



March 1976

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### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 12, no.1, March 1976, p.5-13

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## “A Frugal Splendour”: Thoreau and James and the Principles of Economy

by ELSA NETTELS

AT FIRST glance, no other American writers of the nineteenth century present a sharper contrast than do Henry David Thoreau and Henry James. In resolving in his *Journal* upon “withdrawing into the garret, and associating with spiders and mice,”<sup>1</sup> Thoreau appears to be at the opposite pole from James, who in his autobiography recalled his childish fascination with figures on the “exhibition-stage” of a hotel piazza, “as if I had become positively conscious that the social scene so peopled would pretty well always say more to me than anything else.”<sup>2</sup> The very completeness of the contrast, however, makes certain likenesses between Thoreau and James all the more striking. Thoreau turned to the woods and mountains of New England, James to the complexities of European society, but both wanted essentially the same thing from their chosen worlds—the subject on which they could expend their rare powers of observation and analysis. Different as are the worlds they observed, their central concern is the same—to dramatize the growth of the powers of intellect and feeling which yield, in James’s words, “the very treasure itself of consciousness.”<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the most easily marked bond between Thoreau and James is the central importance which each writer’s conception of economy assumes in his work. Thoreau, in his *Journal* and in *Walden*, and James in the prefaces and other critical essays, develop their conceptions of economy as basic principles in terms of which they define what they most value in life and art. Evident in their works is their enduring interest in economic conditions, in the meaning of money and the effects of wealth and poverty upon people’s minds and lives. Their first concern, however, is not with economic systems or social conditions in themselves but rather with activities and achievements that appear to be divorced from the nation’s economic life and yet cannot be fully understood unless seen in relation to that life. For this reason, both James and Thoreau frequently draw upon the worlds of commerce and finance

1. *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, 14 vols. (New York, 1962), I, 132-133. Hereafter designated J, volume and page numbers given in parentheses in the text.

2. *Henry James: Autobiography*, ed. F. W. Dupee (New York, 1956), p. 20.

3. “Is There a Life After Death?” in F. O. Matthiessen, *The James Family* (New York, 1947), p. 610.

for metaphors to define the processes and the rewards of the kind of economy which they, as artists, practice. Comparison of these definitions shows that in setting forth their concepts of economy both writers express a paradox: through the application of the principles of economy, suggestive of thrift and frugality, the writer lives most intensely and achieves the fullest expression of his experience in the work of art. In affirming this central tenet, James and Thoreau also express views of the creative process in which important differences as well as likenesses are evident.

Thoreau's concept of economy, with which James's ideas will be compared, is defined most explicitly in his *Journal* and in the first chapter of *Walden*, "Economy," his fullest development of the idea. In these works, several points emerge clearly. Fundamental is the distinction Thoreau consistently makes between material wealth and spiritual wealth; between commerce, trade, and the professions for which one receives money, and the life of the intellect and spirit, which is not to be valued in cash terms. What gives this distinction its characteristic edge is the unqualified vigor of Thoreau's refusal to devote himself to business and trade, which he condemned as a "negation of life" (J, IV, 162). When Thoreau confronted what he judged the most important question of his life, how he should get his living, his answer, given through the fable of the Indian basket seller in *Walden*, was not to make one's spiritual life a source of pecuniary profit but to live so simply that one need not exploit one's spiritual resources for gain. Thus, economy, in its simplest form, manifests itself, as in *Walden*, in the provision of the necessities of life as cheaply as possible.

This kind of economy is not of course an end in itself, although the feat of building his house for only \$28.12 ½ afforded Thoreau considerable satisfaction. Economy, in its broadest application, means not simply thrift and denial but abstinence for the sake of a greater abundance. The ultimate purpose of "living economically" is not to save but to gain: through the practice of economy one enters upon a richer life. Not only are material goods, money, and land not what is most valuable; such things are a drag upon the spirit; they consume one's energies and time and so actually deprive one of the highest good. Thus arises the central paradox of Thoreau's thought, expressed repeatedly in the *Journal* and developed as the thesis of "Economy." In proportion as one's material possessions increase is one impoverished; in proportion as one frees oneself from the encumbrances of material wealth is one truly rich. "I find it invariably true, the poorer I am, the richer I am" (J, IX, 160). Thus, the unenlightened townspeople in *Walden*, possessed by their possessions, become the "tools of their tools," and the slaves of their servants.<sup>4</sup>

4. *Walden in The Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston and New York, 1906), II, 41. Hereafter designated W, page numbers given in parentheses in the text.

