

## THOREAU IN/AND “THOREAU”: GENIUS OF LIFE, ART, AND HIGHER LAWS

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### Abstract

“Mr. Thoreau dedicated his genius with such entire love to the fields, hills, and waters of his native town, that he made them known and interesting to all reading Americans, and to people over the sea.” Such is Emerson’s perspective of the eulogy “Thoreau” through which Thoreau’s genius emerges. Emerson insists on the word “genius”, implying by it “an extraordinary gift” (scientific included), and, at the same time, in resonance with the Transcendentalist worldview and ideas, alluding to the word’s etymological meaning of “spirit”. Thoreau was “enamored with spiritual beauty”, he knew “the worth of the Imagination for the uplifting and consolation of human life” and so transformed “every thought into a symbol”, he was a “genius”, who “saw as with microscope, heard as with ear-trumpet” and “from the single fact” could swiftly infer “universal law”. This article deals with Emerson’s “Thoreau”, pointing that for Emerson Thoreau’s spiritual, poetic, perceptual and personal greatness was truly and uniquely commensurate with those great American, and universally human, horizons which lay open before his own eyes.

**Key words:** America, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, New England, Transcendentalism, Emerson, Thoreau, philosophy, literature, intellectual independence, Protestantism, cultural traditions

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“He was a protestant *a-outrance*,” Emerson says in his eulogy for Thoreau. Few lives contain so many renunciations. He was bred to no profession; he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the State; he ate no flesh, he drank no wine, he never knew the use of tobacco; and, though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun. He chose, wisely, no doubt, for himself, to be bachelor of thought and Nature.<sup>1</sup>

Emerson’s eulogy, later published as an essay under the title “Thoreau,” is generally considered by American literary scholars the best piece of writing on Thoreau.<sup>2</sup> Also, it has certainly been the most influential in the reader reception of Thoreau. Precisely Emerson’s views set the terms of Thoreau’s entry, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the literary and cultural canon: he was seen as the odd genius, the eccentric “bachelor of thought and Nature.”

Thus, the most widely read among Thoreau’s works at that time was a small selection of his thoughts on nature, published by Riverside Press, with Emerson’s essay “Thoreau” in place of an introduction. When the publication of Thoreau’s collected works in twenty volumes was being prepared, a literary event today often seen as marking his definitive recognition within the literary canon, the Boston publishers promoted the series by offering a free booklet with Emerson’s essay to everyone who wished to learn more about Thoreau before deciding whether to buy his works.<sup>3</sup> Evidently, for a long time Thoreau was read through the lens of Emerson, i.e. he was identified with the image Emerson created of him, or, in the very least, he was invariably perceived in relation to Emerson. But who was really Emerson’s Thoreau? In what way did Emerson’s patronage continue after Thoreau’s death – who is Thoreau of the essay?

The eulogy / essay is a testimony to Emerson’s complexly nuanced, and ambiguous attitude towards Thoreau. Emerson himself is strongly present in the text, both as an established, mature thinker, and as an old friend who shared many moments with Thoreau. As usual with Emerson, the first, “representative” persona dominates the essay; but the reason for this can be found not simply in Emerson’s characteristic intellectual disposition, but above all in the representative, public genre of the eulogy

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*, ed. Robert D. Richardson, Jr., New York-Toronto-London-Sydney-Auckland: Bantam Books, 1990, pp.342-343.

<sup>2</sup> See Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Emerson: The mind on Fire*, Berkeley: U of California Press, 1995, p. 548.

itself, whose function, as Emerson saw it, was to open the eyes of the "country [which] knows not yet, or in the least part, how great a son it has lost".<sup>4</sup> Emerson subdues the expression of human sorrow for the untimely loss of Thoreau, fourteen years younger than him, barely mentioning the heavy "injury" or the "indignity" an end to a life still in its prime, emphasizing, instead, the consolation found in timeless values: "wherever there is knowledge, wherever there is virtue, wherever there is beauty, he [Thoreau] will find a home".<sup>5</sup>

