The Literature of Civil Disobedience

in Thoreau, the Berrigan Brothers, and King:

An American Tradition

A Thesis

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by

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Introduction

This thesis is like Topsy. It just "grew." Its original impetus was my interest in civil disobedience, which led me to read the prison writings of people from Henry David Thoreau to the Berrigan brothers to Martin Luther King. After reading these things casually over a period of months, I decided to expand my reading to include some of the factual background of American civil disobedience. And so I read Staughton Lynd's *Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism*. Ideas began to form. All the prison writings I had covered seemed to share in an ongoing American tradition, one that began with Thomas Jefferson. I began to write, and more ideas emerged. All the writings seemed to have another philosophical element in common, and that was the underlying Christianity of all of their authors. Still a third idea was that those personal qualities that led the authors of the works I had read to commit civil disobedience showed up vividly in their styles of writing. And so I wrote about that, too. In the process of all this writing, I made several tentative conclusions about why people are drawn to read the literature of civil disobedience. I treated these ideas in my final chapter.

This is a thesis, then, that does several things. It gives an admittedly Lyndian, left-wing view of the tradition of American radicalism. It attempts to show that Thoreau, the Berrigan brothers, and King follow closely in that tradition. It shows that a basic Christianity is a factor that motivated all these men; it discusses the way in which the style of each writer is a product of his personality. Finally, it suggests some hypotheses about the current popularity of the literature of civil disobedience.

It just "grew."
Chapter 1
The Radices of American Radicalism

Traditional American radicalism, according to Staughton Lynd, asserts four principles. It asserts, first of all, that the proper foundation of government is a universal law of right and wrong self-evident to our intuitive common sense. It affirms, also, that the purpose of society is to fulfill the needs of living human beings, not to protect private property. Thirdly, it states that good citizens make their voices known in government, and that they have a right and a duty to break oppressive laws and overthrow oppressive governments. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, traditional American radicalism asserts that we owe our ultimate allegiance to the family of man. These ideas have formed a basis of American radicalism since the time of the Revolution.

For years, all kinds of American radicals have traced their origins back to the Declaration of Independence. Yet even during the revolutionary period, there was factionalism in the United States over the form which the new government would take. The origins of this split go back into the late seventeenth century, to the time of John Locke. The rift is caused by the fact that Locke's work meant something different to him than it did to his Dissenting interpreters. For example, the Founding Fathers tolerated slavery, exterminated Indians, and assured us that a good society is based on private property. Yet the same people wrote of inalienable rights and a higher law.
Thus, there are ambiguities in the ideology of the Declaration of Independence. It was both capitalistic and democratic. It upheld both property rights and human rights. It had to represent both Southern slaveholders and Northern merchants, and both poor and rich. It had, in short, to take all the interests of this country's diversified population into account. These examples help to illustrate the fact that there were two factions in early America and that the Founding Fathers themselves were in two camps.

The American people were split in the same way. Industrial interests and middle class capitalism were on one side; the Revolution had created a number of wealthy prosperous men who were anxious to protect their holdings. This American social phenomenon was analogous to the rise of the English middle class. On the other side of the split were agrarian interests and the ideals of social democracy. The people in this faction were economic liberals who rejected English middle-class ideals. These two groups may be called Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans. While it is the ideals of the Jeffersonian Republicans which form a foundation of much of our present American radicalism, a study of the ideals of both groups will serve as background for this paper.

Turning first to the Federalists, one sees that their views included the following ideas: that men are naturally unequal and are made that way by God; that they are naturally perverse; that their passions lead them to seek not the common good but power and wealth; and that the government must
protect the propertyed minority from the lawless ravages of the mob. These ideas are inspired by the thought of John Locke.

The Jeffersonian Republicans, on the other hand, held very different views. Among them were these ideas: that true economic progress is in gathering the fruits of the earth; that splendor and idleness are to be distrusted; that government should be separated from business; that there should be economic opportunity for all; that rule should be by the majority; and finally that man is naturally well disposed toward his fellows and that all that is necessary for a good society is to make men realize that their own good derives from the common good. These views were derived by Jefferson from dissenting interpreters of John Locke. Jefferson himself changed Locke's three sacred values from life, liberty, and property, to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. There was an ongoing ideological struggle between these two schools of thought; as Parrington says, the Federalists and the Jeffersonians engaged in "a long and acrimonious contest."

Since ours is a capitalist society, it is easy to tell which side has prevailed in the contest. The Federalists took their ideas from Locke; these views will be examined here. A cornerstone in Locke's thought is the idea of the sanctity of private property. Our state has always revered the concept. The tradition goes back to England and the rise of the middle class in the late seventeenth century.
At that time, the importance of rank began to lessen, and security came to be measured in possessions, not in nobility. During our revolutionary period, we used this thought to protect our own possessions from British exploitation. Later, we set it up as a guiding principle of our new nation. Puritanism, too, fostered this idea. The Puritans measured life in terms of material prosperity. They exalted acquisition as a rational end of life, and believed that the most sacred of human rights was to pursue economic well-being in a competitive society. But the most important source of the belief in the sanctity of private property is Locke.

Like the Puritans, Locke believed that man is perverse and predatory. Man creates government to curb his predatory nature, thereby surrendering some of his natural rights in return for security of person and property. Locke believed also that man has an instinct for life, liberty, and property, and that the third of these sets him apart from the beasts. Property is the greatest of these rights. In times of emergency, the state can conscript the life and limit the freedom of the individual, but it can never arbitrarily remove his possessions. Government, then, should assist and not hamper trade and industry. By expressing beliefs such as these, Locke laid the foundations of a new philosophy of capitalism. This is the form our government has taken. In its early days, this form of government was propounded by the Federalists, led by Alexander Hamilton.

This intellectual leader shared Locke's idea of man's
perversity. In fact, he once made the comment, "The people! the people is a great beast!" Hamilton also believed that every man was a knave and had no other end but his private interest. Since he felt that the people were like children, he advocated a strong central government which would restrain the unruly mob and serve the interests of the powerful.

Hamilton was a chief drafter of the Constitution, which proposed the federal type of government. This document at first met with wide popular disfavor. To defend it, Hamilton and Madison wrote "The Federalist," a classic work of political theory. "The Federalist" is an argument for a unitary, sovereign state that would lessen the possibility of faction. Hamilton's political partisans overwhelmed the silent majority with their argument. Polite culture and professional learning joined forces to write down the agrarians. "From this strident debate emerged not only the Constitution but political parties."

"The Federalist" was discussed as an example of the Hamiltonian argument; the Republican argument may be exemplified by Richard Henry Lee's Letters from the Federal Farmer to the Republican. This work argued that the Constitution was undemocratic, that it placed the majority under the control of the minority. The tradition of Lee's work, like that of Hamilton's, goes back to Locke. However, Jefferson and the Republicans based their understanding of Locke on the work of English writers of the early eighteenth century who made Locke accessible in popularized form.
These writers came up with three key arguments against Locke's justification of the unlimited accumulation of wealth. They asserted that the earth is given by God to man in common, and that man only has a right to what he needs for subsistence. They asserted, also, that the inheritance of private property should be subject to social regulation, as is the inheritance of political power. Thus the Dissenting radicals turned upside down Locke's idea that property is the most absolute of rights. To them, conscience and the allied intellectual rights were absolute. They reintroduced the ethical dimension to Locke and defended the intuition of the heart against the analyses of the head.

As Dissenting radicals reached back to Locke, they reached back even further to Lilburne and Overton, religious radicals of the 1640's and '50's. Actually, they returned to an essentially religious outlook. For them, great secular truths were self-evident, as was the truth of religion--intuitively accessible to the average man. Their political faith, therefore, was in the intuition of a universal moral order made by nature's God. This became the faith of the Jefferson who wrote the Declaration of Independence. The Dissenters were politically revolutionary because once they restored conscience to the center of man's experience, they secularized it. In synthesizing secular and sacred, natural and divine, they insisted that all forms of traditional authority should submit to the judgment of a conscience concerned with both God and politics. This idea of the
Dissenters passed through Jefferson to Thoreau and the Berrigans.

One prominent Dissenting radical was James Burgh. In *The Dignity of Human Nature* (1754), he defended the thesis that self-evident truth is not collected or deduced but that it is intuitively perceived. This book was still well-known in America eighty years later when Thoreau took it out of the Harvard library.

Another such dissenting radical was Joseph Priestley. In *Remarks on a Code of Education*, he asserted that freedom is native to our souls, that we are free ourselves, not freed by educators and planners. This is the tradition that passed down to Thoreau.

However, the English Radical Nonconformists were not the only factor influencing the ideas of the Jeffersonian Republicans. Rousseau, also, was an indirect influence. The French philosopher turned away from Locke as the Dissenters did, and regarded ethical truth as self-evidently apparent to reason. A sanguine believer in the goodness of man, he cursed the day when man's desire for property caused him to abandon the state of nature for "the legalized villainies of civilization." He believed that social inequality was the greatest cause of human unhappiness. Government, if it is an institution invented to protect private property, exists to promote inequality. Believing this, the Jeffersonians ally themselves with Rousseau. However, Rousseau did not influence Jefferson directly; rather, he influenced the Dissenters who influenced Jefferson. All made the
same key affirmations.

Jefferson himself, the great agrarian democrat, embodied the idealism of the Revolution: its faith in human nature, and its conviction that through the instrumentality of political democracy, the lot of the common man could be made better.

Perhaps the most striking example of Jefferson’s idealism is his substitution of “the pursuit of happiness” for “property” in Locke’s doctrine. He thought of the propertied class as a chief hindrance to the spread of social justice. In the past, “gentlemen of principle and property,” as the Federalists called themselves, had exploited those who were less materially fortunate. Jefferson was known to have commented, “I have never observed men’s honesty to increase with their riches.” The propertied class had kept government away from the people, and their selfish rivalries had left behind a trail of poverty and wretchedness. Rather than being the prerogative of the ruling class, government, Jefferson thought, should spring from a common interest in human affairs. When a government is set apart from the people, public interest is lost in a sense of futility. These are also the feelings with which Thoreau, the Perrigans, and King write.

There were, then, two traditions at work in revolutionary America. This paper concerns the second of these, that of the Jeffersonian faction, aided by the Dissenters and Rousseau. This is the tradition of American radicalism, which asserts that our intuitive common sense tells us right and wrong;
that the people, guided by conscience, should have a controlling voice in government; that many of the ills in government spring from undue reverence given to private property; and that a person’s ultimate allegiance is not to himself but to the entire family of man. The Federalist, capitalist tradition has prevailed in our country. But the Jeffersonian tradition has remained strong, and is especially prominent in contemporary debates over the Vietnam war and civil rights. After the time of Jefferson himself, the next period in which the tradition of his thought was prominent in the national mind was in the years before the Civil War, when debates over slavery were common.

In the nineteenth century, those who had inherited the radical tradition from the eighteenth century were the abolitionists. They are the radicals of the early nineteenth century. As they turned back to the eighteenth century for inspiration, they naturally turned back also to the English Dissenters. But, unlike the Dissenters, they had not an arbitrary King and Parliament to deal with, but unjust laws democratically enacted. Theirs would be a new kind of revolution: minority disobedience to a republican government. The abolitionists would have to find a new model to guide them.

This new guidance came in the form of the Quakers, who in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had always made testimony concerning civil disobedience. They shared key ideas with the abolitionists of the nineteenth century. The most prominent of these is perhaps their shared concern
over slavery—Penn's Pennsylvania, for instance, had special laws protecting Negroes. They shared also the belief in man's perfectibility through the "inner light" of his intuition, and the belief that this perfectibility was available to all people.

