

In the Place of Mourning: Questioning the Privations of the Private

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Why should I feel lonely? is not our planet in the Milky
Way? *Henry David Thoreau*

Thoreau typically uses openness to conceal something....
Stanley Cavell

*I*n conversation, a friend and colleague who is as much a student of Plato as Emerson emphasized a line from Emerson's "Address" to the Divinity School at Cambridge – "Evil is merely privative, not absolute" (Emerson, 1:78) – with a question for me not concerning the existence of evil, but the nature of privation. The issue, then, was not Augustine's in the *Confessions*, but whether privation, in being a species of evacuation can be known also as the *presence* of something. What is the nature of space that one calls empty? Is such vacancy a sign of sterility and void – merely – or in that openness is it also the site of possibility (that which may be but is not yet); revelation (that which is but is not yet fully known); insight (that which is before us but not yet seen); and reception (that which we await in readiness)? What happens when we find ourselves in this place of privation? What do we find?

Thinking of Thoreau's *Walden*, his time there, and the time he gives us in his book about his time there, his "days and nights" in the open, beside the clearing of water beside the woods, I wondered: Is Thoreau's privacy at Walden Pond a form of privation, or does his solitary

experience convert inherited notions (prejudices?) of “being alone” and “doing without” into invitations for a model of consciousness that divests deprivations of their conventional weight both morally and psychologically? Such a thought – to feel a connection between privation and alertness, between absence and fullness – is occasioned by Stanley Cavell’s highlighting Thoreau’s luminous puns on morning/mourning, and also of Cornel West’s illumination of the connection between morning and suffering as something known not by the water of Walden but by the flowing of tears – as if weeping were a transformation of solitude into community, the dawning of one’s authentic inhabitation in the world. Both Cavell and West’s remarks give me pause, and lay a new valence of significance onto the idea of having “deep breaths” – taking them and making them.

In the space before me I dwell on Thoreau’s conception of morning – as a space of renewal and awakening – as his response to doubts concerning the hazards of privacy, other forms of privation such as skepticism concerning other minds (and maybe one’s own), and the suspicion of living a waking death. And since this dwelling on Thoreau’s thinking is occasioned by Emerson’s relation to privation – his perception of its gifts – Emerson’s lines are regularly invoked or availed as a fitting palimpsest.

Thoreau uses the words “morning” and “work” eighty-seven times each in *Walden*. In this coincidence of equal usage, we encounter the phrase “morning work.” Thoreau describes this as the work we should be doing. The work, though, is complicated by his claim that we are asleep; “slumbering” as Thoreau sometimes puts it. With Emerson and Thoreau’s responses to philosophical skepticism, with Cavell’s reading of the same, ought we to take this disorientation fueled by self-doubt, doubts about others and the external world, as something to be mourned? This question takes the form of asking whether being lost/being at loss, or losing the world (or oneself or others) are tragedies of privation. Given this risk – say of losing oneself or one’s world – how can the privative, as some form of lack, denial, absence,

bear on one's experience of being alone, viz., private, separate, at a distance? Thoreau's reply to skepticism, and its privations, is found, I contend, in his notion of *morning work* – where such work entails waking up.

If Thoreau achieved his morning work – and *Walden* appears to be just such a record, recollection, or fabrication – then what use has he, if any, of others, and they of him? Thoreau repeatedly insists that he has found a new nonhuman community in nature, and it is to this world that he is beholden. Thoreau describes this discovery – as if to defend a conversion to some new state of belief – by saying that being without others is *not* a privation. It is the presence of something else. "Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me." Consider this related to Emerson's notion of compensation, where nature (e.g., its order and laws) might fill spaces that would otherwise be voids. Thoreau does not feel the absence of others as a privation, and therefore as something to mourn, because he has found his morning work in the woods.



In "Shelter," Thoreau – anticipating Heidegger in "Building Dwelling Thinking" – refigures the house as a space of dwelling, not a site for storing things. Indeed, such space is not drawn together for constraint or protection, but for clearing:

At present our houses are cluttered and defiled with it,
and a good housewife would sweep out the greater part
into the dust hole, and not leave her morning's work
undone. Morning work! By the blushes of Aurora and
the music of Memnon, what should be man's *morning*
work in this world? (31)

Thoreau italicizes the phrase. If being human is not first domestic, what then? – One that is unencumbered by made things, or concealed by them, obscuring a view of the clearing. Thus, the human is first natural. To find human "morning work" entails taking heed of what Thoreau

adduces in his first few dozen pages: accounting for things in order to go on from them.

