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**Author:** Tadeusz Rachwał

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TADEUSZ RACHWAŁ

## Wildness and Disobedience: Thoreau's Walking

In the beginning of his "Civil Disobedience" Thoreau heartily accepts the Emersonian ("Politics") motto of that government being best which governs least. Since, ideally, the government which governs least is one which does not govern at all, what we confront is a project of living in a state where there is a government which does not govern, a free state in which the government does not have any right over "my person and property but what I concede to it".<sup>1</sup> Thoreau came "to this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad",<sup>2</sup> not to change it but to independently be. The only state in which such a being is thinkable to Thoreau is one in which government is free individual's *neighbour*, "which treats the individual with respect as a neighbor" and which would "prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not anywhere seen".<sup>3</sup>

Rather than fraternity, Thoreau sees neighbourhood as the third element supplementing the liberty and equality of the French Revolution watchword. Yet, as we shall see, Thoreau himself will go away from this neighbourhood which, as a form of state, still obstructs the independence of living.

Etymologising the German *bauen* (building) Martin Heidegger, in his seminal essay, reconstructs its real and lost meaning of "dwelling" *via* its roots in Old English *neahgebur*, "*neah*, near, and *gebur*, dweller. The Nachbar is the *Nachgebur*,

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<sup>1</sup> Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience", in *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. O. Thomas (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 243.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

the *Nachgebauer*, the near-dweller, he who dwells nearby", in order to find this trace of dwelling in the verb *bin*, in *to be*, in being.<sup>4</sup> This dwelling-being is not a virtual inactivity. "When we speak of dwelling," writes Heidegger,

we usually think of an activity that man performs alongside many other activities. We do not merely dwell . . . we practice a profession, we do business, we travel and lodge on the way, now here, now there.<sup>5</sup>

In the light of Thoreau's claim of not bettering the world, of living in it as it is, the question of productive activity and neighbouring seems to be at least worth problematizing. In other words, the question is: What kind of activity is Thoreau's living in the world?

Thoreau would like to see an individual as a respected neighbour of the state where respect means noninterference, a peaceful cohabitation of the neighbour of the state with individuals who are themselves each other's neighbours. Since neighbours, unlike brothers, are not related to each other by familial bonds, there can be no constitution other than the law of individual property that unifies the neighbourhood and preserves it. However, at least in Lockean terms, property can only be gained by labour understood as active transformation of Nature, as a removal out of the state "that Nature hath provided and left it in". To work is to remove from Nature, to take from it and improve by making things one's own. A neighbour without a property, without a part of nature as a part, or extension of himself can thus live, say, only on the road, at the outskirts of the appropriated territory, or in Nature in whose preservation Thoreau sees the preservation of the world where there are no roads at all. Thoreau's living is a third kind of neighbourhood, a living in which Heidegger's dwelling does not quite mean building, but a nomadic kind of dwelling nearby, though away from the settled territory of workers. This last neighbourhood is, perhaps, the one he had imagined, but which he had never seen.

Thoreau begins his essay on walking with a statement which he himself calls an extreme one:

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil, – to regard man as inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society.<sup>6</sup>

Rather than dwelling and building in society, man inhabits nature which is thus translated into a home which need not be erected, a home which is, perhaps like

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking", in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and ed. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 146–7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in *Great Short Works of Thoreau*, ed. W. Glick (New York: Harper, 1982), p. 331.

that of a snail, a part and parcel of the natural human constitution. What he calls the inhabitant of nature is actually a sojourner in it who, in the primitive ages, still

dwelt, as it were, in a tent in this world, and was either treading the valleys, or crossing the plains, or climbing the mountain tops. But lo! men have become the tools of their tools ... We now no longer camp as for a night, but have settled down on earth and forgotten heaven. We have adopted Christianity merely as an improved method of *agri*-culture. We have built for this world a family mansion, and for the next a family tomb.<sup>7</sup>

