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〈第一回連続講演会論文〉

Uncommon Schools: Stanley Cavell and the Teaching of *Walden*

Paul Standish*

ABSTRACT: Thoreau's *Walden* is a text that has been misinterpreted in various ways, one consequence of which is a failure to appreciate its significance as a perfectionist and visionary text for education. This paper explores aspects of what might be called its teaching, especially via the kind of teaching that is offered by Stanley Cavell's commentary, *The Senses of Walden. Walden* is considered especially in the light of its conception of language as the "father-tongue" and of the ideas of continual rebirth and departure that are associated with this. References to teaching and learning abound in the book, but it is Thoreau's specific reference to the need for "uncommon schools" that provides a focus for the present discussion.

KEY WORDS: Cavell, Thoreau, economy of living, father-tongue, rebirth, Heidegger, Rorty, Romanticism

There are reasons for being cautious about beginning this project, for this is a text about a text about another text . . . and before I go on I can sense the yawns and sighs that for some are provoked by this — that is, by what are imagined to be the narcissism and irrelevance that such approaches might imply. Such approaches amount to little more than eulogies to pet thinkers; they have little bearing on educational practice; they indulge in plentiful quotation from "the master" and little clear and critical engagement with ideas. I have sympathy with such doubts. So let me begin by taking the doubt head-on. Why write about *Walden?* And why write about *The Senses of Walden,* Stanley Cavell's study of Henry Thoreau's book? What can these teach us about teaching and learning? What do they have to say about education? What after all is *Walden?*

Thoreau's *Walden,* published in 1854, is his account of a period of nearly two years that he spent living at Walden Pond, not a remote place but a place in the woods away from the town. Compressing the two years into one, it provides an account of the time he spent there, of the hut he built, the beans he planted, the birds and animals he saw in the woods, the people who visited him, and the pond itself. It is written — allegedly — in order to respond to the kinds of questions that the

townsfolk asked of him: what did he eat, was he lonely, was he afraid, how many children did he maintain, what did he give to charity? These questions may seem innocent enough and perhaps they were, but they sketch the territory of the economy of living that it is the book's purpose to explore and elaborate. It is, Thoreau says, his experiment in living. But what is this *it* that is his experiment in living. While, to be sure, it involves the two years spent at Walden in conditions not exactly of self-sufficiency but of making a living simply, it is also the writing of *Walden* — the realising of a language (or of the possibilities of language) that can provide the conditions for the economy he seeks. Hence, a major concern of the text is with language itself.

This more subtle and complex purpose has not always been recognised, and the book's reception since 1854 has been uneven. While it has been celebrated as a key work in the establishment of an American consciousness and literature, it has sometimes been read as a kind of rural idyll, and a rejection of society to boot. In 1917, in an edition of *The Seven Arts* marking the centenary of Thoreau's birth, the editors comment that it was through living close to "the elements, the forest, the sea, the soil" that Thoreau was able to discover the perfect integrity that he exacted from living things: "It was this that led him to look with the aloofness of an immortal upon the world out of which he had grown"; it was this that made him "solitary and disdainful", a man "whose imagination never compassed the gelatinous mass of human kind" (Editors of *The Seven Arts,* in Paul, 1962, p. 9). The sense of the exacting individualism of Thoreau's thought is there too in what Max Lerner, in 1939, described as the uncompromising nature of Thoreau's social criticism — "a taut, astringent rejection of everything, that could not pass the most exacting tests of the individual life. In that sense there was something of the nihilist about Thoreau, and his thought effected an almost Nietzschean transvaluation of values" (in Paul, 1962, p. 21). Lerner counteracts these rather heavily weighted remarks with the suggestion that Thoreau's hermit-like individualism should not be overemphasised. But it is still a revulsion against society that is understood to motivate his retreat — and indeed it is significant that it is seen as a retreat. In the popular imagination, this amounts to the idea of the escape to the woods, the solitary life lived close to nature, with Thoreau cast as a kind of environmentalist *avant la lettre.*

