

**POLITICS AND THE AESTHETICS OF EXISTENCE  
IN THE AMERICAN ANARCHIST TRADITION**

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**ABSTRACT:** *John Dewey's and Michel Foucault's efforts to extend aesthetics to practices of living and to speak of the artistry of life, are now well-known, but well before Foucault and Dewey, in the American anarchist tradition, beginning at least with the Transcendentalists, there has been a deep and extensive strain within American philosophy that speaks of the good life as an artistic achievement in which one takes delight. This essay identifies Henry David Thoreau as the start of this American philosophical tradition, comparing Thoreau and Foucault, who draw from similar classical sources, and then traces those traditions through anarchists of the Progressive Era, Emma Goldman and Robert Henri. Goldman, like Foucault, was influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche in this regard, and as a friend of Dewey may have been an important influence on his aesthetics.*

In his last works, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, volumes 2 and 3 of *The History of Sexuality*,<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault takes up the provocative question, Is it possible to rethink ethics without appeal to the rule of reason, whether it be utilitarian or deontological? He finds an affirmative answer to that question through his rich genealogy of Western sexual ethics and recovery of an ancient ethical tradition entailing the “aesthetics of existence,” or “art of living”—the “elaboration of one’s own life as a personal work of art”<sup>2</sup>—centered around the notion of “care of the self.” Such ethics are distinct from more familiar forms of Western morality: the latter are prescriptive, rule-based, and universal, while the former are invitational, non-formal, and personal. The significance of the distinction between these two types of ethics is that an aesthetic of existence begins with an invitation to think of one’s life as one’s primary work of art and to delight in one’s own life as an artistic

achievement, and hence it is a matter strictly of personal choice and freedom, while the codified ethics characterizing Christianity and modernity are matters of universal obligation.

Crispin Sartwell shows that aesthetics of existence and notions of the “art of living” are central to a wide range of world spiritual traditions—Buddhist, Taoist, Hindu, Native American, African, African American, and American pragmatist.<sup>3</sup> Richard Shusterman has developed this theme in his “somaesthetics,” drawing especially from the thought of John Dewey. My aim here is to show that, well before Foucault and Dewey, in the American anarchist tradition, beginning at least with the Transcendentalists, there has been a deep and extensive strain within American philosophy that speaks of the good life as an artistic achievement in which one takes delight.

Henry David Thoreau, drawing from many of the same classical sources as does Foucault, developed an ethic rooted in an aesthetic of existence, an artistry of living, especially in *Walden*<sup>4</sup> and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, terms such as “art of living” and “art of life” appear frequently throughout his corpus. For example, in the latter work he warns, “But unless we do more than simply learn the trade of our time, we are but apprentices, and not yet masters of the art of life.”<sup>6</sup> More frequently, though, Thoreau speaks of poetry to make essentially the same point. For example, “The true poem,” he writes, “is not that which the public read. There is always a poem not printed on paper, coincident with the production of this, stereotyped in the poet’s life. It is *what he has become through his work*.”<sup>7</sup> Continuing, he claims,

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<sup>3</sup> *The Art of Living: Aesthetics of the Ordinary in World Spiritual Traditions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> *The Variorum Walden and the Variorum Civil Disobedience* (New York: Washington Square Books, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290. Emphasis in the original.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1985), and *The Care of the Self*, vol. 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1966-84)* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), p. 311.

Not how is the idea expressed in stone, or on canvas or paper, is the question, but how far it has obtained form and expression in the life of the artist [or philosopher]. His true work [viz., his/her life] will not stand in any princes gallery [nor on any library shelf].

My life has been the poem I would have writ,  
But I could not both live and utter it.<sup>8</sup>

The art of living entails, for Thoreau, erasure of the line between one's life and one's works: the true work of art is what the artist becomes through his or her creative activity. Sometimes, though, the lived art work, lived poem, or lived philosophy conflicts with the production of artistic, poetic, or philosophical works, and the true artist, poet, or philosopher will have the integrity and courage to give priority to the former over the latter.

Let us delineate several specific continuities and contrasts between Thoreau's notions of an "art of living" and Foucault's account of the ancients.

