WONDER AND AFFLICTION:

THOREAU'S DIONYSIAN WORLD

Edward F. Mooney
Syracuse University

Tragic undercurrents, figured both as primal sufferings and as literary coping with sufferings, course through Thoreau's writing, especially in some of his lesser-read works, and prominently in his *Journals*. "If it is not a tragical life we live, then I know not what to call it".[1] These dark currents surface in his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, written as a memorial to his older brother. John had died in Henry's arms, suffering a tortured death from lockjaw. This tragic strain also surfaces in his description, in *Cape Cod*, of approaching a partially buried and decomposed corpse abandoned in the sand after a deadly wreck, a body we take to be Margaret Fuller's.[2] We find it also in his impassioned defense of the martyred anti-slavery militant, John Brown.[3] Attending to these tragic undertows gives his steady affirmations a higher pitch of urgency, and also gives a new angle on his concept of the wild. Thoreau's theme of the wild is pluriform, but one of its dimensions is related to tragedy and to what Nietzsche calls the Dionysian. Thoreau's writing is a way to resist tragedy as raw suffering and to redeem the world through art, making life sufferable, as the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy* claims it can. From the midst of inescapable afflictions, writing can open into the sublime and the sacred.[4] If not in the style of Cartesian meditations, Thoreau gives us nevertheless a

[1] *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers,* ed. Carl F. Hovde, William L. Howarth, and Elizabeth Hall Witherell, Princeton University Press, 1980, "Sunday", p. 67. Henceforth, *Week.* From the *Journals*: "What a pity if the part of Hamlet be left out", March 21, 1840, 1st paragraph. "The whole of life is seen by some through this darker medium, - partakes of the tragic, - and its bright and splendid lights become thus lurid", September 1, 1852; and Jan. 8, 1854, 11th paragraph. "It is the . . . wild thinking in Hamlet – in the Iliad – and in all the scriptures and mythologies that delights us." November 16, 1850, 3rd paragraph. Henry D. Thoreau, *Journal*, Vols. I- VIII, ed. John C. Broderick et. al., Princeton University Press, 1981-2008. I thank Lyman Mower for compiling these passages.

[2] *Cape Cod*, Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1961, Chapter 6, p. 123f. In 1850 Thoreau travelled from Concord to the site of the shipwreck to search for Fuller's remains, but did not find a body he could identify as hers. In his *Journal,* Oct. 31,1850, he records walking a beach in search of remains; later he inserts that evocation with slight changes, in *Cape Cod*.

[3] "A Plea for Captain John Brown", and "The Last Days of John Brown", *The Essays of Henry D. Thoreau*, selected and ed. Lewis Hyde, North Point Press, 2002. Henceforth, *Essays.*

[4] In "Silence and the Night" (unpublished), Lyman Mower discusses the contention of Levinas that although tragic drama can succeed in bringing suffering to a partial relief through catharsis, there is raw suffering from which there is

recognizably philosophical writing now reminiscent of the voice of Aurelius or Levinas, now reminiscent of Nietzsche, Rousseau or the German Romantics.[5] But this waits to be shown. Starting with Thoreau in stride with Nietzsche's Dionysian wild, I end with Thoreau in stride with Kierkegaard's philosophical and religious explorations. The upshot is that just as Emerson should be read with Kant and Nietzsche, so should Thoreau be read alongside his continental contemporaries from Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer to Nietzsche.

§ 1 TRAGEDY AND DIONYSIAN RELIGION

In the first instance, tragedy is not a theatrical performance or literary genre, still less a philosophical *theory* of the human condition. It is a condition of terrible suffering. A person or persons are at the center of affliction, which spreads out in waves to afflict others who witness. Tragedy on stage feeds on our knowledge of off-stage tragedy, and gives us a culturally shared scenario of life at the limit. It is a condition suffered viscerally, pressing the senses to the point of radical incapacity. We are struck dumb, blinded. The world is present with intensity so explosive that it simultaneously verges on total blackout, loss of self *and* world. We are not ourselves but become the very pain of our affliction.

Oedipus rips out his eyes because he cannot bear what he has seen, but it is also true that there is no more left to see, given pain's saturation of his bodily consciousness. His world *is* his suffering, and he doesn't need eyes to know that. He remains the intense living site of pain's demonic power even while his suffering wipes out any other world. Yet Oedipus and Hamlet and Lear are not utterly stripped of speech, mad though that speech may become. Tragic suffering in these cases occasions eloquent lament, and the resisting affirmation of human expressive powers – occasions an insistence on dignity in circumstances that undermine it. "The need for dignity arises", Fred Beiser writes, "when tragic circumstances put a strain on our human

no release, escape, or mitigation through art or any other means: pointless, useless, insufferable. He calls this 'the tragic'. See *Time and The Other*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, 1987, p 73. Thoreau starts his *Journal*, noting the trouble (if not outright suffering) of always recurring human need, his need, "to escape myself", Oct 22, 1837.

[5] Both Thoreau and Levinas can be seen to endorse "ethics as first philosophy", the idea of a call or demand or "appearance" ('ethics') that exceeds our most heroic metaphysical reach. Alfred I. Tauber begins this discussion in *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing*, University of California Press, 2001; he acknowledges an encompassing debt to Levinas, p. xi and p. 231. See also Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, Stanford University Press, 2008, especially Chapter 5, "Scarce Resources? Levinas, Animals, and the Environment".

nature, on the normal human constitution."[6] To achieve tragic dignity is to become more than a defeated victim of harsh fate. As Nietzsche put it in *The Birth of Tragedy*, to attain a tragic dignity is to defeat the so-called wisdom of Silenus: *better to die early*, *best never to have been born*.[7] Whatever tragedy Oedipus or Hamlet endures, and whatever tragic circumstance Thoreau endures, a measure of dignity can supervene. Thoreau will embrace what Nietzsche identifies as the inversion of Silenus, the heroic wisdom of Achilles: *better to live long, but best never to die*.[8]

Nietzsche sees the roots of tragic drama in Dionysian religious rites that enact great suffering and sacrifice. A performance of violence and sacrifice preempts and forestalls raw annihilation by giving affliction a ceremonial voice. Recurrent enactments become a celebration not only of cycles of death but of connected cycles of rebirth. Participants survive to enact lives and deaths once more and again, accompanied by music, dance, and intoxication. Dionysus is ripped apart and then reborn. Celebrants undergo cruelty and its *survival,* a metamorphosis of the worst of affliction and dismemberment. Nietzschean invocations of Dionysus can model the sort of suffering and survival Thoreau describes and lives out.

Through the eloquence of words and walking, Thoreau articulates and lives out the ephemerality of pain and its transformations as death yields to life and life yields to death. In the swamp outside Concord in what he calls a hell before the coming war, he smells paradise in a lily.[9] There is inescapable hell to undergo, even Dionysian dismemberment, which was Margaret Fuller's fate. This young and greatly gifted philosophical-literary companion of Emerson and Thoreau drowned in shark-filled waters off Long Island, returning by sea from the Italian Revolution. Thoreau was sent to the Fire Island beach to find in the wreckage the body and what might remain of her personal effects. Yet in the pages of the journal that finally

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[6] Frederick Beiser, "*Schiller as Philosopher*: A Reply to my Critics" *Inquiry*. Vol. 51, No 1, Feb 2008, p. 69. "The personal suffering or sacrifice involved in performing some moral actions is the result of tragic circumstances as much as the weakness of human nature. Gods, angels, or titans, which have much more robust constitutions, could do all their duties with grace simply because they are never prone to suffering. Dignity indeed arises because of the great weakness of human nature; but that weakness reveals itself only under tragic circumstances." Of course not all suffering is tragic suffering. Suffering through a difficult exam is hardly tragic.

[7] Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, ed. tr. Douglas Smith, Oxford, 2000, p. 27. Henceforth, *Birth.*

[8] *Birth*, p. 28

[9] See "Slavery in Massachusetts", *Essays*, p. 193.

make their way into *Cape Cod,* Thoreau can bring wonder and majesty to that desolate site.[10] If there is inescapable affliction, there is also metamorphosis. Dismemberments lurk without attaining *enduring* or *unmitigated* dominance.[11]

As Nietzsche sees it, tragic theater grows out of Dionysian rites. In early theater, a tragic hero emerges who suffers yet eloquently *resists.* The Dionysian wildness at the archaic heart of tragic drama is wiped out, as Nietzsche sees it, with the triumph of rationality, ascetic intellectualism, and a rage for order. Athenian Platonism (or as he would call it, Socratic religiousness) is a stance that denies death *and* life. Nietzsche valorizes wildness as a necessary counterforce to more orderly Apollonian aspects of life and art. Both Thoreau and Nietzsche disavow any theoretical *onlooking* that sunders a person from immersion in the senses and in embodied life.