In fact, *Emerson portrays Thoreau through Emerson*, i.e. inflects his personal observations of Thoreau and interprets his texts through the prism of his own theoretical constructs, already well-known and influential at the time. Thus he builds an image of Thoreau – an image of admiration and respect, but also the object of certain reservations. Of course, Emerson's declared attitude was to an extent inevitable; in the eulogy, however, it seems to be *deliberately underlined*: the paternalist authority of the older, more mature and settled man can be felt in every sentence. Whether his judgment is entirely positive or partially reproachful, Emerson consistently maintains *the distance* determined by the difference in age and social recognition. His admiration does not turn into veneration: remaining, instead, within the bounds of authoritative approval, while his remarks sound closer to reprimands than to criticisms directed to an equal. In other words, Emerson continued to treat Thoreau as a young man, "a youth," as he calls him at the beginning of the eulogy, the way he had always treated him while alive, demonstrating the attitude which to a great extent caused the cooling of their friendship around 1850.

In accordance with the well-established method of the Transcendentalists, the larger part of "Thoreau" consists of extracts taken from Emerson's Journal covering the years of closer relations between the two men. The text of the eulogy, then, was not composed spontaneously under the pressing grief for a friend who was gone, but presented an image of Thoreau which had taken shape gradually over the years. This fact may explain Emerson's *distance* from the image, which embodied his year-long patronizing attitude towards the much younger Thoreau, and account for the supra-

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<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Buell, *Emerson*, Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, p.298.

<sup>4</sup> Emerson, *Selected Essays*, p. 359.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

emotional tone, rather atypical in an eulogy (perhaps also serving to hide the unavoidable pain Emerson must have felt in that difficult moment). That Emerson had a *text ready*, which he simply revised into an eulogy on the occasion of Thoreau's death, may seem at first sight contradictory, even somewhat unnatural compared to custom, but it was not unusual considering the Transcendentalist practice of daily journal-writing. Instead of attempting to transcend grief, *Emerson's text, in fact, precedes grief; it therefore presents – not the portrait of someone dead – but the image of someone full of life*. And although it may also seem paradoxical at first sight, it is precisely Emerson's *emotional neutrality* which in a particularly persuasive manner succeeds in immortalizing Thoreau beyond death. His attitude towards this image of a Thoreau brimming with life remained unchanged with the years; in life as in death, Emerson's was the patronizing distance towards a youth "of the fairest promise," to borrow his phrase from "The American Scholar." Emerson took the position of the "representative I," the high viewpoint from which he could see Thoreau through Emerson, and see him both as a genius and an oddity. Thanks to this elevated point of view Emerson's pronouncements on Thoreau sound with the authority of ultimate truths, of unquestionable judgments, beyond which it would be inappropriate to venture a differing opinion (also one of the main reasons for the powerful influence of the essay).

"He was a born *protestant*": the sentence encapsulates Emerson's perspective in evaluating Thoreau. Everything refers back to this statement, which, far from implying any conventional religious feeling, resounds with the inspired refrain from "Self-Reliance": "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist".<sup>6</sup> In the case of Thoreau, Emerson meant precisely this by "a protestant" – a nonconformist: "He declined to give up his large ambition of knowledge and action for any narrow craft or profession, aiming at a much more comprehensive calling, the art of living well".<sup>7</sup> He considered Thoreau's absolute personal independence to be a virtue which, more than anything else, defined his genius, the genius to be "the man of men," "a speaker of truth," "sincerity itself." Emerson had at this point already appropriated the traditional New England idea of moral self-improvement, redefining it as the development of a uniquely individual artistic nature; he had already created the figure of the Poet, fully devoted to truth bearer of creative energy. In other words, over the years he had erected and

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<sup>6</sup> Emerson, *Selected Essays*, p. 151.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 342.

elaborated his own ethic-aesthetic value system, whose application to the character of Thoreau must have been inevitable. And that is precisely what Emerson's journal entries recording his friendship with Thoreau and later synthesized in his eulogy, testify to. That is why "Thoreau" echoes "The American Scholar" and "The Poet," while the reverence towards truth unambiguously points to "Self-Reliance" and the ideas in "The Over-Soul" and *Nature*. And, most importantly, in Emerson's system of values, nonconformity stood at the very core, as that choice of character which guaranteed truth. "Thoreau" was a protestant, then, in the purest, in the "Puritan" sense of the word, etymologically speaking, as the representation of the high New England Renaissance mindset instilled with the first settlers' creative energy.