Thus, the abolitionists were influenced by both the Dissenters and the Quakers. The Dissenters, who had insisted on freedom of conscience, provided the key to eighteenth century radicalism. The Quaker doctrine of inner light had the same effect on secular political thought of the nineteenth century. From both sources the abolitionists drew their ideas of the wisdom of untutored nature.

A third group influencing the abolitionists, and counting some of them among its numbers, was the transcendentalists. It is as a proponent of this literary movement that Thoreau fits into the pattern of American radicalism. In their objection to slavery, the transcendentalists, like the others, turned away from Locke. They espoused the Quaker doctrine of inner light—Emerson, for example, credited George Fox with his belief in "the common man's capacity to perceive the truth by unaided intuition." The transcendentalists appealed away from books to the testimony of the heart. These three interlocking and mutually supportive groups, the Dissenters, the Quakers, and the transcendentalists, shaped the theory of abolitionism.

Like their forerunners, the abolitionists conceived of conscience as the liberty to think and speak, but insisted
also on the conscientious freedom to act. If freedom is self-determination, it requires acts as well as words. Like Thoreau, the abolitionists sought to “cast a whole vote, not a strip of paper merely.”

One of the first abolitionists to outline their theory of active civil disobedience was William Lloyd Garrison. Writing in The Liberator of March 17, 1835, he said that God’s law is superior to human law, and, since right or wrong cannot be reduced to lawful or unlawful, the individual conscience is to judge whether human and divine laws are in conflict.

Garrison himself was mobbed in the heart of Boston. This incident prompted the abolitionist urge toward civil disobedience. So did the closing of Southern mails to abolitionist literature, the refusal of Congress to receive abolitionist petitions, and the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law.

This law, passed in 1850, armed federal marshals with summary powers, and stipulated that all citizens were bound to assist the marshals on demand. Its passage forced Northern abolitionists to make a practical as well as a theoretical decision. Senator Charles Sumner spoke for many abolitionists when he declared in 1852:

By the Supreme law, which commands me to do no injustice; by the comprehensive Christian Law of Brotherhood; by the Constitution, which I have sworn to support; I AM BOUND TO DISOBEY THIS ACT.
Abolitionists followed his words of civil disobedience with their actions. One of their important activities became the aiding of escaping slaves. Thoreau himself wrote in his journal on October 1, 1851, of putting a fugitive slave "on the cars" for Canada.

As opposed to this directly effective activity, abolitionists engaged in symbolic actions also. On July 4, 1837, for example, a group of them hung out the American flag with the sign "Slavery's Cloak." And in 1854, William Lloyd Garrison, who had been calling on abolitionists to come out of the federal union since the early 1840's, burned the United States Constitution in Framingham, Massachusetts. In this context, the contemporary burning of draft cards and napalming of military files does not seem shocking. Symbolic activity such as this is in good standing as part of the tradition of American radicalism.

Thoreau's night in jail was another symbolic activity. Bronson Alcott, as a critic points out, supplied Thoreau with the precedent when he went to jail three years before for the same crime of refusing to pay his taxes. Yet students remember Thoreau and not Alcott for the act, because of Thoreau's classic essay on the subject. Thoreau had refused to pay his poll tax because he felt that it would support the Mexican War, which, if won, would gain Texas as another slave-holding territory for the United States. Therefore he was put in jail by the Concord jailer; therefore he wrote Civil Disobedience. He felt, like other abolitionists,
that a government in which majority rules is not based on justice when its decisions conflict with the people’s consciences.

17.

The term "my country is the world," coined by Thomas Paine, who had been harried out of England, imprisoned and almost executed by France, and left to die neglected by the United States. This idea of world citizenship led Pride and Prejudice to support the American Revolution in spite of their own citizenship. Thus the abolitionists, and especially the "abolitionists," were driven outside the framework of national allegiance and began to think of themselves as citizens of the world. This idea was passed down by way of Thoreau, to the Berrigan's, and on to the war against Mexico for Texas in a third example. The abolitionists saw that the United States was oppressing other dark-skinned peoples as well. The Cherokees, for example, were expelled from Georgia in 1835. In Florida, war was waged against the Seminoles from 1835 to 1842, whereby men sought to coerce other men against their will. The abolitionists made the short step from this to the treaties that slavery and war were interchangeable means. The abolitionists refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished. Therefore, citizens should choose not to participate in a government which acted against their consciences by upholding slavery. Thoreau wrote, "when the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, the decision of whether or not to join it was up to the individual. Therefore, citizens should choose not to participate in a government which acted against their consciences by upholding slavery."
Paine, Price, and Priestley, furnished precedents by which the Merricks were to act a century later in opposition to the Vietnam war.

Some people took the idea of "my country is the world" even further. They used it to oppose not only monarchy and slavery, but capitalism as well. They felt, out of their sense of allegiance to the family of man, that it was ridiculous to speak of private property in immortal beings. From there they went to a position against private property itself. The most suggestive abolitionist attack on private property was Thoreau's critique of alienated labor.

In his idea that the American laborer was alienated, Thoreau agreed with Marx. Both felt that the essence of man's oppression in "civilized" society is that his human capacities, which should express themselves in joyful labor, become acts of self-sacrifice and mortification. Thoreau felt that even though an American may free himself of a political tyrant, he is still the slave of an economic and moral tyrant. Full freedom required that political democracy be extended to the economy as well. "They need the state most," said Thoreau in Civil Disobedience, "who require it to protect their property." By its guerilla attacks upon the right of property, the revolutionary tradition prepared the ground for a frontal assault upon the authority of the state, and by its assault on the state, it attacked private property. Thoreau's essay attacks both private property and the state.

The sources of Thoreau's ideology are found in eighteenth
century liberalism with its doctrine of the minimized state—
"a state that must lose its coercive sovereignty in the
measure that the laws of society function freely." In
Thoreau's essay, this eighteenth century philosophy came to
its fullest expression.

Notes

1 Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism (New

2 Lynd, p. 19: "...the words of Locke's natural rights
   philosophy meant something quite different to Anglo-American
   radicals in the 1770's than they had signified a century
   before to Locke himself."

3 Vernon L. Parrington, Main Currents in American
   Parrington.

4 Parrington, I, pp. 89-90.

5 Parrington, I, p. 100.

6 Lynd, p. 19, speaks of "...the new modeling of Locke's
   old meanings by "revolutionary radicals. We shall find
   that the preparatory steps took place largely in England,
   among a group of radical Englishmen associated with non-
   Anglican (Nonconformist or Dissenting) Protestant denominations..."

7 Parrington, p. 267.

8 Rod W. Horton and Herbert W. Edwards, Backgrounds
   of American Literary Thought (New York: Appleton-Century-
Horton and Edwards, p. 77.

Parrington, I, 268.

Horton and Edwards, p. 81.

Horton and Edwards, pp. 81-82.

Parrington, I, 271.

Parrington, I, 300, quoting an unspecified comment by Hamilton.


Parrington, I, 291.

Lynd, p. 18: "...Americans often copied, not Locke himself, but English publicists of the early eighteenth century who make Locke accessible in popularized form."

Lynd, pp. 69-70.

Lynd, p. 24.

Lynd, p. 27.

Lynd, p. 31.

Lynd, p. 27.

Horton and Edwards, p. 82.

Lynd, p. 32.

Parrington, I, 343.

Parrington, I, 354.
27  Parrington, I, 354, quoting an unspecified source.


29  Lynd, p. 105.

30  Lynd, p. 102. Lynd also notes that one of Emerson's early essays on representative men dealt with Fox.


32  Lynd, p. 119.

33  Lynd, p. 146.


35  Lynd, p. 140.


37  Lynd, p. 122.

38  *Civil Disobedience,* p. 371.

39  Lynd, p. 131.

40  Lynd, p. 134.

41  Lynd, p. 133.
42 Lynd, on p. 92, through the use of two strikingly similar quotations from Thoreau and Marx, that they agreed that the attainment of political democracy was only a partial step forward. Thoreau's words are from "Life Without Principle," Marx's from On The Jewish Question.

43 Lynd, p. 92.

44 Lynd, p. 96, quoting Thoreau.

45 Farrington, II, 409.
Chapter 2

Henry Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience*, and Intimations of Christianity

At the beginning of Chapter One, four affirmations of traditional American were listed. They were the assertions that government is properly founded on a universal law of right and wrong; that the protection of living human beings and not of private property should be more important to society; that good citizens make their voices known in government, and finally, that we owe our ultimate allegiance to the family of man. In ways which will be examined in this chapter, *Civil Disobedience* follows in the spirit of each of these four points.

The background of Thoreau's essay is also, in a way, the background of abolitionism in Massachusetts. During the 1840's, anti-slavery sentiment was beginning to grow there. Texas was annexed in 1845, and in that same year, Polk was inaugurated on an imperialistic platform. The war with Mexico (1846--1848) was considered by many Northerners as an attempt to extend the territory of the slave states. At the time of the war, as Canby comments, Thoreau's abolitionist family must have been abuzz with anti-slavery talk.¹

Thoreau, as has been mentioned, had failed to pay his
poll tax, contending that the tax would support a war which supported slavery. In July of 1846, as he was on his way into town to have a shoe repaired, Sam Staples, the tax collector and jailer, stopped him and asked him about his tax. Thoreau refused to pay it; hence his famous night in jail, and the writing of *Civil Disobedience*. The essay follows in the assertions of traditional American radicalism, the first of which is the belief in a universal law of right and wrong self-evident to our intuitive common sense.

Thus arises Thoreau's question, early on in *Civil Disobedience*, "Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?" Following his conscience, he declares that his only obligation is to do what he thinks right. Most men, he says, only serve the state with their bodies, not with their consciences.

A very few, as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men, serve the state with their consciences also.

Thinking of his own case, he added, "and they are commonly treated by it as enemies."

The state, as it was formed by the Federalist-capitalist tradition outlined in Chapter One, only understands the human being at his most superficial level. It is a materialistic state, based on private property, and it cannot comprehend the radicals' view of the place of the human spirit. "Thus the state never intentionally confronts a man's sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses." When Thoreau
was locked up in jail, he reflected on the foolishness of imprisoning his body, while his mind, the culprit, was still free. The state, he saw, was half-witted. His thoughts, while he was in jail, roamed as freely as they ever had. Thus Thoreau felt that he was not truly coerced or imprisoned, and wrote, "They only can force me who obey a higher law than I."  

Thoreau feels that the people of Massachusetts obey no higher law. They are "more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity." Thoreau's animadversions against private property reach into the second of the four assertions of American radicalism—that human needs must come before private property.

Of those people in Massachusetts who care more for money than for humanity, Thoreau says, "The rich man—not to make any invidious comparisons—is always sold to the institution which makes him rich." He thus turns the Puritan ethic upside down. His next sentence is, "Absolutely speaking, the more money the less virtue." They who assert the purest right "commonly have not spent much time in accumulating property." He realizes that most people dread the consequences, to their families and property, of civil disobedience. For if they refuse to pay taxes, the state may confiscate their property. Thoreau admits, "This is hard." Yet he offers a solution:

You must hire or squat somewhere, and raise but a small crop, and eat that
You must live within yourself, and depend upon yourself always tucked up and ready for a start, and not have many affairs.

This refusal to become too comfortable and too attached to wealth is reminiscent of the ideas of the early Christians. One critic suggests this when he writes that Thoreau had a great deal "in common with the desert saints of the early church or with the hermits of the Middle Ages."

Yet in his refusal to pay his poll tax and to become attached to private property, Thoreau still declares himself willing to pay one thing: the highway tax. "I have never declined paying the highway tax, because I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject." A good citizen is one who would pay the highway tax in the interest of being a good neighbor.

