



Continental Philosophy Beyond “the” Continent

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ABSTRACT

The meaning and nature of “continental” philosophy is hotly contested, but generally with respect to what constitutes continental thought. However, there is a second point of contestation with respect to this tradition: its close association with Europe as “the” continent. Following Emerson’s exhortation for a distinctively American philosophical expression in “The American Scholar,” this paper argues that, within continental philosophy, this hope has not yet been fully realized. This is odd, because the resources of “continental” philosophy (phenomenology, hermeneutics, etc.) should make it particularly receptive to the importance of thinking “continental” philosophy (i.e., philosophy connected to continental Europe) otherwise. If Emerson is correct, we should begin this project by paying particular attention to the particularity of *place*. And, in considering the distinctive characteristics of the place of America—that part of North America framed by the contiguous 48 states of the United States—“the West” occupies a special place, both as an idea and a geographic reality. The open spaces of the territory west of the 100th meridian—the topographical openness of the prairie, the immensity of the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada, the arid expanse of the desert Southwest—all work their way on the individuals and communities that inhabit them. Among the lessons taught to us by these places is the importance of limits and the need to settle-in-place; but these places also teach us, equally importantly, the necessity of movement and exploration. The latter, exemplified by Thoreau’s practice of sauntering, suggests that one lesson the West can offer to continental philosophy is the salutary effects of wandering.

KEYWORDS

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PART I: The American Scholar

1. Why has America not Expressed itself Philosophically?

In 1837 Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered his famous oration, “The American Scholar,” to the Phi Beta Kappa Society in Cambridge, MA. The context of the address, of course, was one in which a new nation was still finding its bearings. In this moment of relative historical calm,¹ Emerson reflected on the state of American independence, and found that while great strides had been made in the context of political and economic independence, the same could not be said in cultural and intellectual spheres. America still looked East, to Europe, in matters cultural and intellectual; her innovations and inventions, such as they were, tended toward utilitarian and pragmatic concerns. But Emerson looked forward to the day when “the sluggish intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids, and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill.”² When, he wondered, would his fellow citizens express their philosophical, literary, and artistic life in a distinctively *American* idiom? By the time of the Phi Beta Kappa address, our political independence had been secured; our cultural and philosophical independence, Emerson thought, was still to be achieved. We had our Washington, our Jefferson, our Franklin³; it was time to give birth to our Homer, our Dante, our Shakespeare.⁴ Thus, he called for a philosophical and cultural revolution to fulfill the promise of our political revolution: “Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands,” he predicted, “draws to a close.”⁵

Walt Whitman is often cited as the first definitive response to Emerson’s call for a uniquely American voice; and, since Emerson’s time, the United States has indeed achieved distinctive greatness in poetry (not only Whitman, but Frost, Dickenson, Angelou, Snyder), literature (Melville, Steinbeck, Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Stegner, Maclean, Robinson), art (Stuart, Homer, Bierstadt, Sargent, Whistler, O’Keefe, Collins), music (R&B, jazz, American folk), and many other forms of cultural expression.⁶ Only time will tell which of these

¹ The propitious conclusion of the War of 1812—the United States fared remarkably well in the final engagements of that conflict, which some called the “second war of independence”—led to the so-called “Era of Good Feelings” under President Monroe. And while the relative political stability associated with the decline of the Federalist Party had come to an end by the time of Emerson’s Phi Beta Kappa address, the darkness of the Civil War was still decades away.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 53. Or, we might add, in today’s idiom: capitalist-remunerative skill and professional-academic success.

³ I am well aware of the mixed merits of these figures, and many other figures prominent in American history, especially concerning slavery, the treatment of indigenous American peoples, and the treatment of women. Nevertheless, they remain influential, distinctively American characters.

⁴ “Poetry,” says Emerson, “will revive and lead in a new age....” (Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 53). Here again, reflecting the myopia of one kind of “canonical” American thinking, we might add to the question, “where is our Rumi, our Bashō, our Li Po, or our Pablo Neruda?”; but these would not have been Emerson’s questions.

⁵ Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 53. Note that the need for philosophy to speak from and to a certain time and place does *not* mean that philosophy ought to abandon all attempts to speak to universals that transcend time and place, nor does it mean that we should sever ties with the great thought and expression of the past, or of other places. It does mean that a philosophy should, in addition, speak to its own time and place, that it should both reflect on the ways in which universal truths are manifest in particular contexts and, in addition, reflect on phenomena that might be local rather than universal.

⁶ The figures named are meant only as examples, and are obviously idiosyncratic. Clearly there are many other figures toward whom one might gesture in any one of these spheres, and clearly reasonable people might differ

contributions to human culture will have the lasting impact of the European “masters”; but it cannot be denied that these are powerful, culturally significant contributions to human imagination and expression.

But what of philosophy? “Why has America never expressed itself philosophically?”⁷

The question, which jumps from the pages of Stanley Cavell’s celebrated *Senses of Walden*, is ultimately an ironic one, since Cavell believes that America *has* expressed itself in distinctive philosophies, and identifies transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau as two such thinkers. The problem is that Emerson and Thoreau—and, I would add, many other distinctively American thinkers—are not readily identifiable as philosophers in the context of the contemporary academy, which recognizes and, increasingly, certifies as “philosophical” an astonishingly narrow set of topics and methodologies. Dominated more than ever by the demand to express itself in terms that are “correct, scientific, abstract, hygienically pallid,” and designed to produce a kind of “all-purpose solvent” for solving an increasingly narrow set of problems, contemporary academic philosophy excludes, quite artificially, a range of philosophical expression.⁸ Transcendentalism seems to Cavell and others to be a strong candidate for distinctively American philosophy; but it is not a mode of thought that is generally recognized as philosophical in a strict sense. I would wager a good deal of money that Emerson and Thoreau are taught much, much more often in departments of English or literature than they are in departments of philosophy.

Pragmatism—often offered as an example of homegrown American philosophy—fares slightly better here, insofar as it is acknowledged, though not embraced, in contemporary departments of philosophy. And something about pragmatism does seem distinctively American. In Pierce’s belief that “the opinion that is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth and the object represented by this is real” we recognize something of the American faith in progress.⁹ The same could be said for Dewey’s optimistic meliorism. In James’s description of the “cash-value” of ideas—what difference they make in the world—we hear an echo of America’s valuation of productivity, wealth, and results. But flagging pragmatism as the distinctively American philosophical expression is too easy by half. First, it confines the American philosophical contributions to a largely historical register, insofar as pragmatism—while undeniably a rich, living tradition—is also sidelined in the academy and remains somewhat marginal as a philosophical position in larger cultural debates. And, second, it too-narrowly circumscribes what counts as a distinctively “American” perspective, insofar as American thinking is not univocal in its faith in progress, its emphasis on results, and so on. At best, pragmatism is *a* distinctively American philosophy, or a philosophy distinctive of *some* American traits.

with respect to the relative merits of any given author. The point is merely that we can point to distinctive American greatness in a number of these broadly “cultural” fields.

