

The Most American American: A Study of Freedom in American Arcadia

Abstract: One of the American myths, currently obsolete and mostly forgotten, is a vision of America as an Arcadia where the perennial human dream of personal freedom could come true thanks to the idealistic concept of life which is supposedly possible in the pre-industrial, pre-corporation and non-overcrowded society in the context of unspoiled, wild nature. Such vision had a powerful personal and intellectual impact on a famous 19th-century American writer, Henry David Thoreau. The author of the article thoroughly analyses this myth of the American Arcadia on the basis of all major publications of the writer, in particular, the essays *Walking* and *Civil Disobedience*, as well as the book *Walden*.

Keywords: Henry David Thoreau, Arcadia, utopia, personal and political freedom, democracy, wild nature, politics, slavery

Streszczenie: Jednym z mitów amerykańskich, obecnie już nieaktualnym i w większości zapomnianym, jest wizja Ameryki jako Arkadii, w której odwieczne ludzkie marzenie o wolności osobistej mogło się spełnić dzięki idealistycznej koncepcji życia, jakie rzekomo jest możliwe w przedindustrialnym, przedkorporacyjnym i nieprzeludnionym społeczeństwie w kontekście niezniszczonej, dzikiej natury. Wizja taka wywarła olbrzymi osobisty i intelektualny wpływ na słynnego amerykańskiego pisarza z dziewiętnastego wieku, którym był Henry David Thoreau. Autor artykułu analizuje dokładnie ten mit amerykańskiej Arkadii na podstawie wszystkich głównych publikacji pisarza, szczególnie esejów *Walking* i *Civil Disobedience*, jak i książki *Walden*.

Słowa kluczowe: Henry David Thoreau, Arkadia, utopia, wolność osobista i polityczna, demokracja, dzika natura, polityka, niewolnictwo

What is the value of any political freedom, but as a means to moral freedom? Is it a freedom to be slaves or a freedom to be free of which we boast?

Henry D. Thoreau

No truer American ever existed than Thoreau.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

By 1862, when Henry David Thoreau's essay "Walking" was published, the Arcadian concept of freedom had long been politically irrelevant. But politics to Thoreau was perhaps the least important of all of social concerns. The apparent political irrelevance of Arcadia was a counterargument more

insignificant for Thoreau than the irrelevance of politics itself: “the cigar smoke of man,” as he called it in “Walking.” In his *Journal*, *Walden*, and essays, Thoreau repeatedly attacked the complacent American assumption that politics could secure individual freedom and that Americans were free. But that they could be free, Thoreau argued eloquently because, like Jefferson, he believed in the Arcadian myth of American civilization.

Even more than Jefferson’s *Notes* does Thoreau “Walking” embody the concept of the superiority of America because of the superiority of her natural environment. “I must walk toward Oregon,” Thoreau says, “and not toward Europe.” Following the then popular theory about the westward movement of the progress of civilization, Thoreau argues:

We go eastward to realize history and study the works of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race; we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure. The Atlantic is a Lethean stream, in our passage over which we have had an opportunity to forget the Old World and its institutions. If we do not succeed this time, there is perhaps one more chance for the race left before it arrives on the banks of the Styx; and that is in the Lethe of the Pacific, which is three times as wide.¹

The pull of the West, and the consequent refinement of civilization, results from the promise of a better life offered by the existence of free and wild lands consecutively discovered in the Western hemisphere. The East accumulates experience and wisdom; but the West brings them to fruition: “*Ex Oriente lux; ex Occidente frux*. From the East light; from the West fruit.” Columbus, Thoreau says, “felt the westward tendency more strongly than any before. He obeyed it, and found a New World for Castile and Leon.” America is

the she wolf to-day, and the children of exhausted Europe exposed on her uninhabited and savage shores are the Romulus and Remus who, having derived new life and vigor from her breast, have founded a new Rome in the West.²

Before,

the island of Atlantis, and the islands and gardens of the Hesperides, a sort of terrestrial paradise, appear to have been the Great West of the ancients, envelo-

¹ H.D. Thoreau, “Walking,” [in:] *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. C. Bode, New York 1974, p. 599. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Thoreau’s works are made to Carl Bode’s edition, *The Portable Thoreau*.