The third of the four affirmations deals with the duties of good citizens: that they make their voices known in government, and that they have a right and a duty to break oppressive laws and overthrow oppressive governments. In the very first paragraph of *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau declares that the government of the United States is only meant as a tool for the will of the people. Yet it has transformed itself from a tool into "a wooden gun to the people themselves." He feels that the people, in this position, should make known what kind of a government they would respect. The American government as it exists is such
that a man "cannot without disgrace be associated with it."

Many Americans think that they express their wishes by voting. But to Thoreau, voting is futile. Even voting for the right is not doing anything for it. "It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail." When a citizen votes, he picks a certain candidate as the only available one, thus proving that he is himself available for any purposes of the demagogue.

The American's desire to change unjust laws is equally feeble. Unjust laws exist. We do not transgress them at once, as Thoreau thinks we should. Rather, we wait for the majority to alter them. Thoreau will not accept the means which the state uses to remedy such evils. "They take too much time, and a man's life will be gone." Rather, unjust laws should be broken immediately by a whole, integrated person who opposes them. As Thoreau says, "Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine." Thoreau's method of being a "counter friction" is a passive rather than an active one. It is for refusing to do something, rather than by doing something, that he was jailed. But his passive approach does not seem weaker for its passivity; in fact, refusal to pay one's taxes has now become an oft-encountered method of protest.

Some of Thoreau's fellow townspeople, concerned about such matters, say that they do not support the war. They may admire soldiers who refuse to serve in it. But Thoreau exposes the hypocrisy of these people: "The soldier is applauded who refuses to serve in an unjust war by those who do not refuse to sustain
the unjust government which makes the war." Thus even though people may say that they oppose the war, they still support it if they pay their taxes. These people should refuse the state their money. They should not petition the state to secede from the union, but should secede themselves from the state. Thoreau then makes this plea to abolitionists: "Those who call themselves abolitionists should at once effectually withdraw their support, person and property, from the government of Massachusetts."  

The idea that good citizens are those who effectively make their voices heard is an important one in Civil Disobedience: it runs all the way through to the final paragraph of the essay, in which Thoreau says, "The authority of government...is still an impure one; to be strictly just, it must have the sanction and consent of the governed."  

The good citizen who makes his voice heard by refusing to support an unjust war tacitly acknowledges a higher allegiance to the family of man; this is the fourth of the four affirmations. Some readers of Walden may feel, in view of his retirement to the woods, that Thoreau is antisocial. Indeed, this is one popular notion of him. But Civil Disobedience is full of evidence to the contrary. Thus, early on in the essay, Thoreau says of the Mexican War,  

When...a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and is subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize.  

A man is far from misanthropic who calls on his countrymen to oppose the tyrannizing of another country.
Thoreau further reveals his philanthropy in his discussion of Paley, the eighteenth century English philosopher and follower of Locke. Paley resolves moral issues into a matter of expediency. Yet Thoreau says that there are times when, regardless of expediency, a person must do justice. He writes,

But Paley appears never to have contemplated those causes to which the rule of expediency does not apply, in which a people, as well as an individual, must do justice, cost what it may. If I have unjustly wrested a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself. This, according to Paley, would be inconvenient. But he that would save his life, in such a case, shall lose it.

By thus placing the life of a fellow human being as equal to his own, Thoreau reveals his allegiance to the family of man. He also reveals, perhaps unwittingly, his Christianity. This passage is an echo of one in the gospel according to St. Matthew (10:39): "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it." A passage of almost identical wording is in Luke 9:24. Thoreau was not alone in his rejection of Paley. Lynd comments that following the lead of Coleridge, abolitionists rejected Paley with Locke.

Thoreau makes perhaps his most dramatic case for his allegiance to the family of man towards the end of the essay. Here, he asks the question, "Why give your neighbors this pain to treat you as they are not inclined to?" After all, Sam Staples was a friend of Thoreau's who regretted having to lock him up. Thoreau answers this question by saying that he still has millions of other people to consider, and that he has relations to them. He feels that something can be done for them: "I see that appeal
is possible, first and instantaneously, from them to the Maker of them, and secondly, from them to themselves."

Thoreau's active demonstration of his obligation to mankind was, of course, his willingness to go to jail. He saw his refusal to pay the poll tax as an act of positive good, and reflected in *Civil Disobedience* that anyone who would pay his tax for him acted against the public good:

> If they pay the tax from a mistaken interest in the individual taxed, to save his property, or to prevent his going to jail, it is because they have not considered wisely how far they let their private feelings interfere with the public good.

Someone did pay Thoreau's tax, thereby releasing him from the Concord jail. This person is believed to have been his Aunt Maria, appearing in disguise. The poll tax came to a grand total of one dollar and fifty cents.

The final evidence for Thoreau as a philanthropist comes not from *Civil Disobedience* but from his journals. Although this incident does not come from the essay under consideration, it is still a striking one that may serve to illustrate Thoreau's sincerity when he speaks of the family of man. In his journal, on January 28, 1852, Thoreau wrote the following, concerning a little Irish boy, Johnny Riordan, dressed in rags in the winter cold:

> This little mass of humanity, this tender goblet for the fates, cast into a cold world with a torn lichen leaf wrapped about him—oh, I should rather hear that America's first-born were all slain than that his little fingers and toes should feel cold while I am warm. . . . I shudder when I think of the fate of innocence. Our charitable institutions are an insult to humanity. A charity
which dispenses the crumbs that fall from its overloaded tables, which are left after its feasts.

About a week later, on February 8, he writes, "carried a new cloak to Johnny Riordan." Here, then, is more evidence that Thoreau, the supposed misanthropist, did actually care about the sufferings of his fellow men.

At this point it might be easy to make the assumption that because Thoreau shows such abiding concern for mankind, he is a religious person in the best sense of the word. Yet we know that Thoreau repudiated organized religion. As Moloney says, "The problem of Thoreau's religion does not admit of easy solution. He early 'signed off' from the Christianity of his youth." But Moloney continues, "However, he was still near enough to the Christianity which he outwardly rejected to be quite certain that man without the Spirit is not man."

Of his repudiation of Christianity, Thoreau writes in his journal,

I do not prefer one religion or philosophy to another. I have no sympathy with the bigotry and ignorance which make transient and partial and puerile distinctions between one man's faith or form of faith and another's--such as Christian and heathen.

Of this Moloney concludes, "Still a man's heritage is unescapable, and the texture of Christianity was woven closely into Thoreau's conception of life." Staughton Lynd supports Moloney's conclusion. He comments on Thoreau's
critique of Paley; specifically, he points out Thoreau's statement, "he that would save his life, in such a case, shall lose it." It has already been pointed out that this passage is a Biblical echo. Lynd's comment is as follows:

Thus in a key early paragraph of Civil Disobedience, Thoreau took Paley on explicitly, revealing in the process that--all Transcendentalist protestation to the contrary--his own ethic was in the last analysis Christian. 37

The Paley passage in Civil Disobedience is not the only evidence in that essay of Thoreau's Christianity. For instance, near the end, Thoreau states that the state and the Constitution, when seen from a lower point of view, are very good. But as the observer views them from positions higher and higher, he may find that they may not be worth looking at, at all. Thoreau reveals the location of this higher position three paragraphs later:

For eighteen hundred years, though perchance I have no right to say it, the New Testament has been written; yet where is the legislator who has wisdom and practical talent enough to avail himself of the light which it sheds on the science of legislation? 39

Perhaps Moloney and Lynd are right, then. Perhaps when Thoreau speaks of doing good for mankind, he says it out of a Christian heritage which, though he denies it, is still very strong in his thoughts, and though he may deny belief in the patriarchial 40 God of Christianity, his journal is full of evidence to the contrary,
Perhaps the following five quotations from Thoreau’s journals will amply illustrate his religious leanings. First, although Thoreau calls himself a person who refuses to believe specifically in the Christian God, he hints that he still believes that God listens to him: "The great God is very calm withal. Now superfluous is any excitement in his creatures! He listens equally to the prayers of the believer and the unbeliever." It is interesting to note that Thoreau refers to God, not the Brahma or Hari to whom he says he gives equal credence. And as he says in the journal, he is constantly on the lookout for God: "My profession is to be always on the alert to find God in nature, to know his lurking-places, to attend all the oratorios, the operas, in nature." Furthermore, the sounds of nature raise his spirit up to God: "God’s voice is but a clear bell sound... It always mounts, and makes me mount." Later, again referring to the sounds in nature, he says of the crickets and their chirping: "It is no transient love-strain, hushed when the incubating season is past, but a glorifying of God and enjoying of him forever. They sit aside from the revolution of the seasons. Their strain is unvaried as Truth." The idea of giving glory to God is an intriguing one here. One of the aims of Christian prayer is to glorify God. The glorification of God is mentioned three different times in Walden as Stern (p. 151) points out. When Thoreau uses this idea, he is echoing the New England Primer’s Shorter Catechism. Again, Thoreau shows a feeling that it is a sad thing to deny God: "Woe be to the generation that lets any higher faculty in its midst go unemployed! That is to
deny God and know him not, and he, accordingly, will know not of them. Thus, although Thoreau believes himself to have transcended mere Christianity, this evidence from his journal helps to show that, in fact, Thoreau is inescapably rooted in that tradition.

Two passages from *A Week On The Concord and Merrimack Rivers* will be offered as final examples of Thoreau's underlying Christianity. In the Monday section of the *Week*, he writes,

"Here lies, 'Here lies';-why do they not sometimes write, There rises? Is it a monument to the body only that is intended? 'Having reached the term of his natural life';-would it not be truer to say, Having reached the term of his unnatural life?"

The idea of resurrection is, of course, central to Christianity. Christ died and rose so that human beings could rise, i.e., to join God, after they die. Also, the idea that one's earthly life is not his real life is important in Christian tradition. The Christian supposedly lives his life with a view toward the next world. To Thoreau, an earthly life is an unnatural life when it is one that is wasted. His concept is also found in Christian belief. For instance, Christ says in the Sermon on the Mount, "You are the light of the world... . Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works... *(Matthew 5:14).*

When Thoreau writes of the rising of the soul after death, and refers to earthly life as unnatural, he may again be revealing his deeply seated religious beliefs. Finally, in the Monday section, Thoreau has some glowing words to say of Christianity: "Christianity,
"on the other hand, is humane, practical, and, in a large sense, radical... Christ is the prince of reformers and radicals." In the same passage, Thoreau speaks of Christ as improving upon the wisdom of the Brahmins, whom he calls "stagnant." It is not a new idea to think of Christ as a radical. It was done before Thoreau's time, and later, naturally, the Berriganes cited Christ's life as a precedent for their own activities. But in doing so, Thoreau is again showing the tradition out of which he writes. Moloney and Lynd, it seems, are not without support in their intimations that Thoreau was a Christian.

Moloney's comparisons of Thoreau to the desert saints of the early Church and to the hermits of the Middle Ages have already been mentioned. At the risk of pressing a point perhaps already too much pressed, one final bold comparison will be made—a comparison of Thoreau to modern religious, such as the Berrigans, who have made vows of poverty and chastity. There is evidence, in many places in Thoreau's writings, of his poverty. Perhaps two quotations from his journal will suffice. In 1856, for example, Thoreau writes, "I find it invariably true, the poorer I am, the richer I am. What you consider my disadvantage, I consider my advantage." Twelve years earlier he had written, "I am startled that God can make me so rich even with my own cheap stores. It needs but a few wisps of straw in the sun, or some small word dropped, or that has long lain silent in some book." Thoreau's emphasis on lack of material possessions is distinctly otherworldly. Moloney speaks of the "ascetic discipline of his external life." This asceticism may
apply to chastity as well as to poverty. A final quotation
from his journal shows that Thoreau was concerned with both.

