



# Downwardly Mobile for Conscience's Sake: Voluntary Simplicity from Thoreau to Lily Bart

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Downwardly Mobile for Conscience's Sake:  
Voluntary Simplicity from Thoreau to Lily Bart  
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In broadest terms, this essay is about a counter-culture of self-imposed moral and economic limits, or rather cultures (plural), running through and against mainstream American liberalism from the early colonial era down to the present, at some points more strongly than others. At rare moments, it's shown signs of becoming a dominant culture, or at least a dominant cultural imaginary: at certain points in Puritan and Quaker history, in the cult of republican virtue during the early national period, and most especially in such religiocentric communitarian movements as the Shakers and the Amish--or, for that matter, as Puritanism and Quakerism once were.

All these sects, of course, were transplanted from abroad, not native born. What I am attempting to describe is not a propensity unique to the United States. Tolstoi, Gandhi, and Albert Schweitzer might all be worthier prototypes cases than any I'll be examining here. But the formation arguably has special pertinence to U. S. culture, which is stereotypically a culture of capitalism, consumption, of plenty, and of individual upward mobility, relative to most of the rest of the world. Under such conditions the mere existence of countercultures of restraint take on a special interest. As David Shi writes in the best history of national simplicity ethics to date, the myth of the simple life "has, in a sense, served as the nation's conscience, reminding Americans of what the founders had hoped they would be and [so] providing a vivifying counterpoint to the excesses of materialist individualism" (278).

### 1. Voluntary Simplicity Lives?

Writing twenty years ago, Shi is unequivocally confident that "the simple life will persist both as an enduring myth and as an actual way of living" (279). Today some would disagree. Not for nothing was the Bill Clinton era called a New Gilded Age, which the George W. Bush administration, for all its attempts to distance itself from its predecessor, effectively has sought to sustain with large tax cuts for the wealthy in the face of recession. In recent years, US presidents have famously refrained from calling upon American citizens to accept restraints in their standard of living. This has not escaped notice by Americanists. In a recent article ironically titled "What Is So Bad About Being Rich?" Winfried Fluck of the Free University of Berlin contends that representations of wealth in U. S. fiction and film have become increasingly unabashed during the past two decades, indeed that the critique of "the hunger for riches" as an "adolescent wish for self-aggrandizement" that we find in

(say) Howells and James “gradually loses its influence at the end of the 19th century” (61).

Still, as ethos if not as majoritarian practice, voluntary simplicity continues to thrive. As Shi suggests, the dominant culture of materialism assures both its marginalization and its persistence as a voice from the margin. Indeed, voluntary simplicity does a brisk business these days. Anyone with an internet hookup and a little spare cash can subscribe in two or three clicks to *Simple Living Magazine*, or tune in to “The Simple Living Network” (at [www.simpleliving.net](http://www.simpleliving.net)) <http://www.simpleliving.net> to view and order some of the many self-help manuals. These include, for example, *The Simple Living Guide* (1997) by Janet Luhrs (who also edits *Simple Living Magazine*); Duane Elgin’s *Voluntary Simplicity* (1981), still a popular item after almost a quarter century in print; Linda Breen Pierce’s *A 12-Step Guide to Living Simply* (2003); and Elaine St. James’s trilogy *Simplify Your Life* (1994), *Inner Simplicity* (1995), and *Living the Simple Life* (1996)—each of which takes the form of 100 micro-essays on topics like “Cut your grocery shopping time in half,” “Get rid of your lawn,” “Sell the damn boat,” “Take time to watch the sunset,” “Stop carrying a purse the size of the QE2,” “Practice detaching,” “Practice dying,” “Saying no in the workplace,” “Get out of relationships that don’t support you,” and so forth.

These middlebrow self-help books appeal to the sense of overload frustration in such a way as to activate an uplifting fantasy of total life change while holding out the promise that even itty-bitty changes (such as occasional sunset-watching and the smaller purse) can make your life a great deal better—and be good for the rest of the world as well. “A conscious simplicity,” Elgin reassures us, “is not self-denying but life-affirming”—“not an ‘ascetic simplicity’ [but] rather . . . an ‘aesthetic simplicity’ whereby each person considers whether his or her level and pattern of consumption fits with grace and integrity into the practical art of daily living on this planet” (150).

