

MODERN AGE

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The separate ways of John Randolph and Henry Thoreau

Two Types of American Individualism

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OURS IS AN AGE in which individualism is publicly praised and privately snubbed: individual liberty is called the chief goal of all our striving, while at the same time we hear off-stage whispers to the effect that the social cost of individualism is too great a

charge to be borne by a democratic world. Like all questions which give rise to one public attitude and a differing practical procedure, this one may be said to be vital, involving contradictory urges. Individualism is too deeply a part of the heritage we

have been taught to prize to be yielded up easily or thoughtlessly. At the same time our modern world engenders forces which keep it on the defensive and drive it to seek refuge among the interstices of living.

Light can be shed on our problem by examining two types of American individualism, each of which has had a major prophet. One of the types is not now, and I think never was, a feasible form of individualism, though there is something about it which fascinates a part of our nature. The other is not only feasible but is today very much needed, when the forces of regimentation and the example of totalitarianism are threatening to sweep away every principle of distinction that stands in their path.

What I am going to propose will be a transvaluation of values, in which a figure now rather obscure and deprecated will be presented for the lesson he has to teach, and another figure illustrious and much lauded will be criticized. However, before even mentioning the names I shall be dealing with, I will offer a quotation which serves well as a prologue to the general problem. Reinhold Niebuhr has written that there are two ways "of denying our responsibilities to our fellow men. There is the way of imperialism, seeking to dominate them by our power. The other is the way of isolationism, seeking to withdraw from our responsibilities to them." It is my purpose to study two characters from the American past who exemplify in their lives and their thought different responses to this exorable situation. Niebuhr was expressing a dilemma which arises perennially out of the question of the individual's degree of commitment to society. One way to meet a dilemma, as logic tells us, is to seize a horn; that is, to accept one of the alternatives offered but to cast doubt on the causal reasoning which underlies it. This was the method attempted by Henry David Thoreau, whom I am citing as one of the

two major prophets, in the bulk of his social philosophy. Thoreau stood for individual isolation, but failed to see the consequences. Another way of meeting a dilemma is to slip between the horns, which means to find a third alternative without the painful consequences of the other two. The exponent of that method was John Randolph of Roanoke, now a half legendary figure, termed a "political fantastic" by one of his recent biographers and called a dangerous person by another critic, yet a figure of unique interest to one who has studied his career. Randolph stood with equal firmness against imperialism, especially in its disguised form of government welfarism, but he found an alternative to this and to simple withdrawal. I shall take up my examples in the order in which they appeared on the world's stage.

Randolph, like many of the class to which he belonged, was born on an ancestral estate, "Cawsons," near Petersburg, Virginia, on the eve of the Revolution. He grew up a member of the gentry at a time when, in the words of an early biographer, "the gentry gave law to the state, and the state gave law to the Confederacy." From his early years he was filled with a restive spirit, so that his education shows a great deal of shifting about. A brief attendance at a grammar school in Virginia, a year at Princeton, less than two years at Columbia, and a few weeks at William and Mary gave him a kind of educational odyssey. This was followed by three years of reading law under his uncle, Edmund Randolph, who was Washington's attorney-general.

The earliest vivid picture we have of Randolph comes during his first public speech, in which his opponent was none other than the aging Patrick Henry, then making his farewell appearance. Henry had in the meanwhile aligned himself with the Federalists, and Randolph attacked him in

a three-hour argument defending states' rights. The great orator of the Revolution did not reply, but later he addressed this advice to his youthful opponent: "My son, I have somewhat to say unto thee . . . keep justice, keep truth, and you will live to think differently." But Henry was wrong in the prophecy. Randolph never came to think differently. "He was," says his biographer Joseph Glover Baldwin, "the most consistent of all the politicians that ever lived in the republic"—a judgment which may well stand today, a hundred years after it was made.

The defense of states' rights in this maiden speech is the key to Randolph's political career and to his political philosophy. One may say political philosophy because whereas other leaders, North as well as South, rallied behind local autonomy when some special interest of their section or region seemed menaced, Randolph upheld it in every case in which the issue ever arose, whether the threat seemed great or small, near or remote. In the course of his famous debate with Hayne, Daniel Webster was to taunt the opposition with the question: "Does consistency consist merely of casting negative votes?" In the case of Randolph it almost may be said to have done so; he was probably the greatest oppositionist that ever appeared in Congress, but his opposition was to a consistent trend which he saw as carrying the nation away from republican principles, which in his mind constituted the anchor of liberty.

Elected to Congress at the age of twenty-six, he held his seat for fourteen years, or until 1813, when he lost it as a result of opposing the War of 1812—another of his many stands of opposition. He was an ardent Jeffersonian, but he broke with Jefferson on a number of issues during the latter's second administration. He drew further and further away from Jefferson's doctrinaire democracy. Back in Congress in

1815, he spent the rest of his career in dogged fights against all nationalizing tendencies, especially the tariff and the national bank. When he learned that Madison had signed the bill incorporating the Bank of the United States, he expressed himself in a typical burst of rhetoric, the qualities of which I shall discuss later. True to his principle, he was denying that this power lay within the national government.

