

A MAJORITY OF ONE: COUNTING CONSCIENCES IN CONCORD

Robert A. Gross

On Sunday morning, March 3, 1844, Ralph Waldo Emerson came before a gathering of free thinkers at Amory Hall in Boston to offer his view of a region in the ferment of reform. « Whoever has had opportunity of acquaintance with society in New England during the last twenty-five years », he announced, « with those middle and with those leading sections that may constitute any just representation of the character and aim of the community, will have been struck with the great activity of thought and experimenting ». Everywhere he looked Emerson discerned the signs of reforming times: Bible societies; temperance societies; non-resistance and peace societies; abolitionists; vegetarians; Sabbatarians; come-outers from the churches.

No one appeared content with the status quo. The practice of trade fostered « false relations between men »; the system of education produced useless pedants; inequality divided man from man. But these ills would soon give way before the army of reform. « What a fertility of projects for the salvation of the world! » Emerson exclaimed. In the restless mood of 1844, all existing institutions were being called into question and obliged to justify themselves in the light of private conscience. It was this reliance upon individual judgment that was, for Emerson, the most welcome sign of the times.

I conceive this gradual casting off of material aids, and the indication of growing trust in the private self-supplied powers of the individual, to be the affirmative principle of the recent philosophy, and that it is feeling its own profound truth and is reaching forward at this very hour to the happiest conclusions.

Yet, in a characteristic gesture. Emerson embraced the spirit of reform only to reject its concrete manifestations. He had just recently refused to join other Transcendentalists in the new utopian community of Brook Farm. Now he set out to explain why not only that experiment, but virtually all the other reform societies of his day were fatally flawed. The trouble was that the movement of dissent embodied the very ills of the society it set out to change.

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, « New England Reformers. A Lecture Read before the Society in Amory Hall, on Sunday, March 3, 1844 », in Emerson, *Essays: Second Series*, Boston and New York 1883, 239-40, 247.

For one thing, virtually every reform society was too « partial »; that is, each looked only to a single idea, by means of which it hoped to alter the social condition.

One apostle thought all men should go to farming; and another, that no man should buy or sell: that the use of money was the cardinal evil; another, that the mischief was in our diet, that we eat and drink damnation. These made unleavened bread, and were foes to the death to fermentation.

Everyone, it appeared, had his own miracle cure. But worse, in Emerson's view, few were content to trust to themselves. « ...The revolt against the spirit of commerce, the spirit of aristocracy, and the inveterate abuses of cities, did not appear possible to individuals; and to do battle against numbers they armed themselves with numbers, and against concert they relied on new concert ». In the process, they replicated the dominant organizational forms of the day².

For this was, of course, the era when the large corporation and the mass political party were born. It was a time when the mills of Lowell and Lawrence employed workers in the hundreds and earned revenues in the hundreds of thousands, a time when the Democrats and Whigs mounted vast rallies in town and city streets to court the new democratic electorate. The voluntary societies of reform followed their lead. Abolitionists, organized on a national scale and employing the latest steam-powered presses, produced millions of anti-slavery leaflets, which they poured through the mails to hapless post-offices in the South. Bible and missionary societies drew on the voluntary contributions of pious people throughout North and South to promote the cause of Christianity all over the globe.

And a host of groups – Sabbatarians, temperance advocates, opponents of the « Gag Rule » in the U.S. Congress – gathered hundreds of thousands of signatures in vast petition drives to persuade state and national legislators to adopt their cause. Emerson knew well the signs of the times: reform societies were nothing more than vast combinations of numbers and resources for the sake of achieving specialized ends; as such, they formed the exact equivalent of the business corporation and the political party, the very forces many dissenters blamed for the besetting problems of the day. In an age of aggregates, most reformers were part of the problem, *not* part of the solution³.

Emerson's critique of reform was penetrating. In the course of distancing himself from the ferment of reform, he pointed up a central feature of Jacksonian society: its absorption in numbers. It is now a commonplace to remark

² Emerson, « New England Reformers », 240, 248-50.

³ Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers 1815-1860*, New York 1978, Richard D. Brown, *Modernization: The Transformation of American Life 1600-1865*, New York 1976, 94-158; Leonard L. Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing: Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America*, New York 1970, 71-73, 166-70.

that the age of Emerson marked the beginnings of a mass society in the United States, but to the people of the time, that fact dominated popular consciousness. As Emerson observed in « The American Scholar » (1837), « Men are become of no account, Men in history, men in the world of to-day are bugs, are spawn, and are called “the mass” and “the herd” »⁴.

That fact was reflected in a new quantitative frame of mind. Back in the eighteenth century, few people ever bothered with anything beyond elementary ciphering; in the everyday world of farming most people inhabited, the need to calculate was limited, in large part because the extent of the market was slight. Sophisticated counting and reckoning belonged to the world of merchants, who had to keep accounts, balance books, follow the changing prices in diverse markets, and convert florins into shillings and shillings into dollars. Indeed, arithmetic was rarely taught in the common schools; for the most part, the subject was offered privately, on a fee-paying basis, to boys over ten, headed for the countinghouse. As a result, the mathematical skills of the people who made the American Revolution – their level of « numeracy », at it's now called – were minimal⁵.

But by the time Emerson wrote, all that had changed. From 1815 or so on – the years of Henry Thoreau's boyhood – the habits of calculation were rapidly diffused throughout the country. Arithmetic became a regular subject of the schools, and its teaching was transformed: no longer relying upon rote memorization of formal rules, schoolmasters now aimed to convey the principles behind the operations. That effort succeeded so well in New England that Yankees became famous for their talent for numbers.

« Arithmetic, I presume », observed the English traveler Thomas Hamilton in the early 1830s, « comes by instinct among this guessing, reckoning, expecting, and calculating people ». Indeed, people became obsessed with counting and measuring every aspect of American life. Emerson couldn't have missed it: the zeal for numbers affected even the little town of Concord-population: about 2,000 souls – where he and Henry Thoreau lived and wrote, and it was to shape the Transcendental vision they shared⁶.

Let me give several examples of the quantifying frame of mind, which permeated the voluntary associations of Concord and ran through the local press. First, the world of agriculture. The typical farmer, it was said, measured his status in the world by the numbers of his acres and the size of his barn. And he reveled in tall tales of huge crops and « vegetable wonderments » – of ninety-six pound squashes, corn stalks seventeen and a half feet high, and twenty-four pumpkins growing from a single seed. But to agricul-

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, « The American Scholar », in Emerson, *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, ed. Robert E. Spiller, Cambridge, Mass. 1979, 65.

⁵ Patricia Cline Cohen, *A Calculating People: The Spread of Numeracy in Early America*, Chicago 1982, 47-115.

⁶ Cohen, *A Calculating People*, 116-204 (quotation, p. 175).

tural reformers, this was naive arithmetic, at best; it foolishly focused on gross products, rather than on that prudent measure of real value, productivity. New England agriculture, went the complaint, was slovenly, wasteful, inefficient, blindly ridden by ignorance and custom, heedless of long-term damage being done to the land.

The chief trouble lay with farmers' desire to spread themselves over land. Unthinkingly trying to do too much, they cultivated far more land than they had the labor or capital to manage with any success. Everything was done « by halves » – « half-farming, half-tilling, and half-manuring » – without any foresight or plan. The solution followed from the diagnosis. Farmers were urged to cut back on their overextended operations and to adopt a new scheme of farming: the system of scientific agriculture. By following expert advice on crop rotations, manuring, plowing, reaping, marketing, and keeping accounts, they might learn « the immense productive power of a perfectly cultivated acre ».

Farming less land, they might do more with it, and thereby profit more in the end. No matter the traditions on the land: « ...there must be some sacrifice to the pride of ancestry – "It was my great-grandfather's lot, and has been in the family above fifty years". Family pride is concerned in many things besides land; but plain arithmetic will show that it has little to do in calculations of loss and gain ». To be sure, such careful husbandry was no means to get rich quick. As Rev. Henry Colman, the agricultural commissioner of Massachusetts, argued in the mid-1840s, « the gains must be small and gradual; but they are a full recompense for labor steadily exerted, frugality strictly maintained, and capital judiciously applied »⁷.

