

Tadeusz Sławek

Henry David Thoreau – Grasping the Community of the World

Dis/Continuities

Toruń Studies in Language,
Literature and Culture

Edited by Mirosława Buchholtz



PETER LANG
EDITION

This study takes up Thoreau's work as the early and prophetic diagnosis of the modern crisis of relationships between the individual and the society. Thus Adorno's formulation of "a melancholy of science" finds its predecessor in Thoreau's famous dictum from the early pages of *Walden* that we live our lives in quiet desperation. The author reads Thoreau's *Journal* as an attempt to refute tendencies towards the narrowing of life to being understood merely in techno-economic categories which threatens the quality of the development of both the individual and the community. Thus, it is of significant importance to conduct literary scholarship for finding strategies which will critically contribute to the understanding and transforming of what Auerbach called "ways of life" and what Barthes referred to as "living-together".

Tadeusz Ślawek is Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Silesia in Katowice (Poland). He published numerous works on history and theory of literature, William Blake, Robinson Jeffers, Georg Trakl, William Shakespeare, and Jacques Derrida.

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TORUŃ STUDIES IN LANGUAGE,
LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Edited by Mirosława Buchholtz

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Translated by Jean Ward

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Abbreviations

The works of Henry David Thoreau are cited from the following sources:

- CC* – *Cape Cod*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987.
- CEP* – *Collected Essays and Poems*. Ed. E.H. Witherell. New York: The Library of America, 2001.
- GSW* – *Great Short Works*. Ed. W. Glick. New York: Harper, 1982.
- J* – *Journal*. Eds. B. Torrey, F. Allen. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1984.
- MW* – *The Maine Woods*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1961.
- RP* – *Reform Papers*. Ed. W. Glick. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.
- W* – *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. New York: Dover Publications, 1995.
- WCM* – *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. New York: Signet Books, 1961.

His name was Eliot Alison... That was all there was on the yellow piece of lined paper torn out of a notebook and slipped inside the first volume of Thoreau's *Journal*, bought in the spring of 1995 in a second-hand bookshop in Concord. "Books with a Past, Inc.": an exceptionally well-chosen name, when you think that they deal in "used" books, books that have passed through the hands of many other users and owners before they come into ours. But it is *a* past, not *the* past, for these stories are not in themselves the object of interest; they do not unfold themselves in a single narrative form, nor do they find their way inside the covers of the book that is bought. Instead, they remain on the outside; they are weeds that have been pulled up from the fertile field of the story or the academic discourse. *A* past remains untold; it is one of many voices that gradually fall silent outside the closed doors of the cover, while inside is the bright light of some philosophical or literary *salon*, the light of the tale spun behind those closed doors: *the* past. In this way the books with which we spend our time are divested of any life other than the one that they supply to themselves. This study, which begins with a piece of yellowed paper and several thousand pages of a thinker's journal, is concerned with what, to adapt Emerson's term, we may call the "un-self-sufficingness" of literature¹.

1 Ralph Waldo Emerson, attempting to find the defining marks of human character, wrote in the essay of this name: "The face which character wears to me is self-sufficingness". As he continues his argument, however, it quickly becomes clear that this "self-sufficingness" is not a way of shutting oneself off from the world in an autocratic sense of absolute independence. Quite the reverse: Emerson's "self-sufficingness" is an attitude of sharing what is deepest in the human individual, a sharing that reaches far beyond the forms of perfunctory, everyday association. Thus the philosopher goes on to say of the man who is "self-sufficing" that he is a "perpetual patron, benefactor, and beatified man". Later we find a still fuller formulation of the influence of the "self-sufficing" man: "Our houses ring with laughter, and personal and critical gossip, but it helps little. But the uncivil, unavailable man, who is a problem and a threat to society, whom it cannot let pass in silence, but must either worship or hate, – and to whom all parties feel related, both the leaders of opinion, and the obscure and the eccentric, – he helps [...]". "Self-sufficingness" is the most serious form of help that we can give one another in a community. Help that is not mere seeming, but relates seriously to the seriousness of being, where this seriousness is conditioned by the degree of independence of thought in the community and the extent to which it has freed itself from relying on established ways of ordering the course of events. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Character", *Emerson's Essays, First and Second Series Complete in One Volume*, with introduction by Irwin Edman (New York: Harper and Row, 1981) 324-344.

There is also another bookshop that informs us of one or two things concerning the person to whom the statement *His name was Eliot Alison* referred. “The Guy from Eagle Books called” (we don’t know whom, but we may guess that it was the author of the note on the lined yellow paper) with some information about the “former owner of HDT Journals”. He telephoned, no doubt, from among a thicket of tightly-packed shelves, from at least three rooms that must certainly have been filled with the characteristic smell of old books. These three rooms were: the one in which the person whose name was “Eliot Alison” kept his personal library, including the fourteen volumes of Henry David Thoreau’s journal, bound in green; Eagle Books (could it have been in Dublin, New Hampshire?), from which someone telephoned (was it to Concord, Massachusetts?) to tell the person who would note on the yellow paper what we were later to find between the leaves of the *Journal*... Perhaps the author of the note was connected with Books with a Past, the third in our relay-team of “bookish” places. If he was, then there really were three of these places; if he wasn’t, then a fourth place appears, in which the fourteen volumes of Thoreau’s journal were to be found, even if perhaps only for a little while, beside the notebook of yellow paper, before someone brought them (with no small labor) to Books with a Past.

Very little is known about the person whose “name was Eliot Alison”. He was a musician by training and a life time devotee of Thoreau (on the inside of the cover of volume 11 of the *Journal*, an unknown hand, perhaps that of Allison himself, has glued in a few photographs, evidently from a local magazine, in which the commentator on the *Journal* can be seen working – fittingly for a follower of Thoreau, an unknown journalist has added – in a bean field (“a good Thoreauvian, he grows beans, too”). He wrote articles for a local newspaper, *Yankee Magazine*, and published a book about the flowers and birds of Dublin, New Hampshire (we can find this in a second-hand internet bookshop, where it figures as *Mondanock Sightings: Birds of Dublin 1909-1979*, published in that year, 1979). He must have been interested in nature, for he had a collection of books by Edwin Teale, the outstanding naturalist and popularizer of knowledge of the natural world, who was a great friend of his. We also know that his third wife was English and that he married her during the war (“his 3rd wife was an English war bride”). He lived to a great age (“was in his 90’s when he died”), without ever occupying any permanent position, and on his own terms (he “was never really in step with the rest of the world. No real ‘job’”). In volume 11 of the *Journal*, mentioned above, we find a newspaper cutting with a photograph of an observation tower on Red Hill, from which, as the caption tells us, “Mr. And Mrs. Allison operate Red Hill’s firefinder in the tower”. In the photograph, an oldish man and a woman who looks considerably younger are leaning over a round table with a piece of apparatus designed to establish the site of possible fires (the so-called “Osborne fire-finder”).

