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# Speaking a Word for Nature: *Thoreau's Philosophical Saunter*

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## NINE

# Speaking a Word for Nature

*Thoreau's Philosophical Saunter*

Gary Shapiro

Thoreau's extraordinary essay "Walking" is obviously an encomium on what the author calls "the art of Walking" and an exhortation to readers to understand and practice that art. Yes, but we must realize that he speaks of the *art* of walking in no "pedestrian" sense (if this expression may be excused). Thoreau not only wants us to think the unthought in ordinary walking but to participate in the essay's performance of an allegory or analogue of the practice that he calls sauntering to the Holy Land; it becomes an itinerary through the fields of language that reveals unsuspected sights and horizons. These things become clear at the outset (as Mao Tse-tung says, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step). Indeed, the very title of the essay—and Berel Lang has some penetrating observations on philosophical titles—can be taken both as naming its content or object and as a self-referential metaphor for its own method or way of proceeding, a meaning that becomes clearer once we understand what he takes walking to be.<sup>1</sup> As I'll argue, a large share of what we are to learn from the essay has to do with our walk through the surprises lurking in our words (not only our woods), so it may be worthwhile to recall that a *methodos* is originally a way or a road. We hear quickly that this is a rare art, one not accomplished simply by bipedal locomotion, for in the second paragraph Thoreau writes "I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks,—who had a genius, so to speak, for *sauntering*" (225).<sup>2</sup> This declaration leads immediately to a speculative philosophical-lin-

guistic discussion of the etymology of "sauntering," an *Erörterung* worthy of Heidegger, in which that apparently most mundane of our activities is seen with fresh wonder. Genuine walking or sauntering is distinguished from mere vagrancy or random wandering. Indeed, "[h]e who sits still in a house all the time may be the greatest vagrant of all," since such persons may simply drift with whatever social, economic, or other currents carry them along.

Soon enough I will say something about the contested etymology of "sauntering," but first I want to place that analysis in terms of the essay's opening words, namely "I want to speak a word for Nature . . ." Thoreau could hardly be more explicit about the text's linguistic construction and armature. He tells us that he will make "an extreme statement . . . an emphatic one." We should be alerted to attend to the mode of that extreme speaking and stating. We might ask questions like these: Is the statement a thesis that might be given (or paraphrased) in a single sentence? Or is the statement the entire essay? And by saying that he will "speak a word for Nature" does Thoreau mean to call our attention to a specific word or to his use of particular words? If it is a single word that we are to listen for, might it simply be "walking"? If so, then we know by the beginning of the second paragraph that only a tiny proportion of people understand the true idea of walking. Might the statement or thesis be its most quoted phrase, "in Wildness is the preservation of the world"? So we might easily suppose because at a later point, in the center of the essay, Thoreau (uniquely, I believe) speaks once more about his saying; he will now tell us what he has been preparing to say: "what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world" (239). This is no doubt the essay's most famous sentence; for example, it is the signature sentence of the Sierra Club. Yet it is actually not the full sentence in Thoreau's text, a sentence which is also the beginning of a new paragraph after the third of eight breaks between sections introduced by the author.<sup>3</sup> The complete sentence reads: "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." So part of Thoreau's preparation for what he has to say has been to speak about the relation between the West and the Wild. The Wild and the West (of which he has been speaking) are just names for the same thing. At the very least then, Thoreau's signature sentence asks to be read in terms of his preparations to say it; so the reader must understand what Thoreau's West is (which requires attention to his manner of speaking) as well as to his conception of names and naming. We will need then to attend to the mode and manner of this statement and emphasis, not only to what we might imagine to be its abstractable content or thesis.

If true or essential walking—Thoreau's philosophical topic—is a sort of experiment, a test of experience, a thoughtful engagement with the unknown or distant (often called the West), then the essay, both this one

and its genre (as in French *essai* or German *Versuch*), is suited to the subject matter. Readers should note at least two of Thoreau's predecessors, in addition to Emerson, his most obvious dialogical partner: Rousseau and his *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* and Montaigne, whose *Essays* also take us on a surprising walk through the mundane by means of citing and transforming an enormous storehouse of classical erudition. From our later perspective we cannot help but be aware too of Nietzsche's figure of *The Wanderer and his Shadow*, Heidegger's frequent trope of paths and ways, including his *Conversation on a Country Path* and his evocation of the woodsman's forest *Holzwege*, and Derrida's meditations (as in his texts on Heidegger and Blanchot) on what it is to take a step, launch a journey, or follow a way. In considering the "humors" of philosophy, Lang points as far back as Plato's *Protagoras* in which there is an amusing description of Protagoras walking about in an atrium followed by a group of acolytes who obediently wheel and regroup when Protagoras turns around and reverses course.

