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## The Many Paths of Thoreau's Writing: A Response to Buranelli's Critique

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When reading any piece of writing by Henry David Thoreau, it is easy to become lost in the exaggerations, the juxtaposition of opposites, the lengthy imagery, and the bold statements. Because of this aspect of Thoreau's style, many critics have trouble pinning him down under one particular idea. Some believe him to be contradictory and hypocritical, and others, such as Vincent Buranelli, consider him anarchistic, idealistic, radical, and ignorant to the lives of others around him. Buranelli illustrates certain aspects of Thoreau, such as his exaggeration, as negative, while misinterpreting other qualities, such as his call for others to be more independent. I believe that all of these critics who speak negatively of Thoreau are missing the entire point of his life; his primary work is writing, which he considers to be "the work of art nearest to life itself."<sup>1</sup> If we consider this idea in relation to an earlier quote from *Walden*, where Thoreau writes "I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life ... to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms ..." then it becomes clear that Thoreau is living through his writing. He did not necessarily set out to cause a major reform, he set out to record all of his thoughts on the page and let it loose to the world. In that way, he intended for readers to experience his writing as he experienced nature. He wanted it to be multilayered and complicated, yet beautiful. In this essay, I plan to defend Thoreau against Buranelli's argument by examining the background of Thoreau's life for context, by using the thoughts of other scholars on Thoreau's work, and by examining Thoreau's work to reveal his intention behind his writing. In this manner, I will strive to express that Thoreau meant for his writing to wander through a myriad of ideas instead of taking one direct route and thus to portray truth as Thoreau experienced it in nature.

The first point that Buranelli makes is that Thoreau seems unique only in the context of his time period. Buranelli believes that if "our social and political bonds were becoming looser instead of tighter ... there surely [would] be a decisive swing of the pendulum against Thoreau." Buranelli notices this freedom and looseness in the form of Thoreau's exaggeration, which causes his ideas to become radical and should be "considered highly suspect."<sup>2</sup> However, this argument is faulty because it is imperative to consider the time period within

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey S. Cramer, *The Portable Thoreau*, (New York, Penguin Books, 2012), 281.

<sup>2</sup> Vincent Buranelli, "The Case Against Thoreau," *Ethics* 64, no. 4, (1957): 259.

which Thoreau was living while reading his work. Thoreau considered himself a Transcendentalist, and as Robert Sullivan writes in his book *The Thoreau You Don't Know*, “the Transcendentalists in general were thinking critically about society.”<sup>3</sup> Around the time Thoreau was living at Walden Pond, Concord (and the entire country) was coming out of a “severe financial depression.” This caused unemployment to run rampant in towns such as Concord, which Thoreau certainly would have noticed, and “the work that people could get was not necessarily worth it.”<sup>4</sup> This background is what incited many of the thoughts within *Walden*, and it is impossible to critique them as if they had appeared under any other circumstance. Thoreau intended *Walden* to “charge and change the reader, rather than incite a withdrawal from society.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, Thoreau does not call for total freedom and subservience to the natural will — merely an exploration of it. In response to sloth and sin he explicitly states that “[n]ature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome.”<sup>6</sup> He calls for men to work hard at something that is good, instead of merely working hard without purpose.

A distinct part of Thoreau which Buranelli targets is his retreat to Walden Pond. Buranelli argues that, while the journey is admirable, it becomes problematic “when he goes on to set this up as an ideal for everybody.” Besides the fact that Thoreau needs an organized society in order for his experiment to be successful, Buranelli states that if everyone followed Thoreau’s example then the entire prospect of Walden would have been impossible.<sup>7</sup> Contrary to what Buranelli explains, Thoreau did not go to Walden in order to persuade all others to follow in his footsteps. Looking into his biography and his statements within *Walden*, we can see that by going to Walden he was conducting a satirical experiment to comment on society, and that he did not intend for others to follow exactly in his footsteps. Robert Sullivan addresses Thoreau’s plan, calling his journey to Walden a “literary stunt ... an essentially artificial experiment undertaken with an interest in making money on publication or putting forth a not-so-artificial argument.” Through living this way, “he was rejecting the changes that nineteenth-century America presented to him.”<sup>8</sup> But Thoreau did not intend for everyone to leave society to live off in the woods somewhere. First of all, he writes that his text is “particularly addressed to poor students,” and as for his other readers, he hopes that they do not “stretch the seams in putting on the coat.”<sup>9</sup> This statement shows that his ideas are meant to be explored by poor students — those who wish to learn about life and are having

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Sullivan, *The Thoreau You Don't Know*, (New York, HarperCollins, 2009), 41.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 125-127.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>6</sup> Cramer, *The Portable Thoreau*, 378.

