

Towards Voluntary Simplicity

Ideal Resistance to the Mechanisms of Modern Materialism

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Introduction

The narrow focus of the industrial view of reality has acted as a reducing valve that diminishes our capacity to experience directly and consciously the essence of life.
– Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity* (1981).

In 1829, the Scottish historian and literary critic Thomas Carlyle published a frustrated and pessimistic analysis of what he saw as a defining feature of the present-day situation:

It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word; the age which, with its whole undivided might, forwards, teaches and practises the great art of adapting means to ends. Nothing is now done directly, or by hand; all is by rule and calculated contrivance. For the simplest operation, some helps and accompaniments, some cunning abbreviating process is in readiness. Our old modes of exertion are all discredited, and thrown aside. On every hand, the living artisan is driven from his workshop, to make room for a speedier, inanimate one (...) For all earthly, and for some unearthly purposes, we have machines and mechanic furtherances; for mincing our cabbages; for casting us into magnetic sleep (...) We war with rude Nature; and, by our resistless engines, come off always victorious, and loaded with spoils (1889:233).

For Carlyle, who is described by one historian as “an explosive paradox” of radical and conservative sensibilities (Kaplan 2014), this tendency towards “abbreviating processes” was deeply troubling, having ramifications far beyond material culture. The “wonderful accessions” that had been made “to the physical power of mankind” had likewise led to wealth being gathered “more and more into masses (...) strangely altering the old relations” (1889:233-34). The institution of education had lost all its subtlety and human flexibility, and had become “a secure, universal, straightforward business, to be conducted in the gross, by proper mechanism” (ibid:234). Even the religious establishments had been transformed into something which was now merely an “earthly contrivance,” where every endeavour to do the Lord’s work was hindered

by the “constructed machinery” of things such as “public meetings (...) committees, prospectuses” (ibid:234)

Although little suggests he had much aptitude for it himself, Carlyle saw the performance of everyday, manual labour and craftsmanship as inherently ennobling. The plainness, human scale and connection to nature and to God he found in the notion of these “old modes of exertion” were vital to the independence of thought, moral fortitude, sanity and health of the human species. To Carlyle, the outrageous ascendancy of “mechanical” thinking signified a complete collapse of individual human agency and the corresponding birth of a new kind of institutional existence, which could only be immoral:

No individual now hopes to accomplish the poorest enterprise single-handed and without mechanical aids (...) Men are grown mechanical in head and heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind. Not for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangements, for institutions, constitutions, – for Mechanism of one sort or other, do they hope and struggle (ibid:234-6).

Sentiments resembling these have been mirrored, modified and reinvented more times and in more ways than can be easily accounted for. What we might call material progress has always had its detractors, ranging from religious leaders and mystics fearing the erosion of spiritual life, pacifists positing the heightened risk of violence, pessimists predicting impending cataclysms, conservatives lamenting a more cohesive past, environmentalists decrying ecological devastation, socialists insisting on communal control and utopians with a knack for subtracting perceived detriments to society with the stroke of a pen.

My thesis will be an attempt to locate and explicate, within this cacophony of voices, some of the defining features and evolving characteristics of a specific but elusive strand of ideas and practices in this self-perpetuating tradition of resistance, which in recent times has been conceptualised by the adoption of the term “voluntary simplicity.”

This concept, commended by futurist Duane Elgin in the 1970s for its promise of individual and planetary “revitalization” (1981), and more recently by Samuel Alexander as “the poetic alternative to consumer culture” (2009), is tangled up in the complicated web of countercultural beliefs and sentiments hinted at above. The plurality of possible approaches to – and wide and often cross-factional appeal of – the ideal and practice of voluntary simplicity makes it both an interesting subject and a quite unwieldy one. The following pages are the result of a foraging exercise through texts and thoughts produced by advocates of this ethos, none of whom are convinced that our material progress amounts to much more than “exploitation,” “ugliness,” “clutter,” “stress,” “coercion,” “distraction,” and “vanity,” and all of whom are concerned with bringing about a better world for people to live in.

Jeffrey Spear notes that “like historical writing, programs for the transformation of society are implicitly stories – plots in the literary, if not the political sense” (1984:5). This has proved to be true of the subject of this thesis, and a large part of my aspiration has been to locate and problematize some of the important “underlying narratives” or myths that are present in discourses advocating self-directed, “enlightened material restraint” (Shi 1985) as a transformative virtue. I wanted to see how these stories of revolution through individual simplification have evolved in response to, or in spite of, some of the significant historical events and innovations of the last two centuries, such as the two great democratic revolutions and their aftermaths, the rise of industrialisation in Britain and its slow spread through most of the world, the rise of free-market Capitalism, of Marxism, Darwinism, Fascism, Nazism and some of the worst atrocities of recorded history, of secularism and individualism, of consumerism, the environmental movement, astonishing leaps in scientific understanding ranging from the fields of ecology and climate-science to quantum mechanics and the all-pervasive Internet.

With these historical factors in mind, I have grouped my selection of literary, political, philosophical and psychological texts into five chronologically ordered chapters, ranging from the late 1790s to the present day. Many of the authors I have studied have a tendency to surpass their allotted time-period and bridge the gap between chapters, either through prolonged personal activity or through recurring influence, making it safer and easier to draw connections between the various incarnations of voluntary simplicity which comprise the subject of my close, but widely spaced, reading.

The term itself is attributed to the Quaker and “Gandhiist” Richard B. Gregg, who in 1936 wrote and published an influential pamphlet on “the Value of Voluntary Simplicity,” urging his fellow Americans to consider the manifold advantages of adopting the age-old practice and philosophy of a conscious and deliberate simplification of their daily lives:

Voluntary simplicity involves both inner and outer condition (...) It means an ordering and guiding of our energy and our desires, a partial restraint in some directions in order to secure greater abundance of life in other directions. It involves a deliberate organization of life for a purpose (Gregg 1936:2).

Gregg wanted his countrymen to take the material development of their society by the horns, in the recognition that “the great advances in science and technology have not solved the moral problems of civilization”. Contending that real progress is qualitative, not quantitative, Gregg devotes the rest of the well cited and well-structured pamphlet to explaining the reasons why a whole country engaged in voluntarily simple lifestyles could create a positively utopian situation of economic sustainability, non-violence, social justice, “psychological hygiene,” strong personalities, fulfilling spirituality, love, and beauty. Gregg’s pamphlet is an illustrative example of this type of argumentation and of the envisioning voluntary simplicity as both a personal attitude and a social programme, but he is by no means the first.

Nearly a hundred years previously, Henry David Thoreau asserted, in his philosophical autobiography *Walden*, that the only vantage point from which it is possible to truly engage with human life and all its mysteries is “what *we* should call voluntary poverty” (1878:17)¹, later elaborating that: “there are two kinds of simplicity, one that is akin to foolishness, the other to wisdom. The philosopher’s style of living is outwardly simple, but inwardly complex” (quoted in Shi 1985:147). The contrast between “outward and inward” is ubiquitous to the concept of voluntary simplicity, and while not all adherents have very high philosophical aspirations, and not all are of an overtly spiritual inclination, the inkling that there is something *in us* which we are wont to lose connection with (or have never yet realised the full potential of) is very much a part of what we might call the *mythos* of simplification.

William Wordsworth, the Romantic poet, was another outspoken adherent of this ideal. He saw enormous potential in what he called “plain living and high thinking” (1807:139) and was disheartened by its seemingly fading status as a societal ethic in the booming and urbanising England of his day, to the detriment of the lasting happiness of its people, and the “discriminatory powers” of the individual human mind. He might not have needed to fret: The idea and ideal of voluntary simplicity has remained alive and well, albeit perhaps not as widely adopted as some adherents have claimed, from time to time. It has resulted in everything from practical utopian projects, to philosophical treatises, to motivational speaking tours for business professionals since the 19th century. As Gregg defiantly asserts in the statement following his somewhat flimsy attempt at outlining practical, political changes that could help bring a voluntarily

¹Emphasis on “we” from the original, suggesting Thoreau himself wouldn’t necessarily agree with the use of the word “poverty” in that context. The term seems to have been used previously by Coleridge, and in English translations of Schopenhauer’s lectures, there describing the living conditions of ascetic monks.

simple America into fruition: “no matter what changes take place in human affairs, the need for simplicity will always remain” (1936:15-16). It is emphatically not within the scope or purpose of this thesis to attempt to trace the ideal of “simplicity” throughout the history of human intellectual activity. There are several reasons for this.

As Gregg has already suggested, the human desire for greater material simplicity is ever-present; in religion, literature, art. I am sure an argument could be made for a theory that the cave-paintings at Lascaux *really* represent the artist’s conviction that a previous, future or otherwise more ideal kind of existence would be simpler and more beneficial than “the way we live now.” There are certainly references to places and ages, future and past, of beautiful simplicity and easy gratification near the foundation of most belief-systems and folk-traditions, from Ancient Greek myths of a honey-soaked Golden Age (Graves 1960) to the Biblical promise of a joyful “millennium” of justice, peace and plenty² in the wake of Christ’s vanquishing of the devil (Revelations 20). To be sure, the presence of such sentiments in so many of the literate cultures that have left us sources is interesting in its own right, and it might suggest to us something of a “human tendency toward a better condition” (Chesterton 1904:18). But any attempt at a scholarly analysis of this tendency through history would be an invitation to more speculative abstractions than I am comfortable with, (not to mention issues concerning the page-limit).

In addition to the *utopian* ideal of the simple life, there seems to be a philosophical and a moral ideal as well, more closely connected to the question of human conduct. Given that this question (how should we live?) is an existential one which lends itself to practical, experimental, sometimes almost entirely reflexive modes of investigation, it becomes, in its most essential form, a question one can easily suppose members of any

² This is not a contradiction, “simple life” utopias are always blessed with bountiful harvests.

thinking and materially safe community grappling with almost by default: what ordering of priorities will result in the best possible life, death and/or afterlife for myself and other living things I care about and depend on?

This is a question with countless answers, differing in intricacy and attention to communal concerns. When Socrates says that “fine and rich clothes are suited for comedians” (cited in Shi 1985:4), he is expressing the opinion that a serious person aspires to higher things, and does not waste his earthly hours contemplating embroidery. Anti-materialism in Socrates case, then, is based on the notion that vanity and excessive material comforts, fine clothes, extravagant meals, are non-conducive to critical thought and completely unnecessary for a rewarding life, and he is vindicated by his own example.

When the Quaker preacher, abolitionist and puritan John Woolman prays: “Oh! that our eyes may be single to the Lord! may we reverently wait on him for strength, to lay aside all unnecessary expense of every kind, and learn contentment in a plain simple life” (1775:216), we understand that, to him, living plainly and simply and consciously striving to remain in that condition is about accepting the natural crudeness of earthly life in the faith that peace and salvation ultimately emanates from on high. In this sense, learning contentment in simplicity is itself a spiritual exercise, approaching a state of being in which man is most in adherence with the teachings of Jesus Christ. This sense of moral consistency can be gratifying in its own right when attained, but also because you can at the same time picture yourself walking the narrow path towards the realisation of Heaven on Earth (either alone or as a part of a community of friends) which again constitutes a different kind of simplicity, this one of eternal reward.

While I am sure people like Wordsworth, Emerson and Thoreau would partly agree with both Socrates and Woolman, their stances, both on God, on purity and on what constitutes the proper uses of the intellect,

are perhaps more ambivalent and open to experimentation. Thoreau follows Carlyle in stressing the importance of manual labour in the search for the true human experience³, and spends a fair amount of his time deriving pleasure from the gritty properties of the material world. Emerson was less concerned with piety than with the human potential for joy. Speaking out against the mechanisms of party politics in an 1862 lecture, he exclaims: “Cannot we let people be themselves, and enjoy life in their own way?” (2005:277). This assertion might appear to be a populist feel-good cliché: philosophical, apolitical, irreligious, even immoral, but in its enthusiasm and infinite optimism regarding the human potential, it is a quote that really encapsulates the ideal of voluntary simplicity as it emerges from the Romantic Age, and it is not without political applications.

A key notion that the Romantic anti-materialists latch on to, which might be what gives voluntary simplicity its sense of revolutionary potential, is a dawning realisation that there *is* a limiting and destructive force that has entered the human realm and is making us miserable, but it is not original sin, but a modern invention, a human construct.⁴ People have invented this arrangement of society, it is not instituted by God, it removes us from each other and our inner selves, from Nature and the spiritual realm. It causes misery and prevents us from making poetry, love, art. The mission, then, becomes finding a way to deny it that power.

Voluntary simplicity works both as a spiritual and philosophical principle and as a practical “oppositional living strategy” (Alexander

³ Although Thoreau always seems torn between the delight he takes in performing menial tasks and his desire to discover ways to transcend the need for earthly toil. While Thoreau undoubtedly did a fair amount of work while living at Walden, he seems nearly incapable of writing about it without turning every task into metaphor.

⁴ The American Literary Scholar Harold Bloom paraphrases Northrop Frye in claiming that this notion originated in thought connected with radical Protestantism: “All the traditions of civilization that were held worthy of preservation were believed to have been instituted by God himself. But by the early nineteenth century (...) the idea that much of civilization was of human institution had begun to appear” (Bloom 1971:xxiv).

2011) for the liberation of mind and body. It always finds itself arguing on behalf of the beating human heart and the soaring human spirit, and consequently against the clinking of machines and the rushing, dehumanising, anonymising, pleasure-reducing, desperation-inducing, oppressing forces of history and the times. These are, after all, also humanly caused (though seemingly fuelled by a satanic or some other mad, anti-human energy), and therefore should be within our human power to change. This might begin to explain why these ideas tend to be popularised and gain momentum during times of social disturbance. Whether boom, bust or war: to its proponents, voluntary simplicity has a unique ability to tap into and alleviate the feelings of helplessness or disillusionment that tend to arise at moments of rapid change.

The texts I have read often manage to be interchangeably utopian and pragmatic, spiritual and secular, ideal and practicable. They are frequently elitist in origin but almost always intended for the masses or expressed in populist terms. The ideas put forth in many of the texts would accommodate enlightened hedonists and industrious ascetics alike. Rather than striving to ignore, reduce or streamline these apparent contradictions, I have tried to make them part of the subject of my study. I have laboured in the attempt to not be too reductive, and to accurately represent the diversity of sources available and the apparent need the writers have to distinguish their own brand of voluntary simplicity from that of their competitors and forebears, while continually being on the lookout for signs of influence, consistency and agreement between proponents.

In their book *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity*, Löwy and Sayre are faced with similar definitional problems as I have encountered in my study of voluntary simplicity, namely: How to think and write about an idea and a movement which somehow manages to be:

simultaneously (or alternatively) revolutionary and counter-revolutionary, individualistic and communitarian, cosmopolitan and nationalistic, realistic and fantastic, retrograde and utopian,

rebellious and melancholic, democratic and aristocratic, activist and contemplative, republican and monarchist, red and white, mystical and sensual” (Löwy & Sayre 2001:1).

As is the case with voluntary simplicity, the contradictions present in Romanticism do not only appear when looking at the phenomenon at a macro-level but in “the life and work of individual authors, and sometimes even individual texts” (ibid:1). Previous attempts at making sense of Romanticism have included pronouncements that the very thing that defines the phenomena is the impossibility of defining it, calls for the abolition of the term itself, and meticulously compiled lists of common denominators to the literature in question, in a hope that getting enough of these properties in a row will automatically lead to a deeper understanding. Faulting the first two approaches for their intellectual sterility, they claim that the principal methodological weakness of the latter approach is its empiricism:

It does not go below the surface of the phenomenon. As a descriptive glance at the Romantic cultural universe, it can be useful, but its cognitive value is limited. Composite lists of elements leave the principal questions unanswered. What holds everything together? Why are these particular elements associated? What is the unifying force behind them? (ibid:5)

Getting below the surface of the phenomenon has been exactly the ambition of this thesis. Not content with a descriptive glance or merely an effort to establish the presence of a broad-based presence of simplicity in texts, which would involve a much larger selection and a shallower reading, I have set myself the task of digging into a more limited selection of the texts that have emerged in the modern history of voluntary simplicity, in order to look for some of the underlying mythopoeic assumptions that help invigorate and inspire them. To this end, I have employed a combination of close reading and contextual analysis within the setting of a historical connecting of the dots, an approach which is both quite broad and quite deep, and which I believe might be a useful approach

to the subject, as I am looking for plurality as well as coherence. At any rate, it enables me to move beyond sheer empirical registering of textual topics and properties and towards establishing a real closeness to the texts and ideas I am studying, while still maintaining the ability to lift my gaze and look for some of the relevant political and historical dimensions. While I have undertaken to give a reading which is informed by these wider, historical frameworks, my overriding preoccupation is with the texts and arguments as they appear on the page. As I have tried to suggest with the use of the term “connecting of the dots,” this is not an exhaustive approach, and hence will not amount to a complete history. While attempting to get below the surface of the texts, I am, in effect, using them as a way of viewing the world, which keeps me in the shallow end, historically speaking, and experiencing history from fixed and biased, although varying, perspectives. I am also limited to textual expressions, mostly in books, exclusively in English, of the ideas in question, which means that several important expressions of voluntary simplicity have (no doubt) gone by unnoticed, and that many of the less intellectual or more action-oriented approaches to “simple living” have not been considered.

When using the word “emerged” about the texts I have read, I mean that all of them have been published and distributed and read by members of the public in their own day. (I take note of their popularity when I find numbers for this and it seems significant.) The texts also often re-emerge at later points, in that they have been taken up, read and commented on, cited, paraphrased and copied by later writers, who I then proceed to read and discuss, resulting in a conversation between chapters which is not wholly my own construction. Ultimately and importantly, however, the texts have all emerged and revealed themselves to me, the author of these pages; in a process that is always slightly more happenstance than one would like to admit. Researchers like to insist in their introductions how they have had to be *brutally selective* with regards to their choice of source

material, which I suppose is true in an obvious sense: a selection has been made and they have later had to stick with it, a fact that is always both a freedom and a serious limitation. But any selection is recumbent upon factors always slightly out of our immediate control, such as pre-existing knowledge, natural biases, initial assumptions and access to sources, and I cannot help feeling, having written this thesis, that the notion of an entirely rational, rigorous and academically founded selection is destined to be a fiction, often constructed in the perfecting light of hindsight. The selection of texts and authors I have ended up with seems to have grown out of a mix of the above-mentioned constraints and advantages but mainly in the painstaking process of reading texts: a process which is at first hit-and-miss, then much too rapidly accumulative.

Starting from a spark of interest in Gregg's pamphlet, my research and reading was initially informed by books such as Guha's *Environmentalism, a Global History* (2000) and McKibben's extensive anthology of American environmental writing (2008), as well as previous knowledge of the works of Wordsworth, Thoreau and Ruskin. Modern day proponents of voluntary simplicity love to quote the wisdom of their predecessors, so to a large extent I was able to work my way backwards until I hit the wall of early radical Romanticism, which Löwy and Sayre's book helped me find a way to think about, and which, as it challenged and mirrored the rise of industrialism and any number of other 'modern' institutions, ideas and movements, constituted a quite natural starting-point for the project. I discovered David Shi's book *The Simple Life, Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (1985) quite late in the process. Shi's book is the only historical work I have been able to find which treats the ideals and practices associated with the simple life in any depth over an extended period of time (though only in an American context). Shi's book corroborated some of my textual choices, and

supplemented my contextual understanding especially of the Transcendentalists and the 1960s countercultures.

Plenty of authors and a myriad of texts had to be left out of the thesis, some deliberately, some by chance and some due to my own limitations. Religious sects such as the Mennonites, the Hutterites and other Anabaptist groups, the Quakers and the Shakers were not included, both because they precede the starting-point I had set myself, and because I could hardly hope to bring anything substantially new to the discussion of Protestant observance of the simple life. The ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau have not been given their deserved place, although they are credited with influencing both the French Revolution and Romanticism. The best reason I can give for this is constraints in time, in access to original sources (I do not read French) and in general understanding (my grasp on French philosophical history is limited). Tolstoy has been regrettably sidestepped. It would have been interesting to investigate the concept of utopian communities and eco-villages more thoroughly, but as these local initiatives are naturally more insular, the textual sources they produce tended to be of a different character than the ones I have mainly concerned myself with and I would have had to rely too much on historical and sociological books. Lastly, I would have liked to have been able to explore Indian and other Eastern religious and philosophical sources, but while I have strived to recognise and take note of these traditions when I have encounter them, my treatment has inevitably been that of a Westerner evaluating (mostly) Western interpretations and appropriations of these ideas. In fact, with the notable exception of Gandhi, my thesis is entirely dedicated to Anglo-American sources, which constitutes a lamentable bias, and a considerable narrowing of scope. It is a narrowing which grew out of the same constraints mentioned above, but one which, I suspect, has ultimately made my discussion less circumstantial and more rigorous.

To conclude, I want to draw attention to one of Lawrence Buell's insights, which has influenced my treatment of the matter at hand. In his short survey of recent American approaches to voluntary simplicity, he writes:

As Thoreau says of economy, so I would say of voluntary simplicity discourse: it is "a subject which admits of being treated with levity, but it cannot so be disposed of". It admits of being treated sceptically 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 (2005:664).

Many of the ideals and beliefs expressed in the following chapters are easily dismissed as naive, irrational, hypocritical, contradictory or even comical. The concept of voluntary simplicity is difficult to analyse critically, because it is so easy to read as a kneejerk reaction against all things unfamiliar and unpleasant. It seems to be nearly impossible to use the word 'utopian' in anything but a disparaging sense. But much of the unchecked optimism and tendency towards millenarian prophecies evident in voluntary simplicity discourses has been born out of serious concerns and a growing sense of desperation. What troubled the consciences of Thoreau and Ruskin, still trouble consciences in the world of today. While some of the strategies for making this bad feeling go away have amounted to little more than escapism, failed social experiments and symbolic activities of little real impact, it is useful to be reminded of the attempts.

1. Forerunners: Romantics and Transcendentalists

*And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!
And he is no mean preacher.
Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your teacher.*

– William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798)

*In whatever respects the pure moral nature, in true
dignity of soul and character, we are perhaps inferior to
most civilised ages.*

– Thomas Carlyle, *Signs of Change* (1829)

This chapter will not cover the twin literary and philosophical movements of Romanticism and Transcendentalism in their entirety, and I am thus not primarily interested in placing those “fabulously contradictory” (Löwy & Sayre:1) movements in a political, religious, philosophical, literary or even a historical context. While Wordsworth, Coleridge, Emerson and Thoreau, the authors who are the subject of this chapter, are no doubt deeply immersed in the thoughts and ideas arising from all corners of these traditions, it is beyond the scope of this piece to trace these influences to their wellsprings, or to establish a larger unit of contemporary consensus for the ideas I have identified with these writers. In the light of this, it would be irresponsible to attempt a wholesale appropriation of such diffuse and many-faceted cultural forces and to set them down as a first stepping stone in my (very limited) history of ideas. Explicitly stated, I am not trying to suggest by this chapter that *Romanticism* or *Transcendentalism* are voluntary simplicity movements.

I have, however, somehow ended up with four of the most conspicuous and extensively studied poets and philosophers of British and American Romantic and Transcendental thought as the inevitable subject for my first chapter, and a few words regarding my understanding of these

traditions, and why they seem to be important to voluntary simplicity, are in order.

I remain sympathetic to Löwy and Sayre's claim that the various "romantic protests" of the nineteenth century are characterised by "a critique of (...) modern capitalist civilization, in the name of values and ideals drawn from the past" (2001:17). This critique takes different forms and the "pasts", "values" and "ideals" evoked also differ, leading to all manner of conclusions and results, ranging from thoughts of social revolution to melancholic (or, conversely, enthusiastic!) spiritual introspection and escapist recourse to the far corners of the imagination. Another important characteristic of these Romantic traditions as I understand them is a strong non-conformist or individualist streak, placing high value on first-hand experiences and the rebellion against received notions and unintuitive social conventions.

I suspect Kaiser might be justified in claiming that romanticism has instigated and propagated "both the forward-looking spirit of modernism and the nostalgia of medievalism" (1993:29). This is in concurrence with my own findings, and perhaps of particular interest to the thesis as a whole. In texts I have studied⁵, this philosophical feat is often performed by adherence to ideals (often spiritual, millenarian or utopian ideals) according to which certain manoeuvres of imagination or direct experience are understood as furthering the production of thoughts and feelings about our world and fellow beings needed for the creation of a better future. This future might sometimes look like the past, but implicit in the conception of an idealised past are also always budding hopes for the future (however distant).

⁵ The Victorians John Ruskin, William Morris and Edward Carpenter, who I will go on to discuss in Chapter 2, are, in this respect, also romantics.