In his journal, in 1857, he writes,

By poverty, i.e. simplicity of life and fewness of
incidents, I am solidified and crystallized, as a
vapor or liquid by cold. It is a single concentration
of strength and energy and flavor. Chastity is
perpetual acquaintance with the All. My diffuse and
vaporous life becomes as the frost leaves and spiculae
radiant as gems on the weeds and stubble in a winter
morning. You think that I am impoverishing myself
by withdrawing from men, but in my solitude I have
woven for myself a silken web or chrysalis, and,
nymph-like, shall ere long burst forth a more perfect
creature, fitted for a higher society. By simplicity,
commonly called poverty, my life is concentrated and
so becomes organized, a [SIGMA], which before was
inorganic and lumpish.

A passage in Walden shows, again, his concern with chastity:

The generative energy, which, when we are
loose, dissipates and makes us unclean,
when we are continent invigorates and
inspires us. Chastity is the flowering
of man; and what are called Genius, Heroism,
Holiness, and the like, are but
various fruits which succeed it. Man
flows at once to God when the channel
of purity is open.

All this talk of religion, poverty, and chastity is not idle.
It shows that Thoreau has other attitudes in common with the
Berrigans, whose works are next to be examined, in addition
to radicalism.

In his concern for his fellow man, in his willingness to
break the law over that concern, in his poverty and in
his chastity—in these ways, Thoreau shows how high his
ethical standards are. Because of these high standards,
his writing style, like those of the Berrigans, often shows
didactic evidence of the preacher. Because of their stern morality and rigorous consciences, both Thoreau and the Berrigans show a style that is equally stern, and that sometimes borders on the preachy. In Thoreau, this style is the product of a singular personality.

Of the high-minded personality which is reflected in Civil Disobedience, Philip Van Doren Stern says, "He may at first seem to be arrogant, too much the ever-earnest preacher, the unsparing critic, the man for whom nothing was ever good enough. The ever-earnest is a revealing tag, for much of Civil Disobedience has a bombastic ring. Thoreau often uses the hortatory subjunctive, aphorisms, and rhetorical questions to get his point across. All these are familiar tools of the speaker. Thoreau used them, perhaps, because Civil Disobedience was first given as a public speech in a century which revered such talks.

The first-mentioned speaker's technique in Thoreau's style is the hortatory subjunctive. He uses it to urge his audience to do certain things, as when he says "Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it," or "you must hire or squat somewhere." This is Stern's ever-earnest preacher at work, telling his audience what it must do. Another stylistic technique of a preacher is the use of aphorisms. Thoreau waxes almost biblical when he says, "He who gives himself entirely to his fellow-men appears to them useless and selfish; but he who gives himself partially to them is pronounced a benefactor and philanthropist." Or, again, the now-familiar
dictum "He that would save his life, in such a case, shall lose it" is a good example of Thoreau's aphoristic style. The use of rhetorical questions is a third speaker's technique which appears in the style of *Civil Disobedience*. Early in the essay, he asks, "How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today?" Later, he asks, "What is the price-current of an honest man and patriot today?"

These words on the scarcity of honest men bring up another aspect of Thoreau's personality, also mentioned by Stern. He is "the man for whom nothing was ever good enough." Stern adds that Thoreau

shunned people because he was ill at ease with them. He felt vastly superior to most; he found others dull; even those to whom he could talk as intellectual equals—Emerson, Channing, Hawthorne, and Alcott—finally turned out to have shortcomings.

Because he had a tendency to find fault, Thoreau had difficulty in forming friendships. Stern says:

He was always disappointed in his search for friendship because he eventually found out that the person he had admired so much was just another mortal, and therefore imperfect, selfish, inadequate, and unworthy of the great trust he had wanted to impose upon him.

Perhaps Thoreau's feelings of superiority somehow grew out of New England Puritanism. Puritanism created a mind set which led people into patterns of belief in the superiority of a few. Certain passages in *Civil Disobedience* betray that Thoreau sometimes felt this way. "There is but little virtue in the action of masses of men," he says, and "Oh for a man who is a man." Although
it is true that Thoreau's philosophy led him to the advocacy of
the family of man, his own slightly misanthropic personality
sometimes kept him from living up to his own high standards. And
we, the audience to whom he preaches, are made aware of this
gap in our own lives.

Yet perhaps it is the preaching quality of Thoreau's style
that gives Civil Disobedience its magnificence. Stanley Edgar
Hyman says, "As a political writer, he was the most ringing and
magnificent polemicist America has ever produced." And the
impact of Civil Disobedience has been tremendous.

It powerfully marked the mind of Tolstoy, and changed
the direction of his movement. It was the solitary
source book on which Gandhi based his campaign of
Civil Resistance in India, and Thoreau's ideas multiplied
by millions of Indians came fairly close to shattering
the power of the British Empire. It has been the
bible of countless thousands in India, and Thoreau's
ideas multiplied by millions of Indians came fairly
close to shattering the power of the British Empire.
It has been the bible of countless thousands in
totalitarian concentration camps and democratic
jails, of partisans and fighters in resistance
movements, of men wherever they have found no weapon
but principle with which to oppose tyranny.

Notes

1 Henry Seidel Canby, Thoreau (Boston: Houghton Mifflin,

2 Civil Disobedience, Thoreau, Writings, V, 358. Hereafter C.D.

3 C.D., p. 360.

4 C.D., p. 376.
5 C.D., p. 376.
6 C.D., p. 362.
7 C.D., p. 372.
8 C.D., p. 372.
9 C.D., p. 372.
10 C.D., p. 373.
13 C.D., p. 380.
15 C.D., p. 360.
16 C.D., p. 363.
17 C.D., p. 364.
18 C.D., p. 368.
19 C.D., p. 368.
20 C.D., p. 365.
21 C.D., p. 369.
On p. 4, vol IX of the *Journal*, on an unspecified date in 1850, Thoreau writes, "I like Brahma, Hari, Buddha, the Great Spirit, as well as God." However, Thoreau frequently contradicts this expansive, ecumenical statement by specifically referring to God, thus proving himself to be, after all, a product of his heritage.

*Journal*, IX, 315. (January 7, 1842).

*Journal*, VIII, p. 472. (September 7, 1851).


*Journal*, VI, 289 (May 22, 1854).

*Journal*, VII, 88 (December 22, 1854).


Week, p. 141.

*Journal*, XV, 326 (December 5, 1856).

*Journal*, VII, 324.

Moloney, p. 194.

*Journal*, IX, 207.

Walden, in Writings, II, 343.

Stern, p. 16.

C.D., p. 357.

C.D., p. 373.
56 C.D., p. 360.
57 C.D., p. 360.
58 C.D., p. 363.
60 Stern, p. 16.
61 C.D., p. 363.
62 C.D., p. 364.
63 Hyman, p. 137.
64 Hyman, p. 138.
Chapter 3

Christianity Radicalized:

The Berrigan

Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a man's real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now.1

These words were written by Thoreau, yet in style and sentiment they resemble the writings of the Berrigan brothers, Philip and Daniel. Thoreau and the Berrigans protest against different strains of the same disease: man's inhumanity to man. With the former it was the Mexican war, with the latter the Vietnam war. Yet in both cases, the ubiquitous American imperialism of white Anglo-Saxons forces its will on darker people of less "advantaged" cultures. Like Thoreau's, the writings of Philip and Daniel Berrigan show adherence to Lynd's four points. But perhaps some Berrigan background will be necessary before those writings are examined.

The rebelliousness of the brothers is an inheritance from their father, Tom Berrigan. "Labor movements and poetry were the loves of Tom Berrigan's life," comments a critic. In fact, because of his militant participation in the Socialist Party, Tom Berrigan lost his job as a railroad engineer in Minnesota and had to move out of state, to Syracuse, New York. The same critic comments,

He never ceased to agitate for the underprivileged and the underdog. He helped
to found Syracuse's first Electrical Workers' Union and its first Catholic Interracial Council. The Berrigan farm was like a Catholic Worker house of hospitality, its barns and spare rooms filled with the needy, its frugal table always ready to accommodate passers-by.

This type of home atmosphere must have nourished the rebellious tendencies of the Berrigan brothers. Philip, after graduating from high school, began to follow in his father's hardworking tradition by spending a year at the grimy job of scrubbing locomotives. He did this to earn money for St. Michael's College in Toronto, where he went for one semester—until he was drafted. As a recruit, he underwent a brief training period in the deep South, which became "an experience which moved him to dedicate his life to helping the black people."

But his conversion to pacifism had not come yet. As Daniel says of World War II, "War raised no questions among us, it had no place in the sacred curriculum; we rejoiced and sorrowed and carried flags and paraded, even after Hiroshima." Francine Du Plessix Gray quotes a friend speaking of Philip's own enthusiasm for the war: "Philip Berrigan is like St. Paul, an exceptionally gifted warrior. Before his conversion, he could kill men more enthusiastically than most soldiers could."

In 1950, Philip Berrigan graduated from Holy Cross College and entered the Society of St. Joseph, an American order founded to help black people. Although the order had once been revolutionary, it later proved a disappointment.
to Philip. He found that

...his Society of Joseph was as much of an Uncle Tom as any timid white liberal. And Uncle Tomism goes sharply against Philip's grain. For in his view the blacks are not children to be guided by whites. They are rather the race of superior wisdom, gentleness, and maturity, the prophetic people purified and matured by suffering who could bring adulthood to the white man.

One of Philip's first assignments as a Josephite was a teaching position in New Orleans. After a controversial career there, he was moved to Newburgh, New York in 1963, to teach at the Josephite seminary. Disappointed with the opulence of the seminary, Philip started a community center in Newburgh during his first month there. He offered food and shelter around the clock, used clothes, baby-sitting services, and remedial reading. These were his efforts to do something real for blacks. He opposed the hypocrisy of the splendid seminary, which was supposed to prepare men to deal with poverty.

It was in Newburgh that Philip Berrigan made his first public statement, in 1965, against the Vietnam War. He was then transferred from Newburgh to Baltimore with strict orders to remain silent on the subject. He complied for about three months. Yet he remained active in various antiwar groups, and it was as a member of one of these groups, the Baltimore Peace Mission, that he participated in pouring blood on draft files in the Baltimore Custom House. This took place on October 27, 1967, and Philip Berrigan received
a prison sentence of six years for the action. His brother Daniel said admiringly of him at this time, "He was carrying forward an old tradition in our family, of making noise and being congenitally unhappy with false peace and wrong-headed power." The war would continue, said Daniel, and other priests would be drawn into the peace movement. "But Philip was the first. As far as we can discover, he was the first priest to be tried for a political crime, to be convicted and imprisoned."

A few months later, Philip Berrigan participated in a similar antiwar activity in the state of Maryland. This time he was joined by his brother Daniel, who had previously been unsure of the efficacy of such actions, but changed his mind after a long evening of talk with his brother. The act in which both participated, with the group of pacifists later known as the Catonsville Nine, was the napalming of draft records in that Baltimore suburb. At the Catonsville trial, later immortalized by Daniel in his play The Trial of the Catonsville Nine, all were found guilty; Philip received a sentence of three and a half years, to run concurrently with his previous six year sentence. A fitting summation of the intentions of the Catonsville Nine may be found in the words of their attorney, William Kunstler, who

pleaded that the Nine had made the same kind of protest that should have been made in Germany in the 1930's, the kind of protest which Germans were prosecuted at Nuremberg for not making. "They are saying, "We are guilty, but it was
not a criminal act. . . . " They are not more guilty than Socrates or Jesus when they were brought before the courts. . . . They were making an outcry, an anguished outcry, to reach the American community before it was too late. 11

It was while serving these sentences at the federal prison in Allenwood, Pennsylvania, that Philip Berrigan wrote Prison Journals of a Priest Revolutionary. The journal shows that philosophically Berrigan adheres to the four criteria of American radicalism. And with him, there is an added element to his dissent to his radical Christianity.