The Dionysian sets a context for Thoreau's affirmation of a many-faceted wildness that engenders and preserves the world. Other aspects of the wild, each pulling in a slightly different direction, are linked to the tragic or Dionysian. For instance, there is Thoreau's sense of the woodland or forest wild celebrated by present-day conservationists.[12] There is also wildness in all life in its strivings and declines, of trees and insects as well as of salmon and hawks, a bio-centric view of creation. There is the alien, forbidding, even horrific wild that Thoreau finds atop Mt. Ktaadn as well as the lethal wild that wipes out Margaret Fuller, Emerson's young son, and Thoreau's older brother. Each of these contrasting facets of 'the' wild can be threaded through the primal-theme of a Dionysian wild.

"The Dionysian" is not a Thoreauvian term of art, though it weaves unnamed throughout his work. Take his intoxicated pursuits through woods and mountains, his wild desire to devour a woodchuck in his path, his joy in tasting fermented and wild frozen apples, his rebellion against Apollonian stasis in business-as-usual Concord, his tracking cycles of death and rebirth in plants and all life (a Dionysian centerpiece), his

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[10] *Journal*, after October 31, 1850, Princeton edition, Vol. 3, p. 127; *Cape Cod*, p. 123f.

[11] On the possibility that some tragic moments are beyond redemption, see note 4, above.

[12] "In wildness is the preservation of the world", the environmentalist banner, comes from "Walking", *Essays*, 162: "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild, and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World. Every tree sends its fibers forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plow and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind." Note that 'the wild' is something cities import and tree roots seek.

affinity for the wildness of John Brown (who, on Thoreau's rendering, dies and becomes immortal),[13] his sense of impending apocalyptic destruction, laid out at the biblical close of his essay "Wild Apples" – not to mention his thoughts on music: "there is something in a strain of music [which] reminds me of the cries emitted by wild beasts".[14] And "It is the wild thinking in Hamlet . . . that delights us".[15] In *A Week on the Concord* he alludes to archaic Corybantic rites.[16] Only half tongue-in-cheek, in "Walking", Thoreau says he might prefer that life be "a divine tragedy" rather than "this trivial comedy or farce".[17] And his treasured fields become "a Dismal Swamp".[18] There is a recurrent Dionysian sensibility breathing beneath the deceptive quiets of Walden Pond and daily pastoral saunters.

Even in writing *Walden*, Thoreau acknowledges what Nietzsche would recognize as the haunting presence of the Dionysian (not to mention the measured and serene Apollonian).

> [I] find an instinct toward a higher . . . life and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good.[19]

The fires of the tragic feed the prophetic outrage of his political essays and burn slowly even under the more meditative tone of his *Week on the Concord.* We should not overlook, in this account of a trip with his brother, the sobering, even silencing, presence of an other wild story of the river from a century and a half earlier, inserted quite unexpectedly. It is the story of Hannah Duston's escape down the Merrimack after her capture in an Indian raid in 1697. Her still-nursing child was ripped from her arms and savagely killed.

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[13] Thoreau transfigures Brown's execution into a deserved immortality. That "translation" into heaven might be a harbinger of life after apocalypse: Brown would "return" to reign, following the carnage and fires of a great Civil War. See "The Last Days", *Essays*.
[14] "Wild Apples", *Essays*, p. 312; "Walking", *Essays*, p. 168.
[15] "Walking", *Essays*, p. 166; also *Journals*, Nov 16, 1850, 3rd paragraph..
[16] See *Week*, p. 337. The Corybantes were children of Apollo and Thalia (the rustic muse of comedy). Revelers enacted deaths and rebirths through non-linguistic vehicles not unlike the walking, tasting, beholding, and climbing that we find in Thoreau.
[17] "Walking", *Essays*, p. 173.
[18] Ibid. p. 164.
[19] *Walden*, 'Higher Laws", opening paragraph. Within the opening pages we are given the wildly comic picture of Thoreau wanting to devour a woodchuck, to ingest wildness itself, as if incorporating wild flesh makes one even *more* wild. Eating the wild also (or alternatively) might *tame* or *deflect* it. Further on in "Higher Laws", the wild seems less reverenced, and the Apollonian ('higher'), more. Thoreau plays out both instincts, neither one unnerving the other. He tilts *Walden* toward the Apollonian and "Wild Apples" or "Ktaadn" (for instance), toward the Dionysian. Nietzsche has tragic drama require the reign of *both* divinities.

Later she killed and scalped her captors in their sleep, carrying her bloody trophies downstream in her canoe. This is far from Apollonian classical orderliness.

Plato says philosophy is a rehearsal for death.[20] Thoreau had no rehearsal for John's death, suffered at close quarters. Thoreau was invaded three days later as death hollowed him out and took up residence. Thoreau took on all of John's dying symptoms. Philosophy, nestled in the narrative of *A Week,* became a kind of retrospective accounting of his love for his brother, his 'friendship' (though that's too weak a word) with John, disrupted by death, and became an accounting with the violent story of Hannah Duston.[21] He had translated the violence in Aeschylus and Homer. He would later be spiritually eviscerated high on Mt. Ktaadn.[22] Through the mist he sees the top to be the workshop of indifferent Gods. He feels his spirit fly outward from a crack between his ribs. But this Ktaadn-based anxious death and recovery would be a minor skirmish next to John's dying.

Death's insistence calls us to life and to moods that are counter to death: joy and exaltation (among others). Philosophy can be a preparation by recuperating a sense of place and aliveness as a counter-weight to devastation.[23] It is an arc rising from sadness and grief to lamentation and on toward ever-stronger affirmations in (and of) an anomalous, wonder-saturated world. Thoreau presents a wry and exuberant resistance lived out in walking, moving up river, skating, tasting fermented cold apples, writing through and over all of these. His walk into life reanimates the movement of limbs and the movement of pencil over and

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[20] *Phaedo*, 64a-c.

[21] On John Thoreau's death, see *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*, Robert D. Richardson Jr., University of California Press, 1986, p. 113f., and Wai Chee Dimock's brilliant account of the "symbiosis" between brothers that through which Henry took on John's bodily symptoms: "Global Civil Society: Thoreau on Three Continents" in *Through Other Continents*, Princeton, 2006, Chapt 1. The somatic-psychic border is porous within any single person, but also between persons and across time. Henry's body is porous to John's and Henry's psychic borders are porous enough to receive the *Gita,* allowing it to link humankind globally and through time. Her account of the "travel" the *Gita* on death, life, and violence to Thoreau to Gandhi to King (and endless others) inspires my essay "For Love of the World: Thoreau's Translations". For the transmutation of Duston's saga, hese events into a myth of American Fall from Innocence, see Linck C. Johnson's invaluable *Thoreau's Complex Weave: The Writing of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers,* University of Virginia Press, 1986, Ch. 4, pp. 122-62 I am grateful for the provocation of her essay, and to Clark West for passing it on.

[22] See Thoreau, *The Maine Woods,* ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer, Princeton University Press 1972. : "Ktaadn", p. 69-71.

[23] We could say that philosophy's concern is to raise from the dead what is best (the 'friend' evoked in a *Week*, the Fuller who reigns over the beach). We have no need to redeem what is better split off as decaying flesh, and every reason to raise what can be retained as the love or smile or power of the dead. To distinguish what is best left buried and what is worthy lifting up from the grave is the accomplishment of wise perception. The raising of the dead is an achievement of perception and of wise and eloquent words.

through his *Journal*. It is a crescendo toward acknowledgment of a Dionysian, musical pulse of life and death, of a god of disorder, drunkenness, and night.

Searching for Fuller's personal effects, Thoreau returned to Concord having found nothing but scraps of clothing. Bones in the sand, never precisely defined as hers, were still on his mind days later when he reports a "lurid" " blood-stained" sky. Not insignificantly, he also called that sunset "glorious".[24] Writing a monument to Fuller's majesty was, as we will see, an imaginative achievement. From the middle of Dionysian wildness, he preserves and redeems the song of Achilles: *better to live long; best never to die*.