Not so, however, the book after which this talk is titled, *Downwardly Mobile for Conscience Sake* (1995), edited by Dorothy Andersen. This is a collection of 10 autobiographical narratives of individuals and couples of varying ethnicities and class niches (the majority of them white and college-educated, however), all of whom have made stringently principled decisions, for various reasons, to limit their material needs and lifestyles insofar as possible. The commonest single reason is tax resistance: wanting to fly below the Internal Revenue Service’s radar so that “no more of my dollars [go] to this government whose aims and purposes are so far from my own values,” in the words of one contributor (Epling 37).

The most searchingly analytical essay in *Downwardly Mobile* is by a dropout from the professoriat named Charles Gray, who resolved at the age of 52 to live on what he calls the World Equity Budget, his proportional share of the gross world product, which he reckons at \$142/ month. This, for Gray, is what it means really to

*practice* equality rather than just pay lip service (108). His embracement of voluntary poverty (in the spirit of Gandhism and primitive Christianity) is all the more notable for his recognition that this in itself doesn't give a person a one-way ticket to sainthood. "The danger of practicing what you preach," Gray realizes, "is that it can become an end in itself, a searching for personal purity or salvation" to the forgetting of the larger cause or movement (110). One recalls the insight T. S. Eliot puts in the mouth of Thomas à Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral*: that "the greatest treason" is "to do the right deed for the wrong reason" (196). Still, Gray holds emphatically that downscaling at the individual level is the necessary first step to substantive life change. "First change *you*, not the world," as another simplicity advocate puts it (Corbett 4; emphasis added). This is philosopher Bob Corbett, an academic who, the same year Gray went on his more radical World Economic Budget regime, chose to remain in the profession but to scale back to half time, convinced that "personal simplification, downward mobility, is the PRE-REQUISITE to freedom of action toward the questions of social justice" (4).

All this, however, is preamble to the main focus of my essay: episodes and figures from earlier stages of American modernization that have modeled and/or registered the force of the ethos of voluntary simplicity that persists, however diminishingly, even today. Neither Gray nor Corbett refer directly to Henry David Thoreau. But overall, Thoreau is (predictably) the canonical figure from US history most often cited by modern voluntary simplicity advocates. "The most conspicuous and persuasive exponent of simple living in the American experience," Shi calls him (140). The website of [alibi.com](http://alibi.com) features a forum called "Thoreau's Army: Local Peace Activists Share Expertise on the IRS" ("Thoreau's Army"). On [simpleliving.net](http://simpleliving.net)'s list of recommended books, *Walden* (1854) pops up as the first featured item. The particular edition highlighted—the last time I visited the site—is prefaced with an essay by Joyce Carol Oates, who locates Thoreau's appeal in its resistance to "our own gravitation toward the outer, larger, fiercely competitive world of responsibility, false courage, and 'reputation'" (xi).

## 2. Thoreau and the Ambiguation of the Simplicity Ethic

The spectacle of one of the most compulsively prolific writers of our time praising in such terms the most exactly re-written classic in US literary history, which took nearly a decade to complete, is bemusing testimony to the continuing allure of his gospel "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity" (91) as the model for constructing an idealized antiself, even if not as a model for strict emulation. On the one hand, it's a matter of record that Thoreau has helped provoke a number of simplification experiments more extreme than his own: cabins in more remote areas, withdrawal for longer periods of time, greater austerity of life-style, etc. This tradition was ushered in by his fellow Transcendentalists' memorialization of him in extreme terms: as a "hermit and stoic," to quote his erstwhile

mentor's famous epithets (Emerson 456), as one whose natural piety at Walden approached sainthood.<sup>1</sup> "A holy man within a Hermitage," effused his otherwise irreverent friend, poet Ellery Channing (158). On the other hand, Thoreau's example has also been invoked by a far *greater* number of people for whom voluntary downscaling clearly seems temporary and/or partial, not a secession from society at large. As St. James puts it in the Introduction to *Simplify Your Life*, the first book in her trilogy, "to paraphrase Henry David Thoreau, take advantage of the movement of the times and simplify, simplify. And enjoy" (7).