⁷ Stanley Cavell, *Senses of Walden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 33.

⁸ The description of professional philosophy is made by Martha Nussbaum, complaining about the rigid confines of the philosophical community in which she found herself as a young academic. See Martha Nussbaum, “Form and Content” in *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 19. Here witness the general, though certainly not universal, disdain with which both “continental”-style philosophy and non-Western philosophies are treated in many philosophy departments.

⁹ Charles S. Peirce, “How to Make our Ideas Clear” in *The Essential Writings* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 155.

What of analytic philosophy, which is the dominant form of academic philosophy in American universities? There are undeniably great American analytic philosophers, people who have made major contributions to the discipline. But it would be difficult to characterize these thinkers as distinctively American. Because analytic philosophy is pursued in a manner that tends to focus on abstract and disinterested rationality, it is prone to downplaying the significance of history, language, culture, and place. In a word: context. It matters little whether analytic philosophy is pursued in Oxford or Oklahoma, since disinterested reason functions similarly in either locale. Therefore, there is in principle nothing distinctive about *American* analytic philosophy.

2. “Continental” Philosophy?

What, then, about continental philosophy in America? In what way might it represent a distinctively American contribution to philosophy?

The question is complicated, no doubt, by the ambiguity of the term “continental philosophy.”¹⁰ The term came into use as a negative designation to distinguish certain styles of philosophy from what we often call “analytic”—or, archaically, “anglo-American”—philosophy. In this sense, “continental” philosophy is a kind of catch-all for “non-analytic” philosophy. This, however, seems odd for a variety of reasons. For example, entire traditions of philosophy rooted in China, India, Japan, and elsewhere fall through the cracks, insofar as they are not-analytic, but clearly not “continental” in the way most Western philosophers conceive of the genus. But even if we bracket non-Western philosophical traditions, asserting that “continental” philosophy is a term for “non-analytic Western philosophy,” we run into difficulties. Non-analytic Western philosophy includes a variety of fields and sub-fields that differ, often radically, in their questions, methods, and modes of expression. In general, the negative use of “continental philosophy” is not particularly helpful; it may tell us something about what analytic philosophy is—although not with any precision—but it does next to nothing in terms of telling us what continental philosophy is.

Some people peg the “beginning” of continental philosophy on the publication of Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*; others suggest that Kant might be a more useful landmark. In any case, “continental philosophy” has become a catchall for a variety of fields including: German Idealism; Romanticism; the critique of metaphysics in Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud; existentialism; later Hegelianisms and Marxisms; phenomenology; hermeneutics; structuralism; post-structuralism; post-modernism.¹¹ To which we should add a variety of contemporary areas influenced by the aforementioned fields—particularly hermeneutics and post-structuralism—which are often lumped in as “continental,” at least as that term is used critically: various contemporary feminisms, philosophies of race, sex, and gender, posthumanism, and similar fields.

In terms of common use, “continental philosophy” tends to be a label that coalesces around existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, deconstruction, post-structuralism, and similar traditions, just as the continental opprobrium tends to focus on core metaphysics and epistemology in the analytic tradition rather than “analytic” philosophers working on, for

¹⁰ See, for example, Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 12-31.

¹¹ Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 12-31.

example, virtue theory. Why? From the analytic perspective, these sub-fields of continental philosophy exemplify the characteristics from which analytic philosophy wants to distance itself. In hermeneutics, analytic philosophers detect the lingering odor of idealism, which Russell so roundly rejected at the dawn of the analytic-continental schism. In deconstruction they see philosophers who reject the idea that we can grasp truth, reality, value, or meaning with clarity, thinkers whose ideas are expressed in language that descends into obscurantism rather than striving for logical rigor, both charges that were leveled in the Austin-Derrida-Searle debate.

However, while it is certainly the case that we can find extreme examples in either tradition—the analytic philosopher who is historically blind and whose abstractions separate her and her work from lived, human concerns, the continental philosopher whose prose is sloppy and imprecise, and who passes off hagiography for philosophy—to my mind the distinction persists primarily by drawing lines based on certain styles of writing and engagement with particular canons of philosophy. In general, tight definitions for what “counts” as analytic or continental philosophy are hard to come by. We tend to apply Justice Stewart’s test for obscenity: “I shall not attempt to further define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description, and perhaps could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it...”¹²

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the very traditions that we identify most closely with continental philosophy are those that take seriously the context-embeddedness of every knower, the idea that we can only see the truth from a certain perspective, and that every perspective reveals some things and conceals others. Phenomenology and hermeneutics in particular demonstrate the degree to which different perspectives—historical, cultural, linguistic, and otherwise—structure our experience and understanding. And so, from the perspective of continental philosophy, there certainly *ought* to be something distinctive about American philosophical expression. This is why continental philosophy is, paradoxically, the tool for philosophizing beyond continental philosophy.

Put another way, it is continental philosophy (traditions related to phenomenology and hermeneutics) that demonstrates that we should not be tied so closely to continental philosophy (a perspective rooted in European experience). For the sake of clarity it might be useful to distinguish between two uses of “continental.” Let Continental₁ refer to the philosophical forms and styles that we’ve mentioned above: existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and so forth; and let Continental₂ refer to philosophies and philosophers rooted in Continental Europe, the “big names” of Francophone and Germanophone philosophy. The point here is that we need to decouple Continental₁ from Continental₂.

It’s no secret that what passes for “serious” continental philosophy, at least in the academy, gives pride of place to figures who are—geographically, culturally, ethnically—European, and whose work is rooted in the events that marked Europe in the 20th century: World War I and the lost generation; World War II and the Shoah; or the Cold War.¹³ If some distal branches of our philosophical tree have begun to differentiate themselves from such close association with continental Europe, they tend to be branches which are caught up in symbiotic

¹² *Jacobellis v. Ohio* 378 U.S. at 197 (1964) Stewart, J. concurring.

¹³ One might also point out the canonical authors are also almost always men, heterosexual, educated in a specific tradition, and so on. Of course, there are exceptions. There are “continental” philosophers who are not European (either geographically or racially), who are not 20th century figures, and who are not men. But the fact that Arendt, Kristeva, Spivak, Butler, and other figures are spoken about under the rubric of continental philosophy does not, I think, obviate my point.

relationships with other disciplines: intertwined with the tree of theory, grafted to other disciplines, or trans-planted to the soil of interdisciplinary departments outside philosophy proper. The more self-consciously “philosophical” the case (department or scholar), the more closely it is likely to be tied rather directly to the core (phenomenological and hermeneutic) philosophers of 20th century Europe.