Other reformers, too, taught the virtues of small calculations. Against the complaint that the times were too expensive, writers in the press counseled a rational economy, somewhat in the spirit of Henry Thoreau. Avoid luxuries like cigars, advised one essayist. If a man smokes four stogies a day, and they cost eight cents each, he will have spent some \$ 21.90 a year on his transient pleasure. Were he to invest that sum at six per cent a year over thirty years, he would ultimately earn \$ 244, and his worldly prospects would not dissolve in a cloud of smoke. William Alcott, the reforming cousin to the Concord Transcendentalist Bronson Alcott, similarly estimated the value of attending to details. A young man who habitually stayed up until eleven o'clock at night, only to rise two hours past daybreak, would pay the cost in candles; after a half-century of such riotous living, he would have wasted

⁷ *Middlesex Observer*, Oct. 17, 1818; *Concord Yeoman's Gazette*, Apr. 11, 1829; *Middlesex Gazette*, May 30, 1818; Henry Colman, *Fourth Report of the Agriculture of Massachusetts: Counties of Franklin and Middlesex*, Boston 1841, 424; Robert A. Gross, « Culture and Cultivation: Agriculture and Society in Thoreau's Concord », *Journal of American History*, 69 (June 1982): 52-54.

\$ 182.50 on wax. « Live within your income », Alcott pronounced; « to this end you must calculate »⁸.

These reformers of farms and households were merely offering advice. Others were putting the quantitative approach into practice in Concord's own institutions, particularly, its schools. School reformers were obsessed with numbers; where the agricultural improvers invoked the ideal of the « perfectly cultivated acre », crusaders for better schools set out to create the perfectly educated child. To do so required constant calculation. In 1848, the Concord school committee assessed the progress of education in town very precisely. It computed average attendance per season (it was 64 %). It figured the average length of the school year. It compared teachers' salaries in Concord to other places in the state. It even calculated the extent of crowding in schoolhouses. In one, where sixty pupils were tightly packed, « there will be less than five feet square on the floor for each scholar. Now the Committee of the American Institute of Instruction on School houses in 1831, say that 21 feet of the floor is the least that should be allowed. In the best school rooms in Boston, the cubic space allowed to a scholar, is 350 or 400 feet. In this school house it is 44 feet, about one eighth or ninth part ». But the committee did more than take customary measures of Concord's condition. It invented its own standardized tests of student achievement. Each year the committeemen were expected to visit the schools and listen to recitations of what the children had learned as a way of judging the effectiveness of the different teachers and schools. Invariably, their conclusions were impressionistic. But in 1848, the committee decided to tighten up the process. It came up with a numerical rating system.

...the Committee adopted this method. They let eight represent the highest improvement that could be reasonably expected of a class, under all the circumstances. The numbers below represented all the inferior degrees of improvement, down to 0. Each member of the Committee, during their examination of a class, formed an independent judgment of its merit, and set down the number representing it, on his own paper. At the close of the examination, the Committee made an average of their marks for each class and for the whole school.

To their satisfaction, « the average mark for each school in town as a whole, was not below 7, with two exceptions... » By the middle of the nineteenth century, Concord had already entered the modern educational world of standardized tests⁹.

Ultimately, the desire to count took on a millennial cast. The school committeemen, though pleased with Concord's progress, were certain that more was better. The question before the townspeople, they declared, was simple:

⁸ *Concord Gazette and Middlesex Yeoman*, May 8, 1824; Cohen, *A Calculating People*, 3.

⁹ *The Annual Report of the School Committee of Concord, for the Year Ending April 1st, 1848*, Concord, Mass. 1848, 6, 10.