Most of the political activism evident in these thinkers is highly idealised, and there is a sense in which resistance in beliefs and emotions are just as important as resistance in direct action (although Thoreau advocated active resistance to Civil Government in matters of conscience).

Ultimately; Wordsworth, Coleridge, Emerson and Thoreau are of interest to my thesis for the fact that they have been consecutively read and quoted by writers appearing at later points in my voluntary simplicity canon. In this regard, the first chapter is a preparatory one: it serves as a point of entry and a spring-board for many of the recurring philosophical, spiritual, literary and rhetorical themes, myths and arguments that will come to define voluntary simplicity in the years that follow.

1.1 Wordsworth and Coleridge

In his preface to the 1802 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, a book of poetry he co-authored with his friend and kindred spirit Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth tells us that he deliberately set out to write about “incidents and situations from common life,” and in a kind of language “really used by men” (1802:vii). These sentiments might appear entirely reasonable to a modern reader, but actually constituted a radical departure from the main currents of cultural and literary theory of the age, which had been marked by an elitist neo-classicism which valued epic and tragic poetry written in difficult metre and “elevated” language replete with references to Greek and Roman literature (Greenblatt 2006:262).

Wordsworth’s insistence on portraying common life and common speech says something about the democratic ideals that permeate both his poetry and his philosophy of life. A “fervent supporter of the French Revolution” (Greenblatt 2006:243), Wordsworth truly believed that men were “born and remain free and equal,” indeed we can hear distinct echoes of the two Democratic declarations in his preface, as when he proclaims that his

poetry is to be understood as “a homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves (1802:xxxiii-xxxiv).

We sense that Wordsworth is not referring here to a few select people, to a Byronic hero or a Nietzschean superman, but to a common spirit, something that is intrinsic to all human beings who are alive, awake and in touch with their feelings and the environments that nourish them. The literary critic William Hazlitt (who knew the poet personally) says about Wordsworth in a famous essay that: “He sees nothing loftier than human hopes, nothing deeper than the human heart.” (2009:347). The mission of poetry for Wordsworth, as Coleridge later affirms, is “a faithful adherence to the truth of nature” enhanced by “the modifying colors of imagination” (in Greenblatt 2006:478). The “truth of nature” is not a detailed or scientific understanding of the natural world, but an uncompromising adherence to the truth of human emotions. These are the same “household truths” that Hazlitt talks about. Wordsworth has, in his thinking, extended the concept of Nature to include such notions as virtue, dignity and friendship as well as fields and mountains and rushing streams.

In his preface, which reads like an artistic and political manifesto, Wordsworth asserts his belief that “low and rustic life” is the ultimate subject for poetry. Ordinary people living in the countryside were lucky enough to find themselves in a condition where

the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity (...) because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended; and are more durable (1802:vii-viii).

In this passage we can detect the presence of one of the quintessentially romantic ideas, one that has often, before and since, been accepted as intuitively and universally true by adherents of simple living. It is the idea

and associative image that the rural life provides us with the “soil” the deepest parts of our hearts and souls long for and need in order to grow (like a tree) and “attain their maturity”. When properly nurtured and kept away from the restraint of social conventions and other trappings of modern life, our “elementary feelings” can “co-exist” in “simplicity,” a state of balance emanating from the rural manner of being, which itself has grown gradually, over the centuries, out of natural feelings and natural circumstances. Peasant farmers have been talismans of romantic simplicity through all ages, from Roman pastoral poetry to Shakespeare, because in that state of life, with “no enemy, but winter and rough weather” (1919:34), humanity appears to be more concerned with things that really are (or should be) the essential human concerns. These people are engaged in tasks humans have always been performing and which have shaped the way we think and hope and love and pray (to paraphrase Ruskin), as well as the way our landscapes look and work. The fact that Wordsworth does not mention God in this context might be significant, as it makes his case for rustic life seem almost secularly psychological. Our feelings are in need of less restraint, they need to be nourished and tended, if not, we will degenerate into destructive behaviour.

Both Wordsworth’s parents died while he was young, and he was raised in a cottage in the sparsely populated county of West Cumberland in the very northernmost reaches of England, where he was given “simple comfort, ample affection, and freedom to roam the countryside at will” (in Greenblatt 2006:243). Memories from his youth in these hills would go on to inspire most of Wordsworth’s great poems, including some of the most evocative sections of his posthumously published masterpiece, *The Prelude* (1850). The innocence of childhood is the condition in which natural feelings manifest themselves most strongly and are the most pure, thought Wordsworth, and there is a touching sense in which his search, in his poetry, for the sorts of places and circumstances that can germinate and

sustain the growth of the mind and the senses is really an attempt to recover the bygone days of childhood.

It is always in relation to Nature or aided by it that Wordsworth feels his soul grow larger and gets closest to a real communion with the interconnected universe:

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it griev'd my heart to think
What man has made of man (1802:81).

This is a religious belief in Wordsworth, and like many prophets before him, the epiphany of truth leads alternatively to elation and to a deep-seated sadness. Often struck by the seeming lack of an authoritative guiding spirit that could help people on the road to the good life, he sometimes falls into despair: "Perpetual emptiness! Unceasing change! / No single Volume paramount, no code, / No master spirit, no determined road; / But equally a want of Books and Men!" (1807:140). Wordsworth had a high estimation of the possibilities of poetry to fill this perceived gap in society. Unlike "the Man of Science" who "seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor" the Poet "singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion" (1802:xxxvii).

Despite of Wordsworth's high ideals, the natural world was undeniably also a retreat and a consolation to him, which took him away from a social condition he had little affinity for. A poem addressed to Coleridge and written towards the end of 1802, right after his return to London after extensive travels, relates the extent to which Wordsworth is "struck... with the vanity and parade of our own country, especially in great towns and cities" (in Greenblatt 2006:319). In London, the native and naked dignity of man was nowhere to be found:

Rapine, avarice, expense
This is idolatry; and these we adore;
Plain living and high thinking are no more;

The homely beauty of the good old cause
Is gone (1807:139).

Wordsworth's erstwhile democratic aspirations are challenged by his inability to locate humanity in urbanity. His criticism of the commercialisation of life in London can be read as an unfair bias towards the countryside and a particular type of country person, so that, while Wordsworth announces himself to be "the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver" (1802:xxxvii), what he ends up defending is the one aspect of human nature that he finds to be strongest in himself, and which he has, in creative ways, gone on to project onto the farmers and commoners of his poems. Wordsworth kept faith, however, in the universality of the human spirit, and he insists on the truth of his intuition that the feelings that have become manifest in him can be encouraged to grow in anyone, and that the developments of his contemporary society were of detriment to the very activities he believed to be necessary to this growth, which should be the highest ideal of man:

The subject is indeed important! For the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants; and he must have a very faint perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this (...) It has therefore appeared to me, that to endeavour to produce or enlarge this capability is one of the best services in which, at any period, a Writer can be engaged; but this service, excellent at all times, is especially so at the present day. For a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a stage of almost savage torpor (1802:xv).

Matthew Arnold, a Romantic of a later generation, writes in the introduction to Wordsworth's *Collected Poems* that "poetry is at bottom a criticism of life (...) the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life, - to the question: How to live" (1922:12). This is a declaration Wordsworth would have had great sympathy towards. In poetry, he was searching for something to replace

what he hoped the revolution would provide but did not. He had seen the power contained in the works of the great poets of earlier times, and writes about Milton and Sydney that they “taught us how rightfully a nation shone / in splendour: what strength was, that would not bend / But in magnanimous meekness” (1807:141). We see here a kernel of the social conservatism that would mark Wordsworth political position in his later, less productive years, but it also testifies to a strong belief in the primacy of poetry to his understanding of how the world becomes what it is. In this sense, Wordsworth was always a revolutionary thinker.

A year before he was introduced to Wordsworth, while still at Cambridge, Samuel Taylor Coleridge met another young aspiring poet named Robert Southey, who shared his radical political and religious beliefs. Southey had previously been expelled from a London grammar-school for writing a paper denouncing flogging and Coleridge had similarly expressed his incompatibility with organised education while at Cambridge, and ultimately did not finish his degree. The two of them became fast friends, and began planning to establish “an ideal democratic community in America” (Greenblatt 2006:424) based on the French revolutionary ideals that had been enticing eager minds all over Europe at that time, although the atrocities committed during the Reign of Terror had left many of the Revolution’s initial supporters in a state of ambivalence (Löwy & Sayre 2001:119). Coleridge’s 1794 poem “Pantisocracy” (which is a term he coined denoting this kind of community) summarises his aspirations for the project, and hinting at his own personal motivations for this escape:

No more my visionary soul shall dwell
On joys that were; no more endure to weigh
The shame and anguish of the evil day,
Wisely forgetful! O’er the ocean swell
Sublime of Hope, I seek the cottag’d dell
Where Virtue calm with careless step may stray (Coleridge
2013:ch2).

Their utopian commune was to be a place of human freedom, where man's deepest intuitions and passions, his Nature, would be nourished, not trampled on as in the “evil day” of early-modern Europe. “The shame and anguish” might have been a reference to current events in France, and disillusionment with regards to the liberating potential of armed revolution. If the conclusion has been drawn that true reform of society cannot be achieved other than by recourse to a kind of tyranny which negates the very principles one is striving to introduce, the impulse to create another world, one that is not encumbered by old customs and institutional biases is understandable. Characteristic of the Romantic frame of mind, Coleridge seems to have felt that his “visionary soul” was naturally inclined towards the past: “the joys that were” which, in its non-specificity could be a reference both to a memory of childhood and to a lost Golden Age. The alienation and discontentment that seems to have marked his years at Cambridge could, of course, have heightened this sense in him, and convinced him that neither academia, nor modern civilization could provide a place where virtue, high ideals and imagination could receive the necessary nourishment to truly take effect and permeate all of life.

Both Southey and Coleridge committed themselves to marriages, mainly for the reason that their utopia would need children, a small group of likeminded men committed themselves to the idea, and a plot of land “on the banks of the Susquehanna in Pennsylvania” (Greenblatt 2006:424) was considered for the purpose. The scheme eventually collapsed, however, and Coleridge redirected his focus towards poetry and German idealist philosophy instead.

It might be tempting to treat the whole notion of the Pantisocracy as a juvenile exercise in non-conformist self-aggrandisement, but there is something in this idea that runs through all of Coleridge’s thinking, in a

way that remains relevant to the discussion of voluntary simplicity up to present times.

In his opening essay of the weekly paper *The Friend*, which he ran almost singlehandedly from 1808, Coleridge tells the parable of a “golden age (...) when Labor was a sweet name for the activity of sane Minds in healthful bodies” (1969:7) in which a society of free and equal people flourished. One of the elders of the tribe disappears for a while, and when he returns, he informs the people of a vision, according to which a rain of madness will descend on all of mankind unless specific precautions are taken. Nobody takes heed, however, and when the elder reemerges from his hiding-place after the storm, the world is unrecognisable:

Alas! How affrightfull the change! Instead of the common children of one great family, working towards the same aim by reason (...) he looked and beheld, *here* a miserable wretch watching over a heap of hard and unnutritious small substances, which he had dug out of the earth (...) this he appeared to worship... (ibid:8-9).

The fable ends with the wise elder throwing himself into a remaining puddle of maddening rain, in hopeless despair, to the conclusion that “IT IS VAIN TO BE SANE IN A WORLD OF MADMEN” (ibid:9).

Coleridge insisted on indulging in this vain exercise, however, and his gradual retreat into himself can be seen as a tactic for protecting his sanity and his sense of moral superiority amidst all the madness of the outside world. In his “Dejection: An Ode,” Coleridge writes: “I may not hope from outward forms to win,/ the passion and the life, whose fountains are within” (2013:ch2). This is the imaginative realm of “the primary IMAGINATION” which Coleridge held to be “the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and (...) a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I am” (1817:144).

By the time he published his *Biographia Literaria*, from which the previous quote was taken; Coleridge is generally considered to be a conservative thinker. He does not see the search for Divinity within as a

universally appropriate tactic, and was not at all convinced that the simple rusticity idealised in Wordsworth's earlier poetry could produce noble and worthwhile ideas and feelings in just any type of person:

I am convinced, that for the human soul to prosper in rustic life a certain vantage-ground is prerequisite. It is not every man that is likely to be improved by a country life or by country labours. Education, or original sensibility, or both, must pre-exist, if the changes, forms and incidents of nature are to prove a sufficient stimulant (1817:164).

With regards to his own life, Coleridge still seems to have believed in clean country living. In a letter to his friend, he writes that he is "determined to retire once for all and utterly from cities and towns" giving his reasons as the concern for his own health and his resolve that his children should "be bred up from earliest infancy in the simplicity of peasants, their food, dress and habits completely rustic." Believing that he would not have material wealth to leave them, he was adamant to "leave them therefore hearts that desire little, heads that know how little is to be desired, and hands and arms accustomed to earn that little." He also wanted to keep them away from "politicians and politics – a set of men and a kind of study which I deem highly unfavourable to all Christian graces" (2013:ch4).

Coleridge's child-rearing ideal reflects his own gradual retreat from matters of state. He would go on to write several theoretical books, of which *Aids to Reflection* was an influence on Emerson's and Thoreau's thinking. A highly abstract philosophical work, which idealises a state of retreat and contemplation:

An hour of solitude passed [sic] in sincere and earnest prayer, or the conflict with, and conquest over, a single passion or 'subtle bosom sin,' will teach us more of thought, will more effectually awaken the faculty, and form the habit, of reflection, than a year's study in the schools without them (1840:71).

Coleridge has here turned almost entirely away from the outside world. Any revolution now taking place is purely regarding the individual mind

and its relation to the Supreme Being: “The more consciousness in our thoughts and words, and the less in our impulses and general actions, the better and more healthful the state both of head and heart” (ibid:124). The mission now concerns the locating a way to access ones “true individuality.” This mental ascension has begun when “the spontaneous rises into the voluntary, and (...) the material and animal means and conditions are prepared for the manifestations of a free will.” Coleridge’s spiritual, transcendental version of voluntary simplicity consists of a conquering of the animal aspects of our being and our bias towards material stimuli in order to finally rediscover the original genius that lies latent in man, which, “having its law within itself and its motive in the law” is “bound to originate its own acts, not only without, but even against, alien stimulants” (ibid:125). Not commonly a very optimistic thinker in his later years, the his belief in these untapped sources within seems to have sustained him, and even though “in our present state we have only the dawning of this inward sun (the perfect law of liberty),” this belief, in the sense that it worked “to produce its two-fold consequence – the excitement of hope and the repression of vanity” (ibid:125) is a worthy and moral pursuit.

What is implied when Coleridge talks of “our present state” is difficult to infer exactly, but it does suggest the possibility of a future state, where the “inward sun” is allowed to fully rise. Whether Coleridge believed this to be achievable in this life or the next, this notion seems to have been a sustaining one.

1.2 Emerson and Thoreau

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), poet and writer of essays on matters moral and spiritual, is seen as the founding father of a group of thinkers and doers known as the New England Transcendentalist. He grew up

relatively poor, but under the influence of an intellectual aunt who was an “avid reader of Milton, Plato, Coleridge, Byron, and Channing” (Shi 1985:129), and who came from a strong Puritan Christian heritage and tradition. Having become disheartened with his position as a pastor at a local Unitarian church after the death of his young wife, Emerson left for Europe. He visited both Wordsworth and Carlyle in the course of his round-trip (ibid: 130), the latter of which he remained in frequent correspondence with for many years to come.

After his return to America, Emerson settled in the town of Concord, Massachusetts, where he in 1836 published his first book, a philosophical string of essays simply titled *Nature*, beginning with these lines:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. (1836:5)

Why should we settle for something like this, asks Emerson, when it is a fact that, after all: “The sun shines today also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship” (ibid:5-6). Emerson advocated a new way to approach knowledge and experience, not based on ancient conceptions, received intuitions, notions and understandings passed down through the ages in a watered down form, surviving because of our unthinking consensus.

Emerson’s background as a priest seems to inform his concerns and emphases in this early work. The notion that comprehensive knowledge and the enlightening experience of spiritual and moral truth is freely available to anyone stepping into the world with an open mind and an open heart largely bypasses the need for theology, and vindicates him in his choice to leave his initial vocation. Despite his focus on original

sentiment, his prose-style and evocations are reminiscent of a young Wordsworth, nowhere more so than in the following assertion:

Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood (ibid:10).

Emerson believed that in nature man could tap into the “one mind common to all individual men” (1841:7), the “universal soul” that is an aspect of God. If man can find a way to sustain a relationship with this part of the self, the world will have discovered a replenishing source for experiencing and understanding “Justice, Truth, Love, Freedom” (1836:34), which would naturally bring about a new way for people to interact and organise themselves. This promise of a mystical enlightenment for mankind is one of the most frequently recurring themes in the texts studied. It is there in Wordsworth, in Coleridge (although, in him, much harder to get close to), and, as we will see, it will be a staple ultimate goal for adherents of the simple life for the rest of the century and the next.

In 1837 an economic depression hit the North-Eastern part of the United States: “All the banks in New York City, Philadelphia and Baltimore suspended cash payments, as did many in Boston. Of the 850 banks in the United States, nearly half closed or partly failed” (Bloom 2008). It was with this event fresh in mind that Emerson embarked upon the mission of preaching and publishing his new theory of life. He saw great potential in social calamities, as they inevitably lead to self-reflection: “The question which each event and crisis puts, is, Who are you? What is dear to you? What do you stand for?” In his essays and speeches from 1841 onwards, such as “Self-Reliance,” “Man the Reformer” and “Spiritual Laws,” Emerson continues his argument for a non-conformist devotion to the inner voices of genius, claiming that these are intrinsic, and available to anyone with a care to listen for them:

These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs (1841:49-50).

Here again is the opposition between manhood and organised society which Carlyle was so adamant about. Society is limiting man's ability to transcend the world's material concerns, and keeps all of humanity dogged down in a seemingly reasonable but mind-numbing and uncreative self-perpetuation. "Self-reliance" is Emerson's social program, an antidote to the current state of affairs, and as political programs go, it is quite straightforward. The message is essentially: believe in yourself, follow your own way, and your inner nature will guide you towards your life's purpose. Despite the talk of solitude, Emerson is not advocating a complete recluse existence: "the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (1841:53).

This state of insight does not come entirely on its own accord, however, nor can it be a real solution to shun all the "advantages of civil society" as a form of protest. In his lecture read before the Mechanics' Apprentices' Library Association of Boston in 1841, Emerson admits that:

If we suddenly plant our foot, and say, — I will neither eat nor drink nor wear nor touch any food or fabric which I do not know to be innocent, or deal with any person whose whole manner of life is not clear and rational, we shall stand still (Emerson 2013:19).

If this boycott-mentality is inherently unproductive, then what can be done? Outlining his political ideal in more detail, Emerson suggests that: "the height of civilization is absolute self-help combined with a most generous social relation" (2001:271) This is something each individual has to work towards, not by shunning all that is morally questionable, but by

the positive, daily interrogation of oneself as to “whether we have earned our bread to-day by the hearty contribution of our energies to the common benefit?” This is the essence of self-help and only through the conscientious tending of its principle, slowly leading to “the correction of these flagrant wrongs, by laying one stone aright every day” can the new society be realised (2013:19-20).

[T]he idea which now begins to agitate society has a wider scope than our daily employments, our households, and the institutions of property. We are to revise the whole of our social structure, the state, the school, religion, marriage, trade, science, and explore their foundations in our own nature; we are to see that the world not only fitted the former men, but fits us, and to clear ourselves of every usage which has not its roots in our own mind. What is a man born for but to be a Reformer, a Remaker of what man has made; a renouncer of lies; a restorer of truth and good, imitating that great Nature which embosoms us all, and which sleeps no moment on an old past, but every hour repairs herself, yielding us every morning a new day, and with every pulsation a new life? (ibid:20).

Reformation, then, can no longer take the form it currently takes, it cannot be implemented through policies or advocated by appeals to guilt or conventional Christian feeling, it has to be a reflexive response to the realisation that God is in nature and in us, and everything a man needs to do in order to be happy and great is to “live the life of nature, and not import into his mind difficulties which are none of his” (1841:126). The man of reason and science, possessions and servants, luxury and financial speculation, is engaged in tasks he is not meant for, claims Emerson. The prayer is that he will realise this and go forwards into the new dawn to “do and say what strictly belongs to him” (ibid:126). The answer to what God’s purpose with our lives is exists within us, but “we are full of mechanical action” (ibid:129), reflexes and indoctrinations, and these have to be overcome.

The lesson is forcibly taught by these observations that our life might be much easier and simpler than we make it, that the world might be a happier place than it is, that there is no need of

struggles, convulsions and despairs, of the wringing of hands and the gnashing of teeth; that we miscreate our own evils (1841:129)

The spiritual laws, which pertain to both nature and man, execute themselves. The reason for the calamities of human life is our interference “with the optimism of nature.” Emerson had already put this down in his very first book. “Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us” (1836:63). So, we should look to ourselves first – which is not egoism. In a later essay Emerson writes:

Self-truth and self-trust cannot be excessive, and why? Because this self in the high sense in which we speak, this self of self, is our door to the Supreme Reason. This is whence our intelligence comes. Man is not as the world is, but the world is as the man is (2010:269).

This might be the ultimate creed of voluntary simplicity: Emancipation comes from something that is bigger than us, but it rises up within us, makes us do good and feel good, and when we are first transformed, we cannot help but transform our surrounding so that they cohere to the glory within.

In a letter to Carlyle from 1839, Emerson remarks in passing: “I have a young poet in this village named Thoreau, who writes the truest verses,” later describing him as “a noble, manly youth, full of melodies and inventions” (2004: XLV, LIV). Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) would go on to become a self-taught naturalist and a philosopher as well as a poet, and is remembered for his pragmatic and experimental contributions to the philosophy of life, his moral opposition to the institutions of slavery and war and his evocative descriptions of spiritual simultaneity with nature.

15 years Emerson’s junior, he grew up in the same town of Concord that had become Emerson’s adopted home, which had begun to draw in intellectuals and artists from other places by the time Thoreau was a young adult. After receiving a classical education at nearby Harvard, where he attended some of Emerson’s lectures, Thoreau returned to Concord, and

gradually became integrated into the circle of people associated with the Emerson-household, where he would eventually end up also living for short periods of time (Shi 1985).

In 1843 Thoreau wrote a notice in the *Democratic Review* concerning the second edition of a utopian pamphlet by a German-American by the name of J. A. Etzler titled *A Paradise Within Reach of All Men, Without Labor, By Powers of Nature and Machinery: An Address to All Intelligent Men* (1842). The pamphlet proposes, as the title suggests, a technological solution to all human woes, resulting in a glorious and utterly transformed planet where

everything desirable for human life may be had for every man in superabundance, without labor, without pay; where the whole face of nature is changed into the most beautiful form of which it is capable; where man may live in the most magnificent palaces, in all imaginable refinements of luxury... (in Carey 1999:228).

This incredible revolution of life would come to pass through the harnessing of “the planets cost-free energy sources – the wind, the waves, the tides and the sun” (ibid:229) the power of which Etzler had calculated to be immense, allowing man to “accomplish... in one year, more than hitherto could be done in thousands of years; he may level mountains, sink valleys, create lakes, drain lakes and swamps, intersect everywhere the land with beautiful canals...” (ibid:228). The vast and “monotonous” forests of America would be “ground to dust” and made into a cheap and reliable building material. Poverty and crime would disappear because everyone would have easy access to all essentials, America’s slaves could be sent away “for their own benefit” and would be replaced by “the most civilized and most intelligent part of the European population” (ibid:230).

Etzler’s book, and Thoreau’s response to it, gives us a concretised understanding of the kind of radical progressive thinking Romantic advocates of the simple life are fighting against. Calling the book “one of the signs of the times” Thoreau admits that he rose from reading it “with

enlarged ideas, and grander conceptions of our duties in this world” (Thoreau 1906:280). These progressive forces saw technological advances as a ladder to a completely different level of human experience, where nature and society is infinitely plastic and malleable to human wishes, and that these changes to the material condition would make us rise above our baser instincts. Thoreau concludes, that

there is a transcendentalism in mechanics as well as in ethics (...) While one scours the heavens, the other sweeps the earth. One says he will reform himself, and then nature and circumstances will be right. Let us not obstruct *ourselves*, for that is the greatest friction. It is of little importance, though a cloud obstruct the view of the astronomer, compared with his own blindness. The other will reform nature and circumstances, and then man will be right. Talk no more vaguely of reforming the world, - I will reform the globe itself (ibid:281-282).