It is because of this radical Christianity that Philip Berrigan adds something to the radical notion of intuitive common sense. This something is adherence to the Gospel: the law of right and wrong is made known to us not only through our own good intuition, but through the words of Christ. Mention of the lesson of the Gospels abounds in Prison Journals. Christ's word, to Berrigan, helps to lead us to the discovery of what is good and what is evil. In following Christ's words, man may become like Christ Himself: "Becoming a man, we feel, is becoming what Christ was. . . and this we have tried to do." 12

Berrigan's standard, that of trying to imitate Christ, is almost impossibly high; it is because of his high standard that he is such a critic of certain human frailties. One of these is the accumulation of private property. The idea of private property, a cornerstone in the philosophy of the United States government, was also a cornerstone of the Berrigan trials. The draft records destroyed were considered the private property
of the federal government. Philip Berrigan was jailed for destroying this property. Although he pleaded, as Thoreau did, that he was acting under a higher law, it was the mundane law of the sanctity of private property under which he was convicted.

Perhaps his father's vehement socialism was one source of Philip's animadversions against private property. Another source would undoubtedly be his radical Christianity. One thinks of Christ's words to the young man who wished to be perfect; that he should go, sell all he had, give to the poor, and follow Him.

In this connection Berrigan writes, early in the Journals:

The Lord said that renouncing possessions and following Him were two criteria of discipleship, so mutually reliant in fact that the absence of one cancels the other. In contrast, no people have cherished and celebrated property as we have, even to the point of obsession and orgy.13

These words are from Berrigan's "Letter from a Baltimore Jail," which was written in imitation of Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." This nation, Berrigan says elsewhere, had the choice between God and riches; it overwhelmingly chose riches.

And the riches which this country chose are appallingly ill-distributed. Berrigan writes,

A nation that counts its wealth in dollars has two billionaires, six half-billionaires, and 153 multi-millionaires with more than one hundred million each. Paradoxically, this nation has also many poor—ten million who hungered, twenty million inadequately fed. 14
The haves in this country are in sharp contrast to the have-nots. This is a pattern which, thanks to American economic imperialism, is being maintained all over the world. "Our shrinking world being what it is, he writes, "we are now in the process of assuring the same status quo abroad as at home, and that means keeping the 'haves' on top and the 'have nots' on the bottom." The have nots are the darker-skinned underprivileged races of the world. They are two billion strong—brown, yellow, and black.

Our Vietnam fight, supposedly waged for the freedom of some of these people, is a sham:

The only present freedom we're fighting for is our own, and that is of questionable value, since ultimately it means the right to stay on top of the anthill and fight off those crawling up the slopes."

The imperialist successes of the United States have given it a quality of nationhood matched by no other country in the world. "And our imperialist successes became possible because of our determinist attachment to laissez-faire capitalism." Thus the capitalist lifestyle, a Frankenstein's monster nurtured by Locke and by our own national philosophy, has done untold harm at home and abroad. Philip Berrigan's hatred of uncheched acquisition of private property brings to mind the medieval Christian aphorism: radix malorum est cupiditas.

It is because of his Christianity that Berrigan believes that the private citizen has certain duties vis à vis a corrupt
government. Civil disobedience, he writes in his introduction to the Journals, is a Christian duty, and jail is its consequence. Later, he elaborates on this idea of the duty of Christians. The jails, he says, are full of people whom society has failed—social casualties. The Christian should become another kind of social casualty.

By exposing himself freely to the punishments society inflicts on its victims, he can give meaning to their powerlessness. Which is to say that a 'great society' worthy of the name may take the strongest of its infant breaths in jail.  

These words may bring thoughts of revolution to mind. They do to Berrigan, at any rate, for he carries the above ideas to their extreme when he says, "...a man cannot be a Christian without being a revolutionary. Christian revolution means conversion to a crucified and risen Lord—and witness to that conversion." Thus a Christian who disobeys a corrupt government does so because he has converted himself to Christ and his teachings.

One who is converted to Christ is also one who sees Christ in fellow humans. Traditional Catholic teaching says that mankind is the mystical body of Christ, and that Christ is present in all. It is out of this Christian belief that Philip Berrigan's journals adhere to the final assertion of traditional American radicalism: that we owe our allegiance to the family of man.

The Journal is full of mention of the Church as Christ's body and the body of man. Thus each of us is in some way
related to the other. As Berrigan says, "the personal integrity of each one of us is indissolubly linked with our social integrity; in truth, the two cannot be separated." Our lives must stand the scrutiny of both God and man; Harlem should pain us as much as Vietnam. Also, the squalor of a place like Harlem should affect the Christian as much as if he lived there himself.

As a Christian, I must love and respect all men—loving the good they love, hating the evil they hate. If I know what I am about, the brutalization, squalor, and despair of other men demeans me and threatens me if I do not act against its source.

The idea of mankind as a community permeates the Journal; community itself is an important word to Berrigan. He devotes several pages of the Journal to the Catonsville group, calling them "a community of nine," and praising them as "diverse, rich, intelligent, loving, and tough." He speaks of his fellow inmates at Allenwood as "the prison community," and identifies with them as other people whom our corrupt society has failed. He even speaks of his own prison community of pacifists as trying to reach out to other communities within the prison—the Jews, the Mafia, the blacks, the poor whites.

We ought to be reaching all of them; that was one concern. In addition, we ought to be preparing ourselves for the time when we would be released from jail, so that we could be of use to the country and mankind.
Sustaining all this talk of community is Berrigan's love of people in general: "It's a very unchristian thing to lose hope in people; indeed, it's as bad as losing hope in God." But his words about people are not glittering generalities addressed to mankind as an anonymous group; Berrigan's love of people extends right down to the level of the individual. He says of one of his fellow prisoners, a bootlegger from Virginia, for instance: "Real lovely guy. Marvelous guy." This attitude is typical of his gregariousness.

Perhaps the best conclusion to a discussion of Berrigan's feelings on the family of man would be a theological one. This section began with a thought on the idea of mankind as the mystical body of Christ. This idea can be pushed one step farther by saying that

Christ in man is the main revolutionary force in the world, capable of changing even American institutions. We try to make these beliefs articles of faith, even facts, if you will.

Berrigan believes that he has an allegiance to the family of man, and his belief is colored by a tremendous optimism about mankind's perfectibility.

"Optimism" is a key word in describing Philip Berrigan's personality. It is one aspect of his psychological makeup that colors his philosophy and therefore his style. Gray describes him thus:

Gregarious and proverbially generous, Philip was known for his radiant good nature.
his Falstaffian capacity for downing half a bottle of rye without showing it, his enormous tenderness. 27

Berrigan's style reflects this ebullience.

One salient aspect of the *Journals* is his sense of joy in life. He speaks with relish of the home-grown, home-baked food at Allenwood, for instance. "So the food, by and large, was excellent. There would be a lot of crabbing about it, because some rather esoteric tastes weren't being served, but I thought it was great." 28 He speaks with similar joy of his work at Allenwood: "It was a very nice job." He even relishes the down-to-earthiness of one of his more strenuous tasks: shoveling manure. Almost Whitmanesque in his description of the barns and cattle, he ends by calling the rich manure "marvelous stuff." 29

Perhaps Berrigan's joy in life would be impossible without his sense of God's presence in that life. It is well known that religious people, in adversity, will comfort themselves by thinking that God oversees all, and will end all for the best. Berrigan says, "One...tries to hand more and more over to God for his disposal, while continuing to expand one's human interests and responsibilities." 30

This sense of mission, of being in God's hands, also comes across in Berrigan's style. He has a tendency to see and relate events in terms of incidents in the Bible. For instance, when thinking of the holocaust at Hiroshima, he relates its flash (in a negative way) to the transfiguration
A study in contrast—the transfiguration of divine mercy and justice on the mount, and the transfiguration of human arrogance and pitilessness at Hiroshima.

He speaks of his lawyers in similar biblical terms, recalling the parable of the wedding feast:

Like other Americans, our own lawyers will receive invitations to the banquet. It will be to their credit to accept them, and to be the first of their profession to put on a wedding garment. 33

This para-biblical style is something that Philip Berrigan shares with Thoreau. They have one other stylistic point in common: the fact that both can be imperious and sternly moralistic. The cause of this sternness is the same in both men: they each have high standards, standards so lofty that the mass of men would find it difficult to live up to them. Thus both Thoreau and Berrigan can be, at times, contemptuous of their fellow men. Berrigan even echoes some of Thoreau's words in this regard, when speaking of pacifists such as himself, he says, "With Thoreau, they know that being right is being a majority of one." 34 He then extends these thoughts on pacifists into what is almost an exaltation of elitism: "the focal point of divine action is always a tiny remnant of the faithful." 35 And the others, those who have not followed in the footsteps of himself and his brother, he says, are paying with their integrity, their
country's welfare, their Christianity. He tells them, "Perhaps your immediate gain may be your long-term loss." Thus he believes that his actions have a sort of noble status; he even believes that by destroying the draft files, and by being punished for it, he acted as a symbolic scapegoat. "Several people wrote us after the blood-pouring and napalming incidents, 'Thank you for acting for us!'" Perhaps one could say that Philip Berrigan's sense of mission and purpose parallels that of the prophets of the Old Testament.

And, like an Old Testament figure, he shows an occasional intolerance. Of a priest who disagreed with his actions, he says, "I do not find his conscience particularly enlightened or his freedom particularly profound." Of the jury which tried him he says,

They represent not the communities from which we come or which we serve, but simply the great spotless middle class, whose virtue lies in well-fed anonymity, daily deodorant, and Negro-Communist phobias.

It may seem difficult to believe that a man with an ebullient love of human beings could think in this way.

Yet if there is a certain elitism in the harshness of his words, it is not there without a reason. As has been mentioned, Philip Berrigan lives by standards that are as high as they can be, much higher than most people's. He thinks of himself as no less than a disciple of Christ, and he fully accepts the rigors of that discipleship.

Christ's saying that discipleship means
daily self-denial and daily acceptance of the cross is immeasurably more to the point than a romanticism like revolution coming out of the muzzle of a gun.

One who accepts the truth of Christ's teaching, as he does, has a difficult path ahead of him:

If you accept the truth of Christ's teaching, particularly the death-life pattern mirrored in his passion and resurrection, and understand what that means in an existential way, then you have to be revolutionary, not only in your personal life but in public as well.\(^1\)

Philip Berrigan's rhetoric, then, in its sternness, is similar to Thoreau's. Both issue out of a set of standards which may seem impossibly high to the average human being. In this regard, both philosophically and stylistically, Philip Berrigan is matched and perhaps even surpassed by his brother Daniel.

The Berrigan spirit of rebellion is one that Daniel, too, inherited from his father. Yet Daniel inherited none of his brawny expansiveness, as Philip did. Rather, he was "the most sensitive and studious, the frailest and most devout." At age eighteen he joined the Jesuit order, because, as he says, "They had a revolutionary history."\(^2\) He spent the next twelve years alternately teaching and studying philosophy and theology. He was ordained in 1952, and in the following year was sent to France for studies. It was in France that he was revolutionized. There he became acquainted with the worker priest movement. Many of his fellow Jesuits there
were survivors of German exploitation, and had worked in labor camps and factories under the occupier."

Daniel Berrigan continued in the revolutionary lifestyle when he returned to the United States to teach at Le Moyne College in Syracuse. There, in 1962, he established a house off campus for students who were preparing to do Peace Corps-type work in rural Mexico. The following year, he went again to France, the country that had initially revolutionized him, and was revolutionized again.

While in France, he made several trips into eastern Europe and became acquainted with Marxism. He discovered the power of the Church in those countries:

At Prague, I met with Christians from both Marxist and Western societies, and gained some inkling of the role that the Churches could play in the ongoing struggles for human peace and survival.

