, wrote, "I killed President McKinley because I done my duty" and because he "didn't believe one man should have so much service and another man, none."³³ Czolgosz could not have chosen a more presciently symbolic time and place to deliver his message. America, in 1901, was an emerging empire and technological powerhouse, and the Pan-American Exhibition where McKinley was assassinated was meant to serve as a celebration of the United States' regional and global power.

Like the 1893 World's Columbian exhibition in Chicago, the Pan-American Exhibition marked many milestone in American technological development and cemented its political power within the world. As McKinley delivered his speech in front of the Hall of Music the day before his assassination, he celebrated the transformative effect of nineteenth century technologies like the telegraph, steam ships, and the railroad on the United States and the world, and he urged the nations of the world to maintain a policy of free trade based in the free market system that had delivered America to what he called "state of unexampled prosperity." Because of American traditions of individual liberty and economic liberalism, "We" in America, he argued, "are furnishing profitable employment to the millions of workingmen throughout the United States, bringing

comfort and happiness to their homes.”³⁴ Linking American leadership with scientific brilliance and the rational humanism of classical music, the Hall of Music at the Exposition, where McKinley’s delivered his last speech to the American people, was lit brilliantly at night by Price-Westinghouse’s new AC-DC generators and stood as a symbolic beacon of the light of democracy to the world. As McKinley greeted eager Americans with handshakes inside the Hall of Music the following day, Czolgosz approach him with a bandage wrapped around the gun in his hand and shot him twice in the belly.

William McKinley’s assassination placed America’s anarchists under the scrutiny the government, public opinion, and the press. In 1902, New York adopted its criminal anarchy law, under which mere association with anarchists or advocacy of the overthrow of the U.S. government could lead to imprisonment and deportation. By 1917, as a wartime measure, Congress would pass the Alien Immigration Act, which allowed for the deportation of “undesirable” immigrants at the will of the government. Meanwhile, Emma Goldman, as an advocate of free love, became the target of speculation that anarchism was driven by an unbridled sexuality and that Goldman herself had used her feminine charms to seduce Czolgosz into the assassination. A *Chicago Daily Tribune* article publishing the text of the speech supposed to have inspired Czolgosz to his crime depicted Goldman as the devil incarnate, surrounded in a garland of flames, with the head Satan himself. For the next two decades, anarchists in the United States would become subject of the nation’s first “Red Scare.”

For Berkman, as for many anarchists, the government’s response to the European anarchist community—one that involved surveillance, confiscation of mailed materials

on the grounds of obscenity, arrest, imprisonment, and police harassment at public events— underscored the hypocrisy of America’s version of competitive individualism. If, as Social Darwinism held, the individual was naturally disposed to battle for life in an unending struggle of the self against all to seize sustenance from a hostile environment, weren’t acts of violence against impediments to this aim also justified by natural law? Wasn’t an assassination of a head of state merely one means of expressing one’s fitness to survive against an adversary? Why should the state and capital have a monopoly on violence? “I am sick of all this rottenness and sham,” Alexander Berkman wrote in “The Source of Violence.” “I know that all life under capitalism is violence; that every instance of its existence spells murder and bloodshed.” If the capitalist is guilty, “openly and secretly, of violence and outrage in the protection of *his* interests,” then capital has “driven labor to this necessity [of political violence], it defends *its* interests with the weapons *you* [capitalists] use against it.”³⁵

Anarchism at Home in America

Following McKinley’s assassination, Goldman once again, as she had after Berkman’s attempt on Frick’s life, used her high profile in the press to bring the message of anarchism to the American people. She had already told *The New York Sun* in January of 1901, months before McKinley’s assassination, that she hoped to convince “Americans who insisted on believing that anarchy was a foreign revolution” that it is a “universal philosophy” and that America’s “own Emerson and Thoreau said more sensible anarchical things than many of our professed anarchists.”³⁶ This goal became all the more urgent as the United States, under the guidance of former New York chief of police and new president Theodore Roosevelt, put the force of the United State’s

executive authority behind expunging of the anarchist menace. Five years later, in 1906, Goldman launched her journal *Mother Earth*, intended as a magazine of art, criticism, and politics, with the goal of broadening her audience for anarchist writing to an educated middle class. Amid the many living anarchist writers who published in the journal, *Mother Earth* included selections from the works of previous liberals and radicals, including Emerson and Thoreau.³⁷ The cover of the inaugural issue of her journal presented some of the keynotes of Goldman's argument that anarchism was universal and natural as well as naturally American. Illustrated by the anarchist artist Man Ray, the first issue of *Mother Earth* depicts an iconically naked Adam and Eve released from the chains of divine authority and looking into the horizon at a world of possibility. This "return to nature," to Mother Earth herself as the source of liberty, drew on the pastoral tradition personified in such writers as Thoreau and suggested that anarchism was entirely consistent with the radical strains of American writing.

Goldman's attempts to naturalize anarchism in an American context and, in the process, defend her own citizenship, in the two years following the outcome of her 1917 free speech trial and subsequent imprisonment, happened against the background of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the anti-red Palmer Raids in the United States, as a young J. Edgar Hoover along with Woodrow Wilson's Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer began building the case for Goldman and Berkman's deportation. In a Department of Justice Report for 1919 that focused on radicals in the United States, Palmer contended that Goldman, whom he believed instigated McKinley's assassination in spite of a 1901 grand jury's finding to the contrary, was the most dangerous of the 60,000 "reds" living in America.³⁸ She was so dangerous, in fact, that Palmer devoted

over half of the more than 200 page report to Goldman's activities. In a memorandum to the Attorney General's office, Hoover argued that "Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman" were "beyond doubt, two of the most dangerous anarchists living in this country," and that they should not be "permitted to return to the community."³⁹

It was, finally, Goldman's citizenship and not her Constitutionally protected speech that helped the government end her American career. In 1903, the United States, in an attempt to strip Goldman of her citizenship, had denaturalized Jacob Kersner, whom Goldman had married briefly after her arrived in America. Though Kersner had received citizenship before his marriage to Goldman, he lost his citizenship, without ever appearing in court, against the claim that he had been under age when he first applied for citizenship in 1884 and had not been in the country long enough to obtain citizenship, anyhow.⁴⁰ This 1903 decision, combined with the Immigration Act of 1918, led to Goldman's deportation, in 1919, back to Russia on the U.S.S. Buford via Ellis Island. Forced to join Goldman on this "Red Ark" were Berkman and 248 other radicals whom Palmer and Hoover had managed to prosecute.⁴¹

In Goldman's and Berkman's final American statement before their deportation, written as they awaited their removal at Ellis Island, they drew an explicit connection between the works of American-born dissident writers and Goldman's own status as an American citizen. In the introduction to Goldman and Berkman's pamphlet "Deportation: Its Meaning and Menace," radical journalist and artist Robert Minor, who illustrated for such journals as *The Masses*, wrote that, in his opinion, the pair were "Americans, in the best sense, and the best of Americans" since they had "fought for the elementary rights of men, here in our country, when others of us were afraid to speak, or would not pay the

price.”⁴² As Goldman and Berkman saw it, the foreigner, the alien, and the radical had become scapegoats of the capitalists and been “made the lightning rod upon which is to be drawn all the fury of the storm that is menacing the American plutocracy,” even though the “foreigner’s” sole crime consisted “in taking seriously the American guarantees of free speech, free press, and free assembly.”⁴³ Further, in the course of World War I, “One hundred per cent Americanism” had come to mean rooting out “the last vestige, the very memory, of traditional American freedom.” Foreigners, both “the naturalized citizen and the native-born,” were now to be “mentally fumigated, made politically ‘reliable’ and governmentally kosher” by the elimination of “social critics and industrial protestants, by denaturalization and banishment.”⁴⁴

Goldman’s own case proved, the two argued, that “Henceforth the naturalized citizen may be disfranchised, on one pretext or another, and deported because of his or her social views and opinions.”⁴⁵ Linking their own status as naturalized citizens to a tradition of American dissent, their pamphlet closes with lengthy quotations from authors whose words they believed would fall under the criminal anarchy law and the Espionage Act. Among these were Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, William Lloyd Garrison, Henry George, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau.⁴⁶ Goldman’s final claim to American citizenship was rooted in her spiritual and ideological connection to the citizen writers and activists in the personal canon of American dissent she drew on for inspiration, personal validation, and rhetorical support.

Voltairine de Cleyre: American Anarchist

Voltairine de Cleyre, an American-born descendent of French immigrant parents and friend of Emma Goldman, shared Goldman’s view that writers like Emerson and

Thoreau were early representatives of the anarchist tradition in America whose works suggested that anarchism had a natural home there. Born in Michigan in 1866 and named by her father—a French immigrant and freethinker—after Voltaire, de Cleyre, like Goldman, sought to uncover signs of anarchism in nineteenth century American literature. Writing in her essay “Anarchism and American Traditions,” published as a pamphlet by Mother Earth Press in 1909, De Cleyre argued that American literary and philosophical traditions—America’s revolutionary impulse, its Jeffersonian idealism, and its Transcendentalist seeking after higher laws and self governance—all resonated with anarchist idealism: “liberty was nurtured by colonial life” and forged “in the isolation of pioneer communities” which “threw each individual on his own resources . . . yet at the same time made very strong social bonds,” and liberty was perfected in “the comparative simplicity of small communities.”⁴⁷ “All this” however, “has mostly disappeared” by the Gilded Age and, in its place, de Cleyre believed, America was left with “the sin our fathers sinned” when “they did not trust liberty wholly” and “thought it possible to compromise between liberty and government.”⁴⁸ It was from that sin of government, that compromise between the American Revolution and the Constitutional Convention, that the anarchist was awaiting, and actively seeking, redemption and spiritual “Resurrection.”

Drawing further attention to the anarchist idealism in Emerson and Thoreau, de Cleyre wrote in her 1914 essay “Anarchism and Literature,”

None who are familiar with the thought of Emerson can fail to recognize that it is spiritual Anarchism . . . And he who has dwelt in dream by Walden, charmed by that pure life . . . has felt that call of the anarchist Ideal which pleads with men to

renounce the worthless luxuries which enslave them, that the buried soul which is doomed to mummy clothes by the rush and jangle of the chase of wealth may answer the still small voice of the Resurrection, there, in the silence, the solitude, the simplicity of the free life.⁴⁹

For de Cleyre, it was evident that Emerson and Thoreau's anarchism included a plea for individual liberation and a scathing critique of capitalist materialism, that it pointed the way toward that personal liberation necessary for social transformation. They intimated, in other words, the spiritual and individual "Resurrection" she believed was necessary for anarchism to take root in the United States. The values of the Gilded Age, however, stifled this impulse by drowning it beneath a sea of unbridled consumerism.

In de Cleyre's vision of history, which closely paralleled Kropotkin's, every age was possessed of a "dominant idea," and "the one great real ideal of our age . . . is the Much Making of Things—"

not the making of beautiful things, not the joy of spending living energy in creative work; rather the shameless, merciless driving and overdriving, wasting and draining of the last bit of energy, only to produce heaps and heaps of things—things ugly, things harmful, things useless, and at the best largely unnecessary.⁵⁰

Over and against this materialism stood the individual soul, "the mind, or character," an "active modifying agent" that could, if awakened, function as an ethical counterpoint to the new productive and consumptive capitalism that had become a dominant factor in American life and that drew its sustenance from the authority of government. The individual soul must summon the courage to resist and to forge an alternate course: Though "the Society about us is dominated by Thing Worship, and will stand marked so

for all time, that is no reason any single soul should be.”⁵¹ In an Emersonian vein, de Cleyre issued a call for new and representative individuals capable of resisting the materialist course of American and Western history, though they would not be men, as Lincoln was, of government power and authority:

Let us have Men, Men who will say a word to their souls and keep it . . . keep it when the storm roars and there is a white-streaked sky and blue thunder before, and one’s eyes are blinded and one’s ears deafened with the war of opposing things; and keep it under the long leaden sky and the gray dreariness that never lifts. Hold unto the last: that is what it means to have a Dominant Idea which Circumstance cannot break.⁵²

Character in the face of materialism was, for de Cleyre, the meaning of individuality, and true individuality must become the dominant idea of the age if men and women were to reject capitalism and shatter their chains of oppression.

Searching for a usable past that would offer a model of community upon which to base a cooperative utopian future, de Cleyre turned to the Dominant Ideas of cultures that had produced aesthetic works suggestive of a communal orientation and “purposive action”—to Egyptian, Greek and, most importantly, to Medieval European civilizations: “Everywhere in the shells of dead societies, as in the shells of seaslime, we . . . see the force of purposive action, of intent *within* holding its purpose against obstacles *without*.”⁵³ In Egyptian civilization, the Dominant Idea was “to work enduring things, with the immobility of their great still sky upon them and the stare of the desert in them.”⁵⁴ Though this idea was “born and nurtured in the coffins of caste . . . still the granite mold of it stares with empty eyes out across the world, the stern old memory of

the *Thing-that-was*.⁵⁵ In Greek statuary, meanwhile, she found “stone leaping,” the Dominant Idea of Activity” and “Change, swift, ever-circling Change . . . an endless procession changing shapes in their schools, their philosophies, their dramas, their poems.”⁵⁶ In the medieval village, finally, “where a strong old towered Church yet stands” one finds “[e]verywhere the greatening of God, and the lessening of Man . . . [t]he search for the spirit, for the *enduring* things.”⁵⁷ In its spiritual striving, the medieval village offered a repudiation of the modern age.⁵⁸

De Cleyre’s vision of anarchism, then, saw in both the individualism and humanism of Emerson and, especially, Thoreau, the possibility of humankind’s liberation from conformity and materialism and a return to the spiritual values of internal creativity toward social ends. Both Emerson and Thoreau strove to find the spiritual reality of the soul running beneath the oppressive buying and spending habits demanded by the marketplace. Like Goldman, de Cleyre sought to bring anarchism home to America, underscoring its elemental source in the socially engaged American literary tradition. Unlike Goldman, however, her American citizenship was secure, and she had no personal stake in the problem of naturalization. Her rhetorical work to naturalize anarchism in an American context, instead, emerged from her solidarity with working class Jews in Philadelphia, among whom she lived and worked a number of years of her short life (she died in 1912, at 46 years old, of meningitis), and with immigrant anarchists like Goldman and Berkman in New York and across the United States. As Paul Avrich has argued, her commitment to anarchism arose from her sense, as someone who experienced the passing of the American agrarian ideal in her own lifetime, that a corporate, materialistic, and urban ideology of consumption had overrun the core individualism, however

compromised by government, of revolutionaries like Paine and Jefferson and of dissidents like Emerson and Thoreau. If these writers were at least spiritual anarchists, though I would call them an individualist and philosophical anarchist, then so, by extension, were de Cleyre's comrades in the anarchist movement—immigrant, naturalized, or native born—full heirs of American idealism.

For European anarchists such as Hippolyte Havel, a writer and activist in Goldman's cohort, de Cleyre, the native-born American, served as an example of their own belonging in a country that rejected their politics. As he wrote in his introduction to a collection of de Cleyre's work edited by Alexander Berkman and published in 1914 by Mother Earth Press, although "[t]he average American still holds to the belief that Anarchism is a foreign poison imported into the States from decadent Europe by criminal paranoiacs," de Cleyre served to show that anarchism was a phenomenon native to the United States, one that even predated the European advent of socialism.⁵⁹ Parting at times from the socialism of her comrades, she called her anarchism, which was never wholly revolutionary, "anarchism without adjectives." She rooted it, though, in the individualist tradition of anti-government sentiment and dissent that lent credence to the similar arguments of activists like Goldman. Arriving in the United States fourteen years after Goldman and Berkman's deportation to Russia, in a period of global nationalism leading to the Second World War, another influential anarchist, Rudolf Rocker, would similarly link his worldview to American literary and cultural anarchism.

Rudolph Rocker: The American Roots of Anarchism

Like Emma Goldman and Voltarine de Cleyre, Rudolph Rocker, a German anarchist exiled from Germany in 1890 for organizing against Kaiser Wilhelm II,⁶⁰ came

to argue, while he was dwelling in the United States, that anarchism had a natural home in the American social context. After his exile from Germany, Rocker lived throughout Europe, most significantly in East London, where he organized among the Jewish anarchist community for the two decades before World War I.⁶¹ Rocker first met Emma Goldman in 1899 when she visited him in London for two months to help revive, with a series of three speaking appearances, the financially ailing anarchist journal *Arbeter Fraint*, which Rocker had inherited from his London comrades.⁶² After their meeting, Goldman and Rocker maintained a long-term correspondence, with Goldman publishing his work in *Mother Earth*⁶³ and, at one point, suggesting that Alexander Berkman translate Rocker's *Nationalism and Culture*.⁶⁴

Following World War I, Rocker's home in Berlin became a magnet for exiles like Goldman and Berkman, for whom Rocker secured visas, and a stopover for radicals like Sophie Kropotkin, Peter Kropotkin's widow, on their travels.⁶⁵ In 1933, as both German and American nationalism underwent a major resurgence, Rudolph Rocker and his wife, Milly Rocker, moved to the United States on a renewable tourist visa, enlisting their friend Albert Einstein to write a letter on their behalf to American authorities the next year. For several years, the Rockers had to apply to renew their visas annually. In 1928, following *Kristallnacht*, Franklin Roosevelt declared that German refugees living in the United States would have their visas automatically renewed every six months. Twice exiled from Germany, once in 1890 and again by the Nazi regime, which officially revoked Rudolph Rocker's German citizenship, the Rockers were required to register as enemy aliens in the United States.⁶⁶

Rocker, like Goldman, drew his anarchist idealism from a broad range of sources that included early reading in Kropotkin, Engels, and Marx as well as Victor Hugo, Emile Zola, Henrick Ibsen, Edward Bellamy, and other European and American liberal, socialist, and anarchist writers.⁶⁷ It was in the United States during World War II that Rocker, an anti-nationalist without a country, wrote and translated his two major works of intellectual history, *Culture and Nationalism* and *Pioneers of American Freedom*. Like Emma Goldman, the exiled Russian Jew, and Voltairine de Cleyre, the second-generation French immigrant, Rocker sought signs of anarchist revolution in nineteenth century American literature in order to naturalize anarchism in an American context. For Rocker, the American Revolution began the process of liberating the individual from the tyranny of medieval institutions and offered intimations of anarchism picked up and further radicalized by writers like Thoreau and Emerson. In these works, Rocker applied his basic anarchist tenets to the problem of artistic production within a world where constructed national borders too often led to artistic nationalism. Artistic nationalism, Rocker believed, underwrote fascism, defying the true purposes of art.