Throughout *Walden* and the *Journal*, Thoreau enforces the paradox by drawing from the world of business and trade the terms by which he defines the values of a life such as he lived at Walden. He exploits the different meanings of words common in a capitalistic economy when he considers the "real values" in which he "speculates" (J, XIV, 283); defines the flaws in his character as a "mortgage on my inheritance" (J, I, 177); recognizes that "our whole life is taxed for the least thing well done" (J, I, 226); and longs to pay "dividends to society out of that deposited capital" in himself (J, I, 351). His characteristic method is to compress in a pun the analogy between the two worlds of commerce and the spirit and then develop the comparison in an elaborate conceit. Thus he chooses to deposit his funds not in the merchants' banks but in country sand-banks which give one the best "security" for "capital invested" and never fail, "run upon them as much as you please" (J, X, 92-93). Most memorable is the extended passage near the beginning of *Walden* in which Thoreau describes his going to Walden as a business venture undertaken "without the usual capital" (W, 23) and then proceeds on the double track opened by his pun on "trade . . . with the Celestial Empire" to define his enterprise in terms of the manifold demands upon the merchant who undertakes alone all the activities of his business.

In celebrating chastity and self-discipline, in inveighing against luxury, waste, and the greedy struggle for material wealth, Thoreau clearly perpetuates that strain of asceticism so marked in Puritan writings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But in his insistence upon the incompatibility of worldly success and spiritual good, he places himself in opposition to such writers as Richard Baxter, John Cotton, and Samuel Willard, whose views on the importance of labor in one's calling and on the relation between religious and worldly duties formed an important element in English and New England Puritanism. When Thoreau insists that "the ways by which you may get money all lead downward" (J, V, 257), that "trade curses everything it handles" (J, II, 319), and that "just in proportion to the outward poverty is the inward wealth" (J, II, 114-115), he rejects the ideas that profits and material possessions of the virtuous can be valued as signs of God's favor and that worldly affairs and spiritual duties may, in Samuel Willard's words, "very suitably join and go hand in hand . . . we may and ought to allot to each their season."<sup>5</sup>

For Thoreau, the evils of materialism were not to be overcome in this way. Instead of seeking to make worldly prosperity the partner of spiritual vigor, he urged men to embrace the economy which would release them from toil and enable them to pursue the calling of their

5. *Walking with God: The Great Duty and Privilege of Christians* (Boston, 1701), p. 46. For other expressions of this idea, see Matthew Henry, *The Communicant's Companion*, 7th edition (Boston, 1716), pp. 63, 85; Richard Baxter, *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, ed. John T. Wildinsson (London, 1962), pp. 146-147.

highest selves. As many readers of *Walden* have observed, Thoreau's frequent references to rituals of purification suggest that for him the life at Walden was sacramental in character. In the act of sloughing off the old, of removing the dross in oneself, man is born to new life. The practice of economy was essentially the purification of the self, but it was purification that resulted not in hermetic denial of the pleasures of sensory experience but in an expanded consciousness, in a heightened awareness of oneself and one's surroundings as one strove "to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life" (W, 101).

It is at this point that the most important resemblances between Thoreau's and James's ideas become evident. No less than Thoreau, James valued the expansion of consciousness and the development of the self as the highest good towards which men could strive. In asserting that the artist's most precious gift is his "active sense of life,"<sup>6</sup> James is at one with Thoreau, who affirmed that the value of life lies in the quality of one's experience. Thoreau's conviction that "it matters not where or how far you travel . . . but how much alive you are" (J, VI, 237) is echoed in James's more discursive statement: "The thing of profit is to *have* your experience—to recognise and understand it, and for this almost any will do; there being surely no absolute ideal about it beyond getting from it all it has to give" (p. 201). Both writers define the artist's powers in terms of saturation and immersion: James's celebration of the artist's "luxurious immersion" (p. 29) in life and his statement to William James that "the great thing is to be *saturated* with something—that is, in one way or another, with life"<sup>7</sup> recalls Thoreau's conviction that one must be "drenched and saturated" with life before one can render truth in words (J, III, 86)—an idea expressed memorably in *Walden* when Thoreau affirms the supreme value of the "perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us" (W, 107-108).