Thoreau needs to find the knit of things against threats of unraveling. Writing through and over wilderness and death let him face unraveling while knitting composure. *A Week on the Concord* is a liturgical week, starting on Saturday, the day Christ enters the underworld to rescue the dead.[25] Thoreau's holy Saturday would bring John up from the dead. He would be more than a corpse or a body in death's spasm.

§ 2 REDEMPTIVE WRITING AND READING

A glimpse of heaven is occasion for deep joy at just being alive. It is a renewable redemption from otherwise dark desperation. Thoreau's words of gratitude and attentive praise, his hymning and love of the world, leave desperate circumstance tactfully aside -- or *nearly* aside – or on the best days, *and when possible* . . . aside.[26] As he glides across the frozen pond in pursuit of a scampering fox there's no denying his lively delight. His exuberance places him in momentary heaven. We are redeemed from our darkest hours by joining his gliding pursuit. This is affirmative joy, but it does not just spring spontaneously from the brute luck of a cheerful disposition. Consider how Thoreau works to *achieve* redemption of (and for) Margaret Fuller.

[24] Thoreau writes, "a glorious lurid sunset tonight, accompanied with many somber clouds . . . . Pale saffron skies with faint fishes of rosy clouds dissolving in them. A bloodstained sky." See Richardson, *Thoreau*, p. 215.
[25] Holy Saturday commemorates the Harrowing of Hades, Christ's descent into Hell to raise those deserving better. Clark West suggests this possibility. I thank him for countless insights into the religious dimension of Thoreau's writing.
[26] 'Falling in love with the world" is a 'blindness' permissible in the face of dismal skepticism. See Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, Oxford, 1979, p. 431. See my "Acknowledgement, Suffering and Praise: Stanley Cavell as Religious Continental Thinker," *Soundings, an Interdisciplinary Journal*, Summer, 2005, pp. 393-411. For his "redemptive writing" and "a theology of reading" see William Day, "A Soteriology of Reading: Cavell's Excerpts from Memory", to appear in a volume on Cavell edited by William Day and Victor J. Krebs, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Here he is -- along a bleak strip of beach off Long Island's Atlantic shore, some miles from Manhattan. A distant splinter marks the place he hopes holds Margaret Fuller's bones. This must be a place of grief. Yet as Thoreau approaches he sees the inconsiderable stick become a ship's spar; and then become a rugged cairn, a monument holding the place of her reign and majesty.

> Once . . . it was my business to go in search of the relics of a human body, mangled by sharks, which had just been cast up, a week after a wreck . . .. I expected that I must look very narrowly to find so small an object, but the sandy beach . . . was so perfectly smooth and bare . . . that when I was half a mile distant the insignificant sliver which marked the spot looked like a bleached spar, and the relics were as conspicuous as if they lay in state on that sandy plain, or a generation had labored to pile up their cairn there. . . . they were singularly inoffensive both to the senses and the imagination. . . That dead body had taken possession of the shore, and reigned over it as no living one could, in the name of a certain majesty that belonged to it.[27]

This passage is imported from Thoreau's *Journal* (October 31, 1850). It was written three months after he returned from Fire Island, having traveled down from Concord on hearing of the shipwreck and that Fuller had perished. There he found spectators, scavengers, and those looking for friends or relatives. He learned of an unidentified body given a shallow burial five miles up the beach, marked by a stick. Arriving, the body was too decomposed to identify. Thoreau wrote to Charles Sumner that there was such decomposition that his "poor knowledge of anatomy" left him not knowing if it were male or female.

A spar displaces a stick, and a cairn displaces a spar. The wide sweep of the shore displaces any offense the remains might have held. The scene is one of metamorphosis in an anomalous world, a world that doesn't hold still. And the place of Fuller's reign becomes the place of her communion with endless surf that brings her a kind of immortality. It is a rapport that leaves him out: he is this side of death. Thoreau lets the site be illuminated, "clarified" in his writing, lets it assume its rightful majesty. It is as if the *Journal* or

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[27] *Cape Cod*, p. 123. Lacking a body, no grave was ever erected for Fuller or her husband. Their son's body was found. I thank Steve Webb for detective work.

Cape Cod accounts show what *might have been* his discovery of Fuller's bones. Kierkegaard calls this sort of metamorphosis the transfiguration of experience: "All poetry is life's glorification (i.e. transfiguration) through its clarification (through being clarified, illuminated, 'unfolded', etc.)".[28]

> [The] bones were alone with the beach and the sea, whose hollow roar seemed to address them . . . as if there were an understanding between them and the ocean which necessarily left me out. [29]

Strips of flesh yield to rolling communion with the sea. Blinding sorrow is deflected by somber exaltation.

Poetry and philosophy can deflect the cruelest of realities without thereby being only an illicit cover-up or avoidance of truth. Recapitulation of experience in a mode that deflects can be a healthy defense -- say as we deflect a blow aimed at the head.[30] It allows us to move on. Similarly, sublimation is not always a refusal to face up to difficult reality. Thoreau's art deflects or sublimates, not as *denial* of trouble or affliction, but as activity that transfigures it in the service of restoring and redeeming life. He writes to redeem tragic conditions, as in his "Plea for John Brown", where we witness his achievement of immortality for Brown. He works to redeem Brown and Fuller, and works toward his *own* redemption from the wounds inflicted by the loss of his brother and the hell of an approaching civil war. He redeems readers by giving them a sense that *his* transforming resistance can be *theirs*.

Nietzsche reminded us of the wisdom of Achilles, *best never to die,* as a counter-weight to the dismal adage of Silenus, *best never to have been born*. We could think of Thoreau's redemptive writing as effecting a shift from Silenus to Achilles as he faces the dismal evidence of Fuller's death. In "Slavery in Massachusetts," he sees nothing but hell along his meadows and water-ways, aware as he is of increasingly violent clashes over

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[28] Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannahy, Penguin Books, 1996, 5 Feb 1839, p. 101. He raises a toast: "To genius, beauty, art, and the whole glorious world: . . May it live a transfigured life here or hereafter . . ." *Early Polemical Writings,* trans. and ed. Julia Watkin, Princeton University Press, 1990, pp. 66-7. See Joseph Westfall, *The Kierkegaardian Author: Authorship and Performance in Kierkegaard's Literary and Dramatic Criticism,* Walter de Gruyter, 2007, p. 51, p.216f.

[29] Ibid.

[30] See Ian Hacking on "deflection" in *Philosophy and Animal Life*, Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Ian Hacking, and Cary Wolfe, Columbia University Press, 2008. Cavell sees philosophical skepticism about other minds as a deflection of deep, and often tragic, loneliness and separation. Hacking reminds us that deflection is not always an unhealthy defense. See note 29, above.

slavery and the dark approaching of war. Yet walking the edge of a malodorous swamp, a fresh-smelling lily appears, a promise of purity, hope, and heaven that offsets political stench.

There are also moments of heaven in *A Week*. Having slept the night at the top of Mt. Greylock in the make-do comfort of a ramshackle coffin, he awakens to look across three states, surveying a heavenly expanse of good earth.[31] Returning to the Merrimack, an old hell obtrudes. The now and again turbulent river that Henry and John take upward toward New Hampshire's White Mountains is the river that carried a desperate Hannah Duston back down by Indian canoe, with scalps, to her burned out home in Haverhill, her slaughtered infant fresh in mind.[32] Thoreau links the upstream journey toward a source of light and life-giving waters to the downstream memory of a bitter fall for humankind in the cameo of Duston's capture, forced march, retaliatory slaughter, and downriver escape. Some years after the recapture of Anthony Burns in Boston in 1856, Thoreau laments that his usual sojourns in meadows are bringing no relief. "I cannot persuade myself", he writes, "that I do not live wholly within Hell."[33] Then a lily brings paradise.