We do not know whether the “guy from Eagle Books” kept his word and sent the “more info” referred to in the note. This short biographical sketch fails in all these ways to live up to its promise of accuracy. Even the very first sentence turns out to be deceptive: *His name was Eliot Alison* is not an unconditionally reliable piece of information. All fourteen volumes of Thoreau’s *Journal* bear inside the cover a hand-written inscription: “Elliott and Kathleen Allison, December 6th, 1949. Dublin, N.H.”. The date might be the date of their marriage or of their acquisition of the *Journal*; but now the attempt to identify the previous owner of Thoreau’s work comes up against a fundamental problem: he is announced as a different person, someone with a different surname, one that sounds the same but is spelt differently. Not a single, but a double “l” – a person of whom we might say: *His name was not Eliot Alison*. But might we not suppose that this mistake accompanied him throughout his life, that he made his modest entry into history bearing upon himself the blemish of error, the error of his uncertain surname, like a mark of sin?

The attempt to establish who the former owner of the *Journal* was comes to grief on an even more significant and insurmountable difficulty, however: at a certain moment this person disappears in the most literal sense from its volumes. Whereas the moment of his entrance into the world of the fourteen green-bound tomes seems to be clearly proclaimed (6 December, 1949), no date marks the moment when he left that world. To be sure, taking account of the remark on the yellow paper concerning the advanced age of “Eliot Alison”, we may presume that the two horizontal lines crossing out the name “Elliott” are a kind of graphic tombstone in the form of a signature. But the *Journal* is not simply an extended epitaph for Elliott Allison; the two lines that cut through his first name and make it possible to read it only silently, not aloud, do not remove the traces of him that remain in the volumes of the book. Although he has no name, although his name is now only an abstraction of a sound, the pages of the *Journal* still preserve the materiality of the life of Elliott Allison. The name that generalized and gathered together all the small separate moments of his existence has given way and collapsed, like a construction burdened by an annihilating weight, cut to pieces by a death-dealing tattoo; yet his life has survived the onslaught, being preserved now not in any generalizing synthesis, but in the very separateness of its individual moments, resistant as they are to any kind of re-casting. “Elliott” as a totalizing existential, ontological project that sets out aims and tasks for itself, has ceased to exist in the world of the *Journal*; but the individual actions carried out in a certain particular time have remained, unchanged within the *Journal*’s frame. The name gathers these actions together into a whole, drawing them out of the temporal niche assigned to them; but when the name no longer stands, they are

liberated from its generalizing pressure. Once set free, they belong only to their time, a time without one single, “collective” owner.

We find a fulfilment here of Algirdas Greimas’s “dream”: “[...] and if instead of the totalizing ambition that strives to transfigure the whole of life and throws into the balance the whole road travelled by the subject, its designs could be parceled up, if the individual fragments of what has been ‘lived through’ could be appreciated, if the metonymic and sublime way of seeing tried to approach simple things seriously. Life laid bare in this way – let’s consider the Japanese gardener who arranges the stones and sand in his garden just a little differently every morning – might then be able to create the unexpected, almost imperceptibly, ‘almost from nothing’, heralding a new day”². It is thus no longer a matter of “transfiguring the whole of life”; the perspective of “the whole road” disappears, while what remains is “appreciation of the individual fragments of what has been ‘lived through’”. We are now dealing with “a serious approach to simple things”, that is with the creation of the “unexpected”. But this “unexpected” is not an extraordinary or great event; on the contrary – it appears “almost from nothing”, as an ordinary announcement of another day.

We can then clearly see the interesting relationship that begins to take shape between the “transfiguration of life” that is carried out in one signature of a first name, and life that is not “transfigured”, that does not submit to the pressure of a first name and remains nameless, as it were, in its practice, “dissolving”, so to speak, in the grains and crumbs of events. “Elliott” is crossed out by a double line, as if to make absolutely certain, and thereby “the whole road travelled by the subject” disappears; but the notes made in the margins of Thoreau’s *Journal* acquire all the more sharply the localized, regional significance of a particular place. A serious approach to simple things means noticing them, noting them and not linking them into one collective history. This seriousness is the liberation of a past, bound up with the trivia of existence, from under the pressure of one way of life, that is *the* past. It remains to arrange anew each day the stones of events in the garden of one’s existing.

So then, in reality we have two journals. One is signed by name by H.D. Thoreau, and the other – is doubly nameless, for: (1) the name of Elliott Allison never figures in the texts of his notes, (2) although it does appear on the inside flap of the cover (this is an interesting device, not only because, like an *ex libris*, it stamps the ownership of the books, but because it perversely seems to announce that within the officially opened *Journal* with its front cover and spine, where the eye of the reader falls and where the surname of the author is visible, another

2 Algirdas Greimas, *O niedoskonaleści* [On Imperfection], trans. from the French by A.Grzegorzcyk (Poznań: Wydawnictwo UAM, 1993) 111. Translation of this fragment from the Polish – J.W.

“journal” is going to run its course: unofficial, subcutaneous, lending itself to being read only when the right of ownership of the fourteen volumes of the *Journal* comes to an end, when the owner lets the books out of his hands, sells them, entrusts them to someone else or loses them) – at a certain moment it is removed from there by a double crossing out.

On 18 February, 1838, Thoreau records: “*Sunday*. Rightly named Suna-day, or day of the sun. One is satisfied in some angle by wood-house and garden fence to bask in its beams – to exist barely – the live-long day. Spring. I had not been out long to-day when it seemed that a new Spring was already born, – not quite weaned, it is true, but verily entered upon existence. Nature struck up ‘the same old song in the grass,’ despite eighteen inches of snow, and I contrived to smuggle away a grin of satisfaction by a smothered ‘Pshaw! And is that all?’” (*J*, 1, 29). Below this, in another hand (we may guess that it is that of the experienced though home-grown naturalist and expert on birds who occupied himself looking out for summer fires from the top of Red Hill and shepherding children across the busy road to school – Elliott Allison), a note has been added in minute, clear pencil handwriting: “February 18, 1975. Tuesday. The temperature 34 degrees + at 1:55 P.M. At 5:50 P.M and at 9.30 P.M. TODAY’S READING: St.Luke, Chapter 5; ‘Henry David Thoreau’ by Krutch from page 217 thru page 239”.

