# Swerve of Conscience: A Clinamen Reading of *Civil Disobedience*

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**Abstract: In this paper, Civil Disobedience by Henry David Thoreau is examined through the perspective of Harold Bloom's the first revisionary ratio, Clinamen as given in his book, *Anxiety of influence: A Theory of Poetry*. It uses Bloom's concept of the swerve to present that Thoreau breaks away from past democratic and moral frameworks which he saw to be flawed and in turn re-directs those ideas toward a greater role for individual conscience. We see that Thoreau's put forth a purposeful departure from what was handed down in political thought. Also that his shift brings out the moral defects in former democratic ideas but also at the same time puts to a larger stage the issue of conscience in relation to institutional power. Through the perspective of Clinamen we see that Thoreau transforms both the style and purpose of political writing which he does by putting personal experience into play with moral action. This act of revision is what gives Civil Disobedience its lasting influence. It is what allows the essay to still speak so powerfully to issues of ethical resistance and the role of the individual in standing up to injustice.**

**Keywords: Thoreau, Civil Disobedience, Clinamen, Harold Bloom, conscience.**

Civil Disobedience is a work which quietly transforms the moral base which it's readers stand on, at the same time however it does so in a way which almost challenges later thinkers to put forth revisions, extensions or corrections to its direction. When put through the model of Clinamen which Harold Bloom puts forth in *The Anxiety of Influence*, the first revisionary ratio Thoreau's essay becomes a preeminent case study of how a later author breaks away from a strong forebear yet still bears its mark. Thoreau's writing we see this play out as he looks at the legacy of past political and moral thinkers which in large shaped the American democratic tradition and then turns away from their models to put forth a moral picture which puts the authority of conscience at the fore. Bloom describes Clinamen as the poet's "swerve," a creative deviation from the precursor's influence, not in rejection but in a corrective act, as if saying that the earlier text was "not quite enough" and needed to be set on a new path (Bloom 30). Clinamen is a useful framework through which we see Thoreau not just as a political dissenter but as a thinker which he is reworking the very idea of citizenship which he inherits from past thinkers, which he in turn is putting forth an ethics of resistance based in personal integrity as opposed to collective agreement.

Thoreau's take on government is shaped by the Enlightenment which in large part is the social contract tradition. Thinkers like Locke put forth that which gives government it's right to exist is the consent of the governed, also although they put great stock in individual rights what they still did was to put forward systems which function to protect those rights within a group structure. Thoreau takes this in and yet at the same time turns away from it. This is what we see in Clinamen. He writes, "That government is best which governs least" (Thoreau 1), a line that nods to earlier democratic sentiments but then moves beyond them by suggesting that the best government may be one that hardly exists at all. Thoreau follows in the foot steps of his forebears in thought but at the last he veers off into his own direction which is to put individual conscience above the determinism of the majority. . Bloom argues that a writer practicing Clinamen acts as if the precursor's work contains some hidden error that must be corrected (Bloom 30). Thoreau's "correction" is in that he raises the moral bar above the political structure. While past democratic theorists saw in government the answer to social order, for Thoreau government is a problem which the individual has the duty to refuse in cases of

injustice, thus the individual is put forward as the agent of change.

The swerve becomes more visible when Thoreau directly defies majority rule. The American political system had long accepted the idea that decisions rest on the will of the majority. Thoreau agrees to this system but refuses to allow it moral authority. He writes, "A government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice" (Thoreau 4). While others saw majority rule as the fairest practical method, Thoreau considers it as a compromise that often makes people the agents of injustice. The Clinamen emerges here because Thoreau does not oppose democracy as a whole, but he swerves away from its conventional concepts by asserting that truth does not depend on the majority or numbers. Bloom's notion that the later writer "finishes" the work of the earlier one by redirecting its incomplete thought appears in this moment, since Thoreau expands the democratic ideal to include the moral duty of disobedience. It is as if he is saying democracy is valuable, but only when the individual remains awake and refuses to surrender conscience to crowd decisions. This subtle correction gives the essay its enduring power, because Thoreau reframes civic duty not as loyalty to a system but loyalty to what is right

Bloom's idea that Clinamen often involves an imaginative correction that the precursor never carried out is co-relatble when Thoreau performs that correction in real life. By refusal to pay taxes, he rejects the inherited incompleteness in earlier American thought. He does not invent a new moral problem but changes the method of its response. The act of civil disobedience emerges as a solution to the unfinished moral struggle in the democratic tradition. Thoreau's stance on slavery and the Mexican War shows another instance of this swerve. Earlier thinkers like Jefferson had underlined the wrongness of slavery, yet they continued to accept it in practice. Jefferson famously wrote that slavery violated the rights of man, yet he did not call for active refusal to support a government that maintained it. Thoreau takes up that moral thread and completes it in a complete new direction. He opines that it is not enough to oppose slavery in thought while paying taxes that support the government that enforces it. His night in jail became a symbolic moment of Clinamen. He swerves away from passive abolitionism by embodying a form of active, personal noncooperation.