While there, he learned from eastern Europeans the negative view of the world toward the Vietnam war. At the conclusion of that trip, he traveled to Africa, and finally returned to the United States in 1964, "convinced, as I now recall, of one simple thing. The war in Vietnam could only grow worse."

By the time he began teaching at Cornell, Daniel Berrigan had become a dedicated revolutionary pacifist. During this period, the Jesuit order often censured him for his outspoken opinion against the war. He tried all the means of peaceful protest.
We fasted, marched, picketed, sat in, followed every step of escalation as well as we could with our halting methods and means; at least we were dogging the iron heel of Mars. We never succeeded.

The fact that he never succeeded led him to join his brother Philip in the napalm attack at Catonsville in May, 1968. For this act he received a sentence of three years. He was to surrender himself to federal marshals on April 9, 1970, but chose to baffle the law as much as possible by remaining in hiding for four months, until his capture by federal agents. No Bars to Manhood is an account of the things that happened to him until the time of his imprisonment. It, too, reflects the four criteria of traditional American radicalism.

The first of these is the acceptance of a universal law of right and wrong self-evident to our intuitive common sense. Like his brother, Daniel believes that there is such a law and that mankind is capable of following it. But he is not so hopeful, as were some American radicals, as to believe that man's nature is only good. "Violence," he says, "comes to us from our distant animal past. The law of the strongest is a law dating from prehistoric times." Christ is the one who came to redeem this violent nature by substituting for it the law of love.

The law of love, including the love of one's own enemy, comes to us from fairly recent history, almost from outside. It draws us nonetheless like a magnet; witness the power of its historic incarnation from Jesus to Gandhi.
Thus, with Philip, Daniel asserts that the universal law of right and wrong is one that is made known to man only through his redeemed nature.

Daniel Berrigan also agrees with his brother’s beliefs on private property. Together they share their personal poverty with Thoreau. Daniel’s beliefs on poverty were strengthened by his trip to eastern Europe in 1964. There he “was discovering for the first time, and at first hand, the radically different social forms by which other decent men and women were living.” When he taught at LeMoyne College, he “urged his friends to sell their houses, move into the ghetto, live in Christian poverty.” Again, one thinks of Christ’s words to the rich young man.

It is no wonder that, with standards such as these, Daniel Berrigan spoke out about the private property issue which was central to his trial. The idea of weighing the paper draft records against human life seemed to him abysmally absurd. In No Bars to Manhood, he says indignantly:

How many threats to property can we endure as a price of human amelioration? Can we distinguish the weight of human life from the weight of paper? In times of great stress, are we capable of judging the differences between property and human beings?

Finally, he appeals directly to the emotions of his audience:

Americans who can bear equably with the sight of burning children are enraged and baffled with the sight of burning draft files.
The dramatic quality of his plea is one of the earmarks of his flamboyant style.

He is equally dramatic in his assertions about the duty of good citizens to break unjust laws. For instance, he dramatically contrasts the lawlessness of those in power and the lawlessness of those in prison:

The criminal activity of many men in power goes unscrutinized, while those whose despair or alienation drives them into the streets are prosecuted with all possible rigor. Differing criteria? Double standards? Of course.

Those who obey the law, unjust and unequal as it is, thus disobey God or disobey the law of humanity. In fact, the law, as it is presently taught and enforced, is so bad that it is "becoming an enticement to lawlessness...civil disobedience [is] a civil (I dare to say a religious) duty." In this country the law is becoming less and less what it was originally intended to be: a servant of the living.

In every generation, the law must renew itself in the guts of the living...the law must become what it says it is: corpus humanum—a human body.

This idea of the law as a living body resembles and is related to the Catholic teaching that mankind is the mystical body of Christ. Christ's words, "I am the vine and you are the branches," show that the radical notion of mankind as one body has a precedent in Christianity.
Daniel Berrigan, of course, subscribes to the belief that the mystical body of Christ is one, and in this way he upholds the fourth assertion of traditional American radicalism: that we owe our ultimate allegiance to the family of man. He says this of the intentions of the Catonsville Nine:

From the outset, we sought to identify ourselves with those in the streets and the ghettos, with those who face the draft, prison, war or exile, and, indeed, with those at the other end of our 'merciful' activity in economics, politics, militarism, and diplomacy throughout the world.

It should be clear by now that the intentions of the Nine were distinctly directed toward the family of man. Tied up with the idea of man's primacy is the idea of the primacy of one law, the law which Christ came to teach: that of love. Berrigan quotes Camus:

"If someone told me to write a book on morality, it would have a hundred pages and ninety-nine of them would be blank. On the last page I would write, "I recognize only one duty, and that is to love." And as far as everything else is concerned, I say no."

As with his brother, it is Daniel Berrigan's Christian belief that shapes each of his radical attitudes, from the idea of the universal law of right and wrong to the idea of one's allegiance to the family of man.

But, as was mentioned above, his style is somewhat
different from his brother's because it is more dramatic. Perhaps its drama comes from the fact that Daniel is more of a conscious writer. His poetry, and the prizes which he won for it, are well known. Thus when Daniel writes, it is with the power of a man who has devoted much of his life to developing that skill. Consider the drama of the following:

Don't touch--make war. Don't touch--be abstract, about God and death and life and love. Don't touch--make war at a distance. Don't touch your enemy, except to destroy him. Don't touch, because in the touch of hand to hand is Michelangelo's electric moment of creation. Don't touch, because law and order have so decreed, limiting the touch of man to man, to the touch of nightsticks upon flesh... Gray calls him the "poet and dreamer," and it is this aspect of the man that comes across the most clearly in his writing.

Yet stylistically, he does resemble Philip in some ways. For one thing, he shares Philip's sense of joy. Perhaps Daniel's joy, like Philip's, comes out of the Berrigan family background. Daniel says this lovingly of his parents in their old age:

They are liferivers; they gave us life, and then gave us with a certain tender rigor to the service of life itself. So their old age exhibits a kind of moral grace, an unshakeable human beauty.

This sense of love and joy appears and reappears throughout No Bars to Manhood. A typical example is his description of the week of planning the Catonsville incident: "On Sunday
we did something of more import and better sense; we went on a picnic." And finally, after it was all over, he writes, "We stand on the brink of the unknown; which is to say; things are normal, and good, and permissive of joy."

Daniel Berrigan shares joy with Philip; he also shares his sense of the noble status of their act. For instance, before the trial, someone said to him, "Don't worry, we'll do something for you." He answered, "Good; we've already done something for you." He then elaborates, on paper, what he means:

Something for you, Something for the Church, something for the Josephites, something for the Christian Brothers, something for the Jesuits, something for Maryknoll. Something for society, something for the Vietnamese, for the Africans, for the Latins, for the poor. Something for history.

The reader may have trouble determining whether these words are the result of an overweening sense of pride, or if they are merely another manifestation of Daniel Berrigan’s flair for the dramatic.

Yet he does tone down the grandness of such words. He has none of Philip’s disdain for those who do not act as they did. He allows for other consciences:

We never indulged in the romantic hope that others would come to agree with us. Such a hope, it seemed to me, would have indicated a closure of mind upon our own methods as a sole way. God knows, as many methods as good men may discover are required if we are to break the present impasse.
Both brothers would assert that whatever method is used, it must be a nonviolent one. Daniel says this of violent versus nonviolent revolution:

When the revolution begins to require death in order to oil its gears, it is obvious that it is merely the retooling of the old murderous machinery. When the first declarations of 'love of life' have turned into a need of the deaths of thousands, then the reasons that set the revolution in motion are contradicted, and absurdity and nihilism are again in command.

It is interesting that when Berrigan speaks of the violence of revolution, he calls it "the old murderous machinery." Thoreau does the same thing in Civil Disobedience when he compares the government to a machine. In both cases, the metaphor is useful for making the author's adversary--organized government or violent revolution--appear inhuman and life-denying. The advocacy of nonviolence is common to both Berrigans, and in their nonviolence, the Berrigans owe a certain debt to Gandhi, who in turn owes a debt to Thoreau.

Philip Berrigan openly acknowledges his debt to Gandhi. When asked, "Has Gandhi influenced what you have done?" he answered,

I can't tell you how much. To me, he is an unorthodox Christian saint. If canonizations have any point today, this man deserves to be canonized. Rome ought to stage a spectacular for him. Undoubtedly, Christ was the central influence in his life; yet he found no contradiction between reverence for the Gospels and rejection of institutionalized Christianity. It was the Gospel which gave Gandhi compassion and his incredible confidence in voluntary suffering as a tactical and political force.

Of course, Gandhi traces his own debt to Thoreau, and so do the Berrigans. Philip Berrigan mentions Thoreau as a forbear in
the tradition of American radicalism and discusses Civil Disobedience at two different points in Prison Journals.
Daniel says this of the tradition of American radicalism:

One thinks of our history: from the American Revolution through the nineteenth century and the bitter division of the War Between the States, the abolitionists, the shining case and writings of Thoreau, the infinitely vexing question of individuals' entrance or non-entrance into World War II, to the present war. 72

Thus the Berrigans are directly in the tradition of Gandhi and Thoreau. With Thoreau they share many attributes, of which two have been mentioned before: poverty and chastity.

Thoreau was one who cringed when he brought a stone which he had found back to his cabin at Walden Pond. He threw it away lest he should have to dust it. Declaring that he felt better about sitting on a pumpkin than sitting on a velvet cushion, he agreed with Emerson's observation, "Things are in the saddle and ride mankind." 73 The Berrigans would also agree. "They are men sworn to poverty by their religious orders, and a conversion to poverty is perhaps the only conversion which they desire to impose on mankind." 74

The Berrigans are sworn also to celibacy by their religious orders, and in this, too, they resemble Thoreau. Both brothers feel that celibacy is important as a revolutionary tool. Gray says of Philip,

He suddenly realized that celibacy was an essential tool for revolution. If priests were to take their proper role as nonviolent revolutionaries, they had better remain celibates. Acts such as his were
still prophetic and unique, to be undertaken by men of great austerity who had nothing to lose, no property or emotions at stake. . . .

Philip himself says, "I'd like to stress that Dan and I feel that celibacy is crucial in the priesthood and an aid for revolutionary lifestyle." Perhaps both celibacy and poverty are natural demands of a lifestyle that grows out of standards as high as Thoreau's and the Berrigans.

By now, the striking similarities between Thoreau and the Berrigans should be apparent. There are similarities in philosophy, in the ways in which all three assert the four basic tenets of American radicalism. There are similarities in their styles of writing, in their didactic and sometimes arrogant ways of proselytizing about civil disobedience. Finally, there are similarities also in the ascetic lifestyles of the three men, in their revolutionary poverty and chastity.

All three resemble each other, and all three fit the pattern of traditional American radicalism. Thoreau, as one of the earlier American radicals, was helping to set the tradition and therefore was not especially aware that he was acting within it. The Berrigans, on the other hand, were completely aware of the American tradition in which they acted. Gray writes that the Catonsville nine

recalled the long tradition of dissent and Utopian moralism which has led Americans, since the beginning of their history, to take the law into their own hands to further a cause which they believed morally righteous. . . . For good or for bad, the Nine's politics of conscience seemed, in this courtroom, as American as apple pie. . .
On the witness stand in the courtroom, Philip Berrigan had similar words:

'I came to the conclusion that I was in very, very good standing by way of American and democratic traditions in choosing civil disobedience in a serious fashion. There have been times in our history when, in order to get a voice, vox populi, arising from the grass roots, people have had to indulge in civil disobedience.78

His words illustrate the point of this thesis: that the literature of civil disobedience reflects an American tradition of long standing.