Sir, if I cannot give reason to the committee, they shall at least have authority. Thomas Jefferson, then in the vigor of his intellect, was one of the persons who denied the existence of such powers—James Madison was another. He, in that masterly and unrivalled report in the legislature of Virginia, which is worthy to be the textbook of every American statesman, has settled this question. For me to attempt to add anything to the arguments of that paper, would be to attempt to gild refined gold—to paint the lily—to throw a perfume on the violet—to smooth the ice—to add another hue unto the rainbow—in every aspect of it, wasteful and ridiculous excess. Neither will I hold up my farthing rush-light to the blaze of that meridian sun. But, Sir, I cannot but deplore—my heart aches when I think of it—that the hand which erected that monument of political wisdom, should have signed the act to incorporate the present Bank of the United States.

An episode near the end of his career throws special illumination upon the spirit of the whole of it. In the election of 1828, Randolph supported Jackson for the presidency and was thereafter rewarded with the post of Minister to Russia. (Just why Jackson picked Randolph to go to Russia is a matter for curious speculation. A sardonic interpreter might suggest that what Jackson really wanted was to get him out of the country.) At any rate, ill

health caused him to resign that post after a short tenure, and he returned to the United States to face profound disillusionment with the new president. There had been nothing to indicate that Jackson was opposed to states' rights. He had certainly been elected by states' rights supporters, and he had campaigned against the policies of Adams and Clay, which had operated to give more power to the general government. Then came the controversy over nullification.

South Carolina, opposing the tariff laws of 1828 and 1832, passed an ordinance declaring them null and void for that state. This was the sharpest conflict between federal and state authority which had yet appeared in the forty-odd years of the republic. President Jackson, as is well known, asserted the federal power, made preparations for the use of force, and even threatened to hang the nullifiers. This development came like a thunderbolt to Randolph, who now saw the supposed champion of states' rights utilizing the most naked sort of coercion to suppress the action of a sovereign state. The centripetal tendency—the tendency toward centralization—which he had fought for three decades now, was showing itself more ominously than ever before. At this time Randolph was within a year of his death and in a very failing condition. But he had himself lifted into his carriage and went about his old district addressing the people and asking them to support resolutions against the President's proclamation. In one speech he brought in the name of Henry Clay—his old political enemy, with whom he had fought a duel many years before. "There is one man and one man only," he said, "who can save this Union. That man is Henry Clay. I know he has the power, I believe he will be found to have the patriotism and firmness equal to the occasion."

How much effect Randolph's campaign

had upon the final outcome one can only conjecture. The outcome was a compromise, brought about in fact by Clay, who once more used his peculiar talent for composing differences to resolve a crisis. A compromise bill was passed, the principle of protectionism was discarded, the tariffs were reduced, and South Carolina remained uninviolated.

If I have sketched this episode at some length, it is to stress a salient feature of Randolph's political philosophy. As a defender of the dignity and autonomy of the smaller unit, he was constantly fighting the battle for local rights. But it was the essence of his position that the battle must be fought within the community, not outside the community and not through means that would in effect deny all political organization. By instinct Randolph was perhaps a secessionist—every individualist is a secessionist in regard to many things. Individualism is a rejection of presumptive control from without. But Randolph never lost sight of the truth expressed in Aristotle's dictum that man is a political animal. His individualism is, therefore, what I am going to call "social bond" individualism. It battles unremittingly for individual rights, while recognizing that these have to be secured within the social context. This last gesture of his life was symbolic: Randolph rushed to the defense of South Carolina, but called upon his old opponent and enemy Henry Clay—Clay the Westerner, the nationalist, the advocate of the "American System"—to save the situation. Not because he desired either Clay or the system, but because this seemed the *political* desperate remedy. The point I seek to make is that Randolph could not visualize men's solving political questions through simple self-isolation. Throughout the controversy he declared himself opposed to nullification, which would have been simple unilateral action.

Going back a few years in his career, we find a rare anomaly when we discover Randolph, with his pronounced localist views, lecturing New England upon the unwisdom of seceding from the Union. But less than two decades before the crisis over nullification, he had appealed to the "erring sisters" of the Northeast not to withdraw from the partnership of 1789. The New England secessionist movement had its climax in the Hartford Convention, an episode well known to students of American history as the first seriously meditated step toward the setting up of an independent confederacy. During the War of 1812 New England had suffered grievously under the Embargo Act and in general had found the war adverse to her interests. In 1814 a group of her leaders assembled at Hartford for the purpose of making a separate peace treaty with England, withdrawing from the United States, and organizing a New England nation. At least those steps were in contemplation. At that time Randolph addressed a letter to a prominent New England senator, having been advised that "his admonitions would receive their just consideration." A few quotations will convey its thought and sentiment.

It belongs to New England to say whether she will constitute a portion, an important and highly respected portion of this nation, or whether she will dwindle into that state of insignificant nominal independence, which is the precarious curse of the minor kingdoms of Europe. A separation made in the fullness of time, the effect of amicable arrangements, may prove mutually beneficial to both parties: such would have been the effect of American independence, if the British ministry could have listened to any suggestion but that of their impotent rage; but a settled hostility, embittered by the keenest recollections, must be the result of a disunion

between you and us, under the present circumstances.