In Rocker's *Pioneers of American Freedom*, written in German in the late nineteen thirties during Rocker's American sojourn and published in an English translation in the U.S. in 1949 by a small cadre of anarchists and libertarians organized as The Rocker Publications Committee, Rocker attributed the origins of American anarchism to the liberal tradition of the Founders as embodied in nineteenth century works like Emerson's and Thoreau's. For Rocker, Emerson—an American liberal—believed, along with figures like “Garrison, Phillips, Lincoln, and numerous others . . . that the security of every inalienable right, as Jefferson had laid it down in *The*

Declaration of Independence, must repose not in government but in the people themselves.”⁶⁸ Emerson had drawn from this tradition, which emphasized democratic individualism, his view that, in Emerson’s words, “every actual state is corrupt” and that, for this reason, “Good men must not obey the laws too well.”⁶⁹ Indeed, Emersonian self-reliance, Rucker underscored in a lengthy quote from Emerson’s *Politics*, implied the end of the state itself. “The antidote to the abuse of formal government,” for Emerson, “is the influence of private character” and “the growth of the individual” who, in becoming wise, supersedes the state as an entity separate from individual men and women. As Emerson himself had argued, “with the appearance of the wise man the State expires.”⁷⁰

If Emerson set the spiritual tone of the Transcendentalist literary and political movement, Thoreau, Rucker argued, was “perhaps even more outspoken in his blunt defiance of every external compulsion.” Specifically, Rucker argued, Thoreau was attentive to the constraining anti-liberalism of “dead tradition when it becomes a fixed dogma.” Thoreau was “keenly aware that the greatest danger of the time” lies in “the dogmas and institutions which we have inherited from past generations and which the living in reverence dare not disturb.” Further, the mass of men and women, living in reverence of the Constitutional authority of the state, allow “a silent rule of the living by the dead” by which “convictions become mere lip service.”⁷¹ Even more than Emerson’s, Thoreau’s individualism “recognized that the voluntary associations of men for the needs of daily life are the foundation of every social structure” and that state-sanctioned political power “always serves the exclusive interests of privileged minorities.”⁷² Further, Thoreau’s spiritual sensibility, which Rucker calls his “pantheism,” led him to “sip every drop from the unending diversity of existence” in defiance of “the confining bondage of

political institutions.”⁷³ Noting that the “unpleasant truths which he spoke to his generation because of its moral indifference have an even greater importance today than they had then,”⁷⁴ Rocker understood Thoreau’s so-called individualism” as the result not of a “negative attitude of society but of a natural relation of man to man.”⁷⁵

Rocker’s rhetorical and thematic purpose in writing *Pioneers of American Freedom* was to show, in his words, that anarchism was not “a foreign importation, but a product of the social conditions of this country and its historical traditions.” He held that no “definite dividing line” existed “between the first anarchists in this country,” people like Josiah Warren, and “the liberal pioneers of American freedom” like Emerson and Thoreau. Rocker believed that “Jefferson, Paine and their followers had found” in American anti-government individualists like Warren and Tucker the greatest advocates “of that social and political philosophy” on which “the United States was constructed in theory”⁷⁶ At the same time, Rocker distinguished between the individualist anarchism of the Americans and the revolutionary anarchism of their immigrant counterparts. The United States, due to its particular cultural and political history, expressed a form anarchism that “differs essentially from the libertarian ideas brought to American by the European emigration.”⁷⁷ Anarchists emerging from American liberalism tended to espouse a philosophy of individual competition, for example, and by and large were pacifists, while revolutionary anarchists were communistic and embraced assassination and terrorism, rather than primarily inward voluntarism, as politically viable tactics.

These differences, however, were surmountable. Implicitly, the title *Pioneers of American Freedom* suggests that American liberals followed by American anarchists were forerunners of what was to come, a new settlement of naturalized anarchists from

Europe living on the cultivated frontiers of liberty. This cross-fertilization of ideas was possible because art itself knows no national boundaries. Although “Anarchism existed in America at a time when no indication of an anarchist movement was to be discovered in Europe,” “ideas,” Rocker believed are not subject to “any political boundaries but have their fountainhead in the universal sphere of culture to which we belong.” As war fury crept over Europe in the nineteen thirties and anti-immigrant jingoism in the United States, never far beneath the surface, reemerged, Rocker was challenging Americans to overcome the nationalistic tendency to “stigmatize any inconvenient idea or movement by branding it *Un-American*.” “Civilization as a whole,” he argued, “is neither European nor American but embodies humanity in its entirety” and differs only due to the “conditions it encounters in the different countries.” If all humankind shares in the struggle for existence over and against oppression, then it was imperative that anarchists in all camps in America preach tolerance. In addition to preaching and practicing tolerance, however, they must “make self defense the order of the day” in the revolutionary mode if the nation would not heed the wisdom of its own traditions.⁷⁸

Just as De Cleyre associated American conservatism and statism with the failure of the founders to trust liberty wholly, Rocker, in his chapter “America in Reverse,” attributed the failure of Americans to live up to their core ideals to “a whole line of backward and manifest reactionary tendencies whose influence on the spiritual development of American life should not be underestimated.” These ideas were brought over, like American liberalism, from Europe and constituted the kinds of statist compromises with liberty to which de Cleyre had also drawn attention. “Although the constitution guaranteed to every citizen the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of

happiness,” the idealistic vision of America as a land of refuge for everyone oppressed by tyranny, was in many respects but a beautiful illusion.”⁷⁹ Massachusetts had persecuted political dissidents; leaders such as George Washington had found little to fault in the essential elements of monarchy; the Federalists opposed decentralizing authority; John Adams passed the Alien and Sedition Laws (which Jefferson repealed); anti-Masonic and American nativist groups like the Know-Nothings excluded and persecuted minority Americans; a war against slavery became a brutal war against constitutional liberties; and the development of capitalism and industrial monopolies bludgeoned the individual freedom of workers. Although reaction and despotism ran like a “red thread through the whole history of this country” and “retarded every social development which sincere democrats and liberals have dreamed of,” Americans in 1933 were still left with a choice between “a relapse into the medieval bog of absolutism and a revival of the spirit of freedom.” “Will the wheel of history,” Rucker asked in his conclusion of *Pioneers of American Freedom*, “turn backwards or forwards?”⁸⁰

Nationalism, Culture, and the Coming Beat Turn

The choice between moving backward toward despotism or forward toward liberty hinged on the choice between accepting nationalism as a defining feature of a people or rejecting the nation state altogether. As Rucker argued in his 1937 *Nationalism and Culture*, a volume meant to critique the nationalist impulse itself, the concept of the nation and the practice of nationalism had imperiled the people long enough. In their place, Rucker believed, we should look to culture and society as the true sources of creativity and community. Power, which lies at the heart of nationalism, “is always a sterile element in society,” one which consistently has “denied all creative force.” In

contrast to nationalism, which emerges from and for capitalist minorities, culture emerges from the community and “embodies all procreative will, creative urge, formative impulse, all yearning for expression.”⁸¹ Nationalism, by contrast, was an expression of power, and “power itself is the root of evil” since power of any kind “has the impulse to reduce the rights of the community to a minimum to secure its own existence. Society,” by contrast, from which true culture emerges, “strives for constant extension of its rights and liberties” through “the limitation of the functions of the state.”⁸² “The state,” Rucker argued, “welcomes only those forms of cultural activity which help it to maintain its power” even as the “cultural forces of society involuntarily rebel against the coercion of institutions of political power on whose sharp corners they bark their skin.”⁸³ The very idea of a national culture—of a national literature, art, or architecture—was nothing more than an extension of the state’s violence and propaganda to the sphere of natural human creativity. “It is not, however, “the nation which shapes the thought of our species and inspires and equips it for new experiments; it is the cultural circle to which we belong that brings to maturity everything intellectual in us and constantly stimulates it.”⁸⁴

Rucker consistently affirmed the personal will of the artist as a force shaping rather than merely being shaped by the material conditions of society. Rejecting the Marxist doctrine that men and women—and, by extension, art—are determined by the material conditions under which they live, Rucker argued that “a work of art is never the result of an inborn national feeling that is of determinative importance for its esthetic qualities.” While an individual artist may choose to serve a national interest through his art, this choice remains within the province of the individual personality making a conscious decision. While “philosophies are acquired by man and come from without,”

how a person “reacts to them is a question of his personality, a result of his individual endowment.” Although the artist does reflect in his or her person “the whole environment” and is “bound by the men of his time by a thousand ties,” “how this expression will manifest itself . . . is in the final outcome determined by his own temperament, his own special endowment of character—in a word, his personality.”⁸⁵ It is precisely because art emerges from the individual personality and will that, for Rocker, “Wherever intellect speaks, nationality and race vanish like mist before the wind.”⁸⁶

Since race and nation did not determine artistic production, Rocker concluded, there was nothing uniquely American about the core ideas of Emerson and Thoreau. Like Goldman and de Cleyre, Rocker saw in their thought a transnational (what Goldman might called a universal) sensibility of individualism in defiance of the authority of the state. The artists and writers who exemplified individualism in the United States were not “American individualists,” but individual men and women giving voice to a global longing for liberty. Just as Goldman saw art as the dynamite that shakes superstition, Rocker saw art as a stay against the rising tide of nationalism, perhaps the most pernicious superstition of all. A new generation of writers—the Beat generation—would emerge in post-War America from the revolutionary anarchist context of Goldman and Rocker’s generation with an individualist anarchist critique, and rejection of, post-War American nationalism and capitalism.

1. Emma Goldman, "Speech: Address to the Jury," *Berkley Digital Library Sunsite*, accessed February 3, 2010, <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Goldman/Writings/Speeches/170709.html>.

2. Emma Goldman, "The Verdict," *Berkley Digital Library Sunsite*, accessed February 3, 2010, <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Goldman/Writings/Essays/TrialSpeeches/verdict.html>.

3. Noam Chomsky, *For Reasons of State* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 376.

4. Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1976), 5.

5. *Ibid.*, 74. "One of the most frequent modes in which Natural Selection acts," Darwin had written, "is by adapting some individuals of a species to a somewhat different mode of life, whereby they are able to seize unappropriated places in nature"—"in other words," Kropotkin's added, "to avoid competition" by setting up societies in places where fighting over resources is unnecessary.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, 220.

8. *Ibid.*, xvii.

9. *Ibid.*, 206.

10. *Ibid.*, xvi–xvii.

11. Richard Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), 36.

12. For a discussion of Goldman's childhood and the influence of Russian Populism and nihilism on the early formation of her ideals, see Alice Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 20–28.

13. *Ibid.*, 123.

14. *Ibid.*, 48.

15. Candace Falk, *Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 88–89. Among Goldman's objections to Kropotkin's anarchism was that, in her view, Kropotkin "mostly lived a book life and has little knowledge of the World or people" (Falk, *Love*, 48).

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16. Emma Goldman, "The Individual, Society and the State," in *Red Emma Speaks*, 111.
 17. Ibid.
 18. Ibid., 112.
 19. Ibid.
 20. Ibid., 119.
 21. Ibid., 111.
 22. Ibid., 65.
 23. Max Baginski, "Without Government," in *Anarchy! An Anthology of Emma Goldman's Mother Earth*, ed. Peter Glassgold (New York: Counterpoint Press, 2000), 12.
 24. Ibid., 10.
 25. Emma Goldman, "Forward to *The Social Significance of the Modern Drama*," *Berkley Digital Library Sunsite*, accessed February 3, 2010, <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Goldman/Writings/Drama/foreword.html>.
 26. Emma Goldman, "Anarchism: What It Really Stands For," in *Red Emma Speaks*, 74.
 27. Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America*, 166.
 28. Ibid., 169.
 29. Alexander Berkman, *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* (New York: New York Review Books, 1999), 60.
 30. Ibid., 119.
 31. Falk, *Love*, 204–5.
 32. Emma Goldman, "What Is There in Anarchy for Woman?" in *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years: Made for America, 1890–1901*, ed. Candace Falk (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 289–90.
 33. "Lights Out in the City of Light: The Confession of Leon Czolgosz," *University at Buffalo*, <http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/exhibits/panam/law/images/confession2.html>.

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34. William McKinley “President McKinley’s Last Speech,” *Archive.org*, <http://www.archive.org/stream/president00mckinley#page/8/mode/2up>
35. Alexander Berkman, “The Source of Violence,” in *Anarchy! An Anthology of Emma Goldman’s Mother Earth*, ed. Peter Glassgold (New York: Counterpoint Press, 2000), 26.
36. Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America*, 122.
37. *Ibid.*, 123.
38. Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise*, 212–14.
39. *Ibid.*, 215.
40. *Ibid.*, 112–20.
41. *Ibid.*, 221.
42. Robert Minor, introduction to *Deportation: Its Meaning and Menace*, by Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman (New York: Fitzgerald, 1919), 3.
43. Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman, *Deportation: Its Meaning and Menace* (New York: Fitzgerald, 1919), 14.
44. *Ibid.*, 19.
45. *Ibid.*, 21.
46. *Ibid.*, 24–26.
47. Voltairine de Cleyre, “Anarchism and American Traditions,” in *Anarchy! An Anthology of Emma Goldman’s Mother Earth*, ed. Peter Glassgold (New York: Counterpoint Press, 2000), 39.
48. *Ibid.*
49. Voltairine de Cleyre, “Anarchism in Literature,” in *Selected Works of Voltairine de Cleyre: Pioneer of Women’s Liberation*, ed. Alexander Berkman (New York: Revisionist Press, 1972), 145–46.
50. Voltairine de Cleyre, “The Dominant Idea,” in *Anarchy! An Anthology of Emma Goldman’s Mother Earth*, ed. Peter Glassgold (New York: Counterpoint Press, 2000), 190.
51. *Ibid.*, 192.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid., 188.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid., 189.

56. Ibid., 189.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid., 191–93. In de Cleyre’s vision, the medieval city provided a context for equal parts spiritual reflection and collective striving. Even though the collectivism of these social arrangements gave rise to authoritarianism and blood shed, these central ideas, she believed were worth preserving as a cure to the materialism of the Gilded Age. ““Such was the dominant idea of that Middle Age which has been too much cursed by modernists . . . The spirit of voluntary subordination for the accomplishment of a great work . . . Must we [therefore], because the Middle Age was dark and blind and brutal, throw away the one good thing it wrought in the fiber of man . . . that to conceive a higher thing than oneself and to live toward that is the only way of living worthily?”

59. Hippolyte Havel, introduction to *Selected Works of Voltairine de Cleyre*, ed. Alexander Berkman (Brooklyn, NY: Revisionist Press, 1972), 4–6.

60. Mina Graur, *An Anarchist Rabbi: The Life and Teachings of Rudolph Rocker* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), 38–41.

61. Ibid., 70–111.

62. Ibid., 93.

63. Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America*, 123.

64. Graur, *An Anarchist Rabbi*, 212.

65. Ibid., 171.

66. Ibid., 223–24.

67. Ibid., 20–21.

68. Rudolph Rocker, *Pioneers of American Freedom: Origin of Liberal and Radical Thought in America*, trans. Arthur E. Briggs (Los Angeles: Rocker Publications Committee, 1949), 20–21.

69. Ibid., 22.

70. Ibid., 23.

71. Ibid., 25.

72. Ibid., 26.

73. Ibid., 27.

74. Ibid., 29.

75. Ibid., 31.

76. Ibid., 260.

77. Ibid., 155.

78. Ibid., 163–64.

79. Ibid., 166–67.

80. Ibid., 181.

81. Rudolph Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture* (Los Angeles: Rocker Publications Committee, 1937), 85.

82. Ibid., 87.

83. Ibid., 85.

84. Ibid., 472.

85. Ibid., 474.

86. Ibid., 459.

Chapter 4

Japanese Exceptionalism and the Anarchist Roots
of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance

The literary and political traditions of anarchism—individualist and communist—described in the preceding chapters helped to create Beat Zen anarchism, an aesthetic and political ideal that emerged from the Beat generation’s dialogue between Japanese Buddhism and the anarchism of their radical elders. Out of this dialogue, the beat poets Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen, along with the writer Alan Watts, developed an anarchistic critique of American cold war culture. The individualist anarchism of the Beats, like that of Thoreau, depended on individual revolution and a voluntarism, yet it blossomed from their contact with revolutionary anarchist ideas. Their dialogue with Zen, meanwhile, was not, as has been argued elsewhere,¹ Orientalist. In other words, they did not objectify Zen as an oriental Other or Zen teachers as curious exotics. Rather, their Buddhism was Occidental: It gave them a Japanese-centered criticism of American materialism that confirmed their anarchist convictions.

The San Francisco poetry renaissance, a name to describe the gathering of post-War youths of varying age who painted, made music, and spoke poetry in San Francisco’s North Beach neighborhood, includes a number of poets, such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan, and Lew Welch, not discussed in the scope of this chapter. As Michael Davidson has suggested, the San Francisco poetry renaissance appears as much a myth—what he calls an “enabling fiction”—as a historical reality since many of the poets and writers associated with it had roots and artistic outlets outside of San Francisco. Indeed, Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder were “absent from the

scene in many of its crucial years,” studying Zen abroad.² For Davidson, what holds the idea of a San Francisco poetry renaissance together are a mythologized sense of place—Big Sur, City Lights Bookstore, the open road, North Beach coffee shops—along with a communitarian aesthetic of direct and emotionally heightened spontaneous address, sexual freedom, and libidinous experimentation, an urban, cosmopolitan outlook, a rebellious individualism with roots in nineteenth-century American literature, a broadly anarchopacifist politics, and the pivotal event of the famous Six Gallery reading in 1955, a showcase of key beat poets. To this, I would add the broadly inter-religious sensibility and their engagement with Buddhism, fostered on California’s Pacific Rim. Of the poets who participated in the San Francisco poetry renaissance, Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen pushed this general interest in Buddhism furthest, both of them studying Zen in Japan under Japanese masters, with Whalen becoming a priest at the San Francisco Zen Center under the Zen master and founder of San Francisco Zen Center, Suzuki Roshi.

The Beat sense of the sacred was fostered, in San Francisco, in a self-consciously anarchist milieu where openness and dialogue to both cultural and individual others was encouraged. This milieu, centered in its early years around the poet and anarchist activist Kenneth Rexroth, who founded the San Francisco Anarchist Circle in the late nineteen forties, drew inspiration from European and American anarchist thought. Orphaned in 1918, Rexroth spent his teens traveling the United States meeting and befriending various radicals of that decade, including Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. He began his San Francisco Anarchist Circle after World War II to revitalize the European-American anarchist tradition of holding communal, dance hall gatherings for political education and entertainment. Hosting both first-generation anarchists and a new, more mystical group

of young poets and dissenters like Snyder and Whalen,³ the Anarchist Circle met in a hall in the Fillmore, according to Rexroth, “to refound the radical movement after its destruction by the Bolsheviks” over the course of the previous two decades, which are known as decades of soviet-inspired radicalism. Along with solidifying the political perspectives and personal relationships of the poets of the San Francisco renaissance, Rexroth’s Anarchist Circle also gave birth to the independent, left libertarian radio station KPFA, which continues to provide an outlet for the West Coast anarchists, poets, and Buddhist convert-dissenters. As Rexroth recalls, through the relationships forged in the Anarchist Circle and its offshoot the Libertarian Circle, “the ideological foundations of the San Francisco Renaissance had been laid—poetry of direct speech of I to Thou, personalism, [and] anarchism.”⁴

Rexroth’s anarchism derived partially from his encounter with Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, whose principles of genuine dialogue Rexroth used to organize his meetings. “I look back on the first reading of *I and Thou* as a tremendous, shaking experience,” Rexroth recalled in his *Autobiographical Novel*, and this experience provided “a foundation of both the ethical and contemplative life.”⁵ Buber, among the most influential theologians of the nineteen fifties, directly shaped the ideas of Paul Tillich and Martin Luther King, Jr. According to Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, translated into English in 1937 and republished with a postscript in 1957, an individual’s attitude toward the world is marked either by an objectifying orientation that Buber called I-It or a genuinely dialogical orientation called I-Thou. This latter orientation, for Buber as for Rexroth, was both personal and political. Personally, the I-Thou orientation enabled one to cut through the day-to-day world and create a space for genuine meeting between individuals.

