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AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS CRITIQUE IN THOREAU

JEFFREY WILSON
LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT: Thoreau's *Walden* is often disregarded as a philosophical work in academic circles because of its literary form and paucity of formal argumentation. I demonstrate that *Walden* is a philosophical work by relating its method to Kant's in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and I show that *Walden*'s literary genre—autobiography as critique—is a function of the work's philosophical intent: to produce a philosophical instrument of lifeworldly experience. I ascribe to Thoreau a modified Kantian transcendental method by which he investigates the conditions of the possibility of life as such, making the transition from Kant's "experience" (*Erfahrung*) as the spatiotemporal and causal ground of the sciences to Dilthey's "experience" (*Erlebnis*) as including the category of life and autobiographical and historical consciousness. I highlight a number of passages where this philosophical substance of *Walden* becomes clear, and I appeal to the composition history of the work to reinforce the point.

It is often difficult for academic philosophers to read the work of Henry David Thoreau as philosophy because of its literary form and the absence, in large measure, of structured argumentation. In this paper, I attempt to show that his *Walden* of 1854 is indeed a philosophical work in much the same sense as Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and that the former's literary genre of autobiography is a function of its philosophic intent. Thus, I read *Walden* as autobiography-as-critique, using the term "critique" in a Kantian sense. I ascribe to Thoreau a modified Kantian transcendental method, by which he investigates the conditions of the possibility of life as such. I maintain, further, that what Thoreau creates in the form of this autobiography-as-critique is a philosophical tool or instrument of lifeworldly[1] experience. In

doing so, he makes a transition from Kant's sense of experience as the spatiotemporal and causal ground of the natural sciences to Wilhelm Dilthey's notion of experience as including the category of life and autobiographical and historical consciousness. Throughout the paper, I highlight and discuss passages where this philosophical substance of *Walden* becomes clear, turning briefly in the final section to consider how the composition history of *Walden* strengthens and nuances this argument.

I. AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND CRITIQUE

I turn first to a contrast between the two apparently exclusive authorial projects of autobiography and critique, which I briefly juxtapose through quotations from Montaigne and Kant.

> [I]t is myself that I portray. My defects will here be read to the life, and also my natural form, as far as respect for the public has allowed. Had I been placed among those nations which are said to live still in the sweet freedom of nature's first laws, I assure you I should very gladly have portrayed myself here entire and wholly naked. Thus, reader, I am myself the matter of my book; you would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject.[2]

This is how Michel de Montaigne introduces his *Essays* on the first of March 1580: "I am myself the matter of my book." Let us compare this sentence with the quotation from Francis Bacon that Kant employs as the motto to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1787: "Of myself I say nothing; but in behalf of the business which is in hand I entreat men to believe that it is not an opinion to be held but a work to be done; and to be well assured that I am laboring to lay the foundation, not of any sect or doctrine, but of human utility and power."[3] Montaigne and Kant thus represent two authorial projects that appear to be not only exclusive of one another but even opposed: autobiography and critique. But if we turn our attention to Thoreau's *Walden*, we find both of these intentions of writing unified, a kind of autobiography *as* critique. This must, however, be more closely defined. Montaigne lived and then wrote. Kant wrote and thus lived—he lived through his writing and insofar as he wrote. Thoreau formed his life very self-consciously for a limited period in order to write about it. *Walden* is the autobiography of a constructed piece of Thoreau's life,[4] but it is not for that reason a dramaturgical illusion. The task of *Walden* consists rather in proposing and designing a philosophical tool or instrument.[5]

I would like to describe this tool that Thoreau puts forward as an instrument of lifeworldly experience. Thoreau belongs to the American Transcendentalist movement, which is usually distinguished strictly from the transcendentalism of Kant,[6] perhaps because the American Transcendentalists cross what Kant would identify as the boundaries of possible experience

so gleefully and so often. But as soon as the distinction between Kant's and Thoreau's sense of the term *experience* is understood, it becomes clear that we must ascribe at least a transcendental method to Thoreau—in a Kantian sense of this term. Thoreau investigates the conditions of the possibility of experience, whereby he understands by "experience" not just the spatiotemporal causal experience that underlies the natural sciences, but also the lifeworldly experience that includes all sensations and feelings as well as symbols and historical consciousness. One might say, then, that Thoreau reaches back past Kant for the conditions of the possibility of experience in this broader sense and therefore of life itself.[7] To restate the thesis, my claim is that Thoreau employs a transcendental method, constructing in *Walden* an instrument for investigating the conditions of the possibility of life itself. It is in this way that *Walden* is not just autobiography but autobiography-as-critique, in the very sense of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, except that its object is not reason but life.