I mention these precedents and parallels—thinkers who take extraordinary ambles of their own—because many philosophers may be tempted to dismiss Thoreau's writing out of hand as merely literary and not truly philosophical, despite his frequent engagement with a number of recognizable traditional philosophical questions such as those concerned with the relation between naming and knowing; for example, he claims that "it would be some advantage to philosophy, if men were named in the gross, as they are known" (247), an assertion I will consider later. Lang perspicuously observes that with the professionalization of philosophy, whose momentum has accelerated over the last two centuries (say since Kant), the variety of philosophical genres in active use has radically decreased, and there is little academic tolerance for the essay form.<sup>4</sup> Stanley Cavell, in his adventurous reading of *The Senses of Walden* offers an exemplary demonstration of how Thoreau invites and demands a reader who sees herself called and interrogated by his writing. In Cavell's formulation "Walden is itself about a book, about its own writing and reading."<sup>5</sup>

Attending to the manner of Thoreau's saying then, to which he draws explicit attention in at least the essay's opening and its presumed signature sentence, we should dwell upon or peripatetically engage with the first topic he introduces after he has told us that he will be speaking and making an emphatic statement. This discussion has to do on the one hand (or foot) with meaning, language, and definition, and on the other with walking, crusades, and the Holy Land. Specifically, it has to do with a *word*, directly after Thoreau has told us that he will be speaking "a word for Nature." He begins to walk us through his essay by examining two possible derivations or original meanings of "saunter"—both French, so involving linguistic liminality and translation: (1) from medieval times, those who are going (or profess to be going) to the Holy Land; a saunter-

er would be a *Saint-Terrer* (2) to designate those without land or home, *sans terre*. In explaining the first alternative, Thoreau quotes an authority without crediting him, although his contemporaries would not be surprised by the source.<sup>6</sup> The definition appears in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755): "from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under the pretense of going *à la Sainte Terre*." Thoreau prefers Johnson's account because "every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels" (225). The second alternative describes a condition of mere vagrancy. How errant both etymologies are may be evident from the fact that the Oxford English Dictionary considers neither even significant enough to dismiss. Instead the OED's lengthy entry on the word and its derivatives simply notes that it is "of obscure origin" (those of antiquarian bent can pursue the question by Internet idling or googling, which provides no convincing results). Thoreau's irony ought to be obvious here. He transforms a pretense of traveling to the Holy Land (Jerusalem) into an actuality. The citations Johnson provides all emphasize the idleness and vagrancy associated with the word. Notably, several of these quotations come from John Locke, in which the philosopher remarks on how men waste their time because of a lack of focus (yet also Locke says in his *Essay* that "all reasoning is search, and casting about"). So Thoreau purports to find a serious sense beneath the original ironic sobriquet applied to the saunterers while implicitly chiding serious philosophical types like Locke for their lack of adventure (one of the hypothetical origins of "saunter" is the old French "aunter" or "aunture," ancestors of "aventure"). We might say that Thoreau ironizes the original irony. Here we would do well to reread Lang's examination, in *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style*, of the thesis that irony is the basic trope of philosophy.<sup>7</sup> It should also be clear that Thoreau is ironizing the sense of "Crusade" and "Holy Land," and so evades the problematic associations of the terms, which is even more pressing today. By the end of the essay it becomes clear that his Holy Land has no definite geographical place and is sacred to no particular historical religion (indeed if *religio* has the sense of being tied or bound, the spatiality of "Walking" is definitely an a-religious one). Thoreau transforms these words, criticizing most of us for being "faint-hearted crusaders," lacking the courage to take the shortest walk "in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return" (226). The infidels whom he contrasts with the crusaders can be identified with stay-at-home vagrants like the ordinary townfolk of Concord. Thoreau's paradigm of a genuine contemporary crusader is John Brown, who he eulogized in two essays written around the time of his execution. The *first* word that Thoreau will speak "for Nature," *saunter*, is then introduced as complexly ironized. If the essay itself should be taken as his *full* "word for Nature" (admittedly only his, and not that of a greater logos), then the reader has been alerted

to its prevailing mode and should be ready for the transformation of such words as "Crusade" and "Holy Land."

