

Walking Away with Thoreau: The Pleasures and Risks of Exit

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ABSTRACT

Much of the political theory literature on Thoreau is divided, with one camp focusing on resistance and civil disobedience, while the second concentrates on withdrawal. This bifurcation is not borne out in Thoreau's texts, and it can lead to a mischaracterization of Thoreau as an essentially instrumental thinker and an idiosyncratic political actor. In this article I argue against this bifurcation of withdrawal and resistance, maintaining that Thoreau's exit was simultaneously a mode of resistance. His "resistant exit" has double political significance because it was instrumental and expressive. In addition to the change that it can produce in the individual, Thoreau's resistant exit is consequential because the action itself symbolizes opposition.

The political Thoreau most people know is the *paterfamilias* of civil disobedience. Mahatma Gandhi famously thanked America as a nation for producing Thoreau: "You have given me a teacher in Thoreau, who furnished me through his essay the 'Duty of Civil Disobedience' scientific confirmation of what I was doing in South Africa" (Gandhi 1942, 76:358; Hendrick 1956, 372–92; Parel 2009). Striking a similar note, Martin Luther King Jr. recounted becoming "convinced that noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good" after reading Thoreau. "The teachings of Thoreau," he added, "came alive in our civil rights movement; indeed they are more alive than ever before" (King 1998, 14). Orthodox interpretations of Thoreau have cemented this association. As one commentator put it, civil disobedients are "deeply indebted" to Thoreau and "will do well to ponder Thoreau both as a jail-goer and the voice of protest" (Nelson 1962, 56, 60).

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Another has firmly stated, “Thoreau is generally regarded as the most notable American exponent of civil disobedience” (Griswold 1967, 737).

Since the 1990s, a smaller group of scholars have emphasized the theme of individual withdrawal in Thoreau’s work. For this group Thoreau’s exploits outside of society and the public realm are significant because they enable the capacity to think critically about society and politics. In the woodlands of Walden and elsewhere, Thoreau learns to question convention, to combat homogeneity, and to practice the arts of self-cultivation (Bennett 1990, 1994; Walker 1998, 2001; Mariotti 2010). By withdrawing, in other words, Thoreau developed a new sense of self that enabled a sharper, more perceptive understanding of American democracy and its failures.¹

While the literature on Thoreau bifurcates resistance and exit, Thoreau’s texts do the opposite. In his writing Thoreau tends to depict resistance and exit in similar terms, seeing both as methods of challenging forces of injustice and of expressing moral integrity. Indeed, at times Thoreau conjoins resistance and exit, understanding them not only as related but also as united. In “Resistance to Civil Government,” an essay commonly referred to as “Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau depicts the extraction of oneself or one’s funds from the political common as a method of opposition.² Here, resistance takes the form of exit. Thoreau links resistance and exit again when he renarrates the episode of his civil disobedience in *Walden*, reinscribing his resistance within his account of his migration to the woods (Thoreau 1985, 459–60).³ At the end of *Walden*, Thoreau broaches a central question that he knows keenly interests his audience: Why did he go? Why retreat from the comforts of Concord? He answers not by way of rhapsodizing nature as one might expect, but rather by explaining his actions in relation to Mirabeau, a leader of the French Revolution, who should have been obedient “to the laws of his being, which will never be one of opposition to a just government, if he should chance to meet one” (579).

I argue for an interpretation that adheres to Thoreau’s tendency to connect resistance and exit in his texts. For the sake of convenience, I call the intersection of these concepts a “resistant exit.” This phrase implies removing oneself or one’s resources from the public realm with the intent of opposing

1. A third, more militant approach to political change appears in Thoreau’s later writings (Rosenblum 1981, 1996; Zinn 2004).

2. The title of “Resistance to Civil Government” was changed posthumously to “Civil Disobedience.” It is unclear whether Thoreau himself changed the title or his editor did. The term “civil disobedience” does not appear in the text of the piece or in Thoreau’s corpus (Glick 1973). Following Wendell Glick, I refer to the essay by its original title. All quotations from “Resistance” are from Thoreau (2004).

3. All quotations from *Walden* are from Thoreau (1985).

dominant power relations. The removal can be physical—that is, an individual can decide to change physical locations as a kind of resistance—or, the exit can be metaphoric or abstract, consisting of a public disavowal of membership or belonging in order to harm or express opposition to an unjust society. Though it is related to civil disobedience, resistant exit entails a different kind of political action. Rather than violating the law, it involves extracting oneself in some way from the democratic common or from political membership. I use the term “exit” to reference Albert Hirschman’s concept in *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Hirschman 1970). To the best of my knowledge, no one has examined Thoreau’s politics as entailing exit as defined by Hirschman.

An interpretation focused on resistant exit affords two significant insights into Thoreau. First, the current withdrawal literature has understood Thoreau’s extractions as instrumental acts toward one end, self-cultivation, and it has paid scant attention to their significance as symbolic, public acts of opposition. According to this literature, withdrawal enables political change at the level of the individual citizen. By abstracting the self from politics, the individual facilitates a personal transformation that has political implications. I argue in contrast that Thoreau understands his exits in noninstrumental and expressive terms. In addition to describing the instrumental transformative potentials of leaving, Thoreau also conceptualizes exit itself as communicative of dissent. For Thoreau, the exit alone can be a politically significant act, separate from the changes that are wrought in the individual, because leaving can constitute a declaration of profound and fundamental opposition to the injustices of democratic politics. While appreciating its functional uses, Thoreau conceptualizes exit as politically momentous in and of itself, and he longs for a democratic society that is more attentive to expressive, resistant exits from the common.