First, Foucault indicates that the ancient notion of an aesthetic of existence pertains primarily to a "style" of living, which encompasses a broad range of activities, rather than any specifiable set of activities themselves. Thus, such an aesthetic is manifest in, for example, how one educates oneself, athletic and military training, political life, and household economy (*oikonomia*), and in antiquity it is often spoken of, he contends, in the context of agricultural management, for example, in Xenophon<sup>9</sup> and Plutarch.<sup>10</sup> For Thoreau, too, "art" and "poetry" pertain broadly to all activities carried out creatively, deliberately, and freely: "all employments," he claims, "may seem noble and poetic to the eyes of men, if pursued with sufficient buoyancy and freedom."<sup>11</sup> Like Foucault, it is the *style* in which an action occurs, rather than the action itself, that is characterized as "artful" or "poetic." So, too, Thoreau

speaks of crafts and political and household activities as "poetic." Agriculture provides, for him, an especially rich arena for an artistry of life, as he compares the plowed fields of the New England farmers to the masterpieces of Homer, Chaucer, and Shakespeare.<sup>12</sup>

Second, Foucault notes that the care of self, central to antiquity's notion of artful living, entails periodic interruptions in one's ordinary activities for the purpose, among other things, of "contemplating a life reduced to its essentials, to rediscover the basic principles of a rational conduct."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Thoreau's primary purpose in going to the woods at Walden Pond, and central to the life-poem he would create there, is to reduce life to its essentials, not merely as a matter of contemplation, though, but as a matter of experimental praxis:

I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately, to front only *the essential facts of life*, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; ... I wanted to live deep and suck all the marrow of life, ... to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and if it proved to me mean, then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; and if it were sublime, to know it by experience ....<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, for Thoreau, and by contrast to Foucault's recovery of the ancients, talk about the art of living is essentially tied to its experimental practice.

<sup>12</sup> "You shall see rude and sturdy, experienced and wise men, keeping their castles, or teaming up their summer's wood, or chopping alone in the woods, men fuller of talk and rare adventure in the sun and wind and rain, than a chestnut is of meat; who were out not only in '75 and 1812, but have been out every day of their lives; greater men than Homer, or Chaucer, or Shakespeare, only they never got time to say so; they never took to the way of writing. Look at their fields, and imagine what they might write, if ever they should put pen to paper. Or what have they not written on the face of the earth already, clearing, and burning, and scratching, and harrowing, and ploughing, and subsoiling, in and in, out and out, and over and over, again and again, erasing what they had already written for want of parchment." *Week*, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Care of the Self*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>14</sup> *Walden*, p. 67. Emphasis added.

<sup>8</sup> *Week*, p. 290.

<sup>9</sup> Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," p. 243.

<sup>10</sup> *Apophthegmata laconica*, 217a, as cited in Foucault, *Care of the Self*, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> Thoreau, *Week*, pp. 173-74.

Third, as Foucault notes, it is common to view the period starting in the third century B.C.E., and marking the decline of the city-states, as a time of “a general withdrawal from political life,” and he quotes J. Ferguson’s *Moral Values in the Ancient World* as evidence: with “the collapse of the city-state ... people felt themselves in the grip of world powers which they could not control or even affect.” As a result, Ferguson claims, “The philosophies of the Hellenistic Age, for all their nobility, were essentially philosophies of escape.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Thoreau, in his move to Walden Pond, is commonly characterized as escaping from social/political life and responsibilities.

Such characterizations in both instances are wrong. The practice of care of the self, Foucault notes, is simultaneously personal and social: it both constitutes “a retreat within oneself” (Marcus Aurelius)<sup>16</sup> and intensified relations to oneself,<sup>17</sup> on the one hand, and engenders “an intensification of social relations”<sup>18</sup> and affirmation of “the need to fulfill one’s obligations to mankind,”<sup>19</sup> on the other. Care of the self heightens the sense of one’s own mortality and of one’s susceptibility to illness, both physical and psychical, and thus augments one’s sense of dependence upon others, to assist in one’s own care, and one’s feelings of obligation to do likewise for others:

on the basis of this rapprochement (practical and theoretical) between medicine and ethics, there is the inducement to acknowledge oneself as being ill or threatened by illness. The practice of the self implies that one should form the image of oneself ... as one who suffers from certain ills and who needs to have them treated, either by oneself or by someone who has the necessary competence. Everyone must discover that he is in a state of need, that he needs to receive medication and assistance [from others].<sup>20</sup>