In Buber's view, genuine I-Thou dialogue, practiced on a broad social scale, rendered government unnecessary since it enabled those living in community to "substitute society for State to the greatest degree possible, moreover a society that is 'genuine' and not a State in disguise."⁶ In a community of genuine dialogue, it would be possible to live without government because individuals would mediate social relations directly while comprehending the other in his or her full and unique humanity. Ethically, Buber's sense of the sacred made "the individual and the personal the heart of social life." Against "individualism and collectivism," Rexroth wrote, "Buber advocates communism" of the kind that "can be paralleled with dozens of 'communitarian' writers" from those dismissed by Marx and Engels as 'Utopian,' such as Bakunin and Kropotkin, to "the Russian Socialist-Revolutionaries, [Alexander] Berkman," and others.⁷ Buber's emphasis on unmediated speech between person and person guided Rexroth's vision of the Anarchist Circle and he cites genuine dialogue—"communication, statement from one person to another"—as one of the reasons that Beat poetry "has become an actual social force,"⁸ forged by California's "intensely libertarian character."⁹

For Rexroth, religious mysticism and anarchist politics could produce a poetics of religious dissent. "In a religious age," according to Rexroth, the contemplative poetry of the Beat movement "would be called religious poetry" but "[t]oday we have to call it Anarchism" while understanding that "[a] fellow over in Africa" might just call it "reverence for life."¹⁰ This reverence for life, in Beat poetry, was understood to contrast starkly with the gross materialism of postwar society.¹¹ Rexroth's 1953 poem "Thou Shalt Not Kill"—dedicated to the recently deceased Dylan Thomas—expresses Rexroth's

personal disgust with the cold war liberal consensus, a disgust he shared with the poets who gathered around his circle. “Thou Shalt Not Kill” opens with a blunt accusation:

They are murdering the young men.
 For half a century now, every day,
 They have hunted them down and killed them.
 They are killing them now.
 At this minute, all over the world,
 They are killing the young men.

The poem, a favorite among the Beats and one that Rexroth read often, moves quickly to the accusative voice:

You,
 The hyena with polished face and bow tie,
 In the office of a billion dollar
 Corporation devoted to service;
 The vulture dripping with carrion,
 Carefully and carelessly robed in imported tweeds,
 Lecturing on the Age of Abundance;
 The jackal in double-breasted gabardine. . . .

Summoning blood-soaked imagery reminiscent of the age of anarchist direct action (“I want to pour gasoline down your chimneys. / I want to blow up your galleries. / I want to burn down your editorial offices”), Rexroth’s poem rails against the “double-breasted” organization man, whose complicity with the cold war consensus betrays his liberalism betrays his liberalism.¹²

According to Rexroth, the Stalinists who dominated American leftism in the thirties and forties had become, by the fifties, elitist cultural producers whose attempts to produce art as Communist propaganda in the preceding decades were belied by their very *bourgeois* identities. The Beat generation, in Rexroth's view, emerged after twenty years of anarchist resistance to the statist and thus ultimately conservative Popular Front, depicted in "Thou Shalt Not Kill" as a hyena organizing the cold war consensus. The pro-Stalinist reds and their apologists "were all airborne on a gravy train of human blood," Rexroth held. "American radicals" on both the Old and New Left have been placed time and again "in the ridiculous position" of "representing other people's foreign offices"—whether Moscow's in the thirties or Beijing's in the sixties—even as another "dominant tendency in America," the one with which Rexroth identified, has been "anarchist-pacifist . . . and religious in various ways."¹³ This tradition of anarchist pacifist religious sensibility Rexroth saw as embodied in the Beat poets, whose broadly anarchist and libertarian politics outlasted the communist-inflected Popular Front decades of the thirties and forties.¹⁴

On the West Coast, in Rexroth's telling, because of a continuous stream of anarchist propaganda during the Popular Front decades of the thirties and early forties, "It was no longer necessary" by the nineteen fifties "to educate somebody to make an anarchist poet out of him. He had a milieu in which he could naturally become such a thing."¹⁵ Much of this milieu, in fact, was of Rexroth's making and in Michael Denning's words was part of his sentimental "attachment to the Wobblies"¹⁶—or the Industrial Workers of the World. Rexroth's anarchism, however, had far more to do his conviction that communists were disconnected from the working class and from poetry itself.

The Radical Occidentalism of D.T. Suzuki

The most influential Buddhism in Snyder's and Whalen's contact with Japanese Zen—that of D. T. Suzuki—offered a critique of Western rationalism that paralleled the anarchist politics of Rexroth's anarchist circle and North Beach coffee shops in the late forties and early nineteen fifties. Those poets who adopted Zen did so in large part because the critique of Western culture it offered confirmed their anti-authoritarianism and provided an alternative to what they saw as the deadening effects of rationalism on the human spirit, evident in postwar U.S. culture's technocracy and alienation. The Zen critique of Western and American culture that reached them, meanwhile, was informed by the history and demands of the Japanese state in Japan's imperial contact with the rest of Asia and its defensive stance against Western imperialism. As Robert Sharf has argued, Zen was introduced to the West by “an elite circle of internationally minded Japanese intellectuals and globe-trotting Zen priests, whose missionary zeal was often second only to their vexed fascination with Western culture.”¹⁷ Beat Zen, in other words, began not with a Western appropriation of an Oriental “Other,” but with the introduction of Japanese Occidentalism to the United States.

Americans first encountered the Occidentalism of imperial Japan when D. T. Suzuki's teacher, Soyen Shaku Roshi, presented a vision of Zen as a universal, timeless religion at the World's Parliament of Religions, the crown jewel of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. At once exemplifying Anglo-centrism and opening Americans to a progressive interreligious dialogue only imagined by Emerson and Thoreau, the World's Parliament of Religions offered to Asian representatives a platform from which to deploy what James E. Ketelaar has called “Strategic Occidentalism.” For Ketelaar, as for Judith

Snodgrass and Richard Seager, Asian representatives presenting at the Parliament deployed Occidentalism—a critical “othering” of the West and defense of Asian religion and culture—in reaction to the constraining Christo-centric plan of the Parliament, in which Christianity and faith in a Christian God stood at the top of an evolutionary hierarchy of belief. “The Parliament,” Ketelaar notes, “became for non-Occidental religionists in general and the Japanese Buddhists in particular an arena within which Christianity as a global force could be, in fact needed to be, checked.”¹⁸

In order to “check” Christianity, Asian representatives like the Rinzai Zen teacher Soyen Shaku used the very language of science and modernity that rationalized the World’s Fair and the Parliament.¹⁹ Soyen, like other such “New Buddhist” clerics and philosophers in Japan, often compared Zen Buddhist concepts to concepts within American liberalism. At the World’s Parliament of Religions, for instance, Soyen adopted Western rationalist anticlerical critiques of religion to criticize Christianity, related Zen to concepts in European Romanticism, and sought parallels between Zen and Western empiricism. Soyen presented meditation, for example, as an entirely empirical and experiential practice rather than a mystical one. He criticized Western materialism while offering Zen as its more advanced spiritual cure. Absorbing and transmuting the evolutionary scheme of the World’s Fair, with its hierarchy of races and nations, Soyen explained the historical development of Buddhism by employing a neo-Darwinian narrative that valorized Japan as the protectorate of the most advanced evolution of Buddhist philosophy. By the time Soyen reconstituted Zen’s relationship to the Meiji state and to the West at the Parliament, Zen was no longer “a religion in an institutional sense at all” but rather an “uncompromisingly empirical, rational, and scientific mode of

inquiry into the nature of things” that affirmed “Japanese spiritual and moral authority”²⁰ over Asia and the West.

As the parliament proceeded, missionaries distributed “tens of thousands of pamphlets” on Mahayana Buddhism throughout Chicago. Reporting on his observation of unofficial meetings about Buddhism held in bars, cafés, and churches, one Japanese writer claimed, “We have pacified the barbarian heart of the white race.”²¹ Shortly after Soyen Shaku gave his talk, Charles Strauss, a New York banker, became, “in a public conversion,” “the first person to be admitted to the Buddhist fold on American soil.”²² After the Parliament, Dyer Lum, Voltarine De Cleyre’s uncle, was convinced that the law of Karma implied the anarchist possibility of “the moral government of the world, without a personal governor.”²³ Lum, the first Zen anarchist in the United States, was “probably the first American of European descent to proclaim publicly allegiance to Buddhism.”²⁴

Shortly after the Parliament, Soyen sent his student D.T. Suzuki—whose work exposed Snyder, Whalen, Watts to Zen—to work with Paul Carus on translations of the *Tao Te Ching* and *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*. In a period of intense Japanese exceptionalism, as exemplified by his great teacher, Suzuki began his first major work in English, *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*.²⁵ According to Brian Victoria, Suzuki’s early writings on Zen continued the exceptionalist work of Soyen by bolstering the way of the warrior and sanctioning war as an act of compassion that would liberate the Japanese people and help to spread the dharma. In Victoria’s words, “By the end of the 1920s,” with the aid of Suzuki and others, “institutional Buddhism, including Zen, “had firmly

locked itself into ideological support for Japan's ongoing military efforts, wherever and whenever they might occur."²⁶

D.T. Suzuki's American Individualism

However, many of Suzuki's writings were deeply suspicious of the Japanese state's appropriation of Zen for war aims, especially during the Second World War, and of the state itself as an entity. While the New Buddhist strain of Suzuki's writings celebrated the uniqueness of Zen and Japanese culture, another strain, at odds with the demands of the state, emphasized what Suzuki saw as the centrality in Zen of individual liberation. Whereas "Zen is concerned with the absolute individual self," the government, he wrote in 1948, "should cast such a pale shadow that one begins to wonder whether it even exists at all." Toward the end of his life, in 1952, Suzuki took this line of thinking to its furthest extent, remarking at a symposium, "I think anarchism is best."²⁷ What Suzuki brought to the table as he lectured in the United States both early in the century and upon his return in postwar years was a sensibility about Zen informed both by New Buddhist Japanese exceptionalism and American individualism. The former saw Zen as an exceptional gift of the Japanese people to the world and the West. The latter used Enlightenment individualistic language to propagate Zen as a universal, missionary religion whose spiritually revolutionary aim was to liberate the individual both from the cycle of birth and death and from his or her own cultural prejudices and allegiance to any state.

In explicating Zen to American audiences, Suzuki chose to focus attention away from the outward forms of Zen practice and to emphasize, instead, the unique, transcultural experience of Buddhist awakening. Zen, however, Suzuki insisted, must not

become another one of several Western palliatives: psychotherapy, hallucinogenic reverie, and parapsychology, for example. Paradoxically, while Zen was exceptionally Japanese, it was infinitely exportable since the direct experience of *satori*, or enlightenment, transcended culture. What was exceptional about Zen was at once its innate Japanese-ness and its transcultural relevance.

Suzuki derived his emphasis on the immediate, individual, and trans-cultural experience of *satori* from his association with the Kyoto school, a wave of nationalistic philosophers that followed the New Buddhist wave of the late nineteenth century. Founded informally by Suzuki's long-time friend Nishida Kitarō, the Kyoto school, like the New Buddhists, was intently interested in Western philosophy but critical of the Western ways of life that pure rationality had engendered. In a letter to Suzuki written in 1911, Nishida wrote that Westerners "are completely unaware of what is closest to them, the very ground under their own feet. They can analyze and explain all the ingredients in bread and all the elements in water but they can't describe the taste of such bread and water."²⁸ To become completely aware of "the very ground under their feet," Westerners could not go by the artificial way of dualistic logic and reason. Rather, they must, if they wished to break free of the ego delusion, go by way of *zazen* and *satori*, immediately experiencing the awaking at the heart of Zen practice.

It was partly to overcome Western rationalism that Suzuki Roshi, the founder of San Francisco Zen Center, increased the number of bows Americans take after *zazen* from three to nine and insisted that the ego delusions of Americans were so entrenched that they should follow more precepts than their Japanese counterparts.²⁹ For his part, however, D. T. Suzuki translated Zen into terms easily assimilated to Western

perspectives, emphasizing the naturalness of Zen in an American context. In his 1934 *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, reprinted in 1959 with a foreword by Carl Jung, he assured his readers that

Zen aims at preserving your vitality, your native freedom, and above all the completeness of your being. In other words, Zen wants to live from within. Not to be bound by rules, but to be creating one's own rules—this is the kind of life which Zen is trying to have us live.

The real restriction on human freedom and vitality was not formal Zen, but formal logic, which “has so pervasively entered into life as to make us conclude that logic is life and without it life has no significance.” Summoning a martial metaphor, Suzuki claimed that “Zen wishes to storm this citadel” of rationalism “to show that we live psychologically or biologically and not logically.”³⁰

In offering Zen as a liberation from the dominance of rationality in the West, then, Suzuki affirmed some of the core values that his students and readers in the Beat generation also affirmed: vitality, freedom, biological connectedness, individual wholeness, and poetry. Indeed, Zen's emotionality, as distinct from its rationality, seemed to find its most natural expression in literature: “Zen naturally finds its readiest expression in poetry rather than philosophy because it has more affinity with feeling than with intellect,” Suzuki believed.³¹ If Zen would “storm the citadel” of Western ways of knowing, it would do so from the heart and pen, not the rational mind. A poet looking for a spiritual and philosophical sanction for an emotive, personally freeing, libertarian, and poetic assault on the cold war's regime of military-industrial expertise could easily find such sanction in Suzuki's work. Such a poet could also find a path to universal

compassion that would, if embraced by enough dissenters, create a world without masters.

Suzuki's vision of Zen as salvational for the West was echoed by a convert to Buddhism, Dwight Goddard, who compiled a 1932 collection of Buddhist canonical texts in *A Buddhist Bible*. In his introduction to *A Buddhist Bible*, a book that prompted Jack Kerouac's interest in Buddhism after he found it in a library in San Jose, California,³² Goddard made clear that Buddhism offered teachings of "highest promise" to the West. "In these days when Western civilization and culture is buffeted as never before by foreboding waves of materialism and selfish aggrandizement both individual and national," Goddard wrote in his editor's preface,

Buddhism seems to hold out teachings of highest promise. . . . It may well be the salvation of Western civilization. Its rationality, its discipline, its emphasis on simplicity and sincerity, its thoughtfulness, its cheerful industry not for profit but for service, its love for all animate life, its restraint of desire in all its subtle forms, its actual foretastes of enlightenment and blissful peace, its patient acceptance of karma and rebirth, all mark it out as being competent to meet the problems of this excitement loving, materialistic, acquisitive and thoughtless age.³³

For Goddard, who had "converted" to Buddhism while a Congregational missionary in China in 1897, the Buddha was "the greatest teacher of mankind" and the gift of the Buddha's Dharma was "the greatest of all gifts."³⁴ In Goddard's view, Buddhism's alternative "rationality," a rationality of compassionate and loving fellow service, prefigured a utopian end to American materialism.

Of Goddard's compilation of Buddhist texts, Robert Aitken notes that it began "a creative process of Americanizing Buddhism" that manifested in Kerouac, Snyder, Philip Whalen, and others and that created the conditions that "helped to establish a culture in which the Zen Center of San Francisco could develop and flourish."³⁵ Goddard himself, who financially supported several of the monks who helped to translate the texts in his collection, sought to start a monastic community—the "Followers of Buddha"—in Santa Barbara National Forest. Aitken finds in Goddard's efforts to bring Buddhism to the West not an orientalist mindset, but "a talented Yankee gentleman fired with *bodhicitta*—the aspiration for Buddhahood—who bewildered his conventional family and friends and worked a very lonely row quite single-mindedly."³⁶ Goddard, who typed D. T. Suzuki's 1932 translation of the Mahayanist *Lankavatara Sutra*, clearly shared with Suzuki a strong sense of Buddhism's particular competence to save the West.

This competence, in Suzuki's view, emerged both from Buddhism's perfection in Japan and its ability to evolve over time and space. Throughout *Essays in Zen Buddhism: First Series* (1949), Suzuki's text primarily responsible for inspiring the Beat Generation of Zen Buddhists,³⁷ he argued for the universality of the enlightenment experience, unencumbered by cultural particulars, at the core of Buddhist practice. The purpose of Zen, which "transmitted the essence of Buddhism," "shorn of its Indian garb," was "to bring about a revolutionary experience, more or less noetic, in the minds of the students."³⁸ This revolution in knowing would "exterminate all turmoils arising from ignorance and confusion" and would appear "directly poured out from the inner region undimmed by the intellect or the imagination."³⁹ Zen practice would liberate practitioners from the "intellectual nonsense" that veils the reality of our genuinely enlightened natures

and the “passional rubbish” that leads to craving. Such “accumulations” of intellectualization and blind passion make us “groan under the feeling of bondage.”⁴⁰ Once we “personally experience it through our own efforts,” however, Zen, by “directly appealing to facts of personal experience and not to book knowledge,” promises to return us to “our original state of freedom.”⁴¹ Since this immediate apprehension of freedom from within knows no cultural bounds, Suzuki wrote, “Our religious experience transcends the limitations of time, and its ever-expanding content requires a more vital form which will grow without doing violence to itself.”⁴²

“Bodhidharma,” for instance, who is said to have first brought Buddhism to China, “taught his disciples to look directly into the essence of the teaching of the Buddha, discarding the outward manners of presentation” while rejecting “the conceptual and analytical interpretation of the doctrine of Enlightenment.” Those Buddhists, Suzuki believed, who adhered too closely to Buddhist doctrine—those “literary adherents of the Sutras”—were actually enemies of Buddhism who “did all they could to prevent the growth and teaching of the Dharma.” As Indian Buddhism migrated, Suzuki argued, “there was no other way left for Buddhism but to be transformed.” Such transformations from one cultural context to another were imperative so that Buddhism “could be thoroughly acclimatized and grow as a native plant.” Indeed, it was “in the inherent nature of Buddhism” that such grafting and acclimation “should take place.”⁴³

Republished in 1961 by Evergreen Press, the press that cut the first commercial recordings of Beat poets and introduced the Beats to the literary world in its 1957 “San Francisco Scene” issue of *Evergreen Review*, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* demonstrates Suzuki’s *upaya*, or skillful means, a term that refers to the Buddha’s ability to make his

teachings understandable to different types of listeners. This *upaya* manifested itself in Suzuki's appeal to the tradition of American individualism and self-reliance: Zen required personal effort, not faith: "The reason why the Buddha so frequently refused to answer metaphysical problems was partly due to his conviction that the ultimate truth was to be realized in oneself and through one's own effort," Suzuki wrote, "rather than through philosophical abstraction."⁴⁴

Suzuki's concept of "own effort" involved a conscious rejection of one's cultural practices and prejudices. One comes to apprehend truth not through "an ordinary intellectual process of reasoning, but [through] a power that will grasp something most fundamental in an instant and in the directest way," a power which we all "have after all within ourselves." To accomplish this grasping of truth "immediately without any conceptual medium . . . the sole authority in" the Zen practitioner's "spiritual life will have to be found within himself; traditionalism or institutionalism will naturally lose its binding force." It was, Suzuki believed, "this spirit of freedom" that was constantly "impelling Buddhism to break through its monastic shell." In this affirmation of freedom Buddhism found itself again and again "bringing forward the idea of Enlightenment ever vigorously before the masses."⁴⁵ In the act of bringing Zen before the masses, Suzuki translated Zen into an American idiom that hit some of the keynotes of American anarchism: a rejection of cultural conditioning, institutionalism, and traditionalism; an affirmation of individualism and radical self-reliance; and a language of revolutionary transformation beginning with the self.