« How much education can, and ought, this town, and this State, give to all its children as they grow up? » To answer this query, the committee pointed to a survey recently taken by Horace Mann, the reforming secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education. Addressing « a large number of the most successful and eminent teachers in the different parts of the United States », Mann put forward the following proposition:

Should all our schools be kept by teachers of high intellectual and moral qualifications, and should all the children in this Community, be brought within these schools for ten months in the year; then, what per centage of such children as you have had under your care, could, in your opinion, be so educated and trained, that their existence, on going out into the world, would be a benefit and not a detriment, an honor and not a shame to society? Or, to state the question in a general form, if all the children were brought within the salutary and auspicious influences we have supposed, what per centage of them should you pronounce to be irreclaimable and hopeless?

The responses confirmed Mann's every hope. No more than two per cent « would be irreclaimable nuisances to society », opined one educator. No, said another: a mere one in a hundred would be lost to vice. But Catherine Esther Beecher, the daughter of the noted evangelical minister Lyman Beecher and « one of the most eminent teachers, as well as most talented women in the country », was unwilling to give up on even a single student. « Under such conditions, I do not believe that *one*, no, *not a single one* would fail of proving a respectable and prosperous member of society; nay, more; I believe every one would at the close of life, find admission into the world of endless peace and love »¹⁰.

Let me take one final example: the realm of reading. In 1821, the middle-class merchants, tradesmen, and professionals of Concord established a voluntary social library for their own and others' improvement. Reading, they believed, was a fundamental social good. For one thing, it provided the basis for an informed, self-reliant citizenry, capable of defending its rights. For another, it was the key to social mobility. Through the pursuit of knowledge in books, the individual could expand his intellectual capital, increase his efficiency at work, and raise his status in the world. Fittingly, the members of the library judged the success of their venture through numbers.

Annually, the executive committee counted the number of books and periodicals that had been taken out by members and non-members alike, compared the totals to previous years, and solemnly announced whether reading had risen or fallen, in the confidence that they were measuring the mental progress of the town. In these calculations, the committees gave special attention to borrowing by non-members, whose payments to take out books were crucial to the library's budget. To attract these readers, it was essential

¹⁰ Concord School Report for 1848.

to purchase for the collection « the most popular and useful works of the day ». Or so the officers of the library said, year after year, even in the face of the facts. When circulation fell off, despite the purchase of new books, the committees preferred to ignore the data. The truth was, that the proprietors wanted to read the latest books, and although they claimed to be acting on non-members' behalf, it was their reading that over the years correlated most strongly with new accessions.

They simply believed, with William Alcott, that the more one read, the more one improved. In his guide for *The Young Husband*, Alcott recommended that newly married couples spend an hour a day together in mutual study of science. Omitting the Sabbath, the pair would log 313 hours a year in conjugal reading. At ten pages an hour, they would have completed 3,130 pages in all, the equivalent of ten to twelve volumes. But, Alcott conceded, ten pages an hour may be too fast; it allows « little, if any, time for conversations, explanation, illustration, or review ». Still, even five pages an hour would be sufficient to read five good-sized volumes a year and fifty every decade¹¹.

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Now, there was an incredible naivete about all these computations. The school committee asked how much education – not how good an education – Concord ought to give its youth. Unswervingly committed to their pedagogy, the members were certain that more schooling meant more learning. Similarly, the Concord library committees never questioned the assumption that a book withdrawn from the stacks was a book read. To do so would have shattered the faith of the institution. Quantification was not a self-critical enterprise. The school committeemen never questioned the biases of the experts whom Horace Mann surveyed, nor did they lay out the assumptions behind their rating scheme.

Still, their efforts reflected the most advanced thinking about numbers in the general public. The school committee of 1848 was composed of the ministers of the three churches in town; the library committeemen included leading figures in the elite, including, on a couple of occasions, Ralph Waldo Emerson. More than that, the widespread quantitative consciousness in Concord reflected the influence of two individuals in the town: Lemuel Shattuck and Edward Jarvis. Both men were important pioneers of statistical thinking in mid-nineteenth century America. Shattuck, a sometime schoolmaster and merchant, wrote the first major history of the town, published for its bicentennial in 1835. That work was distinguished by its elaborate assemblage of figures from original sources on all aspects of Concord's history – topography, population, valuation, finances, occupations, education, mortality rates, church membership, college graduates, among other facts.