A core assumption in many examples of utopian literature as well as in millenarian political and technological conceptions of the future is precisely this: that the reformation of external “nature and circumstances,” sometimes consisting of a simple subtraction of undesirable elements or conditions, will, by itself, bring about profound and far-reaching changes to human conduct. Here lies the real opposition between the romantic ethos of voluntary simplicity and the theory of life expounded by these other (as Thoreau later calls them) “modern reformers and benefactors of their race” (1878:17). Thoreau's view is essentially that change comes from within, and that it amounts to silliness to attempt material reforms before people have proved themselves able to cultivate the right kind of outlook. A situation like the one Etzler is advocating, one in which (in Thoreau’s description) “man shall no more earn his living by the sweat of his brow” and “all labor shall be reduced to ‘a short turn of some crank,’ and ‘taking the finished articles away’” (1906:297), went against everything the Transcendentalist believed concerning the ultimate source of vitality and creativity. It is a big step in the wrong direction for humankind, the logical conclusion of which is the inflation of want, a life

that “is frittered away by detail” (1878:99) and passed in vacant passivity: “But there is a crank, – oh, how hard to be turned! Could there not be a crank upon a crank, – an infinitely small crank? – we would fain inquire (1906:297).

Thoreau replies to his own question: “No, alas! not,” and turns the turning of the crank, as he is prone to do with most things, into a metaphor:

But there is a certain divine energy in every man, but sparingly employed as yet, which may be called the crank within, – the crank after all, – the prime mover in all machinery, – quite indispensable to all work. Would that we might get our hands on its handle! In fact, no work can be shirked. It may be postponed indefinitely, but not infinitely. Nor can any really important work be made easier by cooperation or machinery (1906:297).

A material transformation of life is not really interesting to Thoreau. Convinced in his view of nature as infused with the spirit of God, he seems unconcerned with smaller anxieties like the procurement of mere necessities. There exists only one kind of poverty which is important; and it is a spiritual poverty, a closing off from the “divine energies”. Already, man is engaged in much he would do well to avoid, things that only serve to distract him from what should be his real concerns. The world is not, as he would go on to say in *Walden*, “well employed” (1878:19). In the essay “Life Without Principle” he writes:

Let us consider the way in which we spend our lives. This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! I am awakened almost every night by the panting of the locomotive. It interrupts my dreams. There is no sabbath. It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once (...) I think that there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business” (Thoreau 1906:456).

Thoreau’s philosophical and literary masterpiece *Walden*, published in 1854, relates his experiences during the two years he spent living outside of Concord, by the pond from which the book takes its name, in a house he had built himself. Reacting against devotion to “business” he had seen in

the towns and fields around him, and taking Emerson's creed of "self-reliance" to heart, Thoreau wanted to become a practical philosopher of every-day life: "To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thought, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust" (1878:17-18). In those lines is summed up much of what the later proponents of voluntary simplicity would adopt as their mantra. It is an approach to philosophy and to life Thoreau arrives at through reading classical Greek and Roman philosophy, but he was also "an avid student of the ancient scriptures and wisdom literature of various Asian traditions" (Furtak 2009). The influence of classical Indian literature on Thoreau's thinking should not be dismissed:

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat-Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions (1878:318-19).

In these ancient texts, Thoreau seems to have found confirmation of the possibility of an enlightened human society. He did not see much promise of that kind in his fellow townsmen. In his frustration at not being able to get functional clothing from the Concord tailor anymore, Thoreau intimates that "I sometimes despair of getting any thing quite simple and honest done in this world by the help of men" (ibid:29). This statement points to an aspect of Thoreau's decision to move to Walden: his individualist streak, the fixity of his ideas on moral as well as practical matters seems to have made some kinds of participation in society difficult for him. Firmly believing, as he did, that civilisation was headed down the wrong track, Thoreau thought life in partial seclusion might facilitate a deeper understanding of the reasons for all the "quiet desperation" he

observed around him. Contemplating the likelihood of a deep reformation of modern people, Thoreau concludes that

They would have to be passed through a powerful press first, to squeeze their old notions out of them, so that they would not soon get upon their legs again, and then there would be some one in the company with a maggot in his head, hatched from an egg deposited there nobody knows when, for not even fire kills these things, and you would have lost your labor (ibid:29).

Though not as optimistic, perhaps, as Emerson, Thoreau cannot have felt that the struggle for reformation was completely useless. While his two year sojourn in the woods was to a large extent about living and learning and rejoicing in Nature, “to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life” (ibid:98), Thoreau could hardly look at any natural feature without thinking of a way to use it to illuminate some philosophical truth or human conundrum. He was a staunch believer in the abolition of slavery, he hosted abolitionist meetings at his Walden hut all during the same time that he was living his Spartan life of quiet contemplation (Solnit 2008:974), and was arrested for having refused to pay his poll tax in protest to slavery and the American-Mexican war while on a stroll through Concord to get his shoe mended. So, while Thoreau had little good to say about the government: “wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they can, constrain him to belong to their desperate odd-fellow society” (1878:186), he was an active member of his community, and hardly a hermit.

With regard to his incarceration, Thoreau says something that can be used to understand some of the thinking behind his stoic attempts at non-cooperation both concerning current laws and tax-obligations, and the larger issues of materialism and shallowness he wanted to combat and eradicate:

It is true, I might have resisted forcibly with more or less effect, might have run “amok” against society; but I preferred that

society should run “amok” against me, it being the desperate party (1878:186).

That notion, of society being the desperate party, must be an important part of the appeal of a (more-or-less) self-sufficient life-style. To live leisurely on a few bushels of beans and Indian-meal, while the toilers of Concord were breaking their backs for rent and meat and butter must have given him a strong sense of liberty. It is a liberty that is only arrived at through the conscious elimination of wants. A man of strict moral principles, also concerning food and drink, Thoreau was a teetotaller, and also refrained from tea and coffee. “The wonder is how they, how you and I, can live this slimy beastly life, eating and drinking. Our whole life is startlingly moral. There is never an instant’s truce between virtue and vice” (ibid:235). These questions are philosophical to Thoreau: Should one go fishing, can it be moral to kill a bird, should any luxuries be permitted?

In the triumphant and ethereal last chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau expresses a profound optimism regarding the future state of humanity.

The life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it, and flood the parched uplands (...) It was not always dry land where we dwell. I see far inland the banks which the stream anciently washed before science began to record its freshets (ibid:356).

The new dawn of life rising up within us, flooding and transforming all that which is now ugly and trivial, is always a possible future for Thoreau. As Emerson says, “we miscreate our own evils,” or in Thoreau’s own words “the light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake” (ibid:357).

1.3 Voluntary Simplicity and Romantic Transcendence

David Shi describes the American Transcendentalists’ attitude to nature and life in this way:

the divine energies at work in the countryside had an ecstatic effect on them, elevating and expanding their vision of the possible and clarifying their understanding of themselves (...) The path to the good life began with self-discovery and then led to an organic synthesis of that self with the natural world surrounding it” (1985:127).

This might as well have been a description of Wordsworth and Coleridge (at least in the years of their youth). Shi insists, however, that the Transcendentalists differ from the European “romantic naturalists” in that they “grafted” these sentiments “onto the tough and springy root of Puritan moralism” (ibid:127).). I do not think that distinction is strictly defensible with regards to Wordsworth and Coleridge. Despite his emphasis on sensory experiences, Wordsworth was a strong believer in virtue and moral rectitude and as for Coleridge: his father and brother were priests; he seems to have had a natural inclination towards puritan strains of Christianity and remained a devout believer throughout his life.

The voluntary simplicity which is the subject of this chapter is deeply influenced by previous expressions of the simple life ethos (not least of which is Quakerism and other forms of radical Protestantism), and it is difficult to make clean breaks in intellectual history. Be that as it may, around the time of the Romantic Movement there seems to have been some significant developments in the stories being made public about the human potential. In order to counterweigh the surmounting forces of industrialisation, urbanisation, rationalism and materialism, the human being is being reimagined, by poets and philosophers, as a being with hitherto untapped inner resources, capabilities that can make us be as gods, but that are being wasted on the limiting idea of material progress which amounts to little more than “throwing stones over a wall, and then in throwing them back” (Thoreau 1906:457). What we are considering, then, is a voluntary simplicity which maintains and develops its emphasis on frugality, thrift, local and personal autonomy, the valuing of the spiritual and ideal before the material and temporary – but which is argued for from

a position of generous humanist pluralism and an enthusiasm for all expressions of feeling. Wordsworth had found that he did not need cities or universities to satisfy his intellect and find happiness, but he did not necessarily advocate the mass-relocation of people to the Lake District. He merely wanted to use his poetry to bear witness to what he had found and “to produce or enlarge this capability” for pleasure in others, wherever they may live. As Harold Bloom says: “The romantic assertion is not just an assertion; it is a metaphysic, a theory of history, and (...) a vision, a way of seeing, and of living, a more human life” (1971: xxiv).

Particular features in these artists and thinkers that seem to have had an influence on later adherents of voluntary simplicity include a focus on individualism and intuitive wisdom and a heady and triumphant but largely non-denominational mysticism, both of which are linked to the struggle for a way to reclaim a connection with basic human feelings and situations. Many of the seeming contradictions of voluntary simplicity are present in the thoughts and actions of these four “founding fathers”, and their ideas, beliefs and assumptions seem to reverberate through nearly all versions of voluntary simplicity that have appeared in the course of the last century and a half.

The dilemma of finding a balance between the wish to reform society and the need to retreat from it is one of the most recognisable traits of voluntary simplicity, a trait all of the people treated in this chapter elucidate in different ways. Importantly, the texts discussed here embody a characteristic way of talking about the simple life – half-pragmatic, half-prophetic – that voluntary simplicity seems to have adopted and maintained as a key feature of its rhetoric. Voluntary simplicity is represented as end and means combined. If adopted, it might result in a moral and spiritual awakening, leading the mass of people towards a more beautiful society built on “magnanimity and trust,” but, regardless of mass-implementation, there is always an intrinsic wholesomeness and

naturalness to life without complex materiality, and on top of that, the condition of voluntary simplicity is already (has always been) the situation in which the full potential of man and his relationship with the Universal Spirit can begin to be unlocked. The simple life, then, becomes a win-win^x situation where any result equals victory.

Emerson said that “Ascetic mortification and unremitting martyrdom of all the sensual appetites, although far more innocent than the contrary extreme, is nevertheless unwise, because it fails of the intended effect” (Quoted in Shi 1985:138). He had realised that too much self-emancipation can congeal into a stifling self-indulgence. If the Romantic quest is, as Bloom suggests, “the quest is to widen consciousness as well as intensify it” it does seem susceptible to an ultimate admission of defeat to the shadow of a “spirit that tends to narrow consciousness to an acute preoccupation with the self” (Bloom 1971:16). This was Coleridge’s fate, and one of the many pitfalls the self-emancipatory form of voluntary simplicity has to contend with.

2. Victorian Pessimism, Aesthetic Socialism and the Transformative Power of Beauty

When will you disembarass yourself of the lymphatic ideology of that deplorable Ruskin (...) With his morbid nostalgia for Homeric cheeses and legendary wool-gatherers, with his hatred for the machine, steam and electricity, that maniac of antique simplicity is like a man who, having reached full physical maturity, still wants to sleep in his cradle and feed himself at the breast of his decrepit old nurse in order to recover his thoughtless infancy.

– Filippo Marinetti, “Futurist Speech to the English”, 1910⁶

In 1876, John Ruskin led a campaign to prevent the extension of the railroad to the Lake District, (Wordsworth’s birth-place and favourite subject). One reason given for his opposition was that he didn’t want people “to see Hellvellyn while they are drunk” (cited in Guha 2000:14). An ideological descendant of Romantics and Transcendentalists, Ruskin believed that there were experiences to be had and moral lessons to be learned in nature and in the countryside, and that these were in danger of being corrupted and diminished by the inherent qualities of the modern industrial progress. Together with like-minded contemporaries such as textile-designer, artist and poet William Morris, Ruskin was attempting to preserve something of the soul of England, which he believed could be found in pure works of art, architecture and literature, and in the undeveloped countryside, away from the vilifying influence of smokestacks and steam-engines. Ruskin and Morris were aesthetes, and the realization of the particular Utopian vision they believed in would mean both a restoration of an idealised old kind of English beauty and wisdom and the dawn of an entirely new way of interacting. Ruskin’s affiliation with the Pre-Raphaelite painters and other medievalists and

⁶ cited in (Spear 1984:xi).

Morris's emphasis on revitalizing medieval techniques of artisan manufacture are testaments to their nostalgic sensibilities. Edward Carpenter, a pacifist and gay-rights activist, had perhaps a more libertarian approach. His poetry, life choices, lectures and pamphlets reflect his conception of Victorian society as restricting and limiting to every sane and healthy aspect of the human body and soul.

Far from merely being grumbling reactionaries, however, Morris, Ruskin and Carpenter personally committed themselves (often on paper, sometimes in action) to effecting radical social change. They wrote and spoke publicly about the destructiveness of industrial capitalism and the immorality of the conditions in which people were forced to work, and called for a restructuring of society towards a more humane and just social economy based on co-operation and reciprocity. Carpenter's approach was more personal and spiritual, but in the same vein.

The 19th Century was a century of competing ideologies. Most of the writers treated on in this chapter can be identified in some way or another as belonging to the political left (or have at least a social state as an ideal), but this branch of socialism, peculiar to late Victorian Britain, wherein the emphasis on worker-rights and the abolition of privilege of more conventional strands of the socialist ideology were mixed with arguments pertaining to decentralisation, reconnection to nature, art and beauty. This has been seen by some historians of socialism, Stanley Pierson among them, as "an unfortunate pollutant of pure Marxism" (Livesey 2004:602). Marx and Engels themselves regretted the tendency that English radicals had of idealising the bygone. They saw industrial capitalism as a first leg in the march of progress on the road to a unified world economy, and would have rejected the socialist ideals of Morris and Carpenter as reactionary nostalgia. However, Löwy and Sayre point to the interesting fact that both Engels and Marx read these English aesthetes with interest, and modelled their analysis and use of imagery of the

detrimental effects of capitalist society on people like Carlyle and Ruskin (2001:89-91).

Many English members of contemporary socialist societies also vehemently disagreed with the notion of an under-industrialised, decentralised and aesthetically minded version of the socialist utopia, calling it elitist and sentimental and accusing its proponents of confusing the message being sent out to the working-classes. It does, nevertheless appear to have been something of a hit with audiences, as exemplified by the huge success and many running editions of books like Edward Carpenter's *Civilization, Its Cause and Cure* (1889), and Robert Blanchford's book of essays on socialist ideas *Merrie England* (1893) in which he calls for "frugality of body and opulence of mind" (ibid:15) in an obvious, though unacknowledged by him, paraphrase of Thoreau.

While it is interesting to note the ironies, hypocrisies and inconsistencies in the lives and works of these prominent late Victorian "simple lifers" (all of whom came from well-to-do upper middle-class homes and were provided with Oxbridge educations), scepticism should never become an end in itself. I will strive to treat texts in context, and critically, but by engaging with, rather than dismissing, the complexities and incongruities of the arguments and actions of these comparatively privileged individuals, we might arrive at a less reductive impression of the nature of the Victorian revolt against material culture. In several of the cases, the very experience of the incongruity between their own comfort and the desperation and squalor of the working-classes, or the uneasy privilege of being put up at Eton or Cambridge as a "gentleman commoner" seem to have been catalysts for the development of political commitment and dissenting views. The pictures of the future and the tactics for getting there provided by these often arrogant, well-educated artists and intellectual might not always have had the populist appeal they would have wanted, but they constitute a vital component in the cluster of

ideas concerning industry, aesthetics, moral and spiritual thought and political and environmental ethics.

2.1 John Ruskin's "Violent, Illiberal" Aestheticism

John Ruskin (1819-1900) was a man who believed in the transformative power of art and natural beauty, and traced many of the social problems of his day to the abolishment of beauty from everyday life. A towering figure in the intellectual landscape of Victorian London, he was an art critic, "sage writer," and moral crusader of numerous gaining and losing battles of public opinion. A staunch utopian thinker, he wrote and lectured profusely during his active years, and referred to himself as "the Don Quixote of Denmark Hill" ("not without a certain bitterness" as Spear notes). His twilight years were marked by mental instability and poor health, making him ultimately a tragic character (Spear 1984:1).

From a well-to-do middle-class London family (his father was a wine-importer) Ruskin received a first rate education at Oxford, and was exposed to contemporary paintings at an early age by exploring his father's growing collection (Kemp 1992). Ruskin quickly developed opinions and sensibilities somewhat at odds with the mainstream of art criticism of his day, and even his earliest books on art and architecture garnered some controversy. Feeling that the paintings regarded as canonical among his contemporaries did not live up to what he thought was the main goal of art, Ruskin asserted "with sorrow," in the preface to the second edition of his first volume of *Modern Painters* (1857) that all paintings

hitherto done in landscape, by those commonly conceived its masters, has never prompted one holy thought in the minds of nations. It has begun and ended in exhibiting the dexterities of individuals, and conventionalities of systems. Filling the world with the honor of Claude and Salvator, it has never once tended to the honor of God (1857: xxiii).

Ruskin, then, takes for granted that the mission of art is to inspire “holy thoughts” in the “minds of nations.” This is a distinctly Wordsworthian notion, and Ruskin, who goes on to discuss Wordsworth in the third volume of *Modern Painters*, holds him up as an example for political art:

Wordsworth’s work was a war with pomp and pretence, and a display of the majesty of simple feelings and humble hearts, together with high reflective truth in his analysis of the courses of politics and ways of men (1863:293).

While commending his political and moral message, Ruskin was not entirely pleased with Wordsworth’s representation of nature, however. The poet, who was still alive at the time *Modern Painters* was published, was one of a set who had a limiting tendency to “clustering and harmonizing their thoughts,” preventing them from “fully perceiving any natural object,” Ruskin claims. Ruskin’s mind, at least in these early years, was of a more exacting bent. He thought it was vital, both for the production and the appreciation of truly good art, art that can inspire man to be good, to know the shape of an elm-leaf and the number of ribs one possesses and had a certain regard for the human impulse to investigate the material mysteries of nature as well as the spiritual: “to dissect a flower might sometimes be as proper as to dream over it” (ibid:291).

Later in the same chapter, Ruskin boasts: “the gift of taking pleasure in landscape I assuredly possess in a greater degree than most men; if having been the ruling passion of my life” (ibid:295). Describing a specific instance of such a passionate communion with nature taking place in his youth, Ruskin claims the feeling was “inconsistent with every evil feeling, with spite, anger, covetousness, discontent, and every hateful passion; but would associate itself deeply with every just and noble sorrow, joy, of affection” (ibid:297) His impression was a distinctly transcendentalist one: “Sanctity in the whole of nature, from the slightest thing to the vastest”. We can here begin to see how Ruskin’s thinking

about art has evolved and expanded to include questions of material progress:

The great mechanical impulses of the age, of which most of us are so proud, are a mere passing fever, half-speculative, half-childish. For there are two classes of precious things in the world: those that God gives us for nothing – sun, air and life (both mortal life and immortal); and the secondarily precious things which He gives us for a price: they can never be cheapened. No cheating nor bargaining will ever get a single thing out of nature's 'establishment' at half-price. Do we want to be strong? - we must work (...) To be wise? – we must look and think. No changing of place at a hundred miles an hour, nor making of stuffs a thousand yards a minute, will make us one whit stronger, happier, or wiser. There was always more in the world than men could see, walked they ever so slowly; they will see it no better for going fast (1863:308).

The section from which this quote is taken is titled “the moral of landscape,” and investigates how representations of landscape in the arts influence our understanding and experience of nature, politics and religion. Ruskin had come to believe, with Thoreau, that most of man's essential labour on this earth cannot really be delegated to machines: all human work has to be performed with the aid and accompaniment of active thought, reflection and close attention in order to be useful to the human body and soul. A material gain devoid of human meaning is not interesting; it is not a true gain.

In his preface to an American selection of Ruskin's essays published in 1888, historian D. H. Montgomery identifies one of Ruskin's overarching objects of life as being “to lift the artisans of England out of their bondage and degradation, both for their own good and for the welfare of the state” (Ruskin 1888:xxv). While he did not self-identify as a revolutionary, he began in 1870 a series of letters addressed to the “Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain” which would be published in several volumes over the following years. This effort was the first step in an attempt to do something practical for the improvement of social conditions in England. In the first volume of the book, entitled *Fors*

Clavigera, Ruskin describes, in open despair, how what he understood to be the current state of affairs with regards to politics, culture, the natural world, the human spirit and society at large, has made his own daily life a permanent pain and distraction:

For my own part, I will put up with this state of things, passively, not an hour longer (...) I simply cannot paint, nor read, nor look at minerals, nor do anything else that I like, and the very light of the morning sky, where there is any – which is seldom, now-a-days, near London – has become hateful to me, because of the misery that I know of, and see signs of, where I know it not, which no imagination can interpret too bitterly. (Ruskin 1871:3).

Ruskin pledges himself to join forces with “any few or many who will help” to do his best to “abate this misery”. Misery, in Ruskin’s estimation, abounded in Victorian England. In the second volume of *Fors* we experience a Ruskin who does no longer allow himself recourse to utopian predictions:

Some eleven in the dozen of the population of the world are occupied earnestly in putting things to wrongs, thinking to benefit themselves thereby. Is it any wonder, then, you are uncomfortable, when already the world, in our part of it, is over-populated, and eleven in the dozen of the over-population doing diligently wrong; and the remaining dozenth expecting God to do their work for them; and consoling themselves with buying two - shilling publications for eighteenpence? (1872:1-2).

By the time this was written, 25 years had already passed since Friderich Engels published his pioneering work of journalistic sociology *Die Lage der Arbeitenden Klasse in England* (1892), and for much of this time Ruskin had been one of Britain's most outspoken (and most eloquent) critics of industrialisation, pollution, the exploitation of the poor, the sorry state of human morality, the degradation and despoliation of the countryside, bad artistry, inferior craftsmanship and ugly architecture. And to no avail, as he now concluded.

In *Fors* Ruskin also comments on the inadequacy of the liberal-conservative axis in British politics, stating that “there is no opposition whatever between those two kinds of men [Liberal and Conservative]”.

Ruskin goes on to identify himself as a “violent Illiberal” with both destructive and innovatory aspirations:

I should like to destroy most of the railroads in England, and all the railroads in Wales. I should like to destroy and rebuild the Houses of Parliament, the National Gallery, and the East end of London; and to destroy, without rebuilding, the new town of Edinburgh, the North suburb of Geneva, and the city of New York” (1871:4).

While anyone would allow that this is not the speech of one who wants to conserve the status quo, it is a distinctly reactionary, anti-modern, misanthropic stance. Ruskin's argument seems to be that modern conservatives want to conserve the exact wrong things – archaic systems of privilege and oppression – at the expense of the things that have been ever-replenishing sources of goodness and health in the world, the things that are, in a word: worth conserving.

Ruskin would like to see “many long established things” changed in his lifetime, but more than anything, he wants “to keep the fields of England green, and her cheeks red; and that girls should be taught to curtsy, and boys to take their hats off, when a Professor or otherwise dignified person passes by.” (1871:4).

Ruskin starts a lecture on “Books and Reading” by asserting that there are only two faults in man “that are of *real* consequence – Idleness and Cruelty.” “Whatever else you may be, you must not be useless, and you must not be cruel” (1888:1). He was not essentially opposed to all class-division and privilege, and did not necessarily think the complexity, immorality and evilness of the current social conditions was masterminded by a small community of over-privileged aristocrats. Rather, shifts in culture and values had been snuck in and take hold because people had not been paying attention, and they had been swallowed up in these shifts and lost their humanity.

The consequences of escalating technological advancements would inevitably be a humankind devoid of the tools and disposition to better

themselves and to truly and usefully observe the facts of nature and the meanings of art – it would be an impoverished humanity, prone to senseless destruction and the submission of the sensations to mindless distractions.

Ruskin was an outspoken opponent of war and violence, and in his earlier collection of lectures, *Sesame and Lilies* he preached his conviction that art, literature and true natural experiences had to be the most effective antidotes to that kind of worldly baseness: “Being human creatures, [sensation] is good for us; nay, we are only human in so far as we are sensitive, and our honour is precisely in proportion to our passion” (1865:34). Because of the disregard of the senses, humanity now found itself in a deplorable situation:

Alas! it is the narrowness, selfishness, minuteness, of your sensation that you have to deplore in England at this day; – sensation which spends itself in bouquets and speeches; in revelings and junketings; in sham fights and gay puppet shows, while you can look on and see noble nations murdered, man by man, woman by woman, child by child, without an effort, or a tear (ibid:35-6).