What links these two journal entries is their tendency towards stripping life of its defined form, distancing it from the well-shaped subjecthood that subordinates the world to itself.

Let us not omit to read this marginal note. For it equates two dates that are separated by 137 years. “Allison” scrupulously notes the temperature and the time of day when he looks at the thermometer – this is one of the ways of “laying hold” of time – the twofold stamp of chronometry and meteorology. A world that is thus “stamped” cannot entirely melt away in the oblivion of the nothing out of which our lives are built. Who remembers with such accuracy the air temperature of even a few days ago, let alone of years past? But have we anything more than that elusive temperature that we can only inadequately record, with a precision that perhaps provokes a smile, that temperature in which yet the whole complex relation between air and earth, calm and wind, moisture and drought is hidden?

Can we strengthen our “grip” on reality? There is always reading, but let us note that now this is not ordinary, abstract reading, the movement of the eye over the monotonous arrangement of lines. Reading is done in a certain aura – that is, in a certain quality of air, in a certain temperature, and this “scenographic situating” means that it will always be “today’s”, always different, changing along with this aura, which is irrevocable because it remains outside my control. Each time what I read will “cleave” to the world in a different way (it is in just this sense that literature is “un-self-sufficing”, needing air and temperature, weather

that will impart its aura to it). The fifth chapter of St Luke's Gospel concludes with one of the most well-known of Jesus's parables, that of the old and new wineskins ("And no man putteth new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish"), which Hans Urs von Balthasar explains as a call not to sew a variety of old patches to a tunic that is woven in one piece³. Reading is thus always, in its "un-self-sufficingness", in its dependence on "aura", a "new wineskin", and this may be the key to its healing power (in the same chapter of St Luke's Gospel we also read two stories of healing): the high heaven of weather and the movements of the air reduce the "I", restoring to it the proper proportions of participation in reality.

Two of Thoreau's sentences deserve particular attention: let us begin with the second, which speaks of how "spring verily enter[s] upon our existence", as if moving the accent – it enters not upon "our" lives, but instead upon "existence", that is on that deeply hidden layer (like the earth under snow), from which human life comes. The reaction of the bored person who knows the laws by which the seasons succeed one another (this is the order of human experience and knowledge) is set in opposition here to a smile, which is a kind of "primordial", "original" manifestation of existence flowing through the human body. And the first sentence which is, perhaps, more important in its multiplicity of meanings (it answers to the convictions of the author himself, who wrote elsewhere, "I should like to meet the great and serene sentence, which does not reveal itself, – only that it is great, – which I may never with my utmost intelligence pierce through and beyond (more than the earth itself), which no intelligence can understand" – *J*, 1, 331). "To exist barely" points us in two directions. To begin with, our understanding goes towards the experience of bare existence, shorn of everything that is inessential, and suddenly unveiled before our eyes – just as we experience it in autumn, when the trees, losing their decoration of leaves, become "bare". But at once thought comes on a different course: "to exist barely" is existence scarcely emerging from behind the horizon of non-existence, "scarcely" and "only just" existing, existence that is not overgrown with all the satisfying attributes of the state of possession, but still remembers its "beginnings" – and let us quickly add: its "non-human" beginnings. "Understanding life" must thus mean going back to the frontier where earth, bird and human being merge in one space of bareness. In order to understand and live according to this course, one must become a man transfigured. Here Thoreau joins Nietzsche in his reading of the fifth chapter of St Luke's Gospel, mentioned above: "I say, beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes. If there is not a new man, how can the new clothes be made to fit?" (*W*, 14). Thoreau interprets the Gospel parable in the spirit

3 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *You Have Words of Eternal Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991) 150.

of the philosophy of becoming, and hence as an expression of not making oneself at home in the individual phases of existence: “All men want, not something to *do with*, but something to *do*, or rather something to *be*”, we read in the same paragraph. Consequently, the man who lives according to the course marked out by Thoreau must constantly discover the lack of cleavage between himself and his garments: “Perhaps we should never procure a new suit, however ragged or dirty the old, until we have so conducted, so enterprised or sailed in some way, that we feel like new men in the old, and that to retain it would be like keeping new wine in old bottles” (W, 15). This sartorial escapade by the philosopher has the aim of placing existence as an unceasing metamorphosis above the social principles that seemingly regulate it, replacing the rhythm of transformation by the rhythm of fashion: “It is the luxurious and dissipated who set the fashions which the herd so diligently follow” (W, 23).

Allison (we are still assuming that it is his hand that made the annotations to Thoreau’s *Journal*) reduces everything to a record of temperature, hours and page numbers of the passages that he reads. This is his lesson in bare existence, in which the subject melts entirely in between the objects and phenomena that create the stage of reality. Greimas writes: “In this way, by a reduction of time – keeping hold only of the short-lived – by a reduction of space – attaching importance only to fragments of it – we have gradually come close to what is most important, while remaining wholly within the material order”⁴.

4 Greimas 111.

*To him there was no such thing as size.
The pond was a small ocean; the Atlantic
a large Walden Pond.*

– R.W. Emerson: “Thoreau”

And yet truly we never remain exclusively in the “material order”; if that were so, philosophy, whose ambition has ever been to approach the foundations of existence, would have to abdicate. In aiming to trace and describe bare existence, philosophy always makes its attempts from a position already outside the “material order”, or at best (as in Thoreau’s *Journal*) on its fringes. It may thus be stated that the discourse of philosophy has always struggled with the following problem: how to occupy oneself “seriously” with *bare existence* in a situation in which two difficulties immediately assail us: first, in whatever we say, we have already crossed outside the sphere of the “material order”; and second, bare existence is always, so to speak, “singular”, individual, without a plural, whereas the human being always belongs to some collective entity that conditions his/her way of life. Bare existence is pre-political, while “man” is always already, as Aristotle tells us, “a political animal”.