For, with every other man of common sense, I have always regarded union as a means of liberty and safety; in other words, of happiness, and not as an end to which these are to be sacrificed. When I exhort to further patience—to constitutional means of redress only, I know that there is such a thing as tyranny as well as oppression; and that there is no government, however restricted in its power, that may not, by abuse, under pretext of exercise of its constitutional authority, drive its unhappy subjects to desperation.

Randolph's theory of how such disagreements could be resolved is clearly indicated in the closing passage.

Our Constitution is an affair of compromise between the states, and this is the master-key which unlocks all its difficulties. If any of the parties to the compact are dissatisfied with their share of influence, it is an affair of amicable discussion, in the mode pointed out by the constitution itself, but no cause for dissolving the confederacy.

This provides another interesting view of Randolph's theory of the obligation of the smaller unit to the larger. In one part of his irascible nature he was a Hotspur of Hotspurs, inclined to cavil over the fraction of a hair when he discerned an issue. But in another part he was a man of prudential wisdom, which is to say, political wisdom. Nowhere in this letter does he say that New England's secession would be unconstitutional. He can even imagine a situation, involving tyranny and subjection, where it might have to be undertaken. What he is urging is that now in present circumstances it would be very unwise. And this would be his estimate in any normal situation. His theory of politics did

not favor simple withdrawal as a solution. This was a renunciation of political privilege rather than the exercise of it. With all his individualism and eccentric bearing, he had too strong a sense of the social bond to see it as a practical recourse, unless things got so out of joint that subjection was the only alternative. As we shall find later, what Randolph saw as a last and a problematical choice, Thoreau was inclined to see as a first step.

At any rate, for Randolph as a politically conscious person, the fight should be waged within the whole and not outside it in some undefinable or ambiguous position. On the other hand, he was equally unyielding in his opposition to surrendering local rights out of veneration for some super political organism called a "union" or "nation." His whole course was in a direction away from this, and now we must ask how the two positions can be reconciled. His theory of remaining within the whole while maintaining local rights, I will suggest, rested upon what military people call "defense in depth" and what political theorists call "dispersal of power"—two names for the same kind of principle in different realms. The essential feature of it is that the further one tries to encroach against local autonomy, the more difficult it is to make headway. In military language again, the depth of the resistance devitalizes the attack. It is left relatively easy to carry the outer works, but the next barrier is more difficult, and the next still more so, and so on. And the smaller and more cohesive the unit, the greater the discretionary power it has. As Randolph used the principle in practice, he fell back first upon what might be called sectional solidarity. The next line of defense was the state. How far back could the defense actually go? This is a question I think he deliberately would not have answered. In his view it would have been one of those "theoretic

speculations," the sort of question which would have appealed to dialecticians, of whom he was openly scornful. It was enough to have the working principle for use against the large, abstract, and uncomprehending force from the outside. Yet I think we might in a way answer it for him. The defense could never fall back as far as the single individual. Men have to work in some kind of concert. It is well if general objectives can be broad, and we should recall his appeal to New England not to allow the United States to be overthrown or dismembered by a common enemy. Yet it is important too for local jurisdictions to be equipped with a stout defense. In our traditional practice, it could be pointed out, we do fall back as far as the jury unit, whereby a small number of local people decide whether or not a man has been in violation of the law.

Randolph was personally involved in one of the dominant issues of the time, and we can test further the consistency of his theory by considering how he stood on slavery. Like many Virginians of his class, he was the inheritor of Negro slaves, there being over three hundred on his lands. In 1819 he wrote a will, of which this was one of the opening clauses:

I give to my slaves their freedom, to which my conscience tells me they are justly entitled. It has a long time been a matter of the deepest regret to me that the circumstances under which I inherited them and the obstacles thrown in the way by the laws of the land, have prevented my emancipating them in my lifetime, which it is my full intention to do, in case I can accomplish it.

Two years later he wrote another will; again among the opening clauses were the following:

I give and bequeath all my slaves their

freedom, heartily regretting that I have ever been the owner of one.

I give my ex'or a sum not exceeding eight thousand dollars, or as much thereof as may be necessary to transport and settle said slaves to and in some other State or territory of the U.S., giving to all above the age of forty not less than ten acres of land each.

Randolph wrote later wills—there were signs of mental unbalance near the close of his life—but it was this will, the will of 1821, which he affirmed on his deathbed and which the Virginia Court of Appeals eventually declared to be John Randolph's true will.

It is not the purpose of this citation to make Randolph appear a philanthropist, which he was not. The very mention of that word probably would have uncorked those sources of abusive eloquence which he possessed in such abundance. The point of interest for this exposition is that at the very time he was writing out the emancipation of his slaves he was deeply involved in the Missouri Question, trying to bring Missouri into the Union as a slave state.