This chapter opened with a characteristic comment of Thoreau's which may as well have been written by a Berrigan, for in philosophy and style, the three are similar. It will end with a Philip Berrigan comment which may as well have been written by Thoreau:

It seems to me that this nation could do nothing better to awaken its conscience than to fill its jails with just men; in our present order, prison should be accepted and welcomed instead of being feared and shunned.79

Notes


6 Gray, p. 65.

7 Gray, p. 80.

8 Introduction to P.J., p. xx.

9 Introduction to P.J., p. xx1.


12 P.J., p. 10.

13 P.J., p. 21.

14 P.J., pp. 17-18.

15 P.J., p. 5.

16 P.J., p. 5.

17 P.J., p. 82.

18 P.J., p. 72.

19 P.J., p. 87.

20 P.J., p. 6.

21 P.J., p. 13.
23 PJ, p. 58.
24 PJ, p. 141.
25 PJ, p. 53.
26 PJ, p. 166.
27 Gray, p. 81.
28 PJ, p. 48.
29 PJ, p. 52.
30 PJ, p. 53.
31 PJ, pp. 74-75.
32 PJ, p. 85.
33 PJ, p. 118.
34 P.J., p. 7.
35 PJ, p. 7.
36 PJ, p. 22.
37 PJ, p. 113.
38 PJ, p. 78.
39 PJ, p. 128.
58  NB, p. 29.


61  NB, p. 16.

62  Gray, p. 64.

63  NB, pp. 22-23.

64  NBp. 22.

65  NB, p. 23.


67  NB, p. 31.

68  NB, p. 131.

69  PJ, p. 170.

70  PJ, p. 13.

71  PJ, pp. 7, 77.

72  NB, p. 30.

74  Gray, p. 79.
75  Gray, p. 126.
77  Gray, p. 190.
78  Gray, p. 205.
79  FJ, p. 97.
Chapter 4

Martin Luther King and the
Beginnings of Black Radicalism

Much has been said, in the previous chapters, of American imperialism which presses its will upon the darker-skinned people of the world. The nineteenth century abolitionists faced this imperialism in their efforts to destroy the institution of slavery. After the Civil War, when blacks were free, they became a semi-colonial people like those in South Africa or Latin America. Like other semi-colonial groups, they realized that they were nominally free but not free in fact. From the time of Reconstruction on, the would-be black bourgeoisie had problems. It wanted liberty and equality, but also money, prestige, and political power. But whites had a monopoly on these things in Western civilization and looked upon blacks as upstarts and interlopers.

The rise of black consciousness, then, began at the time of black freedom. Frederick Douglass and Nat Turner were two prominent figures in the early black movement. Another later leader was Marcus Garvey, with his "back to Africa" campaign. A West-Indian born black nationalist, he advocated black self-sufficiency with the idea of regaining access to the African homeland as a basis for constructing a viable black economy.

Yet no other black movement, not even that of Nat Turner, has had the éclat of those of the sixties and seventies. The Black Muslims, the Black Panthers, the Soledad Brothers—all of
these owe their existence to the nonviolent civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King. Black consciousness in this country began quietly, almost religiously, and then blossomed into the splendid and dreadful flower that it is today. Benjamin Muse asks why the movement began as it did, with nonviolence:

If we ask why, after centuries of submission, the Negro was not only aroused but ready to mount a sustained, nationwide revolt at this moment in history, we shall find the answer in two discoveries which he had made. First, he had discovered that with the techniques of nonviolent action it was possible to picket and boycott and sit-in, with consequences which, though they might involve manhandling or imprisonment for some, were far short of bloody conflict. Second, he had found that such tactics bore fruit. 4

Black revolutionaries of the late sixties would disagree that such tactics bore fruit, but at the time of the Birmingham demonstrations of 1963, Martin Luther King and his followers were confident of their efficacy. Perhaps some background of the Birmingham incident would be appropriate before a discussion of King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." 1

Birmingham in the 1960's was reputed to be the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. There were more unsolved bombings of black homes and churches there than in any other city. Also, the city had a notorious record of police brutality to blacks and of injustices dealt to blacks in local courts. From the year 1957 up to the time of the demonstrations, Birmingham had seen fifty Ku Klux Klan-style cross burnings and eighteen bombings for which no one had been
punished.

Because of this deplorable situation, members of a Birmingham affiliate of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference called on Martin Luther King, the leader of that organization. They asked him to engage in a nonviolent, direct action program there. The demonstrations were planned for the Easter shopping season. Muse describes them: "Wave after wave of Negroes poured into the Birmingham streets, and were repressed by police with spectacular brutality. Many were injured; over three thousand were arrested." One of those arrested was, of course, Martin Luther King. Sitting in his jail cell, he composed the well known "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which has been described as "a masterpiece of cogent reasoning and lofty sentiment which has become a classic of the Negro revolution." As has been mentioned, Philip Berrigan modeled his letter on King's. Perhaps both men had St. Paul's epistles in mind as they wrote, for those were also written from prison. King's letter shows the characteristics of the four assertions of traditional American radicalism.

Turning to the first of these, the belief that the proper foundation of government is a universal law of right and wrong self-evident to our intuitive common sense, one sees that King, like the Berrigans, would assert the power of the human spirit. Muse writes, "Martin Luther King asserted the power of prayer and love." --both of which are Christian additions of man's intuitive common sense.

The "I have a dream" speech is an illustration of King's
belief in the power of the human spirit. Here, he says

'In the process of gaining our rightful place
we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds...
Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights
of meeting physical force with soul force.'

This belief in soul force is in sharp contrast to the ideas of
Locke's followers, who would found a government on the tangible
practicality of private property. This is the foundation on
which the governments of both Britain and the United States
rest. American radicals, however, as discussed in previous
chapters, insist that a good government is properly based not
on man's material possessions but on his spirit.

Thus King's belief in "soul force." In the letter from
the Birmingham jail, he states this American radical belief
a little more clearly. In discussing the difference between
just and unjust laws, he says that a just law is one that
squares with the moral code or with the law of God. It is
any law that is rooted in natural and eternal law. A just
law uplifts the human personality. An unjust law, on the other
hand, is one which is out of harmony with the moral law;
it degrades human personality. Hence, "segregation statutes
are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages
the personality." The important thing to note here is that
King would base the determination of what is a just law—and
thus a just government—on spiritual intangibles. In order
to do this, he must first assert that these spiritual intangibles
are universal, and that there is a natural, eternal moral law.
He does assert this, and no doubt the assertion comes partly out of his religious belief. Christianity does assert soul force.

This soul power, King says later in his letter, is one that is growing among blacks in America and all over the world. Collectively, they are coming to an understanding of the injustice of certain laws which damage the human personality. King says of the American blacks:

Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom; something without has reminded him that he can gain it. Consciously and unconsciously, he has been swept up by what the Germans call the Zeitgeist, and with his black brothers of Africa, and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America, and the Caribbean, he is moving with a sense of cosmic urgency toward the promised land or racial justice.12

The idea of a "promised land" is interesting here. Thoreau and the Berrigans, too, were concerned with a promised land. The Catonsville Nine have already been described as having acted within a tradition of utopian moralism, and Thoreau's Walden experience, like that of Brook Farm, was utopian in character. All four writers were in some way aiming towards a promised land. As King saw blacks moving closer and closer toward this goal of human freedom, he became disappointed with this goal of human freedom, he became disappointed with those institutions which remained behind, clinging to the old law based on private property.

One of these institutions was the white church. "Is organized religion," he asks, "too inextricably bound to the
status quo to save our nation and the world? Maybe I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, as the true ekklesia and the hope of the world. \(^\text{13}\) The status quo of the white church, of course, includes the protection of its own buildings, which are often costly and elaborate. King says that he thought that the white churches would be his allies, but instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of the stained-glass windows.\(^\text{14}\)

King had mentioned that some clergymen were too concerned about their own security to support the demonstration. In fact, some openly tried to dissuade him. Muse says,

Eight leading white Alabama clergymen, including four bishops and one rabbi, had issued a public statement urging the Negroes to withdraw support from these demonstrations, and to unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham.\(^\text{15}\)

Thus those groups which should supposedly care the least for possessions and the most for the human spirit, in some cases turned out to be the greatest disappointments to King. The vast majority of whites, clinging to the status quo, aligned itself into the opposition which King faced.

One aspect of the status quo which was especially bothersome to King was in the history of the South. There, he said, economic security had been gained at the expense of black
misery. "For more than two centuries our forbears labored in this country without wages; they made cotton king; they built the homes of their masters while suffering gross injustice and shameful humiliation."  

King would perhaps agree with Thoreau that the state is more interested in commerce and agriculture than in humanity. It was dangerous for a black man in the South to have such ideas.

But King was a man, and he was wearied by the fact that mature black males were so often treated as boys. "Your first name becomes 'nigger,' he wrote, "your middle name becomes 'boy, (however old you are) and your last name becomes 'John.'"

Thoreau, with his idea that men who serve the state with their bodies and not their consciences are not whole men, supports King's statement. Also, Philip Berrigan rounded out the idea that adult males should act as such when he wrote, "Becoming a man, we feel, is becoming what Christ was." In spite of the formidable opposition of those who would call him Nigger Boy John, King was determined to act.

So he and other blacks, following in the tradition of accepting a duty to act to right injustices, determined that a nonviolent campaign would be the best solution. In his "Letter," he outlines four steps to such a campaign: collection of facts to determine whether injustice exists; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action. It was already apparent that injustice did exist in Birmingham. Negotiations were then sought, "but the political leaders refused to engage in good faith negotiations." Then the blacks talked with
leaders of the economic community. The merchants made certain promises, such as removing the humiliating racial signs from stores, on the condition that there would be no demonstrations. Months passed and the signs remained. King comments:

So we had no alternative except that of preparing for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community.21

The final step before this direct action was one of self-purification. King started workshops on nonviolence. He asked followers, "Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?" By discussing each of these steps, King reveals that he did not move irresponsibly into direct action.

Muse comments on the failed negotiations and on the final alternative of direct action:

Negotiation played a part, but it was the sit-in and the street demonstrations, or the threat of them, that made negotiations productive. . . . In short, harassment was succeeding where supplication had failed. Offending the white man was proving more effective than pleasing him.23

Some groups had pleaded with King to wait, to let time rectify matters, instead of acting immediately. But King felt that action was the only step left after blacks had waited so long—340 years—for equality. He says in the "Letter" that blacks have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure, for privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. "So the purpose of direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed
that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation.

Unlike the black militants who came after him, King insists that this direct action be nonviolent. In explaining why the blacks demonstrated in Birmingham, he says that they had many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations. Since they have to get them out, it is better that they have sit-ins and freedom rides. "If [their] repressed emotions do not come out in these nonviolent ways, they will come out in ominous expressions of violence. King does not advocate anarchy. Rather, he feels that one who breaks an unjust law should do it openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty.

Nonviolence is also an earmark of the philosophies of Thoreau and the Berrigans. Because of this attitude, these four men stand in sharp contrast to some of the revolutionaries, black and white, of the seventies. King also shares another philosophy with Thoreau and the Berrigans. It is the belief that he has an allegiance to the family of man.

It was out of a sense of allegiance that King went to Birmingham in the first place. He says,

I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham.

His sense of allegiance goes even further than a feeling of obligation toward one organization in Alabama. In fact, it is because of his desire to be one with the rest of mankind
that he organized the demonstrations. He discusses the blacks' separation in these theological terms:

Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation: Isn't segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, an expression of his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness?²⁹

Sin, he is saying, is mankind's separation from God. This is a traditional Christian definition of the concept of sin. Segregation, then, is a microcosmic example of sin, because it is the estrangement of one human being from another.

Because he grieves over mankind's separation, King shows that he is concerned with the oneness of the family of man. His immediate allegiance is to the Negro race, but beyond that allegiance is the feeling that blacks should be one with the rest of mankind. As he says to whites, "the Negro is your brother." It is this separation of brothers that King worked so hard to rectify.