It's tempting to scoff at St. James for hijacking Thoreau by giving his simplicity ethic such a hedonistic twist. Yet it's also the case that *some* such reading, even if not precisely *hers*, is truer to the spirit *Walden* than the more extreme memorializations of Thoreau as a kind of monk. He himself stresses that simplification isn't an end in itself but a means to a richer inner life and protests that he is "naturally no hermit" (140). He stresses that his retreat was a temporary experiment; that one of his motivations for undertaking it was release from the grim dutifulness of his neighbors; that he regularly revisited town during the Walden years; that the food budget he lays out is ventured "rather from an economic than a dietic point of view" (61) and that the reader shouldn't "venture to put my abstemiousness to the test unless he has a well-stocked larder" (61)—presumably a droll allusion to his various mealtime subsidies. The only time the *Walden* persona pictures himself explicitly as a "hermit" (in dialogue with his friend the "poet," a.k.a. Channing), he comically abandons both his deep meditation and the "higher law" of vegetarianism in order to go on a fishing expedition (224). Thus he dispenses in advance with the later anchoritish claims made on his behalf—or against him, by detractors seeking to reduce him to a standoffish misfit.

Of course, Thoreau also knew that even a short-term, controlled experiment of the kind he describes entails a degree of deviance and self-denial from which most people would shrink. He knew that for a Harvard graduate in the mid-nineteenth century voluntarily to abandon a conventional professional path and bivouac in the woods for more than two years would seem in the eyes of many of his townsmen seem almost as eccentric a form of retreat and self-denial as if he actually had become a monk or retreated to an igloo in the Canadian arctic. But be that as it may, throughout *Walden*, in the spirit of the hermit's happily abandoned meditation at the start of "Brute Neighbors," what especially gets stressed is the remarkable ease and pleasurable payoffs of simplification rather than the privations and indignities. On this ground Gavin Jones, the leading authority in the field of literature on the subject of U. S. poverty discourse, chides *Walden* for evading the problem of poverty as an endemic social dilemma

by emphasizing its “cultural and spiritual” payoff. “When chosen freely as a way of life,” Jones writes, “poverty defines a state of philosophical wisdom and heightened aesthetic appreciation that focuses on the vital essence of existence. But when he encounters [a *bona fide* pauper] like the Irish immigrant John Field, who appears trapped in his suffering and want, Thoreau recoils in horror” and blames the victim (Jones 772-773).

Whether this is too severe an assessment I shall take up later on. But first let us turn to another equivocating discourse of simplification.

### 3. Woman’s Fiction and the Virtues of the Simple Life

In some respects akin, though not of course identical, to Thoreau’s interweave of the ascetic and the hedonistic is the motif in the paradigmatic Cinderella plot of woman’s fiction—so influentially charted by Nina Baym--of virtuous privation as a pathway to a higher gratification.

Obviously the usual terms of the woman’s fiction plot at the literal level differ in some very crucial respects from the Thoreauvian plot. Woman’s fiction is about finding place *within* the social order, not dropping out; and its catalytic and culminating phases are very different. The heroine’s downward mobility is altogether *involuntary*; poverty itself is “abhorred and feared” (Baym 48); and the heroine is rewarded at the end with material wealth and security. But ethically it is shown to be a good thing for her to have been so tested, to learn to moderate her demands on life and to control her impulses. Baym argues convincingly that maturation rather than marriage is woman’s fiction’s core project: that “marriage cannot and should not be the goal toward which women direct themselves,” that “a commercial marriage is worse by far than a single life” (Baym 39). And crucial to this maturation is the acquisition of a moral autonomy that is tested and forged in a context of privation and harsh judgment by one’s reference group.

Now and again classic women’s fiction even offers up some quite Thoreau-esque figures as models of satisfaction gleaned from austerity, such as Mrs. Vawse in Susan Warner’s *Wide, Wide World*, who (having outlived both husband and children) lives by choice, and to all appearances cheerfully, an austere and self-sufficient life in an isolated mountainy cottage that Ellen and Alice find rather scarily remote. ““She has friends that would not permit her to earn another sixpence if they could help it,”” Alice tells Ellen, ““but she likes better to live as she does”” (Warner 197). Surely this ancient lady’s lifestyle is not what that Ellen desires for herself, or what the novel desires for her, or what other domestic novelists desire for *their* heroines. But far better that even for them, these novels imply, than self-indulgent worldly materialism. So, too, for the novel that Baym treats as the inaugural example of the genre, Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *A New-England Tale* (1822). If rich, benevolent, and judicious

Mr. Lloyd hadn't ever shown up, *A New-England Tale* implies, the protagonist Jane Elton might have lived a perfectly decent life as a low-wage single schoolteacher. Far better that than life with loose-living Edward Erskine.