The Individualist Buddhism of Alan Watts

The writing and talks of Alan Watts, the most accessible and popular interpreter of Zen to the Beat generation, echo the individualistic themes in Suzuki's work. Watts, an ex-Anglican who studied Suzuki prodigiously in his teens and twenties in his native England and who was also familiar with Dwight Goddard's volume,⁴⁶ gave talks, with Suzuki, at the American Academy of Asian Studies in Berkeley to audiences that included Snyder and Whalen. Snyder and Watts first met at a Buddhist discussion group sponsored by the Pure Land Buddhist Churches of America in Berkeley.⁴⁷ Watts's reach and popularity resulted largely from the left libertarian radio station KPFA, which broadcast Watts's weekly show "Way Beyond the West" adjacent to broadcasts by Kenneth Rexroth. Lecturing in this anarchist context, Watts assumed Suzuki's basic critiques, and uses, of Western thought and extended them to his left libertarian critique of postwar American culture. Like Suzuki, Watts understood Zen as resulting from the contact between Indian Buddhism and Chinese Taoism.⁴⁸ Emphasizing the Tao at the heart of Zen, Watts related Zen Buddhism to individual liberation from the tyrannical and authoritarian nature of Western theology. Unlike the Western God, "Tao," Watts argued, "does not act as a boss. In the Chinese idea of nature," in fact, "nature has no boss. There is no principle that forces things to behave the way they do. It [Tao] is a completely democratic theory of nature."⁴⁹ If Christianity offered a system of social relations reflected in the modern, antidemocratic workplace, Zen Buddhism, with the Tao at its core, offered true democracy. This democracy, in turn, was parallel to nature itself, which Watts called "a system of orderly anarchy."⁵⁰

In Watts' political cosmology, the Taoist heart of Buddhism was "high philosophical anarchy," since it implied that nature, including human nature, should be trusted fully.⁵¹ Nature—the Tao—"doesn't have a boss because a boss is a system of mistrust."⁵² The system of mistrust that upheld the "boss" system inherent in Western culture and theology, Watts argued, leads to a "totalitarian state." Combining elements reminiscent of Orwell's description of an authoritarian Communist England in 1984 and David Riesman's criticism of psychotherapeutic cold war conformism in *The Lonely Crowd*, Watts argued that in the "boss" system of Western thought

everybody is his brother's policeman. Everybody is watching everybody else to report him to the authorities. You have to have a psychoanalyst in charge of you all the time to be sure that you don't think dangerous thoughts or peculiar thoughts and you report all your peculiar thoughts to your analyst and your analyst keeps a record of them and reports them to the government, and everybody is busy keeping records of everything.⁵³

As a result of our ways of knowing in the West, Watts stated in the opening minutes of 1949 series of lectures for San Francisco's public TV station, KQED, "Our whole culture, our whole civilization . . . is nuts. It's not all here. We are not awake. We are not completely alive now." Postwar American culture was not alive primarily because it was "using science and technology, the powers of electricity and steel, to carry on a fight with our external world and to beat our surroundings into submission with bulldozers." Our "religio-philosophical tradition," meanwhile, "has taught us to . . . mistrust ourselves." This mistrust of nature and the natural self Watts attributed to Christian faith in original sin, which "has taught us as reasoning and willing beings to distrust our animal and

instinctual nature.”⁵⁴ A turn to the East could revitalize this suffocated animal instinct, returning us to the ground of nature’s system of orderly anarchy.

Like his teacher, D.T. Suzuki, Watts believed that it was “characteristic of Eastern philosophy to be based on experience rather than ideas” and guided by “feeling” instead of rationality. The conception of the East as “feeling” and the West as “thinking,” by all appearances Orientalist, actually favored the East, both for Suzuki and for Watts. To privilege rationality was to mar the natural world, to alienate oneself from nature, and to create an authoritarian society. Rationalism, in other words, offered a delusional and innately inferior way of experiencing the universe. To posit that the East experiences the world more directly and emotionally is not to posit the view, Watts argued, “that there are people in the backward worlds of Asia who think that the universe is ultimately nothing at all.” Instead, the liberating awareness that the world was a direct experience empty of the rational ideas that Westerners impose on it “represents complete spiritual freedom. Or you might say if you don’t like the world spiritual, complete psychological freedom.” This freedom, which Watts equated with *satori* or Zen awakening, “is the objective of human life.” Without this freedom, Westerners would continue to have “a fundamentally hostile cutting up attitude to life,” an “attitude of the knife” that “gives us dead knowledge instead of living knowledge” and that “kills things.”⁵⁵

Governance attuned to nature, Watts explained during his KQED broadcast, would restore life to Western men and women. As part of this restoration, the West—or at least those in the West who awakened to their true, uninhibited natures—would adopt a self-organizing form of governance in which the individual person and the social person naturally aligned. “These forms of Asian philosophy” such as Taoism and Zen “want us

as individuals to feel that we participate in this great democracy of nature no longer as isolated individuals trying to push it around, command it like monarchs or bosses.” Taoism and Zen instead wants us to realign ourselves to nature’s “self governing state” and “self organizing pattern” in which “each one of us is that entire pattern.”⁵⁶ Harmony between the individual, society, and nature was at once a reaffirmation of the individual, in the sense that one’s real nature was realized as identical to that of cosmos, and a freeing of the individual from the delusion of the isolated ego. Thus freed, one could more cooperatively engage the world without government.

In his 1957 *The Way of Zen*, Watts suggested that Zen served primarily as medicine in cultures where social convention was integral to the consciousness of the practitioner. In societies dominated by the principles of Confucianism, Zen merely eased “the conditioning of the individual by the group.” Social conventions themselves, though, were taken for granted in these societies, as reflected, for example, in the formal strictness of the Japanese tea ceremony. However, in contexts “where convention is weak” or “there is a spirit of open revolt against convention,” such as in America, Zen might serve less palliative, more outright “destructive purposes.”⁵⁷ For his part, Watts emphasized the need for destruction: not the destruction of society itself, but of the authoritarian mechanism of the ego at the center of the West’s psychic life. Rhetorically, at least, Watts’ anarchism was revolutionary. However, his revolution began, as it does with individualists, inwardly and voluntarily. Through individual meditation and awakening to the Tao, a society based on the authoritarian principle of the paranoid ego would make way for a society based “in the mutual agreement of human beings.”⁵⁸

Although Alan Watts was critical of “lifestyle” Beats with shallow interests in Eastern philosophy,⁵⁹ his Occidentalism criticism of Western life, like Suzuki’s own, shaped the counterculture in ways that Watts tentatively accepted. For Snyder and Whalen, who pushed Suzuki’s and Watts’s challenge to Western philosophy the farthest in actual, meditative practice, Zen offered an individualist anarchist way of being in the world. Whalen, who practiced Buddhism in the United States before traveling to Japan with Snyder in 1966, wrote both Zen and anti-authoritarianism into his poems, and eventually became a Soto priest at the San Francisco Zen Center. Gary Snyder, meanwhile, lived in Japan for twelve years between 1956 and 1968, studying Zen in temples around the country and seeking the company of Japanese Dharma revolutionaries. For Whalen and Snyder, contact with Zen constituted more than an alternative lifestyle or an Orientalist appropriation of the East. It provided, instead, a stabilizing spiritual practice that grounded their anti-authoritarian critiques of U.S. global hegemony and American ways of knowing.

Gary Snyder’s Revolutionary Anarchism

For Snyder, reading D. T. Suzuki’s *Essays in Zen Buddhism*—he found a copy of it in a bookshop while wandering around San Francisco with Philip Whalen in 1951—⁶⁰ was a transformative experience. Like Watts, what Snyder found most compelling in Suzuki’s writings was the way in which Suzuki related Zen to Taoism.⁶¹ Zen’s sedimented Taoism opened the way for Westerners, alienated from nature, to access a pre-rational connection to the natural. In a 1977 *East West Journal* interview, Snyder described his early immersion in Chinese Buddhist ways of knowing while walking through the Chinese room at the Seattle Art Museum. “The Chinese,” he said, “had an

eye for the world that I saw as real.” The Western eye, by contrast, failed to capture Snyder’s imagination: “In the next room were the English and European landscapes, and they meant nothing.”

In college, Snyder adopted Marxism, but ultimately rejected it on the grounds that it was part of the “the whole Western tradition” of millennial Protestantism. In place of what he viewed as Marxism’s essentially Christian utopianism, he emphasized the need for immediate, inner revolution aided by Buddhist practice and directed toward a distributed, anarchist model of social organization. Shortly after his undergraduate rejection of Marxism, he “found in the Buddha-Dharma a practical method for clearing one’s mind of the trivia, prejudices, and false values that our conditioning had laid on us,” beneath which lay “the deepest non-self Self.”⁶² After shifting his focus to American Indian studies while an anthropology graduate student for one semester at Indiana University, he came to discover “that maybe it was all of Western culture that was off the track and not just capitalism—that there were certain self-destructive tendencies in our cultural tradition.”⁶³ These self-destructive tendencies resulted, especially, from Western humanity’s alienation from the very places they lived, from, in Nishida’s words, the ground beneath their feet. Zen Buddhism, for Snyder, offered a vehicle by which to re-tap the primitive sense of place on which the very survival of the earth as we know it depended. It offered a personal revolution in consciousness that could lead to an anarchist Dharma revolution.

Realizing that Zen offered an invitation to a spiritual practice more accessible to Westerners than he was likely to receive from the “Paiute or Shoshone Indians in eastern Oregon,” Snyder left Indiana University, where he had begun a degree in anthropology,

to study Oriental languages at Berkeley in 1952 in preparation to study in Japan, a decision prompted by his pivotal encounter with *Essays in Zen Buddhism*.⁶⁴ While in Japan, he discovered the very freedom in Zen that Suzuki had promised: “when you go into the sanzen [meditation] room, you have absolute freedom.” This freedom, for Snyder, was the immediate awakening to the value of the present time and place. Resulting from their lack of self-reliance, however, “Americans have a supermarket of adulterated ideas available to them, thinned out and sweetened, just like their food. They don’t have the apparatus for critical discernment either,” and suffered from a “lack of self-reliance, personal hardiness—self-sufficiency” This lack of self-reliance was akin to Marxian alienation: “it can also be described as the alienation people experience in life and work.”⁶⁵ In Snyder’s view, late capitalism’s consumerist alienation could be corrected with a new commitment to conscious work. Drawing on the Zen axiom that the meaning of awakening is to “chop wood, carry water,” Snyder argued that “we damn well better learn that our meditation” in the West “is primarily going to be our work with our hands.”⁶⁶

In Snyder’s Zen anarchism, the alienation of labor from the means of production had created both dependency and an environmental crisis. This crisis could be solved if we became more place-based in our environments, depending on the land for sustenance in a mass return to Neolithic life. This revolutionary return would be aided by the contemplative awareness offered in Zen practice, which grounds us to our environment as well as our present. Zen practice would not only reawaken the West, but would become part of a revolutionary means of solving the environmental crisis created by capitalist consumerism. Forwarding an individualist anarchist conception of political cooperation,

one accompanied, in other words, by an inner revolution, Snyder proposed that the solution to the problem of ecological crisis was less, not more, centralization. The ideal organization of society—local, spiritual, regional—would be driven by an ecological consciousness that Snyder equated with “a political anarchist position: that the boundaries drawn by national states and so forth don’t represent any real entity.” Instead of clinging to this fiction, “people have to learn a sense of region,” surrendering the illusion that “promiscuous distribution of goods and long-range transportation is always going to be possible.”⁶⁷

Snyder held the cold war technocratic state directly responsible for the planetary ecological crisis, and he believed that this state should be overthrown. “There are two kinds of earth consciousness,” he wrote, “one which is called global, the other we call planetary,” he held. “Global consciousness” was the consciousness of the state: “world-engineering-technocratic-utopian-centralization men in business suits who play world games in systems theory.” Planetary consciousness, by contrast, was more revolutionary, biocentric, and literary: “planetary thinking is decentralist, seeks biological rather technological solutions,” and learns from Western sources as well as “the libraries of the high Occidental civilizations.” Planetary consciousness, for Snyder, was “old-ways internationalism which recognizes the possibility of one earth with all its diversity.” In contrast, “global consciousness . . . would ultimately impose a not-so-benevolent technocracy on everything via a centralized system.”⁶⁸ The concept upholding this technocratic dystopia, Snyder told the *Berkeley Bard*, was “the idea of a ‘nation’ or ‘country’ [which] is so solidly established in most people’s consciousness now that there’s no intelligent questioning of it. It’s taken for granted as some kind of necessity.”

Snyder upheld the communism of the “tribal social structure” as “one of the ways of breaking out of that nation-state bag.”⁶⁹

In addition to liberating individuals from the “nation-state bag” and its cultural conditioning, Zen would ground a cultural turn from internationalism to localism in a renewed focus on community. Zen meditation could underwrite this renewal because it could make one aware of the intimate co-arising of self and other, of the unity of the organism, the society, and the environment. “What we need to do,” Snyder believed, “is to take the great intellectual achievement of the Mahayana Buddhists and bring it back to a community style of life which is not necessarily monastic.”⁷⁰ Broken free of the monastery, Zen would become what Suzuki claimed it was inherently: “a birthright of everybody.”⁷¹ Theoretically, this birthright, once embraced by the West, would help to revitalize ways of knowing lost in the globalized consumerist model of humanity with its attendant alienated and displaced labor. Snyder captures this sense of respect for locally-oriented labor informed by Buddhist contemplation in his 1957 collection *The Back Country*, which moves the reader from the Pacific Northwest to Japan, India and back again. Snyder draws attention along the way to truck drivers, hitchhikers making their way “to the wobbly hall,” “dead men naked/tumbled on beaches” in newsreels from the war, and the cyclical, daily labor of Zen monks. Snyder dedicated *The Back Country* to Ken Rexroth.⁷²

As Snyder argued in “Buddhism and the Coming Revolution,” published in 1961 under the title “Buddhist Anarchism,” “The mercy of the West has been social revolution” while “the mercy of the East has been individual insight into the basic self/void. We need both” in order to affect “any cultural and economic revolution that

moves toward a free, international, classless world.”⁷³ Meditation—the Eastern key to opening this world—affects social revolution insofar as it attunes one to “wisdom,” or “the intuitive knowledge of the mind of love and clarity that lies beneath one’s ego-driven anxieties and aggressions.” This mind of love and clarity expresses itself socially both in the Buddhist notion of *sangha*—the interdependent community of all beings—and in the theories of the communist “Anarcho-Syndicalists” who “showed a sense for experimental social reorganization” and who, Snyder reminds us, influenced the “San Francisco poets and gurus” like himself who “were attending the meetings of the ‘Anarchist Circle’” with Rexroth.⁷⁴

Philip Whalen’s View from the Capital

Philip Whalen, Snyder’s friend from Reed College in Oregon, was first exposed to Eastern philosophy through Vedanta before discovering Zen at about the same time as Snyder. According to Whalen, Suzuki’s *Essays in Zen Buddhism* “converted me” to Zen Buddhism, and D. T. Suzuki himself “practically invented [Zen] for the West.”⁷⁵ The aim of Whalen’s poetry in the years of the San Francisco Renaissance was specifically, in his words, to protest “against the government,” which “conducts iniquitous wars all over the world” while laying down restrictive laws proscribing morality and “talking about peace and saving people from communism.” Asked in a 1972 interview about the roots of this spirit of antigovernment resistance in his poetry, Whalen pointed, like Rexroth, to the pre-Stalinist, revolutionary anarchist generation of the twenties who “were already revolting against puritanism and against prohibition.” Whalen’s individualist version of this anarchism was directed against “those people in the Pentagon who are able to push buttons and make catastrophic things happen” while “all we are able to push [as poets] is

words.”⁷⁶ In language shot through with Zen metaphors, Whalen’s *Memoirs of an Interglacial Age* (1960) and *Scenes of Life at the Capital* (1970) show Whalen “pushing words” as weapons against the institutions of psychological constraint on the one hand and against U.S. military hegemony on the other.

In *Memoirs of an Interglacial Age*, the age of Snyder’s idealized Neolithic man, Whalen explores the limitations of human consciousness, institutions, and language from a perspective shaped by Zen meditation. Of *Memoirs of an Interglacial Age*, he wrote, “This poetry is a picture or graph of a mind moving”⁷⁷ in Zen meditation, which “created a habit of hearing and seeing that is the basis of poetry or is actually poetry” itself.⁷⁸ An early poem in the book’s cycle, “Hymnus Ad Patrem Sinensis” (“A Hymn to the Chinese Fathers”), playfully remarks on the Taoist spirit of Zen exactly as it had been underscored by both Suzuki and Watts:

I praise those ancient Chinamen
 Who left me with a few words,
 Usually a pointless joke or a silly question
 A line of poetry drunkenly scrawled on the margin of a quick
 splashed picture—bug, leaf
 caricature of Teacher
 on paper held together now by little more than ink
 & their own strength brushed momentarily over it

 Their world & several others since
 Gone to hell in a handbasket, they know it—

Cheered as it whizzed by—

& conked out among the busted spring rain cherryblossom winejars

Happy to have saved us all.⁷⁹

This individual freedom and naturalness of the Chinese Taoist patriarchs whose spirit Whalen, like Suzuki and Watts, saw as forming the heart of Zen practice, is juxtaposed, in “A Reflection on My Own Time,” with the “lobotomy knife” of cold war American life:

WHAT ideas? Not a brain in my head, only

“Education” & a few “idées reçues” (read
“conditioned reflexes”)

But necessary to open my small

yap

maybe just to say “ouch”

as the lobotomy knife slides

(“painlessly”, they say)

IN⁸⁰

In contrast to Zen’s Taoist-inflected naturalness, the “painless” lobotomy of conformity to the psychotherapeutic cold war state recalls Watts’s criticism of the West’s “attitude of the knife” that “gives us dead knowledge instead of living knowledge” and that “kills things” while it enforces institutionalism, conformism, and nationalism.