And it is no far-fetched claim to observe that Thoreau is following something very close to a Kantian transcendental method. It is well known that Emerson explicitly connects American Transcendentalism with Kant's transcendental idealism in a lecture in 1842:

> It is well known to most of my audience that the Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant, of Königsberg, who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke, which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired; that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them *Transcendental* forms. The extraordinary profoundness and precision of that man's thinking have given vogue to his nomenclature, in Europe and America, to the extent that whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought is popularly called at the present day *Transcendental*.[8]

Emerson makes clear here that the American Transcendentalists quite deliberately intend for their movement to echo Kant's transcendental idealism. If there is a certain terminological imprecision in Emerson's description of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the quotation nonetheless demonstrates Emerson's grasp of the tenor and implications of Kant's work and his sympathy for it.

Thoreau himself is enamored of things German from 1812 forward, when one of his professors at Harvard goes on a campaign to introduce German biblical scholarship there and thus sees to it that all of his students can read the language. Thoreau proves, however, to be more interested in Goethe than in what German academics have to say about the Scriptures. The poet's work is suffused with the concepts and spirit of German philosophy, so that Thoreau's connection with German philosophy occurs, significantly, first and foremost

by a literary route. Just how greatly, if obliquely, influenced Thoreau is by Kant becomes clear by a strange twist: his interest in Hinduism is kindled by the work of his friend James Eliot Cabot, who is arguing at this time that Hinduism is another form of transcendental idealism, with a different vocabulary and originating in a different culture, but nevertheless the same philosophy as Kant's.[9]

Thoreau's philosophical investigation by means of *Walden* is no thought-experiment *a là* Descartes but an experiment in life itself. The experiment is supposed to serve to inculcate specific patterns of attention. The point of these patterns of attention is not to produce cognitions in the natural sciences; rather, Thoreau is cultivating an attentiveness that results in holistic experiences of nature and of his own nature. Those who are familiar with the transition from Immanuel Kant to Wilhelm Dilthey will grasp that the experience Thoreau is trying to reach is not Kant's *Erfahrung*, which grounds the natural sciences, but Dilthey's *Erlebnis*, which grounds the *Geisteswissenschaften*, the human sciences, a category that Dilthey uses to include all of what the English-speaking world refers to today as humanities and social sciences. The difference is that Kant's notion of experience as *Erfahrung* is structured by spatiotemporality and causality, while Dilthey's experience as *Erlebnis* includes, in addition, moods and other psychological states, the category of life (*Leben*), and historical, including autobiographical, consciousness. The similarities between Dilthey and Thoreau cry out for recognition when Dilthey comes to treat autobiography. Matthias Jung has trenchantly outlined Dilthey's views on autobiography in the chapter of his *Dilthey zur Einführung* (*Dilthey, an Introduction*) on Dilthey's later work. The following passage demonstrates how much sense it makes to read *Walden* as constructed autobiography-as-hermeneutic-critique:

> Autobiographical understanding is pregnant with the character of self-appropriation (*Selbstbesinnung*). The hermeneutically opened self is clearly not an individuality that circles within itself but the subject pole of a world-relation, intersubjective subject (*Mitsubjekt*) among other subjects, the point where effectual relations cross, in short, a totality. In Dilthey's own words, "At every point, understanding opens up a world."[10]

The concept of the *Mitsubjekt*, literally the "subject-with," which I have translated as "intersubjective subject," is especially interesting in relation to Thoreau, since his intersubjective subjects include animals, plants, ponds, and dead men in the form of railroad ties. The point of applying this category to this list in Thoreau is that all of these are *Mitsubjekten*, subjects along with Thoreau: he does not just objectify the owl and find a place for him in the stream of his own consciousness; the owl does the same towards him, seeks to realize him. Thus, the owl is a subject *with* him. Thoreau attempts by means of *Walden* to detect and effect an intersubjective subjectivity of all of nature and history. This *Mitsubjektivität* is often evident in *Walden*, e.g., when Thoreau asks himself

why the ducks keep circling Walden Pond. He answers, "[W]hat beside safety they got by sailing in the middle of *Walden* I do not know, unless they love its water for the same reason that I do" ("Brute Neighbors," 213).

It would perhaps be worthwhile, if one wanted to apply the concept of Spirit or *Geist* to Thoreau, in terms of this intersubjective subjectivity, to ask whether it is a Hegelian or a revised Diltheyan concept of Spirit that is needed. Deciding would not be easy, since the comprehensiveness of Hegel's *Spirit* and the contingency of Dilthey's *Spirit* appear both to be contained in Thoreau's work.

In the chapter "Solitude," one finds perhaps his most significant declaration of the intersubjective subjectivity of nature. After he had suffered for a little while under the burden of his aloneness, he writes,

> In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sight and sound around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and humanest was not a person nor a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again ("Solitude," 120).

A crucial consequence of this experience of the familiarity of nature, of the subjectivity which he shares with nature, is that traditional distinctions between self and nature are obliterated. It is equally as true for Thoreau that humanity is "naturalized" as that nature is anthropomorphized. The broadest and, at the same time, the simplest concept for what I have called "intersubjective subjectivity" (*Mitsubjektivität*) is *life*. It is central for Dilthey in his introduction of the term *Erlebnis* for lived experience. It turns out to be the most fundamental category of existence for Thoreau, even if the human capacity to observe and theorize life at the same time as living life remains problematic.