Second, a focus on resistant exit exposes problems with interpretations of Thoreau that have placed priority on private conscience. Hannah Arendt famously argued that Thoreau’s civil disobedience was motivated by a concern for personal integrity rather than by concern for the political world (Arendt 1972, 60–68). For Arendt, Thoreau violated the law as a means of ordering his own soul. This is an instrumental and individualistic interpretation as well: Thoreau acted in order to achieve an individual end, his personal salvation. A focus on resistant exit, however, exposes the many connections between Thoreau and a community of resistance that was also deeply concerned with how to exit from a morally unjust society: the abolitionists. Like Thoreau, activists in the abolitionist movement were animated by the possibilities of leaving society as a mode of resisting its injustices. Thoreau’s resistant exits were expressive of this connection as well. Not only did they manifest his political opposition to a society based on slavery, but his exits also expressed

his bond with a community of resistance that was dedicated to the abolition of slavery.

The argument proceeds by first analyzing the instrumental-withdrawal interpretations of Thoreau—that is, readings that have emphasized Thoreau’s functionalist agenda of personal transmutation—and by identifying the instrumental and individualist bent of them. The second section turns to Thoreau’s texts, especially *Walden* and “Resistance,” in order to argue that Thoreau not only withdrew to accomplish the goal of self-cultivation but also exited in an expressive and resistant way. The third section argues against Arendt’s interpretation by exposing the textual and historic connections between Thoreau and the abolitionist movement.

INSTRUMENTAL APPROACHES TO THOREAU’S WITHDRAWAL TO WALDEN

In popular imagination Thoreau is often remembered for his departures into nature and for his meditations on the joys of living a life apart. Thoreau most famously withdrew to Walden Pond, where in a handmade hut he conducted a 2-year experiment in living away from the finery and frippery of conventional society. Thoreau also documented his expeditions to the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, to Cape Cod, and to Mount Ktaadn, and many of his writings are replete with the pleasures and risks of extracting oneself from mainstream living in order to go into the wild.

While biocentric environmentalists and ethicists have relished this rich vein of Thoreau’s thought, political theorists have puzzled over it, wondering about the political implications of withdrawal. What was Thoreau attempting to change politically by extracting himself from conventional politics and society? What political benefits did he hope to reap for himself and others through separation and distance? Since the 1990s, three political theorists have made significant contributions in this area: Shannon Mariotti, Jane Bennett, and Brian Walker. Despite their differences, their work marks a pivotal break with a prior emphasis on civil disobedience, and it indicates a significant new stage in Thoreau scholarship. Focusing less on Thoreau’s overtly political writings, Mariotti, Bennett, and Walker have deepened and expanded a theoretical engagement with Thoreau’s nature writings, including *Walden*, “Walking,” “Wild Apples,” and “Huckleberries.” This shift in texts has been accompanied by a shift in analysis, as Mariotti, Bennett, and Walker have established a novel area of focus in Thoreau’s work: the extraction of the self from political society.

Mariotti reads *Walden* and Thoreau’s nature writings as offering a “unique politics of withdrawal” and as demonstrating the value of exit to bolster the capacity to think critically and against convention (Mariotti 2010, xii). Read-

ing Thoreau alongside Adorno, Mariotti sees both theorists as offering a critique of the alienating character of modernity and as distancing themselves from the damaged status quo. In Thoreau's case, physical removal from the machine of modernity allows the individual to grasp negative dialectics—that is, to apprehend and maintain a stance of critical antagonism with the social that is free from a Hegelian desire for a transforming moment of synthesis. As Mariotti sees it, Thoreau's withdrawal affords the possibility of “interacting with others in a non-dominating and non-instrumental way that preserves unity and particularity” (17–18). For Thoreau, “withdrawal is not an end in itself” but rather is valuable because of what it produces: a comprehension of negative dialectics (11). This process has political implications as well because it points to the possibility of a more genuine democracy (21–24). One kind of veracity can, in other words, cascade into greater collective veracity; individual authenticity prompts democratic authenticity.

For Bennett, Thoreau combated the conventionality, familiarity, and homogeneity of political society with “solitude [and] a sustained relationship with Nature, the realm of being that eludes and exceeds human reason” (Bennett 1990, 564; Bennett 1994). Contrary to Hegel, who theorizes the formation of the self as entailing mutual recognition, Thoreau aligns with Rousseau in understanding that an inner core of identity has been befouled by civilization. For Thoreau, the “native” self or “one's authentic self” is achieved by venturing out of civilization and into nature (Bennett 1990, 565; see also Cavell 1981). Thus, Bennett reads “The Bean-Field” in *Walden* as an allegory of self-cultivation, a metaphorical account of withdrawal in which Foucauldian-like technologies of the self are fostered and strengthened through a series of unfettered encounters with nature. Thoreau's contribution, then, is to describe the native self who is “capable of an act of conscientious dissent (or consent)” and to provide insight into “the processes through which that individual may come into being” (Bennett 1990, 579).

