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Source: *The Thoreau Society Bulletin*, Summer 2004, No. 248 (Summer 2004), pp. 4-7

Published by: The Thoreau Society, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23402731>

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Thoreau as a teacher and authority figure, this student said, "He seemed the sort of man that wouldn't willingly hurt a fly."

Emma Goldman, Thoreau, and Anarchists

Chris Dodge

Emma Goldman has rarely lacked publicity. The story of the Lithuania-born anarchist orator, author, and publisher has been told by multiple biographers; her autobiography, *Living My Life*, is still in print seventy-three years after first publication; and on 12 April 2004 she was the subject of a ninety-minute documentary film, *Emma Goldman*, broadcast as part of the PBS "American Experience" series. What hasn't been widely recognized is that Goldman was inspired by Henry David Thoreau.

As an adjunct to its broadcast, PBS posted a web site with information about Goldman's life and influences ("Emma Goldman"). The site includes a timeline of events ("Timeline"), the first two of which predate Goldman's birth by nearly seven years, having to do with John Brown's 1859 raid on the arsenal at Harpers Ferry and Thoreau's subsequent "A Plea for Captain John Brown," which—the site claims—would "later influence Emma Goldman's views on violence as a justifiable means to an end" ("Henry David Thoreau"). This statement may be off target. Goldman scholar Barry Pateman, for one, believes Goldman's views on violence were formed more by the Russian revolutionary organization Narodnaya Volya, saying "she never equate[d] Thoreau with violence, as far as I can see."

There's no telling exactly when the multilingual Goldman first encountered Thoreau's writings. In 1893, when she was twenty-four, she was convicted of unlawful assembly and incitement to riot, and then spent ten months in New York City's Blackwell's Island prison. There she received, from her friend Justus Schwab, stacks of books by "Walt Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Spencer, John Stuart Mill, and many other English and American authors I learned to know and love" (*Living My Life*, 145).

Pateman says the first instance he can find of Goldman mentioning Thoreau is an interview with the *New York Sun* on 6 January 1901, where she is quoted as saying, "Americans who insisted on believing that anarchy was foreign revolution are finding out that it is universal philosophy, and that their own Emerson and Thoreau said more sensible anarchical things than any of our professed Anarchists." Pateman notes that this "early example of Goldman claiming an organic anarchist heritage for America ... that had been subverted and twisted by the development of capitalism" was an attempt to reach an American audience and free anarchism from its "immigrant associations" (Pateman: Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America*, 122).

Goldman perpetuated this idea, Pateman notes, in an interview in *The Ohio State Journal* on 8 March 1907, saying, "The doctrine of anarchy taught in this country was founded by Americans. It originated with men of the Concord School. David Thoreau, Josiah Warren and Stephen Pearl Andrews were anarchists. They were associates of William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips and Emerson. Those men were anarchists too."

After tumultuous years of public speaking and three more arrests (there would be twelve more to come), Goldman began publishing the monthly magazine *Mother Earth* in 1906, with her comrade Alexander Berkman acting as editor from 1907 to 1915. The magazine survived through 1917, at last thwarted by postal censorship, and was succeeded by seven issues of the newsletter *Mother Earth Bulletin* (October 1917 to April 1918). During this time Goldman and Berkman also published books under the Mother Earth imprint—including their own writings and those of anarchist contemporaries such as Voltairine de Cleyre, as well as pamphlets. The June 1911 issue of *Mother Earth* advertises a list of "Mother Earth Series" pamphlets, including Thoreau's "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience," available for fifteen cents.

Exactly which writings of Thoreau's did Goldman read and when? Pateman reports that a Goldman letter to *The Philadelphia Public Ledger* on 1 October 1909 quoted from "Civil Disobedience" in support of her right to speak, noting that the paper had cited this as "Evil Disobedience." Goldman quoted "Civil Disobedience" again in her essay "Anarchism: What It Really Stands For" in *Anarchism and Other Essays*:

Referring to the American government, the greatest American Anarchist, David Thoreau, said: "Government, what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instance losing its integrity; it has not the vitality and force of a single living man. Law never made man a whit more just; and by means of their respect for it, even the well disposed are daily made agents of injustice." (56–57)

Goldman neglected to insert ellipses after the clause that ends "single living man," where she left out a clause and then twenty-one sentences. Goldman quotes Thoreau again in a later passage:

"All voting," says Thoreau, "is a sort of gaming, like checkers, or backgammon, a playing with right and wrong; its obligation never exceeds that of expediency. Even voting for the right thing is doing nothing for it. A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance, nor wish to prevail through the power of the majority." A close examination of the machinery of politics and its achievements will bear out the logic of Thoreau.