Thoreau does not seem to discover any such “state of need” for treatment at Walden Pond, nor does his experience there seem to augment his sense of dependence upon others. On the contrary, his experiment at Walden Pond is borne of an already profound feeling for his own mortality, as engendered by the recent death of his brother, and, as his stated reason for living there (quoted above) suggests, it seems to heighten his sense of self-reliance and independence from others. It does, however, also intensify his social/political sensibilities. From the beginning a strong social obligation charges his experiment: caring better for himself, means, for Thoreau, like the ancients, not abdicating his social and political responsibilities, as some popular characterizations of him suggest, but making himself a “better neighbor,” and his experience at Walden Pond heightens his sense of social obligation, as his famous acts of civil disobedience, participation in the underground railroad, and unpopular pleas on behalf of John Brown all indicate.

Fourth, the intensification of one’s social relations, entailed in the care of one’s self and in becoming a better neighbor, means, for both ancient practitioners of the art of living and Thoreau, a radical rethinking of what one’s social obligations are and of what it means to be a good neighbor: the latter requires, for both the ancients and Thoreau, sometimes the transgression of conventional norms and established law. Plato’s Socrates, whom Foucault credits with the earliest expression of an ethic of “care of the self” in the dialogue *Alcibiades*, repeatedly suggests that care of oneself often means the rejection of customary standards and norms: as Foucault reminds us, “in the *Apology* it is clearly as a master of the care of the self that Socrates presents himself to his judges. The god has sent him to remind men that they need to concern themselves not with their riches, not with their honor, but with themselves and with their souls.”<sup>21</sup> Like

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<sup>15</sup> *Care of the Self*, p. 81.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

Socrates, Thoreau is a gadfly, stinging his neighbors and alighting upon the state: he justifies what seem to be overly harsh criticisms, to the point of rudeness, even when a guest in others' homes, by claiming that he merely wants "to wake my neighbor up," and he, like Socrates, refuses to identify "justice" with the laws of the state and hence believes, too, that sometimes the only proper place for a just person is jail. For both, the art of living and its care of the self occasionally require one to forego rewards from the state and to endure punishments administered by it—all for the sake of what is intuited as higher obligations to one's neighbors than laws and conventional norms can specify.

Fifth and finally, both Foucault and Thoreau are greatly troubled by the tendency for aesthetics of existence to become codified into externally imposed obligations and hence betray the freedom from which they were borne. As much as he seems taken by the ancient practices, Foucault claims not to admire those who advance them. When asked in an interview, "What do you think of them [the ancients]?" he responds,

Not very much. They were stymied right away by what seems to me to be the point of contradiction of ancient morality: between on the one hand this obstinate search for a certain style of existence and, on the other, the effort to make it common to everyone ....<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, this is the very point of Foucault's genealogy of ethics: certain prohibitions, e.g., against certain sexual practices, originate as constraints freely chosen as necessary to accomplish the style of living, the art of existence, that one desires for oneself but then quickly become codified, universalized, and matters of imposition, obligation, and even law.

Ralph Waldo Emerson already observed the tendency of free, artistic expression to devolve into tyranny:

Each age ... must write its own books .... Yet arises a grave mischief. The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation, the act of thought, is transferred to the record. The poet chanting was felt to be a divine man: henceforth the chant is divine also. The writer was a just and wise spirit: henceforward it is settled the book is perfect; as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue. Instantly the book becomes noxious: the guide is a tyrant.<sup>23</sup>

So, too, Thoreau is profoundly troubled that his and others' free and living poems quickly become codified doctrines, to be followed mechanically and imposed upon others: "some old poet's imagination is imposed on us as adamantine everlasting truth, and God's own word!"<sup>24</sup> Indeed, his very reason for leaving Walden Pond is his concern that the deliberate practices he has cultivated there are quickly becoming mindless routines and that others are following his footsteps formulaically:

It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pondside; and though it is five or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct. It is true, I fear that others may have fallen into it, and helped to keep it open. The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity!<sup>25</sup>

For all these similarities between Foucault's retrieval of ancient practices of artful living and Thoreau's own notion of poetic existence, we must not overlook at least one major difference, which alone perhaps overshadows all the resemblances noted above: the latter is anchored in a natural law metaphysics of the Transcendentalist Oversoul. "Nature," Thoreau claims, "is a greater and more perfect art [than that of humans], and [the] art of God ...."<sup>26</sup> The cosmic Oversoul is the ultimate source of all artistry, for Thoreau. Hence, the "poetic life" is a microcosm manifesting the great poetry of Being, and the "freedom" expressed in one's life-poem is that of

<sup>23</sup> "American Scholar," p. 67.