He took an extensive part in the debates, making speeches of three and four hours, but they may be boiled down to this essence: Missouri had a right to be admitted as a slave state, and Congress did not have a right to pass on the constitutionality of its constitution. Only the electoral college had this right, he maintained (and we may note again the dispersal of authority).

Now, the superficial inquirer might ask, what becomes of his much-praised consistency? He manumits slaves with one hand and with the other he seeks to extend the slave territory. But this inconsistency dissolves when we look again at his major political premise. Matters of this kind must be dealt with by those who bear the impact of the responsibility. At the bottom was his

theory of the necessity of a homogeneous basis of government. "Government to be safe and to be free," he said, "must consist of representatives having a common interest and a common feeling with the represented." This is the authentic Randolph note. Common interest was the final justification of government, the source of the means of operation, the assurance that it would not become perverted or despotic. Rightly or wrongly in this case, Randolph believed that other forces were the prime movers in the attempt to make the admission of Missouri a critical question. He saw a struggle for sectional dominance carried on by men personally far removed from the institution, but sensing in the feeling against slavery a strong horse to hitch to their wagon. He even declared that he did not believe in the sincerity of the professions of most of them. Yet the crucial issue for him lay in the relation of power to those being affected. And this is always the crucial question for the anti-imperialist.

This interesting story has a sequel, which should not be omitted here. Owing to a long period of litigation, it was the mid-Forties before those charged with executing Randolph's will were in position to carry out its terms. Then Judge William Leigh, one of the executors, bought 3200 acres of land in Mercer County, Ohio, with the object of settling 400 freed negroes upon small farms. But the Midwest was at that time very anti-Negro, and the inhabitants of the county forcibly prevented the Negroes from taking up residence. My sources do not tell what ultimately became of them.

Randolph deserves to be called a political conservative individualist for two reasons which I hope by now are apparent: his belief in the limited though real role of government, and his defense of the smaller but "natural" unit against the larger one which pretends a right to rule.

Closely related to Randolph's political conservatism was his scorn of what he called dialectic. He was not always precise or knowing in his use of this term, but what we actually find in his discourse, if our attention is not diverted by the surface brilliance of the language, is a classical instance of the rhetor, or the master of rhetoric, contending against his enemies. Now the enemy of the rhetor is the dialectician. What I am saying here is to make a point, though it is only half true. As Aristotle maintained, rhetoric and dialectic are counterparts, each one needing the other. But rhetoric and dialectic may become dangerously separated, and then the users of them become enemies ceasing to help each other as both strive to go it alone. In this event the dialectician becomes the mere abstract reasoner, and the rhetorician becomes a dealer in sensational appeals. The one ceases to recognize circumstances, which are somewhat determinative in all historical questions. The other ceases to refer his facts to controlling principles and ideals. For the first there are a good many jocular epithets, of which "egghead" is a modern instance; to the latter the term "demagogue" is most widely applied. Kant observed that concepts without percepts are empty, and percepts without concepts are blind. This will define the two opposed positions.

Randolph thought he discerned among his enemies mere dialecticians; that is, men willing to crucify the conclusions of history and common sense upon some cross of logic. When he felt this way about the opposition, he went on with his usual impetuosity to attack the method of dialectic. Though these attacks are fragmentary and tend to be outbursts rather than careful analyses, they provide an exciting case of the rhetorician assailing the method of his counterpart. The focus of his attack was this: the direction of the state should never be given

to a mere dialectician, whose habit of mind incapacitates him for dealing with affairs of public concern and urgency. In a speech replying to Senator Everett of Massachusetts, he turned to the subject thus:

There is a class of men who possess great learning, combined with inveterate professional habits, and who are, *ipso facto*, or perhaps I should rather say *ipsis factis* (for I must speak accurately as I speak before a Professor) disqualified for any but secondary parts anywhere. . . .

The mind of an accomplished and acute dialectician, of an able lawyer, or, if you please, of a great physician, may, by the long continuance of one pursuit—of one train of ideas—have its habits so inveterately fixed, as effectually to disqualify the possessor for the command of the councils of a country.

A man may be capable of making an able and ingenious argument on any subject within the sphere of his knowledge; but, sir, every now and then the master sophist will start, as I have seen him start, at the monstrous conclusions to which his own artificial reason had brought himself.

Thus a great diplomatist, like a certain animal, oscillating between the hay on different sides of him, wants some power from without, before he can decide from which bundle to make a trial.

But rhetoric and history go hand in hand. The rhetorician always speaks out of historical consciousness because his problems are existential ones.

The fact that Randolph is here employing a rhetoric of an energetic kind must not blind us to the realization that he is addressing himself to a deep-lying problem. The problem of whether subtle reasoners, who leave out the kind of knowledge and consciousness that I am placing under

rhetoric, should be permitted the direction of practical affairs, where their decisions must involve many other people, returns on various occasions to perplex us.

Randolph's style of thought and utterance was that of the statesman—rhetorician rather than the dialectician. This is to say, he did not pass through methodical trains of reasoning, but dived at once to his concluding proposition and tried to make it vivid with illustration. He did not rely upon drawn-out logic for his persuasiveness, but rather upon "the world's body" made real and impressive through concrete depiction.