For Walker the retreat to Walden was also productive: it enabled Thoreau to conduct an experiment in democratic and economic self-cultivation and, in turn, to provide strategies for self-fashioning to the poor and the lower middle classes. Withdrawing to the sylvan hinterlands, Thoreau makes himself “naked, as Mill and Tocqueville never were, to the perils of the labor market,” and from this vulnerable position he composes *Walden*, a “heroic book—a vivid portrait of a type of heroism lived out in conditions of voluntary accepted poverty” (Walker 2001, 167, 173). *Walden* functions as a work of political self-help, demonstrating for its readers a method of enacting concrete democratic practices that resist the potentially overwhelming presence of economic concerns (Walker 1998, 847–49; see also Parrington 1930, 400–413; Cannavo 2012). In Thoreau's *Walden*, then, we find a rare attempt to nego-

tiate the tensions between employment and freedom through an experiment in living, or an act of *praxis* that makes political values and moral commitments concrete.

Mariotti, Bennett, and Walker each offer a different understanding of the political implications of withdrawal. For Mariotti withdrawal fosters critical negation, for Bennett it enables the construction of self that is capable of dissent, and for Walker it facilitates economic self-fashioning. Despite these differences, a theme that unites all three works is that withdrawal is a means to an end. Mariotti is explicit about interpreting withdrawal through the lens of instrumental rationality, while in Bennett and Walker this seems to be an implicit assumption (Mariotti 2010, 11). For each, withdrawal creates something—a critical reflective citizen, a dissenting self, a new economic citizen—that has political implications.⁴ Walking away is productive, in other words, because it creates a different kind of citizen. With Walker's suggestion that Walden be read as democratic and economic self-help, the idea of a productive political withdrawal is clearly extended beyond Thoreau. It is not just Thoreau who is capable of departures and transformations. Ordinary citizens might undertake them as well.

Turning to the essay "Walking," it is clear that Thoreau at times conceives of withdrawal in instrumental terms. At a telling juncture in this essay, Thoreau considers whether he would prefer to inhabit a cultivated garden or a dismal swamp and chooses the latter for instrumental reasons. The swamp possesses potent generative powers for the self:

If it were purposed to me to dwell in the neighborhood of the most beautiful garden that ever human art contrived, or else of a dismal swamp, I should certainly decide for the swamp. . . . When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable and to the citizen, the most dismal swamp. I enter the swamp as a sacred place,—a *sanctum sanctorum*. There is the strength, the marrow of Nature. . . . In such a soil grew Homer and Confucius and the rest, and out of such a wilderness comes the Reformer eating locusts and wild honey. (Thoreau 2001, 242)

As Thoreau describes it, withdrawal into the swamp affords individual mutation. Thoreau gives the sense that the citizen misunderstands the swamp, erroneously seeing the "darkest" and "thickest" wood as monotonous and tedious places when in fact it presents an opportunity for metamorphosis. In

4. As Philip Abbott puts it, "Thoreau's personal pilgrimages . . . raise a central question of political theory: 'What kind of individuals ought we to be?'" (Abbott 1985, 184).

these dank and melancholy spots, Thoreau is reborn; he “recreate[s]” himself. It is there, drawing strength from the “marrow of Nature,” that Thoreau enters a kind of political chrysalis and, unlike the citizen who remains outside of such dismal yet holy cocoons, gives birth to himself anew.

While this instrumental-withdrawal reading of Thoreau has textual merit, it is also limiting and occluding. In particular, it overlooks those places in Thoreau’s work where he presents departure and nonparticipation as politically significant in and of itself. To put this point slightly differently, Mariotti, Bennett, and Walker focus on withdrawal, an action undertaken to achieve an individual end of self-transformation. This misses the fact that Thoreau also “exited.” This term implies something quite different. Since its introduction as a term of art by Albert Hirschman, “exit” conveys dissatisfaction with the political organization or public good that is left (Hirschman 1970). An exit often has an instrumental end, but it is also expressive in and of itself of discontent and disaffection. To exit is to break a political relationship. As Mark Warren puts it, “the act in itself constitutes a mode of communication—a signal” that the political group or public good has failed in some way (Warren 2011, 696). Radicalizing this connection between exit and dissatisfaction, several scholars suggest that exit can express opposition, not just dissatisfaction, to dominant power arrangements, discourses, or identities (Hirschman 1970; Scott 1985, 293; Walzer 1985; Virno 1996, 2003, 2005; Hardt and Negri 2000, 213–18; Hardt and Negri 2004, 348; Hardt and Negri 2009, 152–53). The next section examines Thoreau’s work for this kind of exit—that is a physical or metaphysical break with the common that has a double political significance: both instrumental and expressive.

EXPRESSIVE AND INSTRUMENTAL EXIT

As we have seen, several influential interpretations of Thoreau implicitly adopt an instrumental-withdrawal mode of interpretation, understanding retreat as a mechanism of transforming the political self. While enlightening in many ways, the instrumental-withdrawal reading misses something meaningful about Thoreau’s understanding of leave-taking. In particular, it disregards those places in which Thoreau conceptualized *exit* as a kind of resistance that, separate from its long-term transformative consequences for the individual, was expressive of political opposition to dominant power.

