

VARIA

HENRY DAVID THOREAU'S CRITIQUE OF EXPANSIONIST IDEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1962) is an American naturalist and writer. He is best known for *Walden* (1854), an account of his experiment in living alone at Walden Pond, near Concord, Massachusetts, to observe the life of the woods. In this article, Thoreau was against western expansion when it came to actual politics and dubiously motivated conquests of the day, yet was everything but anti-western when his idealistic precepts of the perfect life of the future were called upon. The language of Thoreau's works often reveals decidedly expansionist overtones, and there are constant references to a host of concepts and metaphors that define the realm of presuppositions tied to expansionist ideas in a wider sense.

Thoreau's ideas on the West and on westward expansion, formulated during the heyday of American expansionism, are manifold, and they are scattered all over his works. As would be expected from a man who was characterized by his contemporary James Russell Lowell as being in love with intentional extravagance of statement and with artful paradox ("Thoreau", p.143), some of these ideas appear to be inconsistent. However, one should be careful not to dismiss them too lightly as another instance of self-contradiction in an intellectual landscape rich in paradox and provocative contradictions. For these ideas stand in close interrelation with a complex of other Thoreauvian ideas- most notably on reformism and reformers- which tend to converge towards a catalogue of philosophical convictions that are indeed consistent though somewhat complicated in origin and exposition.

I would first like to address a number of explicit statements which are usually claimed as evidence for Thoreau's conflicting attitudes towards the West. On the one hand, it is common knowledge that Thoreau had little sympathy for the power politics of westward expansion as it collided with the interests of other people and nations, and that it was this stand which gave him the name of being perhaps the most belligerent anti-expansionist of his day (though practically nobody wanted to notice at the time). This attitude expressed itself in various straightforward statements of open

contempt for the jingoistic slogans of "Go west" and "Manifest Destiny" as they were prevalent during the critic's time. Thus Thoreau wrote in a letter to Blake on February 27, 1853:

The whole enterprise of this nation which is not an upward, but a westward one, toward Oregon, California, Japan, etc., is totally devoid of interest to me, whether performed on foot or by a Pacific railroad. It is not illustrated by a thought it is not warmed by a sentiment, there is nothing in it which one should lay down his life for, nor even his gloves, hardly which one should take up a newspaper for. It is perfectly heathenish -a filibustering toward heaven by the great western route. No, they may go their way to their manifest destiny, which I trust is not mine. May my 76 dollars whenever I get them help to carry me in the other direction p.296).

Two years later, on February 1855, he added in a letter to Thomas Cholmondeley, with a slight shift of geographical emphasis:

You, who live in that snug and compact isle, may dream of a glorious commonwealth, but I have some doubts whether I and the new king of the Sandwich Islands shall pull together. When I think of the gold-diggers and the Mormons, the slaves and the slave-holders and the filibusters, I naturally dream of a glorious private life. No, I am not patriotic; I shall not meddle with the Gem of the Antilles. General Quitman cannot count on my aid, alas for him! nor can General Pierce (p.250).

Similarly, an extensive entry in his journal of 1852 had earlier denounced "The recent rush to

California" as "the greatest disgrace on mankind" (p.265). Thoreau elaborated on this point in his customary vitriolic manner:

Going to California. It is only three thousand miles nearer to hell. I will resign my life sooner than live by luck [. . .] No wonder that they gamble there [. . .] What a comment, what a satire, on our institutions! [. . .] The gold of California is a touchstone which has betrayed the rottenness, the baseness, of mankind. Satan, from one of his elevations, showed mankind the kingdom of California, and they entered into a compact with him at once. (*Journal*, III, p.266f).

To such verdicts we may add Thoreau's recurrent challenge that the whole idea of geographical of physical expansion was wrong from the start, because it took an outward instead of an inward direction¹. All in all, James Russell Lowell's statement seems to sum up adequately the one side of Thoreau's prevailing attitude in these matters: "While he studied with respectful attention the minks and woodchucks, his neighbors, he looked with utter contempt on the august drama of destiny of which his country was the scene, and on which the curtain had already risen" ("Thoreau", p.149f).