As James in his fiction devoted his best energies to the portrayal of characters whose great desire is to live fully, so in his prefaces he devoted himself to analysis of the methods by which the experience of his characters could be rendered with the greatest depth and richness. In this analysis, James's conception of economy emerges clearly, for economy, "the sovereign principle" (p. 64), is the cornerstone of James's narrative method: "working out economically almost anything is the very life of the art of representation" (p. 224). James's analyses in the prefaces may seem to carry him to matters of technique far removed from Thoreau's concern with the art of life. Essentially, however, the principles of economy serve the same purpose for James as for

6. *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James*, introd. R. P. Blackmur (New York, 1934), p. 340. Hereafter all references to James by page number, in parentheses in the text, are to this work.

7. *The Letters of Henry James*, ed. Percy Lubbock, 2 vols. (London, 1920), I, 144.

Thoreau, as becomes evident when one sees what "economy" enables a novelist to do.

In general terms, economy means for James what it means for Thoreau: the employment of one's resources so that one receives the fullest value from them. More specifically, economy, as defined in the prefaces, is the application of principles which enable the artist to achieve fullness and intensity of expression through selection and compression. According to James, the method which most fully expresses the subject, i.e., which "most economises its value" (pp. 37-38), is the employment of a center of consciousness through which the substance of the novel is conveyed. By using only one center in *The Ambassadors*, James achieved a "splendid particular economy" and so expressed "every grain" of the value of Strether's experience (p. 317). *The Spoils of Poynton* assumed form in James's mind when he saw that the "rule of an exquisite economy" (p. 129) required that the consciousness of a character like Fleda be lodged at the heart of the drama. Like foreshortening, the creation of a center of consciousness enables the novelist to compress into a limited space more life than would otherwise be possible and so to resolve the tension produced by the burgeoning subject in conflict with the restrictions of the form.

Thoreau referred to his economy as a discipline, James to his as a system or method, but for both writers economy was the means by which what is valuable is saved and enhanced. What James said of that "deep-breathing economy," the failure of which results in waste or "life sacrificed" (p. 84), could be applied to the economy Thoreau practiced. What Thoreau claimed for the economy of his life at Walden, that it organized what was before "inorganic and lumpish" and produced a "singular concentration of strength and energy and flavor" (J, IX, 246-247), is exactly what James claimed for the "sublime economy of art" and the "organic form" (p. 84) it produces. James's frequent comparisons of artistic creation to a chemical process of distillation suggest that economy for him, as for Thoreau, both concentrates and purifies. In short, for both writers, economy is a means of creating value, not a denying of what one wants; to practice the art of economy is to increase, not diminish, substance, to make the self and the work richer, not poorer. James's economy is not deprivation: it produces works of art "into which the imagination may cut thick, as into the rich density of wedding-cake" (p. 88); it fills the glass to the brim so that there is not "a hair's breadth of the rim . . . to spare" (p. 87); it adds to contents boiled and reboiled in the cauldron "pounds of salutary sugar, as numerous as those prescribed in the choicest recipe for the thickest jam" (p. 233).

No doubt Thoreau would have objected to such images as savoring of those very luxuries and superfluities that men do best without. Probably he would also have felt as alien to the spirit of his works the

way James uses images from business and finance, which are as frequent in James as in Thoreau. Although both writers celebrate values which cannot be measured in monetary terms, James differs from Thoreau in that his images often associate artistic creation with those acquisitive impulses and destructive effects that Thoreau abjures in *Walden* and elsewhere. Requiring "costly sacrifice," art, in James's view, is predatory; economy, a "principle . . . essentially ravenous . . . appeased with no cheap nor easy nourishment" (p. 318).