One particularly rich text in which Thoreau describes the expressive side of resistant exit is “Resistance to Civil Government.” While this essay is well known for advancing the idea that violating a law can be a legitimate, democratic means of opposition, it also endorses exit in similar terms. Thoreau outlines two forms of exit in “Resistance”: he describes removing his taxes

from the government and separating himself from membership in the polity. In both cases, Thoreau pulls himself or his resources back from the polity, actions that mirror his physical exit from Concord to Walden, in order to oppose slavery and the United States' war with Mexico. Calling the federal Constitution evil for its support of slavery and inviting acts of political resistance that “like birth and death . . . convulse the body,” Thoreau depicts exit as a mode of resistance (Thoreau 2004, 74).

Speaking directly to abolitionists, Thoreau recommends extraction from the common as a method of recanting consent. Those “who call themselves abolitionists,” he proclaims, “should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in person and property” (Thoreau 2004, 74). The first exit Thoreau mentions—the nonpayment of taxes—is fairly easy to apprehend and understand. As Thoreau himself makes clear in the essay and in *Walden*, he was arrested and jailed because he refused to pay his Massachusetts poll tax for moral and political reasons.⁵ In addition to explaining his refusal as a just violation of the law, Thoreau casts this action in terms of nonparticipation, arguing that his financial divestiture fractures his political relationship with Massachusetts (Broderick 1956, 617–18). Thoreau urges antislavery activists—who were avid petitioners to the state, sending more than 8,500 antislavery petitions to Congress from 1833 to 1845—to exit (Carpenter and Moore 2014). He writes, “Some are petitioning the State to dissolve the Union, to disregard the requisitions of the President. Why do they not dissolve it themselves—the union between themselves and the State—and refuse to pay their quota into the treasury?” (Thoreau 2004, 72).

This refusal to pay taxes might at first glance appear wholly instrumental. That is, it might seem as if Thoreau is urging abolitionists only to exit in order to drain the public funds and to pressure the state of Massachusetts. To follow Hobbes's metaphor of the body politic in which taxes can be understood as the lifeblood of the polity, Thoreau suggests opening up a vital vein (Hobbes 1996, 228–29). Seen in this light, the exit of taxes from public funds has a purposeful, even somewhat violent quality to it. At the same time, it is important to note that Thoreau draws attention to the symbolic, expressive side of this act of resistance. He describes it as a sign of “dissolv[ing]” and “disregard [ing]” a relationship with the government, words that emphasize its symbolic and communicative meaning, not the causal effects on policy or politics. Thoreau indicates that a fairly banal act—the extraction of support from a public fund—is noteworthy because it is demonstrative of a break in democratic membership and belonging. Resistant exit fractures what should be whole in a

5. The poll tax was a head tax on every white male between the ages of 20 and 70 (Broderick 1956; Thoreau and Harding 1967; Madden 1968).

democratic polity, the demos. “Action from principle,—the perception of and performance of right,—changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with any thing which was. It not only divides states and churches, it divides families; aye, it divides the *individual*, separating the diabolical in him from the divine” (Thoreau 2004, 72). Exit based on moral principle is divisive, signifying separation, discord, and dissent at every level of a democracy. The action matters in part because of what it represents, “the perception of and performance of right,” by both the individual who acts and those who observe the action.

In *Walden* Thoreau makes it clear that his departure from the common society of Concord signifies a moral break with his community: “The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of any thing, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well? . . . I hear an irresistible voice which invites me away from all that” (Thoreau 1985, 331).⁶ Thoreau perceives that he is distinct from his Concord neighbors, not in a subtle or insignificant way, but rather in fundamental terms as to what constitutes the good. Good behavior—which at a minimum entails being a member of the community, living there—is something Thoreau likens to following a fiend. Thoreau is not clear on where the oppositional voice that “invites [him] away from all that” originates, but he does treat obedience to the voice and the act of leaving as meaningful. Departing expresses opposition to the “wooden men” who “are commonly esteemed good citizens,” as well as those who suffer from “[p]atriotism . . . a maggot in their heads” (Thoreau 1985, 578; Thoreau 2004, 66). As he tells it in *Walden*, his repudiation of the tax showed a refusal to be a part of society’s “dirty institutions,” or a state that “buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle at the door of its senate-house.” It demonstrated that Thoreau did not “belong to their desperate odd-fellow society” (Thoreau 1985, 459).