And yet, this is by no means the whole story if it comes to Thoreau's views in regard to the West and "the august drama of destiny" in which American civilization was so obviously participating. For in many other passages of his works Thoreau practically breaks into song when the topic of westward orientation and going west arises. Consider the following statements from diverse sources which show him in one of his more rapturous stances:

Westward is heaven, or rather heavenward is the west. The way to heaven is from east to west round the earth. The sun leads and shows it. The stars, too, light it. (*Journal*, II, p.170).

Man looks back eastward upon his steps till they are lost in obscurity, and westward still takes his way till the completion of his destiny. (Miller, p. 159).

The *great west* and *north west* stretching on infinitely far and grand and wild, qualifying all our thoughts. That is the only America I know. I prize this western reserve chiefly for its intellectual value. That is the road to new life and freedom [. . .] (*Correspondence*, p.436).

[. . .] and yet, to the man who sits most east, this life is a weariness, routine, dust and ashes. [. . .] But to the man who sits most west [. . .] it is a field for all noble endeavors, an elysium, the dwelling-place of heroes and demigods. (*Letters*, p.360).

Moreover, long passages of the lecture and essay on "Walking" seem to be an unmitigated

celebration of the idea of the West and an open endorsement of the great westward drive on a personal as well as on a national plane. Here are some key statements from "Walking":

My needle is slow to settle [. . .] but it always settles between west and south-southwest. The future lies that way to me, and the earth seems more unexhausted and richer on that side [. . .] Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free (p.217).

I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe. And that way the nation is moving, and I may say that mankind progresses from east to west [. . .] we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure (p.218).

Every sunset which I witness inspires me with the desire to go to a West as distant and as fair as that into which the sun goes down. He appears to migrate westward daily, and tempt us to follow him. He is the Great Western Pioneer whom the nations follow (p.219).

The reader may rub his eyes in disbelief, but suddenly the all too familiar rhetoric of vision and destiny, of future promise and past containment, of pioneer spirit and western star, is there again in the works of a man who, but an instant ago, had played the role of militant dissenter and fire-breathing opponent to expansionist impulses of all kinds.

What, then, signifies this opposition of seemingly irreconcilable programmatics in Thoreau? A blatant self-contradiction in aims and terms? An ambiguous wavering between incompatible ideas in a man who otherwise specialized in rather unambiguous pronouncements? A dramatic reversal of mind in a writer who normally was not prone to reversals of opinion? I believe that none of these explanations will do, but rather that we are confronted with two sharply differentiated attitudes addressed to, and stimulated by, two vastly different perceptions and interpretations of the West. As a matter of fact, Thoreau himself suggests as much when he deals with the larger context of his enthusiasm over the West in "Walking". There we read in a pivotal sentence on which the whole argument hinges: "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wilderness is the preservation of the World². From this perspective, it becomes clear that Thoreau's ecstatic statements on the West are predicated on the notion that the West meant wilderness, and that wilderness meant the realm beyond civilization, and that beyond civilization lay the hope and the destiny of a form of

existence far superior to anything civilization would ever have to offer. The idea of the West in this form is merely a symbol and a metaphor for something else, transcribing, as earlier critics have argued, Thoreau's belief in "nature in her truest aspects and colors" and his hope for a new and truer "measure of the intensity of living". In sharp opposition, the actual colonization of the West was perceived by Thoreau as a degrading struggle over political influence and commercial exploitation, and as a power play of national and personal interests which subordinated everything to the contemptible machinery of the very civilization he rejected. Consequently, he denounced the perverse reality of westward expansion and the actuality of what contemporary politics tended to make of the West in the same breath, and as strongly, as he praised the symbolic configurations of the West of his mind. In short, Thoreau was against western expansion when it came to actual politics and dubiously motivated conquests of the day, yet was everything but anti-western when his idealistic precepts of the perfect life of the future were called upon.