Sauntering has been valorized. Yet Thoreau allows that there is a liberatory way of reading the second putative etymology (*sans terre*) as meaning "having no particular home, but at home everywhere." It would be no exaggeration to say that the whole of Thoreau's essay is a demonstration of how these two senses of the word coincide. To saunter to the Holy Land, rightly understood, is to be always awakening and illuminating, wherever one finds oneself, as in his final lines:

So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bank-side in autumn.  
(255)

Here a contemporary reader may well think of other enemies of closure. Levinas distinguishes Odysseus' nostalgia from Abraham's journey without return. Deleuze speaks of lines of flight, and especially, in celebrating "The Superiority of Anglo-American Literature" points to the journeys, whether geographical or metaphorical that are continuous and open-ended, rather than our usual expeditions, as Thoreau puts it, which "are but tours and come round again at evening to the old hearth-side from which we set out" (225–26). Like Jesus, he requires us to be ready in our walks "to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends and never see them again." (226)

Still focusing on the first steps of Thoreau's philosophical saunter we should ask just what he means by Nature, a term already valorized in his circle by Emerson. He will speak, as he says, "a word for Nature," an "extreme" or "emphatic" statement. "Nature" here should be read as *physis*, that is as creativity, emergence, *natura naturans*. The classical opposition, introduced at first by the Greek Sophists is that of *physis/nomos*, conventionally translated by the binary of nature/convention. When *nomos* is taken to mean law, it is understood as subject to mutable human legislation, stressing the variety of laws over time and in different regimes and polities. Some have argued that the opposition is too facile, and that we have generally and all too easily bought into the Sophists' dilemmatic way of thinking, thus committing ourselves to an unbridgeable divide between the is and the ought. As Carl Schmitt reminds us, with his own quasi-Heideggerian explication of a linguistic *Ursprung*, *nomos* originally had the sense of a recognizable territory, a bounded land that is claimed, cultivated, inhabited, and marked off from its surroundings. According to its *nomos* it is a grounded parcel of earth manifesting a certain *ethos*.<sup>8</sup> In that sense it transcends the nature/culture division that the Sophists bequeathed to philosophy.

So the question arises for Thoreau as to what we are to make of the borders and bounds which striate the lived space through which the walker passes. Thoreau was professionally involved with such matters. From the following passage alone, which suggests something about the infernal antithesis of the Holy Land (we might call it the land of the "Infidels," from whom that land, he says, must be reconquered [225]), one would not suspect that he often earned his living as a land-surveyor (although he does acknowledge that later in the essay). Recounting an incident from a local walk he writes:

I saw the fences half consumed, their ends lost in the middle of the prairie, and some worldly miser with a surveyor looking after his bounds, while heaven had taken place around him, and he did not see the angels going to and fro, but was looking for an old post-hole in the middle of paradise. I looked again, and saw him in the middle of a boggy, stygian fen, surrounded by devils, and he had found his bounds without a doubt, three little stones, where a stake had been driven, and looking nearer, I saw that the Prince of Darkness was his surveyor. (230)

So much, it seems, for the *nomos*, whether conceived in the superficial sophistic sense or the deeper Schmittian one. Yet Thoreau's relation to surveying in the essay is more complex. As he tells us here and in other writings (notably *Walden* and "Life Without Principle") he was a skilled surveyor who practiced his profession around Concord just enough to support his frugal form of life. The problem with this work, as related in "Life Without Principle" is that clients wanted the surveyor to help them claim the largest possible areas for their landed property and were at best indifferent to his attempt to achieve a high level of accuracy. Moreover, as Thoreau proceeds to relate in "Walking," there is an apparently irreconcilable conflict between the task of land surveying, the marking off and eventual fencing of private property, and the saunterer's need for unrestricted walking space and, more generally, for that "wildness" which is "the preservation of the world" (239). Surveying leads to industrious transformation of wild land, followed by intensive agriculture which eventually exhausts the soil. The civilized nations—Thoreau mentions Greece, Rome, and England—are in a larger perspective self-destructive, a destiny which becomes evident in the decline of their culture: "There the poet sustains himself merely by his own superfluous fat, and the philosopher comes down on his marrow-bones" (243). Thoreau praises the American West, but he knows that, as in Massachusetts, there is a strong drive to the striation and bounding of the land. Although now "the walker enjoys comparative freedom . . . possibly the day will come when it will be partitioned off into so-called pleasure grounds, in which a few will take a narrow and exclusive pleasure only,— when fences shall be multiplied, and man-traps and other engines invented to confine men

to the public road, and walking over the surface of God's earth shall be construed to mean trespassing on some gentleman's grounds" (233).

Analogous to Thoreau's aversion to the public road is his project of evading or transforming established conventions of communication which package and commodify meaning, as the surveyor and the land owner turn the earth into real estate. In "The Ends of Man" Derrida outlines a double strategy for those who would similarly contest the traditional closure of philosophy. The two strategies are (a) "using against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house, that is, equally, in language" and (b) "[t]o decide to change terrain, in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion, by totally placing oneself outside, and by affirming an absolute break and difference . . . A new writing must weave and interlace these two motifs of deconstruction."<sup>9</sup> There is a verbal contrast between Derrida's framing such strategies as ways of overcoming the hegemony of the West and Thoreau's exaltation of the West. But in fact Thoreau is both transforming the notion of the West (it is anywhere that supports our radical awakening) and playing upon its sense as open horizon. Beyond this, there is a provocative coincidence of vocabularies involving concepts such as the house, with its interior and exterior, and terrain (or bespoke land and wild earth). Thoreau, as I've suggested, goes out of his way ("Walker Errant" to use his term) to signal from the very beginning of his experimental essay that he is excavating older words in such a way as to undermine and ironize established meanings. Another version of the motto often extracted from "Walking" might be "in wildness is the preservation of the *word*," that is of the life of language.