It is a simple theory, but one that Ruskin would go on to dedicate his life to. Ruskin did not think the artist’s first duty should be to reflect his times, because in instances when life is ugly, unjust and cruel, all art that reflects life must necessarily be equally base. The artist should try to bring about the conditions in which good art could be produced. As the state of England was to Ruskin a state of gradual decomposition, and art in itself had proved to be too feeble a tool, Ruskin came to see himself as a warrior, fighting a losing battle for the soul of England:

If no other happiness is to be had, the mere war with decomposition is a kind of happiness. But the war with the Lord of Decomposition, the old Dragon himself,—St. George's war, with a princess to save, and win—are none of you, my poor friends, proud enough to hope for any part in that battle ? (1872:2).

2.2 William Morris – “A Longing for Beauty”

William Morris (1834-1896) was a textile-designer, furniture builder, type-setter and a libertarian socialist. Morris wanted to cause a revolution in England. He was enthused by the idea of a modern, egalitarian version of medieval communalism, a friendly, English branch of socialism, inspired by Carlyle and Ruskin, where an appreciation of the beauty and simplicity of good, manual craftsmanship would teach people that “the true secret of happiness lies in taking a genuine interest in all the details of daily life, in elevating them by art instead of handing the performance of them over to unregarded drudges, and ignoring them” (1888:137). 15 years Ruskin's junior and 10 years Carpenter's senior Morris was a pivotal figure in the English Arts and Crafts movement.

He was himself a visual artist, a furniture-maker and a composer of novels and poetic romances and in most of Morris's artistic work there is an unabashed and deliberate evocation of a hale and healthy medieval past. Morris loved Germanic mythology and medieval artefacts and in his writing he was greatly influenced by Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, of which he later made a hand-printed and illustrated edition. He was also a businessman, however, often selling his hand-made products to wealthy Victorian city-dwellers, and he spent much of his life grappling with the dilemmas facing a man who is concerned about the wellbeing of his fellow countrymen, and of his natural surroundings, who wishes to be independent and create beautiful things, and at the same time has to operate in the marketplace in order to earn a living (Faulkner 1973). He lived for parts of his life in the country-side, having established his workshop at Kelmscott Manor, where he lived with his wife and daughters from 1871, and which was a joint-tenancy shared with his friend, the Pre-Raphaelite painter Rossetti (also an eager Medievalist). The running of his own arts and crafts workshop, selling tapestries and chairs to wealthy

Londoners, had him in a constant flux between country and city, however, and the toll this took on him is evident in his letters, in which he intermittently concludes that “Somehow I feel as if there must soon be an end for me of playing at living in the country: a town-bird I am, a master-artisan, if I may claim that latter dignity” (Greensted 2005:78).

Morris was a practical and energetic man, but well-educated, well-read in classical literature and inclined to idealistic notions. On the occasion of his 40th birthday, he allows himself the following reflections:

Surely if people lived five hundred years instead of threescore and ten they would find some better way of living than in such a sordid loathsome place, but now it seems to be nobody’s business to try to better things – isn’t mine, you see, despite all my grumbling – but look, suppose people lived in little communities among gardens and green fields, so that you could be in the country in five minutes’ walk, and had few wants, almost no furniture for instance, and no servants, and studied the (difficult) arts of enjoying life, and finding out what they really wanted: then I think one might hope civilisation had really begun (Quoted in Faulkner 1980:85).

This might be the first overt expression of Morris’s ideal for England, which he would devote the latter part of his career to bring about, by any available means. It is in his book *Hopes and Fears for Art*, a book of lectures held for art students at various schools and colleges, that we find some of Morris’s most vivid explorations of simplicity and the good life in his pre-socialist years:

How are we to pay for decent houses? It seems to me that by a great piece of good luck the way to pay for them, is by doing that which alone can produce popular art among us: living a simple life, I mean. Once more I say that the greatest foe to art is luxury, art cannot live in its atmosphere (...) We must clear our houses of troublesome superfluities that are for ever in our way: conventional comforts that are no real comforts, and do but make work for servants and doctors: if you want a golden rule that will fit everybody, this is it: *Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful*” (Morris 1882:106-8).

Morris writes that “my ordinary work has forced on me the contrast between times past and the present day, and has made me look with grief and pain on things which many men notice but little” (1888a:vii). During the 1880s Morris became more and more vocal on politics. In his popular book *Signs of Change* (1888a), which, like *Hopes and Fears for Art* stemmed from a collection of lectures, Morris is no longer “the idle singer of an empty day” (1870) that he claimed to be in the early narrative poetry of his *Earthly Paradise*. *Signs of Change* is out to convert people to the cause: In the preface he starts arguments with “we socialists believe...” and openly discusses the unfounded aversion the public appears to garner towards the word “revolution,” and practically quotes from Marx’s *Das Kapital*. Morris appeals to the middle classes and informs them that they are “the unconscious oppressors of the poor” (1888a:3), and that the system in which they live and work is

based on a state of perpetual war. (...) I know that you have often been told that the competition, which is at present the rule of all production, is a good thing, and stimulates the progress of the race; but the people who tell you this should call competition by its shorter name of *war* if they wish to be honest, and you would then be free to consider whether or no war stimulates progress, otherwise than as a mad bull chasing you over your garden may do (ibid:5).

The status quo is very bad, compared to how we should live. Morris lists the things he believes are necessary in order for a life to be good: “First, a healthy body, second, an active mind in sympathy with the past, the present, and the future; thirdly, occupation fit for a healthy body and an active mind; and fourthly, a beautiful world to live in” (ibid:21).

Elaborating on his point about “good health” Morris professes “that a vast proportion of people in civilisation scarcely even know what it means”.

Contemporary society no longer holds it to be possible, dismisses as a utopian fantasy, a condition where people can

feel mere life a pleasure; to enjoy the moving one's limbs and exercising one's bodily powers; to play, as it were, with sun and

wind and rain; to rejoice in satisfying the due bodily appetites of a human animal without fear of degradation or sense of wrongdoing: yes, and therewithal to be well formed, straight-limbed, strongly knit, expressive of countenance – to be, in a word, beautiful (ibid:22).

One does not actually have to go back to the time of Rousseau's "noble savage" in order to find kernels of hope and revolutionary inspiration, Morris argues:

We of this age... have been born to a wonderful heritage fashioned of the work of those that have gone before us; (...) the day of the organisation of man is dawning. It is not we who can build up the new social order; the past ages have done most of that work for us; but we can clear our eyes to the signs of the times, and we shall then see that the attainment of a good condition of life is being made possible for us, and that it is now our business to stretch out our hand to take it. (ibid:35).

Signs of Change includes an entire chapter on the feudal system, in which Morris makes a case the existence of a great, flourishing counter-cultural movement running underneath the apparent tyrannies of kings and lords for at least parts of the European Middle Ages, particularly the 14th century, the age of Chaucer, an age which found man a "serf bound to the manor, and which left him generally a yeoman or artisan sharing the collective status of his guild." There was real pride being taken in everyday tasks and feats of artistry. The feudal lords lived on the land, they had no special affinities for the activities of King and Church, everyone lived their daily lives, partook in the fellowship of their local communities and even the serfs (who admittedly worked very hard, but towards sensible ends), had the benefits of natural surroundings and strong bonds of kin- and friendship. This was before England got "carried into the rising current of commercialism, and the rich men and landlords to turn their attention to the production of profit instead of the production of livelihood." In the light of this, Morris advocates a closer look at this history as a source of the strength and inspiration needed to instigate and justify radical societal change:

The world's roughness, falseness, and injustice will bring about their natural consequences and we and our lives are part of those consequences; but since we inherit also the consequences of old resistance to those curses, let us look to it to have our fair share of that inheritance also, which if nothing else come of it will at least bring us courage and hope; that is eager life while we live; which is above all things the Aim of Art” (Morris 1888a:140).

Morris had that same year published a novel called *A Dream of John Ball*⁷ in which he tries to embody this aim by retelling the story of the life and deeds of the historical figure of the title, a radical preacher who had an important role as an instigator and speech-maker in the weeks leading up to the Peasants Revolt of 1381. His illustration of the print-edition of the book shows Adam and Eve working in harmony and natural independence from masters. The plate is captioned with a quote attributed to the historical John Ball: “When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?” (1888b). The narrator of the novel is a Victorian scholar who dreams that he has travelled back in time and is accompanying John Ball in his revolt against the unjust aristocrats and their lawyers and advisors. Medieval England is portrayed in a positive light, full of honourable, healthy and brave commoners making churches, artwork and houses of “uncommon fitness” and “noble beauty”. During the course of their campaigning the scholar tells the medieval socialist hero of the collapse of feudalism and the state of Britain in the 19th century. Ball is uncomprehending and disheartened when faced with the news that the egalitarian society he is fighting for had not yet been achieved all those centuries later. Having had the capitalist system explained to him in simplistic terms, he answers in disbelief: “and shall they who see themselves robbed worship the robber? Then indeed shall men be changed from what they are now, and they shall be sluggards, dolts, and cowards beyond all the earth hath yet borne” (1888b:120).

⁷The story had previously been serialised in the socialist newspaper *The Commonweal*, November 13, 1886 - January 22, 1887 (Morris 1888).

The Victorian scholar, who has been inspired and radicalised by Ball's oratory skills, reassures him in a captivating farewell speech that the common human spirit Ball is an embodiment of cannot yet be dead in the souls of men. Sooner or later, he predicts, by the grey light of dawn "shall wise men and valiant souls see the remedy, and deal with it!" There is something in us which inclines us towards freedom, and there really will come a time, at "the end of all, when men shall have the fruits of the earth and the fruits of their toil thereon, without money and without price", and the name of John Ball shall never be forgotten (ibid:124).

Waking to hear the factory-bells in the "dirty discomfort" of London, the scholar imagines the wind and the river wooing him "towards the country side," where "away from the miseries of the 'Great Wen'" he might have carried on "a daydream" of what had just transpired. The novel ends with the narrator presumably walking into the city to begin his journey of "hopeful strife," which is revolutionary socialist action towards a more human society (ibid:124).

Despite his medievalism, Morris's socialist utopia would not consist of throwing all the innovations of modernity over board. While Morris believed that Thoreau's maxim that "men have become the tools of their tools" (1878:41) was a correct assessment of the current socio-economic regime in England, which had "long passed the stage at which machines are only used for doing work repulsive to an average man, or for doing what could be as well done by a machine as a man" (1888a:128), he was not entirely against a more reasonable use of machines. Concurring with Ruskin, it would seem, "that, on the whole, *simply* manual occupations *are* degrading" (Ruskin:1872:142), Morris felt that machines could be made to have a place in the socialist state, but working for the people, and not

in making all those articles of folly and luxury, the demand for which is the outcome of the existence of the rich non-producing classes; things which people leading a manly and uncorrupted life

would not ask for or dream of. These things, whoever may gainsay me, I will for ever refuse to call wealth: they are not wealth, but waste (1888a:148).

This is reminiscent of Ruskin's concept of "wealth and illth", and it has here many of the same implications. The waste of luxury is not merely a problem to do with a sensible use and distribution of resources; it is a symptom, one factor of "the outward expression of the innate moral baseness into which we are forced by our present form of society" (ibid:vii). These "uglinesses" are deeply corrosive to what Morris calls "manliness", which is essentially the ability to lead an authentic human life, making "reasonable use" of "the gifts of Nature." The gifts in question are the things which people should always have had access to:

The sunlight, the fresh air, the unspoiled face of the earth, food, raiment and housing necessary and decent; the storing up of knowledge of all kinds, and the power of disseminating it; means of free communication between man and man; works of art, the beauty which man creates when he is most a man, most aspiring and thoughtful – all things which serve the pleasure of people [when they are] free (ibid:149).

Morris's simple life is not a spiritual life of quiet contemplation. Asceticism is a mistake "born of the despair of the oppressed and degraded, have been for so many ages used as instruments for the continuance of that oppression and degradation" (ibid:22). His vision of the socialist state is as a decentralised, ruralised nation. People live and work much more communally, their beautiful surroundings and the leisure afforded them by the abolishment of luxury inspire them to create beautiful works of art, which again adds to the beauty of their surroundings as well as being an intrinsically life-affirming experience in its own right. It is essentially a utopian project with democratic and re-humanising aspirations, characterised by a belief that "from simplicity of life would rise up the longing for beauty, which cannot yet be dead in men's souls, and we know that nothing can satisfy that demand but Intelligent work rising gradually into Imaginative work; which, through

simplicity and joy “will turn all ‘operatives’ into workmen, into artists, into men” (Morris 1882:215).

2.3 Edward Carpenter, Prophet of the New Life

Edward Carpenter (1844-1929), an anarcho-communist poet, philosopher and activist for sexual freedoms, was another English intellectual who combined civilization critique with a brand of early environmental activism. From an upper middle-class Brighton family, he felt like an outsider from the first (Carpenter 1916). In a response to an appreciative address signed by nearly 300 of his admirers and contemporaries on the occasion of his 70th birthday in August 1914, Carpenter takes a moment to describe his experience of the Victorian Era, the culture and society he was born into:

[T]hat strange period of human evolution ... which in some respects, one now thinks, marked the lowest ebb of modern civilised society: a period in which not only commercialism in public life, but cant in religion, pure materialism in science, futility in social conventions, the worship of stocks and shares, the starving of the human heart, the denial of the human body and its needs, the huddling concealment of the body in clothes, the “impure hush” on matters of sex, class-division, contempt of manual labour, and the cruel barring of women from every natural and useful expression of their lives, were carried to an extremity of folly difficult for us now to realise (Sime 1916:139-40).

Leaving the talk of “human evolution” and the “ebb” of civilisation to one side for now, this description of Victorian Britain can be seen as a retrospective manifesto of the reasons behind his lifelong rebellion. Carpenter goes on to relate to us how the days of his youth were days of “considerable suffering” as a direct consequence of all this stricture, heartlessness and futility, how he “looked with envy ... on the men with pick and shovel in the roadway and wished to join their labour” (Sime 1916:140). Carpenter’s experience of the society he grew up in as a place

where the human heart was starved and the human body denied is partly in reference to the difficulties facing a gay man in that era, but his opposition went deeper than that. Carpenter recounts an intense need for action, to speak up and act out against the hypocrites, materialists and prudes who governed society. “I only knew that I hated my surroundings” (ibid:140) he writes, identifying here, perhaps, a driving force behind all the radical writings, projects and endeavours that were to fill his adult life.

Carpenter was at odds with virtually every aspect of Victorian life and custom. Having been active in libertarian socialist circles in Sheffield in the late 1870s, he left the city to establish what became, in effect, an early eco-commune and a gay free-haven (Rowbotham 2008). At Millthorpe, Carpenter was able to devote himself to tilling the earth and putting some of his other theories of “primitive” or nature-based socialism into practice. In the chapter “Manual Work” in his 1916 autobiography, he describes the early period of his tenancy at the country cottage, and all the toil and hardship this life entailed for him:

it was a considerable strain. With my somewhat vague aspiring mind, to be imprisoned in the rude details of a most material life was often irksome. Yet, a consuming passion drove me on – a desire to know, to do something real, an evil conscience perhaps of the past unreality of my existence. I was compelled to eat it all out (1916:113).

These sentiments are analogous with that of many other middle class converts to “bread labour” who were unaccustomed to the work and fuelled by a mix of bad conscience and a slightly inexplicit desire for authenticity⁸, and did not immediately experience the calm sense of deepening understanding and the gradual dropping away of lesser concerns stipulated by Thoreau. *Walden* had been published in several editions in England by this time, and was a great success in radical political circles for its depiction of the vanity of the industrial society and

⁸ See (MacCarthy 2012) for examples of this.

the decrepitude of upper-class living (Hendrick 1977). It was an influence on Carpenter's life at this time, but it was Walt Whitman's book of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*, that initially turned him onto some of the ideas that would stay current in his life and work for years to come (Carpenter 1916). Whitman was associated with the New England Transcendentalists, and his book is full of vibrant, optimistic expressions of every-day ecstasy and (partially homoerotic) love. Whitman was influenced by Wordsworth, and wrote in the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* that "the proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it" (Reynolds 1995:5). Carpenter did absorb Whitman's poetry, describing the discovery of it as provoking "a profound change" within him, a feeling that his "life deep down was flowing out and away from the surroundings and traditions amid which I lived" (1916:64).

Leaves of Grass was Whitman's poem of democracy, infused with a strong sense of egalitarianism and a celebration of all kinds of liberties. Carpenter's own poetic project, *Towards Democracy* which was first published in 1883 was modelled on Whitman both in style and intention. It is full of emancipatory and revelatory intentions. The poem on the title page of the book reads: "In the deep cave of the Heart, far down,/Running under the outer shows of the world and of /people (...) Behold, in patience veiled, divine and wondrous things!" In the opening line of the first stanza of the first poem, the poet exclaims: "Freedom at last!" The speaker promises to "wipe a mirror and place it in your hands" (1896:3). The image of modern man that emerges, admittedly first in a later revision of the poem, is a:

Poor pigmy, botched in clothes, feet confined in boots,
braced, stitched, and starched,
Too feeble, alas ! too mean, undignified, to be en-
dured (1905:386)

This is a state from which he has to be liberated. Carpenter's conviction that Victorian conventions were directly harmful to the human body was

deep-seated. The line about feet “coffined in boots” seems to have been something he himself felt negatively impacted by: once he had settled in his rural home at Millthorpe he spent a considerable amount of time making sandals⁹ for himself and his friends and cohabiters. Democracy, in Carpenter’s poem, is not rule by representation, but a total emancipation of the human spirit. The way a society is organised, at this point, has nothing to do with it. Carpenter has larger concerns: “Civilisation sinks and swims, but the old facts remain/the sun smiles, knowing well its strength” (ibid:4).

Carpenter was a believer in a “social evolution” towards a “generous Common Life” and against and away from all the evils, all the “sordid and self-seeking Commercialism of the era that is passing away” (1916:320). He was not unconcerned with helping this evolution come to pass, however, and in the early 1880s, he was writing tracts and essays advocating the voluntary simplification of living and the immorality of modern commercial practices. Henry Salt, who was to become Carpenter's friend later in life, was said to have been inspired to leave his teaching position at Eton because of the arguments put forth in the book *Modern Money-Lending*¹⁰ (1885). In that book, Carpenter states that:

I have not the least doubt... that with £120 a year a man and a wife willing to do a fair share of work (and both of them free from any desire to make a pretence of grandeur – for this lies very much at the root of the matter) could bring up a little family in health and happiness... But such a change as this, or in this direction, at all generally adopted, would enormously alter the aspect of the nation, and bring us nearer to that ideal of social love, justice, and health from which we have so far strayed (Carpenter 1885:24).

An essay in his book *England’s Ideal* is titled “The Simplification of Life”, and reads like the “Economy” chapter of Thoreau’s *Walden* revised

⁹ He had been sent a pair from friends in India, and taught himself to make them. He is attributed with being largely responsible for their later popularity in Britain. (Copely 2006).

¹⁰ See (Hendrick 1977). Hendrick quotes George Bernard Shaw saying that Salt “read a book in which Edward Carpenter advocated ‘the simple life,’ and said that it could be lived on £160 a year, which was just what Salt had by that time accumulated, he instantly shook the dust of [Eton] off his feet...”.

for the English middle class, although it is a good deal more practically minded. Carpenter here claims, among other things, that the introduction of mechanical aids like sewing machines into households will only work to gradually increase the complexity and frilliness of the clothes being made at home, and lead to an escalation in expectations instead of saving time and labour. He concludes: “thus we see how little *external* reforms avail. If the *desire* for simplicity is not already present, no labor-saving appliances will make life simpler” (1887:88). Here Carpenter has fully absorbed Thoreau’s point of view. While the infrastructure, both social and material, surrounding man undoubtedly is part of what is inhibiting him from a full and mature expression of his inner self, and while discovering ways to bring leisure to the lives of common workers is a big part of what Carpenter sees as his project, any technological fix is bound to fall short. What mankind needs is not easier gratification of wants, but a conscious limitation of needs, a freeing of the self from pretensions of “grandeur”.

If this is the goal, the upper-classes would need to be instigators. The last essay in the book is addressed to the wealthy of London, and is more confrontational. Walking in a fashionable district of the town, Carpenter thinks to himself: “These who live here are really, as William Morris calls them, *the dangerous classes*” (1887:140). Carpenter urges all these “wealthy despoilers” to do away with their luxuries and to “put their lives on the very simplest footing”. The reasons for this are first and foremost moral. No person has any right to live extravagantly “by other people's labour” but in the cases where “his ‘education’ will leave him no other alternative – it is clearly his duty to consume as little of that commodity as he possibly can,” and preferably, one should strive to live “on a level of simplicity at least equal to that of the mass of the people”. There is also freedom in it, however. Liberation for the middle- and upper-classes, for Carpenter, is ultimately a process of elimination:

It is all congestion. Congestion at the dance – so many people, such dresses, that dancing is impossible. Congestion at the dinner party – congestion in twelve courses; so much to eat that eating is impossible. Congestion of books – so much to read, that reading is impossible. Congestion in church – stitched and starched up to the eyes (while the servants at home are preparing the roast beef and plum pudding). Congestion at the theatre, at the concert, yawning in dress-clothes on the front seats; while the real enjoyers and observers are out of sight behind. Such a congestion of unused wealth and property, such a glut, as surely the world before has never seen, and to purge which away will surely require such medicine as the world before has never seen – no gilded pill or silent perambulator this time, but a drastic bolus ploughing its way through the very frame of “society,” not without groans and horrible noises” (1887:141).

One of the additional factors that recommends such a voluntary simplification is that it makes it possible for wealthy to get “to know the people, to become friends with them, to gauge their wants &c” (ibid:147). This, to Carpenter, seemed like an obvious advantage; it is what he had done in Sheffield and at Millthorpe, and it had made him feel more in touch with the common spirit of England, and led to many considerable friendships (some of them sexual) (Rowbotham 2008).

Carpenter had a great deal of optimism with regards to the prospect of a popular uprising, defining socialism as the “substitution of the rule of general advantage for the rule of individual greed” (1887:25). Carpenter does not get bogged down in the details of how such a society should be managed, however. The morality behind the movement is what matters. If socialism ultimately amounts to

merely a change of society without a change of its heart – it merely means that those who grabbed all the good things before shall be displaced, and that those who were grabbed from should now grab in their turn (...) If it is to be a substantial movement, it must mean a changed ideal, a changed conception of daily life; it must mean some better conception of human dignity (...) it must mean simplicity of life, defence of the weak, courage of one’s own convictions, charity of the faults and failing of others (1887:26).

How can such a change be brought about? While not giving a definite answer, Carpenter stresses the importance of individual examples, but also does not shy away from the possibility of spiritual involvement: “Through the tangled thicket there is but one deliverer that can make his way, and as of old his name is the Prince of Love” (1887:146).

The 1889 book *Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure* is an interesting chapter in the English history of radical ideas. The book describes civilisation as a “kind of disease which the various races of men have to pass through – as children pass through measles or the whooping cough” (1889:1), constitutes a thoroughgoing and devastating criticism of modernity:

Again, mentally, is not our condition anything but satisfactory? I am not alluding to the number and importance of the lunatic asylums which cover our land, nor to the fact that maladies of the brain and nervous system are now so common; but to the strange sense of mental unrest which marks our populations, and which amply justifies Ruskin's cutting epigram: that our two objects in life are, “Whatever we have—to get more; and wherever we are—to go somewhere else” (ibid:3).

The text, when Carpenter first read it as a lecture “at a gathering of Social Democratic Federation and Fabian heavyweights” (Rowbotham 2008:143) including such distinguished names in English socialist politics of the day as Henry Hyndman and George Bernard Shaw, was extremely unpopular with the audience. Carpenter was arraigned for glorifying “the condition of savagery (...) distorting Hegel's theory of history (...) misleading the ignorant Philistines as to what socialists were aiming at.” Shaw accused him of bringing “contempt on the Socialist Cause” (ibid:143). Despite of this scathing criticism from fellow leftists, the book, when published, became one of Carpenter’s longest-lasting successes: “It went into eighteen editions in English between 1889 and 1938 and was also translated into French (1896), Dutch (1899), German (1903), Russian (1906), Bulgarian (1908), Danish (1913), while extracts appeared in Japanese” (ibid:144). Carpenter ends the essay by envisioning an existence

beyond the “disease” of civilisation, a utopian, socialist future characterized by ecological connectedness and egalitarian brotherly love:

In such new human life then—its fields, its farms, its workshops, its cities—always the work of man perfecting and beautifying the lands, aiding the efforts of the sun and soil, giving voice to the desire of the mute earth—in such new communal life near to nature, so far from any asceticism or inhospitality, we are fain to see far more humanity and sociability than ever before: an infinite helpfulness and sympathy, as between the children of a common mother (1889:41).