<sup>7</sup> Buranelli, *The Case Against Thoreau*, 260.

<sup>8</sup> Sullivan, *The Thoreau You Don't Know*, 144-145.

<sup>9</sup> Cramer, *The Portable Thoreau*, 200.

trouble finding a meaningful place to do this. Perhaps he intends this type of audience to experiment with life as he did, but in their own way. As for any other reader, he worries that they will stretch his ideas too far. The idea of a coat shows that his idea and manner of living may not be fit for everyone. The reason why he aims his writing towards students connects to his reasoning for going to the woods: “to learn what [life has] to teach.”<sup>10</sup> Regarding his seemingly influential nature in recruiting people to his ideas, Thoreau writes: “(l)et every one mind his own business, and endeavor to be what he was made... let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”<sup>11</sup> Thoreau understands that not everyone is able or willing to follow his example. He portrays his own journey in examining life and provides short phrases that could be applied to any life: “live deliberately,” and “simplify.”

For Buranelli, the idea that Thoreau wanted everyone to follow him in retreating to a space like Walden is a main contradiction in Thoreau’s writing and preaching. Following the idea of contradiction, Buranelli comments on this quote, “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” by saying how Thoreau “[paints] all things either black or white ... he never tries for a nice discrimination among partial truths or for an intertwining of apparently incompatible ideas.”<sup>12</sup> Buranelli uses the quote “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” to express that Thoreau believes that either you are desperately following the rules of society, or you are like him and living freely. As always with Thoreau, however, there are many layers to what he writes. “Desperation” has the sense of losing all hope for the future, as well as a great desire for something (he does not define what), but he also equates desperation with resignation. When read in this manner, Thoreau’s message simply becomes that many men live in a way that leads them always reaching for something yet not feeling fulfilled, as well as giving up any hope of change, since “they honestly think there is no choice left.”<sup>13</sup> Thoreau’s plan in the statement is to awaken the readers to the possibilities surrounding them. He wants to inspire them to believe they have the power to change how they live — even if that change is simply a shift in mindset so that they may become more aware of life to find more enjoyment in it.

As for the contradictory nature — Thoreau illustrates many times his beliefs on writing and how that may lead to contradicting ideas. In his journal, he writes

[s]entences which suggest far more than they say, which have an atmosphere about them, which do not merely report an old, but make a new, impression;

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 462.

<sup>12</sup> Buranelli, *The Case Against Thoreau*, 262.

<sup>13</sup> Cramer, *The Portable Thoreau*, 203.

sentences which suggest as many things and are as durable as a Roman aqueduct; to frame these, that is the *art* of writing.<sup>14</sup>

Within this sentence, Thoreau places two opposites next to each other, the old and the new, to illustrate his commitment to examining multiple sides of an idea in his writing, rather than sticking to one direct idea. The image of the Roman aqueduct emphasizes this idea as well. Besides stating that the sentence and the aqueduct should be durable enough to contain the ideas and the water respectively, Thoreau implies that both good sentences and good aqueducts suggest many things. Considering how an aqueduct carries an ever-flowing stream of water, I believe that Thoreau means to say that a well written sentence is able to provide as many different thoughts as a changing current. Thoreau does not want to set forward one idea for his readers to follow, because he does not experience only singular ideas in his thoughts. He expresses this further later in his journal: “[i]t is wise to write on many subjects, to try many themes . . . there are innumerable avenues to a perception of the truth.”<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, he writes: “the more you have thought and written on a given theme, the more you can still write. Thought breeds thought. It grows under your hand.”<sup>16</sup> This juxtaposition demonstrates how vast the truth of life seems to be to Thoreau. The use of the word “avenues” relates to Thoreau’s prospect of walking to observe life and nature and causes the reader to imagine the pathless wood he travels in which truly has an infinite number of routes. The second quote demonstrates that any one of those paths can lead to such a large amount of truth and thought. If Thoreau believes there is one truth to know, then it must be right to him that that one truth is extremely vast, that it is impossible to understand without considering multiple angles. Therefore, in order to portray this to the reader he must write from all possible angles and point of views.