II

If this takes care of a seeming paradox in Thoreau's deceptively split attitude towards western expansion, other paradoxes relating to a more general concept of expansionism are still awaiting us. The language of Thoreau's works often reveals decidedly expansionist overtones, and there are constant references to a host of concepts and metaphors that define the realm of presuppositions tied to expansionist ideas in a wider sense. Thus in *Walden* alone, there are seventeen references to *expand* and *expanding*, and some sixty references to *travel* and *traveler*. *Discover* and *discovery* are mentioned nearly thirty times, while *explore* and *advance* occur about ten times each. Yet, there is almost always a peculiar twist to the meaning of these terms in Thoreau. In *Walden*, it is usually nature or an individual natural entity which expands, though there are also instances of the body, of the self, and of laws expanding. Only geographical and/or political expansion plays no role at all; there is not a single case of a nation, or a society, or a communal body expanding. *Advancing* usually carries critical connotations, unless it takes an inward direction as in advancing "confidently in the direction of [our] dreams".

Similarly, the terms *discovery* and *discovering* do not predominantly denote an outward movement of, say, geographical exploration, but rather an intense investigation of the inner workings of nature, or, of course, an exploration of the inner landscape of the self.

This change of orientation from outward-bound to inward-bound becomes most obvious when Thoreau deals with the concepts of travel and exploration as natural prerequisites to actual expansionist moves. Again Thoreau's attitude at first seems somewhat split, but it makes good sense when seen from the perspective of its own dialectical implications. As John Aldridge Christie has amply demonstrated in *Thoreau as World Traveler*⁴, the alleged champion of provincialism took an immense interest in the trail-breaking explorers of his day and in the literature of travel and exploration in general. One may say that, in his reading ventures, Thoreau circled the entire globe, and that he did not fail to travel mentally to the most obscure corners of the world, including the then still uncharted regions of the American continent. Moreover, as contributions such as *The Main Woods*, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, "Cape Cod", and "Excursions to Canada" indicate, Thoreau was not at all averse to doing a bit of traveling and exploring himself when circumstances and means permitted him to do so. On the other hand, he frequently advised his readers against traveling as a futile enterprise, and offered instead such maxims as: "Staying home is the heavenly way", and "live at home like a traveler", statements which he supplemented with wonderfully ironic one-liners of self-description: "I have travelled a good deal in Concord [. . .]" (*Walden*, p.4). What is more, his works offer extended polemics against the ambition of exploring out-of-the-way places, and the American West frequently plays a role in them. Thus the "Conclusion" of *Walden* asks: "What does Africa, -what does the West stand for? Is not our own interior white on the chart?" and: "What was the meaning of that South-Sea Exploring Expedition, with all its parade and expense, but an indirect recognition of the fact, that there are continents and seas in the moral world, to which every man is an isthmus or an inlet, yet unexplored by him [. . .]" (p.321). The passage couples its question with a straightforward answer: "Be rather the Mungo Park, the Lewis and Clarke and Frobisher, of your own

streams and oceans; explore your own higher latitudes [. . .]" (p.321). And it culminates in a maxim which fully reflects Thoreau's capability for startling aphoristic reversals:

Direct your eye sight inward, and you'll find
A thousand regions in your mind
Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be
Expert in home-cosmography¹.

As was said earlier, the gist of such statements is the reversal from outward to inward. Thoreau uses the potentials of this reversal to mediate between two superficially opposing views. His recommended form of exploring was an inner exploring so comprehensive in content and scope that it would intellectually comprise its very counterpart in the outside world. Consequently, Thoreau did most of his own journeying and exploring as a reader. And by the same token, his journeying turned into the paradox of an inward-bound expansion. The territorial map of Thoreau's expansionism became the inner landscape of the self, its valid expression the paradox of expansionist contraction.

III

Most of the points discussed in the foregoing have been noticed by earlier critics who have dealt, in various contexts, with the implication of Thoreau's stand on expansion and the West. But what has largely escaped critical notice is another dimension of Thoreau's thought which interrelates aspects of a life-long preoccupation with a critique of expansionist ideology. I am speaking of the interrelation between Thoreau's ideas on reform, and the expansionist presuppositions invariably activated by the very tenets of reformatory change. In the following, I would like to get at the core of this telling interrelation.