² “Walking,” p. 604. *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, eds. B. Torrey, F.H. Allen, Boston 1949, vol. II, p. 151.

ped in mystery and poetry. Who has not seen in imagination, when looking into the sunset sky, the gardens of the Hesperides, and the foundation of all those fables?³

But America was special because it was the last remaining land in this chain of discoveries and the grandest of them all.

“Where on the globe can there be found an area of equal extent with that occupied by the bulk of our State, so fertile and so rich and varied in its productions, and at the same time so habitable by the European, as this is?” To support this claim, Thoreau quotes several contemporary authorities. According to Michaux, “the species of large trees are much more numerous in North America than in Europe; in the United States there are more than one hundred and forty species that exceed thirty feet in height; in France there are but thirty that attain this size.” Guyot, a geographer, says, Thoreau “goes farther—farther than I am ready to follow him; yet not when he says: ‘As the plant is made for the animal, as the vegetable world is made for the animal world, America is made for the man of the Old World.’” And Sir Francis Head “tells us that ‘in both the northern and southern hemispheres of the New World, Nature has not only outlined her works on a larger scale, but has painted the whole picture with brighter and more costly colors than she used in delineating and in beautifying the Old World’”:

The heavens of America appear infinitely higher, the sky is bluer, the air is fresher, the cold is intenser, the moon looks larger, the stars are brighter, the thunder is louder, the lighting is vividder, the wind is stronger, the rain is heavier, the mountains are higher, the rivers longer, the forests bigger, the plains broader.⁴

“I trust,” Thoreau concludes, “that these facts are symbolical of the height to which the philosophy and poetry and religion of her inhabitants may one day soar.” “I believe Adam in paradise was not so favorably situated on the whole as is the backwoodsman in America”:

At length, perchance, the immaterial heaven will appear as much higher to the American mind, and the intimations that star it as much brighter. For I believe that climate does thus react on man – as there is something in the mountain air that feeds the spirit and inspires. Will not man grow to greater perfection intellectually as well as physically under these influences?⁵

³ “Walking,” p. 607.

⁴ *Journal*, vol. II, p. 151.

⁵ “Walking,” p. 605.

For Thoreau, it was almost a rhetorical question; the answer was that, of course, he could. “Else to what end does the world go on, and why was America discovered?”

Thoreau’s is a more earnest, more desperate appeal for the Arcadian mode of life in America than Jefferson’s, or, it seems, than any other appeal that has ever been made by an American Arcadian. In his study of the Adamic myth of America, R.W.B. Lewis remarks that “probably nobody of [Thoreau’s] generation had a richer sense of the potentiality for a fresh, free, and uncluttered existence.”⁶ Thoreau’s appeal is desperate because like Jefferson, he knew that most Americans would not understand, or would not care about, the “potentiality for a fresh and free” existence afforded by the Arcadian setting of the United States. The possibility was unique; it was human beings’ last chance to fulfill the Arcadian dream of freedom.

But the Arcadian ideal of a harmonious relation to nature was doomed; in his *Journal*, Thoreau painfully records the progressive destruction of the environment. Commenting once upon the cutting of woods in the neighborhood, he remarks, “Thank God, they cannot cut down the clouds!” Elsewhere, anguished over the gradual disappearance of Nature’s various smells, tastes, and sights, he says: “I fear that he who walks over these hills a century hence will not know the pleasure of knocking off wild apples. Ah, poor man! There are many pleasures which he will be debarred from!”⁷ It is this anguish, caused by men’s insensitiveness to the Arcadian potentialities of life, that reminds us of Nick’s soliloquy at the end of *The Great Gatsby*, a passage which is the artist’s epitaph to the Arcadian myth of America:

And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the world. Its vanished trees, the trees that made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.⁸

When Thoreau died, in 1862, Emerson remarked in a eulogy that “no truer American ever existed than Thoreau.”⁹ Perhaps, it would be even more

⁶ Ibidem, p. 605–606.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 607.