The second way that Thoreau discusses nonparticipation is focused on people, not property, and the resignation of officials and citizens from political office. Here too, Thoreau placed himself within abolitionist and antislavery debates about how to meaningfully separate oneself from the immorality of a slave society. Alongside animated discussions as to whether they should buy cotton and sugar and whether they should vote, antislavery advocates debated “come-outerism,” a practice in which individuals revoked their membership from organizations tainted by slavery, and they discussed whether public

6. In his discussion of John Farmer, Thoreau again equates a voice with exit: “But the notes of the flute . . . gently did away with the street, and the village, and the state in which he lived. A voice said to him, —Why do you stay here and live this mean, moiling life, when a glorious existence is possible for you? . . . But how come out of this condition and actually migrate thither?” (Thoreau 1985, 499–500).

officials opposed to slavery should relinquish their official positions within a slave government (Cover 1975). Abolitionists and transcendentalists such as George Ripley, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Adin Ballou were withdrawing to found utopian communities where the righteous could live apart in exemplary communities like Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Hopedale (Hopedale Community 1850; Ballou 1897; Spann 1992; Francis 1997, 2005; Delano 2004, 2010).

Thoreau echoes the idea that resignation from office is a method of expressing moral opposition: “If the tax gatherer, or any other public officer asks me, as one had done, ‘But, what shall I do?’ my answer is, ‘If you really wish to do any thing, resign your office’” (Thoreau 2004, 76–77). Thoreau extends the idea of resignation further, however, by suggesting that ordinary citizens resign from citizenship. In “Resistance,” Thoreau illustrates how such a civic divestiture might take place. In addition to withholding his money from the treasury by his refusal to pay the poll tax, Thoreau makes it clear that he is withholding himself as well. He declares in a letter to the Massachusetts government, “Know all men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined” (79). With this assertion, Thoreau appears to have opted out of membership in the government, the “incorporated society” that had assumed his allegiance thus far. He doubles nonparticipation of the poll tax, as it were, refusing to contribute his property to the public fund and refusing membership in a polity he viewed as unjust. As he explains the relationship, “I do not care to trace the course of my dollar, if I could, till it buys a man, or a musket to shoot one with,—the dollar is innocent—but I am concerned to trace the effects of my allegiance” (84). The significance of the economic withdrawal is found in what it accomplishes (one less dollar to inequity), as well as what it expresses about his allegiance. In fact, Thoreau’s phrasing suggests that the functional effect of extracting the money is not as important as what it says about his belonging and fealty. He takes care with his language here to sharply draw the distinction: the instrumental effect of the extraction of his funds is of less interest than its expressive political meaning.

Thoreau’s exit from citizenship is an odd kind of political action, and it is worth pausing to consider what makes it so unorthodox and alien. The action *should* be familiar: Thoreau is merely extending the idea of resignation to citizens, urging individuals to disassociate from their government. As he puts it plainly, “I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually” (Thoreau 2004, 84). At the same time, American citizenship is unlike political and legal office because it is typically not marked by elections, confirmation hearings, swearing-in ceremonies, robes (in the case of judges), or buildings in which the work of citizenship is performed daily (a

court, a legislative chamber, or an executive building). With the exception of naturalization, American citizenship does not typically entail the same sort of trappings that mark entrance into the position of being a citizen and signify continued participation as a citizen. Most American citizens are born into citizenship, and they are considered citizens, formally and informally, whether they vote, serve on juries, or fulfill military service (Shklar 1991). All this, of course, makes it quite difficult to observe a resignation from citizenship. The refusal to contribute to the public funds through a poll tax is comparatively straightforward to discern.

The difficulty of discerning a principled resignation from citizenship may be in part why Thoreau writes his letter to the government of Massachusetts declaring his resignation. It may also be part of the reason why he writes “Resistance” and *Walden*. As Stanley Cavell observes, “the completion of the act [of resistance] was the writing of the essay which depicts it” (Cavell 1981, 85; see also Ball 1973, 21–22; Norris 2009, 423–46). This is borne out by the history of “Resistance” and *Walden*: Thoreau explains that both works were a response to the curiosity of his neighbors. Thus, “Resistance” was initially composed as a lecture for the residents of Concord, and it was delivered at the Concord Lyceum on January 26, 1848 (see also Thoreau 1985, 325). The history of “Resistance” and *Walden* suggests that Thoreau’s departure was what has been called a “noisy exit”—that is, a vociferous or cacophonous leave-taking designed to draw public attention to the exit and the reasons for it (Hirschman 1970, 117; Barry 1974, 95–99; Laver 1976, 741–43; Dowding et al. 2000, 475; Pfaff and Kim 2003, 403). Looked at in this way, the physical action of exit—what Vernon Parrington aptly called an “individual nullification”—was bound up with publication, that is, public oriented speech (Parrington 1930, 410). Cavell’s notion of “completion” suggests that the physical act of leave-taking was not enough; it was necessarily tied up with the expressive, aesthetic act of writing, broadcasting, and communicating. As Thoreau puts it in *Walden*, he had no intention of walking away silently. He chose “to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake [his] neighbors up” (Thoreau 1985, 389).

Emphasis on the expressive side of Thoreau’s exit invites the question, what was it intended to convey? One answer to this question is opposition; the exit communicated antagonism and disagreement, revealing that Thoreau would not “for an instant recognize that political organization as *my* government which is the *slave’s* government also” (Thoreau 2004, 67). Another related answer is that the exit expresses Thoreau’s personal integrity—that is, that his actions flow from “projects and attitudes which . . . he takes seriously at the deepest level, as what his life [was] about” (Smart and Williams 1973, 116). As Bernard Williams points out, integrity implies a deep-seated identification

with one's moral convictions, and it can place the individual in disagreement with the instrumental and utilitarian calculations of others (116–17). Thoreau's integrity and his opposition to instrumental, utilitarian sums are particularly apparent in his scathing dismissal of William Paley's calculating approach to resistance. An English cleric and philosopher who authored *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* in 1785, Paley developed a utilitarian model of political action that focused on an egoistic individual who decided whether to act by weighing both the social costs incurred and the benefits gained. Paley was widely read at the most esteemed American universities of the day, and because he was an abolitionist, his work was widely debated by antislavery advocates in the United States (Ball 1973, 11–12).