In the revised edition of *Towards Democracy*, this transformation is described as incited by a mystical joy: “The earth remains and daily life/ remains, and the scrubbing of doorsteps, and the house and/the care of the house remains; but Joy fills it, fills the house/ full and swells to the sky and reaches the stars: all Joy!” (1905:5).

Carpenter kept on going into the new century, and in 1904 he published a book called *The Art of Creation, Essays on the Self and its Powers*, in which he embarks with enthusiasm upon an investigation of the depths of the contemporary discussion about evolutionary history, creativity and the nature of consciousness. He expresses the belief that the human species is entering a new era of human understanding:

Forty or fifty years ago the materialistic view of the world was much in evidence. We all at that time were automations (...) Since then, however, partly through natural reaction, partly through the influx of Eastern ideas, there has been a great swing of the pendulum, and a disposition to posit the Mental world as nearer the basis of existence and to look upon material phenomena rather as the outcome and expression of the mental. In the later part of the last century we looked upon Creation as a process of Machinery; to-day we look upon it as an Art (1904:10-11).

Carpenter thinks the implications of this could turn out to be revolutionary. Through the book, he cites widely, from the children’s books of Seton Thompson via Schopenhauer, to the 17th century Christian Mystic Jacob Böhme, to the ancient Indian *Upanishads*, but the work is largely a response to the work of Canadian psychiatrist Richard Maurice Bucke,

who had earlier written a rhapsodic biography about Whitman, and whose *Cosmic Consciousness, A Study of the Evolution of the Human Mind* (1902), forms the basis of Carpenter's own theories and conceptions on this subject. In his book, Bucke predicts:

Just as, long ago, self consciousness appeared in the best specimens of our ancestral race in the prime of life, and gradually became more and more universal – (...) so will Cosmic Consciousness become more and more universal and appear earlier in the individual life until the race at large will possess this faculty (...) This new race is in act of being born from us, and in the near future it will occupy and possess the earth (1905:317-18).

Carpenter explores the evidence for the existence of the three different stages of consciousness Bucke had stipulated. The first is an animal, "Simple Consciousness" marked by a feeling of one-ness with nature and the predominance of sensory experience. The other two are what Bucke calls "self consciousness" and "cosmic consciousness." To illustrate the relationship between these forms of consciousness, and the possible ascension by human beings from the one to the other, Carpenter uses the metaphor of a large tree

in which two leaves observe each other externally for a long enough time, mutually exclusive, and without any suspicion that they have a life in common. Then the "self" consciousness of one of the leaves deepening inwardly (down the twig or branch), at last reaches the point whence the "self" of the other leaf also branches off – and becomes aware of its unity with the other. Instantly its external observation of its fellow-leaf is transformed; it sees a thousand meanings in it which it never saw before. Its fellow-leaf is almost as much an expression of self as itself is; for both now belong to a larger self (1904:54).

This conception seems to represent Carpenter's new hope for the future. It is as if he is saying that now the Victorian age is over, the New Life can finally arise.

In *Towards Industrial Freedom*, published towards the end of the First World War, Carpenter discusses the War as a terrible, but avoidable calamity; something he himself, and many other likeminded thinkers, had

predicted many years previously. Catastrophe was a natural consequence of the current system and unavoidable all the while society stayed its course. The previous year he had published a pamphlet titled *Never Again!* in which he pledged himself to work to prevent such senseless displays of violence in the future. Always working towards the ultimate goals, Carpenter imagines a future of non-violence and freedom for all. Nations can “heal,” when the source of the strife is detected and analysed. For Carpenter, mankind had already started the climb towards a better situation:

I think we may see that the new conception of life will only come through the peeling off in the various nations of the old husks of the diplomatic, military, legal, and commercial classes, with their antiquated, narrow-minded and profoundly irreligious and inhuman standards -- those husks which have so long restricted and strangled the growing life within (...) But when Labour is freed – or rather when once it frees itself – from the thralldom, of the old Feudal system, and finally from the fearful burden of modern Capitalism – when once it can lift its head and see the great constructive vision of the new society which awaits it (Carpenter 1916:ch1).

As this was written, of course, the War was still in full effect, Henry Ford was building his factories in the U.S., and when calls for simple living emerged once more into the public discourse in the inter-war years, it would be in a different form.

3. Gandhi's Way – Self-Sufficiency and Rural Resistance in the Face of a “Dying Social Order”

India's destiny lies not along the bloody way of the West, of which she shows signs of tiredness but along the bloodless way of peace that comes from a simple and godly life.

– Mohandas K. Gandhi, October 1909.

For “the mighty of the earth,” when bereft of wisdom, have to devote themselves ruthlessly to perpetuating their own might. This is the genesis of the interminable warfare waged by predatory quantity-minded men upon the quality-minded men who seek to make the world a more beautiful place in which to live.

– Ralph Borsodi, 1929.

In his recent book *The Search for the World before the Great War*, the historian Charles Emmerson writes that before World War One, a Western European could survey the world

as the Greek gods might have surveyed it from the snowy heights of Mount Olympus: themselves above, the teeming earth below. To be a European, from this perspective, was to inhabit the highest stage of human development. Past civilisations might have built great cities, invented algebra or discovered gunpowder, but none could compare to the material and technological culture to which Europe had given rise, made manifest in the continent's unprecedented wealth and power. Empire was this culture's supreme product, both an expression of its irresistible superiority and an organisational principle for the world's improvement (2013:18).

Hyperbole aside, this was, more or less, the culture into which an aspiring Gujarati lawyer by the name of Mohandas K. Gandhi entered when he arrived in London at the age of 19 in 1888. But as we have seen in the previous chapter, late Victorian London was also plump with dissenting views, and the informal part of Gandhi's Western education, during the course of which he became friends with socialists, theosophist and anarchists and joined the same vegetarian society as the pacifist and anti-vivisectionist Henry Salt. It was through friends in this society he became

acquainted with some of the more radical aspects of philosophy and political theory (Parekh 1997, Guha 2014).

All of this can be said to have had a sobering effect on Gandhi, as regards any pro-Western loyalties he might have held on his arrival. He became convinced that a social program of self-directed simplicity, frugality and non-violent non-cooperation was India's only chance of becoming truly independent and self-sufficient. This instigated the first really large-scale attempt of creating a popular movement for self-directed simplicity.

When Richard B. Gregg sat down to write "The Value of Voluntary Simplicity" for an American audience in 1936, after extended travels in India, his timing could hardly have been worse. In Europe, Hitler was consolidating his power. In the U.S.A everyone were beginning to recover from the devastation of the Great Depression. Roosevelt's Second New Deal had been passed in congress, the economy was rapidly improving and unemployment was down for the first time since the late 20s (Rauchway 2008). Attempting to convince recently starving and jobless people that they should, for their own benefit, try to make do with less, reject industrialisation and the complexities of the globalising capitalist free market, looks like an exercise in futility. However, there were already a few strong, dissenting voices making themselves heard over the unending din of America's Fordist progress-machine. Among these was Ralph Borsodi, who wanted to get away from *Ugly Civilization* (1929) and was delighted and surprised to find that independent living was possible in the depression-stricken U.S.A. Borsodi's writings are steeped in American pioneering spirit and a strong belief in decentralised living, and, having more luck than Gregg as regards hitting the zeitgeist of public feeling, his books were popular with people who were inclined to a pessimism concerning the future of the capitalist system but were perhaps even more suspicious of the implications of a social alternative. Borsodi's vision of

the future was a decentralised use-economy with a strong emphasis on personal autonomy.

As Guha notes, the India that Gandhi lived in was a markedly different reality compared to the industrial sprawl of Ruskin's England, or indeed Gregg's and Borsodi's U.S.A of the twenties. Whereas Ruskin's, Morris's or Carpenter's agrarian utopias must have seemed widely unrealistic even to many of their contemporaries, Gandhi's India was a "land of 700 000 villages" and his vision of an independent country organised into self-sufficient "ideal villages" where everything is locally sourced and hand-made must have seemed by far a likelier possibility there than anywhere in the industrial world (Guha 2000). While Gandhi's social program was deeply recumbent upon utopian conceptions of India's presumed "ancient culture" (Fox:1989:39), his published work, as well as his correspondence, speeches, and achievements as a political activist have asserted a prevailing influence on his likeminded contemporaries across the world, as well as later advocates of voluntary simplicity.

In this chapter I can only hope to present a sketch of Gandhi's moral and spiritual approach to politics and independence, parts of which are, of course, public knowledge to the degree of being almost second-nature. However, the Gandhian criticism of industrialism is of special interest to later discourses on voluntary simplicity and also directly influenced by the thoughts and words of the earlier proponents already covered, so it promises to be useful to dwell on some of the rhetoric and convictions underlying his strong and positive alternative to the same mechanising forces all simplicity campaigners have wanted to overthrow.

3.1 Gandhi's Indian Utopia

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869 – 1948) devoted much of the time following the culmination of his legal education in London towards organising and arguing for radical, non-violent resistance to the various constraints put on local people in the colonies, starting with several years of struggle as a lawyer and activist for the rights of Indian workers in South Africa (Guha 2014).

Gandhi's experiences as a student in London, where he had met British activists who, in addition to exposing him to many of the books that influenced his understanding of politics, religion and life, among them Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* and Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, also showed an acute curiosity and interest in Hindu and other Eastern practices of thought and understanding, which again sparked in him a more conscious relationship with his own religion and culture (Gandhi 1957). Combined with his continuing struggle against racial inequality in South Africa, these factors and influences seem to have made the "East and West question" burn brightly in his mind (Gandhi 1999 v10:164). As political theorist Bhikhu Parekh writes, Gandhi, "like many colonial leaders, discovered the West and the East at more or less the same time, and one through the other" (1997:9). By 1908, based on his own observations in the course of the 20 years since he first left India, he had concluded that the British way of life was not something India should strive for:

The British people appear to be obsessed by the demon of commercial selfishness. The fault is not of men, but of the system (...) The true remedy lies, in my humble opinion, in England's discarding modern civilization, which is ensouled by this spirit of selfishness and materialism, which is purposeless, vain, and (...) a negation of the spirit of Christianity (Gandhi 2012:103).

In a letter to his close friend and roommate, the Jewish socialist Henry Polak, sent October 14th 1909 during a short stay in London (this was in the middle of his campaigns in South Africa), Gandhi sets down a list of

conclusions he had arrived at in the course of his recent grappling with the issue of the current relationship – and the possibility of a future, ideal one – between East and West. His beginning conclusion is that: “there is no such thing as Western or European Civilisation, but there is a modern civilisation, which is purely material.” He further determines that:

It is not the British people that are ruling India, but it is modern civilisation, through its railways, telegraphs, telephones, and almost every invention which has been claimed to be a triumph of civilisation. (...) Increase of material comforts, it may be generally laid down, does not in any way whatsoever conduce to moral growth (Gandhi 1999:v10:169).

Gandhi saw that the competitive model of modern capitalism would inevitably lead a liberated India into just another form of servitude in the course of which the country “would only become a second or fifth edition of Europe or America” (ibid:168). This could not be considered practical independence, nor would it do much to redress the nature of the relationship between these parts of the world. The only true levelling of the situation, the only solution in which Gandhi saw the possibility of long-lasting peace, was the scenario of the West throwing “overboard modern civilisation, almost in its entirety” (ibid:168). For even if India could manage to catch up with the Western countries with regards to industry and infrastructure, this could never be a true state of peace, rather, it “would be an armed truce, even as it is between, say, Germany and England, both of which nations are living in the Hall of Death in order to avoid being devoured, the one by the other” (ibid:169-170).

By equating the competitive industrial system with the state of war, in rhetoric closely mirroring that of William Morris, and clearly sensing the inherent unsustainability of such a situation, Gandhi reaches a final conclusion, one that Wordsworth, Coleridge, Emerson, Thoreau, Ruskin,

Morris and Carpenter would have been sympathetic towards, although the exclusion of doctors might have struck them as unnecessarily extreme¹¹:

India's salvation consists in unlearning what she has learnt during the past fifty years. The railways, telegraphs, hospitals, lawyers, doctors, and such like have all to go, and the so-called upper classes have to learn to live conscientiously and religiously and deliberately the simple peasant life, knowing it to be a life giving true happiness (ibid:169).

It is possible to see all of Gandhi's campaigns of non-cooperation and peaceful resistance in India, from the Champaran and Keshavnagar agitations of 1918 to the Salt March of 1930, and beyond, as consistent with the views expressed above (Gandhi 1957, Parekh 1997). These were not merely the private admissions of a radicalised young man, but a conviction Gandhi would go on to repeat in print and in public addresses to his countrymen for years to come.

Gandhi's ideal for Indian home-rule, developed in these early years of self-imposed exile, was not merely a question of national self-determination, then. Ruskin's collection of essays on wealth and social economy, *Unto This Last*, provided Gandhi with the realisation that the good of the individual is contained in "the good of all" (1999:v7:88) an idea which directly inspired his brand of communalism. Gandhi wrote a paraphrase of Ruskin's book in his native Gujarati, and he also read Thomas Carlyle's books at this time (v8:232), and was thus steeped in Romantic anti-industrial, moral and religious sentiments to be applied to his own national and religious context. His political program was also inspired by some of the methods and slogans of an earlier Bengali nationalist movement focusing on *swadeshi*,¹² which in his interpretation

¹¹ They might have all agreed it was likely that such a state of affairs would logically result in much less demand for people of that profession. Morris and Carpenter were particularly adamant about the natural healthiness of their utopian futures, and Coleridge blamed much of his infirmity on exposure to city life.

¹² Hindi: स्वदेशी svadēśī: self-sufficiency, from Sanskrit svadēśīya 'of one's own country', from sva 'own' + deśa 'country' (Oxford Dictionary Online).

amounted to a more radical understanding of the word “independence,” and a definite break with current ideals for progressive, material development.

Gandhi’s early ideal for a ruralised India is a very Romantic conception of permanence and continuity behind the hustle and bustle of the world’s posturing and frivolity: “The rude plough of perhaps five thousand years ago is the plough of the husbandman today. Therein lays salvation” (v10:170). In a similarly Romantic passage, that has much in common with Ruskin’s ideas about mass-transportation, Gandhi writes that:

When there was no rapid locomotion, traders and preachers went on foot, from one end of the country to the other, braving all the dangers, not for pleasure, not for recreating their health, (though all that followed from their tramps,) but for the sake of humanity. Then were Benares and other places of pilgrimage holy cities, whereas today they are an abomination” (v10:170-171).

Walking, being the ancient Indian way of conducting a pilgrimage, and being the most quintessentially human way of moving about, is healthy and soul-enriching. Trains, on the other hand, are degrading to travellers, and thus result in their moral, spiritual and physical degradation. Gandhi’s utopia, then, would be a village economy in which every local community, in Satish Kumar’s words:

avoids economic dependence on external market forces (...) unnecessary, unhealthy, wasteful, and therefore environmentally destructive transportation (...) builds a strong economic base to satisfy most of its needs, and all members (...) give priority to local goods and services (...) The village community should embody the spirit of the home – an extension of the family rather than a collection of competing individuals. (Kumar 1996:419).

The Swadeshi-movement, which, under Gandhi, became synonymous with the localised spinning and weaving of khadi-cloth, stands out in Gandhi’s writing as perhaps the most important act of resistance to British rule, and to modern, industrial civilisation. It was also an industry with a long history he thought could rekindle a sense of pride in local communities:

“Spinning was the cottage industry years ago and if the millions are to be saved from starvation they must be enabled to re-introduce spinning in their homes and every village must repossess its own weaver” (Gandhi 2012:140). The active support of the production of home-spun fabrics, as well as all other manifestations of a traditional Indian village economy and the voluntary limitation of material wants, was seen as the strategy that would bring the poor and dispossessed out of their current miserable state.

Not to support this effort was comparable to treason:

Some fail, out of timidity, to give up foreign cloth and some are so much enamoured of silk clothes and fine muslin that they turn up their noses at the very thought of khadi. People who thus despise anything belonging to their own country practically become foreigners though native born. Those people, especially, who give up the use of swadeshi cloth – cloth woven by women from whatever quality of yarn is available – should certainly be regarded as traitors to the country (1999:v26:84).

It is interesting to note that while Gandhi’s notion of the future Indian village-economy would be a situation of extreme decentralisation, it is rhetorically and practically dependent on a feeling of national pride and unity. In an address to a group of Khojas (a Muslim minority), who he accuses of being ignorant of poverty and the importance of following the principles of swadeshi, Gandhi exclaims: “Why do you believe that you are a small community? Do you not include yourselves among the thirty crores [of Indians]? You certainly have your share of their joys and sorrows” (v26:84). It is not strange that national unity and solidarity should be recurring themes during a campaign for national independence, but it does seem paradoxical that Gandhi should argue for self-sufficiency and decentralised living-patterns built around small, independent, immobile communities, and at the same time scold people for their lack of understanding and brotherly feeling for all humanity, transcending both regional and religious affiliations.

Gandhi believed non-violence and frugality constituted a path to a more spiritual mode of interaction between people, which would

inevitably spread. His religious beliefs accentuated unity across the teachings of separate creeds and denominations:

Belief in non-violence is based on the assumption that human nature in its essence is one and therefore unfailingly responds to the advances of love (...) The non-violent technique does not depend for its success on the goodwill of the dictators, for a non-violent resister depends on the unfailing assistance of God which sustains him throughout difficulties which would otherwise be considered insurmountable (1948:1-175)

Although a believer in local communities, Gandhi was a thinker with global and universal concerns. He rejected early as “simply impertinence” the concept of “any man or any body of men to begin or contemplate reform of the whole world” (1999: v10:169).

What was at stake was not only happiness and peace, but the very essence of India, which was the wellspring of the ideas that, if adopted world-wide, could bring the global situation back into a state of equilibrium:

India is in danger of losing her soul. She cannot lose it and live. She must not, therefore, lazily and helplessly say, ‘I cannot escape the onrush from the West.’ She must be strong enough to resist it for her own sake and that of the world” (Gandhi 1959:14-15).

Biographer D. G. Tendulkar quotes Gandhi rejecting the term “Gandhiism,” saying: “There is no ‘ism’ about it. And no elaborate literature or propaganda is needed about it (...) Those who believe in the simple truths I have laid down can propagate them only by living them” (1954:76). Perhaps this, above all, is the thing voluntary simplicity has understood from Gandhi’s example: There is something to be said for living according to your principles, it can, even if you are unable to found a mass-movement in the process, be a revolutionary act in its own right. This is the exact thing that impressed the young Gandhi so much with Henry Thoreau, the fact that he was “a most practical man, that is, he taught nothing he was not prepared to practise in himself” (1999:v7:279).

The power of this, both rhetorically and morally, is, it seems, something practitioners of voluntary simplicity value a great deal.

3.2 Two American Contemporaries:

I. Richard B. Gregg

In 1932, the John Day Company published Richard B. Gregg's pamphlet *Gandhiism versus Socialism*, in which Gregg set out to communicate many of the insights he had gained in economic and political theory while living and travelling in India in the 20s. His notebooks¹³ leading up to this year show an active tackling of issues related to social change and moral progress, and they are also littered with cut-outs from newspapers concerning Gandhi and the Indian independence-movement. Experiencing India through the words and actions of Gandhi seems to have suggested to Gregg that alternatives to industrial capitalism (or socialist industrialism for that matter) did exist, and there were still people who deeply believed in the advantages and benefits of such an alternative.

Gregg's opening line captures a sense of the modern condition being one of turmoil and upheaval: "We seem to be living in the midst of a change not only of exterior circumstances but also of inner systems of values and of the symbols that go with them" (1932:7). Gregg holds that these inner systems, "ideas and sentiments" are what truly govern the world, whereas "governments, banks, laws and ruling classes are only the exterior instruments of management" (1932:7-8). What recommends Gandhiism, is its shrewd understanding of the importance of ideas, symbolism and psychology, and the insistence, on Gandhi's part, to practice what he preaches, to live simply, wear simple clothes and eat

¹³ Richard Gregg's notebooks have been digitised, are in the public domain and available via archive.org in 48 hand-written volumes. As far as I know no scholarly work on this material exists to date. It was not within the scope of this thesis to decipher Gregg's handwriting.

simple food. Gandhi understands the importance of incorporating resistance to oppressors into every-day acts:

Gandhiism is superior to Socialism in providing for every person a common daily form of social service to help directly toward creating a new social and economic order: namely, hand-spinning and its associated activities. Old and young, men and women, rich and poor, city folk and country folk, educated and ignorant – all can and are urged to take part in this (...) This common activity of Gandhiism is psychologically wise. It recognizes that new habits and attitudes must be built up gradually by small stimuli regularly repeated for many months (ibid:24).

The way to achieve a social state, then, is by letting people socialise and work on communal tasks in their local communities. This breeds the right kind of attitude, a gradual change in perceptions and values which will finally infuse enough people to enable them to act as efficient and natural regulators of the commercial and predatory forces which are currently holding so much of the power in society. “The emphasis of Gandhiism on the value of smallness, on the superiority of quality over quantity, and on simplicity of living, tends to control private property and to prevent its excessive modern evils” (ibid:26). This amounts to more than mere consumer-power. A Gandhian society, it seems, relies on getting to a situation where all pre-established mechanisms and hegemonies would begin to be questioned. If enough people change the way they work, the way they relate to each other, if they simplify their lives and become more quality-minded, the mechanisms of society will be forced to reform themselves around this new way of being.

These ideas were set down in a more rigorous form in the pamphlet concerning *The Value of Voluntary Simplicity*, which was published by the small Quaker press “Pendle Hill” in 1936. In it Gregg lists a range of people and groups, from Lao Tse, Mohammad and Moses to the Sufis, John Woolman and Gandhi, as earlier, wise proponents and practitioners of Voluntary Simplicity, concluding that: “clearly, then, there is or has been some vitally important element in this observance” (1936:ch1).

Voluntary simplicity, Gregg contends, is not a question of “asceticism in the sense of a suppression of instincts” but “involves a deliberate organization of life for a purpose” (ibid:ch1), (Thoreau's maxim “to live more deliberately” springs to mind). Seeing as the concept of simplicity is relative “depending on climate, customs, culture, the character of the individual,” and the question of life-purpose is one of individual belief, no strong or general prescription can be put on what a life of voluntary simplicity would look like. What Gregg is proposing, is for every individual to critically and seriously examine their own life, weighing the things that they do and have against what they actually and “deeply” believe to be conducive to “the good life”, and then “disregarding possessions and activities irrelevant” (ibid:ch1) to this. The main question to the public here seems to be: what (if anything) does “the vast quantities of things given to us by modern mass production and commerce, the developments of science and the complexities of existence in modern industrial countries” contribute to human purposefulness and actual happiness?

Gregg dedicates 6 pages of his pamphlet to addressing some the “doubts” he predicts will be levelled against him. He is aware of not being in a position of preaching to the choir: “Our present ‘mental climate’ is not favorable either to a clear understanding of the value of simplicity or to its practice. Simplicity seems to be a foible of saints and occasional geniuses, but not something for the rest of us” (ibid:ch1). But, Gregg contends, modernity is not flawless, and there is a distinct possibility that it is impossible to micro-manage a system of global free trade and venture capitalism in a way that protects the people, these systems work according to their own criteria:

Our financial price system and debt structure controls production, distribution and the wherewithal to pay for consumption. That system operates to cause wheat to be burned in the United States while millions are starving in China: tons of oranges to be left to rot in California while children in our city slums are subject to

ricketts, bad teeth and other forms of ill health for the lack of the vitamins in those oranges, and so on for a long chapter (ibid:ch2).

Modernity has not solved the problem of production, nor the problem of distribution, and, when all things are considered, these systems do not really have these things on their list of goals.

The great advances in science and technology (...) have altered the form of some of those problems, greatly increased others, dramatized some, and made many others much more difficult of solution. The just distribution of material things is not merely a problem of technique or of organization. It is primarily a moral problem (ibid:ch2).

Gregg rejects the notion that machines are just inanimate objects without agency of their own. What tools we use inform our wants and needs and our way of thinking on a fundamental level.

Again and again in the lives of individuals and of nations we see that when certain means are used vigorously, thoroughly and for a long time, those means assume the character and influence of an end in themselves. We become obsessed by our tools. The strong quantitative elements in science, machinery and money, and in their products, tend to make the thinking and life of those who use them mechanistic and divided. The relationships which science, machinery and money create are mechanical rather than organic. Machinery and money give us more energy outwardly but they live upon and take away from us our inner energy (ibid:ch3).