⁸ F.S. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, New York 1968, p. 227.

⁹ Ibidem.

appropriate to say that no freer American ever existed than Thoreau. He was among those few who actually lived up to the myth of American Arcadia: his whole life—and particularly his celebrated two-year sojourn at Walden Pond—was a consistent search for freedom in Nature's benevolent setting. Few have ever been, or are, less encumbered by a necessity to make a living, by parental responsibilities, by social or political obligations, by custom, tradition, by ignorance, by organized religion, or by any of the myriad entanglements which human beings have always fallen victim to without often realizing that they have.

Unlike Jefferson, who was prepared to compromise his Arcadian beliefs, Thoreau resisted the temptation to become a political figure and, instead, receded into New England wilderness to become, as he described himself, a "self-appointed inspector of snowstorms and rainstorms," or, as Emerson described him, "the captain of a huckleberry-party." Emerson "much regretted" this decision, thinking that with his "energy and practical ability," Thoreau "seemed born for great enterprise and command."¹⁰ But Emerson, unlike Thoreau, was never prepared to follow the logic of transcendentalism to its conclusion and to become a practicing Arcadian like Thoreau.

Jefferson's call for Arcadian moderation in life and in one's relation with Nature as a prerequisite for freedom is paralleled by Thoreau's celebrated call to "simplify," to be as "simple as Nature":

Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen and keep your accounts on your thumbnail. The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which by the way are all external and superficial, is an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it as for them is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose.¹¹

Like the famous Diogenes of Sinope, to whom he has sometimes been compared to,¹² Thoreau points out that wealth is often slavery but that simplicity and even poverty are freedom. Material comforts create an insatiable appetite for more comforts and luxuries, which requires incessant work and

¹⁰ *Journal*, vol. II, p. 153.

¹¹ "Walking," p. 608.

¹² R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam*, Chicago 1958, p. 20.

care, and so precludes freedom. The laboring man “has not leisure for a true integrity day by day” and “has no time to be anything but a machine.” For Thoreau, a forty-hour work week, in an office or factory, is a horror to contemplate, let alone to experience; and in “Walking” he says that men “deserve some credit for not having all committed suicide long ago” because they did not spend at least four hours a day, as Thoreau did, to “saunter through the woods” to “preserve health and spirits.”¹³

One would have thought that Thoreau is less contemptuous of farmers, who seem to come close to the Arcadian ideal of simplicity and freedom, but of Thoreau’s most devastating critique of various walks of life is exactly the one of farming. In *Walden*, Thoreau points out that:

The farmer is endeavoring to solve the problem of a livelihood by a formula more complicated than the problem itself. To get his shoestrings he speculates in herds of cattle. With consummate skill he has set his trap with a hair spring to catch comfort and independence, and then as he turned away, got his own leg into it...

I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of... They have got to live a man’s life, pushing all these things before them, and get on as well as they can. How many a poor immortal soul have I met well nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and wood-lot!¹⁴

“It is a fool’s life,” Thoreau argues, “as they will find when they get to the end of it.” And it is certainly not freedom, even in “this comparatively free country.” Americans had become slaves to “so many keen and subtle masters” that they all live “lives of quiet desperation.” “They begin to dig their graves as soon as they are born.” According to Thoreau, they are so entangled in their fictitious cares and trivial pursuits that “only death will set them free.”¹⁵

Clearly, American civilization was headed in the wrong direction, and, for Thoreau, it had become a hypocrisy and a paradox. This “comparatively free country” had not only institutionalized Negro slavery. What was even worse was that those who were proud of their freedom were in fact moral slaves who regarded themselves as the freest men on earth. Thoreau’s explanation of this was that Americans had become a “nation of politicians” who concer-

¹³ *Journal*, vol. III, p. 213; vol. II, p. 100.