Likewise, the artist is insatiable in his appetite for experience. Balzac, the master of novelists, is "all the exploiting agent, the pushing inquirer, the infallible appraiser."<sup>8</sup> Such terms seem to identify the artist with that acquisitive life from which Thoreau wished to escape, as do James's reference to the "living wage" (p. 54) for which the writer works, and his comparison of the writer who struggles to compress his material to the "victim of the income-tax who would minimise his 'return'" (pp. 234-235). Thoreau divorces himself from clerks in shops when he identifies "my correspondent" as "the gods" and describes himself as "clerk in their counting-room" (J, I, 206-207); James makes the accountant his point of reference when he describes the artist's work as requiring of him "as much ciphering, of sorts, as would merit the highest salary paid to a chief accountant" (p. 312). Whereas Thoreau often asserts that the artist's greatest work is his own life, James repeatedly writes of the artist as one who makes his experience "pay" in the sense that he converts it into art: Balzac was preeminent as a writer who had "wast[ed] almost nothing that had ever touched him."<sup>9</sup>

Such statements remind us that James, unlike Thoreau, did seek to live by his art and that he was haunted by a dread of poverty that Thoreau did not share. We remember, too, that in most of James's novels, from *Roderick Hudson* to *The Golden Bowl*, the possession of money enables the central characters to embark on the experiences through which they attain their fullest development, and that the effects of money upon them and the other characters are essential factors in their growth. In any case, Thoreau's paradox that inward wealth is in proportion to outward poverty is absent from James's criticism. Instead, we find the paradox that the art which is "ruinously expensive" produces "the most princely of incomes" (p. 120), that the economy which consumes life ravenously keeps life from being wasted. "Life has no direct sense whatever for the subject and is capable . . . of nothing but splendid waste. Hence the opportunity for the sublime economy of art, which rescues, which saves, and hoards and 'banks,' investing and reinvesting these fruits of toil in wondrous useful 'works' . . ." (p. 120). Again, James's metaphors suggest a closer relation between the two kinds of

8. *Notes on Novelists* (New York, 1914), p. 147.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

economy than Thoreau's analogies do. Thoreau's pun on "banks"—merchants' banks and country sand-banks—separates the two: James's metaphors associate artistic creation with acts of payment and possession.

Comparison of these passages suggests another difference between the two writers: Nature, essential in Thoreau's concept of economy, is not present as an external system or order in James's theory of art. For Thoreau, Nature is an abiding presence, a perpetual alternative to the world of trade. To the "partial and accidental" economy of a capitalistic society (J, VIII, 109), Thoreau opposes the "still undisturbed economy" of Nature,<sup>10</sup> repeatedly marvelling at its never-failing serenity, variety, deliberateness, refinement, and above all, its incredible fecundity and inexhaustible vigor. The economy of Nature, which produces "true wealth" (J, XI, 127) not only sustains man's body and refreshes his spirit; because there is a "perfect analogy" (J, II, 201) between the life of a plant and the life of a human being, Nature's laws can be embraced as laws for man's life; Nature offers to man the models for his art, for "there is a similarity between her operations and man's art" (*Week*, 339); Nature provides an inexhaustible store of imagery from which man draws the symbols of his thought: "whatever we see without is a symbol of something within" (J, II, 201). In countless passages, Thoreau compares the phases of his life to seasons of the year, the growth of his ideas to the budding of plants, the creation of a poem to the ripening of fruit on the vine, the work of art to an organism with muscles and sinews and blood.

Likewise, James frequently employs organic images for his metaphors of the creative process. Repeatedly he compares the idea of a story or a novel to a germ or a seed which takes root in the soil, grows and puts forth leaves and flowers, and thus testifies to "these lurking forces of expansion, these necessities of upspringing in the seed, these beautiful determinations, on the part of the idea entertained, to grow as tall as possible, to push into the light and the air and thickly flower there" (p. 42). Such an analogy implies that the plant in nature and the idea in the artist's mind are governed by the same laws of growth, but James does not develop this idea, which is central in Thoreau's transcendentalist thought. James's metaphors express resemblances, not the correspondence which in Thoreau implies the presence of a divine system or order which governs all organic processes and through which man and nature are related. Whereas Thoreau turned to Nature as "a greater and more perfect art, the art of God" (*Week*, 339), James posited no system of order outside the mind of the artist. In his world there seem to be no banks—sand-banks or otherwise—that are guaranteed not to

10. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, I, 24. Hereafter designated *Week*, page numbers given in parentheses in the text.



fail. Instead of the never-failing economy of Nature, there is, outside the artist's mind, only life "capable of . . . nothing but splendid waste."