§ 3 SENSING HEAVEN IN HELL

Thoreau elicits imagined yet not unreal moments of the best, forestalling inundations of the worst. He boils this down to the aspiration for principled action and for an increase of fragrance in the land -- delivered by lilies, for instance. In a mock-Kantian twist, he gives us his categorical imperative: "*So behave that the odor of your actions may enhance the general sweetness of the atmosphere* . . ." [34] A phoebe darts against the fragrance of a meadow, moist earth slippers our feet. These saving perceptions can be turned over in hindsight and memory, playing a crucial role in the *refinement* of perception, and in expanding our capacity to meet more fragrant worlds. Reflective memory is the space where Thoreau's *Journals* take shape, where his perceptions mature in a fertile marinate of imagination. Perception is *philia,* a companionable relation, an ongoing dance-

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[31] *Week*, p. 186-88.
[32] Joel Porte sees the upriver trip as a search for "the source of the Concord and Merrimack rivers", and the source "of all seas and mountains, indeed of primal daylight." *Consciousness and Culture: Emerson and Thoreau Reviewed*, Yale University Press, 2004, p. 131. But Porte does not connect this upstream journey to the downstream memory of tragic fall.
[33] "Slavery in Mass." Hyde, p. 192.
[34] *Ibid*. Italics mine. This mimics Kant's moral imperative, "*So act that the maxim of your action can be made universal law*."

like duet of perceiver and perceived, in process, achieved and at risk, moving always for a glimpse of heaven (as heaven glimpses us).

Heaven can appear as the wildness of a woodlot calling for attentive praise in poetry or prose. The wildness of apples calls for tribute. There is the more global wildness of all life -- from leaves and flowing sands[35] to the life of rivers and soaring hawks. To say these are heaven-like is to picture them unfolding under something like the glance of a divinity – as if a fine creator were appreciating the wonder of her work. Such an image underwrites a confidence that *here* a glimpse of heaven is achieved (when it is). And there are less salutary wilds to tally, closer to hell. There are the often wrenching lives and deaths of ordinary folk, and a terrifyingly cruel wild so vivid in the deaths of Fuller or Brown, the heartless blotting out of his brother or of Emerson's son, and in the loss of American Paradise haunting the capture and flight of Hannah Duston. As woodland wilds become heartening, lethal wilds are accordingly muted; and when the focus is death and dismemberment, woodland wilds lose salience. Yet again, there is a contrasting register, neither explicitly lethal nor warmly reassuring, the indifferent and vaguely hostile wild atop Mt. Ktaadn.

At the more desolate reaches of the wild, Thoreau shows us eloquent resistance equal to the aspirations of redemption. The very sea that kills Fuller sings to her undying spirit. Perceptual metamorphoses deliver such saving moments. Eyes *see* the spar and the cairn that memorialize Fuller, and ears *overhear* her whispered communion with the sea. Writing raises the dead though effecting sensory transformations, while the world delivers an ever-changing range of prompts fit for a modulation toward lyric perception. This ongoing three-way exchange – writing, perceiving, and incoming sources - never leaves the awakened senses behind. They are modified by writing, and writing is informed by sources that in turn feed senses and writing. Thoreau declares near the end of *A Week*, "*We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish . . .*" [36]

A sentimentalist could believe that senses can furnish a heaven, but even the rigorous Kant succumbs, as his friend Wasianski reports:

[35] For Thoreau there is life even in flowing sand. He works out this perception of living sand over visits and revisits to a sand bank, cut to make way for a rail bed. The "sandcut" is described in *Walden,* "Spring".
[36] *Week,* p. 382, *Italics* mine.

> [Kant's] face radiated [a] kind of grave charm when he told with intense delight how he had once held a Swallow in his hands, peered into its eyes, and felt as though he had looked into heaven.[37]

In a strange parallel, Thoreau imagines himself looking through the eye of a bittern, a bird contemplating water, who "may have wrested the whole of her secret from Nature." Despite her veils and secrets, Thoreau would know Nature through a liquid eye attentive to waters.[38] In *A Week*, Thoreau asks wistfully (and not altogether hopelessly) "Might I not *see* God?"[39] Perhaps seeing God is seeing a bittern who "wrests all her secrets from Nature." Perhaps seeing the bittern seeing nature is the closest we'll come to seeing God.

For Kant, mind is not an empiricist's passive, empty basket where impressions arrive for inspection or sorting or joining.[40] It is more like a construction or processing site where experience and judgments are

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[37] Wasianski: *Kant's Last Years,* quoted in W.R. Washington Sullivan, *Morality as a Religion*, BiblioBizaar 2007 [orig. 1898], p. 50.

[38] *Week* pp. 235-6. Joel Porte notes this passage, and relates it to Bachelard's discussions of Thales (water) and Heraclitus (a hearth's fire) in *Consciousness in Concord*, p. 132. Among Parisian philosophers, Bachelard was a great reader of Thoreau, as is Pierre Hadot.

[39] *Week*, p. 382.

[40] A group of Concord intellectuals became "transcendentalists" in tribute to what they knew of Kant's "transcendental philosophy". "Transcendentalists" was an adopted identity for Emerson, Fuller, and others -- but it meant many things. When Thoreau calls John Brown a "true transcendentalist" he means a man who lives high ideals, someone who transcends moral mediocrity. On the other hand, "The transcendental club" of Boston accepted the moniker bcause they saw themselves as following the "transcendental" spirit of German Philosophy -- Kant, but also his romantic and idealistic successors. Frederick Hedge returned from Germany fired up about Kant, Herder, Fichte, Schiller, Kant, Coleridge and others who offered a lofty moral philosophy that put emphasis, in Kant's phrase, on "coming into one's maturity" through critical reason that would undermine illiberal, authoritarian and clerical conservatism. Allied with imagination, reason could provide *intuitions* about the role of regulative ideals like Morality and Freedom. Many transcendentalists were Ex- Unitarian Ministers who endorsed the new biblical criticism from Germany. The "search for the historical Jesus" discovered Jesus to be a near-perfect and fully human moral exemplar. How much emphasis the transcendentalists (or Thoreau) put on Kant's epistemology (as opposed to his moral philosophy) is uncertain. The "productive imagination" – an anti-Lockean idea of an *active, world-shaping* mind, sometimes linked to the idea of genius -- would be of more interest than the bare bones empiricism of Locke or Hume. Kant denied access to "the thing-in-itself". Decoupled from accountability to "the thing-in-itself", imagination and poetry were set free (or so one could argue). See Phillip Gura, *American Transcendentalism, a History,* Hill and Wang, 2007. Thoreau makes a claim that seems to transcend Kant's *First Critique* position. "*The boundaries of the actual are no more fixed and rigid than the elasticity of our imagination*" (J. V, 203). The question of Kant aside, Thoreau's claim might be interpreted along the lines of Cavell's moral perfectionism, first voiced in *The Senses of Walden,* (Viking, 1972, and continued in a number of later writings, including *Cities of Words, Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Harvard: 2005). Imagination might let us become the actual persons we can be, let the actual be as elastic as the imagination. We find a person, a writer, continually transcending his or her latest version of their worlds and the selves they can be. It is imagination that reveals that we are not 'beyond reproach', morally, and thus that there is always an improved self to make actual. Our imagination thus expands the bounds of the actual. Thoreau took philosophy to be as unfinished and non-systematic as the self, and devoted to the care of the self. One enlists imagination in the effort to bring the best to light, and so partakes in the transfiguration at least of the soul and even of social life. Thoreau's imagination takes him to Concord's jail; his transfiguring experience, traveling to Gandhi and King, remakes the world.

shaped or produced. Kant asks what the mind must be like if the world is as it seems. Thoreau asks what the world *can* be – Can it be *better*? -- if we but see and hear it in more of its wonders. Kant asks what makes ordinary perception of ships or spoons possible. Thoreau asks why perception sinks so easily toward the dull and deadening. Kant wants to *explain* perceptions and experience while Thoreau wants to *expand* the range and depth of our experience and perception. He wants to reform waning capacities for tasting apples, seeing heavens, sounding ponds that cannot be fathomed. We have hardly begun to perceive.

Kant can only *hope* to see heaven in the eye of a swallow. The official system of his *First Critique* does not allow glimpses of heaven. The *Third Critique* might do better. The theme of the sublime and the positing of aesthetic ideas can expand imagination to a world beyond the pale object-hood of ships or spoons. Aesthetic ideas include love, envy, fame, death, and vice.[41] If these open toward the sublime, we might imagine them also open toward a glimpse of heaven in the eye of a sparrow, and a glimpse of Hades in death's eye. In any case, in the *First Critique* Kant leaves little space either for lingering with the role of affect, desire, or mood as affording access to our worlds (be they better or worse). Nor does he linger to consider educating senses and imagination, as these afford access to better attunements to worlds perceived, and to better capacities to voice our worlds, and to voice who we are in them.[42] Kant takes a famous moment, in the *First Critique*, to bask in awe under starry heavens. But this is an uncharacteristic break in an otherwise puritanical focus on justification and works.