The unyielding conditioning of culture and conformity chases the speaker of Whalen’s poems even into his most private reflections, as when, in “Self Portrait Sad,” he

finds his contemplative reverie haunted by the sense that the ego is an illusion enforced by Western education:

Another damned lie, my name is I

Which is a habit of dreaming & carelessness

No nearer the real truth of any matter

In any direction myself bound & divided by notions

ACT!

MOVE!

SPEAK!

Huge—I'm a *preta*, starving ghost

Self-devoured⁸¹

The hungry ghost, in Buddhist cosmology, has collected Karma so corrupted that he is consigned to a realm in which he lives in perpetual hunger with a bloated belly and a mouth the size of a pinhole. Here, the poet becomes a *preta* because of habits and notions that, we quickly discover, are informed by institutions of Western rationality. The speaker, tired of “walking from one end of a teeter-board to the other” trying to answer the question of who the “I” really is, resolves to “go sit under a chestnut tree & contemplate the schoolhouse” in the center of an open field. Sitting there, he recalls that

Mama said: “You don’t HAVE to believe EVERYTHING they tell you

in school – think for yourself a little bit!”⁸²

The record of the development of Western rationality held in the library the speaker observes and in the schoolhouse next to it are presented as constraints on the freedom the poet strives for while meditating under a chestnut tree. Contemplating the schoolhouse and library, he notes, “The library: A house of correction.” The posture of meditation,

meanwhile, enables the poet to see through the ego-centrism of Western knowledge and begin to “think for himself” from the position of his true, awakened self.

At Snyder’s urging, Whalen lived and studied Zen in Kyoto. In *Scenes of Life at the Capital*, Whalen offers from his perspective in Kyoto a more direct indictment of Western hegemony, one only suggested in his earlier *Memoirs*. *Scenes of Life at the Capital* opens with the poet sitting, once again, in the Zen posture:

Having returned at least and being carefully seated

On the floor—somebody else’s floor, as usual—

Far away across the ocean . . .⁸³

From this transnational perspective—”Far away across the ocean” —Western culture appears not merely coerce and ego-enforcing, as it had in *Memoirs*, but utterly uncivilized:

The longer I think about it

The more I doubt there is such a thing as

Western Civilization. A puritan commercial culture

Was transplanted from Europe to U.S.A. in the 17th Century

American Indians were a civilized people⁸⁴

“Our main difficulty” in the West, the poem continues, is our “fear and distrust of freedom,” and the various

Difficulties compounded by idea of “consent”

And theory of “delegated powers.”

Hire specialists to run everything.

But the powers they derive from us

Relieve these governors of all responsibility

Somehow become vast personal wealth—

Fortunes which must be protected from “license” and “the violence of the mob”

In Whalen’s view from his adopted Japanese capital, people in the West, having delegated their responsibility to government, “find our freedom diminished” and live “where now are only fraudulent states, paint-factories / Lies and stinks and wars.”

America’s wars themselves, from the position of Whalen’s meditative posture taken up across the Pacific, were fought solely for profit:

Fifty years fighting the Bolsheviki

To maintain a 500% profit on every waffle-iron and locomotive

At 499% times are growing difficult, we must try to retrench

At 487½% lay off some of the newer employees the market looks

“Bearish” and 496%. SELL OUT while there’s still a change.

In order to boost profits back to 498%

A “presence” appears in Cambodia.⁸⁵

While such a critique would not have sounded unusual in 1971, Whalen’s criticism of American hegemony stands out because it takes place in a poem that presents itself as an extended session of meditation. His outlook emerges from—or is presented as emerging from—a spiritual ground that lends it the power of direct insight into the nature of the state itself.

Sitting in *zazen* across the ocean, Whalen’s speaker comes to the conclusion that the brutality of the “fraudulent state” infiltrates the mentality of every American:

Almost all Americans aged 4 to 100

Have the spiritual natures of Chicago policemen.

Scratch an American and find a cop. There is no

Generation gap.⁸⁶

Whalen's "Western Civilization rigid and tyrannical" which "teaches necessity for objective examination" offers no revolutionary alternative to this state of affairs since it dominates the consciousness of every Westerner. Even "Mr. Karl Marx wrote a book / All by his lonesome in the British Museum. (Shhh!),"⁸⁷ becoming the very image of the isolated Western ego, as Snyder also saw him. More powerful Western "objective examination," limited by its cloistered intellectualism, is the idea of freedom itself, which appears not from the West in 1970, but in the East.

A few inches of adhesive tape seals the mouth

But it is hard to get rid of the idea of liberty

After forty years of war Asia still exists,

Not to mention the Viet Cong

And quite different from the plans of Washington

Or Moscow or the Vatican. . . .⁸⁸

Scenes of Life at the Capital closes with an affirmation of Japanese ways of knowing that disposes with the West entirely:

Japan is a civilization based upon

An inarticulate response to cherry blossoms.

So much for Western Civilization.⁸⁹

Japanese feeling and sensitivity to beauty, long represented as salvational for the West in works of Japanese exceptionalism, when transmuted by Whalen's anti-statist meditation

becomes a recipe for a revolution in thought and perspective so total, Whalen hoped, that it could end the basis of Western civilization entirely: its strangulating rationality.

Beat Poets and Libertarian Radicals

One might sensibly question the real political implications of ideas such as those contained in the works of Whalen and Snyder, just as one can imagine arguments that could be arrayed against anarchism in general, or against Thoreau, another individualist, and Emerson the philosophical anarchist. Can relevant political change result from internal, psychic revolutions occurring first at the level of the individual, for instance? Did the critique of Western rationality the Beat Zen anarchists adopted from Japanese exceptionalist work affect a cultural transformation on any kind of scale that mattered in the lives of, say, workers? Can an “inarticulate response” make change, or might sentiments of social justice be better, more fruitfully expressed through an organ with a voice and the power to administer this justice, such as a state? These questions deserve further elaboration in relation to the Beat movement, which, in many ways, as others have noted, prefigured the New Left, but which also, as many of their critics at the time noted—including Watts—also instituted a new fashion and lifestyle. Just as compelling as these questions of power, voice, and reception, however, is the question of what kind of “lifestyle” Watts, Snyder, and Whalen advocated. After all, “the American way of life” during the cold war was a lifestyle in itself, one that, as the Beat anarchists pointed out, demanded imperialism, a strong state, repressed individuals, and a terrifying level of material consumption. As propagandists for a revolutionary alternative that drew on American traditions of individualist anarchism, Whalen and Snyder saw temporary

success in the student unrest of the nineteen sixties, which was coupled by an explosion of alternative spiritualities, sometimes escapist and sometimes politically empowering.

However, as Stephen Prothero has argued, the Beats were “spiritual protesters” whose radical critiques of American culture defied the liberal cold war consensus. Further, Prothero argues, Beat spiritual protest involved not just a negative rejection of Western civilization, but a positive sense of “the sacralization of everyday life and the sacramentalization of human relationships” that caused Zen Beats to demand social justice by reaffirming the Buddhist concept of *pratitya-samutpada*, or interdependent origination, which recognizes the mutual dependence of all beings upon one another.⁹⁰ Rexroth’s account of the emergence of the Beat movement and its spiritual sensibility confirms Prothero’s analysis.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said suggested a future direction for his research that deserves more attention than it receives. “Perhaps the most important task of all” to emerge from his work, Said stated, would be “to undertake studies in contemporary alternatives to Orientalism, to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a nonrepressive and nonmanipulative, perspective.”⁹¹ The Zen-influenced anarchism that formed within the Beat movement suggests one example of just such a libertarian alternative. As a cultural phenomenon and social movement, the Beat Zen anarchist formation meets at the intersection between American religious and anarchist political history. Its outcome was a popular literature that deployed Japanese exceptionalist criticisms of Western ways of knowing as an anarchist critique of cold war culture. As this critique broadened in its appeal, influencing the New Left in the nineteen sixties, it would help to give rise to the dominant form of anarchism on the Left today:

liberal anarchism, a theory of anarchism that uses individualist rhetoric and decentralized tactics in its appeal for more, not less, government intervention.

1. Offering a criticism of Beat Zen as Orientalist, in a recent discussion of tensions in the nineteen fifties between Beat Zen Buddhists and Issei and Nisei Jodo Shinshu Buddhists, Michael Masatsugu, for instance, has argued that “Beat Zen Buddhists, dissatisfied with Cold War U.S. society and culture, viewed Buddhism as an alternative American religious practice—an exotic Orientalist religious practice defined as outside and often opposed to U.S. national culture” (425). See Michael K. Masatsugu, “Beyond This World of Transiency and Impermanence: Japanese Americans, Dharma Bums, and the Making of American Buddhism during the Early Cold War Years,” *Pacific Historical Review* 77 (2008): 423–51.

2. Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Poetry Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3.

3. *Ibid.*, 28. See also page 26.

4. The San Francisco Anarchist and Libertarian Circles and their relationship to the emergent San Francisco Renaissance are described in Kenneth Rexroth’s *An Autobiographical Novel*, rev. ed. (New York: New Directions, 1991), 508–521.

5. Rexroth, *An Autobiographical Novel*, 511.

6. Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 80.

7. Kenneth Rexroth, *World outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth*, ed. Bradford Morrow (New York: New Directions, 1987), 94.

8. Rexroth, *World outside the Window*, 54.

9. *Ibid.*, 60. In a personal e-mail, Snyder recalled reading Buber back in the fifties but did not connect Buber with anarchist politics. In his words, “I did read Buber back then, mid 50s, and recall that Kenneth admired his work, but I never thought of it in connection with Anarchism nor heard Kenneth say so.” Gary Snyder, e-mail message to author, December 3, 2008. In his written accounts and interviews, however, Rexroth makes an explicit connection between genuine dialogue and anarchist politics that might not have been discussed directly in the course of Rexroth’s friendship with Snyder but that, Rexroth recalls, profoundly influenced his conception of the Anarchist and Libertarian Circles and of poetry as direct address.

10. *Ibid.*, 64.

11. For a further discussion of Rexroth’s poetic technique and themes, along with an analysis of the shortcomings of his political anarchism and use of Buber, see Ken Knabb, *The Relevance of Rexroth* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1990), 88.

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12. Kenneth Rexroth, "Thou Shalt Not Kill," on *Howls, Raps, and Roars: Recordings from the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance*, Fantasy B000000XBW, 1993, compact disc set.
13. David Meltzer, "Kenneth Rexroth (1969), Interview," in *San Francisco Beat: Talking with the Poets*, ed. David Meltzer (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2001), 235.
14. For a brief, conversational account of Rexroth's confrontation with the state-authoritarian Communist movement during the Popular Front decades, see Meltzer, "Kenneth Rexroth (1969), Interview," 364.
15. *Ibid.*, 235.
16. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997), 208.
17. Robert H. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," *History of Religions* 33 (1993): 3.
18. James E. Ketelaar, "Strategic Occidentalism: Meiji Buddhists at the World's Parliament of Religions," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 11 (1991): 44.
19. According to Snodgrass, Japanese and other Asian representatives at the Parliament were so circumscribed within Western limits of discourse that their need to have "recourse to a Western authority—even a dubious one—to validate things Japanese" meant that their Buddhism was finally "not the religion of any Asian practice but the reified product of Western discourse." See Judith Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 85, 274. However, as James Ketelaar notes, the exotic "other" at the Parliament "was by no means merely a passive object of the Parliament's construction but was itself engaged in the select imaging of the Parliamentarian proceedings and their subsequent interpretation." See James Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 157.
20. Sharf, "Zen of Japanese Nationalism," 5.
21. Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs*, 163.
22. For a description of the long-term effect of the Parliament on Buddhism in America, see Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Shambhala, 1992), 119–29.
23. Quoted in Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844–1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 65. Lum associated Nirvana with an impassive forgetting of the

self that would clear the way for an embrace of all humanity, with the practitioner of meditation “forgetting self that man alone may gain” (261).

For a celebratory portrait of Lum’s life and philosophy, see Voltarine de Cleyre, “Dyer D. Lum,” in *Selected Works of Voltarine de Cleyre: Pioneer of Women’s Liberation*, ed. Alexander Berkman (New York: Revisionist Press, 1972), 284–97.

24. Thomas A. Tweed, “The Seeming Anomaly of Buddhist Negation: American Encounters with Buddhist Distinctiveness, 1858–1877,” *Harvard Theological Review* 83 (1990): 90–91. I have found no evidence that the Beats were aware of Lum. As Ketelaar has noted, there were precedents in early Meiji Japan, when Buddhism was outlawed by the state, for an anarchist and anti-authoritarian interpretation of the dharma. Before the New Buddhists rationalized Buddhism to the state, Ketelaar argued, the practice of Buddhism itself was “carnivalized,” disobedient, and potentially subversive in the eyes of the state such that one nativist critic of Buddhism could argue that the priestly class itself, producing nothing and representing a spirit of lawless playfulness, created an “environment conducive to anarchy.” See Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs*, 39, 50–52.

25. Richard Hughes Seager, *The World’s Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 159.

26. Brian Victoria, *Zen at War* (New York: Weatherhill, 1997), 63. For a detailed discussion of Suzuki’s deployment of the way of the warrior, see 97–113. For Suzuki’s postwar apologetics, see 147–52.

27. Kirita Kiyohide, “D. T. Suzuki on Society and the State,” in *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism*, ed. James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 65–66.

28. Letter quoted in William R. LaFleur, “Between America and Japan,” in *Zen in American Life and Letters*, ed. Robert S. Ellwood (Malibu: Undena, 1987), 73. Ellwood discusses Suzuki’s interest in William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*, which Suzuki believed offered Westerners the hope of sloughing off their cultural trappings in order to experience directly the heart of Zen practice.

29. Fields, *How the Swans Came*, 230–31.

30. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 63–64.

31. *Ibid.*, 117.

32. Robert Aitken, foreword in *A Buddhist Bible*, ed. Dwight Goddard (New York: Beacon, 1994), vii.

33. Dwight Goddard, *A Buddhist Bible* (New York: Beacon, 1994), xxxii.

34. Ibid., 6, 9.

35. Aitken, foreword, viii.

36. Ibid., xvii.

37. Houston Smith and Phillip Novak, *Buddhism: A Concise Introduction* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003). Novak and Smith call *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, “The fountainhead of what was to be a prodigious outpouring of Zen” in the United States” (152).

38. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 37.

39. Ibid., 32.

40. Ibid., 28.

41. Ibid., 18, 24.

42. Ibid., 48.

43. Ibid., 111–15.

44. Ibid., 61.

45. Ibid., 72–75.

46. Fields, *How the Swans Came*, 186–87.

47. Smith and Novak, *Buddhism*, 153. Michael K. Masatsugu discusses the Beat presence at BCC meetings in “Beyond This World of Transiency and Impermanence,” writing that “in the fall of 1955, Beat poets and writers, including Ginsberg, Whalen, and Kerouac, began to participate in the group after Snyder, who had joined months earlier, brought them to meetings” (443).

48. As Watts wrote in his autobiography, “I had learned from D. T. Suzuki” and others “that Zen is basically Taoism—the water-course way of life. . . .” Alan Watts, *In My Own Way* (Navato, CA: New World Library, 2001), 251.

49. Alan Watts, “Identical Differences,” lecture, 1964, on *Alan Watts Live*, Shambhala SLE 15, 1991, audiocassette.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. *4x4 by Watts: Eastern Wisdom and Modern Life* (Seattle: Unapix/Miramar, Inner Dimension, 1995), videocassette.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Pantheon, 1957), 142–53.

58. Ibid., 147.

59. See Alan Watts, *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959).

60. Smith and Novak, *Buddhism*, 153.

61. Fields, *How the Swans Came*, 213.

62. Gary Snyder, *Earth House Hold: Technical Notes and Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries* (New York: New Directions, 1969), 114.

63. Gary Snyder and William Scott McLean, *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks, 1964–1979* (New York: New Directions, 1980), 94.

64 “In the middle of Nevada, on old Interstate 40,” Snyder related in a 2002 interview for the public radio show *Commonwealth Club*, “there was a period of about five hours where nobody would give me a ride. As I stood there in the middle of the sagebrush flats, I was reading through a chapter of Suzuki’s *Essays in Zen Buddhism, First Series*, and I hit on some phrases that turned my mind totally around. I knew that I wouldn’t last at [graduate school in] Indiana, and that I would soon be heading in the other direction back toward Asia, but I had to complete my short-term karma. So I did finish out that semester and then went back to the West Coast.” “Gary Snyder & John Suiter, In Conversation—May 15, 2002,” *Commonwealthclub.org*, accessed January 8, 2009, <http://www.commonwealthclub.org/archive/02/02-05snyder-suiter-speech.html>.

65. Snyder and McLean, *The Real Work*, 10.

66. Ibid., 96.

67, Ibid., 25.

68. Ibid., 126.

69. Ibid., 10.

70. Ibid., 16.

71. Ibid., 17.

72. See Gary Snyder, *The Back Country* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 128.

73. Ibid., 92.

74. Ibid., 106.

75. Meltzer, *San Francisco Beat*, 343.

76. Philip Whalen, *Off the Wall: Interviews with Philip Whalen* (Bolinas, CA: Four Seasons Foundation, 1978), 57–61.

77. Ibid., 49.

78. Philip Whalen, *Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder: Two Modern San Francisco Poets Discuss and Read from Their Works*, Center for Cassette Studies 10154, 1970–79, audiocassette.

79. Philip Whalen, *Memoirs of an Interglacial Age: Poems* (San Francisco: Auerhahn Press, 1960), 49.

80. Ibid., 22.

81. Ibid., 33.

82. Ibid., 35.

83. Philip Whalen, *Scenes of Life at the Capital* (San Francisco: Meltzer and Shoemaker, 1970), 1.

84. Ibid., 16.

85. Ibid., 26.

86. Ibid., 34.

87. Ibid., 37.

88. Ibid., 41.

89. Ibid., 73.

90. Stephen Prothero, "On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest," *Harvard Theological Review* 84 (April 1991): 214.

91. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 368.

Chapter 5

Liberal Anarchism and American Literature

One of the forgotten insights into American literature is the once generally assumed notion that it contains a remarkable anarchist strain. This understanding of American literature as belonging to a culture of anarchism, in fact, was one of the reasons that the canon of American literature was formed in the first place. In the early twentieth century, scholars in the United States began to search in American literature and history for what they would come to call a “usable past”: that is, a past that would help them to explain and resolve the political problems of the present. Writing against the background of the “red decades,” one such writer, John Macy argued in his 1908 *Spirit of American Literature*, that Thoreau was “our village anarchist” whose ideas “should be read by us timorous moderns to preserve us in times of abuse” of government power.¹ Twenty years later, in 1928, Vernon Louis Parrington, among the first Americanists to apply a fully interdisciplinary approach to the study of American culture, wrote in his *Main Currents in American Thought* that Henry David Thoreau had “quite evidently turned philosophical anarchist” by the time he wrote “Civil Disobedience.”² For scholars like Macy and Parrington, along with many others, anarchism was compatible with American traditions.