It is the “raw”, “primitive” and “bare” that occupies Thoreau’s attention, because understanding bare existence is a condition of understanding existence in general. On 8 March, 1859, the philosopher ponders the error of the symbolic understanding of winter as a “barren” time, a pause in which time is frozen, no more than a delay in the process of becoming: “To us snow and cold seem a mere delaying of the spring. How far we are from understanding the value of these things in the economy of Nature!” (*J*, 12, 24). The rawness of the “bare ground” in its naked existence not only uncovers what usually remains concealed (plant roots); it also deprives us of any kind of mantle to protect us from the non-human. The experience of bare existence is an experience of the radicality of being (the ambiguity of the word *radical*, as both “extreme in manifestation” and “of the root”, deserves attention). We read on in this same note in the *Journal*: “If the weather is thick and stormy enough, if there is a good chance to be cold and wet and uncomfortable [...] you may consume the afternoon to advantage [...]”.

●

Ralph Waldo Emerson – aware of the ambiguity of his recommendation – perceived in Thoreau a sylvan figure only partially inhabiting the regions of the human, and in some way reducing the ornamentation of existence that is characteristic of the human being. In nominating his friend a "Sylvan", describing him as "the only man of leisure in the town", and underlining his disinterestedness ("Satan has no bribe for him") and independence of being ("He had many elegances of his own whilst he scoffed at conventional elegance"), Emerson makes Thoreau a Nietzschean figure, a Dionysian "existential robber": "T. is like the wood god who solicits the wandering poet, & draws him into antres vast & deserts idle, bereaves him of his memory, leaves him naked plaiting vines, & with twigs in his hand". The implications of this image evidently troubled Emerson; the last sentence in his journal entry reads: "Very seductive are the first steps from the town to the woods, but the end is want & madness"⁵.

●

Giorgio Agamben touches the heart of the problem when he writes: "There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life (*nuda vita*) and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion"⁶. **The story of the philosophical and political culture of the West is one of tension between the "neutral disinterestedness" of the world's bare existence and the always already "biased", "self-interested" way in which the human person finds his/her place in this world.** Nietzsche's observations, as recorded for example in *Ecce Homo*, concerning the phenomena that constitute the "material order" of human life, are an attempt to force us to look carefully into this fundamental problem. If the author of *Zarathustra* aims to liberate thought from the checkmating by the word "God" that renders every move impossible ("God is a gross answer, an indelicacy against us thinkers—at bottom merely a gross prohibition for us: you shall not think!"⁷), he does this precisely by turning towards the physiology of the human organism.

5 Emerson, *The Topical Notebooks*, vol. 3, ed. R. Orth (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1994) 58-60.

6 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) 8.

7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1969) 236-237.

●

We read further in the same passage that “the salvation of humanity” depends far more” on “the question of *nutrition*” (*die Frage der Ernährung*) than on any kind of “theologians’ curio”. But the physiology of human existence will become more comprehensible only when it begins to accompany the physiology of the world’s existence, which requires the world to be caught on the very cusp of its appearing, in its “earliest” phase. “The influence of climate [*der klimatische Einfluss*] on our *metabolism* [...] goes so far that a mistaken choice of place and climate can not only estrange [*entfremden*] a man from his task but can actually keep it from him: he never gets to see it”⁸. Hence the shaping of our human life depends on the degree to which it is harmonized with the non-human existence of the world. The perception of our end is conditioned by careful attention paid to the weather. For it is weather that enables the world to be caught red-handed in the very act of becoming.

●

This is why Thoreau is such a diligent observer of the weather, like his disciple of a century later, the owner of the fourteen volumes of the *Journal*, who covers its pages with comments on the state of the sky and the temperature. So it is no accident that for Thoreau weather is the “most interesting” thing: “In keeping a journal of one’s walks and thoughts it seems to be worth the while to record those phenomena which are most interesting to us at the time. Such is the weather. It makes a material difference whether it is foul or fair, affecting surely our mood and thoughts” (*J*, 13, 106). Thoreau, like Nietzsche, makes human physiology dependent on the physiology of the world; and what is more, thinking is restored to the sphere of physiology. It is bound up not only with the personal body, but above all with the body of the world; a change of weather is a change in the material of the human organism. Weather and birds – it is to these that the notes recorded by “Elliot Allison” in pencil in the margins of the *Journal* are devoted: “February 10, 1958. Monday. I see 4 sparrows feeding about our house. Temperature 6 degrees at 7:10 AM; 4 degrees at 9:30 AM. Wind West” (*J*, 10, 279).

●

Like the German philosopher, the author of *Walden* is perfectly aware of the fact that writing must be a record of the body in motion; the “journal of walks and thoughts” that Thoreau left us in fourteen volumes fulfills all the conditions of thought in motion, motion as a form of thought, of which Nietzsche wrote, warning against adopting the “sedentary” mode of living dominated by *Sitzfleisch*. There

8 Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* 240.

are many passages in Nietzsche's writings that would not be out of place in the *Journal* of the Concord philosopher. In one of the most obvious, we discover the origin of the idea of "eternal return" (*Wiederkehr*): "That day I was walking through the woods along the lake of Silvaplana; at a powerful pyramidal rock not far from Surlei I stopped. It was then that this idea came to me [...]. Mornings I would walk in a southerly direction on the splendid road to Zoagli, going up past pines with a magnificent view of the sea; in the afternoon, whenever my health permitted it, I walked around the whole bay from Santa Margherita all the way to Portofino"⁹. On these walks, Thoreau more often than Nietzsche glances up at the sky.



It is the sky that is the stage on which the drama of the weather is played out. What particularly absorbs our attention is the fact that this stage is the scene of real, actual events. What happens on the stage of the sky is not "acted" in the sense of "pretended"; it does not emerge from the workings of cunningly planned, carefully thought-out arrangements. The stage of the sky knows no *deus ex machina*. It is the-thing-that-comes on its own terms, and any attempt to write a script for this drama is doomed to fail. Having described the "architecture of the snow", Thoreau notes on Christmas Day, 1851: "I go forth to see the sun set. Who knows how it will set, even half an hour beforehand? whether it will go down in clouds or a clear sky?" (*J*, 3, 155). But the point is not only the sky's unpredictability. Above all, it is the readiness to accept that-which-comes, not as a spectacle, in which I ascribe to myself the role of an indifferent viewer-consumer, but as an event that touches me "to the quick".