But there are good reasons for contesting this picture, and Cavell's manner of doing this, which orientates my discussion, is distinguished by its extraordinary

resonance for education. In the first place, the book is not without its reflections on matters of a quite different kind — on slavery, the Mexican war, factory labour, business, charity, neighbours, health and wealth — reflections that in effect answer to the innocent questions of the townsfolk. Above all its experiment involves living not in the remote countryside but *within about a mile* of his nearest neighbours — which is to say, at a distance where they will see what he is doing, in such a way that his experiment can serve as a kind of example. It is something from which he expects to learn, and it may teach others: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (Thoreau,1986, p. 135). Yes, he went searching for what the woods had to teach, but this is not, it turns out, the only place to go for lessons of this kind, for there will come a time when he will move on, seeking edification in a different direction: "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one" (p. 371).

If the book is his record or account of his time at Walden, it is also the means by which he accounts for himself, showing in the process what counts for him. He even goes so far as to present the odd page of accounts, where columns of figures detail what he spent on the materials for his house, what profit he made from his beans, what his food cost him — inviting the reader to be, as it were, the auditor not only of this balance sheet but of his account as a whole. In order to set our economy straight, the auditing that is needed, this seems to say, is something other than the accountancy procedures that preoccupy the busy townsfolk with their enterprise and their expanding businesses. Indeed a good economy cannot be confined to columns of figures for it must relate to our language as a whole.

If it is Thoreau's aim to present us with a holistic vision of an economy of living, it becomes possible to see the book as a kind of utopian text — albeit that Thoreau's concerns are painstakingly practical (planting beans, building a shelter) and doggedly realistic. But even in these most practical tasks the suggestion of their larger significance is made through a kind of mock-heroic imagery: when he hoes his bean-field, his battle with the "Trojan" weeds casts him as Achilles overcoming "[m]any a lusty crest-waving Hector" (p. 207). The book that remains open on Thoreau's table as he goes about his daily tasks is none other than *The Iliad,* though — the humour may seem deflating but it works both ways — sometimes he

preferred to read the scraps of newspaper in which for convenience he had wrapped his lunch. It is not the sensational in the news, about which Thoreau is predictably scathing, but the epic in the ordinary that this implies. The suggestion of epic importance is more grave, as Cavell demonstrates, in the numerous ways in which Thoreau's language takes on the expressions, rhythms, and imagery of the Old Testament prophets, Ezekiel and Jeremiah. The sense of visionary purpose that is reinforced by such connections helps us to see *Walden* as a kind of perfectionist writing that stands in line with Rousseau's *Emile* and Plato's *The Republic*. Just as Rousseau's purpose is not to provide tips for teachers but rather to offer a substantive social philosophy in which a good education will play a critical role, so here Thoreau's experiment enacts a possibility of living that is tantamount to a kind of lifelong learning. "We have", he tells us, "a comparatively decent system of common schools, schools for infants only... It is time that we had uncommon schools, that we did not leave off our education when we begin to be men and women" (p. 154).

We shall shortly ask what such an (uncommon) education might amount to, but first let us test out the significance of prophecy here. The Old Testament prophets were charged with the responsibility of alerting the people to the ways in which their lives had become corrupt, and of insisting on the ways in which they had, as it were, become blind or deaf to this. They foretold of a world-to-come. The former function is symbolised in Thoreau's book by the figure of the cockerel: he will brag as loudly as a morning cockerel in order to wake his fellow citizens up, for they have gone to sleep in their lives. The latter is accomplished not in specific predictions but in the demonstration of a possibility of living, in which the idea of experiment is itself a motif. For this is no recipe for the good life but an illustration of the need for each of us not to copy Thoreau but to engage in our own experiment, to live as experiment: we should not settle down complacently, like the townsfolk, but should regard our lives as opportunity at every point, with neither established foundation nor final settlement, but with every occasion an occasion for new departure.