The “anarchism” to which these authors refer, however, is an ambiguous one. For John Macy, anarchism was an attitude that could innervate the population if we were to read and appreciate the meaning of Thoreau, a meaning that had a particularly and uniquely American spirit. As Goldman was also arguing in the years around 1908, Macy believed that anarchism was native to American soil. Parrington, meanwhile, who was a

progressive, limits “native” American anarchism to the philosophical variety. The gradualism and eventual statism of philosophical anarchists like Emerson would have appealed to his progressive sensibility. What these interpretations of American literature share, however, is an assumption that anarchism forms part of America’s politically usable past—that it had something, in other words, to teach radicals, and that the lessons derived from America’s “anarchist” literary past could help to shape a better future. Problematically, however, for the writers discussed in this chapter, this future required a great deal of authority and state intervention. We have already seen this theme in Emerson, and it seems to emerge wherever a progressive sensibility and sympathy with anarchism exist. In our time, Emerson’s philosophical anarchism has become liberal anarchism, a hybrid of anarchism and progressivism meant to change American government, to make it more user-friendly and individual-orientated, by using anarchist tactics and rhetoric for essentially liberal, state-interventionist ends.

This chapter focuses on two critics and public intellectuals who represent this type of anarchism: Lewis Mumford and John William Ward. Each of these writers, Mumford writing at first during the cultural front period of the nineteen thirties and forties and Ward a generation later, understood Thoreau and Emerson as American anarchists whose writings could transform the living present. In the process, they gave expression to a cultural current that would come to reshape and dominate American anarchism by the end of the twentieth century: the use of anarchism as a rhetorical argument for inspiring dissent from the Left and the understanding of anarchism as a tactical roadmap not for eliminating government but for improving liberal, civil government. In forming their argument for liberal anarchism, Mumford and Ward drew for inspiration on the works of

American literature that they each had studied in their field, American Studies. To begin understanding the progressive sensibilities of Mumford and Ward and the place of American literary anarchism in those sensibilities, therefore, we will first turn to the political origins of American and American Literary Studies.

Anarchy, Individualism, and American Studies

The search for an American usable past and the formation of what became defined as “American literature” for most of the twentieth century coincided in a period broadly referred to as the Popular Front period, or what Michael Denning has more accurately called the *cultural front*, in American art and politics, which spanned the decade of the nineteen thirties. Along with most of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal programs, American Studies, the academic discipline that made the study of American literature viable in twentieth century American universities, was one of the many national projects first undertaken in this period, and its purpose was to find intimations of radicalism in what scholars called the “usable past” in American literature. The career of FO Matthiessen, the scholar whose *American Renaissance* became a standard reference on the transcendentalists for the second half of the twentieth century, Denning argues, was typical of other radicals of the cultural front years. Matthiessen’s search for a usable past in American literature led him to canonize Emerson and Thoreau as two key American authors. It also, however, led to his investigation by the FBI.

The FBI’s investigation of Matthiessen, which began in 1943 and trailed off in 1947, links him to several “Communist front” groups. In the language of the FBI, Massachusetts and Harvard, where Matthiessen taught, become “the Eastern Defense Command Area,” and Matthiessen becomes, literally, the “Subject” who is, throughout

the FBI's investigation, "considered for removal." What appears to have caught the FBI's attention, the first of the "subversive" activities in his file, was Matthiessen's leadership as president of the Harvard Teachers Union and his public advocacy on behalf of Harry Bridges, the International Longshoremen's and Warehouse Union (ILWU) founder, then on trial by the United States government and under the threat of deportation. Matthiessen also sponsored the National Conference for Democracy and Education in 1941, advocating "the right to free speech as the truth, and secondly, the right to free criticism." He was a member of the Massachusetts Chapter of the ACLU and President of the Cambridge chapter of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL. He was "listed in the Souvenir Journal of the 6th National Conference of the American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born."

The FBI considered Matthiessen's public lectures as suspect as his affiliations. He was "listed on a handbill issued by the John Reed Club of Boston as a speaker" alongside National Communist Party chairman William Z. Foster. "The Subject was scheduled to speak on Lincoln and the Common Man" under the "auspices of the Progressive Bookshop, 8 Beaver Street, Boston" on "February 26, 1943." In 1947, Matthiessen "alleged that there was widespread discrimination among colleges in admitting students based upon religious and racial prejudice" and "advocated a form of Socialism in education" to correct the problem. In brief, the "Subject was suspected" by the FBI "of Communist Party Membership and active in numerous undertakings sponsored by the Party." All the while, the FBI noted, he "continues to be Professor of Literature at Harvard University."³

Michael Denning has written that “the Popular Front generation was epitomized by Matthiessen.”⁴ For Denning, however, the radicalism of the discipline of American Studies was swallowed up in the culture of the cold war years. In Denning’s words, the “critical American Studies of the post-war years” that Matthiessen helped to found “was scarred by the intellectual repression of the cold war.”⁵ Denning’s understanding of American Studies as a once radical discipline that gave way to the forces of the cold war has become, in fact, common currency in the discipline’s self-understanding. According to Donald Pease, for example, a self-described New Americanist, “Americanist policies of neocolonialism and cultural imperialism abroad and liberal anticommunism at home” gained support from “the literary critics who instituted the cold war canon,” including F. O. Matthiessen, R. W. B. Lewis, Henry Nash Smith, Richard Chase, and Perry Miller. Indeed, U.S. global policy, Pease argues, “depended for its coherence”⁶ on the scholarship of these American Studies critics. Paul Giles has argued, along similar lines, that “F.O. Matthiessen, Richard Chase and others,” in their “critical recapitulation of a transcendental ethic of higher freedom,” were “implicitly endorsing a patriotic version of liberty that became institutionally equated with the idea of America itself” and that supported a “rhetorical anti-Marxism” typical of “American studies during [the Cold War] years.”⁷ And according to Cecelia Tichi, “the premise of transcendent democratic truths embodied in texts of aesthetic genius is . . . ideologically self-serving to certain groups, especially to white male elites, and enactive of its own historical moment, such as the cold war.”⁸

Yet these criticisms tend to overlook the fact that cold war liberalism, the broad political consensus of America’s anti-communist years, was in fact a form of liberalism.

As a consequence, when the radicalism of cultural front American Studies became cold war criticism, it helped to create a climate for a leftist critique of American culture and politics that persisted for decades. Perry Miller, for example, wrote in 1951 that the Calvinist myth of America as a city on a hill, coupled with apocalyptic Puritan millenarianism, had underwritten the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.⁹ R.W.B. Lewis, another cold war critic, wrote in his 1955 examination of the myth of the *American Adam* (a book which he opened by noting that “There may be no such thing as ‘American Experience’”) held that the myth of America’s Adamic identity—or its primordial innocence—was underwriting the culture of cold war containment, a culture erected to protect this very mythic innocence: “Ours is a culture of containment,” R.W.B. Lewis argued, marked by a “current rigidity” as “we huddle together and shore up our defenses” in an “arrested development of innocence,” believing that “exposure to experience is certain to be fatal” to American self-identity.¹⁰

Likewise, Henry Nash Smith, in his *Virgin Land*, examined how the myth of America as a barren unoccupied wilderness had shaped American foreign policy and been used to defend conservative American pastoralism along with the expansion of American empire.¹¹ As Leo Marx argued in the opening of his own pivotal work, *Machine in the Garden* (1964), Smith demonstrated how the pastoral ideal in American life “has appeared with increasing frequency in the service of a reactionary or false ideology, thereby helping to mask the real problems of an industrial civilization,” problems that Leo Marx then went on to explore in his examination of how the myth of the American Edenic garden and the reality of the machine revealed “the ancient war

between the kingdom of love and the kingdom of power,” “two modes of consciousness” that he believed were at odds in American life.¹²

These criticisms of American life were written into American Studies texts at a time when, as New Americanist critics argue, American Studies is supposed to have been complicit with the designs of American empire. In reality, the liberalism of American Studies was often anti-nationalistic, a theme that remains an undercurrent of scholarship in the discipline. As Arthur Bestor, the keynote speaker at the very first American Civilization Conference, a precursor to the American Studies Association, noted in his talk in 1950, titled “Courses in American Civilization and the Problem of Nationalism,” American Studies should consciously avoid “the narrow and vicious nationalism that stalks the country today” and “threatens liberal education.” Bestor called for American Civilization programs to remain vigilant against “bigoted nationalists” who are too often “afraid of the free and wide-ranging mind that compares and contrasts and judges for itself” and might seek to lodge scholarship “safely within the bounds of our national frontiers and our national prejudices!”¹³ American Studies, by contrast, should “carry the student into investigations of things happening far outside our geographic boundaries and long before the beginning of our separate chronology.” To overcome nationalism, Bestor proposed, “serious and disciplined study of other histories and literatures, in their own terms” should be undertaken in such a way as to “trace movements as they migrate across arbitrary frontiers.”¹⁴

Following these foundational principles, from roughly 1930, when Americanists seriously began to examine the American literary past under an umbrella called American Studies, to the present, most Americanists have shared a conviction that the nationalist

discourses of American exceptionalism were myths to be critically examined. Yet, in spite of its general critical stance toward America, liberalism in American Studies did often adhere to a form of patriotism summed up in the attitude that Leo Marx has described as “believing in America.”¹⁵ For post-War liberals in American Studies, America’s past continued to be usable, but usable in order to form a more liberal, not more radical *or* a more conservative, future. As it underwent this change, the field of American Studies, and American literary studies in particular, reflected a larger cultural trend, one evident in the work of the Beats, for example: the attempt to revive individualism as a dissident political value in a culture that constrained political change to liberal institutions and parliamentary means. It shared, as a consequence, both the individualist striving of official American literary history and the broadly liberal aims of the cold war consensus, along with the radicalism of the cultural front years that persisted as an undercurrent in cold war criticism.

These “cold war liberal” beliefs included many of the political ideas that ran through the work of Americanists like Bestor, Miller, Lewis, and others: the belief, foremost, that America had a unique role to play in a new world that would be governed by global cooperation, that this world would be supported by Keynesian economic interventionism, inculcated through accessible public education, and made possible by a liberal population that valued individualism and had access to the ballot box. In essence, American Studies during the cold war years expressed the patriotism of an America forever changed by Roosevelt’s New Deal. It advocated economic and international interventionism in equal measure. It rarely, however, expressed the free market values of the burgeoning New Right, as its critics imply, and as a comparative consultation with an

actually conservative text like William F. Buckley's *God and Man at Yale* (a right wing response to the liberal consensus) reveals.

Among the liberal Americanists to celebrate American individualism as a driving force for political change were Lewis Mumford and John William Ward. Mumford, a writer with roots in the cultural front period, and Ward, a college president who studied under Perry Miller at Harvard in the nineteen fifties, were both, in different ways, public figures whose writing and cultural presence helped to shape the national and scholarly debate on the role of the individual in American democracy. Mumford's books were frequent Book of the Month Club selections in an age when public intellectuals exerted a great deal of influence on American culture and politics (comparable to celebrity news commentators today), and Ward made national headlines after becoming the only college president to publically protest the Vietnam War. Both of these figures shared an interest in anarchism as a viable political solution to the problems of their age, but both also expressed elements of the liberal consensus, including a belief that the individualism of Emerson and Thoreau could run through parliamentary reform, authority, and planning. Their fusion of ideas suggests the outlines of liberal anarchism: the idea that the individualist ethos of anarchism was a usable force for creating liberal social change.

Lewis Mumford's Anarcho-Progressive Utopia

Mumford was particularly concerned, like other anarchists, that any ideal society should combine individualism and socialism to appropriate degrees. Throughout his writing, which proposed an anarchist vision of society partly inspired by Peter Kropotkin, Mumford drew inspiration from the American Renaissance canon—particularly Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman. Like other leftists of the popular front decades, Mumford, in

drawing on these authors, was building a usable past. For Mumford, as we look to the past, we find that among the periods of the highest vitality in history was “nineteenth century Concord,” where “men have been whole, and in which society has found a means of supporting and furthering their wholeness.”¹⁶ Yet in the process of building an anarchist utopia out of his usable past, Mumford brought into the present the primary political contradiction of his transcendentalist mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Mumford as well as Emerson tended to mix anarchy and the state, to call upon the aid of government in order to free individual men and women from authority. In order to experience true freedom, for liberal anarchists like Mumford, the individual must undergo a personal and social transformation so total that it requires intervention and planning on a massive scale.

Lewis Mumford grew up in New York where he could travel the radical and progressive circles of the city, admiring anarchist leading lights like Emma Goldman and progressive authors like Upton Sinclair. Like others of his generation, including Goldman, Mumford embraced the Bolshevik revolution with reservations, arguing in 1919 in *The Dial* that “it would set loose long-needed changes worldwide.”¹⁷ His “desire for a more humane economic system,” however, as his biographer Donald Miller argues, “emerged from Plato, Ruskin, Morris, Tolstoy, and Kropotkin, not from Marx or Engels.”¹⁸ The New York that Mumford surveyed at the turn of the century was semi-rural, abutting meadows and natural landscapes, so that Mumford was exposed to a balance of rural and city life from an early age, which forever influenced his political cosmology.¹⁹ It was this vision of American life, in which city and country struck a

balance that could liberate the individual from the constraints of the state, that Mumford used as his basic model for an anarchist society.

Mumford proposed his outline for new kind of city and a new kind of society in his 1922 book *The Story of Utopias*. As he explained in his introduction to the book, which was reprinted in 1962, *The Story of Utopias* was written “in a terrified and discouraged age . . . to remind the reader of the human attitudes and human hopes that once existed and flourished, and that may burgeon again.”²⁰ For a new kind of society to blossom, Mumford argued, we must first do away with the Utopia of the Nation State, a fiction that “had continually to be willed” through a “persistent projection,” a “beautiful fabrication” that was in fact a geographically and anthropologically irrelevant fiction.²¹ In America, the Nation-State, Mumford argued, had imposed a single suburban-industrial model on the country, one that impoverished the cultural and ecological diversity of America’s regions.

Consistent with his anarchist beliefs, Mumford argued that the nation-state was a self-serving entity that had designed society not for the good of the population but for its own perpetuation. Like his individualist heroes and revolutionary contemporaries, Mumford believed that “the chief concern of the national utopia is the support of the central government, for the government is the guardian of territory and privilege.” Its authority, Mumford added, emanated only from the “paper utopia” of the Megalopolis, the bureaucratic center of the nation-state.²² The one thing the State asked of its citizens in exchange for its suburban-industrial-bureaucratic nightmare was complete, undying loyalty: “If you and I were perfect citizens of the Megalopolis, we should never let anything come between us and our loyalty to the State,” Mumford wrote.²³ One of the

virtues of the Utopia Mumford would propose was that it would weaken the power and hegemony of nations and, ideally, return power to local communities and the individuals in them.

Most of the Utopias of the past, according to Mumford, had offered somewhat viable social plans, but they failed to reform the individual because they “neglected to pay attention to the habits of the creature itself—or its habitat.”²⁴ Mumford resolved this problem by returning Utopia to a regional scale. His plan, which he called *regionalism*, involved the creation of relatively small communities, each with a self-sustaining social life—including provisions for education, theater and the arts, democratic self-expression, and community involvement—and each interdependently linked to other communities. Planning such a society, Mumford believed, required the leadership of those who “concern themselves with the ultimate values of men, with what constitutes the good life,” and not only with programs for political reform.²⁵ “The good life,” Mumford believed, involved not just a new structure of society, but a new structure of consciousness for the individual, a consciousness that valued leisure, anti-materialism, and social responsibility in the individualist spirit of Thoreau and Emerson.

Mumford’s plan for individual liberation involved communism in the matter of property, placing him closer to the revolutionary than the individualist anarchists: the land and natural resources, Mumford believed, should belong “undividedly to the community,” so that there would be no private property. Just as importantly, reflecting the progressive ethos of his age, education should be provided to the children of each regional community to encourage good breeding “in every sense of the word.” Such efforts would have to be undertaken by regional planners, experts who would undertake a

massive “economic and geotechnical reconstruction” so that the local community most “effectively used its surrounding resources.”²⁶ Consistent with mainstream liberal and progressive thought in the nineteen twenties, Mumford also proposed a eugenics program to root out genetically undesirable elements from the race so that “the most reckless and ill-bred shall not burden the community.”²⁷

The virtue of Emerson and Thoreau, Mumford held, was that they prevented American towns “from becoming collections of yes-men, with never an opinion or an emotion that differed from their neighbors.”²⁸ They also offered a way of refusing the pioneer ethos of acquisitive capitalism and selfish individualism. The virtue of Emerson in particular was his transcendence of his time and place, his capability “of getting beyond the institution, the habit, the ritual,” and finding out what these things really are “afresh in one’s own consciousness.”²⁹ As for Thoreau, his simplicity pointed the way toward “a higher civilization.”³⁰ What Thoreau left behind is still precious,” Mumford wrote, because “men may still go out and make over America in the image of Thoreau. What the pioneer left behind,” by contrast, was “only the burden of a vacant life.”³¹ The individualism of the pioneer and capitalist, Mumford believed, destroyed all that gave life meaning—community, meaningful work, political participation, direct democracy—because it cared only for personal aims. The individualism of Thoreau and Emerson, by contrast, became a template for the kind of men and women that Mumford’s Utopia would create: the kind who seek Nature “in order to arrive at a higher state of culture” and who practice individualism “in order to create a better society.”³²

Mumford would carry these themes forward into his next four major books, each one a part his Renewal of Life series. *Technics and Civilization*, the first in the series,

was published in 1934, at the heart of the popular front period and New Deal America. In *Technics and Civilization*, Mumford explained the rise of the ideology of the machine and how that ideology undermined the promise of American democracy. Mumford believed, along with the best of the Utopians and the progressives, that if the machine could be harnessed and used collectively, the democratic revolution that the Enlightenment began would be complete. The best elements of the medieval order—its collectivism, its guild basis, its spirituality—could be established in our age, Mumford hoped, “When automatism becomes general and the benefits of mechanization are socialized.” Then, “men will be back once more in the Edenlike state in which they have existed in regions of natural increment.”³³

What the world needed to approach this Eden was a “higher vital standard” for human development than the one we have, a standard that cannot be “expressed adequately in terms of money,” but is best expressed “in terms of leisure, and health, and biological activity, and aesthetic pleasure.”³⁴ Our standard for too long has been utilitarian efficiency and the “maximum of consumption” instead of “life-efficiency or life-expression.” Given the state of the world under capitalism and consumerism, Mumford wrote, “No wonder Thoreau observed” that most men in society “led lives of quiet desperation. By putting business before every other manifestation of life, our mechanical and financial leaders have neglected the chief business of life: namely, growth, reproduction, development, expression.”³⁵ Building a new Eden based on these principles, principles that would liberate the individual from the machine by putting the machine in the service of the community, would merely require the “services of the geographer and the regional planner, the psychologist, the educator, the sociologist, the

skilled political administrator.”³⁶ Each of these experts would be required to establish Mumford’s anarchist American Utopia.