Thoreau, harsh critic of the capitalist-industrial system that he is, knows that one of its consequences is to limit the individual's freedom of creative activity, among other things by the plethora of shows and "entertainments" that it supplies for consumption. But to read the drama of the sky as a mere show, for example as a "spectacle" of scholarly discourse, in which all phenomena are explained and classified, is emblematic for Thoreau of the difficulty that modern man, with the epistemological and juridical structures he has built, finds in relating to bare life, life that is free of this type of ordering and normalizing activity. Giorgio Agamben, inquiring why "democracy, at the very moment in which it seemed to have finally triumphed over its adversaries and reached its greatest height, proved itself incapable of saving *zoē*, to whose happiness it had dedicated all its efforts,

9 Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* 295-297.

from unprecedented ruin”¹⁰, finds in this impasse features that are characteristic of modern democracy.



The problem with life in community thus lies in the fact that its organization and structures tend to be a form of enclosure. In striving to organize the life of its citizens community forgets that the first condition for fulfilling this task (let us remember that Nietzsche accused modern man of alienating his proper tasks, *seiner Aufgabe entfremden*) is that the opportunities to experience the world, within which the individual recognizes his or her own, particular duties, must remain open. **For a community to be able to function, each of its participants must remain sensitive to the solitary experience of bare existence that precedes all explanations and commentaries provided by community.** Let your business, argues Thoreau, be such as “is not your neighbors’ business, which they cannot understand. For only absorbing employment prevails, succeeds, takes up space, occupies territory, determines the future of individuals and states, drives Kansas out of your head [...]” (*J*, 9, 36). One must have something that cannot be understood, a “rest” that cannot be grasped; one must take at least a small step “outside the street and daily life of men” (*J*, 9, 36), in order to be able to build a community.



It is the loss of the disposition to perceive the enigma of existence, its lightning change into a form of scientific or social spectacle that diminishes the element of mystery, that makes it impossible for democracy to rescue *zoē*, that is bare life. Convenience and comfort replace its rawness. The long notes recorded in the December days of 1851 reveal Thoreau’s attempts to find a way out of this impasse. First, there is the already mentioned “architecture of the snow”, which deprives the human being of one of his most basic activities; it is not the human being, but the snow and wind that create those “saddles and shells”, those “waves” and “sharp turrets” (*J*, 3, 154-155). The architecture of the snow is responsible for the shapes to be found in the open air, the figures (like the “snowy sierra”) that call distant spaces to mind; human architecture, in contrast, raises structures that separate and enclose (“walls”). What Thoreau is after is a reduction of this role of the wall, by inscribing it into the drama of nature’s ceaseless movement, so as it would cease to mean anything as a sign of ownership and of the economic and geodesical division of space.

10 Agamben 10.



Let us think about this winter's day. Snow blown about, sifted through cracks in the wall, on its other side forms shapes whose emergence is not subject to the principle of fast, purpose-driven production, but to the unhurried, meandering wanderings of the imagination: "[a]s it passes through the chinks, it does not drive straight onward, but curves gracefully upwards into fantastic shapes, somewhat like the waves which curve as they break upon the shore" (*J*, 3, 154). These "fantastic shapes" are the result of observation that does not lead to ordinary explanation. The straight track of science and technology, the track symbolized for Thoreau by the railroad running through Concord, has only a fleeting attraction for the philosopher. "How little I know of that *arbor-vitae*, when I have learned only what science can tell me! It is but a word. It is not a *tree of life*" (*J*, 10, 294). The point then is to recognize the **bond** between the human being and the world, on the assumption that words can take us only part of the distance that has to be covered.



What gives things the powerful sense of their own identity simultaneously takes away from them the grace of being liberated from the tyranny of need, which liberation constitutes the basic condition for establishing a serious relation. In the December evening Thoreau walks through the snow-blown fields towards the setting sun. Let us not be misled by the surprising sentimentalism, at first glance, of this sentence and action. It is not a "beautiful" view that is the aim of this expedition; on the contrary – in a certain way the point is what cannot be seen. "I go forth to see the sun set"; reading this, we must take account of the accent: although both "seeing" and "sun" undoubtedly find a place in the alliterating melody of this utterance, the sentence is strung between the taking of the road that opens the phrase and the going down of the sun with which it closes. I set out to walk in order to see what is really only a possibility. "We should come home from far, from adventures, and perils, and discoveries every day, ...]" (*W*, 135).



First of all because I do not know what I am to expect: "Who knows how it [the sun] will set, even half an hour beforehand? whether it will go down in clouds or a clear sky?" (*J*, 3, 155). Secondly, because the closer it comes to that moment, the less – among the growing shadows – there really is to see: "[t]he shadow is not partial but universal." What we called a moment ago a vision of "possibility" (in the double sense both of something unpredictable and of something that at the last moment disappears from our sight) means a transferring of my understanding of the world from the level of "statement" to the level of "suggestion": **that which exists reveals itself as possibility, and hence suggests itself, thereby opening**

around itself fields of further possibilities. And then imagination proves itself to be essential. The straight road of rational presentation of the object, by which the world is displayed in the order of statement, is now confronted with a whirling movement that forms fantastic, unforeseeable shapes, a world conceivable only in the order of suggestion.



In Thoreau's observation of the red cloud that accompanies the sunset, the point is not to describe physical processes ("You tell me it is a mass of vapor which absorbs all other rays [...]") in a manner that locks the phenomenon into a defined shape. Quite the reverse: the point is to open up the object and divest it of its unambiguity. **For Thoreau the object is something that extends beyond its outlines, something that – itself destabilized and wrested out of its accustomed rut – becomes a source of thought and of the body's invigoration.** Laying aside scientific explanations, Thoreau continues: "[...] that is nothing to the purpose, for this red vision excites me, stirs my blood, makes my thoughts flow, and I have new and indescribable fancies, and you have not touched the secret of that influence" (*J*, 3, 156-157). Hence the *Journal* – a form of registration of the world that brooks no delay: "The writer who postpones the recording of his thoughts uses an iron which has cooled to burn a hole with" (*J*, 3, 293).



It is not elucidation that is at stake, but its very opposite: arriving at the dark heart of the object. Not "meaning", which leads us into the necessary technical and scientific world, but "symbol". This in turn refers us not to the instrumental aspect of the elucidated object, but to that which in every judgment of a given object is "something unexplainable to understanding" (*J*, 3, 156). Looking at the cloud lit red from below by the rays of the setting sun, Thoreau writes: "It is what it suggests and is the symbol of that I care for, and if, by any trick of science, you rob it of its symbolicalness, you do me no service and explain nothing." (*J*, 3, 155). **Knowledge must thus constantly mediate between understanding and imagination.** "What sort of science is that which enriches the understanding, but robs the imagination?" (*J*, 3, 156), asks Thoreau.