§ 4 ACHIEVING AFFINITIES

Thoreau did not articulate an explicit theory of perception, but it is clear that he would have rejected both the classical empiricist model of mind (a receptacle for impressions) and the Kantian model (a bustling multi-storied processing plant). Thoreau gives us a variety of perceptual attunements to the world across an expansive range of possibilities, and notes our recalcitrant distance from those attunements that could be redeeming. The implicit lesson of his examples, as I read him, roughly follows the lines of a Stoic model of

[41] J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, Penn State Press, 1992, p. 96.

[42] For an account of the education of the senses and perception in the never-ending achievements of moral sensibility, see Sabina Lovibond, *Ethical Formation*, Harvard University Press, 2002.

perception. To perceive well is to attain a learned affinity with one's embodied action with others in a surrounding habitat and inherited milieu. One learns adjustments, culturally, if one is a cultural animal, that attune one naturally to one's needs, desires, physicality, sociality, place, family, and histories.

Oikeiosis is the Stoic term of art for the acquired fit between a fox and its world, for instance its capacity to bound naturally through snow; for the acquired fit between a bird and its capacity to find non-poisonous berries, or between a duck and its awareness of its speed, wing alignment, motion, and the look of the pond as it descends in an easy water landing that gracefully confirms its fit to its world. This perceptual fit of creature to itself and world is "*Oikeiosis*", a word that might translate as attunement, affiliation or affinity. As a network of such protective and nourishing affinities, the term is sometimes rendered in modern parlance as 'economy.'[43] We can speak of an ongoing perceptual economy of connectedness, or more poetically of an unfolding dance of the senses with others, with oneself, with things, with remembered previous perceptions, with anticipations of our next perceptions. We assume this connectedness as a matter of course in the animal and vegetable world. For human animals, even when it is admitted as a goal, achieving it is nothing if not difficult. When perceptual affinities are lost or damaged, we are misfits to ourselves and our milieu and others. We undergo estrangement, disenchantment, objectification, a despairing loss of meaning. How can we picture, not the failure of fit, but successful fit-to-world?

My touch on your shoulder (as we move into a turn) gives a perception to you. But your shoulder touches me as I touch you. That shoulder delivers a perception back to me in the instant I deliver one to you. Our successful attunement rests on a mutual fittingness of perceptions exchanged. We learn of the aptness of fit from response of the other. Perhaps your flinch tells me my perceptual delivery has misfired. I learn thereafter to better modulate my tactile communication. My perception of you is modulated by your perception of me, as you return a responsive perception to me (a kind of flinching, or a kind of gentle

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[43] See Wayne M. Martin, "Conscience and Confession in Rousseau's Naturalistic Moral Psychology," available at privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~wmartin/MartinRousseauPaper.pdf.

yielding). Such is our dance-like access to the world, and the world's dance-like access of us.[44] Thoreau imagines Margaret Fuller addressing the sea with the ear that in turn receives its endless whisper. Thoreau addresses us with that concatenation of perceptions that is the communion between Fuller and the sea that excludes him. We receive (or reject) his perception of exclusion, or his perception of Fuller's communion.

Our receptive capacities are themselves ever in growth and decline. We can hear better, feel more of the subtlety afoot in a touch delivered. A sound has a pitch, extension, and rhythm not immediately evident. A look has a density. Do we sense it? The press of a hand has insistence or gentleness. Narratives emerge as my touch meets your shoulder, and your shoulder touches back, this way or that. The dance of mutual perceptions can weave into ever-expanding narratives of approach and avoidance, lordship and bondage, embrace and exile, love of the world and suffering its refusals. Thoreau works to modulate touch, better to receive the subtleties of the world. The touch of the eye elicits response. With the sight of a bounding fox, Thoreau bounds in response. Under a silent sky he's patient with silence. As whippoorwills whistle from across the lake, he sings back. Seldom if ever does sensory input arrive completely unfit for a dance, inert like a shop-window manikin not even *dressed* to dance. Things of the world and their absence greet us, surprise or annoy us, pique our curiosity or raise our ire, prompt a song or lament or a bounding, mimicking celebration. Learning to modulate our perceptions, attunements and responses is an ongoing, educational affair. It is learning to hear and see better, more aptly, with ever more subtle attention to all that impinges.

Philia begins as a register of *Oikeiosis,* as part of our elemental perceptual fit-to-world. It is the kindly, friendly sense that a mild unevenness in the floor has challenged my balance, and calls for a correction I effect effortlessly, restoring and maintaining a filial exchange between my body and the world. We are in stride and don't lose it. Through infancy and beyond, perceptual fit is continually refined as part of ongoing initiations into various aspects of physical and social life (an ability to balance in snow, an ability to apologize). Refinement in perception allows me to see burdens in my friend's halting glance. Interweaving mutually exchanged imagination-saturated perceptions over time make possible all that I see in my friend's

[44] An echo endorses perceptual affinity as a call into nature is returned in kind. Thoreau writes "Of what significance is any sound if Nature does not echo it"; and "woodland lungs. . . seemed particularly sound to day", seeming "to mouth" the answer they give. *Journals*, after October 31, 1850, 7 pages in, Princeton edition, p. 129.

glance. Our best perceptions are founded on kinship, on what Cavell calls love of the world.[45] (This is not to say that such love won't be crushed by the intrusion of evil or of indifference or of natural catastrophe, or by our own insufficiencies of heart). Thoreau has our best perceptions figured as *achieved* -- often something still *yet* to achieve, as our elemental nature develops ever toward more complex second nature.[46] Perceptions initially *his* achievement can tilt *our* developing perceptions toward preservative, redeeming love (if we will).[47]

With its own generous inspirations, the world meets Thoreau's generously inspired pen. Margaret Fuller delivers majesty and Thoreau's eye and pen receive and convey it. She is received as majestic in death, which, in Thoreau's rendering of the beach, is a startling imaginative achievement. This is perception at risk, not guaranteed. It is not data-reception, but a dance full of stumbles and miscues and meaningless diversion -- while *also* full of wonder (and terror). Philosophy can start and end there, in perceptual achievements and struggles with miscues. Yet as Thoreau has it, we are perennially tempted to digress and divert and insistently explicate or defend, which in crucial cases is to forego contact for the trappings of by-play.

§ 5 WONDER-WOUNDED HEARING

Thoreau's genius is great perceptual range, depth, and acuity, made possible by keen imagination that modulates his affinities to the world through sound, sight, touch, taste, smell. Its fulfillment rests on his success in passing on his perceptions to us, and on the expressiveness of a *world* that delivers all that is *worth* perceiving. The unfolding of the world is like a face-to-face encounter where meaning intervenes.[48] Thoreau opens a hand to a world that extends *its* hand to him. At its best a creative expression of self is completed, momentarily, in the unfolding reality of an expressive world, the dance of the self's perceptions and responses attuned to the expressiveness and receptivity of the world. Co-creation is the mutual implication of self and world. Thoreau is receptive to the movement and whisper of wind and to the gaze of stars; in turn, he is

[45] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, p. 431, and my "Acknowledgement, Suffering and Praise: Stanley Cavell as Religious Continental Thinker," *Soundings.* Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* does not exclude the heart. I consider his defense of "passionate utterances" that "improvise in the disorders of desire" (as contrasted with performative utterances) in *On Soren Kierkegaard, Dialogue, Polemic, Lost Intimacy, and Time,* Ashgate 2007, p. 52-3.
[46] See Lovibond, *Ethical Formation*, on McDowell's and Aristotle's second nature.
[47] Lyman Mower suggests that Thoreau and Levinas amend Heidegger: things can appear neither as instruments-in-use, nor as "mere occurrence" looked at with detachment, but as things to enjoy, take delight in, or love.
[48] Mower, in correspondence.

polyphonically expressive in his address to them. Each can be better or worse in attunement to the other. Blinding snow can repel our walk and sight. Our approach and gaze is repelled by fetid scatterings of flesh. A striking melody can fall on deaf ears. We wonder if a finer attunement can be achieved, and applaud if it can. Not hearing the sea address the shore, debris would win out. Wonder-raising prose depends on wonder-flowing worlds, and on what Hamlet calls "wonder-wounded hearing."[49]

At its best the world has an erotic appeal addressed to our capacities for love. But *eros, philia,* and preservative love are always a risk, and perceptual *philia,* a disposition toward friendly perceptions, is no exception. What lover walking the wreckage-strewn beach would *not* want to avert her eyes at the spot where Fuller's body is tossed and half-buried like old lunch. The bones can't be *only* discarded flesh. They must be what they can be, and Thoreau tells us they are a *saint's relics*, nestled inoffensively in the sand. To see only their brokenness is to be false to the friend who walked with him in Concord before leaving to report on the Revolution in Rome. Thoreau's cairn makes a place for her continuing life.