Here again, Goldman silently elides phrases, clauses, even entire sentences. Unfortunately, her ellipses-free rendering of Thoreau is now perpetuated on the Internet in places where she isn't even mentioned (see Shor, for example).

Another piece in *Anarchism and Other Essays*, "Minorities Versus Majorities," mentions Thoreau twice. Goldman writes, "In the literary and dramatic world, the Humphrey Wards and Clyde Fitches are the idols of the mass, while but a few know and appreciate the beauty and genius of an Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman; an Ibsen, a Hauptmann, a Butler Yeats, or a Stephen Phillips. They are like solitary stars, far beyond the horizon of the multitude" (71). Thoreau, Whitman, and—Stephen Phillips? On the topic of "the American struggle for liberty," Goldman adds Thoreau's name to a different pantheon: "The true patron saints of the black men were represented in that handful of fighters in Boston, Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Theodore Parker, whose great courage and sturdiness culminated in that somber giant John Brown. Their untiring zeal, their eloquence and perseverance undermined the stronghold of the Southern lords" (76). In "Preparedness, the Road to Universal Slaughter," Goldman again called Thoreau by the first name he was given at birth, writing, "The very proclaimers of 'America first' have ... betrayed the fundamental principles of real Americanism, of the kind ... that Jefferson had in mind when he said that the best government is that which governs least; the kind of America that David Thoreau worked for when he proclaimed that the best government is the one that doesn't govern at all...."

At least one Thoreau scholar has noted the Thoreau-Goldman connection. In an essay on the influence of "Civil Disobedience," Lawrence A. Rosenwald writes that the list of those to whom Thoreau's essay "mattered so much ... famously includes Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. It also includes the anarchist Emma Goldman..." (153). Rosenwald later makes an exception of Goldman, writing that "few women activists make much of Thoreau's essay" and pointing to a feminist critique of Thoreau that appears in the same volume as his essay, Dana Nelson's "Thoreau, Manhood, and Race" (167).

Thoreau's name turns up far more commonly in studies of Goldman. According to the Emma Goldman Papers Project web site, in May–July 1916 Goldman lectured in Philadelphia, Cleveland, Denver, Los Angeles, and San Francisco on topics that included "Free or Forced Motherhood," "Anarchism and Human Nature—Do They Harmonize?" and the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman (Falk, "Emma Goldman Chronology"). In 1917 a

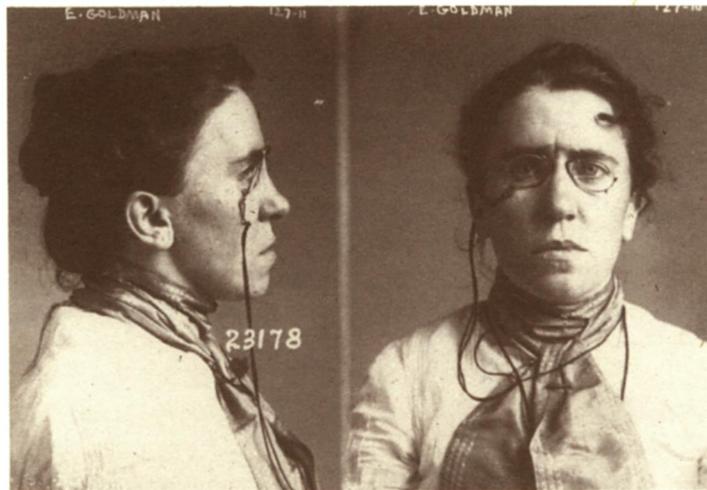
Thoreau poem under the title "True Freedom" ("Wait not till slaves pronounce the word...") was published on the cover of the January *Mother Earth*, with a footnote, "Published for the first time. By courtesy of the Boston Bibliophile

Society." Later that year, after the U.S. entered the war in Europe, Goldman and Berkman were arrested and charged with conspiring to interfere with the draft, though their antiwar stance was hardly a secret (Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America*, 233). In a speech at a meeting of the No-Conscription League on 4 June, eleven days before her arrest, Goldman said, "I honor that great American Henry D. Thoreau, who wrote of the duty of Civil disobedience, and we are following him and his doctrines. We believe the

time will come when the highest conscience of humanity will be shown in civil disobedience to unrighteous requirements of the powerful few" ("Meeting of No-Conscription League").