¹⁴ *Walden*, op.cit.

¹⁵ *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. R.L. Cook, New York 1969, “Thoreau,” p. 250.

ned themselves only with the “outward defences of freedom” – the political freedom.¹⁶ However, according to Thoreau, political freedom, although often a prerequisite to liberty, was the least important kind of freedom.

Even more, Thoreau argued that Americans’ preoccupation with politics became a definite hindrance in the search for a truly free and happy life. That is why, in a typically Arcadian fashion, Thoreau dismissed politics as a trivial and contemptible occupation.

The reason for the failure of American civilization, or at least for its failure to live up to America’s myth of “man’s last chance” to elevate himself from cyclical degeneration, was that the search for freedom concluded much too early, that is, right after the Revolutionary War, when political freedom was secured. In “Life Without Principle,” Thoreau points out that political freedom should be a prelude to the search for individual freedom. “Now that the republic—the *res-publica*—has been settled, it is time to look after the *res-privata*—the private state—to see, as the Roman senate charged its consuls: ‘*ne quid res-PRIVATA detriment caperet,*’ that the private state receive no detriment.”¹⁷

The American War of Independence has been regarded by many Americans and non-Americans as a landmark in the perennial search for freedom and is now nearly a universal symbol of man’s fight for liberty. For example, the American historian George Bancroft considered the American Revolution “the ultimate clue to human history as once the birth of God as man had been thought to be.” As R.W.B. Lewis says: for Bancroft “the New World became the crown, the key, and the consummation of a universal historical process,”¹⁸ the purpose of which is to free men from the yoke of political and social tyranny. Although in not so lofty terms, many others have voiced the same opinion, and very few ever attempted to question it. But Thoreau did. In “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau points out that the Revolutionary War was fought against the British government because it imposed an unfair taxation upon certain commodities. That is, the actual purpose of that war was economic, hardly a reason “to make an ado about”:

If one were to tell me that this was a bad government because it taxed certain foreign commodities brought to its ports, it is most probable that I should not make an ado about it, for I can do without them.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Walden*, p. 273. [in:] *The Portable Thoreau*, op. cit.

¹⁷ *Walden*, p. 344.

¹⁸ See, for example Ch.F. Briggs, “A Yankee Diogenes” (The next reference is erroneously numbered¹⁸: “Walking,” p. 594–595).

¹⁹ *Walden*, pp. 260, 288.

The Revolutionary War carried with it the potential for becoming the most important step towards the liberation of man, but that chance became forfeited when political machinations led to the recognition of Negro slavery and when Americans reverted to moral slavery in their frantic pursuit of wealth, luxury, and social prestige. "I cannot for an instant," Thoreau says in "Civil Disobedience," "to recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also." The acceptance of slavery was, it will be recalled, an expedient measure by the Founding Fathers to save the political union of the 13 original colonies. Thoreau's rejection of the American government was therefore an example of the Transcendalist's demand to act from principle, nor from expediency. As a result, Thoreau agreed to be imprisoned rather than pay a tax in support of the American government's another expedient policy—the decision to wage an imperialistic war against Mexico in 1846.