Another instance of swerve appears in Thoreau's treatment of law. Earlier American leaders respected the law even when they criticized some specific policies. The legal system represented an stability, order, and the rational framework of a civilized society. Thoreau, however, questions this assumption by claiming that the law itself may be unjust, and when it is, obedience becomes a form of complicity. He states, "It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right" (Thoreau 3). This marks a break away from predecessors who thought the law as the embodiment of reason. Thoreau insists that law is merely a human perceived creation, subject to human error. The Clinamen here functions in turning the moral obligation away from state authority toward the individual who must judge the law independently. Bloom's idea that a later writer must make space for his own vision by swerving from the precursor resonates clearly. Thoreau cannot fully forsake the earlier tradition without changing it. His essay is an attempt to correct the misplaced perspective in legal structures, arguing instead for a faith in conscience

Thoreau's distrust of authority reflected an ongoing tension in American ideas of law. The Earlier reformers believed that social institutions could be improved through collective effort. Thoreau counters this concept with skepticism, and suggested that institutions often lose their moral center as they grow with time. He knows about the danger of working within systems that perpetuate injustice: "If the machine is producing injustice, stop being part of the machine" (Thoreau 7). This mechanical metaphor is another act of revision. While the predecessors saw institutions as expressions of human improvement, Thoreau finds them as devices capable of killing moral responsibility. His correction is gentle yet firm. He does not abandon reform, but he proposes a method grounded in personal withdrawal rather than institutional negotiation. Here Clinamen again becomes a useful framework for understanding this shift. Bloom notes that the swerve often positions the later writer as offering the more authentic continuation of a tradition (Bloom 38). Thoreau presents his form of moral resistance as the more honest version of democratic duty, reclaiming moral clarity by stepping

outside the structures and institutions that have forgotten their original purpose.

Government, for Thoreau, is not the fundamental object of loyalty. The true center of loyalty is the self that follows to the law of conscience. This idea might be Emerson's influence but swerves away from it in a meaningful way. Emerson emphasized self-reliance and personal independence, but he remained cautious about direct confrontation with the state. Thoreau takes Emerson's concepts and completes it by adding political application. He states that a person must "break the law" if obedience means becoming an agent of injustice (Thoreau 5). Bloom's Clinamen illuminate this shift. Thoreau does not reject Emerson's philosophy rather extends it into an active resistance. He suggests that Emerson's self-reliant individual remains incomplete until he takes moral action. Bloom explains that the new writers practicing Clinamen often view their precursor's work as powerful but unfinished (Bloom 27). Thoreau finds Emerson's call for independence as lacking a political dimension and corrects it by showing how conscience makes a difference in a world of injustice. This shift is not working against Emerson but the natural evolution of the idea.

The essay "Civil Disobedience" emphasises on personal responsibility that carries another dimension of revision. Earlier democratic thinkers believed the citizen as someone who participates in the political process, votes, and supports public institutions. Thoreau changes this picture by replacing participation with active withdrawal. Voting, he argues, is not a strong moral act as it leaves justice to the majority. He writes, "Even voting for the right is doing nothing for it" (Thoreau 9). This marks a strong swerve from civic optimism. Where others saw voting as the means of achieving justice, Thoreau sees it as a weak gesture that postpones moral clarity. His swerve lies in urging individuals to act directly, without waiting for institutional approval. Looking through the lens of Clinamen, this shift becomes a necessary departure. Thoreau responds to the gap that lies between democratic theory and moral action by moving the onus of justice from the collective to the individual. This change does not eliminate democratic ideals rather purifies them by grounding them in ethical personal responsibility rather than procedural agreement.

Thoreau's writing style itself indicates Clinamen. His simple, direct language echoes earlier political essays, but he sways from their formal tone by using personal experience as moral proof. When he describes his night in jail, he transforms a deep private moment into a political lesson that is something earlier writers rarely did. Bloom suggests that the later writer often turns inward to find the imaginative space needed to escape the precursor's influence (Bloom 40). Thoreau uses his personal experiences not to imitate other political essays but to create a new ways in which lived experience becomes the ground for political truth. The swerve here is stylistic yest deeply meaningful. It shifts political discourse away from abstract principles and toward the lived reality of conscience.

Thoreau's understanding of freedom flows with this revisionary movement. Earlier American thinkers understood freedom in terms of the rights guaranteed by the government. Thoreau respects this idea but adds a deeper layer of moral obligation. True freedom, he suggests, comes from refusing to participate in any kind of injustice, even at personal cost. When he prefers jail to paying taxes, he demonstrates a moral freedom that cannot be granted or taken away by institutions. Bloom's Clinamen captures this movement because Thoreau's idea of freedom grows out of the democratic tradition but moves away from its conventional political definitions. He is swerving the assumption that freedom depends on legal status. Instead, he portrays freedom as a moral state. Even inside th jail cell, he claims to feel freer than those enforcing unjust laws. This swerve redefines the foundational idea of liberty in the American tradition.

The movement of Clinamen appears in how Thoreau thinks the future. He believes that men of conscience can improve the society simply by refusing to support injustice actively. This idea grows from earlier reformist concepts but takes a new direction by emphasizing non-cooperation rather than activism. Thoreau does not for revolution but for moral withdrawal from wrongdoing. Bloom notes that Clinamen involves a "corrective movement" that sets the precursor's thought on a more truthful path (Bloom

42). Thoreau imagines a society where people rely on conscience first and then comes political systems. This vision completes the real democratic dream by returning it to its moral foundation. It is a dream of a society guided not by institutions but by individuals who refuse to surrender their conscience of right and wrong.

Thoreau's Civil Disobedience still continues to echo across generations as it stands at that point where traditions are swerving and becomes something new. Bloom's Clinamen helps us see how Thoreau works not against the predecessors but in response to them, revising their ideas to create a stronger moral vision. Thoreau's swerve becomes the source of his true originality. It gives the essay its direction, its sense of urgency, and its lasting influence. By revising the political and moral traditions he inherited, Thoreau created a concept that continues to guide people who face their own moments of moral choices. Through the simple but firm act of correction, he swerves the democratic tradition from within, offering a version of fundamental citizenship grounded in courage, integrity, and unwavering commitment to what is right at the level of conscience.

## REFERENCE

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