Later in the 1960's, King asserted his allegiance to the family of man in yet another way. He opposed the Vietnam war. He began to be vocal about the war shortly after he received the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in civil rights. Muse says,

Dr. King began to express 'grave concern' over the situation in Vietnam soon after he was honored with the Nobel Peace Prize for 1964. Before a Negro gathering in Petersburg, Virginia, in July, 1965, he called for a negotiated peace, and said: 'The long night of war must be stopped.' He criticized the American war effort increasingly during 1966, and in 1967 he was leading demonstrations which were more antiwar than pro-civil-rights.³¹
And so King demonstrated his allegiance to the family of man both through his civil rights and his anti-war actions.

It was in demonstrating his belief in the oneness of mankind that King was a leader. His was a leader's personality. Muse says that

...his religious fervor, his eloquence, his learning, a degree of mysticism, and no little histrionic talent had won him nationwide primacy among Negro leaders. To the general public he had become a symbol of revolution. To the millions of Negroes he was a Moses come to lead his people out to Egypt.

Undoubtedly, King also thought of himself as a leader. This aspect of his personality is evident in his style.

In fact, he opens his letter by explaining why he was in Birmingham. "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here." He is a leader, then, who goes wherever his people need him to combat injustice. In the same paragraph, he likens himself to the prophets of the eighth century and to Paul spreading the word of God. He say, "I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular home town." Francine Gray has already compared Philip Berrigan to St. Paul. Perhaps, in the description of the type of work King and the Berrigans do, the warrior-missionary simile is a useful one. As a leader, King has a certain sense of mission, and he carries this sense to the point where he feels that he works hand in hand with God. Human progress, he says, "comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be co-workers with God. When King compares himself to the prophets and to
God, he reveals that he thinks that his work has a certain noble status. In this feeling, he is similar to Thoreau and the Berrigans. Like his sense of leadership, this feeling is a salient aspect of his style.

King has already compared himself to St. Paul, thereby showing that he feels that his work is courageous and historically noteworthy. His feelings about the status of his actions are shown throughout the letter. King also compares himself to the biblical heroes Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to the early Christians and Socrates. Some people, he says, feel that he is an extremist. At first, this bothered him. Later, however, he changed his mind: "But as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist...?" The comparison to Socrates and Jesus is one that had already been made by the Berrigan's lawyer, William Kunstler. The temptation to describe an unjustly punished man as being like Socrates or Jesus is probably a very real one. King then goes on to name a list of extremists with whom he feels kinship: Amos, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson. He concludes the thought by saying: "So, after all, maybe the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists." There is a certain pride in King's words as he counts himself among the creative extremists of history.

Not surprisingly, however, King's pride is offset by a show of the virtue of patience. Realizing that a letter full of
haughtiness will not win favor with his critics, he tempers his words. A feeling of calm, reasonableness, and patience permeates the letter. In the opening he says to his critics, "I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms." And at the letter's close, he writes, "If I have said anything in this letter that is an overstatement of the truth and is indicative of unreasonable impatience, I beseech you to forgive me." With the use of words like this, King accomplishes a difficult task. On one hand, he must make it clear that his race is tired of waiting and that it will not be put off any longer. Thus he entitles his book about the Birmingham incident Why We Can't Wait. Yet at the same time he must appear reasonable enough so that his audience will give him credence. His style, a combination of humility and magnificent impatience, achieves this balance.

One more important aspect of King's style should be mentioned. The word "magnificent" has just been used to describe that style. Muse uses the words "histrionic talent." That King's histrionic talent tends toward magnificence is true at times. Yet at other times his style tends toward the baroque. His use of metaphor, for instance, is rather ornate. At one point, he compares the oft-heard word "wait" to a dangerous drug: "It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration." Later, his metaphor becomes even more shocking when he says this of certain civil
rights workers: "They have carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment." Finally, he ends the letter with a use of metaphor so lavish that it may be deemed "purple prose":

Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all of their scintillating beauty.

Perhaps there is a reason why Martin Luther King's style tends to be "purple" in this way. All of the authors thus far discussed have come out of a certain tradition of public speaking. Thoreau lived at a time in which every town of size had its own lyceum for lectures; he delivered *Civil Disobedience* as such a speech in 1848. The Berrigans, as priests, are also dedicated to the art of giving homilies. Sermons, unlike the written word, require a certain overstatement in order to make their point clear. King's words are particularly overused because the tradition of black preaching has been one of speaking to comparatively uneducated people. This hyperbolical type of overstatement has carried over to King's letter. There may be another reason why his style is sometimes overly oratorical. Thoreau, and at least Daniel Berrigan, are writers, the one by vocation, the other by avocation. Although King is a much-published author, he is remembered not as a writer but as a civil rights leader. Thus perhaps he devoted less time to the refining of his writing.
King's baroque style becomes very interesting when he speaks of the American tradition of which he is a part. He shows more faith in the American government that either Thoreau or the Berrigans. Although all four men take part in the tradition of Jefferson, the first three acknowledge, either tacitly or implicitly, that it is the capitalist tradition of Hamilton that has always prevailed in this country. This capitalism has been closely linked to every American effort of war (including the American Revolution) or imperialism. Jefferson's opening words of the Declaration are stirring, but in fact their practice is not evident in American society, as Thoreau and the Berrigans would probably agree.

But King does not shunt their pessimism about American government, and he speaks with patriotic zeal of "those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers. . . ." At another point in the letter he says:

We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America. Before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched across the pages of history the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence, we were here.

Thoreau and the Berrigans would perhaps reply that the priority of capitalist America is not freedom. King, like the others, is directly in the tradition of Jefferson. But unlike the others, he grants the American government a degree of respect and credence.
Notes


2. Cruse, p. 82.


6. Muse, pp. 5-6.


8. Muse, p. 27.


10. Quoted by Muse, p. 16.


15. Muse, p. 27.

17 Letter, p. 84.
18 PJ, p. 10.
19 Letter, p. 79.
20 Letter, pp. 79-80.
21 Letter, p. 80.
22 Letter, p. 80.
23 Muse, p. 30.
24 See, for example, pp. 82-84 of the letter.
25 Letter, p. 82.
26 Letter, p. 91.
27 Letter, p. 86.
28 Letter, p. 78.
29 Letter, p. 85.
30 Letter, p. 94.
31 Muse, p. 231.
32 Muse, p. 11.
33 Letter, p. 78.
34 Letter, p. 89.
35 Letter, pp. 86-87.
36 Letter, p. 92.
37 Letter, p. 92.
38 Letter, p. 77.
39 Letter, p. 100.
40 Letter, p. 83.
41 Letter, p. 97.
42 Letter, p. 100.
43 Stern, p. 74.
45 Letter, p. 97.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

Quo vadis?

Quo vadis? Perhaps there are two possible conclusions to this discussion. One would be a simple wrap-up of the preceding four chapters. The other would be an attempt to explain why I, and perhaps other readers in America in the twentieth century, am attracted to the literature of civil disobedience.

Perhaps the following comments will be à propos of a summary. First of all, although I didn't originally plan it, this paper seems to be as much of a study of Christian belief as a study of American radicalism. I now realize that it was inevitable that the thesis take this turn, and for this reason: the English Dissenters, from whom we get so many of the ideas underlying American radicalism, were religious men, a minority group trying to make their own ideas known to a hostile audience. When Locke's work was published, their strong convictions would naturally lead them to make their disagreement known. Those convictions, of course, have a strong religious flavor, and it is those same convictions that have shaped American radicalism.

Consider, for instance, the idea that man's spiritual being, his conscience, should be a basis of law. That is a distinctly religious, as opposed to a materialistic, idea. Consider, too, the otherworldliness of the radical disdain of private property. Christ himself set the Christian precedent
for shunning worldly goods in this way. Thirdly, the idea of acting to rectify injustice was a popular one in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when men such as George Fox and the Wesleys founded new religions opposing what they felt were the injustices of the official church. Finally, the idea of the oneness of mankind is an old one, common to many systems of ethics; among these is Christianity. Thus the basic principles of American radicalism came out of a Christian context, and thus this thesis has turned out heavily flavored with Christianity.

A final note of summery concerns the personalities and styles of the authors here presented. All, I think, have strong personalities. Strength of conviction is necessary if a person is to stick his neck out as Thoreau, the Berrigans, and King have. The strong personalities of these men have come across in their styles as a kind of pride. Probably this pride is a mixture of an understandable self-defense, and of the courage of their convictions.

Stylistically and philosophically, then, all these four writers resemble one another. I have said this again and again. Quo vadis? The conclusion to this conclusion will be the suggestion of a hypothesis concerning the reasons why the literature of civil disobedience has been so popular in the sixties and seventies.

My first is the vaguest but perhaps the most pervasive reason why people read the works of men who write from jail.
It is the existentialism in the air that causes us to feel kinship with prisoners. Even if the term "existentialism" were not used, the feeling of man's imprisonment, thanks to Messrs. Sartre and Camus, would be considered a prevalent one in twentieth century culture. Man's only courageous mode of existence, from this viewpoint, is to be completely free to determine the nature of his own essence. Most people, without even realizing it, fail to live up to this challenge of freedom, and therefore remain mental prisoners all their lives. Man as prisoner—the idea, whether tagged as existentialist or not—has become a basic one to the culture of the twentieth century. We identify with the struggles of prisoners. And so we read the writings of men in jail.

In the same way that the twentieth century human being identifies with prisoners, he also, if he is an American, identifies to a certain extent with the concept of rebellion. Every year on the fourth of July we hear speeches dedicated to the bravery of our noble forefathers who dared to stand on their principles and to oppose the tyranny of the mother country. Americans, according to popular ideology, are the ones who dare to be different; they are the ones who will rightfully rush to rebel against injustice. Madison Avenue has capitalized on this element in our culture, and has given the consumer products from station wagons bearing the name "Rebel" to television programs called "The Bold Ones" or "Maverick." Of course, the American spirit of rebelliousness has been tolerated more in word than in deed. Philip Berrigan
has an interesting comment on the subject:

In a capitalist society, whose very survival depends on its proving that self-interest can be profitable and socially manageable, human freedom undergoes a redefinition, becoming subject to the profit motive which informs society. In this context, freedom is tolerated, encouraged, even made marketable—except when it interferes with production and sales. In effect, freedom is no more than freedom to pursue self-interest within rigidly defined lines, so that the conflicts that emerge might be socially harmonized.

His words reveal the Jeffersonian-Hamiltonian split in our society, which gives lip service to one ideology but acts upon the other. He is one who acted on the Jeffersonian ideology and was punished for it.

Most of us do not have the courage to do what the Berrigans, or King, or Thoreau did. We applaud their acts from the audience. The theatrical metaphor is not used idly here. People who read about civil disobedience usually have some concern about the present state of the country. They deplore it; perhaps they feel guilty because they, too, do not take the gigantic risk of doing something about it. Let me not generalize. I feel guilty, at least, and I think that I read Thoreau and the Berrigans and King because I want to be purged of my feelings of guilt. If I read enough to be exceptionally well-informed and aware of the deplorable treatment of "good people" radicals, in this country, perhaps my awareness will be the next best thing to acting. I am like an audience, and I want Thoreau and the others to give me a catharsis, to
purge me of my guilt. I speak for myself, but I suspect that I am not alone.

These are some of the reasons that people drawn to read the literature of civil disobedience. They are, I think, the reasons that compelled me. My interest in this type of literature has led me to do a great deal of thinking about it, and from that thought has evolved my theory that the writings of these four men—Thoreau, the Bergens, and King—all partake in the ongoing tradition of American radicalism.

Note

1 PJ, p. 66.
Bibliography