Political freedom for Thoreau was important only insofar as it helped towards "moral freedom":

Do we call this the land of the free? What is it to be free from King George the Fourth and continue the slaves of prejudice? What is it [to] be born free, and not to live? What is the value of any political freedom, but as a means to moral freedom? Is it a freedom to be slaves or a freedom to be free, of which we boast? We are a nation of politicians, concerned about the outside of freedom. It is our children who may perchance be essentially free.²⁰

Although slavery was the greatest evil of the American political system, Thoreau regarded moral slavery and prejudice "more keen and subtle" enslavers of people than physical slavery. "There are so many keen and subtle masters that enslave both North and South. It is hard to have a Southern overseer; it is worse to have a Northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver yourself."²¹ Given the various moral, social, political, and financial entrapments of most Americans, Thoreau thought the 4th of July celebrations a rather clamorous display of hypocrisy:

I do not know but there are some who, if they were tied to the whipping-post and could but get one hand free, would use it to ring the bells and fire the cannon to celebrate their liberty. It reminded me of the Roman Saturnalia, on which even the slaves were allowed to take some liberty. So some of you took the liberty to

²⁰ Ibidem, pp. 260–261, 263, 289.

²¹ *Journal*, vol. II, p. 179.

ring and fire. That was the extent of your freedom; and when the sound of the bells died away, your liberty died away also, and when the powder was all expended, you liberty went off with the smoke. Nowadays men wear a fool's-cap and call it a liberty-cap. The joke could be no broader if the inmates of the prisons were to subscribe for all the powder to be used in such salutes, and hire their jailors to do the firing and ringing for them.²²

He basis of all of Thoreau's criticism of the emergent American civilization was his unwavering belief in the superiority of the Arcadian mode of life. It demands simplicity and moderation but affords leisure and freedom. An Arcadian like Thoreau is convinced that Nature is more than just a commodity or a resource to be manipulated for a financial profit or material gain. Like Jefferson, Thoreau argues the thesis about the moral regeneration of human beings through a harmonious relation with Nature. And like Jefferson, Thoreau claims that real freedom is possible only in an abundant, unspoiled, and wild environment, which could free us from a debilitating and enslaving necessity to gain comfort and security in a non-Arcadian, industrialized environment. The price of such apparent comfort was more than its value. (Thoreau once remarked that he preferred cold and hunger to the means which we have devised to stave them off.)²³

For Thoreau, a non-Arcadian, capitalistic, and technology-based civilization destroys Nature, a basis for a free and meaningful existence. The fascination for the machine and technological progress, he regards mostly as a misdirected endeavor to improve only the external aspects of life at the cost of the spiritual life. "Our inventions," he said, "are but improved means to an unimproved end."²⁴ However, Thoreau does not naively reject all technological progress; rather like Aldous Huxley in *Island*, he would have allowed for a gradual and controlled process of technological development so as not to upset the delicate balance between human needs and those of eco-systems. But beyond this extent, he views it a suicidal folly to destroy Nature in the name of technological progress or for the sake of the ill-conceived goals of comfort and security from the elements. The effect of such a hostile attitude towards Nature would inevitably be the eventual loss of the opportunity to live a self-reliant, free and spiritually more rewarding life.

²² "Life Without Principle," p. 650.

²³ R.W.B. Lewis, p. 164; L. Stroller, "Civil Disobedience: Principle and Politics," [in:] *Thoreau in Our Season*, ed. J.H. Hicks, Massachusetts 1966, p. 113; *Journal*, vol. II, p. 162, 182; *Walden*, p. 263.

²⁴ *Walden*, p. 306.

Thoreau believed that an Arcadian civilization was possible in America because of the uniqueness of America's natural environment and a unique opportunity to "live a quiet, free life, such as Adam's."²⁵ This is the essence of the Adamic myth in American culture, a myth that had become the central point of "a lively and creative dialogue" among American writers in the years 1820^s–1860^s. As R.W.B. Lewis says in *The American Adam*: "A century ago, the image contrived to embody the most fruitful contemporary ideas was that of the authentic American figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history."²⁶

In this Edenic garden of America, Thoreau hopes there will be little room for politics and politicians. "I am pleased to see," he says, "how little space it occupies in the landscape. It is but a narrow field." Politics in Arcadia became insignificant or irrelevant because we, Thoreau argues, are inhabitants or part and parcel of Nature, rather than members of society: "Let us live amid the free play of the elements. Let the dogs bark, let the cocks crow, and the sun shine, and the winds blow."²⁷