What solidifies this idea of contradiction for Buranelli is how he perceives Thoreau as living and speaking “from high principle and without compromise,” with “remarkably few second thoughts or hesitations,” and “no admission that he was ever wrong.”<sup>17</sup> Yet it is the very exaggerated and bold writing that allows for the consideration of the opposite. As Henry Golemba explains in his book, *Thoreau’s Wild Rhetoric*, doubt arises due to this exaggeration. By speaking from such a style described by Buranelli, Thoreau intentionally invites his reader to debate against him. “The rhetoric of doubt necessitated by exaggeration involved revolutionary implications,” Golemba writes, and “casting doubt upon an issue involved not only epistemological questions but also hierarchical and social

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<sup>14</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal 1837-1861*, (New York, New York Review, 2009), 70.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 602.

<sup>17</sup> Buranelli, *The Case Against Thoreau*, 262.

reconsiderations.”<sup>18</sup> This idea disproves the idea that Thoreau never admitted he was wrong. His high exaggerated style was meant to be provoking in a semi-humorous way while simultaneously bringing on the debate which could allow for Thoreau to be wrong.

Buranelli’s final point against Thoreau is painting him as an anarchist, since if everyone followed their own individual will, society would fall into chaos. Not all men have a strict sense of morals which could lead to their delusion of what is right, and “delusion is a loving parent of atrocious crimes and vices.”<sup>19</sup> By willing all to follow in his example, Thoreau wants an “end to organized, civilized life,” which, according to Buranelli, Thoreau knows would be nearly impossible for those with families and jobs. However, this argument is negated at the start of *Civil Disobedience*, where Thoreau asserts “I ask for, not at once no government, but *at once* a better government.”<sup>20</sup> The only reason Thoreau includes the idea of no government at all is due to his belief about the importance of exaggeration. In his book, Golemba speaks about Thoreau’s rhetoric of exaggeration, saying how “the important point about the rhetoric of exaggeration is its powerful effect on readers ...”<sup>21</sup> Exaggerating a point makes the reader consider it more. It allows for some doubt to come into the mind of the reader regarding the hyperbolic extent, which forces them to think about the idea. At the same time, Thoreau is convinced “[he] cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression.”<sup>22</sup> For Thoreau, facts do not state as much as the experience of a man. In order to express the entire truth of a matter, Thoreau needs to exaggerate to show the reader how it appears in his mind, and to more forcibly move the reader’s mind. His exaggerated claims about government and the self are not meant to completely overthrow the government, but rather to awaken the reader to the issues and to inspire action, however small. In *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau treats the government as a singular entity, yet he addresses individual men. It seems that through this method, Thoreau puts forward the connection between government and individual, saying that only if every man who desires justice were to take action towards justice, then the government would shift: “[m]en generally think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them.”<sup>23</sup> It appears that Thoreau connects “the majority” to the government, where it seems the individual self is the minority trying to persuade. This entire argument shows that Thoreau is not calling for “anarchy,” as Buranelli suggests, but rather he is simultaneously calling for individuals who will step forwards with their desire for

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<sup>18</sup> Golemba, *Thoreau’s Wild Rhetoric*, (New York, New York University Press, 1990), 78.

<sup>19</sup> Buranelli, *The Case Against Thoreau*, 264.

<sup>20</sup> Cramer, *The Portable Thoreau*, 76.

<sup>21</sup> Golemba, *Thoreau’s Wild Rhetoric*, 78.

<sup>22</sup> Cramer, *The Portable Thoreau*, 461.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

justice, and a government that will be more responsive to such action without impeding the individual.

Jonathan Mckenzie responds to Buranelli's argument by explaining what he refers to as Thoreau's idea of political indifference. Thoreau uses the phrase "minding one's own business," which Mckenzie believes to refer to both managing one's economic situation while simultaneously "[promoting] the well-being of the individual, well-being as the individual himself defines it."<sup>24</sup> The argument which Thoreau presents, through Mckenzie's reading, is highly focused on the individual, but it does not reject involvement in government and society. His idea of civil disobedience is "first and foremost, a privatist statement of disdain for the ways in which 'everyday politics' draws the individual's imagination outward from its properly inward focus."<sup>25</sup> For Thoreau, the individual should hold priority over the needs of society, but that does not mean that the needs of society should be disregarded. When it comes to slavery, for example, Thoreau feels personally required to act against the evil he sees. Only once such an external event "[encroaches] upon him personally, [he must] take an interest in it, it must violate the liberal individualism he hopes to take for granted."<sup>26</sup> The existence of the government allows him to mind his own business and to speak up when he feels the need to.