<sup>24</sup> *Week*, p. 55.

<sup>25</sup> *Walden*, p. 244.

<sup>26</sup> *Week*, p. 270.

<sup>22</sup> *Foucault Live*, p. 319.

creatively living in accord with the harmony, the laws, of Nature. Epistemology thus grounds ethics, as we generally find in modernity: one must first in some sense know Nature, throughout which the voice of the Oversoul reverberates, before one can author one's life-poem in harmony with Her. Foucault, of course, will have none of this Transcendentalist romanticism: artful living, in its highest form, is the expression of radically ungrounded freedom. By Foucault's assessment, Thoreau would thus exemplify, despite his efforts to the contrary, the drift in aesthetics of existence toward universalization, prescriptiveness, and ultimately, rigid, enforced codification. The poetry of the Oversoul admits of infinite expression in human life-poems: no one life-poem can ever exhaust it. It nonetheless marks the difference between acceptable and unacceptable, authentic and inauthentic arts of living, and hence still lends itself to the power of prescription, law, and subjugation.

Thoreau, though, is perhaps only the start of an American tradition concerned with the "art of Living," which, as it develops, loses those foundationalist qualities that we find in his version of it. The "art of living" is central to the anarchist movement at the turn-of-the-century, a badly neglected aspect of the so-called "classical period" in American philosophy and one for which Thoreau is a primary influence, in all its variations. The notion is found, for example, in the individualistic anarchisms of Benjamin Tucker and Lysander Spooner but is more highly and significantly developed in the anarcho-syndicalism of Emma Goldman and the generation of artists that she befriended and influenced. As a Russian Jewish immigrant, Goldman brought with her the central sources of European anarchism, viz., Bakunin, Proudhon, Kropotkin, Freud, but especially Nietzsche, for whom she is the first American translator and the first to cultivate an American following. Shortly after her arrival in America, she is introduced, through the anarchists and intellectuals who gathered at Justus Schwab's East Side inn in New York City, to English and

American writers such as Whitman, Emerson, Hawthorne, Spencer, Mill, Jefferson, and especially Thoreau, whom she eagerly synthesizes with her own evolving anarchist philosophy.

Goldman's idea of artful living is perhaps most clearly articulated in "Art in Life," a 1909 lecture, presented often especially to working-class audiences. There she claims, "life in all its variety and fullness is art, the highest art."<sup>27</sup> It is Nietzsche who, ironically and in turn, heavily influenced by Emerson,<sup>28</sup> frees her notion of artful living from metaphysical foundations and leads her to distinguish it from merely "beautiful living." The latter is an effort to construct one's life in accord with some preconceived principles or fixed ideal, such as "beauty" or "Nature." It is supported by metaphysical crutches and borne of *ressentiment* and weakness, of cowardice to live life purely out of one's own deliberate freedom, creativity, and will. Thus, the Transcendentalists, such as Thoreau, as much as she admires them, practice merely beautiful living and fall short, by Goldman's standards, of truly artful living.<sup>29</sup>

Goldman significantly influenced artists of her generation working in a variety of media, helping to found the Francisco Ferrer Center in New York City. For example, she worked with and published, in her journal, *Mother Earth*, early pieces by writers such as Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, Mike Gold, and Theodore Dreiser, one of her closest personal friends. She is especially interested in drama as an art form with special power, in her judgment, for social/political transformation, and she creates, at the Ferrer Center, The Free Theater, out

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<sup>27</sup> Goldman, *Living My Life*, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1970), I, 463-64.