Like Emerson, Thoreau consistently points out that our primary concern should be spiritual life invigorated by a constant communion with Nature. Human beings are "degraded when considered as the members of a political organization. As a nation the people never utter one great and healthy word."²⁸ Again and again, in his *Journal* and essays, Thoreau methodically criticizes and ridicules the pretentiousness, hypocrisy, and ultimate futility of all political endeavors, American or not:

The heaven-born Numa, or Lycurgus, or Solon, gravely makes laws to regulate the exportation of tobacco. Will a divine legislator legislate for slaves, or... regulate the exportation of tobacco? What shall a state say for itself at the last day, in which this is a principal production? ... [Americans] are essentially provincial... So is the English Parliament. Mere country bumpkins, they betray themselves, when any more important question arises for them to settle.

I saw that the State was half-witted, that it was timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it, and pitied it.²⁹

²⁵ *Journal*, vol. I, p. 61.

²⁶ "Civil Disobedience," R.W.B. Lewis, p. 110.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 124, 136–137.

²⁸ *Journal*, vol. I, p. 306.

²⁹ *Journal*, vol. II, p. 47, 163; "Life Without Principle," pp. 650–651; "Civil Disobedience," p. 126.

Like Emerson, Thoreau questions the value of all political action because politics is concerned not with moral principles but with economic expediency and power. In their pursuit of political power, politicians are motivated mainly by self-interest or, as Madison argues, by factional interests. But when Madison believes that a system of checks and balances, which pits ambition against ambition, can curb factional tyranny and secure moral values, Thoreau argues that the basis of all social improvement must be the moral uprightness of an individual citizen. All external, political measures invariably fail to improve human beings morally and the fusion between principle and expediency in politics can only be accidental.

Thoreau did not live to see this happen in America: he died in 1862 before the question of slavery was finally settled during the Civil War. As Leo Stroller says:

[H]atred of slavery became a political force only as merchants and industrialists and farmers and wage-earners learned that the planter-controlled government not only kept the Negro from freedom but stood between each of them and his own kind of freedom. When it became necessary to free the slaves in order to be free to pursue your own self-interest, principle and expediency fused, and then the Southern insurrection could be put down.³⁰

Thoreau questions even the concept of a majority-based democracy and postulates a government based on conscience, or on what is “right—not on what is legal or on what the majority has decided to be legal.” In “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau asks:

Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? – in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward.³¹

He admits, however, that the American government is still more tolerable than others if only because there is “so much less of government with us.” Thoreau goes beyond the classical American adage in this respect and claims that that “government is best which governs least.” Thoreau, according to Nathaniel Seefurth, “believed in the minimum of government, quite the op-

³⁰ “Civil Disobedience,” p. 42.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

posite of the ideal state of Plato.”³² But in “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau makes clear that the American government falls far short of his expectations:

This American government—what is it but a tradition, though, a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity? It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will... [T]his government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. It does not keep the country free. It does not settle the West. It does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way. For government is an expedient by which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone; and, as has been said, when it is most expedient, the governed are most let alone by it.³³

Thoreau also seems to have rejected Madison’s idea that a political government could protect the individual and help develop his faculties. “For my own part,” he said, “I should not like to think that I ever rely on the protection of the State.” But this argument Thoreau left inconclusive when, in the conclusion of “Civil Disobedience,” his best political essay, he returns to the Madisonian formula of a good government:

The progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual... There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State 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, I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow men. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen.³⁴

Needless to say, Thoreau also rejects Utopia. As noted above, all Arcadians find politics rather trivial and irrelevant. Since Utopia can be defined as politics obsessed with laws and paranoid about human diversity and indi-

³² N.H. Seefurth, *Thoreau: A View from Emeritus*, Chicago 1968, p. 26.