It is apparent that Gregg, like many others of his convictions, thinks the ratio between outwardly and inwardly directed energy should be reset. Directing too much energy outwards leads to destruction and unrest.

In the same way Gregg's pamphlet on Gandhian politics was concerned with tactics for making change happen in real life, he wants voluntary simplicity to become a social movement, and explores ways to make this come about. Asserting belief in the view that "I have no right to criticise evil elsewhere unless and until I begin to remove it from my own life," Gregg goes on to suggest that "if an entire ruling group or intelligentsia were always to live simply, the moral unity, self-respect and endurance of the entire nation would be enhanced" (ibid:ch 5). The

importance of strong and charismatic leaders, who can serve as an inspiration and an example, is based on the success of Gandhi, who taught the world that “many, many repetitions of any small stimulus, such as one person’s example, for a long period of time, create growth among all the people who receive the stimulus” (ibid:ch9).

It seems to Gregg more problematic to get a broad-based movement going in America, where “the prolonged lack of simplicity of our whole society has increased the distance between his thoughts, feelings and ways, and mine, and so adds to the social barrier” (ibid:ch 6). Through the text, Gregg switches between a way of talking that seems to be addressed to the masses of people, and the small changes they can do in their own lives, and a way of talking that is more political, more concerned with ways to sway the masses. He is interested in simplicity because he thinks it is the healthiest alternative for the human mind, a more spiritual and peaceful way of co-existing with one another, but he also seems to imagine it to be a social uprising against all that is wrong in this world. It is not only the fact that we live in a mechanical society that does not function properly that there are wars and famines; there is something in the mechanics themselves which diminishes our ability to differentiate between right and wrong. Voluntary simplicity is not just about regaining personal balance and peace of mind, it is about rediscovering the human ability to make all important decisions on a moral and considerate basis, and to live with compassion and love.

The pamphlet reads like a manifesto, and it is easy to understand why Elgin and Mitchell decided to draw so heavily on it in their efforts to popularise voluntary simplicity in the 1970s. Gregg provides solace to any pioneering spirits who feel their actions are lost in a sea of stronger forces:

if such simple action by me seems too tiny and insignificant to make it worth while to attempt, I should remember that it is not really insignificant, because it is an organic part of the great spirit of millions throughout the ages who have voluntarily simplified their lives (ibid:ch4).

II. Ralph Borsodi

Ralph Borsodi (1886 – 1977), who started his career in advertising and as an economic consultant, was responding to Gandhi's Indian struggle to establish a viable alternative to industrialisation, when he in 1929 published a book called *This Ugly Civilization*. He was also influenced by an American individualist tradition (which includes Emerson and Thoreau) which had found a modern expression with Irish-American home-steader Bolton Hall. Hall's claim, as expressed in the book *A Little Land and a Living*, published in 1908 with an introduction written by Borsodi's father William, had been that in times of economic uncertainty, it could be both easier and infinitely more rewarding for a modern family to get out of the urban setting, live of the land and cultivate an older dream of freedom than that of the steady pay-check. In a not entirely flattering analogy, Hall writes that "when a goose goes under an arch she ducks her head; that is not because there is not space for her, but because she thinks there is not, and that is because she is a goose" (1908:77). Hall's idea (which he might as well have gotten from Carpenter or Morris) was that "slums and billionaires are not diseases, but the symptoms of a disease, the divorce of the people from the land" (1908:84). Borsodi's book is very much a continuation of this line of thought, and the style of the prose is reminiscent at times of Ruskin in some of his most energetically gloomy moods. In the first paragraph, Borsodi lashes out:

This is an ugly civilization. It is a civilization of noise, smoke, smells, and crowds – of people content to live amidst the throbbing of its machines; the smoke and smells of its factories; the crowds and the discomforts of the cities of which it proudly boasts (1929 ch1)

Not content with describing and analysing the symptoms of the civilizational disease and disfigurement, however, Borsodi has practical-philosophical aspirations on par with those of Thoreau; he wants to investigate life and how it can best be lived. In the preface, he writes:

If I have ventured to step from the humdrum practicality of economics to the sacred and dangerous precincts of philosophy, it is because philosophers generally seem to forget that the acquisition of food, clothing and shelter is prerequisite to the pursuit of the good, the true and the beautiful. Epistemology, ethics and esthetics acquire reality only if related to economics (ibid: preface).

His philosophical project is an investigation of the nature and recent developments in the “human quest for comfort – material and philosophical” (ibid: preface) and to suggest a way for the two aspects to be successfully and harmoniously combined. A liberalist in the older sense of the word, Borsodi had little faith in political organisations or other forms of organised mass-movements. He cites Nietzsche’s maxim that “since humanity came into being man hath enjoyed himself too little” (ibid: ch1), and sets out to challenge the reasonableness of modern goals and ambitions. Describing the particular pathologies of three quintessential American industrial centres, he goes on to note that

Pittsburgh is not our only sooty factory city; Chicago is not our only smelly stockyards town; New York is not our only crowded metropolis. The cities of the country differ from one another only in degrees of sootiness, smelliness, noisiness and crowdedness. What is most discouraging: those not so sooty as Pittsburgh, nor so smelly as Chicago, nor so crowded as New York, aspire to equal these three shining jewels of our civilization in the very things that make for ugliness (ibid:ch1).

In this sense, the driving force of modern civilisation is a clamouring for an exponential growth in ugliness, and not because of the comfort it affords the masses of people, or for the stability it brings to the nation-state, but because of a mismatch in power between the “acquisitive, predatory, ruthless, quantity-minded types of men” and “the individuals who mitigate the tragedy of life – those who have contributed all the beauty to be found amidst the wealth of folly and waste in the world”(ibid:ch1). The “powerful but inferior types impose their wills upon superior types of men” by way of the political and monetary structural supports they have managed to bring into effect so as to perpetuate “their

own might”, and thus the “quality-minded men” who represent morals and aesthetics and humanity “are penalized and handicapped in their work” (ibid:ch1).

Borsodi sees this as a war in which the inferior, but stronger side employ a “subtle hypocrisy” towards persuading “the people to engage in the factory production of creature comforts while imposing conditions which destroy their capacity for enjoying them,” while the quality-minded men, who really make up a much bigger part of the populace, have very little clout in society, and lack the means to fight back effectively. It is the system of centralised government, centralised production and centralised living which has robbed the quality-minded man of most of his powers of dissent, and while “America has not yet permitted the factory, officially, to take over the government,” and the people in power still talked about “the rights of the individual”, it was now increasingly the case that “‘business as usual’ is not a mere slogan – it is a holy and patriotic virtue” (ibid:ch1).

Predicting that civilization will continue to get progressively uglier “until the men who are able to mitigate its ugliness free themselves to do so” (ibid:ch1), Borsodi begins his discussion of the alternative by citing the contemporary Indian debate concerning the place of the machine in public life. Borsodi quotes Gandhi from one of his books, where he, in reference to the spinning machines used by local households to make khadi, says that “‘slowly but surely the music of perhaps the most ancient machine of India is once more permeating society’” (ibid:ch2). From this Borsodi goes on to note the seeming inconsistency between that utterance, lauding the spread of machines through the land, and a later one, in which he replies to an accusation that he is anti progress by saying

“Do I want to put back the hand of the clock of progress? Do I want to replace the mills by hand-spinning and hand-weaving? Do I want to replace the railway by the country cart? Do I want to destroy machinery altogether? (...) My answer is: *I would not weep over the disappearance of machinery or consider it a calamity*” (Borsodi 1929:ch2).

From these different uses of the term “machinery” in Gandhi’s thinking, and borrowing from his concept of swadeshi and belief in the importance of decentralisation, Borsodi concludes that it is safe to enlist new forces to the cause of quality-minded men and women who want to achieve independence from the industrial system of factory-slavery and subjugation to ruthless capitalists everywhere. As well as moving away from the city and growing food locally, people needed to realise that:

The domestic sewing machine is at war with the factory sewing machine. The domestic washing machine and domestic mangle are at war with a whole group of laundry machines. The domestic refrigerating machine is at war with the machines in the artificial ice-factories. The domestic steam pressure cooker is at war with the machines in the canneries and packing houses. The domestic cream separator and churn are at war with the butter-making machines in the creameries. The domestic flour and grist mill is at war with the flour mills, feed mills and cereal mills with their legions of brands and gaily colored cartons (1929:ch2).

Borsodi also sees great promise in new developments in car-manufacture as it could also become a tool in the decentralisation and liberation of the nation, and take power away from public transportation systems which are complicit with the factory system. Despite his dismissal of the ugliness and congestion of modern civilisation, then, Borsodi is a technological optimist. New inventions enabling private production and a new form of self-reliance, rapidly advancing to cover more and more of people’s individual needs, could, in America’s new struggle for independence, serve the same function as Gandhi’s spinning-machines. The way to prevent mankind from being “made into appendages to machines,” is to find ways for individuals and small communities to become competitive with the system of factory production, in short: “the right kind of machinery must be used to free man from the tyranny of the wrong kind of machinery” (ibid:ch2). Borsodi started his career in economics, and it is perhaps unsurprising that he would reach conclusions like these. You could not, in America, in the 1930s, in an address to every-man, really get

away with denouncing the factory system by claiming it produces only superfluities and ugly things that can easily be discarded (as the Victorian advocates of simplicity did). The system of mass-production produces products people have learnt to depend on every day, and at a cheaper price than any other form of production. The liberation and decentralisation of technology is, to Borsodi, the only way to strongly oppose this dependency. At the same time, he has learned from Gandhi that if the performance of local production can be made into an open act of rebellion against the undesirable elements of modern life, if operating a domestic sewing machine can be reimagined as an act of non-cooperation, non-violent warfare against the oppressing forces of regulated, centralised, ruthless and predatory capitalism, you might have the beginnings of a mass-movement.

In his next book, the more widely published *Flight from the City; the Story of a New Way to Family Security*, Borsodi takes a more practical approach. The dust-jacket reads:

Everyman asks: How can I move my family to the country? Can we support ourselves on a modest investment? What kind of home production should we undertake? What equipment should be buy? Can the unemployed on a large scale be placed on self-sustaining homesteads? READ THE ANSWERS IN THIS BOOK! (1933).

The book is written in response to feedback he received from people who read his last book, who wanted to know more in detail how to live of the land, and *Flight from the City* is a thorough how-to guide, answering exactly the questions posed on the dust-jacket. Borsodi discusses urbanisation and mass-migration, referring to the United States Census statistics for the years 1920-32, coming to the conclusion that there is a “profound dissatisfaction with living conditions both in the country and in the city”. Borsodi points to how the “industrialization of agriculture during the past century – its transformation from a way of life to a commercial business” explains this tendency. He predicts one out of two scenarios for

the future, and in both of them, flight from the city appears to be a winning option:

We are living in one of the most interesting periods in the world's history. Industrial civilization is either on the verge of collapse or of rebirth on a new social basis. Men and women who desire to escape from the dependence upon the present industrial system and who have no desire to substitute for it dependence upon a state controlled system, are beginning to experiment with a way of living which is neither city life nor farm life, but which is an effort to combine the advantages and to escape the disadvantages of both (1933:xiii).

William Morris thought the use of machines could be justified as long as the devastation they caused was minimised and the work they performed was not work that could be done better, or with more satisfaction, by a man. Carpenter believed the introduction of labour-saving machines would only lead restless minds away from the simple joys of pure, unadorned living. Borsodi's approach, more pragmatic and much more distrustful of large-scale communal solutions to production, was to look at new technology, not as a force to be tamed, but as a resource to be exploited in creative ways in his own war of independence. Borsodi thought the new social order would come into being once the quality-minded, creative forces of society had been liberated from a system designed to benefit the few. What humanity needed was freedom to experiment, to mix and match from the sum-total of human achievements thus far – disregarding what does not fit them, keeping and expanding upon the more promising approaches.

3.3 An Age of Ecological Innocence?

In a heart-felt address published in the paper *Harijan* in October 1939, at a time when wars were building up on all sides, Gandhi is still defending his original vision of the future:

I believe that Independent India can discharge her duty towards a groaning world only by adopting a simple but ennobled life by

developing her thousands of cottages and living at peace with the world. Whether such plain living is possible for an isolated nation, however large geographically and numerically in the face of a world armed to the teeth, and in the midst of pomp and circumstance, is a question open to the doubt of a sceptic. The answer is straight and simple. If plain life is worth living, then the attempt is worth making, even though only an individual or a group makes the effort (2012:ch26).

Many of those among the advocates of voluntary simplicity who lived to see the utter devastation which World War Two brought with it, both materially, ecologically and in the sheer loss of human life, might have good reasons to feel that their world-view had been vindicated: It did seem to be the case, they felt, that the level of abstraction and complexity inherent in modern society, coupled with almost exponential technological progress and limited or badly managed natural resources could, and would, lead to cataclysmic and deeply traumatic consequences.

This was not a line of reasoning that garnered much public support in the years after WWII, however. The countries of the world needed to be rebuilt. Strategies for achieving reliable economic growth and decent industrial infrastructure seem to have comprised the entire political agenda in the post-war West. Nelissen et al. point out that this ideal of steady growth of production “was strongly supported by the memory of mass unemployment in the 1930s,” the thought being that it was widespread joblessness and economic instability that lead to extremism and war (1997:77). With the Cold War era providing strong incentives for continuing escalation in technical and industrial advancement, development was seen as the only road ahead. Thus, the 1940s and 50s can be said to have been (at least in macro terms), to use Guha’s term: “an age of ecological innocence” (Guha 2000), an age in which popular opposition to mechanisation, materialism, pollution and ecological degradation was basically non-existent (Nelissen et al 1997:77).

This might be one reason why Gregg is better known today for his Gandhi-inspired work on non-violent resistance (his book *The Power of*

Non-Violence was a big influence on Martin Luther King) than he is for his writings on simple living.

Dissent does not die, however. Scott and Helen Nearing began planning to disassociate from mainstream American society after Scott was fired from his teaching position on account of his radical socialist lectures and books in the early thirties. Influenced by Tolstoy, they moved to a farmstead in Vermont to put into practise their opposition to war, capital accumulation and industrial meat-production. Their book *Living the Good Life, How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World*, which was first published in 1954, discusses the reasons for and the early experiences of their retreat to subsistence farming in 1932. It did not sell much, initially.

Borsodi also kept his back-to-the-land experiments going and worked tirelessly for his vision of a truly independent America well into the 1970s. His “Decentralist Manifesto” was published in India in 1958, and stands for a more radical interpretation of what is to be considered human rights:

Human beings are not mere animals. They have, it is true, in common with all other animals an inherited, instinctual drive for self-survival (an economic drive). Also in common with animals, a sexual drive for self-production. But much higher than these two is the last instinctual drive with which evolution has endowed humankind -- the drive for self-expression. It is for this reason that no political institution can be considered human and properly adapted to the nature of humankind if it in any way infringes upon liberty; if it even in the slightest, interferes with the conditions necessary to individual self-expression and to the free development of the highest potentialities of being human (1958).

The fundamental importance of liberty evokes Edward Carpenter’s poetry, and ideas surrounding the possibility of reaching “the highest potentialities of being human” will go on to be an important aspect of the call for simpler life as it re-emerges, alongside a heightened sense of a worsening global situation and the need of a planetary response to these problems.

4. The Self-Directed Evolution of Human Consciousness and the Birth of a Modern Movement

Is it possible that we have had thousands of years to look, meditate, and record, and that we have let these thousands of years slip away like a recess at school, when there is just enough time to eat your sandwich and an apple? (...) Is it possible that despite our discoveries and advances, despite our culture, religion, and science, we have remained on the surface of life?

– Rainer Maria Rilke, (1910)

4.1 The Sixties

The 1960s were a decade characterised by the re-emergence of widespread criticism of industrial growth, capital-intensive technologies and the perceived arrogance of the dominant paradigm in science. Several anthropologists and historians of environmental writing pinpoint the revival of “ecological consciousness” with the publication and success of biologist Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* in 1963¹⁴. First serialised in *The New Yorker*, the book became an international phenomenon, opening people’s eyes to the dangers of industrial farming and the use of pesticides, notably DDT. The book was met by a “huge assault from the chemical industry,” but the U.S. nevertheless moved to restrict the chemical, saving several endangered species of bird, including, as McKibben points out, “the national symbol of America, the white-headed eagle” (2008:365). *Silent Spring* was a counter-cultural book in the sense that it challenged and questioned the hegemonic epistemology of positivism, and consequently the general faith in science and progress among members of the public. In addition to arguing for a management of the natural world based on holistic, ecological notions, Carson also recommended policy-makers and

¹⁴ See (Nelissen et al. (eds.) 1997), (Guha 2000), (McKibben (ed.) 2008).

scientists to adopt a more “high minded orientation” and an increased sense of “humility before the vast forces with which they tamper” (2000:257).

Around the same time counter-culture gurus like Timothy Leary were promoting psycho-active drugs as a way of exploring what Leary in his *The Psychedelic Experience* (originally published in 1964) calls “Eastern psychology,” the unconventional but still “scientific” study of “consciousness change” through “meditation, yoga, monastic retreat, and sensory deprivation” taking place in such works as “the Book of Tao, the Analects of Confucius, the Gita, the I Ching, the Tibetan Book of the Dead” (Leary 2000:19-20). The role of psycho-active drugs was not just an interesting, intellectual pass-time, but also had a political aspect: The psychedelic guide “is literally a liberator, one who provides illumination, one who frees men from their life-long internal bondage.” The drug-experience facilitates the discovery of “the wonder and awe of the divine life-process” it is an “evolutionary drama” towards a form of transcendental enlightenment which promises to heal the relationship between the individual and the world (ibid:2000:109-110).

In 1969 the philosopher Paul Shepard provided a mission statement for a new generation of world-reformers when he wrote:

If nature is not a prison and earth a shoddy way-station, we must find the faith and force to affirm its metabolism as our own—or rather, our own as part of it. To do so means nothing less than a shift in our whole frame of reference and our attitude towards life itself, a wider perception of the landscape as a creative, harmonious being where relationships of things are as real as the things. Without losing our sense of a great human destiny and without intellectual surrender, we must affirm that the world is a being, a part of our own body” (Shepard 1969, 3, cited in Devall 2001:16).

This idea owes something to Wordsworth and Emerson, and does not only seem like a manifesto for a new environmental movement, but also a secularised expression of beliefs which have appeared in Western sources

ever since the early Romantics. It is also ringing with an echo of Carpenter's metaphor of the cosmically conscious tree and Bucke's prediction that humanity was rapidly embracing a move towards a global or universal experience of consciousness. This is an idea which was taken up and popularised in the 60s and 70s, bringing in the perceived global implications of individual simplicity, quality-mindedness and the search for truth.

There is a stupefying amount of literature concerning the counter-cultural movements of the late 60s and early 70s, and very little of that will be rehashed here. The environmental, scientific and philosophical ideas and movements of the those decades did have an important influence on the rhetoric of voluntary simplicity, however, and by the time Jørgen Randers and the Club of Rome released the findings of *Limits to Growth* in 1972 the movement had gained some powerful new arguments, and a kind of scientifically based legitimacy it had not been able to boast before.

This chapter will strive to create an impression of the multiplicity of voices calling for a simpler life, but what we will be looking at specifically can be seen as a "by-product" of those movements. I will try to elucidate a prevalent understanding of the relationship between humanity, society, ecology and the universe that, while it is often reminiscent of Emerson's and Carpenter's more mystical writing, constitutes a different way of speaking and thinking about simplicity, a kind of scientific mysticism about the connection between the evolution of the mind and the global ecological system, the implications of which are seen as a totally novel realisation with far-reaching consequences.

It is in the 1970s we see voluntary simplicity conceptualised as a social movement. Gregg's article became a sort of pioneering manifesto of this movement, and was proclaimed to be "prophetic of present-day realisations," but became known largely due to the efforts of a social researcher by the name of Duane Elgin. Elgin and Arnold Mitchell, who

came from a left-field think-tank, started thinking seriously about how to adapt the principles of voluntary simplicity to a modern reality, a task that included collecting empirical data from individuals, families and groups who were already engaged in voluntary simplicity, something they did in their 1977 “Simplicity Survey”.

The findings from this survey, along with his and others work and experiences throughout the 70s resulted in the book *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*, which was published in 1981 and is considered an important milestone in this respect and will constitute a key part of the discussion of this period.

4.2 The Greening of America – A Waking Up to Everything

On the 26th of September, 1970 the New Yorker magazine published a 70-page excerpt from an up-coming book by Charles A. Reich entitled *The Greening of America*. The essay was the single longest entry the magazine had thus-far published. It announced that there was a revolution coming, a revolution originating with “the individual and with culture,” one “seen against a background of what has gone wrong in America – the betrayal and loss of the American dream, the rise of the Corporate State and the way that State dominates, exploits and ultimately destroys both nature and man” (1970:ch1).

Reich was a teacher of law who had embraced the thoughts and sentiments of “the Summer of Love” which was in full fruition at the west-coast University of Berkley in the late 60s. Reich’s notion of cultural evolution arose from his understanding of the history of the United States, and his beliefs regarding the importance of consciousness evolution (a belief that had several adherents around this time, it seems).

Reich has simplified his history of the American consciousness into three overlapping stages of development,” and very form of consciousness

has two components: a reaction to a way of life that existed before and an adaptation to new realities” (ibid:ch2). At the time America was founded in 1789, when land was abundant and the people idealistic and freedom-loving, the people developed a consciousness which was not geared towards the “worldly, cunning, overly learned or intellectual.” On the contrary, “the hero of this new land was (...) an innocent – a pioneer, a settler, the boy who makes good – and a moral being” (ibid:ch2). He is also endowed with an “exaltation of self-interest” however, which turned out to be the corrupting force that eventually made “Consciousness I lose touch with reality” by exposing it to “the market system” turning “all men into competitors” (ibid:ch2) and leading to a destabilisation of life, a liquidity and speed which this limited, preindustrial consciousness was not equipped to deal with in a good way.

All kinds of evil consequences would result from this, most of them leading to a diminishing of human agency, including a “loss of the pursuit of self-fulfilment, for employees could no longer define their own quest.” The prevalence of Consciousness I sustained and perpetuated this system of Capitalist exploitation, both through its valuing of self-interest above all, its belief “that the American dream is still possible” and its blatant refusal of “the fact that organizations predominate over individuals in American life” (ibid:ch2).

Because of its “innocence and optimism” then, Consciousness I was powerless to tame the forces of industrialisation, lacking the “fundamental depth” to comprehend their situation. Not only would American’s be mentally underequipped to deal with the transformation of their country, they “would possess no set of values to oppose industrialism, no culture, tradition, social order or inner knowledge of self by which to guide industrial values and choose among them” (ibid:ch2). Being so impoverished, the idealist spirit and moral feeling of the American people was eroded away by external powers.

Consciousness II arose out of the final consequences of this ineptitude: The Great Depression. Social reform, the way it was carried out in America, did not consist of a liberation of the human spirit, but a consolidation of power in a small elite: “The New Deal really consisted of an alliance of interest groups, presided over by a narrow ridge of liberal intellectuals who were the main source of New Deal thinking” (ibid:ch3). Hence, Consciousness II is not one marked by “humanism or idealism,” but a consciousness “that believed primarily in domination and the necessity for living under domination”. Reason-driven, materialistic, calculating, ambitious, and busily optimistic, this was what gave birth to “the American Corporate State” and many of the terrors and dissatisfactions of modern life. Consciousness II thrives in complexity and “ultimately believes that individuals have no existence apart from their work and their relationship to society” (ibid:ch4).

The heart of a State’s power “lies in its ability to keep its people in a condition of false consciousness,” involving a constant flux between the discipline and deprecation of work and the “pleasures of consumption”. This is not a sustainable condition anymore, argues Reich.

The theory is wrong. For some people it is wrong because hard work does not leave time or energy for outside enjoyment. For some it is wrong in principle, because if they are persuaded to believe in the principle of hedonism, they find it hard to hold on to the principle of service. And for a very large group of people, it is simply impossible on a personal level; they are psychologically unable to go back and forth between self-denial and pleasure (ibid:ch5).

It’s from this emerging group of people the cultural and individual revolution is going to stem. Founded on the inconsistencies inherent in the system, as well as undue repression of expression and the mad logic that instigated the Vietnam War, an entire generation of young people is in the process of snapping out of the state-induced “false consciousness” and are ready to embrace all the advantages of this.