¹¹ Robert A. Gross, « Much Instruction from Little Reading: Books and Libraries in Thoreau's Concord »; William A. Alcott, *The Young Husband, or Duties of Man in the Marriage Relation*, Boston 1841 (rpt., New York 1972), 200-05.

« The object of local history is to furnish the first elements of general history », he explained, « to record facts rather than deductions from facts... Many facts, minute in themselves, are in this view important. The details... are not so much history itself as materials for history ». From that record and countless others like it around the country, Shattuck believed, the general historian would ultimately be able « to exhibit the connexion of the several parts, and to show how they depend one upon another, in bringing about the great changes, which have been taking place and affecting the condition of society ». By the time that book was issued, Shattuck had left Concord for Boston, but he had found his calling in counting.

In Boston, he became a founder of the American Statistical Association and a leading figure in the emerging field of public health, chairing the landmark Massachusetts Sanitary Commission of 1850 that probed the relation between environment and disease in the newly industrialized state. He also served as a consultant on the federal census of 1850. Edward Jarvis, his fellow townsman in the 1820s and 1830s, gained equal national renown as a statistician. A medical doctor who specialized in treatment of the insane, Jarvis obsessively counted everything he could in an effort to discern the underlying laws of life. He, too, joined in the founding of the American Statistical Association, chaired an important state inquiry into public health – the Commission on Lunacy in 1855 – consulted on national censuses, and pursued the quantitative details of local history as an avocation.

The two men led stunningly parallel lives; in the process, they were major influences on the intellectual milieu of the Concord elite in the years of Emerson and Thoreau. Concord's Transcendentalists may be better-known today. But in their own time, Jarvis and Shattuck constituted an equally important set of intellectuals, whose public activities framed the terms against which Emerson and Thoreau would react¹².

Why did these New Englanders suddenly become « calculating people » in the Jacksonian age? Surely, the rapid commercialization of the region fostered mercantile habits of mind. So, too, did the sentiment of nationalism, which gauged the success of the new republic in the growth of population, manufactures, and wealth. But something deeper was at work, a force bound up with the emergence of a mass society. The Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville called

¹² Lemuel Shattuck, *A History of the Town of Concord; Middlesex County, Massachusetts, From Its Earliest Settlement to 1832...*, Boston and Concord 1835, V-VI; Cohen, *A Calculating People*, 181-2, 191-204; Maria M. Farland, « Lemuel Shattuck, Statist: A Puritan in a Transcendentalist Age » (undergraduate paper written for History 55, « Culture and Community: The Worlds of Emerson, Dickinson, and Thoreau », at Amherst College, December, 1985); Barbara Gutmann Rosenkrantz, *Public Health and the State: Changing Views in Massachusetts, 1842-1936*, Cambridge, Mass. 1972, 8-47; Gerald N. Grob, *Edward Jarvis and the Medical World of Nineteenth-Century America*, Knoxville 1978, 138-41; Robert C. Davis, « Social Research in America before the Civil War », *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, VIII (January, 1972), 64-85; Edward Jarvis, « Traditions and Reminiscences of Concord, Massachusetts, or a Contribution to the Social and Domestic History of the Town, 1779 to 1877 » (unpublished manuscript, 1878, Concord Free Public Library).

it the spirit of equality. In an aristocracy, people belong, by birth, to distinctive orders of men, marked by unequal privileges and duties. Such ranks may be ordered in an ascending series, but they are fundamentally incommensurable; they can never be grouped together in a single mass. By contrast, in democracy, equality levels hierarchy, dissolves social bonds, and frees individuals from dependence upon others. But instead of fostering true individuality, democracy produces habits of conformity.

It does so in two ways at once. First, isolated from traditional associations and perceiving society as a vast aggregation of numbers, the individual naturally fears being overwhelmed and hastens to submerge himself in the mass; hence, the well-known danger of a «tyranny of the majority». Alternatively, the individual may seek to distinguish himself from that mass through the scramble for riches. For in a democratic society, money is the one distinction universally admitted as legitimate: it is, in theory, open to all, and it easily serves as the standard by which everyone can be ranked. It is a uniform measure of value. « Among aristocratic nations money reaches only to a few points on the vast circle of man's desires; in democracies, it seems to lead to all »¹³.