Though he shared his commitment to end slavery, Thoreau flatly rejects Paley's utilitarian approach to resistance that weighs the cost of the resistance to the public or its "public expediency." As Paley put it, the "lawfulness of resistance, or the lawfulness of a revolt, does not depend alone upon the grievance which is sustained or feared, but also upon the probable expense and event of the contest" (Paley 2002, 6.3.2). Would-be resisters must determine whether government crimes have "public consequences of sufficient magnitude" to "outweigh the evils of civil disturbance" (6.3.4). Thoreau certainly disagrees with Paley's preference for civil obedience, but he is antagonistic to Paley's focus on consequences as well. There are some cases, Thoreau counters, in which justice must be done despite the consequences: "This people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people" (Thoreau 2004, 68). It is not entirely clear what Thoreau means by the word "cost." Looked at from a historical vantage point, this is perhaps the most ominous line in "Resistance" because it seems to eerily foresee the slaughter and desolation of the Civil War. Thoreau's statement may be hyperbole, or he might be thinking of a kind of destruction that is symbolic, not actual.⁷ Or, it is possible to interpret Thoreau's statement as a call for a refounding. On this reading, Thoreau may be pointing out that the American people, whose collective identity is grounded in slavery and military strife, must abandon these commitments and re-create themselves as a people.

Thoreau's statement does imply that it is sometimes more important to adhere to one's values rather than focusing on the social costs or on what is consequentially advantageous. In rejecting Paley, he is also rejecting the idea of detaching personal integrity from democratic politics. As Williams puts it, utilitarianism like Paley's tends to demand something that Thoreau is not

7. Jack Turner observes that, for Thoreau, the moral and political value of Brown's resistance derived in part "from the spectacular way it demonstrated conscientious moral commitment" (Turner 2009, 169).

willing to do: “to alienate him in a real sense from his actions and the source of his actions in his own convictions” in the name of the utilitarian common good (Smart and Williams 1973, 116).

CONSCIENCE AND COMMUNITY

Thoreau reveals, thus far, what might be called the multiple political dimensions of exit. First, Thoreau demonstrates that departures can be political in the way that Bennett, Mariotti, and Walker argue—that is, as a necessary step to achieve political metamorphosis. Second, Thoreau’s writings also indicate that exit can be political because of the act itself, what it expresses. The exit itself has political significance as resistance, separate from the *telos* of the transformation or the political consequences of the defiance.

This section focuses on a third political dimension of resistant exit: the connection of the one who exits to the political context and its political communities. As we have seen thus far, Thoreau’s resistant exit involved separation from membership in the Concord political community and a rejection of the status quo. Thoreau attempts to cut himself off, to sever relations with the polity, and “to live aloof” from the state (Thoreau 2004, 90). At the same time, Thoreau’s resistant exit maintains a connection with the political community through his writing and his agitation, actions that suggest that he wants to change the dominant power arrangements. Absent this connection, Thoreau might well have exited silently, not making the effort to explain his actions to his neighbors through speech and writing. There is an unexpected tension here between separation and attachment that needs to be explored in greater detail.

Thoreau speaks to the first element of this tension—the separation from the political context—when he explores the pleasures of willfully unshackling oneself and the delightful potentialities of releasing oneself from the status quo. Exits from democracies can be understood as expressive rejections of what the political community holds in common, broadly understood. They can entail a refusal of the democratic community’s laws (e.g., the Concord poll tax, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act), their institutions or policies (slavery, the Mexican War), or their identities (American, nineteenth-century conceptions of citizenship).

While the rejection of the commons is arguably terrifying and paralyzing, Thoreau revels in the insights and possibilities that it presents. When Thoreau is physically outside of the democratic commons in the Concord jail, for instance, he is exhilarated by this experiential gift and welcomes the revelations of being apart. Concord, his hometown for his entire life, becomes an astonishingly unfamiliar place: “It was like travelling into a far country, such as I

had never expected to behold . . . —a wholly new and rare experience for me.” An outsider who can perceive what insiders cannot, Thoreau gains “a closer view of my native town. I was fairly inside it . . . I began to comprehend what its inhabitants were about.” The town and the community, Thoreau is clear, did not actually change (“I did not perceive that great changes had taken place on the common”). Rather, Thoreau’s perception of the democratic commons and its inhabitants changes because he is no longer a part of them: “I saw yet more distinctly the State in which I lived. I saw to what extent the people among whom I lived could be trusted as good neighbors and friends . . . that they did not greatly purpose to do right; that they were a distinct race from me by their prejudices and superstitions, as the Chinamen and Malays are. . . . This may be to judge my neighbors harshly; for I believe that most of them are not aware that they have such an institution as the jail in their village” (Thoreau 2004, 82–83). Thoreau does not mean, of course, that his neighbors are actually unacquainted with the jail, but rather that they are ignorant of what kind of institution the jail is. They do not comprehend it as an establishment outside of democracy that allows one to perceive the state, its inhabitants, and what they share anew. They overlook that the jail is a remarkable and rare place, a “far country,” in which one’s fellow citizens can become foreigners and their shared practices are exposed as bigoted and unjustified.