So it is for the "village," whose name excites Thoreau's wonder. Invoking the authority of the Roman grammarian Varro, as he had earlier appealed to Samuel Johnson's, it is a place, he says, "to which the roads tend," whether trivial or quadrivial, the correlate of the "villa" and the "via." Its variants include "vile" and "villain," which "suggests what kind of degeneracy villagers are liable to. They are wayworn by the travel that goes by and over them, without travelling themselves" (231). The conventional roads are means of traffic and exchange; they suppose a reductive economy that homogenizes all value and meaning. Yet if the saunterer avoids the public highways, as Thoreau says is his constant inclination, still "there are a few old roads that may be trodden down for profit, as if they led somewhere now that they are nearly discontinued." So let us take a thoughtful walk down the Old Marlborough Road "which does not go to Marlborough now, methinks, unless that is Marlborough where it carries me." Thus Thoreau lets us know that he is ready to reinscribe proper names as well as common terms. At this point the sauntering thinker interrupts his prose to insert his poem on the road, of which I selectively cite a few lines, ones that I imagine Thoreau took to be



applicable to what he presumes to be "one or two such roads in every town":

Nobody repairs it,  
For nobody wears it;  
It is a living way,  
As the Christians say.

.....

What is it, what is it,  
But a direction out there,  
And the bare possibility  
Of going somewhere?

.....

If with fancy unfurled  
You leave your abode  
You may go round the world  
By the Old Marlborough Road.

I leave it to the reader to articulate this poem with Heidegger's trope of half-hidden *Holzwege* in the forest that seem to go nowhere, with Thoreau's own frequent references to a variety of poets in this essay, and with his remark that "English literature, from the days of the minstrels to the Lake poets . . . breathes no quite fresh and in this sense wild strain. It is an essentially tame and civilized literature, reflecting Greece and Rome" (244). And there is something to ponder in the possible gap between the poet and "the Christians," especially given what becomes of the crusades and the Holy Land in this text.

Speaking his "word for Nature," Thoreau does not hesitate to transform words and to argue against the use of names. His is a wildness of words as well as of places. "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" (239). "Preservation" is not antiquarian mummification but continual creative deformation and metamorphosis in word, thought, and action. Poetry would be the *physis* of language; the genuine poet's words would be "so true and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring, though they lay half-smothered between two musty leaves in a library . . ." (244). Going further than nominalism, Thoreau not only says that names are conventional, exemplifying the (sophistic) *nomos* of language, but he also makes the philosophical proposal that we might begin to dispense with them: "Methinks it would be some advantage to philosophy, if men were named merely in the gross, as they are known . . . At present our only true names are nicknames" (247-48). If a person manifests no marked individuality, some particular wildness then it is pointless to dignify him or her with an individual name. So this hyper-nominalism turns inside out, in one of Thoreau's artful ironic gestures, to

become a form of realism. Individuality is a rare achievement, both socially and metaphysically, and should be recognized as such.

Early in the essay Thoreau contrasts living within civilization and inhabiting the earth (225). There is here the trace of an emergent distinction (Nietzsche and Heidegger carry it further in different ways) between the *world* and the *earth*, although I concede that Thoreau's terminology is not consistent. The "world," as the nineteenth century's hegemonic Hegelian philosophy of history taught, is a structured hierarchy of states with territorial sovereignty. Migratory or wandering peoples have no world, on this view.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, according to Hegel, Islam never had a chance of becoming a true world-historical player, because the domains of its various Caliphs and potentates on the earth were as indefinite as the shifting sands of the desert. And the United States too! From the perspective of world history he judges it as lacking a true state's defining characteristics of monarchy and established religion, deficiencies it masks by constantly expanding westward, a process that must one day meet its limit. A life of sauntering, in Thoreau's sense, is enough to exclude one from the world or what he calls "civilization." And indeed, Thoreau sometimes speaks this way himself, occasionally giving "world" the invidious sense it typically has in the New Testament, as when he rejoices in the kind of walk that is "absolutely free from all worldly engagements" (227).