Brought to trial, Goldman addressed the jury, asserting, "Never would I change my ideas because I am found guilty," then related a canard that still makes the rounds (whose source is still a mystery to me): "I may remind you of two great Americans, undoubtedly not unknown to you, gentleman of the jury: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. When Thoreau was placed in prison for refusing to pay taxes, he was visited by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Emerson said, 'David, what are you doing in jail?' and Thoreau replied, 'Ralph, what are you doing outside, when honest people are in jail for their ideals?'" (*Red Emma Speaks*, 372–373). Biographer Alice Wexler notes that in late 1919, as Goldman and Berkman awaited deportation on Ellis Island, the two wrote a pamphlet titled *Deportation: Its Meaning and Menace*, in which they "appended a list of quotations from famous Americans, including Thoreau, Emerson, Lincoln, and Jefferson, which would be liable under the current criminal syndicalism laws" (*Emma Goldman in Exile*, 16).

Despite her deportation, Goldman wrote later that she did not "despair of American life" and that having experienced police raids on her lectures (about such topics as birth control), with "innumerable arrests and three convictions," she hadn't felt alone in facing repression. Citing "heroic figures ... who in the face of persecution and obloquy have lived and fought for the right of mankind to free and unstinted expression," Goldman then specifically



On 10 September 1901 Goldman was arrested by Chicago police, who attempted to implicate her in the assassination of President William McKinley (Library of Congress photograph number B2-127-11; courtesy of The Emma Goldman Papers Project and the Berkeley Digital Library SunSITE, <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Goldman/>)

named some “native-born children who have assuredly not lagged behind”: Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Voltairine de Cleyre, Moses Harmon, and Horace Traubel (*Red Emma Speaks*, 437).

The twentieth-century American anarchist movement spurred by Goldman and Berkman included countless lesser known figures also inspired by Thoreau. Paul Avrich’s *Anarchist Voices* is drawn from interviews conducted with over two hundred anarchists between 1963 and 1991. Many mention Thoreau. Anatole Freeman Ishill, the son of anarchist printer Joseph Ishill (1888-1966), reports, “Father was a strict vegetarian and a Thoreauvian. He belonged to the Thoreau Society and we all visited Walden Pond in 1962, which for him was a kind of mystical experience” (248). American Civil Liberties Union founder Roger Baldwin says, “The individualist anarchists, like Benjamin Tucker, never inspired me, despite the fact that they claimed Thoreau and Emerson, whom I claimed too” (63), while Juan Anido confides otherwise, saying “I was mostly drawn to the individualists, to Emerson and especially Thoreau” (396). Avrich notes that machinist Valerio Isca, “active in both the Italian and English-speaking anarchist movement in New York” from the 1920s on, was “a great admirer of Henry David Thoreau whose portrait hung on the wall of his Mohegan cottage, with an open copy of *Walden* on the desk beneath” (144). He also cites Thoreau’s influence on Louis Genin (440) and quotes Manuel Komroff’s assertion, “I feel closer to Jefferson and Thoreau than ever” (203).

Perhaps Avrich’s most interesting interviews mentioning Thoreau are those with Jo Ann Burbank and people who knew her. Burbank (also known as Jo Ann Wheeler) edited a journal called *Mother Earth*, a publication calling itself “A Libertarian Farm Paper Devoted to the Life of Thoreauvian Anarchy” (bringing Goldman and Thoreau together, in a sense). In one interview Burbank says, “We had been brought up in my family on Emerson and Thoreau and Bronson Alcott—the Fullers were cousins of some sort. I was much impressed by Thoreau’s essay on Civil Disobedience, but *Walden* was our bible, and, given the Depression, we tried living on the land. It wasn’t easy, but we did it. We tried to follow the authority from within, rather than any external authority. We hadn’t much money but we had a great deal of spirit and high thinking” (266). Burbank refers in passing to her son, Jon Thoreau, fathered by John Scott. Of Scott she says, “His first son, with another woman, was named Marx Scott. A son named Marx[.] then, seventeen years later, a son named Thoreau—that’s an interesting evolution!” (266).

Goldman contemporary Voltairine de Cleyre read Thoreau; and Avrich, her biographer, asserts that Goldman was “using the language of Thoreau” when she wrote that anarchism “pleads with men to renounce the worthless luxuries which enslave them,” and when she urged that people replace “the rush and jangle of the chase for wealth” with “the silence, the solitude, the simplicity of the free life”

(*American Anarchist*, 164). Carlotta R. Anderson’s biography of another contemporary of Goldman’s, Joseph Labadie (1850-1933), also cites Thoreau several times.