No college ever offered him a diploma, or a professor's chair; no academy made him its corresponding secretary, its discoverer, or even its member. Perhaps these learned bodies feared the satire of his presence. Yet so much knowledge of Nature's secret and genius few others possessed, none in a more large and religious synthesis. For not a particle of respect had he to the opinions of any man or body of men, but homage solely to the truth itself... He grew to be revered and admired by his townsmen, who had at first known him only as an oddity... They felt, too, *the superiority of the character* which addressed all men with a native authority.<sup>8</sup>

Emerson sees "the superiority of character" and Thoreau's reverence to truth as correlated, even co-dependent qualities, whose very correlation gives that inviolable inner independence he glorified in "The Poet": "the ideal shall be real to thee".<sup>9</sup> For Emerson, Thoreau had arrived at that ideal individual reality. The radical nature of Thoreau's rejection of all forms of habit and convention was for Emerson the closest possible embodiment of the blissful, limitless freedom which could transform the creative individual into "a liberating God" ("The Poet") – a liberated person bestowing liberty upon others. The sole condition for such freedom was the rejection of all conditions, i.e. the methodical, conscious relinquishment of all kinds of custom, especially those codified in institutions. To maintain such freedom, in turn, implied continuous negation. "Few lives contain so many renunciations," Emerson rightly observes.<sup>10</sup> So within the framework of Emerson's ideal abstraction, Thoreau's nonconformity – his Protestantism – represented the highest of values.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 352-3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

Whilst he used in his writings a certain petulance of remark in reference to churches or churchmen, he was a person of a rare, tender, and absolute religion, a person incapable of any profanation, by act or by thought.... Thoreau was sincerity itself, and might fortify the convictions of prophets in the ethical laws by his holy living.... He thought that without religion or devotion of some kind nothing great was ever accomplished.<sup>11</sup>

Emerson's observations here, although filled with profound admiration, surpass the purely human feelings of respect, alluding, instead, to the idealized greatness of first settlers' Puritanism. Emerson sees in Thoreau the rebirth of ancestral spirituality, of that high, "purified," extreme form of Protestantism, free from institutional constraint and professing unmediated communion with God, which predetermined the creation of the New World. That is precisely why Thoreau is a man of "absolute religion." Emerson's overall evaluation of Thoreau's Protestantism here draws most heavily on the etymological and historical premises of New England Puritanism. For Emerson, Thoreau is a man with a spiritual mission; his mission, moreover, apart from being a testimony to his greatness, is the mission of a successor – and the sense of belonging to the great forefathers' tradition constituted the core of American identity, as Emerson always affirmed. Himself one of the most remarkable authors within New England "mythical mode of cultural continuity,"<sup>12</sup> Emerson incorporated Thoreau in it. Thus, Thoreau's devoted, pure and holy life, along with his personal achievement, is presented, in Emerson's eulogy, as one more prophecy fulfilled. Thoreau's absolute religion contains the high nonconformity of his forefathers – their liberated spirituality, charged with creative energy, whose renaissance, Emerson believed, would bring the awareness of America's uniqueness. "Thoreau" was "a born protestant," because he was the proud heir of the New England Puritan Pilgrims, Emerson claims.

Thus, Emerson believed that "no truer American existed than Thoreau" – not because Thoreau represented a beginning in any sense free from history, but, on the contrary, because he was the sublime emanation of an equally sublime beginning of all beginnings. Whereas "The American Scholar" may invite questions as to how American Emerson's scholar really was,<sup>13</sup> "Thoreau" admits no such doubts. In Emerson's eyes, Thoreau is an absolute American, just as he is a man of absolute religion. The two, in fact,

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 355-6.