The sense of estrangement, detachment, and individuation in this passage is suggestive of Arendt’s influential and much-criticized reading of Thoreau. Arendt argues that Thoreau is not properly categorized as a civil disobedient because his actions were primarily aimed at achieving personal righteousness and individual salvation. He was disconnected from politics and uninterested “in the world where the wrong is committed or in the consequences that the wrong will have for the future course of the world” (Arendt 1972, 60). Instead, he was focused on satisfying the demands of his own conscience, which were personal and idiosyncratic. Conscience “cannot be generalized; in order to keep its validity, it must remain subjective. What I cannot live with may not bother another man’s conscience” (60).

Arendt does foresee a way for moral objections based on conscience to gain political import: “conscientious objection can become politically significant when a number of consciences happen to coincide, and the conscientious objectors decide to enter the market place and make their voices heard in public” (Arendt 1972, 67–68). In these cases, individual, idiosyncratic conscience transforms into a part of public opinion. Those resisting “actually rely no longer on themselves alone” (68). Rather, they belong to a group of individuals who share an opinion that something is unjust. The “strength of their opinion does not depend on conscience, but on the number of those with whom it is associated—‘unanimous agreement that ‘X’ is an evil . . . adds cre-

dence to the belief that ‘X’ is an evil” (68). In Arendt’s view, Thoreau’s conscience never underwent such a transformation because it was unallied with a group that shared his moral convictions. In matters of conscience, he relied on himself alone, addressed his own needs for purification, and was uninterested in the future course of the world.

A difficulty with Arendt’s reading, however, is that it overlooks the extent to which Thoreau was connected to a dominant resistant organization of his day in matters of conscience: the abolitionist movement. As we have seen, Thoreau addressed abolitionists directly in “Resistance,” and he attended to key matters of conscience that concerned them: how could abolitionists resist political, social, and economic structures based on the enslavement of a people by extracting themselves? Thoreau builds on and radicalizes actions that abolitionists and antislavery advocates were debating—the boycott of sugar, cotton, “come-outerism,” and resignation from office—with his own expressive exit from the Concord common.

While Thoreau was disdainful of collective reform movements and his relationship with the abolitionist movement was complex, it seems inaccurate to describe his inner sense of the immorality of slavery as wholly unique, discrete, or independent given the historical and textual evidence of his connections to antislavery.⁸ As commentators have pointed out, Thoreau’s political writings engage explicitly and implicitly with abolitionist and antislavery arguments made by William Lloyd Garrison, Lysander Spooner, and Adin Ballou (among others) as he navigates his way through the fraught terrain of absolutism and pragmatism, a core issue for proponents of antislavery and abolitionism (Rosenblum 1996; Taylor 1996; Hyde 2002; Zinn 2004; Turner 2005, 2009). The Thoreau household, a “veritable den of abolitionists,” was a lively political place in large part because of the political activism of Thoreau’s mother and his sisters (Kritzberg 1989, 537; see also Hyde 2002). Four years before “Resistance,” Thoreau was ringing the bell at the First Parish Church to beckon his neighbors to the annual fair of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society (Thoreau 2001, 649–50). A year later, Thoreau attended a lecture by the celebrated abolitionist orator Wendell Phillips, writing an appreciative account that was published in Garrison’s *Liberator*, and, along with his family, Thoreau assisted fugitive slaves fleeing to Canada (Glick 1973, 59–62; Kritzberg 1989, 538).

The abolitionist and antislavery movements conform to the process of the politicization of private conscience that Arendt describes: coming together as

8. Sandra Harbert Petrulionis concludes in her analysis of the influence of the Concord antislavery movement on Thoreau that “the evolution of Thoreau’s antislavery ideology [was] a product of his community’s activism” (Petrulionis 2006, 3).

a group, they transformed idiosyncratic consciences into a shared political opinion. There is no doubt that they intended to change their political world because the very names they chose to describe themselves—"antislavery" and "abolitionism"—announced both the wrong and how it should be addressed (Barnes 1964; Elkins 1968; Kraditor 1969; Sewell 1976; Perry 1995; Newman 2002). Further, the abolitionist movement was painfully aware of Arendt's point that, in the realm of public opinion, numbers mattered. Garrison's strategic political plan was focused on increasing membership: he urged that an immediatist agenda could be realized by organizing a vast network of local antislavery organizations in towns all across New England. In Concord, Garrison's vision was realized in part by Thoreau's mother, Cynthia Dunbar Thoreau, and his sisters, Sophia and Helen, who founded the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1837 (Petruionis 2006, 7–35). A goal of these grass-roots abolitionist organizations was to increase the number of members and sympathizers through direct moral and emotional appeals to the consciences of their neighbors. Through speeches, events, and publications, abolitionist organizations purposely attempted to make idiosyncratic consciences less so and, more specifically, to unify them in opposition to slavery.