Thoreau lived at the heyday of American reformism with all its prophetic and engaged, glittering and chaotic, bewildering and messianic configurations⁶. As Emerson duly admitted in a letter to Carlyle in October, 1840: "We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform. Not a reading man but has a draft of a new Community in his waistcoat pocket. I am gently mad myself [. . .]". Or, as James Russell Lowell put it in his more sarcastic way:

Everybody had a mission (with capital M) to attend to everybody else's business. No brain but had its private maggot, which must have found pitifully short commons sometimes [. . .] Communities were established where everything was to be common but common sense. [. . .] All stood ready at a moment's notice to reform everything but themselves. ("Thoreau", p.132f).

This being so, it could not fail that the ambitions of reformism and their sisters, the fantasies of moral, social, or political mission quickly showed whenever one scratched the surface of a given program, catch phrase, or political platform of the day. The programmatics of westward expansion and their ideological supporting concepts such as Manifest Destiny were a case in point. Beside the fact that the notions and the practices of expansionism and Manifest Destiny were not identical in all respects⁷, both concepts held similar dichotomies of motivation which were never fully reconciled in nineteenth-century America. On one hand, their premises seemed to call for a territorial expansion predominantly in pursuit of power, influence, and the spreading of commerce, regardless of the moral costs of the enterprise⁸. On the other hand, they often seemed to argue, almost to the point of contradiction, for the pursuit of moral goals and for encompassing political blessings first envisioned and then administered by the American people for the salvation of the world. The latter variation of ideological underpinnings for expansionism as a divine mission and a moral obligation is clearly brought out in Ray Allen Billington's ironic description of a wide-spread attitude of the day:

The righteous but ill-informed people of that day sincerely believed their democratic institutions were of such magnificent perfection that no boundaries could contain them. Surely a benevolent Creator did not intend such blessings for the few; expansion was a divinely ordered means of extending enlightenment to despot-ridden masses in nearby countries! This was not imperialism, but enforced salvation. So the average American reasoned in the 1840s when the spirit of Manifest Destiny was in the air⁹.

It was this ideological motivation -described by Arthur M. Schlesinger as "an honest idealism about the future of the world" (Schlesinger, p.427) -which immediately evoked the dimensions of reformism in the whole enterprise. Generally, it entailed and suggested reforms on a world-wide scale by arguing that the American continent, if not the world at large, was in dire need of radical

reshaping, and that the American people were the chosen people to get the job done¹⁰. Hence Thoreau's caustic warning in "Reform and the Reformers" to other nations and people that large-scale reforms, American style, were coming their way whether they liked it or not:

Do ye hear it, ye Woloffs, ye Patagonians, ye Tartars, ye Nez Percés? The world is going to be reformed, formed once for all. Presto-Change! Methinks I hear the glad tidings spreading over the green prairies of the west; over the silent South American pampas, parched African deserts, and stretching Siberian versts; through the populous Indian and Chinese villages, along the Indus, the Ganges, and Hydaspes. (*Reform Papers*, p.183).

Considering the two somewhat conflicting sides of expansionism, Thoreau's attitude, on the whole, was sharply divided. For an expansionist ideology that put all the emphasis on territorial gain, political power, and commercial interests, he had nothing but sheer disdain. As is well known, he counted the annexation of Texas and the Mexican-American War among the lowest enterprises he had witnessed during his time, and he took special measures to show his dissent with utmost clearness. As far as the spreading of commerce was concerned, he took the customary stance of baffling his readers in "Life Without Principle" by claiming the opposite of what they seemed to accept as established majority opinion. "We are provincial [. . .]" , he argued, "because we are warped and narrowed by an exclusive devotion to trade and commerce and manufactures and agriculture and the like, which are but means, and not the end" (*Reform Papers*, p.174f). In even stronger terms he denounced the idea of commerce as an encompassing activity, and the equation of the spreading of commerce with the progress of civilization:

A commerce that whitens every sea in quest of nuts and raisins, and makes slaves of its sailors for its purpose! [. . .] Yet such, to a great extent, is our boasted commerce; and there are those who style themselves statesmen and philosophers who are so blind as to think that progress and civilization depend on precisely this kind of interchange and activity, -the activity of flies about a molasses-hogshead. Very well, observes one, if men were oysters. And very well, answer I, if men were mosquitoes. (*Reform Papers*, p.176).