<sup>12</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, New Haven and London: Yale U Press, 1975, p.143.

<sup>13</sup> See Buell, *Emerson*, pp. 43-58.

coincide since Thoreau's American self-creed is presented by Emerson as a religious absolute.

"His preference of his country and condition was genuine," Emerson asserts<sup>14</sup> and, unsurprisingly, attributes to Thoreau's Puritan nonconformity another traditional New England characteristic – the tendency to draw comparisons between the two sides of the Atlantic:

His aversion from English and European manners and tastes almost reached contempt. ... The men were all imitating each other, and on a small mould. Why can they not live as far apart as possible, and each be man by himself?<sup>15</sup>

This last question may be taken as a paraphrase from Thoreau's essay on Carlyle or from "Walking"; but it also sounds similar to what Emerson himself had written in "The Poet," "Self-Reliance" and *Nature...* Both Thoreau and Emerson believed that America's identity would come to its own not only when it successfully distinguished itself from, but when it directly opposed itself to, everything European, and most importantly, in becoming aware in the process of its own advantages. (The complex manner in which the thought and the writing of these two great American authors were affected by transatlantic influences is a vast subject in its own right.) Emerson willingly adds another (self-)quotation from Thoreau:

In every part of Great Britain,' he [Thoreau] wrote in his diary, 'are discovered traces of the Romans... But New England, at least, is not based on any Roman ruins. We have not to lay the foundations of our houses on the ashes of a former civilization.'<sup>16</sup>

This is the only passage in which Emerson erases his carefully observed distance from the image of Thoreau in the eulogy. Having himself written against all European "courtly muses" and "retrospections," appealing, instead, for the perspectives opened up by America, Emerson presents Thoreau as a co-thinker of *equal*, even superior, standing, as the "true American." Rather than evaluate him, then, from a higher position, he places both Thoreau and himself as two equals within the great community of the *American* "Over-Soul." And perhaps precisely when emphasizing the need for constructing America's cultural identity in their unique New England Renaissance and Romantic-pathetic manner, Emerson and Thoreau can be said to have truly "walked" together.

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<sup>14</sup> Emerson, *Selected Essays*, p. 346.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

“It was a pleasure and a privilege to walk with him,” Emerson observes with admiration. “He knew the country like a fox or a bird, and passed through it as freely by paths of his own.... One must submit abjectly to such a guide, and the reward was great.”<sup>17</sup> For Emerson, the importance of walking, the absolute devotion to America’s nature constituted one of Thoreau’s greatest virtues – it embodied the sublime purified spirit of what was truly American, and before this spirit Emerson submitted abjectly, but also with limitless respect.

There was nothing so important to him as his walk.... Mr. Thoreau dedicated his genius with such entire love to the fields, hills, and waters of his native town, that he made them known and interesting to all reading Americans, and to people over the sea.<sup>18</sup>

In a very Jeffersonian gesture, Emerson measures Thoreau’s greatness in terms of the service he had rendered to his country. Thoreau’s thought, his character, talent and spirit helped America become aware of its own value, by distinguishing it necessarily, and so emphatically and continuously, from its counterparts across the Atlantic. His service to the country, therefore, which Emerson underlines respectfully, is another virtue in Thoreau’s walking – or in walking with Thoreau – among America’s Nature.

He resumed his endless walks and miscellaneous studies, making every day some new acquaintance with Nature... His interest in the flower or the bird lay very deep in his mind, was connected with Nature, — and the meaning of Nature was never attempted to be defined by him. He would not offer a memoir of his observations to the Natural History Society.<sup>19</sup>

Emerson quickly regains the perspective of distance, which he had relinquished for a moment, and focuses on Thoreau’s absolute nonconformity – his independence from any institutions, his inborn Protestantism which so perfectly aligns with Emerson’s own idea of “Self-Reliance.” But there is something else here which itself imposes the distanced point of view. When he broaches the topic of Thoreau’s relationship with Nature, Emerson inevitably becomes more acutely aware of Thoreau’s otherness, i.e. his intense perception and sensitivity. The knowledge of their disparity in perceptual ability, at the source of Emerson’s earlier admission on the “sleepy generality” of his thought, naturally fixes Emerson’s viewing position across the