This criticism leads, not to an exposure of the uselessness of rational processes of understanding, but to their grounding in imagination. Without imagination, "science" runs into debt to procedures of "understanding"; and the loan cannot be repaid. It destroys the state of balance between the human being and the world, which now appears as comprehensible only in the categories of instrumentally

understood rationality and the needs generated by it. Thoreau's economic and legal terminology cannot but make one wonder; following on from the question recalled a moment ago, the philosopher writes: it "not merely robs Peter to pay Paul, but takes from Peter more than it ever gives to Paul". Analysis of this state of things must lead to abandonment of the concept of "need" as traditionally understood, as justification for the existence of objects. Now "need", or "benefit", is transferred from the sphere of pure instrumentality to that of "suggesting thoughts to us". The benefit flowing from the object as answering a certain particular need gains a significant complementary value, in that the object "gives us food for thought".



So we read: "If there is nothing in it [your explanation] which speaks to my imagination, what boots it?" (*J*, 3, 156). Let us notice that it is to imagination that both the effect of the things to be found in my field of vision ("a crimson cloud"), and the manner in which judgments are passed on them ("your explanation") are addressed. Thoreau's critical philosophy, after its ontological (arriving at "bare existence") and epistemological (changing the way of seeing reality) phases, also penetrates to the sphere of style; **the new philosophy of the object must find a new manner of expression**. Eight years later, John Dewey was again to set before humanities the task of finding words free of the automatic and habitual to describe the procedures of knowing; and, like Thoreau, he was to move towards that end by turning towards the imagination, as in the following passage from the 1938 study *Art As Experience*:

Trains of what by courtesy are called ideas become mechanical. They are easy to follow, too easy. Observation as well as overt action is subject to inertia and moves in the line of least resistance. A public is formed that is inured to certain ways of seeing and thinking. It likes to be reminded of what is familiar. Unexpected turns then arouse irritation instead of adding poignancy to experience. Words are particularly subject to this tendency towards automatism. If their almost mechanical sequence is not too prosaic, a writer gets the reputation of being clear merely because the meanings he expresses are so familiar as not to demand thought by the reader. The academic and eclectic in any art is the outcome. The peculiar quality of the imaginative is best understood when placed in opposition to the narrowing effect of habituation. Time is the test that discriminates the imaginative from the imaginary. The latter passes because it is arbitrary. The imaginative endures because, while at first strange with respect to us, it is enduringly familiar with respect to the nature of things¹¹.

11 John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958) 269.

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Thoreau's work is a passage in which the romantic becomes pragmatic. His criticism of the "automatism" of words is not a radical rejection of their usefulness: more than one sphere is involved in our getting to know the world, and perhaps the drive of Thoreau's effort of reflection is towards turning our attention to the **polyepistemic**. It is not within a single circle that we come to know the world; imagination's task is not simply to occupy a position of epistemological monopoly, for its logic is not that of a revolutionary striving at all costs to replace the old order with a new one. Thoreau is not a revolutionary of the imagination, since he makes allowance for many orders, as when, pointing out the differences between "understanding" and "imagination", he writes that the scandal of cognition consists precisely in a radical overthrow by which one force mechanically replaces another. Such substitution impoverishes human life, for it leads to deformation of reality in consequence of falsifying the results of knowledge.

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Putting the effects of instrumental, scientific and technical reflection in the place of imagination produces unsatisfactory results: "Just as inadequate to a mechanic would be a poet's account of a steam engine" (*J*, 3, 156). In the first chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau was to formulate this thesis in yet another way: establishing a monopoly of thinking of an instrumental kind leads to instrumentalization of human beings themselves. The ceaseless social and economic evolution leads unnoticeably to a situation in which "men have become the tools of their tools" (*W*, 24). Elsewhere, comparing manual and mechanical production, Thoreau was to write that in the latter, "the man is turned partly into a machine", whereas "the workman's relation to his work is more poetic, he also shows more dexterity and is more of a man" (*J*, 11, 227).

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The author of the *Journal* directs his criticism not so much against "rationalism" as against the "rationalizing" of reality that is responsible for reducing the world to a collection of predictably operating and constantly improved instruments ("Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys" – *W*, 33). Accepting such a vision of the world means, as Jung would put it, an "inflation of consciousness", that is the reduction of understanding exclusively to the level of the individual's ambition and bio-social bonds, in which economic interest plays the principal role. In this context, we may note Roman Berger's view that we are witnesses of how "the individual lowers his or her degree of preference in order to adapt to the average level of a given environment. The mechanisms of the unconscious then make

themselves felt: ‘denial’, ‘rationalization’, ‘projection’¹². Somewhat as William Blake had done a little earlier, Thoreau aims not to dethrone reason, but to show how powerful, indeed tyrannical, are the tendencies involved in the procedures of rational reflection; procedures that claim to be unbiased.



The point, then, is the character of the bond between thought and hand. Haste, already perceived by Goethe as the dominant feature of the modern world, reveals itself strikingly in the way in which we conquer space. But this is only a symptom; the hidden essence of the matter is founded in the shortening of distance between thought and its practical application. In an interesting passage, we read: “We seek too soon to ally the perceptions of the mind to the experience of the hand, to prove our gossamer truths practical, to show their connection with our every-day life (better show their distance from our every-day life), to relate them to the cider mill and the banking institution” (*J*, 3, 156-157). Thoreau’s interest is in opening up a space of **unhurried thought**. This is not to excommunicate the practical applications of reflection, but to strive to find an appropriate time for them. To rediscover a rhythm of action that is concurrent with the rhythm of thought: this is the aim of a philosophy that is not to be merely a process of discovering the views of philosophers, but an art of life; a *Lebensphilosophie* consisting simply in establishing a rhythm between thought and hand.



The journal entry that we are considering here was made four years after the end of Thoreau’s existential experiment, the two-year sojourn on Walden Pond; but in the first chapter of the book that describes this, we find a significant comment concerning the restoration of the meaning of philosophy as **reflection** that constitutes an essential preparation for action: “There are now professors of philosophy, but not professors. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, 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” (*W*, 9). The opening up of a space for unhurried thought mentioned a moment ago is not a matter of rejecting the everyday practices of living. On the contrary, it is an attempt to restore meaning to this sphere. It is the practice of life that must deal with the limitations of language: “Who will undertake to describe in words the difference in tint between two neighboring leaves on the same tree?” (*J*, 11, 255).