The main point of Thoreau's transition to intersubjectivity becomes clearest when Thoreau writes in an 1851 journal entry that his ventures into botany and natural history are really directed toward no goal in the natural sciences: "[T]he ethical philosopher needs the discipline of the natural philosopher. He approaches the study of mankind with great advantages who is accustomed to the study of nature."[11] As I will show later in this paper, the appropriateness of Thoreau's interest in nature for purposes of moral philosophy includes the notion that cultivating an awareness of nature allows him to discover the animal in himself, to attend to those features of his existence and awareness that are brute and sensual. At the same time, Thoreau appears to locate the rational nature of humanity not in some unique feature that human beings, but not

other animals, possess; instead, as I will show using Thoreau's treatment of what I call "owl consciousness," the posture of the attentive spectator, of the theoretician in the original Greek sense of *theoréo* as "to observe or look at," is one that stands, paradoxically, in continuity with nature for Thoreau, not apart from it.

II. THE TRUE AMERICA

Thoreau abandons the big city and even the small town and builds himself a house at the edge of a pond. He does without many things that one usually believes one cannot live without. By this means, he attains (so to speak) a lifeworldly experience of the true conditions of the possibility of human life. Thoreau writes of his neighbor, the Irishman John Field, "[H]e had rated it as a gain in coming to America, that here you could get tea, and coffee, and meat every day. But the only true America is that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without these" ("Baker Farm," 185).[12] Thoreau has come to Walden Pond in order to find the true America, where there is a guarantee of the freedom to do without. This is surely a part of the significance of Thoreau beginning to reside on Walden Pond on Independence Day, 1845 ("Where I Lived and What I Lived For," 78): he is seeking both his own independence and the independence of this "true America." He calls the moving date an "accident," meaning perhaps that what is ordinarily named America and what one customarily takes to be its independence have only an incidental connection to the true America or the true independence that Thoreau himself seeks and teaches.[13] As the German Thoreau scholar Thomas Liesemann, who reads Thoreau's "true America" as a utopia in the literal sense of a "nowhere," writes, "America remains a challenge to and a task for each individual: it cannot be reached by crossing the Atlantic."[14]

Doing without is a fundamental constituent of the philosophical instrument of attention that Thoreau intends to build by means of *Walden*. "None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what *we* should call voluntary poverty. . . . To be a philosopher is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically but practically" ("Economy," 15). In particular, doing without all kinds of purchased goods leads to being forced to find ways other than purchasing in order to solve problems. This form of doing without serves also to draw our attention to hidden costs. Thoreau writes, "[T]he cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call *life* which is required to be exchanged for it" ("Economy," 29).

If someone must sacrifice numerous years of her life in order to buy "the right house," and believes that she has no other choice than to act in this way, then it might very well be the case that an experiment is called for in order to determine what is really necessary in matters of human shelter. Building one's own house means, as well, for Thoreau that one directs attention toward the building materials and their provenance.

The richest example of this point comes with Thoreau's treatment of the materials he needs for building his fireplace. He builds with old, used bricks, fills the holes between them with pebbles from the edge of Walden Pond, makes his mortar with the sand of the pond shore, but purchases the lime for his plaster. This purchase does not, however, violate the experiment, because the point is not to do everything oneself. Many critics of Thoreau who list the number of things he did not do for himself (e.g., that he ate many meals at nearby homes) are missing this crucial point. Thoreau's real goal is to achieve the attentiveness that building one's own house produces. As to the purchased lime, he writes, "I had the previous winter made a small quantity of lime by burning the shells of the *Unio fluviatilis,* which our river affords, for the sake of the experiment; so that I knew where my materials came from. I might have got good limestone within a mile or two and burned it myself, if I had cared to do so" ("Housewarming," 221). This passage makes clear that it is attentiveness to materials and their provenance, not doing everything himself, that Thoreau is striving for.

What Thoreau wishes for and recommends most of all is an attentiveness that leads to wakefulness. Stanley Cavell relates this wakefulness back to the concept of the true America, connecting it at the same time to the puritanical religious consciousness of early New England: "[T]he Founding Fathers brought both testaments to this soil, and there is no America; knowing that, Jonathan Edwards helped bring forth a Great Awakening, and we are not awake."[15] The two testaments Cavell refers to are the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible. To say that "there is no America" is to say that the experiment in democratic government that the Founding Fathers were making has not yet clearly succeeded. And although Jonathan Edwards led a movement to bring about a Great Awakening, the result is not, according to Cavell, that America has become characterized by its wakefulness. Cavell thus relates Thoreau to the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, whose task is to awaken those around him to the truth. My central point is that *Walden* is not just a jeremiad against those who are not able or willing to hear the truth; it is, at the same time, a philosophical instrument for bringing about the wakefulness that is constitutive for Thoreau of "the true America."

