

David Robbins, thesis opponent

B.A. thesis evaluation

Irena Dvorakova

Henry David Thoreau and His View of Slavery

Thesis director: Martin Prochazka

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Charles University

In this thesis, Ms. Dvorakova examines Henry David Thoreau's developing attitudes toward and relationships to slavery and anti-slavery from the mid-1840s until the end of his life in 1862, by focusing first on the structure and ideas of the antebellum anti-slavery movement and then on the content and tone of the limited number of works produced by Thoreau in which slavery is an explicit or implicit subject. She then undertakes a preliminary examination of Thoreau's influence on several subsequent liberationist theorist/activists, particularly Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Vaclav Havel.

Ms. Dvorakova's handling of Thoreau's slavery-related writings is, in general, competent and faithful to the internal content of those works, although she insists on treating *Walden* as a journalistic, historically accurate account of his stay at Walden Pond rather than as the idealized individual utopia that it actually constitutes.

The principal problem of the thesis is in Ms. Dvorakova's insufficient understanding of the anti-slavery activities to which she attempts to relate Thoreau's work. There is all too frequently inadequate distinction made (or, one suspects, even recognized) between Anti-Slavery and Abolitionism, between the nature and condition of antislavery activists in the North and in the South, and between the situation and possibilities of free blacks, fugitive slaves, and those still enslaved. There is also no indication of any awareness that Thoreau's (and the other Transcendentalists') principal objection to the Mexican War (which led to his over-dramatized tax nullification episode and one-night incarceration) was that it was a war sponsored primarily by the southern states for the defense and expansion of slavery. This a crucial missing link that goes as far to unify and explain Thoreau's activities during the Civil Disobedience period of the mid- to late-1840s as knowledge of the Compromise of 1850, the strengthened Fugitive Slave Law that resulted, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act goes to unify and explain Thoreau's activities of the early- to mid-1850s. While some knowledge of the latter is visible in the initial chapter of the thesis, nothing of the former is to be found. Also missing is any evidence of an awareness that Thoreau's arrest for tax evasion and his "Civil Disobedience" speech, both of which took place in Concord, occurred precisely during his "residence" at Walden, parts of most days of which were actually spent in town.

There is also lacking throughout the thesis an acknowledgment of the degree to which Thoreau was indebted to Emerson for anti-slavery rhetoric, strategy, and tactics, and the degree to which Emerson, and not Thoreau, was a committed and public anti-slavery activist from 1845 until 1865. For each speech or writing on the subject that Thoreau produced, Emerson produced many more. This false impression that Thoreau, not Emerson, was the one who acted on the courage of his convictions, is still widespread; but

overtones of it persist in this thesis and contribute to a systematic overstatement of Thoreau's (through a systematic understatement of Emerson's) influence on the liberationist philosophy and rhetoric of Gandhi, King, and Havel.

The thesis is well-written, articulate, and fluent. The author has undertaken a serious first effort to comprehend and present important aspects of a subtle and complicated issue, and of the relation of a subtle and complicated individual to that issue. That this is a bachelor's-level work both excuses a somewhat cursory grasp of the slavery and anti-slavery phenomena and justifies particular acknowledgment of the competence with which Ms. Dvorakova has dealt with most of Thoreau's slavery-relevant writings.

The real concentration, and value, of the thesis lies in the chapters concerned with these writings, and so, despite the shortcomings to be found elsewhere within it, I believe that, overall, it is to be judged between "1, vyborne" and "2, velmi dobre."

Thesis evaluation: "Between 1, vyborne, and 2, velmi dobre."

Signed:

Prof. David L. Robbins, Ph.D.
Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures
September 2, 2013

If the reader has any questions or needs additional information, please contact me at drobbins22@netzero.net.