Thoreau responds to his friend's catastrophe in the perceptual registers of friendship and love (mixed with grief). He responds to the catastrophe of slavery in the registers of justice in tatters and integrity outraged. Less catastrophic troubles call for shelter and hospitality. In an underappreciated essay, perhaps best titled "The Inn Keeper", Thoreau elaborates a post-structuralist theme. The Inn and its keeper offer that humane and convivial refuge and succor for all who list between homes or are homeless. The Inn, its keeper, and his tavern answer estrangement and the sense of placeless *unheimlichkeit.* They shelter those of all faiths and walks of life who gather to escape storms, to talk, eat, drink, and share in good cheer.[50] The needs of those in the ambit of tragic ordeals exceed what hospitality can offer (though hospitality may still be welcome). Fuller, Hannah Duston, John Thoreau, and John Brown need more or other than shelter and good cheer. A more adequate (though still lacking) response to their calamity would call on our capacities for

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[49] *Hamlet*, III, i. Here, the stars themselves "stand as wonder-wounded hearers" before the wails of Laertes; but the irony is that his wails would not catch the interest of a toad. Hamlet is sarcastic. When the stars *do* stand still in wonder, we know that eloquence stops in its tracks everything on earth and in heaven. I will call this "the dance of perception".
[50] "The Landlord", *Excursions*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer, Princeton University Press, 2007. "Methinks I see the thousand shrines erected to Hospitality shining afar in all countries, as well Mahometan and Jewish, as Christian, khans, and caravansaries, and inns, wither all pilgrims without distinction resort." P. 47. The tavern keeper also presides, if not over full Dionysian revelry, then over the mild inebriation Thoreau savors in frozen but thawing and fermented wild apples.

outrage and deep willingness to witness *with* their suffering, in a kind of *philia* or love. E. M. Forster's "only connect" sounds against a world bent on destruction. Rick Furtak observes that when our connections with life are severed, "*. . . it is as if an erotic bond has been broken*."[51] But what is broken can often be mended, or made sufferable, and it is worth the try. Thoreau writes "There is no remedy for love but to love more."[52]

§ 6 THOREAU AND PHILOSOPHY

Thoreau gets shelved as literature, even when he's writing as a naturalist or comparative religionist or angry prophet or explorer of those anomalous zones where the stench of the swamps meets the fragrance of the lily, or where life is intermixed with death, or death with life. Those whose model of true philosophy is sustained and explicit argumentation won't quibble at shelving Thoreau with literature. And those whose model of religion is bound up with social institutions or denominations will want him shelved there, too, not with books on (or of) religion. But why think books must have but a single shelf-identity?

Philosophers dedicated primarily to disciplined argumentation may block out those moments when Thoreau evokes silence, quiet, or waiting, say, or evokes a particular beauty or terror, apart from its placement in argument. Thoreau lets his writing carry non-argumentative impact. What John Austin would call the perlocutionary force of writing – say, writing as it bears witness or calls others to witness or highlights what had been missed -- is often first on Thoreau's agenda.[53] Wonder has its time in the pace of philosophical writing, a time of its own beyond quick comment or critique. Both wonder and its shadows are woven into his most detailed descriptions, his most arching overviews, his most sober critiques.

Thoreau gives argument fragments, and in his political essays, he makes extended and powerful argumentative appeals. But like Aeschylus and Homer, whom he admires and translates, narrative is the stream that carries arguments along. They don't have automatic pride of place. Socrates is irritated at the boys squabbling at his feet because they don't grasp the larger aims and visions in whose service Socrates

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[51] "Skepticism and Perceptual Faith: Henry David Thoreau and Stanley Cavell on Seeing and Believing," Rick Anthony Furtak, *The Transactions of the Charles S. Pierce Society*, vol. 43, No. 3, p. 552. Italics added.
[52] *Journals*, July 25, 1839.
[53] For a defense of moral thinking as engaging imagination in a register quite other than moral judgment and forensic argumentation, see Alice Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgment*, Harvard University Press, 2007.

interrogates. For his students, philosophy means intellectual sword play, an amusing diversion, a by-play that deflects from a wonderous reality that needs to *appear* and *sink in*.[54] There is a way of writing philosophically, for instance in Montaigne or Aurelius, that doesn't end in a "therefore" -- that stalls smart counter argument – because what's being presented *for* philosophy, for *wisdom* or *insight* is not a strikingly demonstrated conclusion, but a stunning or gentle emergent philosophical wonder or image, an alluring vision or event. Thoreau gives us sentences that are philosophical *showings* – of delight and affliction, for instance. His sentences say and also reveal and evoke. They can reveal as they deflect the worst of suffering and brokenness and open toward what Cavell calls love of the world.

Plato teaches by argument but also with drama, myth, images, and *Eros,* making these essential to his task.[55] Rousseau presents arguments in his prize essays, but he also gives us evocative settings in *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*.[56] Kant gives us deductions but also his myth of creation in which animal instincts are "that voice of God that all animals obey".[57] He gives no argument for this claim. He knows none could be given, yet is not just indulging a whimsy. We get a moment of philosophical wonder: creatures have access to the voice of God; he accesses *them*, and they obey naturally, instinctually. So instinct is not at all a hard-wired mechanical response but a wonderful *answering* to a call (or command) that is divine. Here we have Kant figuring an animal's place in creation in an emphatically non-Cartesian framework. And expanding his abbreviated gesture toward myth, we could take an animal's answer to a call or command from heaven as itself a form of speech. Hawks bespeak ease and power and grace in their flight. Instinct is the way animals voice an affinity with multiform creation, and with the divine – all this is implicit in an image from no less a rigorous thinker than Kant! Of course logically speaking, these are loose, even flimsy associations that

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[54] For Socrates as far more than a rigorous intellectual interrogator, see *On Søren Kierkegaard,* Chapts. 1-4.

[55] See Paul Friedlander's neglected study, *Plato, an Introduction*, Princeton University Press, 1958, for Plato as a poet who wants *his* (philosophical) poetry to set the standard. In the final chapter of *Cities of Words,* Cavell suggests that Plato's aim (in *Republic)* is not to banish all poetry but to let philosophical poetry show its claim to be better.

[56] See Frederick Garber's short remarks on the resonances between Rousseau's fifth walk and Thoreau's seeking 'immediate presentness': *Thoreau's Redemptive Imagination,* New York University Press, 1977, p. 153f.

[57] "Conjectures on the beginning of history", *Kant on History*, ed. Louis White Beck, Bobbs Merrill, 1963, p. 55. Given that one wonders how much of this picture to fill in imaginatively, I take it that instinctual responses of animals are expressions (for Kant) of obedience. Their actions voice compliance. Creatures who can hear the will of another and voice their obedience also judge: the cat judges that she has to run faster to catch her prey, or should rest in the shade.

demonstrate absolutely nothing. But at least to my ear, Kant's myth of creation provokes poetic-philosophical wonder that I would not want to censor or suppress.

Wittgenstein announced without elaboration, "if a lion could speak we would not understand him".[58] This oracular pronouncement belongs with his picture of language at play within forms of life, an image meant to displace the picture of language as a deracinated propositional system. Wittgenstein assumes that we share too little life with a lion to understand him, were he to speak. My initial observation is that Wittgenstein's point, whatever its worth, is uttered with next to *no* explicit argument. He leaves us with images that might grow toward a dab of an explicating story, but the images are meant to persuade largely on their own. If they work, Wittgenstein leaves us in philosophical wonder (perhaps lurked by shadow). We can explore this wonder further (perhaps after it has sunk in), but it's clear that he is not offering a smart and finishing QED meant to cancel all further discussion. (If we have little love for images or story-fragments in philosophy's sanctum, we will be left just plain exasperated: what are *lions* doing there!)