In gathering up the significance of his style, we can profitably attend to some points made by his biographer Baldwin.

His conclusions did not wait upon long and labored inductions. His mind, as by an instinctive insight, darted at once upon the core of the subject, and sprung, with an electric leap, upon the conclusion. He started where most reasoners end. It is a mistake to suppose that he was deficient in argumentative power. He was as fertile in imagination as most speakers; he was only deficient in argumentative forms. His statements were so clear, so simplified and so vivid, that they saved him much of the laborious process of argumentation. Much that looked like declamation was only illustration, another form of argument.

"He started where most reasoners end."

This may well be the text that opens up the true view of Randolph's mind. And now it begins to appear that whereas logic and dialectic are the method of the scientist and the democrat, intuition is the method of the artist and—despite the unpopularity of the word, I must use it—of the aristocrat. A dependence upon mere logic seems to be the habit of those who are afraid of the act of divination; and 'wisdom is a kind of divi-

nation.' I would add that divination sometimes takes the form of recognizing the universal in the single instance. The direct approach springs from those aristocratic qualities of self-confidence and simplicity. Anyone may possess the intuitive type of mind, but when he does, he is prone to be impatient of those redundancies which consist of spelling out a logical process. For him the process is too mechanical, and it is even likely to substitute means for ends. This is the ground for saying that the aristocratic mind is anti-scientific and anti-analytical. It is concerned more with the status of being than with the demonstrable relationship of parts.

So, with simple directness, men of this habit move to their conclusion, and their argument consists of demonstration with all the forms, colors, and pressures of the actual situation. The method is not so much a begging of the question as it is a dealing with the conclusion in historical and poetical ways. Such a mind comes to wrestle at once with the true objects of rhetoric, the impulses of attraction or aversion that form men's passions.

Such, in part, was the mind of John Randolph. An ultra-individualist, he began his career by breaking a lance with Patrick Henry and ended it by tilting against Andrew Jackson. A defender of states' rights and of the original philosophy of the constitution, he adhered to its tenets "even after they had been abandoned by the fathers of the church," to quote the inimitable Baldwin again. He was a follower neither of men's opinions nor their fortunes, and he did not feel that a bold utterance needed apology. He was the kind of person who feels that he must be right because he knows that he is a great man. There is great potential danger in this, but there is also power. In some men the feeling is productive of conceit and blindness, but in others it is the very substance of proof without

which the forms of logic are but dry perfections.

II

TO SOME PERSONS it will seem an impudence to link the names of John Randolph and Henry David Thoreau. The former has not gone down as a thinker, although his reputation does something less than justice to his actual power of thought. He was a political figure, who left no body of writings to serve as texts for future generations. So far has the tide of opinion receded from Randolph's position that only occasionally is he resurrected by some scholar of special interest, as by Russell Kirk in his recent *Randolph of Roanoke*.

With Thoreau it is altogether the other way around. His name is writ very large in American literature. He is the bachelor of nature, the chaste and ethereal spirit of the Concord group. His *Walden* survives as a literary classic. A steady flow of monographs about him appears in the scholarly journals. In politics he was the teacher of an extreme philosophical radicalism, the inspirer of Gandhi and other revolutionaries. But let me emphasize that this is a study of individualism, and where that is the center of interest, the two men can justly be considered together. Here in fact are two powerful individualists, living at a time when our American culture was beginning to form. Both thought a great deal about the relation of the individual to the state, and both carried on a more or less continual warfare with the government in power. Both were great "nay" sayers in the Carlylean sense; and they were fond of hard sayings, or of expressions so bold that

the underlying principles were immediately revealed.

Since Thoreau is a far better known figure than Randolph, a few biographical facts may serve as reminders. He was born in 1817 in Concord, of an ancestry that included English, Scottish, and French strains. From early youth he came to know the delights of fields and woods. He entered Harvard in 1833 and there led a rather seclusive life, preferring an alcove in the library to the company and sports of his fellows. When he graduated, one biographer has noted, he was far from the head of the class, but he was probably the best read member of it. After Harvard, he taught school in several places. In 1839, when he was twenty-two, Thoreau made with his brother John a trip on the Connecticut and Merrimack rivers, which was to be the subject of one of the two books published in his lifetime. It was on the Fourth of July, 1845, that he took up his residence in the hut at Walden Pond. This experiment in living apart from civilization, continued until September, 1847, was to furnish the subject of one of the famous books not merely of American literature but of literature in English. Following the Walden experience, Thoreau moved back to his father's house on the main street of Concord and there supported himself with the family's inherited business of pencil making.

Meanwhile *Walden* was being written, though it was not published until 1854. Shortly after its publication, Thoreau developed symptoms of tuberculosis, and the remainder of his life was largely a battle against ill health. His last effort to mold the public opinion of his time was made in 1859, when he championed the cause of John Brown after the famous raid. He spent his last months confined to a sick-room, and his life came to an end in 1862.

before he had attained his forty-fifth birthday.

An analysis of how Thoreau arrived at his theory of individualism may well begin with the kind of impression that he makes upon a reader today. The English critic Holbrook Jackson, in an essay meant to be appreciative, has what seems a discerning estimate of him.