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 351.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 349.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 342-352.

distance once and for all chosen by him, predetermining, at the same time, no less naturally, his radical characterization of Thoreau (in contrast to himself, but also to everything else) as someone at the other end of the spectrum:

His power of observation seemed to indicate *additional senses*. He saw as with microscope, heard as with ear-trumpet, and his memory was a photographic register of all he saw and heard.<sup>20</sup>

Emerson's admiration for Thoreau's extraordinary gift was no doubt sincere, as it must have been throughout the years of their acquaintance: this is the "abject" admiration for what Emerson wished to possess himself, for what, in *Nature*, and in general, he wished were more than "the distant line of the horizon".<sup>21</sup> Thoreau's sensuous intimacy with nature, his "organic," as Emerson qualified it, bond with nature augmented (in a markedly personal manner) the initially defined perspectival distance of Emerson's "representative I"; as a result, the additional distance begins to imply the danger of real proximity (becoming somewhat personal) and Emerson hurries to overcome the danger, "pulling" the image of Thoreau back into the range of his chosen point of view. "And yet," he expressly points out, "none knew better than he [Thoreau] that it is not the fact that imports, but the impression or effect of the fact on your mind."<sup>22</sup> Thus Emerson arrives at probably the best known and most often quoted among his observations about Thoreau: "I know not any genius who so swiftly inferred universal law from the single fact".<sup>23</sup>

This is Emerson's "Emersonian" perspective of the eulogy through which, in all its greatness, emerges Thoreau's genius. Emerson insists on the word "genius," implying by it "an extraordinary gift," but, at the same time, in resonance with the Transcendentalist worldview and ideas, alluding to the word's etymological meaning of "spirit." "Thoreau" was "enamored of spiritual beauty"; he had "the source of poetry in his spiritual perception"; he knew "the worth of the Imagination for the uplifting and consolation of human life" and so transformed "every thought into a symbol"; "his presence was poetic" because he thought the fact "of no value, but only the impression"; he had that "wisdom in him... which showed him the material world as a means and

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

symbol”<sup>24</sup>... These phrases clearly contain echoes from *Nature* and “The American Scholar,” from “The Poet” and “Self-Reliance,” “The Over-Soul” and “Representative Men” – all works composed in the course of time along with (and on the basis of) his journal, whose entries included his thoughts on Thoreau... During their years-long acquaintance, Emerson valued Thoreau most highly, finding in him – in his character, his thought, his behavior – the correlation of his own ideas in their continuous metamorphosis and elaboration. Thus, Emerson must have felt particular satisfaction in his relationship with Thoreau, precisely because of the extraordinary sense of adequacy which his younger friend provided – a sense of adequacy, of parity, of “*correspondence*” and not of blind imitation, or of any kind of Emersonianism. The proof of this lies in the very text of “Thoreau”: compiled from journal notes recorded over the years, reflecting observations and judgments solidified by the repeated test of time, the essay resounds with the frequent chords of Emerson’s thought but in no way presents Thoreau as a simple echo of its music. Emerson’s respect for Thoreau’s self-reliance was too strong for any such suggestion. Self-reliance was what he valued most in Thoreau, where he found Thoreau’s unique quality of character and thought. And precisely because of his self-reliance, Thoreau was – not a follower – but a “genius” in Emerson’s eyes – a genius “walking” with whom was a blessing and a spiritual pleasure. Emerson’s great respect for nonconformity also played a part here: to see Thoreau as an Emersonian would have meant to see him as a conformist, something inadmissible for both of them. So in maintaining his distance, Emerson took the higher position of authority and paternal condescension towards someone younger than him, but never implied any impersonalizing characterization of Thoreau as a follower. The uniqueness of the individual was of supreme value for Emerson and it would have been against his beliefs to belittle either his own individuality, or that of Thoreau, through such “proximity” in roles.