12 Roman Berger, “Celanstimmen – głosy na koniec czasu”, *Zasada twórczości. Wybór pism z lat 1984-2005*, ed. K.Droba and S.Kosz (Katowice: Akademia Muzyczna, 2005) 374. Translation of this fragment – J.W.

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Thought is the leaven of poetry and action; *poiesis* is thought's element. Like William Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Thoreau returns to the concept of energy, in which thought is a poetic activity subject to the sanction of ethical courage. "He is the man of energy, in whom subtle and poetic thoughts are bred" (*J*, 10, 404). Such a man not only shows dynamism in action, but also belongs entirely, without remainder, to the sphere of strength and its influence; he is, as Thoreau writes, a "man of energy". The thinker is a poet of action. In the same journal entry of May 1858 we read: "The thinker, he who is serene and self-possessed, is the brave, not the desperate soldier.". It is in this high position of *poiesis* that the philosophical background to the principle of civic disobedience and its political consequences is to be sought. "If you think the fatal thought of men and institutions, you need never pull the trigger. The consequences of thinking inevitably follow" (*J*, 10, 405).

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To return to the etymological meaning of philosophy as "love of wisdom" is not to announce the primacy of "subtle thoughts" over "life". The philosopher, in contrast to the "professor of philosophy", locates himself outside the "system", and this indicates three characteristics of the thinker. First, the philosopher who operates in the space of unhurried thought will not belong to a system or "school"; second, such a philosopher will also not belong entirely to the institutionalised "system" of the academic lecture; while third, as follows from these two observations, such a philosopher, since he does not treat either a "system" of thought or the "system" of an institution as the main point of reference for his reflection, will have to start from observation of his own life and thought. In this sense the philosopher must begin with "life" and return to "life"; but now, once he has made this about-turn, returning to the Ithaca of the everyday, life becomes a matter of "simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust" – and here Thoreau's use of nouns seems to strengthen the philosophical eloquence of his thesis.

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It is as if we find here a different understanding of the Nietzschean concept of *Wiederkunft*, which was to appear forty years later: if "living" precedes "professing" ("Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live"), and if we draw conclusions from this precedence that lead to an appropriate rhythm of life (also a proper rhythm of relation between thought and hand), then professing and living must become one. For "professing" loses its exceptional position, that is the place assigned by the system for cultivating "subtle thoughts", and becomes part of life led in accordance with a rhythm of "simplicity, independence, magnanimity

and trust". The "return" to life is thus a return that is as necessary as it is merely apparent, for the philosopher has never really left it. Those who do leave it are headed for the misty provinces of inauthentic life, which Thoreau elsewhere describes as "mean" ("I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that that *is* which *appears* to be" (*W*, 63).



The philosophical odyssey consists, then, not in traversing huge spaces, but in discovering that one always remains within the circle of the everyday. The philosopher's return to life is a renewal of a vision of the world that reveals its "non-nativeness" and "unfamiliarity" as, paradoxically, the only familiar, only "native" region of human life. So the point lies in confirming – let us add, in *openly* confirming, and in a moment we shall come back to that openness – our deep, not merely professional, involvement in what we do. As contrasted with slothful indolence in respect of our own thoughts: "No exercise implies more real manhood and vigor than joining thought to thought. How few men can tell what they have thought. I hardly know half a dozen who are not too lazy for this" (*J*, 10, 405). This is how one might think Nietzsche's "eternal return", whose idea consists not in "the *fact* of the eternal recurrence, [...] but the *thought* [...]" that one commits oneself eternally to performing the actions that one chooses"¹³.



This means at the same time that even the life that I lead before the perceptual and existential watershed, that "mean life" of which we read in *Walden*, is not entirely worthless, for it constitutes the indispensable preparation for that watershed. Thoreau's critique of modernity does not consist in a radical denial of the world whose birth and rapacious development the philosopher observed in a changing Concord. Thoreau strives to "see through" this world, to separate its layer of "appearance" ("We think that that *is* which *appears* to be") from the layer of "being", and in this way reach the "hard bottom" of reality. A well-known passage from the second chapter of *Walden* presents this intention: "Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*" (*W*, 63-64).

13 Alan D. Schrift, *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation. Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 70.

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Penetrating below the surface of the object is thus a return to everyday reality, but seen this time from two points of view. One, strictly individual, I have arrived at by my own analysis; the other, always kept in mind by me, is common to me and to others. This dual situating of the subject leads to a duality of utterance concerning the world; in one order, that of the “surface”, this is the discourse of “opinion, prejudice, tradition” (which includes the traditional academic lecture – a cool and impersonal presentation of the opinions of others); in the other, the philosopher must seek out his own form of utterance, because as he will always be speaking “*for himself*”, we will also speak “*himself*”. The return to the everyday and to the fitting and wise practice of the everyday is thus a kind of Nietzschean “eternal return” which Gary Shapiro describes as “the quest for a private language in which one can say that which is truly one’s own [...]. Zarathustra’s thinking [...] is best seen as a metaphilosophical demonstration of what happens when one explores one’s very own thought in one’s very own language”¹⁴.

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The philosopher will not be satisfied with any source of reflection that he can discover in another thinker. He will look for sources in his own self. To put the matter more accurately, one should say that the philosopher turns towards those regions in which thought is not yet thought, but only the leaven or presaging of thought, the possibility of its promise. When I refer to another philosopher, or to a system or school, I come upon ready-formed, already formulated ideas, whereas the task of the philosopher is to reach the place where thought is only just beginning to form. **The “unready” thought, the thought that is forming itself, and thus is free of any kind of systematic shape, the thought that fits no prepared moulds, the “not-yet-thinking thought”, so to speak – it is for this that the philosopher’s inquiry makes its bid.** It is a task inevitably involving the Herculean labor of moving to one side all that has so far been piled up; and Thoreau treats this as a heroic, agonistic struggle: “There is no more Herculean task than to think a thought about this life and then get it expressed” (*J*, 10, 405).