The proto-Nietzschean affirmation that is evident here is also pointed up in Thoreau's claim, made first in the epigraph to the first chapter, "Economy", and repeated later in the book: "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer [the cockerel] in the morning standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbours up" (p. 45). But one reason that Thoreau will not write an

ode to dejection is that Coleridge has already done that. Hence, this remark helps to place *Walden* in relation to Romantic thought and achievement. And yet the association with Coleridge's poem, for all the affirmative emphasis of Thoreau's claim, means that melancholy is never far away. As Cavell points out, Thoreau allows space to something like desperation or despair in the book in the kind of irritability — and actually boredom — that creeps into some of its pages. The robust affirmation symbolised by the cockerel is also complicated by various forms of indirectness in the text — a stealthy approach that wrong-foots the reader, at times even the deviousness and unpredictability of the trickster, symbolised by the cockerel's adversary, the fox. The inconsistency of Thoreau's voice, the wilful ambiguity of the rhythms of his sentences, serve to put the reader in the position of *having to read:* of being faced constantly with the decision of how to take a phrase, how to react to it, what to understand by it, whether to assent. This condition of reading — which is treated directly in a chapter by that name — tells us something of how we should address ourselves to the occasions that life presents.

But what exactly is reading, and what is its importance here? The indirectness of the relationship between reader and writer is associated at one point with the bent arm's length, the elbow support, that separates book from reader, implying the bearing the reader must gain on the text. While reading a book is metonymic of the more pervasive reading of the world that is required of us, the written word carries a special significance in terms of our education as adults — that is, our education *into* adulthood, *through* adulthood. Indeed it represents a crucial aspect of our ongoing acquisition of language, the condition of continual rebirth. As we grow up we inevitably learn to speak: we acquire our mother-tongue. This is our common schooling, our schooling into community. But we need later to acquire the "father-tongue" — a "reserved and select expression, too significant to be heard by the ear, which must be born again in order to speak" (p. 146). The father-tongue is associated by Thoreau crucially with the written word. The learning of the father-tongue stands in contrast to the naturalness of our initial and conventional acquisition of language and learning, at our mother's knee. That the phrase is not intended to suggest anything authoritarian or doctrinal is made clear: "I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be careful to find out and pursue *his own way,* and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbour's instead" (Thoreau, 1986, p. 114). Finding one's way depends upon the father-tongue. This is an uncommon schooling, but it is one upon

which the community and the culture ultimately depend.

In Thoreau's own withholding of meaning in his text — in its ambiguities and ruses and unsettling of the reader — the book repeatedly foregoes its claims to direct the reader in substantive ways. The reserved and select expression that we confront in reading well requires us to return to words as through a condition of estrangement, to choose our words and see how their meaning measures us. Cavell writes: "[F]or a child to grow he requires family and familiarity, but for a grownup to grow he requires strangeness and transformation, i.e., birth" (Cavell, 1981, p. 60).

Writing in New England in the 19th century, Thoreau could hardly have understood the measure of the words that confronted him without some sense that, with the burgeoning culture of business and individualism, the Pilgrim Fathers' promise of a new land had *not* been fulfilled, and that the promise of America had *not* been realised — that, in a sense, America was still to be created. Writing in 1971 — *The Senses of Walden* was written in an intense period of some seven weeks when the Vietnam War was at its height — Cavell's judgement on this point is unlikely to have been more sanguine, nor could it be so today. The sense of this failure is sustained through Thoreau's repeated pondering of questions of gain and loss and of the kinds of investments that it is right to make, with the rightful ordering of the home that is economy[1], and with the relations of labour and neighbourliness that this implies. The book asks what work is and what it is to be housed, and what indeed possessions are: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it. . . For what shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark, 8, 35-36).