“I look in vain for the poet whom I describe,” Emerson had written years earlier,<sup>25</sup> and the essay “Thoreau” carries the force of this statement from “The Poet.” Yet, the admission is not as sorrowful as it may appear at first sight: discernible in its background is the sweet consoling murmur of the idea that the poet described shall never leave the pure sphere of the ideal. (Later Emerson would note in his Journal that

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

he had “no school and no follower,” feeling this “a boast rather than a lack”.<sup>26</sup> The pride in communicating this “boast” aside, the journal entry unambiguously testifies to Emerson’s independence of mind, which is so vivid and so solidly conceptualized that the independence of others is considered not only with due respect, but as a confirmation of his own.) The same idea is found in “Thoreau”: Emerson portrays a figure whose worthiest quality is absolute and radical independence – i.e. the fact of being “protestant *an outrance*.” And “a born protestant,” whose life was full of “renunciations,” could not become a disciple; he could become, however, a co-thinker, a soul-mate, a “correspondent.” This is, indeed, how Emerson approaches Thoreau in the essay, through “independent” correspondences in the course of a joint spiritual “walking”. In “Thoreau,” Emerson is not “looking in vain” (since there is no abstract description whose original model never existed in reality). “Thoreau” is neither “The Poet” nor “The American Scholar,” but for Emerson, Thoreau’s spiritual, poetic, personal greatness was commensurate with those great American, and universally human, horizons which lay open before his own gaze. That was why “Thoreau” was “a genius,” and “no truer American existed.”

But “Thoreau” is also an oddity, an eccentric, the incorrigible “bachelor of thought and Nature” whose form of behavior invariably – in everything – consisted in stubborn opposition.

There was something military in his nature not to be subdued... as if he did not feel himself except in opposition.... It seemed as if his first instinct on hearing a proposition was to controvert it.<sup>27</sup>

Emerson is clearly critical of this aspect of Thoreau’s “inborn Protestantism” – to such a degree, in fact, that he does not consider it necessary to revise the old journal entry before including it in the eulogy. “This habit, of course, is a little chilling to the social affections,” he adds (on a clearly personal note), seemingly sharing the judgment he then cites: ““I love Henry,” said one of his friends,” Emerson quotes, ““but I cannot like him”.”<sup>28</sup> Thoreau’s continuous opposition was, in Emerson’s view, a sign of immaturity, which, more than the fourteen years difference in age, motivated his patronizing and often reproachful attitude towards the “youth” Thoreau. The stately,

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<sup>26</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 16 vols., eds William H. Gilman *at al.*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960-1982, XIV, p. 258.

<sup>27</sup> Emerson, *Selected Essays*, p. 344.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

mature Emerson, known for his serenity and calm, must have felt certain tension in the presence of Thoreau's unquenchable need to controvert and procure himself "a little sense of victory".<sup>29</sup> Despite all his admiration for Thoreau's genius, Emerson could not but qualify this habit as "extreme" (infantile) behavior which "mars the conversation," chills the affections, partakes somewhat too much of the "bachelor" for the taste of the settled family man Emerson. He would have no doubt liked Thoreau better if Thoreau had been less eccentric, more temperate, and respectively – more independent in his behavior. (It is worth noting here that while Emerson was complaining in his Journal of Thoreau's "stubborn and implacable" behavior,<sup>30</sup> i.e. his continuous opposition for the sake of opposition, Thoreau, in his turn, noted with indignation in his Journal:

[Emerson] offered me friendship on such terms that I could not accept it without a sense of degradation. He would not meet me on equal terms, but only be to some extent my patron... We grieve that we do not love each other.<sup>31</sup>