I'd add a second observation in the form of a trailer to Wittgenstein's dictum: " If a lion could talk, we wouldn't understand him *much more than we already do*." My amendment is offered to shift us from a presumed *lack* of understanding across species to a widespread *sufficiency* of understanding. As Thoreau might aver, quite apart from speech, *we already understand* the lion who (through instinct, as Kant would say) voices, gestures, roars: *This turf is mine! Back off!* Whether Wittgenstein would agree or not, bi-pedaled speaking animals share ways of life with these felines.[59] We too protect our food and our cubs and occasionally bask in the sun. Some, like Thoreau, will bound along after a fox.[60] He enacts, thereby, a mutual understanding across species.

Now if these evocations of a shared form of life across species seem the least bit plausible, I've accomplished something philosophical with barely a shred of argumentation (though parts could be recast as

[58] Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations,* Blackwell, 1958, II, xi, p. 223.

[59] Perhaps lions don't have an *inaccessible* life, an "inner life" they could report on if only they had speech. Perhaps we *don't share a way of life*, and so *couldn't* understand a speaking lion. My amendment need not imply that Wittgenstein has made a mistake. His claim is open-ended enough to support more than one reading, and, to my ear, invites elaborations that go contrary to its apparent immediate point. It as much provokes as declares.

[60] *Philosophy and Animal Life* is close at hand, and no doubt tilts my formulations. Kierkegaard tried to get a taste of the park on horseback, but was stiff at anything athletic. He lacked a knack for saddles, and switched to carriage rides.

an argument). Philosophical insight, if it's deepened at all, comes in this case and in others like it, through little scenarios and fantasies and imaginative prods, meant to make a new aspect of things come to light – not, for instance, by making the case for our affinities with animal life by arguing abstractly that animals have rights or minds, or can reason or suffer.

These moments in Kant and Wittgenstein on animals (and my elaborations and friendly amendments) illustrate a place for wonder (and its shadows) in philosophy. They mark a place for the unargued and perhaps the unarguable, for the capacity of philosophy to reorient our perspectives and let us *see*. Thoreau gives us the sort of pictorial philosophical vision, assembled loosely piece by piece, that we find in Kant's essay or in Rousseau's *Reveries* or in Wittgenstein's strange assemblage of scenarios, questions without answers, images and anti-pictures called *The Philosophical Investigations*.[61] The upshot is that Thoreau cannot be excluded from the precincts of philosophy solely on the basis of his relative disinterest in casting his reflections as sustained arguments. Let me continue with another instance of philosophy without argument, the instance of *Hamlet*.[62]

When Hamlet asks, "to be or not to be", he is not weighing arguments on the merits of suicide. He is letting dark truths flare out with unrivaled eloquence. He exposes his exposure to a world other than ordinary, or ordinary but not ordinarily acknowledged. He exposes his exposure to what Cora Diamond calls difficult realities.[63] Ordinary arguments launched from a region where we are neither exposed nor find it apt to expose our vulnerabilities are often ineffectual or beside the point or irksome. They are beyond the pale when one speaks and listens from the domain of affliction and despair, taking that domain as the center of the matter, and speaking to others in affliction or despair. Dispassionate observations or arguments are outside any world Hamlet can, in his time, inhabit. He is *witness* to his troubles, exposes his vulnerability to

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[61] Wittgenstein holds that thinking runs astray when "a picture holds us captive." We might think of pictures as playing a role in static representations, as in picture galleries, where we can take in the whole scene in a glance. Images, in contrast, might be seen as shifting, indefinite, 'spectral' items in narrative or poetry, things inchoate and hard to pin down, even while having dreamlike power. See Thoreau, "Autumnal Tints", *Excursions*, final pages, on images.
[62] He belongs shelved with philosophy, as does Henry James, Dostoevsky, and Proust (to name just a few whose identities are wider than any single disciplinary or cultural classification).
[63] *Philosophy and Animal Life*. The trouble or trembling we undergo is not only the work of a vagrant, flawed subjectivity.

them. He is not a meticulous accountant keeping track of malfunctions. The startle and wonder is that his words of dark exaltation fly wildly, elegantly, *above* and *through*, those troubles.

Hamlet's words ought to stop us in our tracks, awaken us to terror -- and also to the wonders of the human voice. We are beautifully bounding animals, but not only that. We hear and we speak in registers of eloquence. Hamlet's voicing of silencing terror, melancholy, doubt, and wonder should not be lost – and not lost for philosophy for lacking argumentation. Over and over in Thoreau, there are moments of philosophical radiance, joy and exaltation. They do not stand to be confirmed or refuted, but are exposed on their own to stand on their own, for what they are. In the moment, they quiet or arouse quite independently of supportive reasoning. Yet too extended a silence in their presence would fail them. As responsive creatures, we're moved to speak in memoriam and celebration, in elaboration and repetition, continuing and renewing the moment of their life. We bring words of commemoration and redemption again and again onto this meager stage where they can speak, be heard, be exposed and seen, once again.

Here again is Thoreau at that place of mourning he transforms through commemorative evocation.

> when I was half a mile distant the insignificant stick or sliver which marked the spot looked like a broken spar in the sand. There lay the relics in a certain state, rendered perfectly inoffensive to both bodily and spiritual eye . . . . That dead body possessed the shore as no living one could. [The bones were] alone with the sea . . . whose hollow roar seemed addressed to the ears of the departed.[64]

Fuller's placement and aspect are changed. What Thoreau takes as her shark-scored bones yields to infinite communion with the sea's address. Sorrow and terrible loss are displaced. Against the pull of undertows, Thoreau through his writing inhabits the confluence of wonder, poetry, and philosophy.

§ 7 CONCORD AND COPENHAGEN

Let me round out the plausibility of Thoreau's full membership in the congress of philosophers by a quick comparison with another literary thinker, a Danish writer and walker as rich in philosophical insight as

[64] Ibid.

Nietzsche (with whom we began this essay). In December, 1838, Thoreau wrote out in his Journal a brief but striking philosophical desire:

> Could we for a moment drop this by-play – and simply wonder – without reference or inference! [65]

Some eight months earlier, a literary philosopher from Copenhagen reported in *his* Journal:

> This morning I saw half a score of geese fly away in crisp cool air. . . . They divided into two flocks arched like a pair of eyebrows above my eyes, which were now gazing into the land of poetry.[66]

We might be surprised that Thoreau bears comparison to Kierkegaard (yet we can read just that in the marvelous entry on Thoreau in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).[67] Of course once we think of it, there are intriguing parallels.

Each kept astounding journals, Thoreau starting his at age 20, in 1837. Kierkegaard jotted his first entry at age 21, in 1834. Both were poetic, ethical, political, and religious, and both skewered their fellow citizens with mordant wit. Both were philosophers of the place they inhabited. While their reading made them global and brought the past to their present, Kierkegaard left provincial Copenhagen as seldom as Thoreau left Concord. From the mid 1840's on, Kierkegaard exposed the sham of his city's Christendom. Thoreau found the freedom won at Lexington and Concord despoiled when Mexico was invaded and slavery was enforced in Concord and Boston, the latter in the case of Anthony Burns. Kierkegaard dies disowned by the elite of his city at 42, while Thoreau dies almost uneventfully at age 44, his demise overshadowed by The Civil War. Yet one can't discount his part in bringing on that cataclysm.[68]

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[65] *Journals*, December 7th, 1838.

[66] Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals,* Vol. 5 ed. and trans Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, Indiana University Press,1978, entry for 1 April 1838, p. 116.

[67] I thank Rick Furtak, who noted the proximity of Kierkegaard and Thoreau in his entry for *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* that prompts my comparisons here. He also made suggestions greatly improving this essay.