Thoreau's weakness is that he cannot trust his more concrete concepts or even his own abundant common sense. He feels a need to idealize and to intellectualize, and in doing so he is in danger of missing the life he so abundantly seeks. The curious thing is that he knows idealism leads inevitably to disappointment—but he persuades himself it is the real and not the ideal which has let him down. . . . His friends rarely live up to his illusion of them, so he tries to remember them only as ideals. . . . The finite and temporal leave him with an "unsatisfied yearning."

Now when one looks deeply or analytically into what goes on in his writing, this proves to be a remarkably accurate diagnosis. For what we find is that Thoreau belongs to that class of dialecticians which Randolph so anathematized. He is not a complete one—but he is a good enough one to get into trouble. This fact alone will explain why, with all his resources and all his charms, he is so often found out on a limb—that is, taking a position which is not merely unpopular but is actually untenable. The clearest example of this tendency appears in the celebrated essay "Civil Disobedience." Here by the operation of a dialectical movement both man and the state are refined out of existence; they are made into ideological constructs quite adapted to their author's play of fancy, but out of all relationship to history. It is simple to place man beyond the effect of

such things as taxation and slavery if one de-incarnates him. Still, a criticism thus sweeping of so famous a document needs some defense.

The progression of thought in "Civil Disobedience" is reducible to a very neat scheme. Thoreau does not follow the scheme consecutively, but no one reading the essay need miss the stages. It is a dialectical progression toward the author's ideal, which is finally offered very winningly, but in complete isolation from the facts of life. In Thoreau's vision there are four levels of man, each one transcending the one below it in a movement upward toward a kind of ineffable purism. At the bottom, of course, is the slave. The slave is the most degraded form of man because he is a mere instrumentality. The slave does not even own his own will; his status is one of complete deprivation. He is the nether pole from which the ascension upward begins.

Somewhat higher but still in a deprived condition is man as subject. Subjection too is a degraded state, implying limitation of the will of the subject and of course his inequality with the ruler. It is in this class which Thoreau puts the U.S. Marines, against whom he declaims so forcefully at the beginning of the essay. The Marine is depicted as a man "made with black arts" and as "a mere shadow and reminiscence of humanity." The Marine is not owned outright, but he is in a subjection almost as servile as the slave when he carries out the bidding of the state, according to Thoreau.

Above the subject is the citizen, characteristically of a democratic or popular state. He has achieved considerable freedom and dignity, since he is a participant in government, and he may be said in a sense to rule himself. Still, he is not free with a complete freedom. He is involved with things like elections and laws, and he has the problem of what to do about the

decisions of majorities when they are repugnant to him. He has the problem of his conscience.

Consequently there has to be a higher level still, and this is represented by man as an apotheosized being, who does not need the state, to whom the laws are only impedimenta, and who will discharge all of his duties out of an inner enlightenment. He may live a neighbor to the state, but he will not be embraced by it; he has matured beyond requiring anything it can do for him, and so he lives in a philosophical anarchy.

This final creature is not, of course, historical man, but an idealized figment more abstract, I submit, than that produced by any other philosopher. Yet it must be obvious that Thoreau, in dealing with the problem of human existence, has left the task conspicuously uncompleted. It is no difficult work to imagine man freed of all his intractable qualities and then to say of what remains, "This is man." We are indeed thankful to those who have furnished us with ideals. But there lies ahead the task of conceiving how this or any ideal is going to be conditioned by historical existence, and then of saying something helpful about how this conditioned being can live, cooperate, and compete in a civil order. Here, I am afraid, Thoreau is not so much a philosopher as a philosopher on a holiday. He is letting his thoughts follow his wishes and turning his gaze away from recalcitrant reality. It is characteristic of a dialectic not respectful of the facts to lead away from the existential world.

The same kind of dialectical exercise is performed upon the state. Here we find a similar ascension by stages from a lowest level to something existing out of this world. At the lowermost level is absolute monarchy, or despotism, where people are essentially in the condition of slaves. Next above this is limited monarchy, which rests

upon subjects. Above this is democracy, whose members are free men, taking part in self-government but still under pressure to obey and conform. Thoreau asks rhetorically at the end of the essay: "Is democracy, as we know it, the last improvement possible in government?" The expected answer prepares for his vision of the state conceived on a higher plane "which can afford to be just to all men," respecting their individuality and leaving them alone. This would indeed be a *politeia en ouranōi*, "a polity existing in heaven," in a sense more ideal than Plato's.

At the close of his narrative of the night he spent in prison (he was put in jail on one occasion for not having paid his poll tax) Thoreau gives an account of leaving the state—the political state—which is charming on the literal level and meaningful on the symbolic one. He writes:

When I was let out next morning, I proceeded to finish my errand, and having put on my mended shoe, joined a huckleberry party, who were impatient to put themselves under my conduct, and in half an hour—for the horse was soon tackled—was in the midst of a huckleberry field, on one of our highest hills, two miles off, and then the State was nowhere to be seen.