The very idea of business -that epitome of expansionist activism and incessant pushing for more markets and territories which could be sub-

jected to the hustle and bustle of trade- tempted him to break into one of his more disdainful harangues:

This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! I am awaked almost every night by the panting of the locomotive. It interrupts my dreams. There is no sabbath. It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once. It is nothing but work, work, work. [. . .] I think that there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business (*Reform Papers*, p.156).

It was a different, much more complicated story, however, with Thoreau's attitude towards the other, the reformatory dimensions of expansionism. For reform issues were closer to his own heart, and ideas on reforming what had to be reformed were a life-long, though anything but unambiguous, preoccupation of his own.

IV

Thoreau's views on reform and reformers present, at best, a medley of praise and disparagement, and an idiosyncratic amalgamation of pro and contra arguments which tend to transfer essentials of the reform debate to other fields of reference. Beside main reform issues of the day in which he was seriously engaged - Abolitionism, abuse of political power, the question of Indian policy- Thoreau has variously been claimed the herald of many other reform movements. Accordingly, the editors of *The Writings* felt it necessary to dedicate a whole volume to a class of contributions which they summarily called *Reform Papers*¹¹. However, it is precisely these reform papers -characterized as a "collection of polemical writings" constituting "a microcosm of Thoreau's literary career"¹² -which strongly suggest the impression that a decisive part of the polemics is not directed against the various states of affairs in need of reform, but rather against the self-proclaimed reformers themselves. This impression is not at all unwarranted, because in many respects Thoreau shows such a pronounced bias against the professional reformers that a sizable part of his alleged reform writings could as well be subsumed under the heading of anti-reform writings. What is at stake here can be brought out quickly when we compare Thoreau's and Emerson's deviating opinions on the reformer as a human type.

In his essay "Man the Reformer", Emerson primarily outlines a grandiose picture of the benefits humanity owes to that perennial representative of altruistic impulses, the reformer. Emerson selects the singular when he speaks of his idealistic abstraction, and thus indicates his interest in a human possibility beyond the configuration of actual deformity or historical aberration. For Emerson, the reformer is the epitome of the "free and helpful man", the "benefactor" who unremittingly follows the dictates of his noble aims incorporated in the majestic though somewhat hazy "doctrine of Reform"¹³. "What if [. . .] the reformers tend to idealism?" Emerson asks, and he points towards the high road in his answer: "Let ideas establish their legitimate sway again in society, let life be fair and poetic, and the scholars will gladly be lovers, citizens, and philanthropists ("Reformer", p. 228f.). Though, in passing, he touches upon "The demon of reform" and upon the disquieting idea that the key to all reforms might be self-help (p.229, p.246), all in all he stands firmly by his interrelated convictions that "We are to revise the whole of our social structure, the State, the school, religion, marriage, trade, science, and explore their foundations in our nature", and that the reformer in all of us is the suitable agent to carry out these noble schemes:

What is a man born for but to be a Reformer, a Remaker of what man has made; a renouncer of lies; a restorer of truth and good, imitating that great Nature which embosoms us all [. . .] Let him renounce everything which is not true to him, and put all his practices back on their first thoughts, and do nothing for which he has not the whole world for his reason (p.248).

Predictably, if we follow Emerson's prescribed path of reformatory amelioration, everything is bound to end in a harmonious state which reflects Emerson's optimism at its shallowest: "[. . .] and every calamity will be dissolved in the universal sunshine" (p.255).

Not so in Thoreau's world of deflating skepticism and nagging dissent. Thoreau frequently selects the plural when he talks about reformers, indicating that he has little confidence in a shadowy ideal of human perfection, but that he is more interested in the concrete, individual embodiments of ideals as they are found among the lowly phenomena of a perhaps not so perfect world. Not surprisingly, there is a persistent note of skepticism, if not downright cynicism, in his discordant song on the heroics of the reformers.

In "Reform and the Reformers", he calls them summarily "the impersonation of disorder and imperfection"(182)¹⁴. Their maneuvering room for imparting benefits upon their fellow men is seriously restricted by the shortcomings of human nature: "It is rare that we are able to impart wealth to our fellows, and do not surround them with our own cast off griefs as an atmosphere, and name it sympathy" (p.191). And when it comes to individual reformers with their history of personal grievances, motives, and aims the picture gets even bleaker:

Now, if anything ail a man so that he does not perform his functions; especially if his digestion is poor, though he may have considerable nervous strength left; if he has failed in all his undertakings hitherto; if he has committed some heinous sin and partially repents, what does he do? He sets about reforming the world.