Not to lose one's soul, for Thoreau, cannot be understood in purely negative terms — say, as the avoidance of sin — because in such a life of avoidance the human being goes to sleep! On the contrary, there is an increasing demand to take up the occasions of one's experience in such a way that one departs from one's settled and accustomed ways of understanding them, in order that one should seek possibilities of new departure — and this not only at the level of one's larger decisions in life but also in one's daily engagement with language and life, epitomised by the process of reading. Of course, we begin by acquiring a language, and to a large extent our use of this language requires our obedience to convention. But words that are just repeated or passed along down the line go dead on us and on the culture; the culture is deadened by them. "It is difficult to begin without

borrowing", Thoreau writes, but, as with an axe that you borrow, you can return words sharper than you received them (Thoreau, 1986, p. 83). The salience of the vocabulary of counting and accounting in fact extends into a constant use of words that relate to money ("borrow", "interest", "invest", "return", "economy", "currency"). But there is a responsibility in using words so that they do not devalue, so that you return them with interest. That this is a condition to be achieved, and always still to be worked at, is, so Cavell suggests, not only a question of our personal fulfilment, or of our saving of our souls, but the condition of seeing the world aright: "Until we can speak again, our lives and our language betray one another; we can grant neither of them their full range and autonomy; they mistake their definitions of one another" (Cavell, 1981, p. 34).

One thing this requires of us is our readiness to be affected. Thoreau makes fun of conventional Christian notions of rebirth — as if rebirth were something that must happen just once. On the contrary, it is a process that must recur. It is not, as must be conceded, something we can simply decide to do, but we can make ourselves open to its possibility. In *Walden* rebirth is symbolised in various ways. It is there in the proximity of Walden pond and the daily bathing that this affords ("I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did", Thoreau, 1986, p. 132). It is there in the various processes of moulting or shedding feathers or skin that Thoreau describes in the animals he observes, processes paralleled in the discarding of surplus clothing. It is there in the idea of giving up unnecessary possessions. The religious resonances of these symbols connect also with a powerful indication of what it is that our receptiveness or openness requires and of why this might involve a kind of death of the existing self, a departure from any existing settlement with the world. You are required to allow yourself *to be struck* by something new: "If you stand right [and face a fact], you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter[2], and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow" (Thoreau, 1986, *Walden,* II). In sum, it requires being ready to leave what you think is yours (your possessions, *you*), and so a readiness for departure, where readiness is not something for which you consciously prepare but more like a receptiveness to the new and a release from the hold of the past. And so, with Thoreau's celebrated pun, morning (the orientation towards the future) is close to mourning (loss, departure): mourning becomes morning.

We have so far seen something of what it is that *Walden* has to teach, and this

is drawn substantially from Cavell's reading of the text — in effect from his teaching of that text. In the process we have seen also something of Thoreau's manner of teaching — the modulations and disruptions of his voice (as cockerel or fox, as Homer, Coleridge, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Christ), his indirectness, ambiguity and stealth, his positioning of the reader so that the reader cannot but think. We have seen also, as has been implied by my writing, something of the manner of Cavell's close reading of the text — his registering of the kind of response that *Walden* invites. What implications might there be here for our practices of teaching and learning, in schools that might be uncommon? Let me conclude by offering a series of pointers — first, in a predominantly negative way, by considering the kinds of contemporary practice that stands in the way of such an uncommon schooling, and second, and with a more positive accent, by adverting to the ways in which the kind of education and ethics that is suggested here might be differentiated from some currently influential viewpoints.

In the first place, the idea of departure in *Walden* cannot be based on any *telos*. It cannot be planned or programmed systematically, any more than moving to Walden could be a kind of recipe for rebirth. So too the possibilities of life (and hence of education) cannot be understood in terms of a totality, determining retrospectively how development is to be understood. Teaching and learning cannot be understood well in terms of linear progress and accumulation: the accumulation of facts or skills, the building up of the self through foreseeable stages of development.