We should read Thoreau's transcendental geography in opposition to such European "world-historical" theories. Quoting the famous poetic line of one philosopher, Berkeley, on the westward course of empire, Thoreau is only in verbal agreement with another, Hegel, in declaring that the future, and specifically the future of freedom, lies in a westward movement. "Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free . . . mankind progresses from east to west" (234). But where Hegel sees the rise of new and truer states in history's occidental trajectory, Thoreau's east is identified with the city and his west with wilderness. The westward movement is not so much a historical development as a geographical becoming (to speak with Deleuze and Guattari). "The Atlantic is a Lethean stream, in our passage over which we have had an opportunity to forget the Old World and its institutions." Thoreau, like Nietzsche, praises an active forgetfulness and, like the German thinker (who also both learned from and departed from Emerson), he invokes a rich mnemonic storehouse of classical erudition (a counter-memory) in order to overcome memory's excesses. Lethe, the river of forgetfulness is sought, not shunned. So Thoreau urges us to undertake and persist in our walking or sauntering to the Holy Land, which is clearly not in Palestine but both a state of mind and an activity of deterritorialization: "If we do not succeed this time, there is perhaps one more chance for the race before it arrives on the banks of the Styx; and that is in the Lethe of the Pacific, which is three times as wide" (235). We must wander farther, creatively

forgetting ossified and inherited meanings. This kind of wandering is akin to wonder, which Aristotle called the beginning or *arché* of philosophy, and I take Thoreau's constant motif of awakening to be a call for a constantly renewed sense of wonder. Even Aristotle, whose thought has so often been compressed into a closed, systematic form, can be read in awakened fashion as saying that wonder is not only the chronological initiation of philosophizing or its efficient cause, but its principle and soul.<sup>11</sup>

Is it far-fetched to hear Thoreau's enthusiastic identification with the cock-crow of every new dawn as a riposte to Hegel's figure of Minerva's owl? That wise, contemplative old bird spreads its wings only at twilight, so that philosophy is destined to paint its canvases in grisaille, as a form of life completes itself, having outlived its vital freshness. Thoreau agrees that Greece and Rome (indeed, all Europe) have exhausted their creativity along with their soil. All the more need then for novel awakenings. We might pause to think here about how Thoreau varies the ancient trope that associates birds with knowledge, one already found in ancient practices of divination, whose literary testimony occurs as early as Homer's seers who read bird flight. While "Walking" is emphatically Thoreau's individual statement, his own "extreme" and "emphatic" declaration, the author deploys the figure of the bird to suggest that thinking, especially the fresh and genuine thinking he praises, is not to be thought of as a production by the autonomous human ego. At the very least, so goes his continuous refrain, thought is a matter of a complex ecological network which is at its best when humans open themselves up to wild Nature. Consider this passage exploring the comparative ecologies of avian abundance (or dearth) and the richness (or poverty) of human thought:

We are accustomed to say in New England that few and fewer pigeons visit us every year. Our forests furnish no mast for them. So, it would seem, few and fewer thoughts visit each growing man from year to year, for the grove in our minds is laid waste,—sold to feed unnecessary fires of ambition, or sent to mill, and there is scarcely a twig left for them to perch on. They no longer build nor breed with us. In some more genial season, perchance, a faint shadow flits across the landscape of the mind, cast by the wings of some thought in its vernal or autumnal migration, but, looking up, we are unable to detect the substance of the thought itself. Our winged thoughts are turned to poultry.  
(253)

A few years later Charles Peirce (who admitted an Emersonian influence, although more reluctantly than Thoreau) wrote that rather than saying "I think" we should say "I am in thought," in the sense of participating in a process much larger than ourselves. There is then a strong anti-Cartesian

strain in the philosophy of America's signature individualist as well as in that of the father of pragmatism.

Anticipating another dimension of pragmatism, Thoreau cites three great models of wisdom to establish that action ought not to be derived from first or highest principles, but that knowledge should be oriented from the beginning for the sake of right and free action. Here Thoreau engages with leading representative philosophical traditions of east and west. He begins by praising ignorance and seems to summon up the spirit of philosophy's *arché-ironist* Socrates (who remains unnamed): "Which is the best man to deal with,—he who knows nothing about a subject, and, what is extremely rare, knows that he knows nothing, or he who really knows something about it, but thinks that he knows all?" (250). The emphasis of this extended passage on knowledge suggests that such learned ignorance is the most we can attain. Here Thoreau considers knowledge and ignorance as dimensions of an active life, as is presupposed by his question about which man we ought to prefer to deal with. To this end he creatively cites two classic eastern books of wisdom that were part of the library of transcendentalism, transforming what many take to be treatises of occult knowledge into practical manuals of action. He quotes the Chaldean Oracles, one of the Neoplatonic texts read by Emerson and his circle, which was believed to embody archaic Persian and Babylonian wisdom. He quotes both in Greek and in translation: "You will not perceive that, as perceiving a particular thing" to support his thesis that if there is any "higher knowledge" it must consist in "a novel and grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we called Knowledge before." To complete this global trinity of anti-wisdom wisdom texts Thoreau praises the insight of the Vishnu Purana which, on his reading, takes genuine knowledge to be only that which contributes to our liberation: "all other duty is good only unto weariness; all other knowledge is only the cleverness of an artist." The sages of east and west combine to teach us creative forgetting.