In this Tocquevillian perspective, the spirit of equality fosters the development of quantitative consciousness, for society consists of numerous units, graded by small differences, and gathered together in a single, endlessly churning mass. Yet, the very restlessness of democratic society was unsettling, and many people in mid-nineteenth century America were anxious about the constant changes they observed all about them. One strategy for security, as Tocqueville detected, was to join with others in voluntary association, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of the individual and escaping total absorption in the mass. Another, cultivated by men like Edward Jarvis and Lemuel Shattuck, was to contain social change through the order of numbers.

To Jarvis, who worried that constant striving for advantage in an open society caused widespread anxiety, insecurity, and, inevitably, insanity, statistics offered an illusion of stability. By measuring the progress of institutions, he and his fellow calculators could assure themselves that New England was not dissolving into a mass of «floating atoms». Instead, the productive energies of numerous individuals – all «moral and social beings» – came together to produce the well-being of the whole. «...As in the individual, so in the mass of people», wrote Shattuck in 1848. «The different human beings that are constantly coming into existence [are] the nourishment which this mass receives...».

This vision was a legacy of ancient New England ideals; it is what I term an institutionalist point of view, a faith that individuals are born into and belong to an ongoing community and are obliged to contribute their talents to the

¹³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols., New York 1945, vol. 2 (quotation, p. 240); Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief*, Stanford 1957, 33-56.

common pool. Thanks to the labors of Jarvis and Shattuck, New Englanders came to measure those contributions in quantitative terms¹⁴.

It is easy to see, then, why Emerson and Thoreau should have so disliked the quantifying mentality of their neighbors. To the institutionalist perspective of Jarvis and Shattuck, they offered the anti-institutional vision of Transcendentalism. « An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man... », Emerson announced; Thoreau declared that « as a snow-drift is formed where there is a lull in the wind, so, one would say, where there is a lull of truth, an institution springs up. But the truth blows right on over it, nevertheless, and at length blows it down ». Thoreau signed off from such institutions early on in his life.

« I am not responsible for the successful working of the machinery of society », he announced in « Civil Disobedience ». « I am not the son of the engineer ». Naturally, neither writer would have anything to do with such calculations. « ...let there be one man, let there be truth in two men, in ten men, then is concert for the first time possible », Emerson affirmed back in Amory Hall in 1844; « because the force which moves the world is a new quality, and can never be furnished by adding whatever quantities of a different kind ». So, too, Thoreau:

« Nations! What are nations? Tartars, and Huns, and Chinamen! Like insects, they swarm. The historian strives in vain to make them memorable. It is for want of a man that there are so many men. It is individuals that populate the world »¹⁵.

Yet, unlike Emerson, Thoreau did not merely denounce the calculating mentality. He directly shaped his writings to satirize, subvert, and shatter the quantifying consciousness. *Walden*, it has long been recognized, is packed with numbers in a deliberate parody of the book-keeping habits of his countrymen. From the details of his « income » and « outgoes » to the cost of building his house, through the elaborate report on his bean field, Thoreau meant to spoof the penny-pinching world of Poor Richard and Henry Coleman.

I have argued elsewhere that he even set up the account of his « Bean Field » as an elaborate hoax, the details of which are plausible, if you know little about farming, but in fact, constitute a malicious tall tale of man and beans. Everything he did was the reverse of what agricultural improvers advised. He grew beans for cash, when hardly anyone else did; he planted late; he failed to manure; he left enormous spaces between the plants. And

¹⁴ Farland, « Lemuel Shattuck », 23.