<sup>28</sup> George J. Stack, *Nietzsche and Emerson: An Elective Affinity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> Lynne M. Adrian, "Emma Goldman and the Spirit of Artful Living: Philosophy and Politics in the Classical American Period," in *Frontiers in American Philosophy*, ed. Robert W. Burch and Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr., Vol. 1 (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1992), pp. 194-95.

of which grows, in 1916, the Provincetown Players, including Floyd Dell, Hutchins Hapwood, William Zorach, Stella Balantine (Goldman's niece), and, most famously, Eugene O'Neill. As a drama critic, Goldman was one of the first to identify O'Neill's importance, and she presented lecture courses on him in both America and England.

Through all of the above, and more, Goldman cultivates the idea of artful living as a central theme for early twentieth-century American thought, but it is perhaps Robert Henri, founder of the so-called "Ashcan School" of painters, whom she most profoundly infects among practicing artists. He identifies himself as an "anarchist" from the 1890s until his death in 1929, and he, too, is one of Goldman's closest friends. He regularly attends her lectures on art and drama, carries on with her long discussions on aesthetics, and paints her portrait, and largely through the art courses that Goldman enlists him to teach at the Ferrer Center, he becomes what art historians widely consider the single-most significant influence upon a whole generation of American painters, including Arthur B. Davies, organizer of the Armory Show in 1913.

Henri's *The Art Spirit* clearly bears Goldman's fingerprints. In it he writes, "I am not interested in art as a means of making a living, but I am interested in art as a means of living a life. It is the most important of all studies, and all studies are tributary to it."<sup>30</sup> The painting, or the poem or the play, is "merely the trace left by the artistic process of living" and hence is no more artistically significant "than a well-made table, a freely educated child, or a labor union improving the ability of many to live wholly."<sup>31</sup>

The important point here is that Goldman's notion of artful living carries forward an American tradition of

aesthetics of existence, comparable to the ancient tradition recovered by Foucault, and she, unlike Thoreau but like Foucault, also under the influence of Nietzsche, avoids grounding such a notion metaphysically and epistemologically.

The American tradition of artful living continues in the aesthetics of John Dewey. Dewey and Goldman are close personal friends, exchange philosophies, especially on education and art, and hold each other's ideas in high regard. Dewey publicly defends Goldman against press attacks as early as 1901, describes her as "a romantically idealistic person with a highly attractive personality,"<sup>32</sup> and supports her in the founding of the American Civil Liberties Union. Following the Russian Revolution, Goldman is deported, along with hundreds of other American radicals, and Dewey, in 1934, cosponsors her for a visa to return to America and gives the welcome-home dinner address for her in New York. Given these close personal ties, it is reasonable to speculate, as at least one commentator does, about Goldman's influence on Dewey's aesthetics<sup>33</sup> and to see it in such passages of *Art as Experience* as the following: "the intelligent mechanic engaged in his job, interested in doing well and finding satisfaction in his handiwork, caring for the materials and tools with genuine affection is artistically engaged."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, like Thoreau, Goldman, and Henri, Dewey is interested not so much in art that is confined to the museum or performance hall as he is in the aesthetics of everyday living, in the cultivation of practices that enable one to "live well," and that means to engage one's environment with self-conscious purpose and intelligence.

<sup>32</sup> As quoted by Richard Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman* (New York: Bantam, 1973), p. 106.

<sup>33</sup> Adrian, p. 198.

<sup>34</sup> *Art as Experience* (1934), *The Later Works*, vol. 10, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> *The Art Spirit*, compiled by Margery Ryerson (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1923), p. 158.

<sup>31</sup> Adrian, p. 192.

American philosophy, its anarchist tradition in particular, as exemplified by such figures as Thoreau, Goldman, and Henri, thus provides those interested in the notions of an “artistry of life” and “care of the self,” such as Foucault recovers from the ancients in his last writings, with rich resources. Moreover, the aesthetics of existence, or “arts of living,” provide another example of how American philosophy developed important philosophical themes well in advance of the continent: it is a theme that has been central to American thought at least since Thoreau, and many of the features found in Foucault’s presentation of such an ethic, as recovered from the ancients, are found already in various places in the American anarchist tradition. Those interested in aesthetics of existence and artistry of living and followers of Foucault who have been intrigued by his provocative recovery of the ancient moral tradition of “*techne tou bio*,” “care of the self,” would do well to study carefully texts of the American anarchist tradition.