But surely this is problematic for a discipline whose core commitments contend that one cannot occupy, or philosophize from, a “view from nowhere”? If the phenomenological *method* were, so to speak, emptied of its *content* and transplanted to, say, Bhutan or Sri Lanka, the resulting questions, answers, themes, and foci would differ, perhaps radically, from those with which we are accustomed. What, then, would it mean to do “continental” philosophy in a manner that was less constrained by fidelity to continental Europe? One more attentive to the very historical and cultural situatedness that is so often cited as a strength of continental philosophy vis-à-vis analytic philosophy? And, more daring, what would it mean to be attentive not only to the ways in which temporal, linguistic, and cultural differences shape our hermeneutic horizons, but also spatial, carnal, and topographic differences?¹⁴ Perhaps it is time to think of continental philosophy beyond “the” continent.

These questions are highly significant for those of us doing “continental” philosophy rooted in communities and landscapes around the Pacific Rim, that geographic boundary that, loosely construed, is among the foci of *JPACT* and *PACT*. Compared to the European core of continental philosophy we are, as it were, thinking “on the edge”: on the other side of the temporal edge marked by the third millennium; on the edge of a continent that faces Asia as well as Europe (to say nothing of its physical connection to the continent of South America); and, finally, on a geographic edge backed by an area (the American West) with its own particular geographic and hermeneutic horizons.

The middle of the twentieth century is no longer our time; and continental Europe is not our place. Shouldn’t we, in an Emersonian spirit, move beyond mimicking the figures rooted in that time and place? Stop engaging in linguistic obfuscation, dropping non-English passages—untranslated and without explanation, even in cases where linguistic precision and supposed “untranslatability” are not an issue—merely as a display of erudition? Stop drawing quite so exclusively on European poetry, literature, art, and music in our examples? Isn’t it time we glanced up from our books—as important as they are—and took in the *place* in which we’ve been reading them?

3. Growing Up

Now, before someone readies the tar and feathers—or, worse, sighs dismissively, suggesting I’m not even worth the tar and feathers—let me clarify a few things about what I am proposing.

First, given recent political developments, I cannot emphasize strongly enough that my concern here has nothing to do with a blustering nativism. Obviously, the point is not to advocate

¹⁴ There may be certain forms of intellectual inquiry that operate more or less outside the influence of the vagaries of time and place, culture and tradition—I’ll leave that question for another time—but whatever the status of such disciplines, “continental” philosophy is not among them. It is a commonplace in continental philosophy that historical situatedness—facticity, thrownness, narrative identity, and the like—is significant, even essential. And if most of our sense of situatedness is broadly speaking temporal, it is a short and easy leap from there to geographic—or, better, topographic—implacement.

for the wholesale superiority of North American thinkers. Nor to suggest a blind equivalence between any given non-European thinker and those we think of as belonging in the canon of continental philosophy. Surely some North American philosophers, authors, and poets are ignored for the simple reason that their work is poor, and others are relatively unknown because their work is merely good. And if it is true that continental philosophy has a Eurocentric air about it, it is equally true that figures like Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Marion are read so carefully because their works are so rich and insightful.

Given the history of the United States, there is no escaping the intellectual legacy of Europe. And whatever our individual histories and intellectual itineraries, those of us who are “continental” philosophers are to an even greater degree formed by and linked to European traditions. There is no escaping Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Locke, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, and the rest. We cannot un-read Homer, Dante, Milton, Proust, Dostoevsky, Joyce. We cannot un-see Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Cezanne, Monet, Bernini, Michelangelo. Those of us who have lived and studied in Europe cannot erase it from our personal history—Hemingway’s “moveable feast” and all.

Emerson says, or hopes that, “our long apprenticeship” to Europe has come to an end. Of course, this implies that there *has been* a genuine apprenticeship, that we have learned and learned well from Europe, that we have gained familiarity with that which Europe has transmitted to us. It is important to read—and to read well—the great figures of the Western European tradition. But apprenticeship is not serfdom, not slavery; the point of an apprenticeship is to master an art and strike out on one’s own, to make one’s own contribution to the art. And so, with respect to “continental” philosophy and continental Europe, what is called for is not an end to engagement, or dialogue, or even careful scholarship on European figures, but rather an end to dependence, mimicry, hagiography.¹⁵

I am not calling for intellectual parricide. I do not advise burning the crops and salting the fields of our European literary, artistic, and cultural heritage. Nor am I calling for a provocation that will pit European culture against the culture(s) of North America so as to engineer a conflict—the graduate students of Boston, inspired by that city’s famous Tea Party, poorly disguised as incompetent university administrators, stealing into bookstores and dumping the city’s stock of *Sein und Zeit* into the harbor. There are no philosophical, artistic, or cultural blank slates. As Thoreau reminds us, “it is difficult to begin without borrowing”; and this is as true in philosophy as it is in cabin-building.¹⁶ However, when borrowing, the goal should be to do something original and to improve a thing, to be able to say, as did Thoreau, “I returned it [the axe, or in this case the philosophy] sharper than I received it.”¹⁷

What I mean to insist on, then, is that continental philosophers in general might want to make a *conscious* effort to look *beyond* continental Europe. And that one way to start doing so is

¹⁵ It is often said that analytic philosophers work on “problems” and continental philosophers work on “figures,” and these two approaches are susceptible to different vices. Some analytic philosophy insists on language that is “correct, scientific, abstract, [and] hygienically pallid” as a kind of “all-purpose solvent” for solving an increasingly narrow set of problems (see above, note 8). And the focus on “figures” over “problems” in continental thought leads people to describe themselves in terms of the figures they study—a Hegelian, a Heideggerian, a Derridean—and at times to treat these figures as philosophical “skeleton keys,” substituting “Heidegger says X regarding Y” for an argument about the nature of Y itself. In the end, the “all-purpose solvent” and the “skeleton key” are perhaps not entirely different epistemic vices.

¹⁶ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 40-41.

¹⁷ Thoreau, *Walden*, 41. Also see Stanley Cavell, *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 52.

by paying attention to one's particular historical, cultural, geographical, biological place.¹⁸ I am not suggesting that we give up on studying philosophers from 20th century continental Europe. I am, however, suggesting that we might want to apply the *methodological* resources of "continental" philosophy while working from the cultures, traditions, figures, questions, and concepts of other continents. And that, conversely, we might want to apply the cultural and intellectual resources of those other continents to continental philosophy, shaping its methodology. Dialogue is, after all, a two-way street.

4. New Thinking

If we are going to follow Emerson's exhortation toward a greater independence that will allow us to articulate distinctively American philosophies, he suggests several "influences" that might guide us in our efforts: the past, action, and nature.¹⁹

(a) *The Past*

As I've indicated, a "break with tradition" is never complete. And Emerson explicitly exhorts us to engage "*the past*," the very seat of that tradition from which he hopes to declare a kind of independence. The "mind of the Past" is communicated to us in many forms: "literature," "art," "institutions," and, one presumes, poetry, music, and mythology, as well as all forms of material culture, from architecture to clothing and cuisine.²⁰ In the context of the matter at issue, the past would be the canon of "continental philosophy."