This wakefulness is, in turn, true life. "To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?" ("Where I Lived and What I Lived For," 83). We are so unused to true life that we would be unable to bear the sight of it. Thoreau thus strives for a wakeful attentiveness that would make him like Moses in the Book of Exodus coming down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments: Moses's face was shining so brilliantly from having been in the presence of God that he had to cover it to save others from being blinded by it.[16] Thoreau plays on this concept of wakefulness over and over again, from the beginning of *Walden* forward. He says in the motto that he proposes to "brag as lustily as a chanticleer in the morning, if only to wake my neighbors up" ("Economy," 5).

The reader of *Walden* should always ascribe a particular significance to references to sleeping or waking up. But it is easy to overlook a passage where wakefulness plays a special role, and where it is also a matter of hidden costs:

> Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man. . . . The rails are laid on them. . . . They are sound sleepers, I assure you. . . . And when they run over a man that is walking in his sleep, a supernumerary sleeper in the wrong position, and wake him up, they suddenly stop the cars, and make a hue and cry about it, as if this were an exception. I am glad to know that it takes a gang of men for every five miles to keep the sleepers down, . . . for this is a sign that they may sometimes get up again ("Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," 85).

The first lesson here runs: building a railroad costs human life. Many die in the construction of a stretch of tracks, others simply spend their entire adult lives on this construction. The people who ride the train are not aware of these true costs of the railroad: they are not awake. But the people who have built this stretch of tracks and are no longer alive are as present for Thoreau as the railroad ties, the so-called "sleepers" which, despite their name, do sometimes wake up and stand up and, in doing so, hinder the progress of the train. They have worked on the railroad; they are conscious of the true costs of the thing. Thoreau envies this railroad worker consciousness but nevertheless does not want to be one, since to be a railroad worker would mean that the railroad would ride on him. But perhaps it is true, as well, that a piece of technology like the railroad rides on all of us. He writes, "We do not ride on the railroad, it rides on us" ("What I Lived For," 85), or elsewhere, "men have become the tools of their tools" ("Economy: Shelter," 35). This inverted relation between human beings and their tools, such as the railroad, leads to the widespread error that such a tool is necessary for our very survival. The rudiments of a transcendentalist philosophy of technology are thus present in *Walden*.

Is Thoreau's statement that the sleepers "may get up again" a reference to resurrection, to reincarnation, or to a more symbolic awakening? Many of Thoreau's literary references do have a broadly Judeo-Christian background, with more frequent borrowings from the Jewish Scriptures than from those uniquely Christian. At the same time, his friend Lodge's interest in Hinduism should not be discounted as an influence on Thoreau. Nevertheless, Thoreau's indirect reference here to the resurrection of railroad workers is best read symbolically in terms of the conscious attentiveness that manual labor brings to the laborer that is not available in the ordinary course of events to the office worker. The passage also appears to suggest that this difference in the capacity for wakefulness could have long-term social implications for the true America. While Thoreau is pessimistic about this true America being brought about by politicians, industrialists and entrepreneurs, he expresses optimism that the attentiveness that lies dormant in the members of society who have

never ceased to work could be awakened to transform the whole culture. Labor unrest (symbolized by the sleeper who is awakened by the railroad that rides on him) is thus not a sign of the breakdown of a society but of its impending recovery of consciousness.

The railroad transforms time consciousness, as well. All of Thoreau's friends have become punctual, do everything at railroad speed, speak faster, even think faster. The time consciousness that Thoreau, by contrast, cultivates in *Walden* revolves not around the railroad but, for example, in Autumn around the departure of the ducks from Massachusetts on their way to winter over in Louisiana. Or Thoreau can measure time by the colors that the leaves show on the trees: "Already, by the first of September, I had seen two or three maples turn scarlet across the pond" ("Housewarming," 215). One must do without the time of the railroad-station clock in order first of all to be able to perceive nature's time.

III. OWL CONSCIOUSNESS

This instrument of attention that Thoreau is constructing in *Walden* consists, though, not just of the act of doing without. One exercise he undertakes is imitating animal sounds, e.g., the hooting of an owl: "I find myself beginning with the letters *gl* when I try to imitate it" ("Sounds," 114). How could one devote more attentiveness to a sound than through such attempts at imitation, just as one learns really to see things for the first time when one draws or paints them?