Well, how more precisely should we conceptualize the linkages, such as they are, between the hero of *Walden* and the heroines of woman's fiction? Two motifs seem especially germane: first, a shared ideology of republican simplicity, including an ideal of *domestic* self-sufficiency—albeit home-making gets played through very differently in the two cases, of course—and, second, a shared resistance to invasion of one's personhood and to moral compromise of one's integrity.<sup>2</sup>

This second denominator takes on extra resonance insofar as the texts of women's fiction can be understood as covertly grasping after a greater independence than mainstream middle-class gender expectations allow their plots to display. If so, at least a dotted line if not a straight line connects figures like old Mrs. Vawse and young Jane Elton with post-domestic-fiction texts by women writers that indulge more openly the dream of self-sufficiency at the cost of standing aloof from social (including) male entanglements and material blandishments at whatever material cost. One such case is the reclusive, Emily-Dickinson-like artist-figure Alicia Raymond, in Elizabeth Stoddard's "Collected by a Valetudinarian" (1870) a tale that reflects women writers' increasingly self-conscious identification with an ideal of high artistic vocation as the nineteenth century unfolded. This text is singled out by Anne Boyd in *Writing for Immortality* (2004) as indicative of the high-canonical aspirations of (a certain) mid-to-late-century generation of US women fiction writers relative to the antebellum sentimentalists. By the terms of Stoddard's tale, to maintain one's artistic conscience intact necessitates retreat from the world.<sup>3</sup>

A more ambitious and indeed more pertinent text is Sarah Orne Jewett's *A Country Doctor* (1884), whose heroine Nan Prince resists her proud rich aunt's belated but earnest pleas to abandon medicine and the single life for a comfortable urban marriage with the aunt's protégé, a young lawyer who adores Nan. (The elder Miss Prince is an intriguing composite of the traditional roles of wicked stepmother and fairy godmother.) Nan also turns down more prestigious *professional* paths than the one on which she settles for conscience's sake. "More than one appointment had been offered [her] in the city hospitals," says the narrator, where a worldly success would have been assured (Jewett 364), but she refuses these to remain loyally in her home village with her aging guardian and mentor Dr. Leslie. Although Stoddard was the more admiring reader of *Walden*, *A Country Doctor* actually makes the better matched pair because of its more explicit critique of heteronormativity, its explicit brief for the necessity

of following one's vocation, and its fuller articulation of Nan's choice of country village life over upscale urban life.

But probably neither the would-be artist nor the would-be doctor would have been reckoned such defining images of virtuous voluntary female downscaling from the perspective of turn-of-the-century readers as the urban charity worker—a figure embodied most famously by the urban settlement house pioneer, activist, and (later) Nobel Peace Prize laureate Jane Addams. This brings me, at last, to Wharton's *House of Mirth* (1905), a novel written in the midst of the two decades of social work encapsulated by Addams in her memoir *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910).

#### 4. Conscienceful Downward Mobility in Old New York

Elaine Showalter argues that *House of Mirth* undoes woman's fiction by reprising the scenario of the orphaned protagonist forced into dependency on the good will of a nasty imperious aunt as a tragic naturalist plot in which the heroine goes down to defeat and death amidst a toxic culture of female relationships that are “distant, formal, competitive, even hostile” and maternity and childbirth are “banished to the margins” (Showalter 362-363). There's much truth to this judgment of the particular niche into which Lily is born and hopes to ensconce herself, even though the sweeping claim about female culture doesn't hold at all for the one woman of Lily's caste who opts for an unfashionable lifestyle of do-gooding: Gerty Farish. But the omission is understandable enough, considering how both Lily and to some extent even the narrative voice itself types Gerty as a different and inferior species of being, living ““in a horrid little place, [with] no maid, and such queer things to eat”” (Wharton 8).

Such is Lily's snide encapsulation of Gerty in Chapter 1, which groups Lily in a triad with the two characters in her set who model quite different styles of voluntary restraint: Gerty, who isn't literally there but is dissected in absentia, and her cousin Selden, to whose apartment Lily has indiscreetly repaired. Selden and Gerty are both smitten by her in ways that differ according to the split they exemplify between the hedonistic and self-denying facets of voluntary simplicity that the Thoreau persona conflates.

Selden lives a basically contented and tasteful life within his means, voyeuristically relishing exquisite objects he knows he can't afford (like Lily) and consoling himself with the high-minded notion of his spiritual independence in his self-styled republic of the spirit, even as the novel makes clear that his drive to remain part of the world of high fashion is hardly less strong than Lily's. Gerty, for her part, lives by choice more frugally and less tastefully than she can afford, channeling her inherent good-heartedness into helping less fortunate women, eventually including also Lily—although Gerty too remains bonded to the meretricious upper crust (“a parasite in the moral order, living on the crumbs of other tables,” the narrator rather mean-spiritedly calls her) (118)—tied there by

her fund-raising efforts, her crush on Selden, and her gratitude at being admitted to elite social gatherings.