As a final response to the critique of Thoreau, I would like to speak about his intentions when it comes to writing. As many authors realized: "Thoreau wanted to write — he knew it by the time he had graduated,"<sup>27</sup> "what he was doing more than anything else was writing,"<sup>28</sup> "to Thoreau, the most important of all the subjects he taught was writing."<sup>29</sup> From how much time Thoreau spent trying to make a living as a freelance writer in New York, to how much writing he did when he returned to Concord, we can tell that writing was near to life itself for Thoreau. This is clear in his statement of why he went to Walden:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately ... [to] learn what [life] had to teach ... [to] reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world ...

His main purpose, "living deliberately" means that he wants to have a constant consideration of his life, to live without haste and leisurely. However, within the word "deliberately" hide the words "liberate," and *liber* (which is Latin for book). Here we see the example of Thoreau's manifold meanings in his writing.

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<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Mckenzie, "How to Mind Your Own Business: Thoreau on Political Indifference," *The New England Quarterly* 84, no. 3, (2011): 425.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 427.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.

<sup>27</sup> Sullivan, *The Thoreau You Don't Know*, 43.

<sup>28</sup> Golemba, *Thoreau's Wild Rhetoric*, 105.

<sup>29</sup> Mildred P. Hughes, "Thoreau as Writer and Teacher of Writing," *The English Journal* 67, no. 5, (1978): 33.

He wants to live presently, freely, and he wants to write. In this passage we also find a reference to his idea of simplicity, where he says we wants to “reduce [life] to its lowest terms.” This is an active plan, considering “reduce” comes from *reduco* — to lead back. By including the word “terms,” we see another reference to writing, since Thoreau plans to put words to what he discovers. He continues this reference by saying how he wants to “publish its meanness to the world.” This language shows that his primary goal is to put into words what he experiences in a way that allows his readers to experience life in the way he did. Seeing as how Thoreau required walking in nature to write, it only seems natural that his writing would imitate his experience. When we think of his writing to be as complex as nature, “*Walden* is as much a language experiment in a ‘natural style’ as it is a record of ‘Life in the Woods.’ A natural style, like nature itself, speaks in many dictions, in a variety of styles ... Looking into the text of *Walden* fluidly reflects the vision Thoreau experienced when looking into nature.”<sup>30</sup> With this interpretation in mind, there is no reason to believe that Thoreau would want one straight path through his writing. He would want the reader to get sidetracked by many different thoughts, to at one point become engrossed in the simple beauty of the prose, to experience sadness and happiness, and to work his way slowly and meticulously through all of *Walden*.

It is easy for a reader to misinterpret the writings of Thoreau or to try to put him into a specific category, which is a common method when dealing with other authors. Buranelli categorizes Thoreau as anarchistic, contradictory, overly serious, and not in tune with the needs of the common man — and in this belief he fails to approach Thoreau with a mind open enough to understand the complex ideas Thoreau advocates. When it comes to Thoreau, if one were to categorize him and his writings, it would most obviously have to be “wild” and “nature-like.” From the research I have done for this essay, it has become apparent that the three most important aspects of Thoreau’s life to him were his individualism, nature, and his writing — so there is no reason for him to keep these three separated. It is his personal goal to pursue nature and writing, so by living this way he performs as an individual. Then, he only needs to combine nature and writing to be perfectly satisfied in life. As I was reading the end of his journal, I noticed how, even though he knew his health was declining, he was still observing nature and working on his writing, which showed me just how certain Thoreau was that he had found his vocation. Critics like Buranelli do not quite understand that Thoreau primarily wanted to enjoy life through writing, so in his decisions he was having fun — he should not be read as overly serious and imperative. Thoreau sought to address as much of the truth of life as possible and present it to his readers in a beautiful fashion, as if they themselves were wondering the woods of Walden while reading *Walden*.

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<sup>30</sup> Golemba, *Thoreau’s Wild Rhetoric*, 223-226.



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