Thoreau finds it possible not just to imitate the hooting of the owl but also to comprehend owl consciousness. Thoreau observes a striped owl one afternoon. The sleepy owl was waiting for the coming night, that is to say, waiting for his day, with barely open eyes: "There was only a narrow slit left between their lids, by which he preserved a peninsular relation to me; thus, with half-shut eyes, looking out from the land of dreams, and endeavoring to realize me, vague object or mote that interrupted his visions" ("Winter Visitors," 238). While Thoreau observes the animals, the animals objectify him, try to realize him, to laugh him out or drive him out of the woods. Thoreau has, indeed, foreshadowed his meeting with the owl chapters before in "The Village," where he describes himself coming home through the woods on a dark night. In order to guide himself, he finds that he must "steer by the known relation of particular trees which I felt with my hands, passing between two pines for instance, not more than eighteen inches apart" ("The Village," 153). In the later episode, Thoreau describes the owl's departure in very nearly the same words he has used earlier for his own return home in darkness: the owl is "guided amid the pine boughs rather by a delicate sense of their neighborhood than by sight, feeling his twilight way as it were with his sensitive pinions" ("Winter Visitors," 238).[17]

The owl is thus awake, attentive, and able to orient himself even in the dark; in fact, his day dawns and he awakens from sleep just as darkness sets in. Thus the owl is, as Cavell so aptly points out, counterpart to the rooster (the "chanticleer") whom Thoreau wants to be.[18] The owl is, of course, the symbol of wisdom in traditional philosophy, so that Thoreau's affinities with the owl are at the same time affinities with traditional philosophical wisdom. What America requires, however, is a rooster to awaken it and make it attentive to itself in such a way that it can become the true America. What the rooster makes America attentive toward is, at least in part, its owl consciousness—its ability to orient itself through the traditional wisdom it shares with Europe even in times of darkness, when sight is useless. Sight would, of course, also be useless in a moment in which one has been blinded by the brilliance of a great light, as in the story of Moses coming down from Mount Sinai. In this connection, Thoreau could even be saying that, blinded by the brilliance of having seen in himself someone who was fully alive, he was at times forced to orient himself by traditional European wisdom until his eyes could adjust once again to the harsh brilliance of the light of the fully awake, true America. The wakefulness of this true America does not exclude the nightly wakefulness of the owl; it explicitly includes it as an inner possibility. The true America subsumes European wisdom and its structures into the larger context of the natural-supernatural world.

Thoreau can comprehend the animal consciousness of the owl because he has an animal nature in him that he values no less than his human or rational nature: "I found in myself . . . an instinct toward a higher, or . . . spiritual life, . . . and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both" ("Higher Laws," 189). In another passage, Thoreau writes, "We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual" ("Higher Laws," 197).

The discovery of this animal in him is, at the same time, the discovery of one true condition of the possibility of life. Without it he would not be alive at all, nor could we experience (*erleben*) what is simply there. Experience presupposes, for Kant as for Thoreau, the capacity to sense. (Through the example of the owl's departure and his own return, feeling his way through the pines, Thoreau does a better job than Kant—and most other philosophers—of including not just sight but other senses such as touch in his account of experience.) But Thoreau's experience presupposes beyond this that one is able, silent and motionless, to observe nature: "You only need to sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods that all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns" ("Brute Neighbors," 205). Cavell points out that "[T]he purity of Chanticleer's prophecy is that he can speak only to waken and to warn; his essential calling is to watch."[19] But to observe also means to hold oneself at some distance from nature—no longer completely to belong to it; this is a part of the significance of Thoreau situating his house at least a mile

knowledge that human beings who live in nature have possessed all along. And Thoreau's attentiveness in *Walden* is an attempt to invent a literary tool or instrument that can communicate this knowledge (or better, this way of knowing) in a sufficient way. This instrument is a kind of storytelling whose purpose is not to communicate settled facts; rather, employing this instrument causes in the reader an experience (*Erlebnis*) and a transformed participation in life.[22]

For this reason, it is not important for Thoreau to remain at the house on Walden Pond. He belongs to human society, but he practices by means of *Walden* a critique that reveals the conditions of the possibility of life in general, human common life included. What I have described as Thoreau's instrument of attentiveness is not just available to Thoreau but most of all to his readers. Like Thoreau with his purchased lime, it is not necessary for all of us to build our own houses in order to become wakeful. But we must recognize where the materials of life come from, the materials we ourselves are made up of, in order truly to live and to experience life.

I have already made several comments on time consciousness in Thoreau. In the end, however, it is place consciousness that is much more important for him, and by "place consciousness" I do not simply mean spatial consciousness. Thoreau writes, "I read one or two shallow books of travel in the intervals of my work, till that employment made me ashamed of myself, and I asked where it was then that I *lived*" ("Reading," 93). The experiment of *Walden* serves to locate Thoreau. "For the most part, we are not where we are, but in a false position" ("Conclusion," 291). *Walden* is thus no recommendation to live as Thoreau lived on Walden Pond. Instead, it is a literary attempt to impart a "located" or "placed" life to humanity.[23]