Concomitantly, the essay on "Civil Disobedience" complains about "the cheap professions of most reformers" (*Reform Papers*, p. 87). And in a journal entry of June 17, 1853, Thoreau describes his revulsion on the occasion of a visit by "Three ultra-reformers": "They [. . .] rubbed you continually with the greasy cheeks of their kindness. They would not keep their distance, but cuddle up and lie spoon-fashion with you [. . .] I was awfully pestered with [their] benignity" (*Journal*, V, p.264). In graphic terms of loathsome contempt he suggests that he would rather expel such specimens of the reform spirit from society than join their causes.

However, Thoreau's antagonism to reformers is more than an airing of personal animosities and irritations. On a deeper level of argumentation, one pointed charge against reformism gains more and more force, until it becomes the focal point of a critique which then connects with a critique of expansionist ideology in a wider sense. It is the charge, almost the verdict, that the basic orientation of the reformer is irrevocably wrong because it takes an outward-bound instead of an inward-bound direction. In a journal entry of 1841 Thoreau had already stressed that reform, for him, was always an individual and not a social or institutional issue (*Journal*, I, p.247). In an early essay entitled "The Service", which was rejected by *The Dial*, he plays on the opposition between an "unwise generation" which puts all the emphasis on outward activities, and a far wiser generation "that builded inward and not outward" (*Reform Papers*, p.4). In his long review

"Paradise (To Be) Regained", he worked out the same opposition of principles in criticizing the wildly utopian projects which one J.A. Etzler had suggested in his book *The Paradise within the Reach of all Men, without Labor, by Powers of Nature and Machinery* (London, 1842). (*Reform Papers*, p. 19-47). Thoreau firmly demanded self-reform as the initial step towards all reform ventures and he rejected outward reforms -and that meant all variations of socially or institutionally instigated amelioration- as the wrong beginning. The gist of his argument is that it is useless to reform nature and circumstances in order to set our lives right, and that we should rather reform ourselves, so that "nature and circumstances will be right" (p.20). "Undoubtedly if we were to reform this outward life truly and thoughtfully", he concedes, "we should find no duty of the inner omitted". But then he adds: "But a moral reform must take place first, and then the necessity of the other will be superseded, and we shall sail and plough by its force alone" (p.45f). Thoreau knows, of course, that this goes against the current of an age of reform-crazy institutions and community prophets: "Alas! this is the crying sin of the age, this want to faith in the prevalence of a man. Nothing can be effected but by one man [. . .] In this matter of reforming the world, we have little faith in corporations; not thus was it first formed" (p.42). But, nevertheless, he sets against these forces of outward-directed reformism his belief in love and faith, or rather faith in love, as the basis of all reform ventures: "Faith, indeed, is all the reform that is needed; it is itself a reform" (p.43). Finally, Thoreau emphasizes that the substance of the whole reform debate reveals itself as the opposition of "paradise within" versus "paradise without" (p.47). *Walden*, as we all know, reverberates with similar ideas that all is well when each man saves himself, and with the message: "Reformer, reform thyself!"

Admittedly, Thoreau's position in the debate over self-reform versus social reform changed drastically in his later years. It was the question of Abolition, the experience of the inefficiency of the opponents to slavery, the frustrated violence that broke out in John Brown, which made the difference. Wendell Glick, in his dissertation *Thoreau and Radical Abolitionism*, has drawn our attention to the fact that only until about 1845 Thoreau believed wholeheartedly in the concept of reform from within¹⁵. In the course of the fif-

ties he began to see that self-reform did not change anything in the matter of slavery, and he began to think more highly of coordinated efforts by pressure groups, reform societies, and militant radicals to instigate actual change, even with the help of force. Thoreau's changing attitude finally found its powerful expression in his lectures and essays in defense of John Brown, which brought him close to celebrating the militant rule of morally inspired and dedicated saints as the only form of government which might bring salvation to mankind¹⁶. However, this is not the stage of Thoreau's thinking which concerns us here. For questions of expansionism did not really come into the picture under the compelling dominance of the slavery issue, whereas at an earlier stage Thoreau had explicitly associated such question with the orientations of a certain type of reform spirit. Consequently, it would be fair to accept the outspoken statements of "Reform and the Reformers" -notwithstanding the complicated genealogy and publication history of this piece (cf. *Reform Papers*, p.379 ff) -as an authentic expression of convictions Thoreau has held in regard to expansionism and the reform spirit.