"The state was nowhere to be seen" is the clue. It was thus simple for Thoreau to place himself physically where that physical embodiment of the state, the jail in which he had just spent a night, was no longer visible. And the force of the image implies that any man can proceed to a height where the state will no longer offend his vision.

So, it is easy to mount the dialectical ladder until one has a beatific vision, but in the meantime the earth has dropped from view. Yet it is precisely the earth,

with its thickness and stubbornness, that the political thinker has to cope with.

There occur several lesser examples of abuse of the dialectical method, so that one can safely say that this is the characteristic defect of Thoreau's process of argument. Near the beginning, to cite one more interesting example, we are met with this statement: "That government is best which governs not at all." This is of course the position he arrived at in the sequence of reasoning just noted at some length. Here, however, we are brought to it in a different way, and a way very revealing of a method. The starting point is a proposition that a standing army is an evil thing. Now a standing army, it is made to appear, is but a species (an "arm") of the genus "standing government," and therefore "standing government" is an evil thing. It is a relationship of implication. What can be predicated of the part can be predicated of the whole. What involves the one must necessarily involve the other. If we reject the idea of a standing army, then we must reject the idea of a standing government. So we are propelled along by the force of the dialectical implication from the acceptance of a fair-seeming proposition to the acceptance of one that is dubious. Those commonsense perceptions which tell us that, while a standing army and a standing government may have some points of resemblance, they are not identical, have been omitted.

Furthermore, Thoreau is working here from a premise still more dubious, which is that man is a kind of creature who should never be visited with coercion, either by a thing called an army or a thing called a government. History is unanimous that however enticing this may be as a thought, it is not realizable in this world. At the very lowest estimate, society always produces a few individuals who have nothing but scorn for the common morality and who will recklessly and even gleefully in-

vade the rights of others. For them, coercion is inescapable. That is why we are again forced to conclude that Thoreau is not talking about real men in the real world.

These defects in reasoning are accompanied by what might be called a defect of temperament which has serious consequences for his over-all case. Despite his sometimes skillful use of dialectic to make a specific point, he is not consistent in his attitude toward the state, but seems to shift ground as if by whimsy. In "Civil Disobedience" particularly, he is first here and then there in his stand on the subject of government. At the very opening he professes that he is not a "no government" man; he only wants a better government. Not only is this in contradiction with the dialectical conclusion of the general argument, where government is made to vanish away, but it also conflicts with his expressed readiness to secede at once as an individual, which would of course produce "no government." His position is neither one of continued membership in the state nor definite withdrawal from it; he seems to move from one to another of these depending on the degree of vexation he is feeling at the moment. Seen from one point of view, he admits "even this state and this American government are, in many respects, very admirable and rare things, to be thankful for." And he says further, "I will cheerfully obey those who know and can do better than I, and in many things those who neither know nor can do so well." These statements, however, are nullified by other professions. "The very constitution of the state is the evil," he declares. Yet "it is not my business to be petitioning the Governor or the legislature any more than it is their business to petition me." And finally, "As for adopting the ways the state has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways. They

take too much time and a man's life will be gone. I came into the world not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad." There is no way of overlooking the fact that this is effectually a repudiation of the responsibility, acknowledged earlier, for improving the condition of things. It is indeed a pose of moral indifferentism, quite out of harmony with most that he has been professing right along, and of course incapable of maintenance. This attitude seems to express the feeling of one who sees that the problem is really insoluble on the grounds that he has taken.

When Thoreau decided not to pay the church levy, he prepared this formal statement: "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." Later he added that he would resign from all the societies he had never joined if he had been able to find a complete list of them. Would this include the political society of which he was born a citizen? Now whether an individual can be born a member of a church is perhaps an arguable question. But that a man is born a member of the state which protects and nurtures him is a practically universal concession. There is no original "social compact" which he signs for admission to citizenship. His living under the laws and customs of the state is regarded as evidence of his membership, of his participation in the social union. Thoreau's solution, however, points in the direction of a complete severance of the social bond, which would permit him to become apolitical and hermitic. There is a concealed note of arrogance in his assertion that he came into the world to live in it; this goes too far, to say the least, toward assuming that one is the author of his own being. Thoreau dwells almost not at all on one half of the story, which is how much Cam-

bridge and Concord helped him to become what he was. They supplied education, such companionship as he chose to avail himself of, conveniences such as the shoe repair shop which he had just patronized, and other things which can exist only when men live within the "social bond." It is hardly a fair return for this to say to society, 'a plague upon you, for your difficulties are many, and they get in the way of the untroubled life I would like to lead.'