IV. COMPOSITION HISTORY

Any interpreter of Thoreau must be attentive to the composition history of his writings. *Walden* is not a straightforward report of Thoreau's experiences and thoughts during the limited period he spends around and about Walden Pond. Thoreau lives in the cabin at Walden from July 4, 1845, to September of 1847, just over two years. But the publication of *Walden* takes place in 1854, nearly seven years after his departure. Thoreau does produce a first version of *Walden*, apparently intended as a lecture or a series of talks, during 1846 and 1847.[24] Between the original manuscript and the published version, Thoreau makes a second and third draft of the original material, then five more partial drafts that incorporate materials from his journals reflecting on his experiences.[25] Sattelmeyer argues that it is first in these expansive partial drafts that a real plot emerges in *Walden*, "the journey or quest of the narrator passing through various changes marked by the progress of the seasons and advancing toward some kind of self-knowledge."[26] Thus, distinguishing material found in the first version from Thoreau's later additions should help in

from any neighbor. The chapter "Brute Neighbors" makes clear that the term "neighbor" is to include both human and non-human neighbors. Although Thoreau can never be quite successful in distancing himself physically from his brute neighbors, he can nevertheless do so by an act of the mind. The capacity to become attentive entails at the same time the capacity to double oneself in a certain sense:

> By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent. We are not wholly involved in Nature. . . . I am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand remote from myself or from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you. ("Solitude," 123)

Precisely at the point where many philosophers would believe themselves to have discovered the true self, Thoreau writes, "that is no more I than it is you": the theorizing or objectifying "I" is no "I" at all but maybe Spirit (*Geist*) in Hegel's sense or simply Nature itself, which perceives all differences but shares none of the differences. But we can at least exclude the possibility that this "observer in me" is the subject of moral action; above all it has no interest that actions could stem from or abstract from, although it is interested in everything.[20]

I want to make quite clear that Thoreau does not regard the observer in me as what is distinctively human. He ascribes this kind of consciousness to the owl as well as to himself. As I have already mentioned, the owl attempts to regard Thoreau as an object and to integrate him as such into the stream of the contents of its consciousness. The fact that Thoreau sometimes writes that we human beings instinctively theorize the world points toward Thoreau's ascription of the observer in us to our *animal* nature.

At this juncture in Thoreau, one finds a deep ambivalence that does not allow itself to be resolved by the use of traditional categories. My attempt to formulate this ambivalence would be to say that, for Thoreau, this distinction between observing and living is falsely constructed by society and tradition. If we were able to do without traditional concepts such as "I" and "self," the possibility would exist to overcome this distinction. If the task of *Walden* is that of waking up, then it is at the same time the task of transforming my individual self into a universal one. In this true self-observing, nature itself comes to consciousness, wakes up.[21]

For Thoreau, it is also not the task of the natural sciences to complete or correct our everyday experience. "We are most interested when science reports what [fisherman, hunters, and woodchoppers] already know practically or instinctively, for that alone is a true *humanity*, or account of human experience" ("Higher Laws," 190). The natural sciences document and confirm the

ascertaining the difference between what Thoreau set out to do when he moved to Walden and what he learned—as well as what he wishes for his readers to take away—from his sojourn there.

I do not mean here to evaluate Sattelmeyer's claim or even necessarily to contribute anything new to the composition history of Thoreau's writings. Rather, my point in this final section is to apply Sattelmeyer's insight in the above quotation to several of the passages of *Walden* I cite in previous sections, in order to discern in a preliminary way how attention to the composition history may further nuance the account I have already given. The attentiveness I exercise here in this regard is quite rudimentary: I only try to distinguish material already present in the 1845–47 first draft from later additions. Doing this simple task is, however, enough to begin to answer some questions about how *Walden* goes beyond a straightforward report of an extended rustic vacation.

The entire passage I quote from "Baker Farm" on the Irishman John Field on "the true America" (185) is missing in the first version. This is puzzling, since the theme of voluntary poverty is central to Thoreau's initial motivation for performing the experiment at Walden. But the two further passages I cite from "Economy" clarify somewhat the differences between, on the one hand, Thoreau's motives for making the experiment and, on the other, the results of the experiment and his motives for communicating these results in *Walden* in the form he does. In the first passage, Thoreau's claim that "[N]one can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage point of voluntary poverty" (15) stems from the first version. But the statement that "to be a philosopher is to solve some of the problems of life, not merely theoretically but practically" (15) is a later addition. This close juxtaposition of older with newer material shows a contrast between an initial negative approach on Thoreau's part and a later (on reflection) positive approach to voluntary poverty. The negative moment consists of leaving human society and doing without nearly all purchased goods. The positive moment of the experiment comes in actually solving some concrete problems of living, by means of active labor. The negative moment purifies consciousness for more accurate observation—somewhat in the manner of Socrates' or Descartes's attempts to abstract from the material world—while the positive moment shapes consciousness and provides it with refinements of its observational and practical equipment, refinements that are won by labor with raw materials and inquiries into their provenance. What I am calling the positive moment of the experiment, which Thoreau apparently only articulates on later reflection, anticipates the later developments of American Pragmatism with its focus, for example, on the "cash value" of concepts.