It is likely that some of Goldman’s forebears in the anarchist movement also read and were influenced by Thoreau. Avrich says that Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman were writers that Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) held in esteem, for instance (*Anarchist Portraits*, 80). However Thoreau is not listed in the index to Kropotkin’s *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* nor in the index of his *In Russian and French Prisons*. George Woodcock’s biography of Kropotkin does mention Thoreau, but only in a passing reference to “the native [American] individualist anarchism of Benjamin Tucker, derived from Thoreau, Josiah Warren, and Proudhon” (268). Avrich further notes that Max Maisel, an early 20th-century bookseller on New York’s Lower East Side, had “a huge stock of radical works in Yiddish, some of them—by Kropotkin, Thoreau, and Oscar Wilde—published by Maisel himself” (192), and cites an article about Maisel published in *Fraye Arbeter Shtime* on 1 November 1959 (293). Among the early twentieth century editions of “Civil Disobedience” listed in the WorldCat database is *Di Flikht Fun Ungehorkhizamkeyt Tsum Shtatt*, published at New York in 1970 by “M. Mayzel.”

Did Emma Goldman read Thoreau in Yiddish? It’s not outside the realm of possibility. Maisel advertised his books in *Mother Earth* and, according to Goldman scholar Candace Falk, “Goldman lectured regularly in Yiddish to Jewish audiences, although she much preferred and was more proficient in German, her mother tongue” (*Volume One*, 367). Turn over rocks and interesting facts sometimes scurry out. So, too, however, do questions keep coming.

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Thoreau's Letters to a Spiritual Seeker: A Review

Dave Bonney

Henry D. Thoreau. *Letters to a Spiritual Seeker*. Edited by Bradley P. Dean. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004. ISBN: 0-393-05941-3; 266 pp.; US\$21.95 cloth.

It was a disillusioned and spiritually hungry Harrison Gray Otis Blake who took up his pen in March 1848 and wrote a letter to Henry Thoreau. The men were mere acquaintances. They had known each other by sight from their Harvard years in the mid-1830s, but it wasn't until late in 1844 or early 1845 that they were formally introduced to one another by Emerson, with whom Blake, an early disciple, was visiting. They had a single lengthy conversation, which was memorable to Blake. The seeds planted during that encounter took root and grew in him during the intervening three-and-a-half or four years. Seeking a deeper and more spiritually satisfying experience of life, but finding himself grounded in the shallows of society's conventions, Blake boldly, if not somewhat impertinently, demanded in his only surviving letter to Thoreau: "Speak to me in this hour as you are prompted.... Could I plant myself at once upon the truth, reducing my wants to their minimum ... life would be infinitely richer. But alas! I shiver on the brink." Thus began this rich correspondence that continued

over the next thirteen years. A spiritual seeker had found his spiritual mentor.

Bradley P. Dean, whose credits include the reconstruction and publication of Thoreau's "lost works," *The Dispersion of Seeds* (in *Faith in a Seed* [1993]) and *Wild Fruits* (2000), has performed another valuable service by culling the Blake letters from the larger body of Thoreau's collected correspondence. In their earlier contexts, the special nature of these letters is easily overlooked, appearing perhaps as so many disconnected threads. When gathered together by themselves, without intervening distractions, they become whole cloth, of a weave revealing the spiritual and religious dimension that lay at Thoreau's core, a dimension which permeates and pervades his writings. This compartment of Thoreau's mind, and his devotion to it, is critical to understanding the man and his work.

As Dean writes in his introduction: "Thoreau's writings are most profitably understood as reports from along the route of his pilgrimage." Thanks largely to the narrowness of the path to which Blake directed Thoreau's footsteps (Blake's questions may be accurately reconstructed from Thoreau's responses), this volume provides us with a succinct yet reasonably comprehensive view of Thoreau's development as a seeker of life's deeper meanings. Consider but a few examples of his visionary character:

- "My actual life is a fact in view of which I have no occasion to congratulate myself, but for my faith and aspiration I have respect."
- "The laws of earth are for the feet, or inferior man; the laws of heaven are for the head, or superior man...."
- "Our thoughts are the epochs of our lives, all else is but a journal of the winds that blew while we were here."
- "As for conforming outwardly, and living your own life inwardly,—I do not think much of that."
- "It is not enough to be industrious; so are the ants. What are you industrious about?"

These letters display a warmth that we're not used to seeing in Thoreau, even when he is writing under the cloak of privacy that his journal permitted. As the correspondence progresses, he forthrightly acknowledges how much these letters, and Blake, meant to him as the years passed and their relationship deepened.

"I am much indebted to you," he told Blake in 1853, "because you look so steadily at the better side, or rather the true center of me ... and as I have elsewhere said 'Give me an opportunity to live.' " But all is not serious; Thoreau's humor repeatedly shines through, as when he writes: "The doctors are all agreed that I am suffering from want of society. Was never a case like it. First, I did not know that I was suffering at all. Secondly, as an Irishman might say, I