If we read Reich as a voice of the generation, or, perhaps more fittingly, as an enamoured chronicler of that generation and their beliefs and ways of viewing themselves, we can see how the story of young people everywhere waking up and realising truths and wisdoms previously only available to people like “Thoreau, James Joyce and Wallace Stevens” and other “exceptional” members of “the artistic, the highly sensitive, the tormented” (ibid:ch6), must have been supremely liberating, and affected the understanding these people had of the possibilities of life. The sense of having transcended the follies the parental generation makes the moral quandaries earlier generations had about allowing masses of people uncritically utilise technology seemingly irrelevant, because if used in a state of love and oneness with the universe, instead of in deference to aspirations of “power and status” technology is just as much a part of the “totality of nature” as anything.

Lessons from technology that the older generation doesn't know, even though it invented technology, It's one thing to know intellectually that a machine can copy anything and a pill can make sexual intercourse safe, but it's quite another thing to live with these facts, make use of them, and thus learn to live with them (ibid:ch6).

The youth-culture of the 60s does not seem to see machinery as inherently limiting or oppressive to the human spirit. Everything that is available can, if used creatively and by living experiment, be a part of the liberation of humankind.

4.3 Radical Self-Reliance in the New Age – “Making it your own way”

As the feeling that the revolutionary spirit of the late sixties was going to lead to a direct shift in societal organisation slowly died down, the ethos of voluntary simplicity still had an immense appeal for some of these radicals, with its promises of personal autonomy, greater self-sufficiency,

less stress and the chance to be a part of the creation of a less destructive, happier and healthier future. This era

produced an explosion of intentional communities throughout the world, with thousands of mostly short-lived urban groups self-identifying as communes and hundreds of rural communities founded with varying utopian visions (Sargent 2010: 42).

Many of the social experiments of the back-to-the-land variety (communes, collectives, farming co-operatives), were influenced by Scott and Helen Nearing's book *Living the Good Life*, which was reissued in 1970, sold several hundred thousands of copies, and became an inspiration to many who wanted out (McKibben 2008).

In the preface to the book, the Nearings outline their original reasons for moving to “pre-industrial, rural community” in Vermont, calling it “an individual experience, meeting a special need, at a particular time” (vii): They wanted to “dissociate” from “a society gripped by depression and unemployment, falling a prey to fascism, and on the verge of another world-wide military free-for-all” (vii). A society that “had rejected, in practice and in principle, [their] pacifism, vegetarianism and collectivism.” Helen and Scott Nearing describe a real sense of living in the end-times of a social paradigm, namely that of free-market capitalism. Their shift was founded both in necessity, as Scott could not get anyone to provide him with steady employment because of his outspoken advocating of socialism and they both felt the strain and “exacting pressures” of life in New York City, idealism, as they thought it best to participate as little as possible in an economy so heavily invested in activities and ideologies they loathed, and tactics:

Under the circumstances, where could outcasts from a dying social order live frugally and decently, and at the same time have sufficient leisure and energy to assist in the speedy liquidation of the disintegrating society and to help replace it with a more workable social system? (1970:viii)

In a review of the book, *The New Republic* magazine wrote: “this is what the New Age is all about,” whereas *Newsweek* described it as “a prophetic account of the creation of a self-sufficient little Walden in rural Vermont that has been an underground bible for the city-weary” (ibid:cover). The back-cover blurb of the new edition also reproduces a quote from an ancient Chinese text that is used in the book as an introductory quote for the chapter of the book titled “Our Design for Living”:

When the sun rises, I go to work
When the sun goes down, I take my rest
I dig the well from which I drink
I farm the soil that yields my food
I share creation, Kings can do no more (1970).

The sheer simplicity and independence expressed in these lines of poetry would have appealed to many individuals who had been a part of the counter-cultural movements of that time, people still anxious to escape what they saw as the strictures and hypocrisy of the political establishment, the alienation and frustration they felt with modern ‘work and consume’ culture, people interested in, to use the title of an article in the first issue of one of the alternative magazines appearing around this time: “How to make it your own way” (Mother Earth 1970).

Preoccupied with holistic approaches to knowledge, community, do it yourself and self-sufficiency, while reporting on ecological devastation and myriad shortages, *the Whole Earth Catalog* was the brain-child of Steward Brand, who came up with the idea as a practical way of “saving Space-Ship Earth” and “help my friends who were starting their own civilisation hither and yon in the sticks”. Its recurring mission-statement proclaims grandiosely that “we are as god’s and we might as well get used to it” and that its aim is to provide tools to help man turn away from “remotely done power and glory – as via government, big business, formal education, church” and towards a more “personal, intimate” individual power of “conducting his own education, find his own inspiration, shape

his own environment, and share his adventure with whoever is interested.”

The Whole Earth Catalog provided

information on “appropriate technologies” and common-sense advice for individuals who wanted to participate in the process of invention he hoped might lead to a new environmental culture in sync with the technological enthusiasm of one wing of the counter-culture (Kirk 2007:1).

The notion of appropriate technologies had many advocates in the 60s and 70s. It is consistent with Borsodi’s idea of the local adoption and creative use of technological advances as a subversive tactic. Not heeding Gregg’s warning that our mechanical instruments conspire against humanity; this conception makes the use of technology into a life-affirming, life-enhancing experience, in which the potential for a new way of being partly stems from humanity learning to invent and develop more enlightened ways of dealing with human problems.

The 1969 edition features a “Declaration of Interdependence,” modelled on the American Declaration of 1789 and stating:

When in the course of evolution it becomes necessary for one species to denounce the notion of independence from all the rest, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the interdependent station to which the natural laws of the cosmos have placed them, a decent respect for the opinions of all mankind requires that they should declare the conditions which impel them to assert their interdependence (Brand 1969).

This text illustrates the pervasiveness of scientific words and concepts in the counter-cultural movement’s conceptualisation of itself. It is a recurring tendency of voluntary simplicity discourse to subscribe to elaborate histories of development, and also to some extent to mystify the forces behind these developments. In many of the texts that came out of the sixties, the notion that modern man is at the forefront of evolution, and just about to figure out how to steer it away from certain destruction. Although heavily influenced by Eastern religious philosophy, the concepts and practices lifted from those teachings seem to have become internalised, and the

holy men who instigated them are seen as direct precursors to the current age of widespread enlightenment. The protests of the counter-culture are understood as having to do with something that is perceived to be a completely new way of understanding the world.

Another influential magazine that came to embody some of that same sense of self-directed evolution and a do-it-yourself and don't-let-anybody-tell-you-you-can't spirit was *Mother Earth News*. Co-founded and edited by John and Jane Shuttleworth, it was launched in January 1970 with the subtitle "A new beginning," its first feature article was titled "How to Make it Your Way" and opens with the words:

So the air is full of crud and the water tastes funny and the nine-to-five is a drag. You're tired of the subway, dog crap in the streets, bumper to bumper traffic and plastic TV dinners. 'Maybe the communes – with all that fresh air, sunshine, love and home-baked bread – are really into something.'(...) The global electronic village is Now! Just like McLuhan and Bucky Fuller keep telling us. Nobody has to live second hand anymore. The Material Scarcity world is dead. Long love Free Energy. Time and Space are now plastic and life is exactly what you make it (Shuttleworth 1970).

The early editions of *Mother Earth News* are full of articles such as this one, offering practical advice and tips concerning everything from squatter rights in Arizona to new ways of hitch-hiking to books on how to build your own Plains Indian Tipi or dirt hut. Articles typically reference members of the hippie intelligentsia such as Buckminster Fuller, Timothy Leary, Robert Theobald, Marshall McLuhan, Allan Watts and Stewart Udall, as well as some books published earlier in the century belonging to a somewhat different tradition of self-sufficiency, such as Bradford Angier's 1959 *How To Go Live In the Woods On \$10 a Week*, and Borsodi's *Flight from the City*. John Shuttleworth stated in a 1975 interview that:

Within the limits of the painfully short resources we had on hand, we wanted to publish — even if we never got past the first one —

a magazine that would interest *us*. Not advertisers, not distributors, not the ‘average’ reader, not the pseudo-intellectuals. Us. And we wanted a periodical that would [1] help other little people just like us live richer, fuller, freer, more self-directed lives and [2] ease us all into more actively putting the interests of the planet over and above any personal interests (Mother Earth News 1975).

Late 60s voluntary simplicity is not something that is being argued for on purely moral grounds or because it is in keeping with the teachings of certain traditions of wisdom. It is almost exactly what Emerson recommended, where all human establishments seem to be founded on an intuitive basis, taking personal feelings and inclinations as a hint from the universal God. But as the English self-sufficient farmer John Seymour admits, growing your own can be partly to do with “opting out” of a social system he does not agree with:

the tax-eaters have not done very well out of us. We have not contributed much to the development of the atom bomb, nor to the building of Concorde. When the latter breaks the sound-barrier over our heads, and scares the wits out of our cows, we have to endure it, but at least we have the satisfaction of knowing that we haven’t paid for it (Seymour 1970:7).

But then, this is non-cooperation in the style of Thoreau, Gandhi and Borsodi, and while not as radical as “running amok” at society, at least these back-to-the-land self-sufficient, or low-impact livers did not have to feel they were contributing to society’s capacity for running “amok” whether with regard to the arms-race, or the Vietnam war.

4.4 The Simplicity of Duane Elgin - Personal Choice and the Totality of Existence

During the early 1970s, Duane Elgin, a Wharton MBA graduate, worked as a staff member of a joint Presidential-Congressional Commission on the American Future, co-authoring reports on likely scenarios of development between 1970 and the year 2000, a job which led to a senior position with the Stanford Research Institute International think-tank (SRI), where he

worked on related future-studies publications, with names such as: “Alternative Futures for Environmental Policy”, “The Future of the Automobile”, “Limits to the Management of Large, Complex Systems” and “Changing Images of Man” (Elgin 2014). The latter opens with a quote from the Dutch futurist sociologist Fred Polak stating that: “Awareness of ideal values is the first step in the conscious creation of images of the future and therefore the creation of culture, for a value is by definition that which guides toward a ‘valued’ future” (1982:v). The introduction discusses the work undertaken at the SRI during the 70s and the “sobering conclusion” that among the “fifty highly plausible future histories, only a handful were by usual standards at all desirable” (vii). Due to the increasing effects of such issues as “population growth, resource depletion, pollution, and so forth” euphemistically referred to as the “world-macro problem,” the group of social scientists involved in making the report eventually arrived at the realisation that “any of the more desirable alternative future paths would likely require fundamental changes in the way our industrial culture is organized” (1982:xviii). Discussing the scope and goal of their research, the futurists conclude that:

Although it was tempting, we decided that it would be premature to immediately attempt analysis and description of the ‘transformed future’ we had by this time come to believe was urgently needing to be envisioned. Rather it seemed a more appropriate task to assess, insofar as feasible, the conceptual foundations of thinking and doing that might support a benign transition to such a future, choosing as our research focus to concentrate on ‘images of nature of man in relationship with the universe’ (ibid:xix).

The report, originally released in 1974, employs an interdisciplinary and unconventional methodological approach, following “the course of inquiry wherever it would lead” and “contrasting different conceptions held at different times in different places, recognizing patterns and similarities between divergent modes of thought, and seeking creative syntheses wherever possible” (xxi). One of the key goals of the study is said to be

exploring the “deficiencies of currently held images of humankind” and to “identify high-leverage activities that could facilitate the emergence of new images and new policy approaches to the resolution of key problems in society” (xxii).

One of the more promising images of man detected by Elgin, Markley et al., is that of “the human as Spirit,” an image of man “that has remained surprisingly unchanged since it was first formulated in the Vedic era of India, about 1500 B.C.” This image is based on a conception that “The basic nature of the universe is consciousness, and the human individual can participate in this "cosmic" consciousness (...) For the human, it is a "superconscious" or divine aspect of one's being, and one's physical nature is a manifestation of universal consciousness.” It is a view usually remaining “somewhat underground in most cultures,” because “although the human can experience or participate in this cosmic consciousness, he or she usually chooses not to, going through life in a sort of hypnotic sleep, feeling that he is making decisions, having accidents occur to her”. This is a terrible waste, however, as the active participation in the divine oneness of the universe could have really far-reaching results:

Human potentiality is limitless. All knowledge, power and awareness are ultimately accessible to one's consciousness. As a person becomes aware of this basic nature of reality, he or she is motivated toward development, creativity, and movement toward that "higher Self," and becomes increasingly directed by this higher consciousness. What is called "inspiration" or "creativity" is essentially a breaking through to ordinary awareness of these higher processes. Evolution occurs, physical and mental, and is directed by a higher consciousness and is characterized by purpose. As humankind increases its level of consciousness, it participates more fully in this evolutionary purpose.

This, then, was the type of research Elgin was conducting in the early- to mid-70s and it is possible to see how this line of inquiry, along with his reading of people like Gregg and his awareness of current trends could have led to his endorsement of voluntary simplicity as the way forward for

humanity, as it produces an “image of man (or of humankind-in-the-universe)” which answers the call of the six-point strategy of the final conclusion of the “Changing Images of Man” report, the first of which concerns the promotion of an awareness that “transformation” is unavoidable:

Pulled by the emergence of a ‘new transcendentalism’ and pushed by the demonstrated inability of the industrial-state paradigm to resolve the dilemmas its successes have engendered, the fact and the shape of the necessary transformation are predetermined (1982:195).

Elgin’s first foray into the promotion of “Voluntary Simplicity” was in an essay bearing that title, which he co-authored with fellow SRI employee Arnold Mitchell and which was originally published by the SRI in 1976, but re-published in *The Co-Evolution Quarterly* in 1977 with an appended “Simplicity Survey” (supposedly the first of its kind) for self-confessed adherents to fill out and return. In this essay Elgin and Mitchell posited their inkling that the movement towards voluntary simplicity might already have become “a major social movement” which “could represent a major transformation of traditional American values” and “be a harbinger of multifold shifts, not only in values, but in consumption patterns, institutional operations, social movements, national policies...” (1977:1).

The authors acknowledge that the “practical and ethical positions” of voluntary simplicity are already developed, and place its roots in the “legendary frugality and self-reliance of the Puritans” as well as in the “naturalistic vision” of Thoreau and in “Emerson’s spiritual and practical plea for ‘plain living and high thinking’¹⁵” (ibid: 3). But the “uniquely modern aspect” that has turned voluntary simplicity into a movement, is that it is a way of life that “seems to be driven by a sense of urgency and social responsibility that scarcely existed ten or fifteen years ago”. This sense of urgency derives from the same kind of “world-macro problems”

¹⁵ This quote is a misattribution, belonging, as it does, to Wordsworth. (“London, 1802”)

presented in the SRI reports, although here they are presented in stronger and more concrete terms:

The prospects of a chronic energy shortage; growing terrorist activities at the same time that developed nations seem increasingly vulnerable to disruption; growing demands of less developed nations for a more equitable share of the world's resources, the prospect that before we run out of resources on any absolute basis we may poison ourselves to death with environmental contaminants; a growing social malaise and purposelessness which causes us to drift in our social evolution (ibid:3).

The people who replied to the *Co-evolution Quarterly* survey, more than 620 “pioneers of the new life” (1981:45) some of which had answered the question-sheet, others written in-depth letters elucidating their values and aspirations, provided Elgin with a (more or less) empirical basis from which to proceed with his study and advocacy of this phenomena of growing demand for values such as “material simplicity, human scale, self-determination, ecological awareness and personal growth” (1977:5)

The next step for Elgin, towards “the goal” of freeing American people “of the overwhelming externals so as to provide the space in which to grow – both psychologically and spiritually” was his book *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life that is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich*, (the subtitle is a Thoreau paraphrase, as we know) which was first published in 1981. Elgin’s preface begins with the words “We have entered a time of transition as a human family. We are being pushed by hard necessity and pulled by enormous opportunity to fundamentally reconsider the ways in which we choose to live our daily lives” (1981:7). The blurb tells us that “a new way of life is taking root in the United States.” Author George Leonard writes unreservedly that: “a copy of this book in every American household could change the course of history.” The main goal of Elgin’s voluntary simplicity is to achieve a way of life that is sustainable for all:

On the one hand, a life of creative simplicity frees energy for the soulful work of spiritual discovery and loving service – tasks that all of the world’s wisdom traditions say we should give our highest priority. On the other hand, a simpler way of life also responds to the urgent needs for moderating our use of the world’s non-renewable resources and minimising the damaging impact of environmental pollution (ibid:45).

How does he propose to bring this state of being about? Elgin denounces the back-to-the-land approach and other tactics prone to make people into martyrs for no substantial gain. Rather than an “ascetic” movement, Elgin’s voluntary simplicity is an “aesthetic” movement. While this is a nice nod to Ruskin, Morris and their ilk, Elgin is careful not to be misunderstood:

The romanticized image of rural living does not fit the modern reality, as a majority of persons choosing a life of conscious simplicity do not live in the backwoods or rural setting; they live in cities and suburbs (...) Instead of a “back-to-the-land” movement, it is more accurate to describe this as a “make the most of wherever you are” movement (ibid:30).

Referring to the SRI research discussed above, Elgin presents two possible scenarios for western civilization in the coming years. One is stagnation, the other is revitalisation. Business as usual will lead to stagnation, but: “ecological living is a sophisticated response to the demands of deteriorating industrial civilisation,” and “will result in changes as great as the transition from the agrarian era to the industrial era” (ibid:37).

This change will be as much a spiritual one as a material and political one. The conventional way of life can often seem to be “psychologically and spiritually hollow – living in massive urban environments of alienating scale and complexity, divorced from the natural environment, and working in jobs that are unsatisfying” (ibid:44). For Elgin, as for most of the Romantics, all change starts from the individual, and from our ability to think and reflect around our place in the world. Voluntary simplicity is a lifestyle characterised by conscious living:

“To live more consciously means to be more consciously aware, moment by moment, that we are present in all we do” (ibid:148).

Like Reich, and Bucke and Carpenter in the early 20th century, Elgin operates with three separate forms of consciousness. They are not temporally founded, however, but successive and accumulative, ranging from the “normal” state of non-reflection, in which we tend to “forget ourselves” and “run on automatic,” to the farthest reaches of what he rather clumsily refers to as “the conscious evolution of consciousness”:

The boundaries between the ‘self-in-here’ and the ‘world-out-there’ begin to dissolve as we refine the precession with which we watch ourselves moving through life. The inner and outer person gradually merge into one continuous flow of experience (ibid:152).

This experience, claims Elgin, is present in all cultures, testifying to the fact “that we are all human beings and there are common experiences we share.” The actualisation of this condition for a large number of people at the same time seems unrealistic to Elgin in “these difficult times” and he suggests we keep it in mind as an ultimate end in our evolutionary progress, but that we keep focus on mere “self-reflective consciousness,” which awakens us to our possibilities and responsibilities and that “is immediately, usefully and widely accessible” (ibid:154).

Through self-reflection, “we can bring greater integrity and balance into our manner of living,” and “respond more quickly to subtle feedback that something is amiss” (ibid:156).

These are not trivial enhancements of human capacity. Each enabling factor was described as essential to both our further evolution and to our survival. Our civilizational crisis has emerged in no small part from the gross disparity that exists between our relatively underdeveloped ‘inner faculties’ and the extremely powerful external technologies now at our disposal (158)

The very last chapter, titled “East-West Synthesis” concludes with the following statement:

Voluntary Simplicity represents the practical convergence of two major flows of human growth and learning [meaning: strands of eastern and western philosophy] that are thousands of years in the making, and that find their crossroads at this juncture in human history. The grass roots blossoming of the way of life termed 'voluntary simplicity' thus reflects much larger evolutionary forces at work. Voluntary simplicity is not a fad, soon to go away. This way of life is a microcosm of the global convergence of the human family. In this living experiment are the seeds of new human frontiers that we have only scarcely begun to imagine and explore. (1981:236).

The 70s was the decade really got swept up in global, "evolutionary forces". What Reich and Elgin are talking about, is, according to them, the same spirit which inspired Wordsworth and convinced Emerson of the existence of God in Nature. The awakening Bucke predicted, which rekindled Carpenter's hope for a humane and free future for life on the planet, has now been reset to "emerge" (a word which is becoming a recurring one in this text) very soon indeed. By applying Emerson's creed, "trust thyself" (1842:47) to any context, you as an individual may achieve a form of enlightenment. Others will follow. The new dawn is upon us.

The endpoint of David Shi's history of "the simple life", takes place in the United States of 1984, in the middle of the Reagan-era, a time when the economy had "grown dramatically and 'bigger is better' bumper stickers began to displace those proclaiming 'small is beautiful.'" Adamant that this was not the death of the "trend toward simpler and more ecologically sensitive ways of living begun in the 60s," however, Shi predicts that it will continue "to represent a significant alternative to the consumer culture and its pecuniary standard of value" (1985:276).

5. Voluntary Simplicity in the New Millennium

Oprah Winfrey's *O Magazine* published in 2009 an article carrying the headline "Back to Basics: Living with 'Voluntary Simplicity'" which chronicles one family's odyssey towards the simple life. Kristen (37) tells us that:

I was married and doing the country club thing, and I met some friends who were living very simply. I saw how much happier they were than me. They were authentic. I realized then that the endless shopping was not making me happy (Glock 2009).

Kristen divorces her yuppie husband, stops dyeing her hair and moves with her young children to an 800 square feet "stucco cottage in the woods." Further down in the article, the journalist tells us how Kristen exemplifies a growing trend and the emergence of a modern movement around a concept that had previously only appealed to a fringe counter-culture:

2008 was something of a perfect storm for the voluntary simplicity movement. The mortgage crisis, the banking meltdown, the spike in gas prices, and the unfettered baking of our atmosphere has led an unprecedented number of folks to put down the credit cards and start thinking about plan B" (Glock 2009).

Wanda Urbanska, a TV host described as "the Martha Stewart of the voluntary simplicity movement" strengthens this impression by informing us that "there is a shift going on. When I first started talking about this in 1992, I was seen as a wacko zealot. Now simple living is fashionable" (ibid). Urbanska's sentiments are corroborated entirely in Elgin's preface to the 2010 edition of *Voluntary Simplicity* (which I will go on to discuss later in the chapter). The new introduction is entitled "How the Times Have Changed!" and exclaims enthusiastically that: "There has been a seismic shift in public interest in simpler, more sustainable ways of living" (2010).

Voluntary simplicity has in the 21st Century gained an unprecedented degree of mainstream exposure. A book search for “The Simple Life” on Amazon.com turns up nearly 4000 titles containing the exact phrase. “Voluntary Simplicity” similarly produces almost 500 hits¹⁶. Many of these books take the form of “self-help” and “how-to” guides, some of them are cookbooks, some have a religious agenda (ranging from Christianity to Western Tibetan Buddhism), and the overwhelming majority of them have been published in the course of the last 25 years. There are “Simple Living” magazines, a Voluntary Simplicity Institute (2014), a Simplicity Collective (2014), simplicity workshops and voluntary simplicity bloggers abound. One such blogger, whose website is titled “Choosing Voluntary Simplicity,” gives the following answer when prompted about the difference between “simple living” and “voluntary simplicity”:

I think of voluntary simplicity as the same simple living lifestyle but with your personal philosophy wrapped around it. I believe that voluntary simplicity goes way beyond HOW you live and is more about the WAY you live and how you interact with the world around you. I see voluntary simplicity as so much more than downshifting, decluttering, and frugality – it’s also about happiness, contentment – going outside your comfort zone, accepting responsibility for your actions, and getting your priorities “right.” Simple living results in a better LIFE. Voluntary simplicity results in a better life – but also a better YOU (Shirley 2014)

This chapter will attempt to locate some instances and to look for changes as well as recurring themes in argumentation and thought. It will include a very brief review of voluntary simplicity as self-help-literature, analysis of an anthology of texts and essays on Voluntary Simplicity published in 2003 and a comparison between the first version of Elgin’s *Voluntary Simplicity* with his latest revision will be carried out. One gradual change

¹⁶ As of May 20th 2014.

is the fact that technology has decidedly stopped being an enemy (sometimes it even operates as an enabler for a simpler life). This view seems to have its foundations in the kind of personalisation and domestication of machinery and technology Borsodi in the 1920s thought could liberate individuals from the factory-system, and 1960s and 70s ideas of “appropriate technologies”, a new sense of sensitivity and sophistication with regards to how technology can be used and “appropriated” towards goals they might not have been intended for originally. William Morris could just about see the outlines of the types of machines that could be tolerated in his artisan utopia, but he did not predict the washing-machine or the personal computer. Many of the discourses that have in the 21st century united themselves under the banner of “voluntary simplicity” lean towards the wholly practical side of it as a living strategy. The possibility of flexible working hours and an increase in the type of infrastructure that would help make “choosing simplicity” a little easier for the everyman and woman seem to be rallying cries.