An examination of the fireplace-building passage in "Housewarming" provides an even more striking instance of the reflective expansion of the first version of *Walden*. The first version talks about mortar and sand, but Thoreau's

only mention there of the purchased lime occurs in his account of the "exact cost" of the house, where he lists "two casks of lime" at a cost of $2.40 (45). His account of burning the shells of the *Unio fluviatilis* to see how lime is made is a later addition. Even though he burned the shells "the previous winter" (20), it is apparently not until he thinks through the positive aspect of the principle of voluntary poverty that he ascribes a significance to the action that can help him explain how the purchased lime is not a violation of that principle. In a negative sense of voluntary poverty—of leaving society and doing without—such purchases seem only to compromise the purity of the experiment. But once the positive sense of this principle asserts itself, the attentiveness one forms in the course of solving practical problems of living takes precedence over avoiding purchases.

And although the accounting of the exact cost of the house is present in the first version, it is not until later that Thoreau is able to think through and express the whole idea he has acquired of the concept of cost. Thoreau's statement that "[T]he cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call *life* which is required to be exchanged for it" ("Economy," 27) is also a later addition. If one were to read "life" merely to mean "time," then the time Thoreau spends gathering materials, honing his building skills, and building his house would have to be included in his account of its "exact cost." But the positive sense of voluntary poverty has it that the time devoted to such a task is life gained, not spent, because of the formation of attentiveness one wins in the process.

The theme of attentiveness as wakefulness is already robustly present in the first version of *Walden,* but the later versions add significant nuances. A small example is the quotation from "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," where Thoreau says, "To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?" (83) The first sentence occurs in the first version; the second and third are later additions, as if Thoreau only becomes aware of the rarity of complete wakefulness after he has already returned to human society—as rare as Moses himself.

In the same chapter, the quotation I used earlier regarding the railroad "sleepers" is carried over to the published version virtually intact from the 1845–47 draft. But the succinct formulation in the published version that runs, "We do not ride on the railroad, it rides on us" (85) is distilled from the following longer and subtly different sentence from the first version: "So that if a few have the pleasure of riding on a rail—the rest have the misfortune to be ridden upon."[27] In the published version, the distinction between the privileged few who make use of the railroad and the rest, who are victims of its organized violence, disappears. A leveling of perspective occurs, and there is no privileged few who do not suffer as a result of technological innovation.

As Sattelmeyer notes, one of the chief improvements Thoreau makes in later drafts is to develop the sense of the progress of the seasons, thus moving from the time of the railroad, measured in minutes, to nature's time, measured in

years.[28] The recovery and reinforcing of this natural time sensibility that Thoreau undertakes subsequent to the first draft of *Walden* corresponds to the discovery of his own affinity with nature. If Thoreau leaves human society behind, life in the woods introduces him to his society with many non-human (brute) neighbors. It simultaneously shows him a brute and sensual nature in himself as well as the stance of the theoretical observer in non-human subjectivity. The passage on the striped owl who strains to "realize" Thoreau as a "vague object" is a later addition. If Thoreau only expects a cleansing from the residue of polite society when embarking on his experiment, it seems that this cleansing opened him to a largely unexpected encounter with a brute society that is both more authentic and more universal and that calls the full human being into play. In keeping with this point, the passages of "Higher Laws" where Thoreau writes that "[W]e are conscious of an animal in us" (197) appears only in versions later than the first, as do the references to doubleness in "Solitude" (123).

The most interesting case of affinity with nature that Thoreau discovers is the scene of the striped owl navigating through the woods at night not by sight but by the light touch of its wings against the trees—as Thoreau himself does with his hands ("Winter Visitors," 238, and "The Village," 153). The two separate descriptions, which Thoreau leaves it to the attentive reader to connect, are both later additions. It is surely no accident that Thoreau attains heights of philosophic insight through manual labor: his hands become his wings. If Thoreau had the sense before he left for Walden that he lived in a time of darkness where he could only gain a sense of direction by retreating to the woods, he discovers in the woods, through his affinity with the striped owl, that although he cannot "see" (reason) in the dark of his times because the ambient light is so dim, he can nevertheless "feel" his way along (through imagination, emotion, and his embodied brute self).

I would suggest that it is not until Thoreau has returned to human society for a time that he can discern the equipment for lifeworldly experience—including for political action—he has brought back with him. Thoreau's jailing in 1848 over an unpaid poll tax and his publication in 1849 of "Resistance to Civil Government" attest to this development, and the ability to make one's way safely in darkness gains a poignant concreteness in 1851 as Thoreau becomes more and more involved in the Underground Railroad, helping slaves to safety and freedom in Canada.[29] The transformation that occurs in Thoreau at Walden moves his philosophy from the theoretical sphere of German idealism into the practical sphere, not just toward moral philosophy but "all the way down" to political activism.

The passage, likewise in "Solitude," on the "beneficent society of nature" that Thoreau discovers "[i]n the midst of a gentle rain" (120) stands almost verbatim, however, in the first version. This fact would seem to attest to a three-stage process Thoreau undergoes from the formation of his intention to leave human society to his discovery of the friendliness of brute nature toward him

evident in the "gentle rain" passage to the awareness that this friendliness is possible because of the "animal in us."