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This is why we also read in Thoreau’s entries for the same winter of 1851: “It would be a truer discipline for the writer to take the least film of thought that floats in the twilight sky of his mind for his theme, about which he has scarcely one idea [...], faintest intimations, shadowiest subjects, make a lecture on this, by assiduity and attention get perchance two views of the same, increase a little the stock of

14 Gary Shapiro, *Nietzschean Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 91.

knowledge, clear a new field instead of manuring the old; instead of making a lecture out of such obvious truths, hackneyed to the minds of all thinkers” (*J*, 3, 156). The “discipline” that is Thoreau’s subject here signifies an exercise in turning inwards, in contrast to “professorial” enquiries, which are concerned mostly with what other thinkers have already succeeded in formulating. Philosophy is a “discipline”, not, however, in the sense of an appropriately designated sphere of academic life, but in the sense of self-reflection, penetrating reaches that are free of this kind of “disciplinary” and “disciplining” demarcation.



Roman Berger writes of the kind of discipline that enlivens (though it does not “discipline”) Thoreau’s thought: “A system of exercises. Discipline. Introduction to the everyday life practice of order. [...] hygiene is necessary – not only in the way we eat, but in the sphere of looking, listening, reading. Discipline of attention. Differentiation between the outer and the inner – directing attention inwards, to the depths”¹⁵. *Walden*’s author’s tireless walks, his painstaking observation of plants and birds, his studies of animal tracks, those pages covered with Latin and English names of specimens – all these were quite simply a “spiritual exercise”, the disciplining of “assiduity” that is essential to the philosopher who moves in the sphere of unhurried thought and who persuades us to an unhurried life full of reflection: “We should not meet [...] in haste. Most men I do not meet at all, for they seem not to have time; they are busy about their beans” (*W*, 107).



Thoreau never tires of returning to the idea that thought should begin in a zone that is not cultivated (at least in any obvious way) by others; the point is to clear virgin territories, not to move along well-marked roads. It is in the situation where the reaches of thought are unmapped territory, untouched by such anticipated indices as the names of famous thinkers, that the opportunity comes for us to measure up to thought that has not yet taken shape, to the premonition and intuition of thought. So the philosopher works where truths are cloudy, scarcely outlined, no more than a gossamer borne on the wind of the fortuity of fate. This means that we abandon the conviction of “firm”, uniform and seamless truth; now the philosopher tracks the delicate strands of thought that lead him towards “gossamer truths”, not only “rare”, and thus not constituting an object for explanation by “systems” and “schools”, but also illuminated from various points of view.

15 Berger, “*Opus magnum. Dziewiętnaście spojrzeń na Oliviera Messiaena*”, *Zasada twórczości...* 350. Translation of this fragment – J.W.

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What is more, where academic philosophy, revolving within the enchanted circle of a “discipline”, seeks expression for well-known, stabilized truths, unhurried thought, abandoning the archive and vocabularies of systems, must at every occasion find a new means of expression. We can find both these observations in another remark of Thoreau’s, this one, having the character of an instruction: “Do not seek expressions, seek thoughts to be expressed. By perseverance you get two views of the same rare truth” (*J*, 3, 157). We thus understand the author’s invocation, “Ah, give me pure mind, pure thought!” in the same part of the *Journal*, as defining the agenda of a philosopher whose aim is a breakthrough in perception, designed to replace “tradition” and “opinion” with a view of the object that enables its surface to be penetrated. This in turn is conditioned by the degree to which the thinker is capable of undertaking the risk of defending the lightness of “gossamer” truth over against the monumental truths of the “system”.

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Pure mind is thus not simply Kantian “pure reason”. On the contrary, “purity” of mind in Thoreau’s recommendation is not a matter of making available to the mind the procedures of logical deduction. Instead, it is the mind – as “phenomenological reason” – that is here to discover itself in the whole dense material of its involvement in the world. We emphasize “its”, because “purity” of mind assumes an essential procedure of reduction of opinions and judgments that have been taken for granted. The pure mind is the one that looks with assiduous attention at the object and purifies it by this careful gaze from all foreign accretions and “alluvions” in order to allow it to come into existence in its separate distinctiveness. Like Blake in his conception of “Minute Particulars”, Thoreau sets himself the aim of creating a phenomenology of the separate, individual object: “Let me not be in haste to detect the *universal law*; let me see more clearly a particular instance of it!” (*J*, 3, 157).

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Now we can better grasp Thoreau’s philosophy of distance. Before it appears fully in ethical reflection, as a significant element in the philosophy of friendship, we can already see here the important role it plays in the theory and practice of unhurried thought. When, in the passage recalled earlier, Thoreau recommends maintaining the appropriate distance between thought and hand, he is making a bid not only for seriousness of thought, but also for the existential placing of the one who thinks. Liberated from the discipline of a system, restored to the discipline of careful looking as a spiritual exercise, the one who thinks seriously now begins to move in the open space between thought and hand. “Distance from our every-day

life” does not mean that the thinking subject shuts himself or herself off from the hustle and bustle of the everyday; this very distance is intended to restore us to that everyday, which enables the one who thinks to turn towards the distant and invisible sources of thought, and by so doing to impart to the activities of daily life a deeper significance than the one we usually grant them in our automatic execution of them.



Thoreau’s “distance” means liberation, both of the very space of our daily existence and of the one who undertakes the effort of thought within this space. As in Nietzsche, we encounter here the yearning whose object is no longer this or that particular achievement (this is the source of satisfaction in instrumental-scientific thinking), but the possibility of moving within the suddenly accessible space. Now the destination is no longer the most significant thing: “Such a longing is content to live with distances because it does not have to go anywhere. Its desire is not directed toward any specific objects in their specificity; the desire is rather to dance or play over the many things of human space and time that are separate from one another”¹⁶. This desire also fits within the horizons of the ethical man as Kierkegaard defines him: “He is a definite individual, in the choice he makes himself into a definite individual, that is to say, into the same, for he chooses himself [...]. The person who lives ethically always has a way out, [...]. there is always a point he keeps hold of, and it is – himself”¹⁷. Emerson was to name this the principle of *self-reliance*.



It is in the same way that Jean Jacques Rousseau carries out the therapy designed to cure him of fear and despair. In his eighth walk, recalling his “awful state”, he also speaks of the “serenity, tranquillity, peace and even [...] happiness”¹⁸ that followed this, attributing it to the attitude of *amor fati*, which in its turn is a consequence of relying on himself. We can only become aware of the events of the world as necessity (“I have learned to bear the yoke of necessity without complaining”) when we recognize, not so much general, teleological rationality, but the haphazardness of the opinions that shape social topography (“[...] the principles on which men base their opinions are drawn solely from their passions or their prejudices which are created by their passions”). Rousseau presents this as

16 Shapiro 93.

17 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1992) Part 2, 543-544.

18 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Russell Goulbourne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 85-86.