

## Thoreau, a Hippie in History

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Thoreau's major similarity to the hippies [of the 1960s and 1970s] is his attitude towards society (not towards his fellow men, for whom he had some affection, a bit of humorous contempt, and a great deal of pity but no hostility). For while Thoreau's life was in every respect morally irreproachable—that is to say, he was chaste,<sup>1</sup> sober, paid his debts, discharged his obligations, and broke no laws—he was clearly aware that he had dropped out, had set himself apart from the standards of society, and was, indeed, conducting a guerilla warfare primarily for the benefit of his own soul. “The greater part of what my neighbors call good,” he wrote, “I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior.” He did spend one night in jail because of his refusal to pay taxes to a state that supported and enforced the Fugitive Slave Act. Though his pamphlet, “Civil Disobedience,” is his major treatment of that incident, he does mention the episode once in *Walden*, in an attempt to explain his relationship to society: “Wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they can, constrain him to belong to their desperate odd-fellow society. It is true, I might have resisted forcibly with more or less effect, might have run ‘amok’ against society; but I preferred that society should run ‘amok’ against me, it being the desperate party.” (That last clause is a choice sample of Thoreau's wit, the counterpart among hip-

pies being something like Galahad's<sup>2</sup> offering to paint the walls of the Ninth Precinct the day after he had been arraigned.)

Thoreau's remedy for mankind was that it should learn to live simply and organically, in the way that he himself chose to live, “by truly Indian, botanic, magnetic, and natural means,” as he put it, returning to nature not merely by going out to live beside a pond but more radically and spiritually, in something like a kind of natural mysticism. And like the hippies, he not only made a folk-hero out of the American Indian but also quoted again and again in his book from the Indian scriptures.

Thoreau was not, however, like his friend Emerson, a teacher looking for disciples. His ethic, as opposed perhaps to his metaphysic,<sup>3</sup> was precisely the code of the hippies—let each person find his own thing and do it, and don't try to put your thing on anybody else: “I would not have any one adopt *my* mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own* way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead.”

1. chaste: decent and modest.

2. Galahad: a hippie who ran a commune in New York City during the 1960s.

3. metaphysic: philosophical principles.