With reference to the above quote, “a better life” and “a better you” seem to be major goals in all voluntary simplicity discourse through the ages, but popular expressions of these wishes often suffer from a tendency to recycle and dilute these messages of hope to a state where it becomes painfully clichéd. Simplicity, which has always been (at least partially) a conscious attempt at finding a way to live life that seems more intuitive, more human and more “natural” is a very marketable idea, and books on related subjects have a knack of selling a great deal. One author writes that “complexity has become the hallmark of human existence” (Davidson 1999:xii), and there is a stronger sense in these recent texts to view this complexification as something we have done to ourselves, and unknowingly. The biggest external culprit might be media advertising, but essentially it is a mess we have built up around us, from which we have to dig our way out slowly.

5.1 Responding to Consumer Culture

A widely seen American TV documentary dedicated to the modern malaise of “affluenza” was first aired on the U.S. Public Broadcasting Service in 1997. The premise of the program is dramatized by a scene between a doctor and a middle-aged woman who complains that “nothing gives me pleasure anymore, not the house, the car, the clothes, the raise, nothing!” The doctor’s diagnosis: “I’m afraid you’re suffering from affluenza. It’s the new epidemic!”

This documentary, which was turned in to a bestselling book in 2001 with the added subtitle: *the All-Consuming Epidemic*, and taking readers through the symptoms, causes and cures for the ailment, represents perhaps the most mainstream and low-brow example of the anti-consumerist ethos available, but it does say something about the potentially broad and non-factional appeal of an idea that “the making of money and the accumulation of things should not be allowed to smother the purity of the soul, the life of the mind, the cohesion of the family, or the good of the commonweal” (Shi 1985:3-4) and makes apparent the link between voluntary simplicity and a kind of common-sense anti-capitalism almost anyone should be able to get behind: Half an hour into the program an Evangelical Christian pastor and self-proclaimed “free enterprise conservative” asserts: “It is not worth adding another 1000 square-feet to your home if it means losing your relationship with your wife.”

The best cure for affluenza turns out to be “voluntary simplicity”. Promising more family-time, less stress, less clutter, better management of money, better health, gradually less susceptibility to advertising, a host of “Simple Life”-campaigners, including historian David Shi, make an appearance: Joe Dominguez and Vicky Robin, ex-investment bankers and authors of *Your Money or Your Life: Transforming Your Relationship with Money and Achieving Financial Independence*, get a segment, so does

consumer sociologist Juliet Schor who wrote two influential books on over-work and over-consumption in the late 1990s. Duane Elgin makes an appearance, smiling and excited by all the visible signs of the emergence of a new “culture of simplicity, a culture of ecological living.” Gerard Celente, a “trend analyst,” tells us how voluntary simplicity has been singled out by his company as *the* trend of the new millennium. Estimating a rise from 5% to 15% strong adherents between 1996 and the year 2000, Celente states that “never before have we seen an issue that is gaining such global appeal as voluntary simplicity” (Affluenza 1997).

In her book, *Living the Simple Life*, Elaine St. James devotes a chapter to “the things that complicate our lives” (1996:32). Her list of a hundred things includes:

Big houses. Big mortgages. High-maintenance automobiles. Property taxes. Home remodelling. Inflation (...) Multiple credit cards. Consumer debt. The national debt. Not having time to spend with our spouses. Not having enough time to spend with our children. Difficult spouses. Children who are difficult because we don’t have enough time to spend with them (...) Having too much stuff. Having no options. Having unlimited options” (ibid:32-33).

St. James goes on to note that “in this culture, at this point in time, most of us won’t be able to avoid all complications completely. But we can eliminate more than we think we can” (ibid:35). This pragmatic approach is one of the things that characterise the popular books on voluntary simplicity in the late 90s moving into the 21st century. The method for this type of thing consists of looking around, seeing what people are struggling with in their daily lives, and then writing books with practical and constructive ways of dealing with those issues. These books are often organised in chapters addressing one aspect of life at a time, and hints and tips are often in list-form.

In his preface to a 1999 book called *The Joy of Simple Living*, Mark Victor Hansen, motivational speaker and the man behind publishing phenomenon *Chicken Soup for the Soul* commends the author of the book

for filling “a void in information on the science and art of simplification.” In researching the book Davidson had found “scores and scores of other publications on the general topic of simplicity, dating from the mid-1970s,” however, all of these books had “some glaring omission or other shortcoming”:

- Books written before 1991 do not address fax machines, fax/modems, and the growing office equipment network of which communications technology is just one aspect.
- Books written before 1995 contain little – if any – information about the dramatic impact of the Internet, cellular phones, and e-mail, among many other technological breakthroughs.
- Books relying on affirmations or a one-tip-per-day format lack the comprehensive approach necessary to simplify all aspects of life.
- Some books focus on solely personal issues or professional issues rather than on both.
- Some books advise readers to withdraw from certain aspects of their lives, if not from society as a whole.
- Some books propose changes that might simplify some aspects of life but complicate others (Davidson 1999:x-xi).

The introduction begins: “Take a look around your home and office. What do you see? More paper, more piles, and more clutter than you can comfortably deal with” (ibid:xii). Modern people are “leading increasingly hectic lives, hoping to get through each day with their sanity intact.” The book promises to deliver “simpler, more efficient lifestyles without sacrificing what is truly important,” and “help you find and maintain balance in an increasingly hectic and demanding world” (ibid:2-3). It is a book built like a tool, and which is to be “retained, to be referred to whenever you notice the level of complexity in your life edging upward” (ibid:xi).

In this version, voluntary simplicity has been reimagined as a set of life-skills that can help individuals stay afloat, be “sane” and “efficient” amidst the complexity of modernity. Many of these discourses are deliberately non-political, and high-light the fact that these strategies do not demonstrate a forceful break with the current societal trends and

developments. They often include tips on how to organise your home after minimalist principles, how to get rid of “clutter” (something Thoreau, Morris, Carpenter and Gregg talked about too, but might have meant more by) how to shop more cleverly, how to get by while working shorter hours: it is, in short, a voluntary simplicity set entirely within the framework of modern civilisation. They tell us that living a life that contains everything you want life to contain while eliminating many of your worries and frustrations, is possible. Just follow these simple steps.

5.2 “Psychological Implications, Societal Consequences”

In his preface to this 2003 anthology of texts designed to address “the what, the why and the how of voluntary simplicity,” Daniel Doherty states, with a reference to 9/11, that:

In a shadow cast by the jarring beginning of the new millennium, simplicity has an undeniable appeal. Global conflicts, domestic security concerns, and a stalling economy can make keeping up with the Joneses feel like, at best, a misguided luxury. Now is not a time for excess; it is a time, it would seem, to focus on “what really matters” (2003:preface).

Doherty preliminarily defines voluntary simplicity as “a notion that combines the freedom of modernity with certain comforts and virtues of the past,” which is undoubtedly the vaguest and least critical definition of the concept we have come across thus far. After asking rhetorically why a *voluntary* simplification would have to be advocated: “after all, if Americans wanted to simplify their lives, there is nothing stopping them,” Doherty concedes that “if humans really do find satisfaction in greater consumption per se, simplicity would not only be unreasonable, it would be undesirable” (ibid:preface). Hypothesising, however, that our preferences might be more “malleable” than we think, and that the causal relationship between wealth and happiness is likely to be an unfounded construct by modern economics, he suggests that the issue might be more

“complex” than that. Doherty describes the intention of the anthology as a presentation of texts from economic, sociological, psychological, historical and theological perspectives combined in new ways in order to explore “the desirability and feasibility of voluntary simplicity.”

The anthology is comprised of an eclectic collection of texts, some of which are predominantly concerned with the findings of recent happiness-research, and also included Maslow’s “Theory of Human Motivation,” a chapter devoted to historical expressions of the voluntary simplicity ethos, made up of a text by David Shi concerning the 18th century Quaker John Woolman, a 1901 text by a French reformed pastor Charles Wagner titled “Simple Needs,” Gregg’s 1936 essay and Elgin and Mitchell’s 1977 paper, as well as two “critical perspectives” of which one is an apology for advertising, and the other a disparagement of the “conspicuous simplicity” of America’s wealthiest.

The introduction, written by sociologist Amitai Etzioni, paints a picture of a modern America that has reverted to “an earlier age, that of rawer capitalism – when people labored longer and harder and the whole family worked, leaving little time or energy for other pursuits” (2003:intro). With the “collapse of noncapitalist economic systems” the world over, as well as increasing suspicion among modern people in the West that affluence does not automatically lead to happiness, and “does not address the spiritual concerns – the quest for transcendental connections and meanings – they believe all people have” (ibid:intro), Etzioni claims the time is ripe for renewed critical attention to, and a “search for alternatives to consumerism as the goal of capitalism” (ibid:intro).

This turn of phrase is interesting, as it explicates the gradual shift in focus from the necessity of total rejection of the capitalist system, which in earlier incarnations of voluntary simplicity is seen as inherently evil and limiting in its concentration of wealth and power and unsustainable

concepts of growth, to the idea that, while our values and priorities are shaped by the economic system in which we live, and the assumptions that have informed and guided the development of that system have led us to submitting to ultimately undesirable and dehumanising living conditions, it is a system that can be reformed simply by directing it towards different goals.

Etzioni defines voluntary simplicity as “the choice out of free will (...) to limit expenditures on consumer goods and services and to cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning,” and identifies the foundational factor of the “trend” as the rise “post-materialist values,” which originated with the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and emphasised “freedom, stronger sense of community, more say in government, [etc.]” (ibid:intro).

The quantitative work on this theory has been carried out chiefly by Ronald Inglehart, who in the 70’s found, when comparing values and attitudes in different generational segments of the population, that “among those aged 65 or older, materialists were fully 12 times as numerous as post-materialists; among those born after World War II, postmaterialists were slightly more numerous than materialists” (Inglehart: 2008:130). From this he concluded that:

postmaterialist values emerge as people come to place increasing emphasis on autonomy, self-expression and the quality of life. This shift is linked with changing existential conditions – above all, the change from growing up with the feeling that survival is precarious, to growing up with the feeling that survival can be taken for granted (ibid:130).

While admitting that “intergenerational value change, by its very nature, moves slowly,” Inglehart still holds to the truth of his thesis and its potential for “broad-based” social change (2008). Etzioni, on the other hand, notes the incongruity between the measurable rise in such values (“from 9 percent in 1972 to 18 percent in 1991”) and the fact that “personal consumption (...) continued to grow” in this same period of

time (2003:intro). Citing the above-mentioned lack of convincing socio-economic alternatives to capitalism, the worrying world-wide trend of wholesale adoption of a less than nuanced approach to capitalist and consumerist ideologies in emerging economies, which at a certain point stops being in adherence with what psychologists and other researchers are slowly realising to be our real, basic human needs, Etzioni nevertheless sees voluntary simplicity as a way for attitudes still prevalent in “mature capitalism” to be challenged and changed.

He organises voluntary simplifiers into three groups, the least committed being “downshifters” who are usually in the upper segment of the income-bracket and who make sporadic life-style changes like consciously decreasing time spent at work and organising pot-luck dinners instead of eating out. The second breed are the “strong simplifiers” who alter their lives more dramatically, sometimes changing careers or retiring early, motivated by various non-material gains of this tactic. “The most dedicated, holistic simplifiers adjust their entire life patterns according to the ethos of voluntary simplicity,” often involving radical life-changes. This “Simplicity Movement” is differentiated from the other groups “in that it is motivated by a coherently articulated philosophy,” inspired by people such as Duane Elgin. Etzioni argues that the question

whether or not voluntary simplicity can be sustained, or even greatly expand its reach, depends to a significant extent on the question of whether voluntary simplicity constitutes a sacrifice that people must be constantly motivated to make, or is itself a major source of satisfaction, and hence is self-motivating (ibid:intro).

If people can be thus persuaded, Etzioni believes a mature capitalist system can be moved to adopt voluntary simplicity on a large scale. Etzioni bases his understanding of people’s ability to move away from consumer culture on the work of Abraham Maslow. The maturity of the system is a prerequisite for a mass movement, as Etzioni believes only people who have climbed sufficiently up Maslow’s pyramid of needs

“objectively feel ready to turn more attention to their higher needs (even if their consumeristic addiction prevents them from noting that they may, so to speak, shift upwards)”. In this view “Voluntary Simplicity is (...) a choice a successful corporate lawyer, not a homeless person, faces; Singapore, not Rwanda” (ibid:intro).

5.3 Elgin Revised For Present Realisations

Since the first publication of *Voluntary Simplicity* in 1981, Duane Elgin has revised and reprinted it twice, most recently in 2010. He has in the meantime also written books and articles regarding his own version of Gaia-theory, merging quantum-physics and Eastern philosophy.

The preface to the latest edition counts the ways in which the “public conversation about simplicity” has changed since he began talking and writing about it in 1977. The discussion has gone from “complacency to urgency:”

In the 1970s, there was little public concern about climate change, massive famines, energy and water shortages, and more... The majority of people were focused on the “good life” in the short run. More than thirty years later, these are no longer problems for the distant future; they represent a critical challenge to the human community now. Simplicity of living, by whatever name, is moving from an easily dismissed lifestyle fad to an approach to living that is recognized as a vital ingredient for building a sustainable and meaningful future (2010:preface).

In the first part of the book, Elgin calls what is happening all over the world a “leaderless revolution (...) building a sustainable future with the Earth, a harmonious relationship with one another, and a sacred relationship with nature and the universe” (2010:15). Elgin takes everything as a manifestation of voluntary simplicity: “Because this is a leaderless revolution in living, people are inventing as they go – including inventing words and phrases to characterize their approach to living.” He

goes on to list ten “alternative” phrases that mean essentially the same, and undertakes to use all of them interchangeably throughout the book.

“Green lifeways, earth-friendly living, soulful living, simple living, sustainable lifestyles, living lightly, compassionate lifeways, conscious simplicity, earth-conscious living, simple prosperity” (ibid:16).

Elgin states that the ball really started rolling with the countercultures of the 1960s. The counterculture “was an eclectic assortment of people and causes held together by a ‘new consciousness’ (which was not really a ‘new’ consciousness but a very old consciousness re-emerging)” (ibid:16). Large portions of the book remain exactly as they were in the 1981 edition, including the chapter on consciousness, but in this new age, we have had developments people could only dream of in the 1960s. With the realisation of the internet, Elgin’s expansion of consciousness and communication to the larger, universal level has been granted an unexpected and unprecedented advantage, with applications for global governance and the organisation of the leader-less revolution of concerned and enlightened individuals, world-wide, beyond Elgin’s wildest dreams:

Developing the capacity for self-reflective consciousness also enables us to respond more quickly to subtle feedback when something is amiss. In being more attentive to our situation as a society, we do not have to be shocked or bludgeoned into remedial action by, for example, massive famines or catastrophic environmental accidents. Instead, more subtle signals suffice to indicate that corrective actions are warranted. In the context of an increasingly interdependent world – where the strength of the whole web of social, environmental, and economic relations is increasingly at the mercy of the weakest links – the capacity to respond quickly to subtle warnings that we are getting off a healthy track in our social evolution is indispensable to our long-run survival. As the internet fosters a new capacity for rapid feedback from citizens and organisations around the world, the human family is developing a level of collective awareness, understanding, and responsiveness to the well-being of the Earth that previously would have been unimaginable (2010:84-85).

In simplicity, and deepening understanding of the interconnectedness of everything, and with the aid of global, instant communication, we can begin to govern the world in the right direction.

Answering objections that “you can’t change human nature” with the metaphor of a tree, which takes us back to Carpenter, Elgin asks: “Does the inherent character and essence of a seed change when it grows into a tree? Not at all. The potential for becoming a tree was always resident within the seed” (ibid:86). Elgin’s unwavering belief in the inherent potential of the human mind seems to be what drives him. There are passages in his book which could almost have been lifted from one of Emerson’s essays.

Elgin’s revolution is summed up in these words:

Our direct experience of the subtle aliveness infusing the universe is transformative. When we relax into our direct experience, we rest within the ecology of conscious aliveness, and this expands our vision of the human journey (ibid:167).

This, then, is how humanity will overcome current, global issues. Nature, or the universe, will tell us what to do.

6. Conclusion

Aldous Huxley wrote his book *Ends and Means* (1937) in the midst of what would turn out to be the upsurge that brought large parts of the world into a state of total war. In it he calls attention to an interesting characteristic of “recent” human ideals for living on the earth:

About the ideal goal of human effort there exists in our civilization and, for nearly thirty centuries, there has existed, a very general agreement. From Isaiah to Karl Marx the prophets have spoken with one voice. In the Golden Age to which they look forward there will be liberty, peace, justice and brotherly love. “Nation shall no more lift sword against nation”; “the free development of each will lead to the free development of all”; “the world shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Huxley 1941:1).

It does seem almost undeniably true that if a generous interpretation is applied to any human belief-system or political theory, the goals all unify into this one. The problems start to arise when people try to conjure up ways of reaching this goal. Living simply as a revolutionary virtue has a peculiar place in this history of human notions and ideals for the reformation of life. On the one hand, it is a practical and pragmatic approach to unhappiness and frustration where undesirable elements are simply disregarded, resulting in a move from dis-ease to ease. Many of the proponents of simple living found in the previous pages have at times become exasperated at the realisation that most people did not already engage in this tactic voluntarily, which seemed to them an inexplicable mystery. Thoreau, on his visit to a neighbouring family of Irish immigrants, expresses his puzzlement at their living situation, and says that “if he and his family would live simply, they might all go a-huckleberrying in the summer for their amusement” (1878:222). Such leisure has been imagined to result in all manner of positive effects, chief among them, perhaps, growing creative faculties and a stronger sense

of connectedness with people and larger nature. Many, if not all, of the texts studied are written by people who are themselves convinced of the immutable truth that a simple life, if consciously chosen and practiced with deliberation and care, is what the world needs. This belief seems to stem from an even deeper belief in the potentialities embedded in humanity, both in the sense of cognitive, mental capacities, and in terms of compassion and love. If Wordsworth could not find these vital components in the busy streets of London, it was certainly present in the poets he read and loved, and in the unadorned and familiar manner of the English shepherd. Emerson and Thoreau discovered with reverence the almost god-like purity of intellect and feeling in the ancient texts of the Far East, which suggested the possibility of both a transcendence from the lesser concerns of the man-governed world, and a deepening of understanding of the truly great mysteries of existence, all the hints of divinity present in nature, that, no doubt, are there for human's to meditate upon, and utilise for the betterment of themselves and life in general.

One of the reasons for the millenarian tendencies of Romantic simplicity beyond the fact that it owes a cultural and religious debt to Christianity, might have to do with this disconnect between the conviction that the meaning of life is to be found in the immaterial things, that excessive focus on material gratification is profoundly limiting to human beings, and the seeming impossibility of opening the minds and hearts of popular opinion to this truth. There is, it seems, also an intrinsic satisfaction in being aware of the deeper well-springs of the human soul, and it is not supremely important if the rise of these intrinsic waters has to be postponed. What gives hope, is the fact that there is something in us, quietly urging us towards a better, and deeper, situation. Hence is the word "emerge" ("will emerge", "re-emerge", "now emerging") one of the most frequently employed words in voluntary simplicity discourse.

This mystical way of thinking has, as we've just seen with Elgin, survived all the way up to this day. But the preoccupation with religious experience and mystical practices does not negate the social programs and concerns of these voluntary simplicity adherents. Many of these writers were profoundly radical in their political beliefs, and the question of popular revolution is not infrequent in these pages. While some, like Morris did, have joined forces with radical leftist parties, believing that the transformation of life could only come about once the masses had gained control over the means of production, the question of revolution in voluntary simplicity often turns out to be a question that has been asked and philosophised about since the ancient Greeks: how can this virtue be taught?

In his essay on "Social Progress and the Individual" Edward Carpenter muses on how positive change can be effectively instigated, as an alternative or prerequisite of social revolution:

How can such morality be spread? – How does a plant grow? – It *grows*. There is some contagion of influence in these matters. Knowledge can be taught directly; but a new ideal, a new sentiment of life, can only pass by some indirect influence to another. Yet it does pass. There is no need to talk – perhaps the less said in any case about these matters the better – but if you have such new ideal within you, it is I believe, your clearest duty, as well as your best interest, to act it out in your own life at all apparent cost (...) To a certain extent it is true, perhaps, that men and women can be *grown* – like cabbages. And this is the case of the indirect influence of the strenuous few upon the many" (1887:61).

This "lead-by-example" theory has been enthusiastically embraced by simplifiers through the centuries. The importance of action, of doing, is paramount. In fact, doing, in itself, can be an ennobling and enriching experience in its own right, and the sense in which people moving back to the land or plant a patch of beans, as Thoreau did, feel that they, by so doing, are sustaining a tradition, a culture of simplicity, which might fade away if it is not tended. Adherents of voluntary simplicity see themselves

as being on the barricades for human freedom – because there are societal forces wanting to reduce all of existence to mechanics, and all of humanity to a rapidly increasing exchange of goods and services. Theodore Adorno’s analysis of the conditions of human life written during the Second World War would coincide with the world-view of many voluntary simplicity advocates:

What the philosophers once knew as life has become the sphere of private existence and now mere consumption, dragged along as an appendage of the process of material production, without autonomy or substance of its own (...) Only by virtue of opposition to production, as still not wholly encompassed by this order, can men bring about another more worthy of human beings. (Adorno 1974:15).

Voluntary simplicity is, given this world-view, a struggle for human emancipation. The quest for simplicity can easily be placed in the context of a utopian tradition. It has been suggested that the “imaginative excitement” of utopian projects “comes from the recognition that everything inside our heads, and much outside, are human constructs and can be changed” (Carey 1999:xi). While adherents of voluntary simplicity have often found that it is easier to change what is inside our own heads than society at large, utopianism as a way of creating opposition to materialism should not be dismissed offhand. As Martin Buber has said:

By providing alternative futures, the utopia challenges the present to justify itself in values that transcend the immediate question of power. The utopia emphasizes that life is for humans and that society should be designed to achieve the fulfilment of all the people in it (cited in Sargent 2010:100).

This is a good description of what many of the texts considered here are attempting to point towards.

In a text published on the pages of simplicityinstitute.org titled “Communicating Simplicity” written by Mark Burch – “one of the most eloquent advocates of simplicity” according to another member of that organisation (2014) – is stated: “For those who think that voluntary simplicity has something to offer the world in its present predicament,

[how we communicate simplicity] must be a matter of considerable practical importance. Communicating simply is a matter of rhetoric and style. Communicating simplicity is an urgent task upon which the future of our species may depend.” (2012:1) Further down the page, after a discussion of the power of metaphor, exemplified by that of the Titanic, Burch exclaims:

Maybe we’re not passengers on a cold iron ship fated to kill us because of its own design flaws. Instead, maybe we’re more like a flock of birds, or a school of fish. We’re a shining multitude capable of launching, stopping and turning on a dime. We are not a mute, mechanical mass of metal, or even a pile of silicon chips that must be plugged in and programmed to do what they do. We are a self-energized, self-aware, self-replicating, self-repairing, self-organizing, self-actualizing, solar powered, completely organic, totally recyclable, omnilocal, interdependent and fully conscious community (2012:2).

Voluntary simplicity, as a utopian projection of the future and as an illustration of what might be possible for mankind to achieve, are profoundly interested in the power of ideas, ways of speaking, ways of writing about the human journey. Each text seems to offer a new take on world history, and how it has all led us to this moment. Burch, Elgin and nearly all the other writers discussed in these pages seem to think voluntary simplicity is an idea with the potential to change the course of history, if only the disparate strands of it can be brought together in the right constellation. Elgin’s notion of a Western and Eastern flow of “human growth and learning” resulting in some kind of a “global convergence of the human family” is an incredibly teleological representation of the history of this idea, but the convergence of enlightened understanding has always been a mainstay in voluntary simplicity discourse and belief, one might say it depends on it to survive.

To end on a constructive note, here is one last vision for the future of mankind. The Elgin et al. *Changing Images of Man* report concludes with a list of requirements for a new future system of governance, which

would come into effect after the transformation of the current paradigm (through evolution, revolution or cataclysm). Towards the end of the list the social scientists predict that this system will incorporate:

a principle of complementarity, or reconciliation of such “opposites” as free will and determinism, materialism and transcendentalism, science and religion (1982:109).

This middle way might be what voluntary simplicity is ultimately working towards. The struggle to resist the mechanisms of modern materialism does not seem to be a negative campaign, but a pluralist exploration of alternatives and possibilities.

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