The implication of James's statement is clear. If order is to exist, it must be created by the artist. Although the work of art is a "living organism" Nature does not provide the model for the organic form of art, nor is economy in art achieved by a process of spontaneous growth. In James's prefaces, the words that the adjective *economic* modifies—words such as *mastery*, *device*, *representation*, and *rule*—indicate that economy is the product of the artist's deliberate calculated effort which shapes the expanding subject into organic form that has no necessary counterpart outside itself. James is not less aware than Thoreau of the spontaneous unconscious nature of art, but to a much greater extent than Thoreau he stresses that side of the creative process that involves the conscious artistry of the craftsman. In fact, in the absence of divine economy to inspire and guide the artist, the artist's imagination takes on some of the powers and attributes that made Nature for Thoreau the great artist and the supreme art. As Thoreau marvelled at the inexhaustible fecundity of Nature, so James marvelled at the fertility of the artist's mind which "has only to exhale, in its degree, a fostering tropic air in order to produce complications almost beyond reckoning" (p. 101).

There is no question that for James, in the prefaces, the subject of supreme interest is the mind of the artist, and the powers of most importance to him, those of the artist's imagination. One may make the same statement of Thoreau, even though he never wrote a detailed analysis of his own creative method and in his *Journal* said more about Nature's art than about the art of writing. His praise of Nature as the greatest art should not obscure the fact that his first concern, too, was always human consciousness. Nature was important above all because it "stands there to express some thought or mood of ours" (J, XI, 126). The "highest quality of the plant" was "its relation to man" (J, XIV, 118). No less emphatically than James, Thoreau celebrated the importance of seeing and feeling, affirming that "we are as much as we see" (J, I, 248), but "a man has not seen a thing who has not felt it" (J, XIII, 160). In stating that "the actual objects which one person will see from a particular hilltop are just as different from those which another will see as the persons are different" (J, XI, 285), Thoreau anticipated James's image of the house of fiction from which each of the observers, watching "the same show," receives an impression "distinct from every other" (p. 46).

Thus we are brought back to the essential points of resemblance between Thoreau and James: their abiding interest in the nature of consciousness, their affirmation of the uniqueness of each person's vision of the world, their conception of art as the expression of the character and temperament of the creator, their distrust of preconceived

theories and systems as a basis of judgment, their celebration of seeing and feeling as the primary way to knowledge. What gives these ideas and beliefs, defining elements of European and American Romanticism, their distinctive character is the way they are rooted in conceptions of economy basically alike. Although, at times, Thoreau, in his quest for simplicity, and James, in his quest for lucidity in complexity, seem in their definitions of economy each to seek what the other rejects, the impulses and ideals underlying their conceptions of economy are similar.

Undoubtedly in both writers there is something compensatory in the celebration of the rewards of economy that is based on sacrifice, on the relinquishing of one kind of life or profit to gain another. James's identification of himself as one "in whom contemplation takes so much the place of action"<sup>11</sup> and his repeated assertions that seeing and feeling are a kind of action suggest awareness of exclusion from certain experiences as surely as does Thoreau's insistence that by remaining in Concord he gained the whole world. Given the vigor of the creative energies of the two writers, however, one cannot say that the main-spring of their beliefs and their art is a sense of deprivation. Rather, their ideas of economy reflect their consciousness of possessing extraordinary powers which when cultivated make lives and art of rare value. At this point, both Thoreau and James would modify Emerson's law of compensation that every gain is balanced by loss, that "every advantage has its tax."<sup>12</sup> For Thoreau and James, the payment of the tax which the exercise of economy demands—for Thoreau, the relinquishment of material wealth; for James, the submission to the "torment of expression" (p. 29)—is in itself a source of gratification. Although art, in James's view, demands enormous effort of the artist, his labor is "after all but the last refinement of his privilege" (p. 29). Both Thoreau and James in defining the artist's experience in terms of many activities—hunting, fishing, mining, building, cultivating, navigating, and exploring—suggest that the artist's work is self-sustaining and all-absorbing, that it is rewarding and exacting beyond any other; in Thoreau's words, "No exercise implies more real manhood and vigor than joining thought to thought" (J, X, 405). For both James and Thoreau, it is not the effort to compensate for what one lacks but the effort to compact much life into little space which creates, in James's words, the task "ever dearest to any economic soul desirous to keep renewing, and with a frugal splendour, its ideal of economy" (p. 231).

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11. *Autobiography*, p. 17.

12. "Compensation," *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Journals*, introd. Lewis Mumford (Garden City, N.Y. 1968), p. 126.