It is in this essay that he minces no words about the disorientations and the pitfalls of reform enterprises. Inward versus outward, self-reform versus outer reform, are again his key paradigms for right and wrong, and he leaves no doubt as to which model he recommends: "The Reformer who comes recommending any institution or system to the adoption of men, must [. . .] see that he represents one pretty perfect institution in himself, the centre and circumference of all others, an erect man" (p.184). And it is in this essay that Thoreau most clearly points to the frequently overlooked interconnection between the idea of reform and the ideology of American expansionism. In several key passages in which he deals with the dichotomies of inward versus outward, self-reform versus enforced reform of others, he immediately calls upon illustrations from a world of actual expansionist aims and orientations. Thus, in an already quoted passage, he lets his cynical analysis of the motives of the typical reformer be followed by a weirdly prophetic list of spheres of influence (including South America, Asia, the Nez Percés, and the prairies of the West) on which the United States would soon cast its eye in search of worthy expansionist pursuits (p. 183). In a way, Thoreau anticipated the ever

widening range of American expansionism with its intentions of going beyond continental confines in a no-limits approach of reaching out for the Caribbean as "American Mediterranean", the Pacific as *Mare Americanum*, and -William Seward's dream- for Asia and South America¹⁷. He is more than casually aware of the imperialist and materialistic dimensions of many of a missionary venture which pretends to be in the name of political reform and in the best interest of those reformed. Clearly, Thoreau had an inkling that the reform spirit, particularly when it took a continental or an international perspective, was not quite as innocent as it sometimes wanted to appear.

There are also other, equally striking errors of judgement shared by the proponents of expansionism and the reform spirit under the perspective of the inward-outward paradigm. Exploring and exploiting adventurers are westward-bound, whereas they should be home-bound in search of success and riches¹⁸. Quite generally, the expansionist and the political reformer alike tend to take the wrong direction when dealing with the world and their lives:

Most whom I meet in the streets are, so to speak, outward bound, they live out and out, are going and coming, looking before and behind, all out of doors and in the air. I would fain see them inward bound, retiring in and in, farther and farther every day, and when I inquired for them I should not hear, that they had gone abroad anywhere, to Rondont or Sackets Harbor, but that they had withdrawn deeper within the folds of being. (*Reform Papers*, p. 194).

Inward is a direction which no traveller has taken. Inward is the bourn which all travellers seek and from which none desire to return [. . .] Those who dwell in Oregon and the far west are not so solitary as the enterprising and independent thinker, applying his discoveries to his own life. This is the way we would see a man striving with his axe and kettle to take up his abode. To this rich soil should the New Englander wend his way. Here is Wisconsin and the farthest west. It is simple, independent, original, natural life. (*Reform Papers*, p. 193).

What such inversions eventually amount to in Thoreau is, among others, a strong bias against the expansionist spirit on grounds of being hypocritically reformatory, and against the reform spirit on grounds of being effectively expansionist. For Thoreau, the reform spirit all too frequently revealed itself as an attitude close to expansionism in a philosophical sense, for it implied a constant impinging on others, a persistent spreading of the empire of one's own moral and political beliefs

over the territory of other peoples' lives. It was, in effect, the practice of moral and social expansionism holding sway over regions of individual legislation. Vice versa, Thoreau's repugnance against the expansionist drive reveals itself in large measure as an aversion to the missionary pretensions of certain people who elected to mind other peoples' business instead of their own. It was, analogously, an invasion of the others under the pretense of bringing salvation. However, if there was anything Thoreau hated best, it was surely the invasion of his own private realm by others, under whatever given pretense. Consequently, the reformer as expansionist and the expansionist as reformer had to fare badly with him.