[68] For further points of comparison, Thoreau lived from 1817-1862; Kierkegaard, from 1813-1855. Thoreau starts his journal in 1837; Kierkegaard starts his in 1834. Thoreau's first essay appears in 1842, the year of John's death. Kierkegaard publishes *Either/Or, Fear and Trembling*, and *Repetitio*n in 1843. in 1846, Thoreau writes Ktaadn, and in1849 "Civil Resistance" and *A Week on the Concord.* He retrieves Fuller's body in 1850 and publishes Walden in 1854. "Slavery in Massachusetts" appeared in 854. 1857 he meets John Brown. In 1859, he delivers "A Plea for John Brown" to an audience of 2,ooo in Boston. Douglass was to have spoken, but after Brown's capture, fled toward Canada. After

There are differences, notably, of temperament. Thoreau was not sentimental enough to have written this: "no turtle-dove builds its nest in my branches".[69] And lacking Thoreau's marvelous animal exuberance, Kierkegaard could not have given us this:

> . . . I saw a fox . . . making across to the hills on my left. As the snow lay five inches deep, he made but slow progress, but it was no impediment to me. So yielding to the instinct of the chase, I . . . bounded away, snuffing the air like a . . . hound.[70]

At a deeper level, there are a number of convergent philosophical motifs whose presence might surprise us. In no special priority, these five stand out:

1) Thoreau said one could find teachers of philosophy but no philosophers in and about Concord. He valued not just a *conception* of how to live. He valued its exemplary *enactment* in the detail of one's life. Kierkegaard mocked the strictly academic practice of professors of philosophy that had absolutely no bearing on living out one's convictions in daily life.
2) Thoreau waits for new days to dawn, creation occurring ever and again bequeathed to those with 'eyes to see'; Kierkegaard's poetic 'young man' awaits a new world delivered in a thunderclap, given in an *Augenblick* that he announces with a term of art, "repetition".[71]
3) For both, the *telos* of awareness is an *earnest openness*, a moment for responsibility, not just a moment of cognitive success or of self-interested or rational satisfactions.[72] Kierkegaard calls this subjectivity; Thoreau has no single term to catch this fertile slant of attentiveness.

Thoreau and others arranged a memorial service in Concord on the day of his hanging, outraged Concord citizens hung Brown in effigy. Kierkegaard was not martyred, but church dignitaries shunned his funeral, and student supporters disrupted the graveside service, protesting church rites they were sure he would despise.

[69] Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals, A Selection*, ed. and trans. Alastair Hannahy, Penguin Books, 1996, 9 July 1837, p. 109.

[70] *Journals,* January 30, 1841.

[71] See *Kierkegaard's Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs,* ed., intro. & notes Edward F. Mooney, tr. Marilyn Piety, Oxford University Press, 2009, and my "*Repetition*: Getting the world back", *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Marino and Hannahy, Cambridge University Press,1998.

[72] See Charles Larmore, *The Romantic Legacy*, Columbia, 1996, for the move from the epistemological goal ot neutral cognition to the broadly ethical goal of 'subjective' responsibility.

4) Thoreau asks why George Washington, who never gave his life or word to rid the land of slavery, should be ranked *higher* than John Brown, who did. Kierkegaard asks why Abraham, who was ready to sacrifice another's life, should be ranked *higher* than a common murderer.

5) Maine's Ktaadn, at the top, is an indifferent, even hostile mountain: spirit exits through a gap in one's ribs; a frighteningly 'raw existence' forces Thoreau to cry out in uncharacteristic dismay, "*Contact! Contact! Where are we? What are we?*" Kierkegaard calls this onslaught (and frightful *flight*) of existence dizziness or anxiety, and places it, like Thoreau, in a dark before the world is born.[73]

We have more than enough here to improvise (on another day) any number of extended conversations.

§ 8 Great Moral Philosophy

There is a tragic undercurrent in at least much of Thoreau's writing, an undercurrent that travels with a Nietzschean concept of the Dionysian. Thoreau's writing as resistance to affliction and delivery of redemption is in part a transformation of a Dionysian wild. In bringing out these themes I've simultaneously pursued a wider aim. Thoreau's writing belongs within a broad tradition of moral philosophy that flourishes in the work of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, Hegel and Carlyle, and earlier in the work of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. Stanley Bates characterizes that tradition as an exploration of human living aimed at seeing and living it better.[74] This is a tradition more or less lost to 20th Century moral philosophy. Accordingly, if Thoreau is to be woven into a tradition neglected or in decline, retrieving his presence for philosophy is part and parcel of retrieving that broader tradition for philosophy.

> It is a striking fact that since the latter part of the nineteenth century when academic philosophy divided itself into subdivisions and the specialty of moral philosophy was created, almost no one who has practiced that specialty has been a "great" philosopher.[75]

The occlusion of that older tradition occurs with disciplinary professionalization. Moral philosophy loses the stature of a grand vista on the person in life and becomes one of a number of specialized

[73] See *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. and ed. Reidar Thompte, Princeton University Press, 1980.
[74] Stanley Bates, "Stanley Cavell and Ethics", *Stanley Cavell*, ed. Richard Eldridge, Cambridge, 2003, Chapt. 2.
[75] Bates, p. 39

sub-fields. Bates doesn't deny that there have been any number of philosophers concerned with the question of how one should see and live life better, but these thinkers, he says, fall outside what has become the restricted 20th century academic rubric of "moral philosophy." As he puts it:

> Since that time [the latter part of the 19th century], or a bit earlier, almost all of the philosophers who have been most significant in helping general readers to understand how to live their lives would not be classified as 'moral philosophers.' I think of Hegel, Kierkegaard, Emerson, Thoreau, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Dewey, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Sartre (and of course not all of these would be allowed the name 'philosopher' by analytical philosophy). These thinkers tend either to produce narrative structures or to reflect on the narrative structure of human existence, not in order to provide a formula, or a template, of human existence, but to deny the possibility of such a formula.[76]

Thoreau gives us narratives of domesticity (through writing and residing at Walden Pond, establishing a home) and narratives of travel, pilgrimage, or commemoration (*Cape Cod, The Maine Woods, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack*). He delivers narratives of ways of living and not living with others ("Slavery in Massachusetts", "A Plea for Captain John Brown", "Resistance to Civil Government"). And he delivers narratives of ways of living with oneself (parts of *Walden*, "Walking" and "Wild Apples"). Furthermore, we find in Thoreau the haunting undertones of tragedy that intimate, as Bates puts it, the impossibility of any simple formula or template to guide seeing and living life in the midst of its ample vicissitudes and terrors. None of this fits well with contemporary academic models of moral philosophy. There one seeks moral "action guides" and formulas, guiding principles and constraining and enabling rights. It continues worthy debate about the capacity of utilitarian or Kantian or neo-Humean orientations to provide order and guidance. Recent debates about virtue theory fail to promise much help, for they underrate what Diamond calls 'the difficulty of reality', its sheer contingency and harsh interruptions.[77] If Thoreau falls outside the

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[76] Ibid.
[77] *Philosopohy and Animal Life*.

ambit of contemporary academic moral philosophy, he nevertheless falls well within the ambit of moral philosophy in the 19th century sense of the term that brings in Schopenhauer or Kierkegaard, Nietzsche or Levinas, and his nearest neighbor, Emerson.

Bates goes on to quote from Stanley Cavell's discussions of Emerson, Nietzsche, and others. Cavell says that he is interested in a dimension of moral life that "concerns what used to be called the state of one's soul" and "the possibility or necessity of the transforming of oneself and of one's society . . . ."[78] It takes little or no modulation to hear Thoreau voicing a concern for the soul and its relation to others, to the wild, and one's society. That is an interest more diffuse and elusive than the more Apollonian coverage of principles or law-like frameworks or formulas. But if Thoreau is in fact working in (and out) towards his soul, towards its transformation, and towards the resonance of this work with reforming society, then this should secure his eligibility to be deemed a "great moral philosopher", a thinker at home in the company of Kierkegaard or Nietzsche or the early Marx on alienation.

Thoreau speaks to the state of one's soul, which is an implicit concession or promise to forego technical arguments, say, epistemological ones that contest Kant or Hume with specialized arguments about value-apprehension, or that explicitly contest Plato or Aquinas on the status of the transcendent. Thoreau addresses non-specialists, bringing them to issues any person in an inquiring or contemplative or troubled mood might raise about orientations to a life, about what it is like to see life from unconventional perspectives in desperate or unanchored times. That sort of address is only minimally argumentative, and relies on images, pictures, scenarios, narratives, untamed wonder and a glimpse of release from terror. That is writing that lacks the closure of a "therefore". It relies on an ability to mark a path through life -- and light it for another. It relies on an ability to describe a setting with full justice to its complexity and allure, a setting wherein a soul might find itself at home despite ineluctable ephemerality and incompleteness. It is writing that lights up a deficient life (or segments of one) that exposes constrictions and corruption, that is shallow or

[78] Ibid.

full of quiet desperation. It is writing that has powers to bring out moments of intense delight, serenity, outrage, and eloquence in the face of devastation.