Lily's self-positioning in relation to both Selden and Gerty follows from her status as "the victim of the civilization which had produced her," as Selden silently sums her up in the first chapter (8). Between the two styles of quasi-contrarianism Selden and Gerty represent, his sophisticated self-containment is predictably the one that attracts Lily. Gerty's path she also recognizes to be a possible escape route from marriage with the Percy Gryces of the world; but she recoils in disgust at the prospect of committing herself to it. ("No; she was not made for mean and shabby surroundings, for the squalid compromises of poverty. Her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury" [23], she thinks early on.) Later, Lily does nonetheless fitfully try out the charity option, even to the point of starting to see the lower class "victims of fate" not just as a mass but as "bundles of feeling . . . clothed in shapes not so unlike her own" (119). But though she briefly opens herself up to Gerty and then to Nettie Struther, the working woman she once helped, it is clear all along that these worlds will never be hers—and what's more, the novel suggests, that's that's just as well. The narrative voice itself satirizes both those kindly women for well-meaning denseness, with an extra swipe at Gerty for her pathetic jealousy of Selden's attraction to Lily.

As such, *House of Mirth* might be read as a kind of retort in advance to Jane Addams's brief for "The Subjective Necessity of Social Settlements," showcased in *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (68-76). "We have in America," Addams writes, "a fast-growing number of cultivated young people who have no recognized outlet for their active faculties," whose "uselessness hangs about them heavily" (71). Addams could have been talking about Lily Bart, or about Nan Prince's well-bred but rudderless would-be fiancé in *A Country Doctor*. Addams' call to such folk is essentially the call of Social Gospel progressivism to "share the lives of the poor," to "make social service . . . express the spirit of Christ" (73). Yet such appeals the fictive world of *House of Mirth* has scant patience for. Although Maureen Howard rightly characterizes Gerty Farish as the kind of person who might well "have been in the audience when Jane Addams lectured, making a point of the social responsibility which must be assumed by the fortunate" (149-150), not even Gerty goes so far as to live in a settlement house. Nor are her pitches in the least degree religiously inflected. Indeed the whole idea of genteel charity workers' identification with the poor is more satirized in *House of Mirth* than sympathized with.

On the other hand, and by the same token, *House of Mirth* and *Hull-House* are clearly products of the Social Gospel moment: the compassionate discovery of the poor, particularly the urban poor, by the rich, particularly by the first sizeable generation of women of education in search of a worthwhile independent vocation. For one thing, there never was a writer more self-consciously adept at satirizing the self-deceptions of genteel do-

gooding social workers than Addams herself (with considerably greater subtlety than Wharton, in fact), to the point that it sometimes seems that Addams takes less pleasure in reporting her team's accomplishments than in humiliations like Tolstoi's criticism of her absentee landlordism and expensive clothing (Addams 156-57) or the Hull-Housers' failure to create nice "young people's clubs" (79) for the urban poor that would compete with the allure of saloons. Throughout Addams's autobiographical writing, the discourse of high-minded progressive reform unfolds symbiotically with a discourse of self-parody, a bit reminiscent in this respect of Transcendentalist discourse, as when Thoreau follows his screed on "Economy" with Thomas Carew's poem on "The Pretensions of Poverty." But regarding Wharton per se, the point I would stress especially for present purposes is that Lily Bart in her own irregular way *does*, in fact, choose downward mobility for conscience's sake, even if not quite so emphatically as Addams or even Gerty did. Although Lily's decision to forego profit from the Dorset letters was hardly disinterested given her crush on Selden, the fact that she burns her trump card instead of playing it is shown unequivocally to be a fine and noble thing. This makes for an even more striking contrast between the often compared suicide denouements of *House of Mirth* and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* than Wharton's ambiguation of the question of whether Lily really wanted to make away with herself.