We may say, then, that it was the expansionist impulse in reformism, and the reformatory impulse in expansionism which made Thoreau feel uneasy, and that his aversions to American expansionism, far beyond the specifics of his critical stand on actual westward expansion, originated to a large degree from this dialectical interaction of popular concepts of the day. Outward expansion, in this context, seemed futile though it might eventually conquer a continent. What counted, what would further the growth of the individual, and thus eventually enlarge the realm of humanity, was a move in the other direction. These were Thoreau's convictions -at least during long periods of his life. And, given his predilection for paradox, it cannot surprise us that he turned them into patently provocative, yet enlightening concepts such as inward expansion as the only form of expansionism to be safely recommended.

NOTES

1. See in particular Thoreau's essay on "Reform and the Reformers", in *Reform Papers*, 193 ff.
2. "Walking", 224. For Thoreau's praise of the wilderness in this context, see also 226, 232.
3. Lawrence Willson, "The Transcendentalist View of the West", 190 and 188. Willson was the first to discuss extensively this aspect of Thoreau's attitude towards the West. His article was subsequently plagiarized by C.A. Tillinghast in "The West of Thoreau's Imagination: The Development of a Symbol", 42-50. For Thoreau and his "spiritual" concept of the West, see also Edwin Fussell, 175-91, and John Aldrich Christie, *Thoreau as World Traveler*, 104-17. Christie's reading is somewhat different from the others in that

- he argues that "Thoreau's West was of both the spirit and the body, neither one denied, both as real as the Brahma and the woodchuck he found in his own backyard" (117).
4. See "Works Cited" for bibliographical data.
 5. *Walden*, 320. See for almost identical statements, "Reform and the Reformers", in *Reform Papers*, 194 f.
 6. For a somewhat journalistic, highly sarcastic picture of the times as a virtual circus of reform issues, see Grace Adams and Edward Hutter, *The Mad Forties* (New York: Harper, 1942).
 7. For this point see, among others, Norman A. Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific*, 217 f. and 226-28.
 8. See in particular Hans-Ulrich Wehler's equation of expansionism with a form of "Handelsimperialismus", and of the envisioned "Continental Empire" with a "Commercial Empire", in *Der Aufstieg des amerikanischen Imperialismus*, 14 ff. and 9 f.
 9. Ray Allen Billington and Martin Ridge, *Westward Expansion*, 513. Compare in this context also Hans-Ulrich Wehler's formulas: "Kolonisationsmystik", "Sendungsbewusstsein", and "Missionsauftrag". *Der Aufstieg des amerikanischen Imperialismus*, 11 ff.
 10. For a possible genealogy of the interrelation between "progress", "reform", and a "collective sense of mission", see Charles L. Sanford, "Classics of American Reform Literature", 295.
 11. Some of the pieces were previously published in 1866, four years after Thoreau's death, in a collection entitled *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers*. There is little evidence that Thoreau ever planned to publish all pieces included in *Reform Papers* as a separate volume.
 12. See "General Introduction" to *Reform Papers*, 226.
 13. Emerson, "Man the Reformer", in *Nature: Addresses and Lectures*, 228. In all fairness it should be noted that Emerson was not always as blue-eyed when he talked about reformers. For critical views of reformers and the reform spirit, see his "Lectures on the Times" (1841) and "New England Reformers" (1844).
 14. "Reform and the Reformers", 183. Compare also *Walden* (77) for an almost identical statement.
 15. Wendell Glick, *Thoreau and Radical Abolitionism*. For an even stronger statement on Thoreau's change of mind, see Helmut Klumpjan, *Die Politik der Provokation*.
 16. See, among others, Helmut Klumpjan, *Die Politik der Provokation*, 163 ff.
 17. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Der Aufstieg des amerikanischen Imperialismus*, 9 f., 14 ff; Norman A. Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific*, 217 f.
 18. In "Life without Principle" Thoreau writes: "Men rush to California and Australia as if the true gold were to be found in that direction; but that is to go to the very opposite extreme to where it lies. They go prospecting farther and farther away from the true lead, and are most unfortunate when they think themselves most successful. Is not our native soil auriferous?" *Reform Papers*, 165.

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