³³ “Civil Disobedience,” p. 110.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 124, 136–137.

vidualism, Thoreau finds Utopia not only trivial but absurd. Jefferson, as is well known, “swore upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of the tyranny over the mind of man.” He would therefore never have qualified for a membership in Plato’s *Republic*, More’s *Utopia*, or Harrington’s *Oceana*, even though the last one, a cleverly disguised Utopia, was masquerading as Arcadia, Jefferson’s ideal state. Even more inconceivable would be Thoreau’s acquiescence to live in any of these classic Utopias.

Thoreau, in fact, renounced all active participation in any organization or society, Utopian or not. He did not join even Brook Farm, the originally Arcadian experiment, to which Emerson gave at least some verbal support. One obvious reason for this was that Thoreau was “that rarest thing on earth: an individual,” as Henry Miller puts it.³⁵ And, as an individualist, Thoreau believed only in self-improvement and regarded all, so-called, social progress as chimerical. In this, he closely follows Emerson, who, in “Self-Reliance,” argues that social progress is a fallacy:

All men plume themselves on the improvement of society, and no man improves. Society never advances. It recedes as fast on one side as it gains on the other. It undergoes continual changes; it is barbarous, it is civilized, it is Christianized...; but this change is not amelioration. For every thing that is given something is taken.³⁶

In “Paradise (To Be) Regained,” Thoreau argues that nothing can really be “effected but by one man... He who wants help wants everything. We must first succeed alone, that we may enjoy our success together.”³⁷ Thoreau “has much to say of value,” Seefurth points out, “to the individual,” but “nothing helpful to society, for nothing helpful can be said”:

Society has no ears for what the wisest man has to offer. It is only as individuals that men can think and act upon what the philosophers have said. The fine fencing, the abstractions, the attempts at logical explanations of nebulosities that do not lend themselves to logic, the systems designed to make a better society, so dear to the hearts of professional philosophers, metaphysicians, theologians, re-formers, all these endeavors, noble as they may be in their intent, invariably fail to improve society. History is littered with systems of one kind or another

³⁵ H. Miller, “Preface to Three Essays by Henry David Thoreau.” *Thoreau: A Century of Criticism*, ed. W. Harding, Dallas 1954, p. 162.

³⁶ R. Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” p. 91 (*Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. R.L. Cook).

³⁷ *The Annals of America*, published by Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., Chicago 1976, p. 164.

that have flourished and died, been exhumed, revived under different names, and died again.³⁸

“I came into this world,” Thoreau said, “not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad.” Life, according to Thoreau, is “an experiment” which is worth for what it has to offer to an individual here and now—not for what it might be in the future or was in the past. While all Utopians and most politicians are obsessed with perfecting socio-political conditions, Thoreau is concerned only with improving himself. In *Walden*, discussing the hypocrisy and futility of most philanthropic enterprises, Thoreau says that if he were to “teach” at all, he would recommend that human beings not “go about doing good” but “set about being good.” “If I knew for a certainty,” Thoreau says, “that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life.” It is not a man’s duty to perfect, not even to improve, the world. “Often the poor man is not so cold and hungry as he is dirty and ragged and gross.” The fault may not be in the socio-political conditions but with himself. “If you give him money, he will perhaps buy more rags with it.”³⁹

The only meaningful improvement is individual improvement, which is really the only prerequisite of social and political improvement. As Leo Stroller says, for Thoreau, “the only way to begin changing society was to come out of it and revolutionize [oneself].”⁴⁰

The Utopian axiom that it is possible to devise a system of political laws which will control man’s imperfection and ensure a perfect state Thoreau dismisses as wrong-headed. “Laws,” he says, “never made men a whit more just.” In his *Journal*, Thoreau asks:

What does the law protect? My rights? Or any rights. My right, or the right? If I avail myself of it, it may help my sin: it cannot help my virtue... While the law holds fast the thief and murderer for my protection (I should say its own) it lets itself go loose. They may clash. English law may go to war with American law, that is English interest with American interest, but what is expedient for the whole world will be absolute right, and synonymous with the law of God. So the law is only partially right. It is selfish, and consults for the interest of the few.⁴¹

³⁸ N.H. Seefurth, pp. 26–27.