Toward the conclusion of his philosophical saunter, Thoreau develops the figure of the morning cock-crow, in opposition as I believe, to that of the twilight owl. Now, a rooster is of course "poultry," but it is his radical greeting of the morning that Thoreau celebrates. It is also at this point in the essay that he becomes increasingly explicit that his writing is meant to have a *philosophical* impact, and that it concerns our approach to memory and the future—or better, futurity, the sense of the unexpected and unpredictable event: "He is blessed over all mortals who loses no moment of the passing life in remembering the past. Unless our philosophy hears the cock-crow in every barn-yard within our horizon, it is belated" (254). Old Europe (for whom Hegel may be taken to speak) stagnates in self-confessed belated thought. Many bird cries, like those of the loon at twilight, are valued for what we hear as a tone of melancholy or lament. But as for the morning cock, "[t]he merit of this bird's strain is its free-

dom from all plaintiveness." Creative forgetfulness is the antidote to resigned acceptance or lingering resentments. Now someone may want to object—and I have provided plenty of evidence for their objection—that Thoreau's essay itself is a kind of memory-theater that draws profusely, if allusively, on the linguistic, literary, and philosophical heritage. To this we might respond that we need both to read Thoreau more closely and to realize (as with his transvaluation of "sauntering") that he is inviting us to rethink the concept of memory. For starters, he does not claim for himself the virtue of losing no moment in remembering the past. More to the point, Thoreau provokes us to ask whether transforming and putting the old to new purposes (as with the etymologies cited from Johnson and Varro) should count as losing a moment or as enriching and redirecting it. What is it, really, to waste or to lose? This is a question that inhabits all of Thoreau's writing (he raises the question of economy at the beginning of *Walden*), and which was signaled early on in "Walking" by his remarks on the vagrant life of Concord townspeople.

Walking, we might think, is ineluctably transitory and temporal. Yet by the conclusion of Thoreau's sauntering essay the dialectic of remembering and forgetting leads to a revelation of an eternal present, or perhaps more accurately to something like a Nietzschean idea of eternal recurrence, one that like Nietzsche's, is pegged to a walking experience in a particular place and at a particular time. In the last page or so of "Walking" Thoreau recalls "a remarkable sunset last November" which he and an unnamed companion (or companions) experienced. He describes it as a privileged moment of beauty, an epiphany, in which at the end of an otherwise cold gray day the setting sun suddenly passed through a clear patch of sky and illuminated the scene in an extraordinary way:

It was such a light as we could not have imagined a moment before, and the air also was so warm and serene that nothing was wanting to make a paradise of that meadow. When we reflected that this was not a solitary phenomenon, never to happen again, but that it would happen forever and ever an infinite number of evenings, and cheer and reassure the latest child that walked there, it was more glorious still. (255)

Thoreau continues to describe the moment of illumination, literal and spiritual, emphasizing how in this "golden flood" of light the "west side of every wood and rising ground gleamed like the boundary of Elysium." As the walkers "reflect" that the moment experienced here will happen infinitely (at least so long as there will be children) they affirm the eternal recurrence of Nature. As with Nietzsche's much misunderstood and still enigmatic teaching of eternal recurrence, it is *natura naturans* whose wild creative process (Nietzsche speaks of "chaos") is affirmed here, not merely the repetition of a physical or perceptual event (*Wiederkunft* rather than, or more than, *Wiederkehr*). The revelation of this scene, postponed until the end of the essay, as if after a long literary walk or saunter,

contrasts with Emerson's positioning and ultimate view of privileged landscape views in "Nature." Emerson begins by speaking of certain days "in this climate . . . wherein the world reaches its perfection, when the air, the heavenly bodies, and the earth make a harmony, as if nature would indulge her offspring."<sup>12</sup> Such halcyon days, as he calls them, are most likely to occur in October Indian summers. While it is nature (he says "the world") that reaches perfection here, it seems that we humans are not involved in the scene with the same depth and intensity as in the moment that Thoreau reports. After elaborating on the joys of such experiences, Emerson tells us that "[t]hese enchantments are medicinal, they sober and heal us." [*Essays*, 312 ] Like Thoreau he contrasts the restricted life of the city with the expansion of the senses and consciousness which occurs when "we make friends with matter, which the ambitious chatter of the schools would lead us to despise." Yet while "[c]ities give not the human senses room enough," there seems to be no question in "Nature" that having had such medicinal experiences we will return to the city, rather than continuing on into the Thoreauvian West. For on closer consideration the difference between city and nature is superseded by their unity:

We talk of deviations from natural life, as if artificial life were not also natural . . . If we consider how much we are nature's, we need not be superstitious about towns, as if that terrific or benefic force did not find us there also, and fashion cities. Nature who made the mason made the house. [*Essays*, 318]

Later in the essay, after having celebrated the creativity of *natura naturans*, Emerson explicitly qualifies the importance of landscape experience. A passion for such experience—one that turns to *natura naturata*—is suspect:

A diletantism in nature is barren and unworthy. . . . If there were good men, there would never be this rapture in nature . . . our hunting of the picturesque is inseparable from our protest against false society. . . . By fault of our dullness and selfishness, we are looking up to nature, but when we are convalescent, nature will look up to us. [*Essays*, 316]

Emerson may be thinking of the craze for picturesque tourism which swept eighteenth-century England, exemplified in the guidebooks of William Gilpin and the use of the Claude glass, a kind of darkened rear-view mirror used for framing recommended landscape views. Yet toward the essay's end he widens his criticism, suggesting an inevitable melancholy in the experience of nature:

There is in woods and water a certain enticement and flattery, together with a failure to yield a present satisfaction. This disappointment is felt in every landscape . . . the poet finds himself not near enough to his object. . . . Nature is still elsewhere. [*Essays*, 323]

At the outset Thoreau defines true walking or sauntering in terms of a journey to the Holy Land. By the conclusion of his itinerary we should know that almost any land that is not overly civilized is holy, when properly encountered. Indeed, we might observe in transcendentalist or quasi-Kantian mode, it is the sauntering that structures and enables the experience of holiness, rather than a given, objective, external holy location which makes the pilgrimage possible. Thoreau was not seeking this particular kind of sunset in this specific place. It appeared to him unexpectedly, as a kind of grace or blessing delivered by the sun. It is a completely immanent "paradise" or "Elysium." Religious language and the tones of awe traditionally associated with mystical experience are deployed here in speaking of Nature.

"Walking" shows Thoreau to be both more politically radical than Emerson and to have a more capacious sense of the ecology of nature and thought. In this essay which means "to speak a word for Nature," this is compressed and encoded in one of those words that "expand like buds at the approach of spring." Revising the essay in his last weeks, knowing that he was dying of tuberculosis, Thoreau cultivated a number of such budding words. The one I now point to occurs in a passage where, playing again on the theme of borders and border crossings, the writer defines his relation to the political state:

For my part, I feel that with regard to Nature, I live a sort of border life, on the confines of a world into which I make occasional and transient forays only, and my patriotism and allegiance to the State into whose territories I seem to retreat are those of a moss-trooper. (251)

This sentence requires some unpacking, and I will begin with the somewhat archaic and esoteric word "moss-trooper" with which Thoreau describes his political status. The term comes from the era of hostilities around the border between Scotland and England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when England was solidifying its incorporation of Scotland into its kingdom. Some who continued active resistance to English rule were known as moss-troopers. The borderlands are marshy and boggy, so the partisans or bandits (as they were variously regarded) were known as moss-troopers, "moss" being the Scottish equivalent of "bog" or "swamp." Moss-troopers had their bases in the swamps, from which they would make raids either north or south, depending on their political tactics or predatory purposes.<sup>13</sup> In "Walking" Thoreau celebrates the swamp as a form of the Wild. The swamp teems with life and resists the efforts of farmers and homesteaders to drain and clear it, to transform it into bordered and productive land. In his work as a surveyor, mentioned several times in the essay, Thoreau was a reluctant accomplice to this process of marking and cultivating. He tells us that in his own walks he enjoyed ignoring the very boundaries that he had helped to establish, and his beloved West or Wild is a dimension of the earth

where it is possible to escape from the bounded world. Thoreau also noted, in his *Journal* and elsewhere, that New England farmers should not be surprised when their drained and reclaimed land was inundated once again, because rivers and groundwater could be contained only temporarily.<sup>14</sup> The swamp, of course, is and was not what typically comes to mind among those seeking to enjoy the beautiful, the picturesque, or the sublime in nature.<sup>15</sup> It is rather generally regarded as dismal, grotesque, repellent, and dangerous, an attitude Thoreau reproduces when he speaks of seeing a landowner "standing in the middle of a boggy, stygian fen, surrounded by devils." Yet in the same description, Thoreau describes the proprietor as failing to observe that "heaven had taken place around him, and he did not see the angels going to and fro." When Thoreau calls himself a moss-trooper, then, he means that he is an outlaw or bandit in his relation to the state; like the bandit (as language suggests) he might as well be banned by sovereign authority. He "seem[s] to retreat" into the territories of the state in order to maintain supplies of necessary goods (material or cultural). He is a border character, not a full inhabitant of Nature, into which he regretfully makes "occasional and transient forays only." Thoreau would love to be in the swamp, which no doubt helps to explain his self-designation as a moss-trooper (recall his preference for expressive nicknames rather than the conventional names under which we are, for example, billed for taxes or jailed by the state). But he spends only part of his life in the swamp, or the Wild for which it can function as a metonymy: "Unto a life which I call natural I would gladly follow even a will-o'-the-wisp through bogs and sloughs unimaginable, but no moon nor firefly has shown me the causeway to it." So he confesses that he compromises with his circumstances and himself so far as to have his residence in Concord.