Emerson maintains that books are the best and noblest means of transmitting truth, insight, and innovation to posterity. The scholar takes the world and life, and in them or through them finds some element of truth, which she records in a book.²¹ But, in a very hermeneutic moment, Emerson maintains that no such distillation of truth is ever perfect, and no transmission ever without loss or error. Because every scholar is historically situated and because no scholar can ever fully transcend her time, each book, each expression of truth, remains influenced by what is "conventional" and "perishable"—that is, by the contingencies of the hermeneutic perspectives and prejudices of the author. When we view books as pure distillations of truth—or when we view canonical figures of philosophy as dogmatically authoritative—they become poisonous: "the guide becomes a tyrant."²² Therefore, Emerson insists, "each age [and, here I would add, each *place*]... must write its own books."²³

This is familiar territory for hermeneutic philosophy: no book, no account, offers us a complete or unambiguous account of the truth. "Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst," writes Emerson.²⁴ And a problem arises when

¹⁸ There is a rich history of place-sensitivity in environmental philosophy. For some earlier work, see Ed Casey, *Getting Back Into Place* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993) and Robert Mugerauer, *Interpretations on Behalf of Place* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press., 1994).

¹⁹ In terms of both importance and temporal succession, Emerson treats them in the following order: nature, the past, action. Here I treat them in a different sequence in order to build toward the importance of *place*.

²⁰ Emerson, "The American Scholar," 56.

²¹ Emerson, "The American Scholar," 56.

²² Emerson, "The American Scholar," 57.

²³ Emerson, "The American Scholar," 56.

²⁴ Emerson, "The American Scholar," 57.

Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given [to whom we might add Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida], forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote those books.²⁵

Great books, read well, can enlighten us and ennoble us. But the written word is not for imitation, veneration, or fetishization; it is for *inspiration*. “The past” is an indispensable tool and ally in the quest for truth and wisdom; but for Emerson the past never trumps nature and action, never trumps the lived experience of the scholar, the revelations of particular places in particular times.

Books are for the scholar’s idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men’s transcripts of their readings. But when intervals of darkness come, as they must, —when the sun is hid, and the stars withdraw their shining, — we repair to the lamps which were kindled by their ray, to guide our steps to the East again, where the dawn is.²⁶

Books will, and should, remain a rich source of knowledge, wisdom, and inspiration. But our philosophies should be more than a mere history of ideas. The point of life is to live, not to read; and truth always requires an element of personal engagement.

(b) *Action*

It is for this reason that Emerson also insists that *action* is necessary in moving past convention and expressing new truths. Although for the scholar action is subordinate to reflection, the scholar must be active in the world. Without action, a thought cannot “ripen into truth.” Here Emerson embraces something of the same spirit that fires Peirce and James, the idea that what really matters is how ideas affect the world: “There can *be* no difference anywhere that doesn’t make a difference elsewhere – no difference in abstract truth that doesn’t express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct consequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere and somewhen.”²⁷ For Emerson, an action is the “perfection and publication” of thought.²⁸

Thinking and action are to some degree co-constitutive; and the connection between thought and action means that actions are, in this particular sense, distinctive human capacities. “Actions” without thought are not, strictly speaking, actions at all. A mere gesture or operation might be brought about unreflectively, or instinctively, or as the result of some appetite; but an action in the proper sense flows from thought. Conversely, thoughts without actions are in some sense incomplete. Thinking is, on its own, at best a merely “partial” act; action completes thought, makes it real, actual. Not only does thinking manifest itself *in* life, it is based *on* life. In order to think, the scholar must have something on which to reflect. Life provides the raw material, from which thought draws nourishment: “Only so much do I know, as I have lived,”²⁹ writes Emerson. So life provides both the raw material for thought and the arena in which

²⁵ Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 57.

²⁶ Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 58.

²⁷ William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 20.

²⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature” in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 30.

²⁹ Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 60.

thought can become manifest, which helps to explain the strong experiential, observational, and empirical bent of many of those influenced by Emerson (e.g., Thoreau, Muir).

(c) *Nature*

Finally—and perhaps most distinctive of the approach taken by Emerson and Thoreau, as well as their heirs in the American West—we must remain attentive to *nature*. “Nature” should be taken in the full transcendentalist sense of the term. To be sure, it includes the forests, lakes, rivers, and mountains that people often associate with nature; but Emerson’s Nature is more comprehensive than the study of biota. For him, Nature is the entire “web of God.”³⁰ In Nature we find both the transcendent (that which surpasses us) and the transcendental (that which provides the conditions of possibility for anything at all). Thus, transcendentalists insist that the laws of nature and the inner law of the human mind reflect and correspond to each other (the world is “a shadow of my soul,” “another me”). Here, as in Kant and in Kohák, the moral law within is a reflection of the starry sky above; the “law of nature” and the “law of spirit” reflect each other, reveal the same reality, speak the same truth.³¹

On this view, engaging nature does not require a trip to a national park or other area of preserved sublimity; Emerson finds nature in the local, the particular, and the ordinary: “I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provençal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low...”³² This focus is possible precisely because the grandeur of nature encompasses the spectacular and the common: “one design unites and animates the farthest pinnacle and the lowest trench.”³³ It is Thoreau who most strikingly develops Emerson’s transcendental view of nature in relation to particular, concrete places. Whether in Concord town or at Walden Pond or on the summit of Mount Ktaadn, Thoreau recognizes that particular places speak to us in particular ways, and so contribute to the shaping of our world.

* * *

What would it look like to pursue philosophy with some of the insights drawn from Continental₁ without feeling constrained by the need to do so within the cultural and historical framework of Continental₂? What would it look like for America to express *itself* philosophically?

If Emerson is right, a distinctively American contribution to philosophy—and this would apply, equally, to distinctive contributions from any other culture or place—would start from the local and the particular, from our experience, in the idiom of our poets and artists, attentive to the

³⁰ Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 55.

³¹ Some aspects of transcendentalism seem to set up a binary between nature and culture that is difficult to maintain given contemporary work in environmental philosophy. Nevertheless, I think there are important insights to draw on here. While I appreciate arguments that insist there is no clear way to make a distinction between nature and culture, I am unwilling to give up entirely the concept of “nature” or “wilderness,” or the idea that in some meaningful way nature can “speak” to us. Hermeneutically, I think we can say simultaneously (1) that nature and culture cannot be neatly and clearly differentiated, that there is no binary we can identify or establish here, and (2) that there remains didactic, philosophical, and even ontological reasons to maintain the language of nature and culture.

³² Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 68-69. No need to search for the “clearing of Being” in the *Schwarzwald*. One can find it outside of Concord, or on Boston Common.

³³ Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 69.

phenomena and the questions that arise from our place and our time. But that short answer proves rather complicated in the case of “America.” The United States is, famously, an “immigrant country,” the diversity of which complicates any characterization of “distinctively American” expression. Any version of a “distinctively” American narrative—including the one we are about to consider—is, or ought to be, haunted by the voices of its others: for example, the First Nations of North America, which suffered genocide at the hands of colonial settlers, and the slaves brought to this continent against their will. There can be no easy synthesis of a singular “American experience,” and no totalizing “American expression” that sums up that experience in a neat unit. At best we are able to identify distinctively American expressions, in the plural; and we must recognize, hermeneutically, that all such expressions are partial and incomplete, and remain haunted by things that are unsaid, voices that are not included.