In *The Culture of Cities*, published in 1938 as the second part of the *Renewal of Life*, Mumford examined the toxic ideology of the nineteenth century “atomic individual,” which he believed had generalized the medieval tyranny of despotism to every individual with a despotic streak, making every man and king and every man a potential tyrant. The capitalist/Enlightenment myth of the untrammelled individual, Mumford argued, “was in fact the democratization of the baroque conception of the despotic prince,” so that “now every enterprising man sought to be a despot in his own right.”³⁷ Such individualism had led to “Western man’s ruthless exploitation of nature for the sake of his temporary and petty profit-economy.”³⁸ The capitalist ideology of individualism, generalizing medieval despotism, had destroyed the medieval urban ideal and was an even worse despotism than any concocted by medieval society: “Laissez-faire, even more than absolutism, destroyed the notion of a co-operative polity and a common plan.”³⁹ The “Circe of capitalism”⁴⁰ and the myth of the individual that accompanied it had created cities that encouraged “a minimum of life,” of schooling, rest, cleanliness, and comfort. As a consequence, American cities had become a “gray pall of negative virtue.”⁴¹

Peter Kropotkin, Mumford continues, had given Utopian planning “a more positive turn” than that taken by the capitalist West,⁴² and an anarchist-inspired plan for economic regionalism could actually be achieved, according to Mumford’s thesis in *The Culture of Cities*, “now that the technical means of economic regionalism and the social means that gave it direction have converged.”⁴³ In his plan, every city would subsist in a

bioregion, and every bioregion would be a place large enough to embrace “the diversity of crafts and economic activities needed to sustain a community and small enough so that its members had a direct shared set of interests and direct collective concern.”⁴⁴ For each regional community, in the spirit of Thoreau, there should be “a portion of the wilderness” set aside “free for the citizens from all the encroachments of civilization, where the individual could attune himself to the individuality of the landscape. All land, not just public parks, would be communally owned, “placed in the trusteeship of appropriate municipal and regional authorities,”⁴⁵ and would be occupied by those best suited to maintain it for the benefit of all, creating “individual security” through temporary leasehold possession while protecting “collective interests.”⁴⁶

The primary impediment to Mumford’s vision of personal and social wholeness, he believed, was what he called “the power state.” The power state was both regressive and “mystic,” something that always meant “whatever the ruling classes hold it convenient to mean at the moment.”⁴⁷ However, there was another, better kind of state: the “service state,” one that would operate not as “the arbitrary rule and dictator of regional life, but as the willing agent of that life.”⁴⁸ Writing in *New Deal America*, Mumford was convinced that such a state was possible given all that Roosevelt was accomplishing: “The triumph of the Public Works Administration” had already demonstrated “superior methods of comprehensive planning and design,” and had proven “the advantage of large-scale operations and unified technical direction.”⁴⁹ The New Deal had showed “the desirability of planned housing, not for individuals, but for communities.”⁵⁰ As long as such planning was meant to broaden the scope for individual

expression, creativity, and development, Mumford believed, it could lead back to “the restoration of the human scale in government.”⁵¹

There was, however, a shadow side to Mumford’s plan, one evident in his emphasis on politics as a form of localized discipline. The service state that Mumford envisioned “democratized” the political process to such an extent that one can feel the weight of the political system in one’s daily walk, and the localism of Mumford’s political ideal threatens to make politics an immanent tyranny. For a society built on a human scale would require “the systematic practice of rational discipline through education and co-operative service.”⁵² If we could implement systemic practices of self-governance through education, then, like “the great aristocracies of the past,” we might utilize “our abundant collective resources” to create a culture of the “truly enlightened and disciplined individual.”⁵³ As the citizens become disciplined, political life for everyone would become “as constant a process in daily living as the housewife’s visit to the grocer or the butcher.”⁵⁴ As the process of education moved forward in Mumford’s Utopia, the community would naturally find itself comprised of two classes: “the base”—those who were “generic, equalized, standardized, and communal” and “the emergent”—and a minority, comprised of those who were “specific, unstandardized, individual, [and] aristocratic.”⁵⁵ Mumford’s enlightened, Emersonian aristocrats would become the new architects of a new society.

Many of the details of Mumford’s plan in *The Culture of Cities* were consistent with the New Deal, and like the New Deal, the planned elements of Mumford’s anarchist utopia carried with them the potential for the abuse of power. Hand-in-hand with the New Deal came the Second World War, which, like the New Deal itself, centralized executive

power in ways unprecedented since Lincoln. Mumford envisioned the death of the nation, but in Roosevelt's America, progressivism and war planning together strengthened nationalism.⁵⁶ Mumford could not have foreseen, in 1938, the full horror the Pentagon would unleash on Nagasaki, Hiroshima, and the world, horrors that were the consequence, in part, of an overabundance of the very faith in planners that Mumford brought to his Utopian ideal.

By 1944, in the third part of the *Renewal of Life—The Condition of Man*—Mumford was describing the United States as a society where “everywhere the machine holds the center and the personality has been pushed to the periphery,” a society that needed the kind of “inner change and redirection” that “widens into a collective act.”⁵⁷ This individual/collective act of change would be supported by “a radical change in public policy” that would help to bring about a post-capitalist economy.” To create this new economy and society—this political economy, as Emerson and Thoreau had thought of it—“We must create a new idolum,”⁵⁸ a new set of ideals that can guide our personal and social ethics. It was not enough to reorganize the social system. One must also reorganize “the *ideal* basis” of society. Marxist materialism had overlooked the social power of idealism, and had also “overlooked the role of co-operation and mutual aide, which Peter Kropotkin was to emphasize.”⁵⁹

One must strike a balance, Mumford argued, between the “egoism of states,” which “places the state above morality and above law,” and the “atomic individual,” who was “divorced from all associations that give body and texture to his personality, and that lend him their collective support.”⁶⁰ In part, the invention of the atomic individual had been reinforced in the nineteenth century with “the insurgence of Romanticism,” an

insurgence of false individualism that helped to justify a nation in which man held a “callous disregard of all decency and all humane purpose in his exploitation of the environment for profit.”⁶¹ *Laissez-faire* individualism only provided “freedom to escape the obligations, traditions, and constraints of communal life.”⁶² A true person, by contrast, “seeks to be at one with all humanity.”⁶³ Those who came closest to striking the necessary balance between the individual and the state, and who were best at becoming one with all humanity, were “Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville,” who painted a “new world-picture” on which the rest of the world could one day be modeled.⁶⁴

Even as he hoped the world would one day adopt his uniquely American synthesis between the state and the individual, post-New Deal America, ironically, seemed to Mumford mired in the culture of expertise. In the fourth and final volume of *The Renewal of Life*, *The Conduct of Life*, published in 1951, Mumford surveyed an America fully “committed to the ideology of the machine” and “government by specialists,” “unbalanced men who have made a madness of their method.”⁶⁵ Instead of being centrally governed by such men, Mumford believed, the world should be regionally shaped by men who are guided by what he would call “The Doctrine of the Whole.” This was the doctrine that, “Out of the divisions of peoples and races, we must create unity; out of the separation of classes and cultures, we must create common goals that will unite them, without permitting any permanent state of dominance and inferiority.” Finally, “we must create a new person, who is at one with nature, and a new concept of nature, one which does full justice to the whole person.”⁶⁶

The Conduct of Life, a title Mumford borrowed directly from Emerson’s 1860 collection of essays, refers to the moral life as well as the social life. Like Emerson,

Mumford believed that although the good life was meant for every individual, it could not become manifest through the individual alone. It “must be applied in society before it can be fully effective in the life of the person.”⁶⁷ The good life for the individual can only be achieved by “widening the social base,” by socializing and distributing the costs of inner freedom.⁶⁸ Neither “Marxian communism” nor “Emersonian individualism” could encapsulate the total view of life, Mumford argued in *The Conduct of Life*, since neither paid full attention to “life’s total pattern.”⁶⁹ An Emersonian individualist with a regional view, however, could strike the ideal balance between socialism and individualism: distributed and managed anarchism.

Yet cold war America, Mumford argued in his next series, *The Myth of the Machine*, which he published in two parts, in 1968 and 1971, had given birth to the megamachine. Society, as he argued in Part I, *Technics and Human Development*, had become by 1968 psychologically, militarily, and bureaucratically mechanistic. The entire nation had accepted the “myth of the machine, “the notion that this machine was, by its very nature, absolutely irresistible—and yet, provided one did not oppose it, ultimately beneficent.”⁷⁰ The controllers of the machine were responsible for “mass atrocities coldbloodedly perpetrated with the aid of napalm bombs and defoliating poisons” against “an innocent people, uprooted, terrorized, poisoned and roasted alive in a futile attempt to make the power fantasies of the American military-industrial-scientific elite ‘credible.’”⁷¹ If the megamachine was responsible for the horrors of the Vietnam War, the practice of a regionally-based “democratic technics,” for which Peter Kropotkin had already “outlined [a] potential new economy,”⁷² could save America from its recent atrocities and restore direct democracy to the American system.

Directing his attention to the military industrial complex, in Part II of *Myth of the Machine*, *The Pentagon of Power* (1971), Mumford came to understand “the increasing number of mass protests, sit-downs, and riots” around him as

an attempt to break through the automatic insulation of the megamachine, with its tendency to cover up its own errors, to refuse unwelcome messages, or to block transmission of information damaging to the system itself. Smashed windows, burning buildings, broken heads are means of making humanely important messages take possession of the unmindful medium and so resume, though in the cruelest form possible, two-way communication and reciprocal intercourse.”⁷³

For Mumford, the age of Emerson and Thoreau still represented a vestige of resistance to the “ancient trauma of ‘civilization’”⁷⁴ playing out in the nineteen sixties. A recovery of true civilization required planning “an organic system, to provide the right quantity of the right quality at the right time and the right place in the right order for the right purpose.” This would demand “deliberate regulation and direction, in order to ensure continued growth and creativity of the human personalities and groups concerned.”⁷⁵

Throughout his career as a scholar and public intellectual, Mumford attempted to align the two competing impulses of his basic anarchist thought: his anarchist individualism and his liberalism. Even as Mumford decried the influence of the machine and the mechanistic culture of expertise on American life, his proposals recapitulated the basic liberal impulse of post World War II America: the belief that planners and experts could best direct the psychic and material lives of the people, and that the service state could act as a corrective to the destructive Pentagon of Power. Mumford’s merging of liberal planning and anarchist social arrangements—his liberal anarchism—would find

echoes in the career of another scholar who applied anarchist theory to demand a better, more liberal government from the technocrats who planned the Vietnam War.

John William Ward: Anarchy as American Myth

On May 11, 1972, John William Ward sat down in front of Westover Air Force Base near Chicopee, Massachusetts, with his wife Barbara, 1,000 students, and 20 faculty members from Amherst College in protest against Richard Nixon's escalation of offensive bombing in Southeast Asia. Like numerous social critics of his era, such as Mumford, and like many of his students, John Ward had become opposed to what he considered America's imperialistic foreign policy in Vietnam. Unlike most of these critics, however, and unlike his students, Ward was also the recently appointed president of Amherst College. Also unlike his students, John Ward was a central figure in the myth and symbol school of American Studies scholarship. By the nineteen sixties, with the rise of a New Left that had become suspicious of all forms of authority, anarchism took a new turn accompanied by a new increase in popularity. Horrified at American actions in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, Ward turned to the anarchist past to construct a usable concept of political activism for a liberal society that needed not revolution but reform.

In the context of the nineteen sixties and early seventies, Ward's act of protest was comparatively benign. The Watts and Chicago race riots, the Berkeley free speech movement, the Kent State shootings, and the Chicago Democratic National convention, and the Civil Rights marches had forced Americans to confront civil disobedience as an enduring feature of American life, one that would persist at least as long as social injustice existed. Even the "establishment" was beginning to accept that protesters could be and often were in the right. The Walker report on violence at the 1968 Democratic

National Convention, for instance, concluded that the violence that erupted at the Chicago convention was largely the result of a police riot.⁷⁶ Daniel Walker, who had been appointed to write the report by the National Commission on Violence, was, in the words of Max Frankel of *The New York Times*, “the very essence of an establishmentarian.”⁷⁷ Uniquely, however, John Ward did not just hold that protestors could be right while the establishment could be wrong. Rather, after examining contradictions in the American consciousness between the sovereignty of the individual and that of the state, Ward concluded that the establishment and individuals within it should generate protest and that failure to do so was a failure of American democracy.

The basic elements of Ward’s criticism appear in his essay “The Meaning of Lindbergh’s Flight” (1958), a widely anthologized examination of how myths are culturally manufactured. In this essay, Ward argued that certain contradictions in Charles Lindbergh’s 1927 transatlantic flight were overlooked in the national rhetoric that followed it. The national press transformed Lindbergh into a pioneer type “to link him” rhetorically “with a long and vital tradition of individualism in the American experience.”⁷⁸ Lindbergh became a figure of the frontier who “came of the West and rode all alone.”⁷⁹ Lindbergh as a symbol and his flight as a myth, however, were contradicted by the mechanical fact of *The Spirit of St. Louis*, a technological achievement whose production required the cooperation of industry and technicians in a rapidly advancing technological society. “Organization and careful method were what lay behind the flight, not individual self-sufficiency and daring romance,”⁸⁰ Ward—and Lindbergh himself—argued. America imagined an individualism that was, by and large, a fiction.

In Ward's view, a fundamental shift in the meaning of American individualism had occurred in the late 19th century, when American mythmakers—the popular press, politicians, and intellectuals—replaced libertarian individualism with capitalist individualism and the new gospel of wealth. In the Gilded Age, the ethic of self-reliance was disfigured in the guise of the great organizers of capital, even as, paradoxically, one of them—John D. Rockefeller—announced that “Individualism has gone, never to return.”⁸¹ At the same historical moment that vast amounts of wealth were being reorganized with the sanction of the state by a handful of individuals presumably serving the greater good, the culture found a way, Ward wrote, “to preserve the emotional sanctions of the ideal of individualism.”

In the mid-20th century, a new vision of the individual as an extraordinary conformist had become the American gospel. The individual was no longer really defined as a self-reliant agent, but only “in terms of functional fitness . . . in terms of his ability to contribute to the group.”⁸² For Ward, the 20th century gospel of sham individualism was summed up in Eisenhower's duplicitous statement, “more than ever before, in our country, this is the age of the individual . . . There is no limit . . . to the temporal goals we set ourselves—as free individuals joined in a team with our fellows.”⁸³ Eisenhower's statement, however banal, actually describes the general liberal outlook of even “conservative” cold war America. John F. Kennedy sent the same message when he made the dubious claim that individuals are meant to ask how they should serve the country, a complete reversal of the declared intent of the Constitution in its Preamble.

Ward was implicitly arguing for a new kind of American individual borrowed from American's usable past. Since the bond between the individual and society was

unbreakable, he believed, one could neither resurrect the 19th century free republican individual nor surrender to organizational society. There was clearly a need, though, for activism inspired by the American myth of individual liberty. The aim of this activism should be to reform, not to overthrow or further limit, the state. Much as Mumford believed that the war state could transform itself into a service state, Ward believed that “Our choice is not between organizations and something else. It is a choice between organizations that serve our needs and ideals and organizations that do not.”⁸⁴ After all, Ward argued, if the promise of America was the idea that society existed for the benefit of the individual, the individual was responsible for seeing to it that such a society existed:

If Americans insist that society exists to serve the individual, not the individual to serve society, then we must show more imagination in the organization of our organizations in order to bring them at least within hailing distance of our professed ideas.⁸⁵

Although American individualism had failed to live up to its promise, it could still serve as an inspiration for future change.

As a scholar, Ward believed that he should hold himself individually responsible for the failures of his society as well as for its future transformation. In the mid-nineteen sixties, as Ward saw it, there was a “tension inherent in the nature of the university” between a “dreaded fear of conformity” on the part of scholars and their social mandate to create citizens who would “conform to the expectations of society.”⁸⁶ In this situation, the intellectual was both a cleric and a critic, responsible on the one hand for transmitting “the mores and values of the culture” and on the other for critiquing those same mores

and values. Suggesting a way through the horns of this dilemma, Ward argued that “in the very act of formulating and articulating the values of the culture, the intellectual is driven to see tensions and even contradictions within the system of values that society knows and cherishes as tradition.”⁸⁷ One could, in other words, teach a given set of values critically and thus pass them forward as values criticized. In the process, “the intellectual is . . . plunged deeply and inevitably into the battles of his own time.”⁸⁸ The historian, Ward declared, must necessarily become “troublesome” to the establishment.⁸⁹

As he worked out the relationship between mythic American individualism and the technocratic society of warfare and violence that had displaced it, Ward was laying the groundwork for a personal political praxis based on his understanding of anarchism as a tactic. In a democracy, even one that seemed to be failing, and the individual was an agent ethically bound to seek social justice. His act of protest—the disobedience of John William Ward—was a response to troubling cultural currents that demanded an answer: the violence of war, poverty, and protest that had plagued the nineteen fifties and sixties. In formulating his personal political praxis, his liberal version of anarchism, Ward turned to Alexander Berkman’s *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*.

Anarchy as a Liberal Tactic

Having gone to press in several editions, including Yiddish, Chinese, and German translations, for most of the first half of the 20th century, Alexander Berkman’s *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, first published in 1912 by Emma Goldman’s Mother Earth Press, lay dormant and unpublished until the sixties, when a New Left disenchanted with capitalist democracy and communist socialism in equal measure turned to anarchism for inspiration, many reading the anarchist Paul Goodman’s *Growing up Absurd*, a best seller

on college campuses in the decade, for an explanation of the failures of the liberal consensus. Published as part of the New Left anarchist zeitgeist in 1969 and then in 1970 by separate presses, *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, dedicated “to all those who in and out of prison fight against their bondage,”⁹⁰ relates the story of Alexander Berkman’s attempted assassination, in 1892, of Henry Clay Frick, Andrew Carnegie’s partner, in retaliation for Frick’s suppression of the Homestead steelworker strike. It describes in particular Berkman’s subsequent incarceration in Pennsylvania’s Western Penitentiary. Written in 1970 for New York Review Books’ reprinting of Berkman’s memoirs, Ward’s essay on Berkman’s politics continued Ward’s ongoing examination of American individualism as a politically useful American myth. American individualism held out the promise, Ward argued, for a “benign Anarchism,” but when the state suppressed the individual long enough, this anarchism was likely to break out into violent opposition in the streets.