Absolute freedom and wildness is the freedom of dwelling without parcelling the world into this and that, for instance, a nomadic living in which nature is one's home. Men as "tools of their tools" have separated themselves from nature by settling down and improving their mansions, by parcelling out not only the land, but also the interiors of their houses to the point where the distance between the kitchen and the parlor makes cooking such a secretive kind activity as if the host "had a design to poison you". The language of parlors, we read in *Walden*, has degenerated into *parlever*, an idle talk of sorts which is as distant from nature as the kitchen from the parlor.<sup>8</sup> Then Thoreau as it were politicizes the question of cooking and eating mapping the topography of the house upon that of the world and asks: "How can the scholar, who dwells away in the North West Territory or the Isle of Man, tell what is parliamentary in the kitchen?"<sup>9</sup> Kitchen is the space where the raw gets cooked, a space where the civil meets the necessity of life which, ideally, does not need any cooking. The Hottentots, Thoreau informs us, "eagerly devour the marrow of the koodoo and other antelopes raw" while Northern Indians eat raw the marrow of the Arctic reindeer

as well as other parts, including the summits of the antlers, as long as they are soft. ... They get what usually goes to feed the fire. This is probably better than stall-fed beef and slaughter-house pork to make a man of. Give me a wildness whose glance no civilization can endure, – as if we lived on the marrow of koodoos devoured raw.<sup>10</sup>

The wild is distasteful to the civilized taste in the manner living in the forest, for instance, is inconvenient. What Thoreau's project of return to nature also involves is the critique of the civil as aesthetic, of civilization as ideological aestheticization of the world, of its transformation into a safe, comfortable and nice environment. Yet, as is well known, Thoreau never went too far from the civil, always keeping Concord at some available distance. He always dwelt nearby, as a neighbour

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<sup>7</sup> Henry David Thoreau, "Walden", in *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. O. Thomas (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Henry David Thoreau, "Walking", p. 349.

occupying the space which nobody really wanted. He walked away from the “merely civil”, away from public roads. According to Paul Virilio, “the political power of the State is polis, police, that is, management of public ways”.<sup>11</sup> Thoreau saw villages as “a sort of expansion of the highway” deriving the word “village” from

the Latin *villa*, which together with *via*, a way, or more anciently *ved* and *vella*, Varro derives from *veho*, to carry, because the villa is the place to and from which things are carried. . . . Hence, too, apparently, the Latin word *vilis* and our vile, also *villain*. This suggests what kind of degeneracy villagers are liable to. They are wayworn by the travel that goes by and over them, without travelling themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Not to be vile, one has to have the power of disobedience to the guidance of the public road and walk away elsewhere. A neighbour to the civil must disobey the civil ethics and aesthetics by becoming mobile, by becoming an unguided traveller who, like e.e. cummings' seeker of truth, follows no path. “I can easily walk ten, fifteen, twenty, any number of miles, commencing at my own door, without going by any house, without crossing a road except where the fox and the mink do.”<sup>13</sup> Walking, one is also disobedient to one's own civility, one recesses “civilized, political life to distant views from hilltops” or escapes it altogether, as Anne D. Wallace notices.<sup>14</sup>

Viewing the civil as a distant political prospect demands, of course, shaking off the civil from oneself, leaving behind a part of one's consciousness as alien. We should walk not quite as ourselves but spiritually follow the bodily instinct. We should not “direct our steps to the woods, if they do not carry us thither”, says Thoreau then telling us that he feels “alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit”.<sup>15</sup> This split of body and spirit, the inability to easily “shake off the village”, as Thoreau phrases it, makes him feel that “I am not where my body is, — I am out of my senses”.<sup>16</sup> This touch of slight madness, of its necessity in any movement away from the social, makes the existence of the society of neighbours thinkable. Thoreau quite clearly realises the, say, erratic character of his openness to wildness when he suggests that one more estate within the social structure. “The chivalric and heroic spirit which once belonged to the Rider seems now to reside in, or perchance to

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Virilio, *Vitesse et Politique* (Paris: Galilée, 1977), p. 21. Quoted in: Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Nomadology. The War Machine*, trans. B. Massumi (New York: Semiotexte(e), 1986), p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “Walking”, p. 338.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 337.

<sup>14</sup> Anne D. Wallace, *Walking, Literature, and English Culture, The Origins and Uses of Peripatetic in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 185.

<sup>15</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “Walking”, p. 336.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

have subsided into, the Walker – not the Knight, but the Walker Errant. He is a sort of fourth estate, outside of Church and State and People.”<sup>17</sup> Though outside the three estates, the Walker is also an estate, the one who dwells near the other three without obeying their laws.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 332–3.