The cooling of their friendship obviously permeated the journal entries which were ultimately included in "Thoreau." But the reasons for this loss of affection are evident too: Thoreau saw his relationship with Emerson as imposed mentorship against which, naturally, he rebelled; Emerson saw in his relationship with Thoreau the immature rebelliousness which, naturally, provoked the mentor in him. Their mutual observations of each other are confirmed by the written record left by people close to both. More importantly, though, both in Emerson and in Thoreau transpires the same desire – the (unfulfilled) desire for friendship on equal terms.) In "Thoreau," however, the eulogy which was a public speech, becoming subsequently a published essay, Emerson would not linger on the ephemeral aspects of their personal relationship. His "representative I" swiftly moves to timeless values, accounting for the absence of "a healthy sufficiency of human society" in Thoreau with "the *severity* of his ideal"<sup>32</sup>– or, in other words, with Thoreau's absolute nonconformity, his religious reverence of truth, the greatness of his "inborn Protestantism." Thus, Emerson presents Thoreau's eccentricity, his intellectual "bachelorship," as the positive expression of "higher laws." He goes perhaps even further, as Lawrence Buell insightfully suggests: the moral rigor

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Emerson, *The Journals*, 183.

<sup>31</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, eds Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, 14 vols, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906, VIII, 199.

<sup>32</sup> Emerson, *Selected Essays*, p. 356.

of Thoreau's behavior, which Emerson could witness with his own eyes, made salient the absence of such uncompromising wholeness of person in himself, so Emerson idealized the socially inadapted Thoreau as a desired alter ego.<sup>33</sup>

Precisely Thoreau's personal and creative wholeness, vindicated, in every aspect of his behavior and spirituality, as the fruitful blessing of independence, elicited Emerson's greatest respect; since, for Emerson, it embodied the creed of supreme individualism, but, as mentioned earlier, it presented also the sublime rebirth of the Pilgrim Fathers' spirit of enterprise. Therefore, Emerson's most serious criticism of Thoreau concerned the failure to fully accomplish his spiritual and creative mission – understood within the terms of the old New England Puritan (practical) creativity (in this criticism, Emerson expressed perhaps also his disappointment that his greatest hope in Thoreau was cut short by death). At the end of "Thoreau" Emerson says:

Had his genius been only contemplative, he had been fitted to his life, but with his energy and practical ability he seemed born for great enterprise and for command; and I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry party. Pounding beans is good to the end of pounding empires one of these days; but if, at the end of years, it is still only beans!<sup>34</sup>

The allusions to *Walden* (the bean field) and to "Civil Disobedience" (the huckleberry party after being freed from prison) are evident. Emerson's point of view here is extremely superposed: he criticizes the failure to perfect (to accomplish) the ideal from the position of the ideal itself; he patronizingly reproaches Thoreau for his excessive eccentricity, ultimately leaving us with the "representative" imperative of the New England idealist Emerson. His positive judgment, however, is given once and for all: Thoreau, the man independent to the extent of being odd, remains for Emerson the truly admired "truest American."

Emerson's "Thoreau," a figure depicted from a very particular perspective in the essay, inevitably poses the question of the "real" Thoreau. Was he an Emersonian – or, on the contrary, an anti-Emersonian? Both conjectures have their critical history and are supported by considerable evidence: the former was favored at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Emersonian idealism was popular in America and the continuity between

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<sup>33</sup> See Buell, *Emerson*, pp. 301-307.

<sup>34</sup> Emerson, *Selected Essays*, p. 357.

generations was accepted as traditionally unproblematic (precisely then, as mentioned previously, began the reader-reception biography of Thoreau); the latter reflects a more modern mindset which sees the controversy between “moderns and ancients,” the rebellion against, and opposition to, one’s predecessors, as obligatory. Yet both of these otherwise conflicting interpretations are limited in their one-sidedness, whereas, as many facts bear witness, Emerson and Thoreau exerted reciprocal influence on each other.<sup>35</sup> In fact, although having traditionally invited univocal readings, the essay “Thoreau” attests exactly to the reciprocity between the two thinkers – to Emerson’s fruitful spiritual “correspondence” with (the younger) Henry David Thoreau. Hence, the final lines of the eulogy suggest the pathos of gratitude, transforming the essay into *the apotheosis of immortality*: Emerson relates the thought of his friend Thoreau with the Edelweiss, translating, in his illumination, its symbolic meaning as “noble purity,” “everlasting life” ...

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<sup>35</sup> See Buell, *Emerson*, pp. 300-305.