It follows also that the economy of desire and satisfaction that tends to characterise contemporary ethics, and that gives shape to prevailing conceptions of the curriculum, cannot be sustained. Against the satisfaction *of criteria* (in a test, for example), and against the satisfaction *felt in success,* there must be a kind of persistent *dissatisfaction* with oneself. This is not a predominantly negative matter (not one ultimately of dejection, say) but something positively orientated, always towards new possibilities — with the humble recognition that coming to see things truly will not be a once-and-for-all process but will require a continual kind of rebirth of one's self: one is not fixed but forever in need of new departure, where this is openness towards the other. Such an outlook stands against complacency or hubris but it does not prevent — indeed it may enable — a kind of fortitude and quiet confidence.

The implications for assessment that are indicated here also have a bearing on

questions of planning. Of course, a lesson or course can be planned but this must not be done exhaustively or finally or definitively. Good teaching and learning must retain a degree of openness. The direct matching of learning and assessment plainly militates against this. Whilst it is true that teaching necessarily involves assessment, there is reason to emphasise again the value of an approach to assessment that is not formal and not exhaustive.

We have heard that a fact is something that should strike us; words should strike us, if they are to count — though in a sense all will count, for good or ill. The aesthetic and the volitional, what we feel and what motivates us, should not be taken to be external to the facts and the words. We need to find out what words are: that they are not just means of communication; that we are at stake in our words; that we find ourselves in our words. Hence, so much concern about the motivation of learners seems to be misdirected. Its psychological credentials bolster it against the insights that may come more naturally to the teacher committed to the worth of what she is passing on. In part the kind of relation that such a teacher has to what is taught is likely to embody some sense of the way that learners find themselves not through some introspective quest but "out there" — ex-pressed in the words (in the print, in press), struck by the thoughts that the subject brings to them.

The positive orientation of the kind of educational practice that *Walden* might underwrite can perhaps be understood further through differentiating it from an influential viewpoint to which it has some superficial resemblance. The distinctions between the mother-tongue and the father-tongue, and between common and uncommon schools, might be thought to map on to Richard Rorty's well-known division between the socialising role of compulsory schooling and the critical function of higher education. Rorty insists that education is not a continuous process "from age five to age 22". He writes:

> Primary and secondary education will always be a matter of familiarizing the young with what their elders take to be true, whether it is true or not. It is not, and never will be, the function of lower-level education to challenge the prevailing consensus about what is true. Socialization has to come before individuation, and education for freedom cannot begin before some constraints have been imposed. But, for quite different reasons, non-vocational higher education is also not a matter of inculcating or educing truth. It is, instead, a matter of inciting doubt and stimulating imagination,

thereby challenging the prevailing consensus (Rorty, 1989).

Rorty's expression of this fostering of criticism is apt to sound somewhat "laid back", just as the division he draws between socialisation and education seems wilfully simplistic. In developing his case he aligns his position with Dewey's and specifically alludes to the ways in which Dewey is influenced by Emersonian "fuzzy utopias", exemplified in a "vision of America as the place where human beings will become unimaginably wonderful, different and free".

If this is a correct take on Dewey's Emersonianism, which is incidentally far from self-evident, it seems to be at a remove from the development of Emerson's thought that is found in Thoreau. The difference in the style of the prose — Rorty, on the one hand, Thoreau, on the other — is an initial indicator of what is at issue here and why it matters. But let me identify four key distinguishing factors. First, there is the way in which Thoreau's experiment reveals the learner to be at stake in what is undertaken: this is after all an experiment in living and as such is all-involving; it is exemplary of a good kind of education. Second, Thoreau's conception of truth has little in common with that of Rorty's conservative defenders of truth: there is a robustness to Thoreau's sense of the individual's exposure to experience and to the reality of the world that is largely absent from their stance. A third point is that there is nothing in Rorty to compare with the nuanced account of language achieved through the highly suggestive idea of the father-tongue. That this is tied in its turn to a sustained examination of accounting in the book helps to reveal the subtle ways in which we both measure the world and are in turn measured by our words: this, we might say, is the measure of things, with all that this double genitive implies. And fourth, the idea of rebirth in *Walden* is manifestly at odds with the kind of singular transition that Rorty envisages. Grasping the implications of this continual rebirth, this departure, is challenging; and this needs to occur at a level that is perhaps less purely intellectual than existential.