In what follows, we’ll explore one way in which the resources of continental philosophy—phenomenological description, hermeneutical interpretation—can help to shed light on the experience of a distinctively American experience of place: “the West.” This topic suggests itself for a variety of reasons. PACT and JPACT are both projects formed around and deeply responsive to *place*. And in some sense each provides a forum for an open-ended, polyvocal response to the question “what does it mean to philosophize in *places* that sit on or face the Pacific?”

PART II: PHILOSOPHY BEGINS IN WANDER

5. *D’où parlez-vous?*

Let’s begin, ironically enough, with a French question. Richard Kearney tells us that Paul Ricoeur would begin his graduate seminars by asking each student *d’où parlez-vous*, that is, “*from where* do you speak?”³⁴ The “where” with which Ricoeur was concerned certainly included national identity, religious tradition, linguistic home, and the other sorts of cultural identifiers to which Kearney refers in his own response to the question; however, the “where” from which we speak, the where that shapes our respective hermeneutic horizons, is also material, topographic, and placial.³⁵

What does it mean to speak “from the West”?

The West to which I refer is not primarily the West of European culture in the industrialized global north—the West of Plato and Descartes, of Abraham and Jesus, of capitalism and democracy—though this is also undoubtedly true in its way. By “the West” I mean the West of the Montana big-sky country, the West of the Four Corners, the West of the central California coast and Pacific Ocean, the West of the Sierra Nevada. This is the West evoked by Wallace Stegner’s famous phrase “the geography of hope,” and indeed by complexities of that phrase that Stegner himself never fully unpacked.³⁶

³⁴ Richard Kearney, *Anatheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), xi.

³⁵ See Brian Treanor, “Earthy Hermeneutics: Beyond the Metaphor of the Text” in *Continental Philosophy and the Environment*, ed. Jonathan Maskit (Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield International, forthcoming).

³⁶ Wallace Stegner, “The Wilderness Letter,” which appears as “To: David Pesonen, December 3, 1960” in *The Selected Letters of Wallace Stegner*, ed. Page Stegner (Shoemaker and Hoard, 2007), 352-357. Of course, the West, like all hermeneutic realities, is multifaceted within its (quasi)unity. The edges of this landscape include areas that are substantially different, but still noticeably “Western” in some significant way. Thus, the urban coastal cities of San Diego and Los Angeles defy the general character of the West as small towns in big spaces (though I must confess that the vastness of the Pacific Ocean, which resists even the gigantomachean and malignant growth of Los

To know the West—or indeed, any other place—one must have a sense of “the lay of the land,” and this in a variety of senses. First, the lay evokes the physical reality of the land in its folded, variegated complexity, which constitutes its particular “directionality”: the strata of its geology, the talweg of its watershed, the prevailing winds which sweep it, the cycle of nutrients (e.g., salmon runs) that sustain it. Second, the lay of the land includes the lay—the lyric or narrative poem—of its history: the story of its specific locales, of the flora and fauna that inhabit it, of the human cultures that people it, and of the interactions of these various constituencies. Finally, lay brings to mind the directionality and twists of rope strands, and so reminds us that topographic and narrative lays are part of one unified placescape. Reality is never composed of a single, unambiguous thread; it is always a complex, mixed affair. And understanding it requires a nuanced hermeneutic sensitivity.

Distinctive “American,” “Western,” or “Pacific” contributions to “continental” philosophy would have to consider all this and more. Here I offer just one example drawing on American figures who engage the idea and reality of the West, not in order to suggest it is definitive—as I’ve noted, there are multiple American and Western narratives, and multiple American and Western places—but rather as an example of the ways in which narratives or philosophies interact with topography to shape places.³⁷ My wager here, all too brief, is that reflecting on the experience of “the West” can give us some hermeneutical insight into dwelling more thoughtfully on the Earth.

6. Two Types of Westerners

Drawing on Crèvecoeur’s celebrated *Letters from an American Farmer*, and on his own keen observation, Wallace Stegner sketches out two general character types formed by the American West.³⁸ The first type was what Crèvecoeur called the “new” American man, the frontier farmer; he was “industrious, optimistic, upwardly mobile” and, more, “family-oriented, socially responsible... a lover of both hearth and earth, [and] a builder of communities.”³⁹ He represented the liberty for which America was widely known, but without the dark side of that freedom, which is illustrated by a second type of frontier denizen. This second type lived alone or with a small family; “he had no fixed abode, tilled no ground or tilled it only fitfully, lived by killing, was footloose, uncouth, antisocial, impatient of responsibility and law.”⁴⁰ We can think of these two rough character types as “settlers” and “transients.”

Crèvecoeur hoped that the wild, transient westerner would die out and give way to the more industrious and settled westerner; but this both happened and failed to happen. It happened in the sense that as “civilization” moved westward and population centers grew, people became more settled—whether as rural farmers or urban workers and merchants. It failed to happen in the sense that the transient character type reappeared and persisted on the edge of the frontier as

Angeles, strikes me as somehow archetypally Western, as do ocean narratives like *Moby Dick* and *Two Years Before the Mast*). Likewise the lush rainforests of the Pacific Northwest are at odds with the aridity that seems so characteristic of the West.

³⁷ For the significance of the West as an idea, see Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967).

³⁸ J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters From an American Farmer and Other Essays* edited by Dennis D. Moore (Harvard University Press; 2012). Also see Wallace Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West* (New York: The Modern Library).

³⁹ Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings*, 104.

⁴⁰ Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings*, 105.

it moved from the Ohio River Valley to, in succession, the Mississippi River Valley, the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, the Pacific Coast, and finally—if less characteristically “Western”—to Alaska. Moreover, our view of such characters underwent a kind of “mythic enlargement”⁴¹ that distorted our perception of their virtues and vices, which affected even communities well behind the frontier. The transient characters were always those linked with the frontier and the wild; and the frontier plays such a prominent role in the American narrative imagination that it was nearly inevitable that we would mythologize the figures associated with it. The transient—an exploiter rather than a cultivator, anti-social rather than cooperative, uncultured and uneducated—became, in our cultural myths, the anti-heroic high plains drifter: independent, self-sufficient, a law unto himself, tribe of one. As a result, says Stegner, “being a Westerner is not simple.”⁴²

Every American is several people, and one of them is or would like to be a placed person, another is the opposite, the displaced person, cousin not to Thoreau but to Daniel Boone, dreamer not of Walden Pond but of far horizons, traveler not in Concord but in wild unsettled places, explorer not inward but outward.⁴³

The complexity of the “Western” character is captured in these competing drives for hearth and horizon—Kerouac’s longing for the open road alongside Snyder’s attentiveness to particular places. The power of place is magnetic: it pulls people in, they settle down. Many of them become deeply connected to particular bioregions, landscapes, towns, or places. But the West is so full of magnetic places, that it is equally true that many people are powerfully drawn to something just over the next ridge or across the next river. As the Germans note, a person can suffer from either, or both, a desire for home (*Heimweh*, the aching for home, or homesickness) and a desire for the horizon (*Fernweh*, an ‘aching for the distant,’ or wanderlust). However, because “the West” moved with “the frontier,” we have tended to associate the West with the wanderlust of the “high plains drifter” rather than hominess of the “implaced settler.”