³⁹ *Walden*, pp. 326–329.

⁴⁰ L. Stroller, p. 41.

⁴¹ *Journal*, vol. I, pp. 47, 335; “Civil Disobedience,” p. 111.

The “kernel” of Thoreau’s individualism, points out Drinnon, “was his belief in a natural or higher law.”⁴² Nature, Thoreau says, is stronger than law, and so is, more important, obedience to conscience than obedience to law. “It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right,” he insists. In *Journal*, he claims that “he who lives according to the highest law is in one sense lawless, for man is superior to all laws, both of heaven and earth, when he takes his liberty.”⁴³

In his defiance of political authority and in his appeal to conscience and justice, Thoreau, Drinnon argues, represents a long-established view in Western tradition, a view which defies political authority in favor of a moral imperative. “The most dramatic presentation” of this attitude in literature is perhaps to be found, Drinnon says, in *Antigone* by Sophocles:

Like Sophocles’ heroine, Thoreau made quite clear his rejection of the Periclean argument of Creon that the highest responsibility of the individual must be to the state and his rejection of the later Platonic assumption of a pleasing harmony between the laws of man and the laws of the gods.⁴⁴

Lastly, Thoreau rejects Utopians because of their preoccupation with the future rather than with the present. For Thoreau, the present, passing moment is a miracle to contemplate because life is a miracle and reality is “fabulous.” The present, even if unsatisfactory, state of things in general is still better than future Utopias because it is real. It is foolish to disregard the reality of the present time for the putative glory of the future. And it is foolish to exchange the miracle of the life here and now for the phantasm of future or past perfection. “A living dog,” Thoreau says in the conclusion of *Walden*, “is better than a dead lion.” Criticizing J.A. Etzler’s Utopia, *The Paradise Within Reach of All Men*, Thoreau points out that Etzler’s “schemes require time, men, and money, three very superfluous and inconvenient things for an honest and well-disposed man to deal with.” Even “ten years” which Etzler requires for his Utopia to be implemented is “a tedious while to wait if every man were at his post and did his duty.”⁴⁵ The fundamental error that Utopians make is that while they promise a paradise in the future they lose irrevocably the opportunity to experience heaven now. “God,” Thoreau says, “culmina-

⁴² R. Drinnon, “Thoreau’s Politics of the Upright Man,” ed. J.H. Hicks, Massachusetts 1966, p. 155.

⁴³ *Journal*, vol. II, p. 171.

⁴⁴ R. Drinnon, p. 154.

⁴⁵ “Paradise (To Be) Regained,” *The Annals of America*, p. 153.

tes in the present moment and will never be more divine in the lapses of all ages.”⁴⁶

Perhaps this is, all things considered, the final fault with our civilization, according to Thoreau. Like Utopians we prefer to dream about future happiness rather than try actually to experience it now. With our obsession to improve only the material, external aspect of life, we have also become obsessed with the future and have lost the ability to be satisfied with the “gift of life.” “There is nowhere recorded, Thoreau says, “a simple and irrepressible satisfaction with the gift life.”⁴⁷

It is the Arcadians like Jefferson and Thoreau who believed America could become a country in which human beings, redefining their relation to Nature, would live simply yet freely and happily. If the politics of freedom of these two outstanding American Arcadians can now be facetiously criticized as naive, it is not because they were naive but because their vision of life was broader than that of those of us who scurry about in the pursuit of the future, secure in our knowledge that we know better than to indulge in Arcadian reverie.

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⁴⁶ *Walden*, p. 349.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 332.