The long-continuing power of this essay, and I do not underrate its fascination, proceeds from the natural delight we take in haughtiness toward the state and in that spirit of independence we recognize in anyone who says he is going to make his conscience his guide, come what may. But an analysis not prejudiced by Thoreau's great reputation must regard this, I am afraid, as an example of high but irresponsible thinking. To be responsible one must take cognizance of all the facts and realities—and one must be patient. Whenever it suits Thoreau not to deal with realities, he puts them aside, or on a lower plane of existence. To cite an example from another source, in his "Life Without Principle" he says, "What is called politics is something so superficial and inhuman that, practically, I have never fairly recognized that it concerns me at all." This way of bowing out may bring comfort, but then comfort is seductive; it is with the complete picture that the political counsellor has to deal. For him there is no abdication of that responsibility through homilies upon the nature of man fictionalized. That course is political fantasy, not a consideration of the *conditio humana*, and what this condition entails. When Randolph wrote out the emancipation of his slaves, he made economic provision for them. In Thoreau's anti-slavery papers one looks in vain for a single syllable about how or on what the freedmen

were to live. The matter for him began and ended with taking a moral stance.

An anarchic individualism coming down through a transformed Calvinism in the shape of an otherworldliness thus meets us in the pages of the Concord sage. His prescription is defective because it does not recognize both the driving forces and the inertia which cause human beings to behave as they do. A dissenter from dissent even in New England, he diverged thus far from that conception of man as a whole which underlies Ciceronian humanism and the later development of Catholic Christianity.

Of that tradition Randolph, even the crotchety, eccentric Randolph, is plainly the heir. His attitude was one of scorn for those who evade reality. His tactic in dealing with an evil was to hold it up in all its repulsiveness and then urge that something be done to overcome it. If time permitted, I could instance this well from his speech on the great Yazoo Land Frauds Case. Thoreau's tactic was to avert his gaze from it, or ignore it. Here I speak more literally than might at first be supposed. At the time of Fort Sumter, Thoreau was writing to a friend that the best thing to do—the only thing to do—was to ignore it, that being “the most fatal . . . weapon you can direct against evil.” If you know of an evil, then you are “*particeps criminis*”—a partaker in the crime. Therefore one should not read the newspapers or the President's messages; one should keep himself pure by not hearing of these things. Surely this is one of the most curious positions ever taken.

It is possible that I have given credit for more than is due to Randolph's genius or native power of thought. Possibly he was not so much a political genius as a man kept on the right path by his tradition. He was born to politics and perhaps he was saved from errancy by his tradition. I am

at least willing to consider this as an alternative explanation. But this calls for looking more closely at what that tradition was.

The tradition which shaped Randolph's thinking had preserved a belief in the dualism of man's nature. He did not, of course, get it directly from Catholic Christianity, by which it has been most widely taught, but rather from his reading of the classics and from that Anglican Christianity which was widely diffused throughout his part of Virginia. He had been baptized in the Church of England. After a long period of indifference he was reconverted about 1818. In writing to his friend Dr. Brockenborough, he attributed his apostasy to a dislike of “prelatical pride and puritanical preciseness.” The phrase “puritanical preciseness” could well include, I think, those extremes which can be reached by a dialectical kind of thinking which leaves out the matrix of circumstances in which issues are found.

At any rate, Randolph appears a Christian humanist to the extent that he accepted the earthly part while making profession of that spiritual part which owes a transcendental allegiance. In politics both practical and theoretic he was a conservator, distrustful, on principle, of innovations. But even conservation demands some measure of renewal; and his principle of “wise and masterly inactivity,” which he urged upon all governors, and his advice never to disturb anything which is at rest must be taken as emphasizing his dislike of restless change. In this matter of reform especially he stands in contrast with the great New England individualist. Randolph's vision of reform is social, and it is anti-millennial. Though he was possibly unaware of it, he was in the mainstream of the thinking of patristic Christianity on this subject. Change by reform is Christian; change by revolution is not. The Christian philosophy of reform firmly rejects millenarianism, or

the idea that perfection can be realized on this earth. Neither man nor society can be perfected in this life; progress toward perfection is the ground of renewal and the measure of reform. This Thoreau ignores in many a fine gesture, but Randolph kept it steadily in view throughout one of the most singular political careers in our history.

I mentioned at the outset that this would be a transvaluation of values. The half-mad Virginia statesman appears, at least in the light of this exposition, a safer source of political inspiration than Thoreau. There is no need to grow uneasy over detraction from Thoreau. His powers of description and that peculiar intimacy with which he entered into nature will leave him always as one of our distinguished writers. But if we are interested in rescuing individualism in this age of conformity and actual regimentation, it is the Randolphian kind which we must seek to cultivate. Social bond individualism is civil and viable and constructive except perhaps in very abnormal situations. Anarchic individualism is revolutionary and subversive from the very

start; it shows a complete despite for all that civilization or the social order has painfully created, and this out of self-righteousness or egocentric attachment to an idea. Of the many radical statements to be found in Thoreau, none is more radical or more subversive in import than that one appearing near the close of his "Life Without Principle": "where there is a lull of truth, an institution springs up." This notion that there is an utter incompatibility between truth and human institutions, the one forever denying the other, is again not a proposition for this world. It is charged with a lofty disdain for the human condition, not the understanding of charity. It is not Christian to accept such a view; or, if that is too narrow, it is not politically wise; or, if that is too narrow, it is just not possible. Such a view ends in the extremism of nihilism. The other more tolerant and circumspective kind of individualism has enjoyed two thousand years of compatibility with institutions in the Western world and is our best hope for preserving human personality in a civil society.