But there are at least two problems with this preference for and mythic enlargement of the high plains drifter, its consequent persistence of that archetype in the American psyche, and its global impact through American cultural influence. First, the lionization of that figure is a post-hoc distortion of a much more cooperative and community-oriented society. Natty Bumppo is a “very American figure” but in some sense he is “not a full human being. He is a wild man of the woods, a Sasquatch.”⁴⁴ Figures like this serve best as a reminder of an essential aspect of the good person and the good life, as Enkidu did for Gilgamesh. Our mythology would have us believe that the Western version of Bumppo—the solitary drifter of mid-20th century films—was a model for virtue and an embodiment of that which is distinctively American and Western. However, far from ruling the West as independent, rough-but-just anti-heroes, these itinerants were often both less admirable and less successful than they are made out to be in cultural narratives: “the only real individualists in the West... wound up on one end of a rope whose other end was in the hands of a bunch of cooperators.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings*, 103.

⁴² Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings*, 100.

⁴³ Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings*, 199. Although Stegner pegs Thoreau as a homebody here, he is referring to the popular conceptions of Thoreau (and of Daniel Boone). The actual Thoreau, as we see below, was an advocate of both implacement and displacement

⁴⁴ Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings*, 200.

⁴⁵ Stegner referencing a quip by Bernard DeVoto in Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings*, 50.

The second problem with the mythic enlargement of the transient type is that, even if it were true to history, the environment in which those characters and their virtues supposedly flourished no longer exists. The image of a solitary wanderer who takes what he needs before moving on, with no thought of the aftermath of his passage, someone who cares little for his connection to wider society, someone whose sense of justice is founded on knee-jerk violence and retribution is one that is both outdated and dangerous in a world populated by some seven billion souls. The world we've mythologized is not our world; and the characters that populate that mythology would not fit or flourish in our world. The population of the West has exploded since Crèvecoeur's time, as have the per capita resource use and waste footprints of its inhabitants. Aridity has always been characteristic of "the West," demarcated by Powell's famous 100th meridian, west of which rainfall is scarce enough to require artificial irrigation. Such an environment means that people will cluster around relatively scarce resources, especially water, and that settlements will consequently be separated by significant distances. As population grows around limited resources, technological innovations—for example, dams—are deployed to expand the human carrying capacity of the area; but these inevitably alter the landscape, the distribution and movement of flora and fauna, and other local particularities in unpredictable and often problematic ways. Witness the near-destruction of many historic Pacific salmon runs by dams. Eventually, population growth expands to environments that are entirely unsuitable for significant development (e.g., scores of golf courses in the desert of Las Vegas). Even before the most dramatic forms of ecological overshoot, the pressures of limited resources induce many people to pack up and move on in search of greener pastures—the next undeveloped valley, the up-and-coming neighborhood, the last "hidden gem" of a mountain town.

As a consequence, the geography of the West is "raided more often than settled,"⁴⁶ whether the boomtown is a Wyoming oilfield or a cluster of tech startups in San Francisco. In either case, the model is the same: move in, exploit conditions for short-term, explosive growth, and move out for greener pastures when the place becomes too crowded, too polluted, too bourgeois, or just too "yesterday." This boom and bust economic model—as opposed to a model of long-term sustainable abundance—is an echo of the way in which we have interacted with the places of the West: "Indifferent to, or contemptuous of, or afraid to commit ourselves to, our physical and local surroundings, always hopeful of something better, hooked on change, a lot of us have never stayed in one place long enough to learn it, or have learned it only to leave it."⁴⁷

If such behavior was ever really a virtue, it is a virtue whose time has passed. As Stegner notes, "complete independence, absolute freedom of movement, are exhilarating for a time... but [it is likely that they do] not wear well." Consequently, he concluded that it is "probably time we settled down... probably time we looked around us instead of looking ahead.... Neither the country nor the society we built out of it can be healthy until we stop raiding and running, and learn to be quiet part of the time, and acquire the sense not of ownership but of belonging."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings*, 202.

⁴⁷ Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings*, 204.

⁴⁸ Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings*, 206. Although this was made in the context of the recognition that "I doubt that we will ever get the motion out of the American, for everything in his culture of opportunity and abundance has, up to now, urged motion upon him as a form of virtue." (*ibid.*, 205). Stegner also recognizes the possibility of responsible movement, including the migratoriness that is our focus here. Although some boom-and-bust Western movement resembles the swarming of locusts, other human movement resembles "the traditional, seasonal, social migratoriness of shepherd tribes" or, he adds, "of the academic tribes who every June leave Cambridge or New Haven for summer places in Vermont, and every September return to their winter range" (*ibid.*, 200).

7. Migration: Wisdom Wanders Between Places

The West and the people in it have perpetuated or endured many catastrophes, only some of which I've mentioned, and those only in passing. A full accounting of the West as place and what it has to teach us would have to consider the range of atrocities and advances, tragedies and triumphs, virtues and vices associated with its places and histories. And surely one of the things the West has taught and is continuing to teach us is that many of the behaviors it encouraged or allowed—rootlessness, itinerant scavenging, boom-and-bust economies, to say nothing of Manifest Destiny, utilitarian-cornucopian views of nature, and so forth—proved to be deeply misguided. Stegner was correct: it is time for us to live on the Earth in a different manner, one that takes into account disappearing frontiers, limited resources, and a diverse, booming human population—that is, a world that is shrinking in significant ways.

But the lessons taught by a place are never univocal, and they are never final. The West teaches us more than one thing, both as a present reality and as a lingering effect of our historical interactions with it. And if the West has taught us that rootlessness has its limits and comes at a price, might it not also remind us, under the gaze of a more attentive reflection, that wandering is not without merit or value? The trick, perhaps, is to live in a place in a manner that is *rooted* enough to know it, deep down in its topography and seasons and moods, but simultaneously *restless* enough to desire and appreciate difference. To love both the hearth and the horizon.

In his famous essay “Walking,” Thoreau likens his peregrinations to the unknown paths of non-returning comets, which on first gloss might seem to encourage the very rootlessness the West has taught us is unsustainable. However, everyone who has read Thoreau well knows that the spirit that animates him is more aligned with careful observation, stewardship, and simplicity, and is deeply at odds with rootless exploitation. We ought, therefore, to emphasize and heed a different metaphor—one Thoreau uses much more frequently—as we seek to frame and understand the complex lessons taught to us by the geography of the West: *migration*.