##### 5. The Upshot

Amy Blair's recent article "Misreading *The House of Mirth*" argues that many of the novel's contemporaneous readers insisted on identifying with idealized images of Lily that they constructed for themselves: with Lily as a "surrogate for the upwardly mobile reader" (154), a tragic example of a perfectly proper aspiration. Maybe so. But just what *is* the "proper aspiration" that Lily's trajectory represents? Read through the lens of voluntary simplicity discourses, Lily emerges as the figure in the novel who comes closest to addressing—however partially and belatedly—the core social problem that Wharton insisted to at least two of her friends, including William Roscoe Thayer in a letter of 11 November 1905, was at the heart of the novel's project, namely that "fewer responsibilities attach to money with us [Americans] than in other societies" (262). From this standpoint, *House of Mirth* looks not so much like the undoing of woman's fiction as its continuation in at least two key respects, and of Thoreauvian simplicity discourse as well. First, *House of Mirth* also defines virtuous restraint as the basis of right conduct over against a society valuing material advancement. Virtuous self-privation trumps conscienceless affluence. Second, it distinguishes aesthetically compelling modes of material self-restraint from squalid ones. Readerly identification with Lily's final self-denial, certainly to Selden and likely to most readers also, depends in no small measure on its refinement and dignity—and so too with Nan Prince, with Jane Elton, with Mrs. Vawse,

and with Henry Thoreau.

This brings me back to Gavin Jones's critique. Can dramatization of the virtues of restraint as aesthetic appealing avoid suppressing or at least marginalizing the hard realities of poverty? I have six short reflections to offer in response. First: admittedly it can't—at least not altogether. Jones is absolutely right about that. But second, this downside hardly delegitimizes the project of dramatizing the positive virtues of antimaterialism. Which would be more likely to tolerate uncritically a culture of capitalist exploitation: an ethos of material aggrandizement, or an ethos that set a high value on personal limits and restraint? The answer seems obvious. Third, simplicity discourse often—if not always—*does* involve wrestling with the nightmare of real poverty. Jones himself intimates this vis-à-vis Lily Bart. Her story revolves “around poverty as [both] an ontological [and] an economic category” (779). Lily's “old incurable dread of discomfort and poverty” (Wharton 231), permanently implanted in her by the ruin of her family fortunes during her adolescence, is basic to her psychic makeup from start to finish. This makes that final renunciation of hers more poignant and consequential: the fact that Lily knows in her bones, even if she hasn't had before to face the prospect with such stark directness, what it means to live and die poor. I'd also be prepared to make a version of the same claim in the case of both Thoreau and woman's fiction protagonists. Consider for example Thoreau's combination of hauteur toward and implicit identification with his community's marginal others, such as woodchopper Alex Thieren and bogtrotter John Field, who become de facto doubles of his own marginalized condition even as he tries to draw a line between his condition and theirs.

Fourth, to make converts, voluntary simplicity discourse must depend at least partly on appeal to the pleasures as well as the rigor and nobility of downsizing. The admonition “Take up your cross and follow me,” alone, isn't likely to do the trick for more than a very few. So fifth, and conversely, then, the resultant compromise strategy on which most calls, as well as most responses to calls, to voluntary simplicity rest—the argument that material self-restraint is a win-win proposition that promises to make you happier and benefit the world at the same time)—that strategy explains both why simplicity countercultures might persist even in a climate of hegemonic materialism and why the consciences even of those devotees who are saints compared to the average run of humanity (like Jane Addams and ex-professor Gray) can never be at peace. For these noble individuals will always be sizing up the actual practice of voluntary simplicity in awareness of how easy it is to settle for what Christian ethicist and German resistance martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace,” that is the sensation or proffer of redemption that does not exact a true discipleship of “renunciation” and “self-effacement” (46-47).<sup>4</sup> Sixth and finally, then, as

Thoreau says of economy, so I would say of voluntary simplicity discourse: this is “a subject which admits of being treated with levity, but it cannot so be disposed of” (Thoreau 29). It admits of being treated skeptically as a bourgeois mystification of individual autonomy complicit with capitalism, but the troubled conscience that gets activated to set itself against hegemonic materialism cannot and should not be so disposed of—provided, that is, that it continues to make trouble for itself as well as for its readers.

#### **Notes**

1. Emerson’s qualifying amplification is no less important, however” “hermit and stoic as he was, he was really fond of sympathy, and threw himself heartily into the company of young people whom he loved” (456).
2. See Anderson for a discussion of *Walden* in the context of a broader argument for the centrality of domestic rhetoric in American male as well as female writing from John Winthrop through the nineteenth century (72-86).
3. See Boyd 87-90. See also Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s letter to his wife after visiting the Dickinson household: “If you had read Mrs. Stoddard’s novels you could understand a house where each member runs his or her own selves” (473).
4. For Bonhoeffer, “grace” has meaning only in an evangelical Christian context.

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