It seems fitting that Thoreau continues this discussion by reminding us of the complex of questions that are raised by the word and thought of living in Concord. His walks or "occasional and transient forays" take him "to another land than is described in their owners' deeds, as it were in some far-away field on the confines of the actual Concord, where her jurisdiction ceases, and the idea which the word Concord suggests ceases to be suggested" (252). "Concord" suggests harmony and agreement, or harmonious agreement. But what is it on which its citizens harmoniously agree? Certainly Thoreau can be part of no concord in Concord concerning the poll tax during the Mexican War or on the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law. He doubles down on the question of "Concord," giving a lengthy account of having observed on a recent walk what he ironically takes to be an "altogether admirable and shining family . . . settled there in that part of the land called Concord" (note the repeated emphasis on naming). The "family" is in fact a cranberry-meadow surrounded by trees. Thoreau concludes this section of his meditation by declaring "[i]f it were not for such families as this, I think I should move



out of Concord" (253). What is it then to be "in Concord," we are provoked to ask. Thoreau is in concord with Concord, we might say, only when he has ignored or transgressed its bounds, ironized its name, and reimagined it as a natural community. Thoreau said early in the essay that most of our walks are mundane day trips, in which we return by evening to the place from which we set out, and here he is describing what is, externally considered, such an outing that begins and ends in Concord. Yet since the "word" that he speaks for Nature involves rethinking even this name and place, we can sympathize with the essay's conclusion that we continue to "saunter toward the Holy Land."

## NOTES

1. Berel Lang, *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style* [Basil Blackwell, 1990], 26–27.
2. All page numbers in parentheses in the text refer to the Library of America edition, *Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherall [New York: Penguin, 2001].
3. I am following the text as printed in The Library of America edition, as above.
4. Lang, *Anatomy*, 27, 35–37.
5. Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* [North Point Press, 1981], xiii. Cavell's remarkable readings of Thoreau and Emerson are exemplary demonstrations of the power and importance of what Lang calls philosophical style. He is insistent, in reading *Walden*, that Thoreau is constantly attempting to devise ways in which to make it possible for a reader to challenge her own preconceptions so as to be able to listen to what he has to say. In other words, Thoreau is, in Lang's terms, an ironist. In this essay I refrain, with just a few exceptions, from articulating the relation between "Walking" and *Walden* (or indeed that to Thoreau's other books, essays, poems, and journals) or with Cavell's luminous readings. My reason here is essentially strategic: "Walking" deserves to be read as its own extreme and emphatic statement, one that Thoreau was at pains to craft carefully and which he invites the reader to consider on its own terms. I will note as especially suggestive the division of the three chapters of *The Senses of Walden* into "Words," "Sentences," and "Portions."
6. Thoreau was familiar enough with French to prepare a translation of a French version of a Hindu philosophical text; see "The Transmigration of the Seven Brahmans" in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Translations*, ed. K. P. Van Anglen [Princeton University Press, 1986], 135–144. Thoreau read a number of languages and published translations of Greek poetry and drama in the transcendentalist journal *The Dial*.
7. Berel Lang, "Philosophical Humors," in *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style: Literary Philosophy and the Philosophy of Literature* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990], 103–120.
8. See Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, trans. G. L. Ulmen [Telos Press, 2006], 67–79, 324–335.
9. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982], 135.
10. Hegel, *Encyclopedia*, par. 549; *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988], pp. 89–90.
11. See Lang's remarks on the (usually neglected) traces of irony in Aristotle: *Anatomy*, 118–119.
12. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays: First and Second Series*, ed. Douglas Crane [New York, 1990], 311.
13. Thoreau also mentions moss-troopers in his essay "Thomas Carlyle and His Works," saying that Carlyle "was born in the border country, and descended from

moss-troopers, it may be"; *Collected Essays and Poems*, 167. There are frequent references to moss-troopers in Walter Scott's writings; many of his poems and novels treat Scottish border conflicts.

14. For an illuminating account of such questions and topics, see Patrick Schura, *Thoreau the Surveyor* [University of Florida Press, 2010].

15. However, nineteenth century America began to see some changes in taste with respect to attitudes toward swamps; see David C. Miller, *Dark Eden: The Swamp in Nineteenth-century American Culture* [Cambridge University Press, 1989].