V. CONCLUSION

I have attempted to make the case in this paper that Thoreau's *Walden* should be taken as a philosophical text in the traditional sense. In it, Thoreau pursues a method closely analogous to the transcendental method that Kant employs in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: the method of uncovering the conditions of the possibility of experience. But since Thoreau's sense of experience is more Diltheyan than Kantian, it encompasses a far greater range of human and non-human existence. Excavating the conditions of the possibility of experience thus becomes for Thoreau the project of exposing the conditions of the possibility of life itself.

I am convinced that there is a great deal more to be done to draw Thoreau into dialogue with the traditions of European philosophy. Indeed, from his own point of view he is already in this dialogue. The task is neither to exclude Thoreau from a canon of what one takes to be genuine philosophy nor to construct a bridge from the works of those canonical authors to Thoreau. It is, rather, to read Thoreau with an eye for the philosophical practices that have grown so organically into Thoreau's literary enterprise that they are invisible to the eyes of readers who insist that philosophy always take the form of structured argumentation. To make them visible, one must entertain the possibility that the philosophical instrument of attentiveness that Thoreau wishes to place at the reader's disposal can only be built along literary lines.

ENDNOTES

I owe thanks to Matthias Jung and Thomas Liesemann for comments on an earlier German version of this paper, and to William Rossi for his encouragement and advice which, along with suggestions from an anonymous reviewer for this Journal, significantly improved the exposition here.

1. I am translating the German term "*lebensweltlich*" here. The phenomenological overtones of the word are intentional, since I am attempting here, among other things, to suggest parallels between Thoreau and both Diltheyan and Heideggerian hermeneutics.

2. Michel de Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, trans. D. M. Frame (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1958), 2.

3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Spedding's translation of the Latin motto as given in Norman Kemp Smith, *Commentary to Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason,"* 2nd ed. (Atlantic Highlands, N.J: Humanities Press International, 1992), 4.

4. Stephen Fender identifies Thoreau's species of autobiography as a distinctively American one, like the spiritual autobiographies of early New Englanders or like Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, with the intent "to present and defend a complex of cultural

and moral lessons." "Introduction to Henry David Thoreau," in *Walden*, ed. Stephen Fender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), xxviii–xxix. But Fender largely misses the philosophical intent of the work–the critique side of the autobiography-as-critique.

5. For another example, largely compatible with my own reading, of an interpretation of *Walden* primarily as a philosophical text in literary form, see Thomas Liesemann, *Wirklichkeit und Sprache: Zur Funktion der Rhetorik in Henry David Thoreaus* Walden (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1995), 2. Liesemann argues that Thoreau's text should be read as philosophy if "philosophy" is meant not strictly in the sense of the canonical philosophical tradition with its classification of movements but in the sense of a text that promotes the activity of philosophical reflection in its reader.

6. Stanley Cavell locates *Walden* in a "pre-philosophical moment . . . before the German and the English traditions of philosophy began to shun one another." *The Senses of Walden*, expanded edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), xiv.

7. For another reading of Thoreau's relation to Kant, see Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 94–95.

8. *Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Centenary Edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), vol. 1, 339. See also Robert D. Richardson, Jr. *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 72–73, 405.

9. I have drawn these details of Thoreau's relation to Germany and to Kant from Richardson, *Henry Thoreau*, 20, 27–30, and 204–205.

10. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Stuttgart: B. Teubner, 1965) vol. 7, 205. Matthias Jung, *Dilthey zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 1996), 167, my translation.

11. Quoted in Richardson, *Henry Thoreau*, 247.

12. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

13. Compare this point to Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 7–8.

14. Liesemann, *Wirklichkeit und Sprache*, 130 (my translation).

15. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 30.

16. Exodus 34:29–35.

17. I am indebted to William Rossi for pointing out to me this connection between the owl's wings and Thoreau's outstretched arms.

18. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 36–38.

19. Ibid., 39.

20. When I write about "interest" here, I do have Kant and both his moral and aesthetic theories in mind, but I am also thinking of something like Habermas' early *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

21. I owe the seed of this idea that Thoreau articulates a self-world dualism not to endorse it but to work toward overcoming it to a conversation with William Rossi.

22. It would be possible here to draw numerous parallels between Thoreau's intentions for *Walden's* effects on its readers to the transformative role Aristotle ascribes to tragedy in the *Poetics*, but doing so here would unduly lengthen the paper.

23. Cf. Cavell's concept of "placing ourselves in the world," *The Senses of Walden*, 53.

24. A transcription appears as "The First Version of *Walden*," in J. L. Shanley, *The Making of "Walden"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 103–208.

25. I have drawn this brief description of Thoreau's work process from the much more detailed account in Robert Sattelmeyer, "The Remaking of Walden," in Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, 2nd ed., ed. William Rossi (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992), 430.

26. Sattelmeyer, "The Remaking of *Walden*," 434.

27. Shanley, *The Making of Walden*, 142.

28. Sattelmeyer, "The Remaking of *Walden*," 433.

29. I draw these facts and dates from Fender, "Introduction to Henry David Thoreau," liv–lv.