For Ward, Berkman’s memoir forced the question, “Is violence, rather than some mad aberration, an intrinsic and understandable part” of the American experience? Was the violence in American streets in fact derived from “our best and noblest ideals about the meaning and the promise of American life?”⁹¹ Did individuals, in other words, violently oppose the state because the state failed to live up to its mythical function as a guardian of liberty? If so, then the canonical myth of liberty had served to inspire and motivate Berkman’s direct action. In fact, Berkman’s underlying belief, like Ward’s, was that America had betrayed its best ideals, and Berkman allows the reader to understand this betrayal from the inside out. In the process, we are allowed to “identify with a man who idealistically accepts terrorism as a political instrument,” and thus to sympathetically

comprehend the cultural contradictions that underlay Berkman's assassination attempt.⁹²

In the process of empathizing with Berkman, readers could better comprehend the causes of political violence and the necessity for activism. *Prison Memoirs* taught us that we "must act on our ideals or change our minds."⁹³

In 1970, the same year as he published his introduction to the Berkman volume, Ward consulted an essay by Irving Howe, equally indicative of the tenor of the times, titled "Anarchy and Authority in American Literature." In it, Howe, a self-identified socialist historian, found in the figures of Mark Twain, Henry Thoreau, Herman Melville, and James Fennimore Cooper expressions of an America caught between the authority of the state and "the anarchist vision coursing through nineteenth century American literature" that "speaks for a wish to undo restrictions which violate the deepest [national] myth" of liberty.⁹⁴ The tension between freedom and society—evident, for instance, in Huck and Jim's constantly interrupted journey of friendship and Huck's return to racism every time they touch land and "civilization"—represented "an endless dialectic in our life and our literature," the "clash between anarchy and authority."⁹⁵

In exploring the social implications of Berkman's retaliatory violence through a lens much like Howe's, Ward began formulating an anarchist model of effective political activism. The catalyzing event of Berkman's book was, after all, a direct action, an assassination attempt that became "a testing ground for his [Berkman's] theory."⁹⁶ What Berkman taught Ward was that effective political action must emerge in a form recognizable to the audience for whom it is intended. This, for Ward, was the central lesson of Berkman's life. In prison, Berkman repeatedly encounters inmates who insist that his act must have been motivated by profit, and Berkman comes to realize that

Americans are not socially primed to understand propaganda of the deed. Greed, power, or revenge—those far more compelling components of American life—seemed more legitimate explanations for political assassination to the majority of prisoners than liberating the proletariat. What kind of political action, Berkman began asking himself, might better convey the messages the revolutionary anarchists wished to communicate? For Berkman, as for Goldman, the battle for class revolution eventually became a battle for the only tool of dissent American seemed to offer: the liberal right of free speech. Drawing from Berkman's revolutionary anarchism, Ward concluded that the anarchist call for individual liberty could only be meaningful to Americans stripped of any revolutionary means.

In Ward's words, as he gradually became aware of the futility of violent protest in an American context, Berkman learned to distinguish between "an individual act and a social act."⁹⁷ The former was an act for which "the background of social necessity was lacking"; in other words, an act fated to be misunderstood by a culture where "the ideology is . . . immune to revolutionary and violent action." In America, the democratic "ideology which holds captive even those who are oppressed" rendered violent revolt unthinkable to most Americans.⁹⁸ Since propaganda is a social act, its success depends upon what Jacques Ellul has called "pre-propaganda," the background of socialization that makes an act, word, or spectacle meaningful to its receivers.⁹⁹ Paradoxically, Ward noted, America's professed "freedom from external restraint means that the individual must internalize the values of the culture, and restrain himself." The result is that we are "puzzled when violence is used to attack" the state but relatively undisturbed by the fact that "violence has been used again and again to support the structure of authority in

American society.”¹⁰⁰ Underpinning this entire quagmire was what Ward considered the central conflict between democratic freedom and political dissent: “The insistence that all men are free and equal leads to the curious consequence of mass conformity and a mood of intolerance for dissent in any form.” “The fault, as Berkman”—and, in fact, John Ward—“would have it lies in American consciousness.”¹⁰¹

Ward concluded his essay on Berkman with a call to action premised on what he saw as the basic social responsibility of academics. If Americans were incapable of understanding why a person might choose to resist institutionalized aggression and if the fault for this inability lay in America’s consciousness, Ward concluded, as “the keepers of that consciousness, American intellectuals have dismally failed in their responsibility to American society,” since

[o]ne of the functions of the intellectual is to raise to consciousness the ambiguities inherent in the professed ideals of our society, and to make clear the meaning of social forces implicit in the actions of society that contradict those ideals.¹⁰²

Since the “actions of society” lent support to an unceasing war in Vietnam, the intellectual was obligated to protest.

As a scholar, Ward believed that “simply to read is inevitably a political act,” but he also came to believe that simply reading and critiquing was not enough. Ward’s political orientation away from a politics of the word toward that of the deed, a politics closer to Berkman’s but stripped of its revolutionary violence, appears in the transcript of a speech he delivered to student activists at Amherst the night before the joint student/faculty protest at Westover Air Force Base:

Night before last . . . a student called my home and left word with my wife that he and other students hoped I would write a letter [in support of their planned protest]. Write a letter? To whom? One feels like a child throwing paper planes against a brick wall. I might write such a letter and you might cheer and, if the world goes on, you might think me a pleasant and sympathetic fellow. But the mines are laid [outside North Vietnam's harbors] . . . [and i]nstead I will, for myself, join in the act of passive civil disobedience at Westover Air Force base.¹⁰³

Ward's expressed reasons for his protest, then, were twofold. First, there was the immediate situation of the Vietnam War, a "cruel and foolish mistake."¹⁰⁴ Second, it was necessary in a time of war to reassert the political sovereignty of the individual in American life. Ward was protesting, in one sense, on behalf of the spirit of *Huckleberry Finn*, *Walden*, the *Leatherstocking Tales*, and *Moby Dick*. American individualism, after all, underwrote the citizen's right to dissent against cruel and unjust government incursion into the social conscience and American institutions had violated that promise of democracy. As much as protesting against the war, Ward was petitioning the government to grant its citizens the liberal value free speech: "What I protest," Ward said, "is that there is no way to protest."¹⁰⁵

Ironically, in spite of his attention to social necessity as a background for protest, following his arrest Ward found himself under the microscope of public scrutiny. Concerned parents wrote letters protesting Ward's action, members of Amherst's alumni association threatened to withdraw their financial support from the school, columnists questioned Ward's sincerity, and educators debated whether a college president should take a public stand on any political issue. At the heart of the criticism of Ward was a

sharp distinction between public and private life that Ward had come to reject.

Specifically, Ward's critics argued that a college president had a responsibility, first and foremost, to the institution. Only secondarily did an educator have a responsibility to his or her own ethics. Ward, of course, had concluded that institutions, first and foremost, were responsible to individuals and that the individual's primary responsibility to institutions was to ensure that they served individuals. In Ward's view, an individual did not surrender this responsibility simply by joining an institution, working a job, or pledging allegiance to a union of states.

In response to his critics, Ward turned to the conclusions he had drawn from his exploration of American myths and symbols, to the dialectical tension between the individual and society as it had evolved from the contradictions of the nineteenth century. The relevant conflict, he argued, was not between a university president and a university, but between the citizen and organized society. The question was not whether college presidents should publicly express a political view; rather, the question was, as Ward saw it, "Should a citizen" in general "take a stand on a sensitive public issues?" "This question is important," Ward told a panel at the 1973 American Association of Higher Education conference in Chicago, "because it draws in its train central questions about the meaning and conduct of our common political life."¹⁰⁶ In his address, Ward reiterated the contradiction he had underscored throughout his career between the myth of American individualism and the ubiquity of an institutional culture that suppressed individual freedom. He also offered a restatement of a synthesis that he believed resolved the conflict between the individual and "the institution": "A political community which accepts a government and its policies . . . bears a collective responsibility for the actions

of its government [and] an individual who continues to accept membership in the political community bears, by derivation, a personal and individual share of that collective responsibility.”¹⁰⁷

The individual was imminently social, Ward held, and society emerged from the individual consciousness that it played a part in shaping. This symbiotic relationship between the individual and culture demanded not only better, more liberal institutions, but also a new investment in the kind of individualism without which protest on behalf of a better community would have been impossible. In fact, he held that “the government of the United States” through suppression of the individual conscience had become “a threat to the [very] existence of a public will.”¹⁰⁸ In a world where the individual has no voice, Ward concluded, “the institution has no voice and the public vanishes.” “In such a world” devoid of constructive individualism, “there is no public. There is only power.”¹⁰⁹

The ABCs of Liberal Anarchism

Ward’s definition of the public, though, was a decidedly liberal one: it was one, in other words, that equated the individual with the institution, affirming the liberal democratic idea that institutions and the public are one and the same and that American intellectual resources can be used to align them. Nowhere does the notion appear in Ward’s gradual turn toward anarchist direct action as a tactic for liberal reform that in the best of worlds no such institutions should exist, or that liberal, democratic methods may disguise abuses of power by their very nature, or that a guaranteed right of speech—Ward’s ultimate reason for protesting—muzzles a dissenter somewhere as soon as it is written down. Each of these criticisms of American democratic institutions was a mainstay of anarchist rhetoric in Berkman’s generation. Yet, for Ward, the lesson of

Berkman's life was that American democratic institutions should be changed, not dissolved, that they should become more like the classical liberal myths we have of them: imbued with individual actors who exercise the Jeffersonian right of free speech. Where Berkman in fact came to believe that such myths disguised the pernicious, self-perpetuating nature of the American machine of the state, Ward concluded that the state could free the individual if only if it were in the right hands and lived up to its promises, a fundamental tenet of cold war liberalism.

Ward's fusion of liberalism and anarchism has become common in other forms among activists on the Left. Like the liberals who protested in direct action at the 1969 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Ward had come to reject and protest the Vietnam platform of the Democratic Party while accepting the necessity for collective institutions. Like that of the anarchist protestors in Seattle in 1999 who used decentralized means to temporarily defeat the economically liberal World Trade Organization Meeting, Ward's "anarchism" was tempered by his belief that institutions should be transformed and regulated, not dissolved. As one anarchist activist who disrupted the WTO in Seattle reported, there were "anarchists involved in every possible way" at the protest—"as labor activists, puppeteers, non-violent lock down blockaders, marching musicians, medics, communication people, and media people."¹¹⁰ The coalitional of groups at the "Battle of Seattle" included liberals groups, self-described "Black Box" revolutionary anarchists, and primitivists "who put anti-technology and environmentalism at the forefront of their politics" and who trace their lineage to Thoreau, Lewis Mumford, and Gary Snyder. All of these actors were "critical to the

success of the demonstration” since it was “the barrage from all sides that led to the all-encompassing critique that has spread out across the country.”¹¹¹

The decentralized tactics of the WTO protests, media began pointing out, reflected the new influence of the World Wide Web on the American left: activists were forming coalitions without a central direction or a leader, and direct actions like a human blockade around the WTO meeting site were being planned on the spot by dedicated anarchists and spontaneously joined by liberal contingents.¹¹² With or without direct anarchist participation, it was the organizing principle of the protest, its anarchism as a tactic, that made it an anarchist event. Liberals—from labor leaders to environmental protestors—were the largest contingent in the streets, and their readiness to join anarchist protestors suggests their willingness to embrace anarchist tactics for liberal reform.

It remains to be seen what long-term effects this fusion of anarchism and liberalism may have on American politics and legislation after the Occupy Wall Street movement, a similarly decentralized protest movement for the reform, not dissolution, of American institutions. Anarchist and progressive thought has appeared side-by-side in American culture before: in the age of Emerson, in the Progressive Era, and in the New Left uprising of the nineteen sixties. Individualism will likely remain part of the Left’s arsenal from the usable past for as long as that past is remembered, just as another version of individualism motivates the right.

The roots of this individualism on the Left in America, equally at home with liberalism and anarchism, hold deep in the American soil. Beneath liberal anarchism on the Left run the currents of American literary individualism, an individualism that refused to disappear in the nineteen fifties because it was contained in the literary canon of the

cultural front, which became the so-called “cold war” canon in post-War America. Indeed, the McCarthy years yielded as much struggle between the canons of American individualism and the bipartisan cold war consensus as conflict between liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, over the meaning of this individualism. According to the Thoreau scholar Walter Harding, when “the United States Information Service included a standard textbook of American literature in all their libraries around the world that reprinted Thoreau’s ‘Civil Disobedience,’” Senator Joseph McCarthy “succeeded in having this book removed from the shelves of each of those libraries—specifically because of the Thoreau essay.¹¹³ Perhaps McCarthy had intuited the threat that dissident individualism would pose to the cold war consensus. Or perhaps he had intuited, in the words of F.O. Matthiessen, that the best way to read “Civil Disobedience” “would be to relate Thoreau to the background of native American Anarchism.”¹¹⁴

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1. John Macy, *The Spirit of American Literature* (New York: Bondi and Liveright, 1913), 179.
 2. Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930), 409.
 3. Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Subject: F.O. Matthiessen," file HQ-1000026967, Freedom of Information Act Document.
 4. Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 77.
 5. *Ibid.*, 446.
 6. Donald E. Pease, "National Narratives, Postnational Narration," *Modern Fiction Studies* 43, no. 1 (1997): 17–18.
 7. Paul Giles, "Virtual Americas: The Internationalization of American Studies and the Ideology of Exchange," *American Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (1998): 526.
 8. Cecelia Tichi, "American Literary Studies to the Civil War," in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Studies*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: Modern Language Association, 1992), 218.
 9. As Miller argues in *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), "The authors of the highly official *United States Bombing Survey* . . . were falling into a the pattern of a literary form more ancient, and more rigid than the sonnet" (238), but, Miller held, "Not for this was the errand into a wilderness run, and not for this will it be run" (239).
 10. R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 196–97.
 11. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 12. "Empire conceived as maritime domination," or the mercantilist ideal, Smith argued in his introduction, "presupposes American expansion toward the Pacific," such that the closing of the frontier, as expressed in Frederick Jackson Turner's hypothesis, led Americans to conceive of the rest of the world as a new virgin land, a new empire—the "garden of the world." Nowhere in his book does Smith defend this empire as necessary or desirable. He does, however, provide an interesting framework for post-colonial American Studies if post-colonialists would read his title as the expression of an American myth, not an American reality.
 12. Leo Marx, *Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 7, 11, 350.

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13. Arthur E. Bestor Jr., "The Study of American Civilization: Jingoism or Scholarship?" *William and Mary Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (1952): 4.
 14. *Ibid.*, 7–8.
 15. Leo Marx, "Believing in America," *Boston Review*, <http://bostonreview.net/BR28.6/marx.html>.
 16. Lewis Mumford, *The Conduct of Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1951), 186.
 17. Lewis Mumford, qtd. in Donald L. Miller, *Lewis Mumford: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), 111.
 18. *Ibid.*, 99.
 19. *Ibid.*, 168.
 20. Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias* (New York: Viking, 1962), 10.
 21. *Ibid.*, 221–222.
 22. *Ibid.*, 225–26.
 23. *Ibid.*, 231.
 24. *Ibid.*, 252.
 25. *Ibid.*, 255.
 26. *Ibid.*, 303.
 27. *Ibid.*, 333.
 28. *Ibid.*, 58.
 29. *Ibid.*, 46.
 30. *Ibid.*, 56.
 31. *Ibid.*, 59.
 32. *Ibid.*, 59.

33. Ibid., 279.

34. Ibid., 399.

35. Ibid., 400.

36. Ibid., 389.

37. Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 145.

38. Ibid., 151.

39. Ibid., 154.

40. Ibid., 175.

41. Ibid., 179.

42. Ibid., 305.

43. Ibid., 340.

44. Ibid., 314.

45. Ibid., 328.

46. Ibid., 331.

47. Ibid., 349.

48. Ibid., 365.

49. Ibid., 365.

50. Ibid., 373.

51. Ibid., 382.

52. Ibid., 383.

53. Ibid., 458.

54. Ibid., 382.

55. Ibid., 458.

56. See Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Three New Deals: Reflections on Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany, 1933-1939* (New York: Picador: 2007).

57. Lewis Mumford, *The Condition of Man* (New York: Mariner Books, 1973), 394.

58. Ibid., 413.

59. Ibid., 332.

60. Ibid., 311.

61. Ibid., 281.

62. Ibid., 310.

63. Ibid., 197.

64. Ibid., 382.

65. Ibid., 180–81.

66. Mumford, *The Conduct of Life*, 223.

67. Ibid., 189.

68. Ibid., 190.

69. Ibid., 179.

70. Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), 224.

71. Ibid., 225.

72. Ibid., 255–56.

73. Ibid., 183.

74. Ibid., 41.

75. Ibid., 128.

76. Daniel Walker, *Rights in Conflict* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 1–11, 59–71.

77. Max Frankel, introduction to *Rights in Conflict*, by Daniel Walker (New York: Dutton, 1968), ix. Specifically, Walker was a “prominent Chicago attorney and civic leader, the president of the prestigious . . . Chicago Crime Commission, a former naval officer, aide to Adlai E. Stevenson and [. . .] Vice President and Council of Marco, Inc.”

78. *Ibid.*, 29.

79. *Ibid.*, 28. Ironically, Ward’s review of the press’s response to Lindbergh echoes the New Americanist revision of the very school of thought in which Ward was working, making Ward a precursor of the New Americanist mode of deconstruction. This parallel should come as no surprise since, as the New Americanists note, myth and symbol cultural criticism was the dominant mode of criticism in American Studies while they were in college.

80. *Ibid.*, 35.

81. *Ibid.*, 250.

82. *Ibid.*, 250–51.

83. *Ibid.*, 260.

84. *Ibid.*, 265.

85. *Ibid.*

86. John William Ward, *Red, White, and Blue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 318.

87. *Ibid.*, 320.

88. *Ibid.* 321.

89. *Ibid.*, 328.

90. Alexander Berkman, *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* (New York: New York Review Books, 1999), iii.

91. John William Ward, introduction to *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, by Alexander Berkman (New York: New York Review Books, 1999), xiii.

92. *Ibid.*, xii.

93. *Ibid.*, xxviii.

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94. Irving Howe, "Anarchy and Authority in American Literature," in *Decline of the New* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1970), 98.
95. *Ibid.*, 111.
96. Ward, introduction, xix.
97. *Ibid.*, xx.
98. *Ibid.*, xx, xxii.
99. See Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage, 1975).
100. Ward, introduction, xxvii.
101. *Ibid.*, xxvii.
102. *Ibid.*, xxvii–xxviii.
103. John William Ward, "To Whom Should I Write a Letter?" *New York Times*, May 13, 1972.
104. *Ibid.*
105. *Ibid.*
106. John William Ward, "Should College Presidents Take Stands on Sensitive Public Issues?" July 18, 1973, box 1, folder 23, John William Ward Papers, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College, Amherst, MA.
107. *Ibid.* Cf. John William Ward, "The Meaning of Passive Civil Disobedience," September 1972, box 1, folder 16, John William Ward Papers, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College, Amherst, MA.
108. John William Ward, "The Committee for Public Justice," November 7–8, 1972, box 1, folder 21, John William Ward Papers, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College, Amherst, MA.
109. *Ibid.*, 3.
110. David Barsamian, "Black Block Interview," in *The Anarchist Papers*, ed. Dimitrios Roussopoulos (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2002), 187.
111. *Ibid.*, 188–89.
112. See Chris Ney, "Democracy in Seattle's Streets," in *The Anarchist Papers*, ed. Dimitrios Roussopoulos (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2002), 176–181.

113. Walter Harding, *The Variorum Walden and the Variorum Civil Disobedience* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), 336.

114. F. O. Matthiessen, *The Responsibilities of the Critic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), 213.

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<http://www.walden.org/Institute/thoreau/writings/walden/Reviews/Chambers%20Journal%2021%20November%201857.htm>.
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