¹⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, « Self-Reliance », in Emerson, *Essays: First Series*, Boston and New York 1883, 62; Henry David Thoreau, « Life without Principle », in Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, ed. Wendell Glick, Princeton 1973, 171, 177; Henry David Thoreau, « Resistance to Civil Government », in Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, 81; Ralph Waldo Emerson, « New England Reformers », 457.

his yield per acre was paltry: at a time when most bean cultivators harvested twenty bushels per acre, Thoreau got only seven or eight. The satire of « The Bean Field » was a great romp through the sober, utilitarian, calculating literature of agricultural improvement. Thoreau disliked the farmers' penchant for accumulating acres to advertise their status – it only served to bury them more deeply under the soil – but he was no more attracted by the intensive husbandry of the reformers. Close calculation of manures and profits were guaranteed, he thought, to make one stink¹⁶.

Still, Thoreau could not keep his mind off the numbers. Perhaps, he was taken by the illusion of order they provided. He did, after all, plumb the depths of Walden Pond: it was « exactly one hundred and two feet; to which may be added the five feet which it has risen since, making one hundred and seven ». As a schoolmaster, he pioneered new methods of teaching mathematics, introducing surveying into the curriculum as a means of giving the subject « a more practical and vivid application ». As a surveyor himself and a pencil-maker, Thoreau knew all about calculating the bounds of property and gauging the efficiency of machines. Yet, however much he played with statistics, Thoreau refused them a place in his social philosophy. In « Resistance to Civil Government », he offers us the fullest, most explicit critique of the quantitative mentality.

At the heart of the essay is an assault on the doctrine of expediency, articulated by the English philosopher William Paley in a textbook used at all the leading antebellum colleges and academies. By what rule should we decide whether or not to obey an unjust law? Paley asks. His answer is simple: « ...the justice of every particular case of resistance is reduced to a computation of the quantity of the danger and grievance on the one side, and of the probability and expense of redressing it on the other ». But to Thoreau, this was fundamental misunderstanding of the absolute law of conscience. Morals were not a matter of calculation, but of truth. Moreover, government – an expedient by which « men would fain succeed in letting one another alone » – could never bind the conscience. « The only obligation which I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right »¹⁷.

Failing to understand this law of conscience, the mass of men, as Thoreau saw it, gave over their lives to the state, serving « not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies ». The truth was that they did not deserve to be called real men. « Our statistics are at fault: the population has been returned too large. How many *men* are there to a square thousand miles in this

¹⁶ Robert A. Gross, « The Great Bean Field Hoax: Thoreau and the Agricultural Reformers », *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 61 (Summer, 1985): 483-97.

¹⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Owen Thomas, New York 1966; Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau: A Biography*, New York 1962 (rpt. New York 1982), 82-83, Wendell Glick, « Bishop Paley in America », *New England Quarterly*, XXVII (Sept. 1954): Thoreau, « Resistance to Civil Government », 64-65, 68.

country? Hardly one». Still, masses of men, however inauthentic, were gathered into political majorities that dictated laws and imposed taxes against the true individual's conscience. Under these circumstances, Thoreau raised his own standard of action: the majority of one:

I do not hesitate to say, that those who call themselves abolitionists should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in person and property, from the government of Massachusetts, and not wait till they constitute a majority of one, before they suffer the right to prevail through them. I think that it is enough if they have God on their side, without waiting for that other one. Moreover, any man more right than his neighbors, constitutes a majority of one already.

It was a lovely turn of phrase: a majority of one. In American politics, a one-vote margin carries the day, with no legitimacy except our common consent to accept a numerical rule as the peaceful way to conduct democratic government. But Thoreau's majority of one meant just the opposite: every one his own majority. In his Transcendental mathematics, one is an absolute number, and one plus one equals one – or, better, it equals one plus one. And one raised to a higher power is The One, the spiritual force that insures a common conscience to mankind¹⁸.

Even so, the Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau is not simply the opposite of the quantifying, institutional perspectives of their neighbors. The larger point of this foray into the calculating age is to disclose that the literary vision of these writers was locked into opposition to the utilitarian ethos of the age, so powerfully that it shaped the forms and substance of their writing. With good reason: the two frames of mind, however antagonistic in spirit, are products of the same historical moment. In American culture, the calculating mentality of capitalism produces its inevitable reaction in anti-institutional individualism. For a great many decades now, many of us have never succeeded in moving beyond those poles.

¹⁸ Thoreau, « Resistance to Civil Government », 66, 70, 74.