Thoreau's economy of living is to be distanced also from two further currents of thought. In some ways the emphasis on departure and newness here seems to bring us close to some of the siren pressures of postmodernity. But in Thoreau the individual's exposure to experience is to be attuned not to the ephemera of the postmodern world, in which image displaces substance, but doggedly to the real. For the learner to be at stake in what is undertaken is a matter of words, but not *merely* of words. To foreground language is to sanction not some kind of free spinning of

words but rather an answerability or responsiveness to the possibilities of thought and being that language realises. And the idea of continual rebirth and departure has little to do, say, with the self-reinventions and makeovers that the media constantly entice us towards or with the itinerant, skill-bearing, anonymous, flexible learners that are, it is imagined, the requisites of a globalised knowledge-economy, any more that it has to do with the therapy of rebirthing. It is more like a call towards becoming, orientated less by any substantive end than by a strengthening sense of the fakery of identities that proffer themselves — from the outside and from within. It is departure from these things and a refusal to acquiesce in fixed identities and the values they enshrine, whether the result of custom or the object of (perhaps commercially constructed) desire, that opens the way to these possibilities.

But so too Thoreau's economy of living is to be distanced from what might at this point offer itself, inspired perhaps by the later Heidegger, as a kind of salvation from ephemerality: a fidelity to one's steady sense of place and history. Thoreau's building of his house in the woods is tantamount to an enacted meditation on the building-dwelling-thinking that Heidegger a century later will thematise (Heidegger, 1975/1954). It involves a fidelity to the way things are, here, at this time, involving the observance of a daily regime that is something other than dull mechanical routine. The vibrancy and validity of this are born not only of familiarity but also out of an acceptance of and receptivity to strangeness. In the end, however, and contrary to popular readings of Thoreau, it is not this particular place that is the heart of the matter: what is more important is the possibility, or perhaps the principle, of this combination of particular attachments (the regimes of living attuned to them, the commitment appropriate to them) with a readiness for departure — before, as it were, they fossilise or perhaps come to be romanticised or to parody themselves. Moreover, as Cavell puts this in a recent paper, the manner of Thoreau's leaving of Walden demonstrates

> what Freud calls the work of mourning, letting the past go, giving it up, giving it over, giving away the Walden it was time for him to leave, without nostalgia, without a disabling elegiacism. Nostalgia is the inability to open the past to the future, as if the strangers who will replace you will never find what you have found. Such a negative heritage would be a poor thing to leave to *Walden's* readers, whom its writer identifies, among many ways, precisely as strangers (Cavell, 2005, p. 000).

The idea of the stranger, alien to *Dasein's* being-with-others, also points up a contrast between the journeying home or being homebound that exerts so strong a gravitational force in Heidegger's thought and the *sojourning* emphasised in Thoreau, where one is to live "each day, everywhere and nowhere, as a task and an event". Unlike the ideas of "mineness" and belonging that recur in Heidegger, there is here some sense of the "essential immigrancy of the human" (p. 9). Reading well, as we saw, requires us to return to words as through a condition of estrangement, as though we have still to arrive at our words. Education, the education of grownups, requires our discovery of our immigrancy to ourselves.

It is in the mature relationship to language that the father-tongue represents that this challenge can come to pervade the ordinary, uncommon experience that can and should be ours. Such experience depends upon education and upon the kind of uncommon schooling that can recur through our lives. This perhaps is the teaching of *Walden.*[3)]

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1) Literally the ordering (*nomos*) of the home (*oikos*).

2) That is, a scimitar — an oriental flat sword, which curves towards the point.

3) An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Network of Philosophers of Education meeting in Madrid, in August 2004. I am grateful to those present for their comments. Michael Bonnett and Naoko Saito are also thanked for helpful suggestions.

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