To put this claim in a trope more familiar to post-Levinasian continental philosophy, perhaps the model for mobility ought not be Abraham (leaving home without a backward glance, lured by the promise of something over the horizon), nor Odysseus (committed to one home, but largely a plunderer of other places), but rather a third way, one that takes our migratory brothers and sisters—for example, the bison, salmon, gray whales, and other non-human animals so deeply emblematic of the American West—as models. If the lessons of the West can teach us something useful in terms of the hermeneutics of place, perhaps it is precisely the value of the productive tension between the irresistible call or lure of the other and the desire or need to be rooted in the familiar. The geography of the West teaches us, paradoxically, both that it is good to settle down, live within limits, and know your place, and at the same time that “our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. *We need the tonic of wildness.*”⁴⁹ Enkidu and Natty Bumppo have, after all, their own virtues. For good humans, the point is neither to sink a single taproot and remain fixed in one spot (like an oak in well-drained soil), nor to surge ravenously from place to place (like swarming locusts), but rather to wander-within-implacement or migrate-between-places.⁵⁰ For Thoreau and the stream of

⁴⁹ Thoreau, *Walden*, 557. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁰ For an account of ways in which homogenized space influences implacement, see Gerard Kuperus, *Ecopolitical Homelessness: Defining Place in an Unsettled World* (London: Routledge, 2016).

American thinking I am tracking here, it would not be an overstatement to say that the lessons of the West teach us that philosophy begins in *wander*.⁵¹

It might seem odd to turn to Thoreau—a man famous for his connection to a single place (Walden Pond), a man deeply immersed in New England—in the course of a reflection on “the West”; but I’ve already suggested that the geography of the West is both physical and psychological. And Thoreau’s views on the West are both reflective and formative of the American experience of it.⁵² Thoreau claimed to suffer from spiritual and physical malaise if he failed to attend to his daily walks through the woods around Concord, which often occupied four or more hours of his day.⁵³ This ‘spiritual exercise’ was one of the primary means by which he immersed himself in and experienced wildness—observed it, learned from it, was changed by it—whether those treks were on paths around Concord or deep in the Maine woods. He referred to these outings as “sauntering,” the meaning of which he linked to both *saint terre* (holy land) and *sans terre* (without a land or home). This daily practice was an occasion for both the empirical observation of environment around Concord—flora, fauna, hydrology, topography, climate, and so on—and a form of carnal hermeneutics through which Thoreau delved ever more deeply into the meaning of the environment, local and global, and of his place in it. And for Thoreau, sauntering was inclined by a “subtle magnetism” toward “the West,” by which he meant the *wild*: “The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild.”⁵⁴ The lessons of sauntering resemble those of the West; they were the means by which Thoreau cultivated both the place-based virtues of inhabitation and the migrant virtues of the traveler and explorer.

First, perhaps paradoxically, sauntering—leaving home—is a practice that connects us with our place. The built environment overlays, as in a palimpsest, another strata of place formed by the material topography, natural rhythms, flora, and fauna.⁵⁵ And to genuinely understand our place, we need to appreciate all these various strata. The built environment is part of place; but the “concrete jungle”—whether the village of Concord or the sprawl of Los Angeles—tends to

⁵¹ A nice expression of this, and from a distinctively American thinker, can be found in Henry Bugbee, *The Inward Morning* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 39.

⁵² Casual readers associate Thoreau solely with his “experiment” at Walden Pond, tend to think of his nature as fundamentally sedentary and reclusive, and so might think that he would champion something like Crèvecoeur’s settled “lover of hearth and earth.” But while such a characterization is not without truth, Thoreau was no anchorite, fixed in place. If his two years at Walden Pond represent an inflection point in the arc of his life, it was his daily practice of sauntering that fueled his thinking and that—by its repetition and constancy before, during, and after his life at Walden—best expressed his spirit. Moreover, a number of influential ideas about the West took root in America when “the West” referred largely to places like Western New York, the Cumberland Gap, and the Mississippi River Valley, although the Lewis and Clark Expedition had already reached the West Coast in 1805 and trade with southwest North America—first the Spanish Territory and later Mexico—had existed since the 1700s. Several mythic American archetypes, real and fictional, spent much of their lives east of the Louisiana Purchase: Natty Bumppo, Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and others. So, in some sense “the West” means the frontier, at least in the European North American idiom. But the frontier West reaches an apotheosis of sorts in the actual Western part of the physical continent, in geography west of Powell and Stegner’s famous 100th meridian.

⁵³ Henry David Thoreau, *Walking* (Cricket House Books, 2010), 3. For other accounts of walking philosophers, see Frédéric Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 2014).

⁵⁴ Thoreau, *Walking*, 17. Among other things, the West—as an idea and a place—was an arena in which to hear and respond to Emerson’s call for distinctively American philosophy, poetry, and literature: “We go eastward to realize history and study the works of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race; we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure. 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, *Walking*, 12). To head west is to head away from domesticity, sameness, and common custom toward wildness, otherness, and mystery.

⁵⁵ On the palimpsest of place, see Martin Drenthen, “Ecological Restoration and Place Attachment: Emplacing nonplace?” in *Environmental Values*, vol. 18, no. 3 (August 2009): 285-312.

overlay and obscure other equally important strata, and to that degree displaces those within it. Sauntering, however, breaks with the monotony of climate-controlled buildings the grid-like pattern of roadways; it exposes us to weather; it reminds us of our embodied connection to the environment. It reveals something “new” that, in fact, was there all along. In so doing, sauntering implaces us more deeply in the places we already inhabit, connecting us to a reality often overlooked in the modern idiom: the roll and pitch of the topography; the local flora and fauna that have been reduced in number and pushed into smaller and smaller niches; circadian and seasonal rhythms obscured by climate-control and artificial light. This connection to local particularities is not merely practical or utilitarian, it shapes the meaning these places have for us, and so informs our understanding and valuing of them. Thoreau believed that the liveliness of a town or city is dependent on the nourishment provided by the wild in which it is embedded. Sauntering reconnects us to that wellspring.