As he makes clear in *Walden*, Thoreau was never politically or morally far removed from the concerns that animated and divided his community. Even in the bean field at Walden, he can hear "the town fire its great guns . . . and some waifs of martial music," both of which make him "proud to know that the liberties of Massachusetts and of our fatherland were in such safe keeping." Continuing this moment of irony, Thoreau admits that when "a really noble and inspiring strain . . . reached these woods, and the trumpet . . . sings of fame . . . I felt as if I could spit a Mexican with a good relish,—for why should we always stand for trifles?—and looked around for a woodchuck or skunk to exercise my chivalry upon" (Thoreau 1985, 450). There is certainly distance in this passage, as the guns and music sound altered to Thoreau, but there is also a vivid sense of proximity.

In "Resistance" Thoreau reinforced this closeness and attachment by bringing his voice and his conscience back to Concord when he delivered it as a lecture for his neighbors: Thoreau returned to the political common of Concord to explain why he left in the first place. A comparison with religious recluses in the monastic traditions of Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism is instructive on Thoreau's engagement through exit. Anchorites, hermits, and "Desert Fathers and Mothers" withdrew from society in order to pursue spiritual perfection through rigorous asceticism. Seeking personal redemption or individual salvation outside of society, their goal was to cut off contact entirely, not to preserve it through speech and writing. Once in the wilderness, their primary relationship was with God, not other humans. Their preferred mode was

silence. Thoreau was opposite in this regard, eschewing stillness and quiet for lectures at the Lyceum and publications in journals. Thus, it is perhaps not too surprising that Thoreau likened speech to a valuable and unwavering weapon in the public realm in his address on John Brown. Brown “could afford to lose his Sharps’ rifles, while he retained his faculty of speech, a Sharps’ rifle of infinitely surer and longer range” (Thoreau 2004, 127).

In terms of conscience, Thoreau’s resistant exit, taken in its entirety, seems similar to what Jack Turner has called “performing conscience.” His “personal act of no-saying” became a “positively political act of self-exhibition . . . as soon as Thoreau sought to use his experience to influence the ethical and political dispositions of his fellow citizens” (Turner 2005, 466–67). And, as Turner’s phrase suggests, the political force of his resistant exit lay not just in its instrumental or purposive ends but also in its symbolic, expressive, and intrinsic value as a performance.⁹ While Thoreau’s conscience was certainly his own, the public performances of his conscience were expressions of his alliances with his abolitionist and antislavery neighbors, friends, and family.

WALKING AWAY WITH THOREAU

Thoreau’s actions and his writings have been interpreted as being motivated by his personal integrity, as being prompted by a desire to pursue moral righteousness for himself and by himself. “It is not a man’s duty,” he states, “to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong . . . but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it” (Thoreau 2004, 71). In this view, Arendt’s view, Thoreau’s exit to Walden, his refusal to pay his poll tax, and his renunciation of citizenship might be seen as solely private mechanisms to assure his personal righteousness and salvation. Governed by the demands of his anomalous conscience, Thoreau absolves himself of the evil of American politics and—in sharp contrast to the public, persuasive actions of later civil disobedients—refuses further involvement with the political world.

Others have countered this antipolitical reading, arguing that Thoreau’s withdrawals from mainstream society and politics were purposive acts of self-regeneration. Aiming to transform the polity at the level of individual citizens, Thoreau provides an exemplar that he hopes others will emulate by becoming new citizens, achieving an antagonistic consciousness, or adopting a heterogeneous mode of being in the political world. His were instrumental withdrawals, aimed at transforming the polity one citizen at a time.

9. Terrence Ball notes that through his public disobedience Thoreau “attempts to dramatize an issue, to expose its contradictions, and to persuade others to see the issue in a similar light” (Ball 1973, 22).

Both interpretations see Thoreau in overly individualistic and cloistered terms. The first understands Thoreau as almost monastic, as the peculiar dictates of his individual conscience demand seclusion and separation from political evil. The second rightly sees Thoreau as political, but understands his conception of political action to be grounded in the isolated actions of individuals. A problem with both interpretations is that they do not sufficiently emphasize that Thoreau's resistant exits were expressive acts of opposition connected to a community of dissenters. When Thoreau walks away, renouncing his political membership in American democracy, the aesthetics of his action point to its public and performative character. In contrast to a monkish silence, Thoreau crowed as "lustily as chanticleer in the morning" about his exit, choosing to publicize his departure from the common as widely as possible in order to persuade others of the probity of his opposition.

It is important to remember that, though his house was not ready, Thoreau departs Concord for the shores of Walden on July 4, 1845. As this auspicious date suggests, his resistant exit was bound up in American politics, joined with both the country's hope for democratic freedom and its founding in the tyranny of slavery. Though he walked away from Concord, Thoreau never walked alone. He walked with a dissenting community, the abolitionists and proponents of antislavery, who informed his conscience and gave his exit its political direction and worldly effect. He also did not walk away aimlessly, without political purpose. He pulled away from his political community as a way of critically engaging with it.

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