Second, sauntering connects us to wild nature, that is, to reality. True, wilderness and wildness can be found anywhere, even in a modern megalopolis; a facile, dichotomous or binary version nature/culture is untenable. Nevertheless, distinguishing between nature and culture in a more nuanced and hermeneutic fashion remains both useful and valid. And whether one thinks of wilderness as a place or an idea, it remains archetypally connected to those areas and landscapes that are more perceptibly outside human influence or control, landscapes that once typified, and still persist in, the West. Removing artificial constraints on our experience and reconnecting with the wild, sauntering reengages us with what Michel Serres calls “hard” reality. Or, to use an American idiom, it engages in what Jack Turner calls “gross contact.”⁵⁶ The point is that sauntering—especially the extended, multi-day sauntering once common in the West—reconnects us with the aspects of reality to which we must accommodate ourselves, in contrast to the experience of city life in which much of reality is bent to conform to our wishes. Hard, wild reality has an “iron law”: “Respect the thing itself that, alone, commands and not opinion, this above all else teaches the work-producing life.”⁵⁷

Third, sauntering liberates us from influences that are both artificial—at least in some sense—and pervasive: the tightly defined passages circumscribed by sidewalks, streets, and highways; the unnatural speed of cars; the stifling routine of productivity and efficiency; the straightjacket of convention; and the artificial rhythms of time-clocks and business hours. When sauntering, we are exposed, and we are forced to slow down and adopt a natural, more suitable pace. Rebecca Solnit suggests we do our best thinking at three miles per hour, that is, at the pace of a walk or hike.⁵⁸ When we saunter we roam free of blind fidelity to artificial barriers, whether footpath, roadway, property line, or municipal boundary. We aim to produce nothing and, freed from demands of practical or economic productivity, end up producing or discovering much of value. As anyone who has backpacked or otherwise sauntered for an extended period will know, the body and mind quickly fall back into a more relaxed, pre-industrial rhythm, one dictated by sunrise and sunset rather than alarm clocks and caffeine. When sauntering we can stop for any reason, or no reason. Detour to skinny-dip in an alpine lake, check to see if the blackberries are ripe, or watch nesting birds in a local park. Nap all afternoon, or wake at three in the morning to watch the Perseid meteor shower. Time flows differently in this mode—Thoreau writes of whole days passing while sitting in the door of his cabin, gazing out on Walden Pond.

⁵⁶ Michel Serres, *Variations on the Body*, trans. Randolph Burks (London: Continuum, 2008), 34. And Jack Turner, *The Abstract Wild* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1996), 19ff.

⁵⁷ Serres, *Variations on the Body*, 34.

⁵⁸ See Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* (New York: Penguin, 2000).

Fourth, sauntering is a conscious choice to take leave of the familiar and walk into the wild (characterized by otherness, and by our lack of control), hear what it has to say to us, and learn what it has to teach us. When a person saunters, it is often alone, or in small groups like Thoreau's huckleberry parties. The dark side of freedom, independence, and solitude is the possibility of Crèvecoeur's isolated misanthrope; but the upside is respite from the incessant clamor of society and the marketplace. This different experience of time and place is one means by which sauntering facilitates an encounter with a genuine otherness. In contrast to myriad economic schemes and urban infrastructure projects, in contrast even to various forms of more rigidly scheduled and managed journeys, when sauntering we ask where nature—topography, weather, rhythms—wants us to go. And, so, we find ourselves surprised by experiences, landscapes, and phenomena we would not have chosen on our own. As Thoreau says, "I believe there is a subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright."⁵⁹ This guidance, the directionality of nature and our place in it, only becomes evident when we "let go" of our attempts to bend it to our will and "let be" the things as we encounter them. Annie Dillard writes eloquently of this orientation, in which rather than making an effort, observing, and trying to wrest secrets from things, we stop trying and allow things to reveal themselves to us in a moment of "surprise."⁶⁰

It's crucial to remember that Thoreau's sauntering—both his daily walks and his longer expeditions—took place in the context of a life profoundly committed to Concord and its environs. Similarly, Muir's travels throughout the Sierra Nevada, as well as expeditions further afield (e.g., Alaska) took place in the context of a love affair with Yosemite Valley as committed as Thoreau's experiment in Walden.

Thoreau is often caricatured as either a misanthropic evangelist for wildness and wandering, or, alternatively, as a poseur who spoke about solitude and wildness but who ate dinner at the Emersons' and washed his clothing at his parents' home. But a careful reading of Thoreau reveals something quite different. His goal was neither civilization nor wildness, but rather what he called a "border life."⁶¹ In Thoreau's case, he sought to live by making forays into one territory or another, sometimes implying that his home was settled and the forays were into the wilderness, and at other times suggesting that his home was in the wild and that his forays took him into town. In *Walden*, he writes: "I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both."⁶²

We might say the West teaches us something analogous: the value of both implacement and displacement. Implacement is the foundation for long experience and familiarity, along with virtues such as care, restraint, and patience. But while implacement undoubtedly develops certain virtues, strengthens communities (human and non-human), and tends toward the stability and sustainability we associate with wise and frugal use, it also runs the risk of myopia, provincialism, and stagnation. Those risks are mitigated to some degree precisely by the

⁵⁹ Thoreau, *Walking*, 602.

⁶⁰ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), 35. For a parallel insight in the idiom of continental philosophy, see Martin Heidegger, *Country Path Conversations*, trans. Bret Davis (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016).

⁶¹ If that border life looked more like choosing wildness over domesticity, it is because Thoreau was trying to correct a deficiency he identified in his community. His encounters with Alek Therien, the "Canadian woodchopper," make clear that the "natural life" was not fully virtuous when completely detached from culture and civilization.

⁶² Thoreau, *Walden*, 210.

displacement that comes with wandering, sauntering, or migration. The surest and best way to guard against the pitfalls of implacement is through exposure to otherness: experiencing things otherwise.

Sauntering is one way—there are others—to try to live the twin lessons of Western geography: (1) come to know and love a particular place, and give oneself to it and, nevertheless, (2) never stop exploring, wandering, and giving oneself over to otherness. These lessons are not only good for inhabitants of the physical geography of the West; they are good for “Continental” philosophy as well. A person should be familiar with the place she inhabits; she should be committed to it, value it, work to insure its well-being. However, she should also get out, explore, see something new, try something different. Likewise, a philosopher should know her tradition, her philosophical home—whether that is ancient Greek philosophy, Medieval scholasticism, French phenomenology, American pragmatism, Taoism, or some other tradition. But whatever one’s philosophical home, one should also do a bit of intellectual sauntering or wandering, because one’s understanding is enhanced by encountering other engagements with truth, other expressions of value, and other questions of meaning. A person who only views things through one philosophical lens is like someone who reads only one book. There is a tendency to narrow-minded dogmatism in such folk.

The salmon, bison, and gray whales are neither simply implaced, in the sense that they are rooted in a single site, nor simply displaced, as if they wandered across spaces that are meaningless and interchangeable. Rather, they migrate between places. The wandering of salmon is anchored by a commitment to a particular place as strong as any on Earth, something that brings them back unerringly, across years of time and vast, oceanic distances, to the specific creek or tributary that marks their life-cycle. But that deep, mysterious fidelity to that single, particular place—indistinguishable to non-salmon from myriad similarly favorable locations—is disrupted, equally profoundly and irresistibly, by the need to leave that home and to wander. This is the lesson, or one lesson, of the West: we must be implaced to live well, *and* we must wander to live well. We should aspire to be fully, authentically, lovingly connected with particular places and, at the same time, not to be trapped by those places, and to leaven or spice our implacement with a dose of exploration, wandering, sauntering.

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