Soon after, Thoreau allegorizes this exchange – say, of the customary for the natural – by pitching us the idea that we aren’t yet awake, which isn’t quite to say we’re dead, but is an insinuation that we’re not yet born. Morning hasn’t happened *for us*.

Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life
of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with
Nature herself (72-73).

Later he will return to this:

The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature,
– of sun and wind and rain, of summer and winter, –
such health, such cheer, they afford forever! (112)

The morning purifies (“innocence”) as it enlivens (“cheers”). Then he returns to the clearing that makes memory possible, as if remembering and waking were stimulating and sustained by the dawn:

The morning, which is the most memorable season of
the day, is the awakening hour (73).

... All memorable events, I should say, transpire in
morning time and in a morning atmosphere. (*Ibid.*)

The awakening hour is the time in which we see what “we fell asleep from.” Emerson is partial to the image of Lethe, and never speaks with confidence that we are drinkers enough to survive our imbibing [“Experience”].

Thoreau chastises those who have not entered the time of the “auroral hour” (73). One who has not come to this consciousness, who has not come to this intelligence, “has despaired of life, and is pursuing a descending and darkening way” (73). He later asks “Shall I not have intelligence with the earth?” (112). But through the clearing that dwelling makes possible, and the memory that is born of consciousness, the objective bears itself straight away as making the day “a perpetual morning.”

"Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me" (74). To be possessed of or by dawn pledges affinity to Wittgenstein's notion that in coming to see the world anew, we undergo the "dawn" (or dawning) of an *aspect* [See the *Philosophical Investigations*, Part II]. One is tempted to say: "it just dawned on me." What dawned, what was awakened, what experienced a morning, was this consciousness or intelligence.

Thoreau makes this possession into a prerequisite not just for evaluation, but valuation. A necessary condition for change is being awake to see it: when it comes, happens, is made. Thus ... "Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep" (74). This ejection is also a deception. Waking up is a way of riddance, or forgetting, and a way of coming to a consciousness that others cannot see, perceive, or remember. Thoreau has said that he loves to be alone (110). If he should wake up, this will not be a choice of affection, but a consequence of his rare conversion.

The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but
only one in a million is awake enough for effective
intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a
poetic or divine life.

With our population of "hundred millions," we might, therefore, be able to anoint two or so to this "poetic or divine life." Without being coy or desultory, can we take Emerson and Thoreau as marking their inhabitation in this role? Still, what meager promise for the rest of us. When Cavell asks, "Is moral perfectionism inherently elitist?" Thoreau's passage comes to mind. If moral reform is contingent upon wakefulness, and a few of the multitude are capable of this, what says Thoreau for those – the mass of men – who remain asleep? That is, for those for whom dawn has not yet broke?

To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man
who was quite awake. (74)

The conceit of the Enlightenment, one could say, was charming us to the indefinite extent to which consciousness might be enlarged, the degree to

which knowledge could become perspicuous. We would, because of continual illumination, always expect enhanced wakefulness. But being awake in this manner, becoming ever and ever increasingly conscious, yields a peculiar sort of life – a life that is not the beneficiary of a privileged perception, but the victim of an unrelenting insomnia. In exhaustive consciousness one becomes exhausted, awake but no longer capable of being aware. Though my eyes are open, I cannot see. And if I can see, I cannot remember.

A year before Thoreau began his experiment, Emerson wrote in “Experience,” in sympathy with a certain Platonic allegory, that the condition of forgetfulness is not elective, but constitutional. And not one fitted for amendment.

But the Genius which, according to the old belief, stands at the door by which we enter, and gives us the lethe to drink, that we may tell no tales, mixed the cup too strongly, and we cannot shake off the lethargy now at noonday. (Emerson, “Experience” 3:27)

Emerson keeps a genealogy of language on the surface of his prose – by the emphasis of proximity, consider how lethe, as a clouding, blurring, soporific substance has to do with lethargy. Being lethargic means being both forgetful (*lethe*) and idle (*argos*). And so our imbibing – taken here as an existential consummation – renders us hapless, at the mercy of this tonic: our willed toxin, taken willingly. In his essay “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” Heidegger says as much about philosophy, a practice that, in his words, “does not heed the clearing of Being” (443). Heidegger contends, “in that clearing rests possible radiance, that is, the possible presencing of presence itself” (445). What cannot be “shaken off,” then, is our habit of taking *aletheia* as truth, instead of as the condition of truth. Heidegger writes:

Why is *aletheia* not translated with the usual name, with the word “truth”? The answer must be: ... *aletheia*, unconcealment in the sense of the clearing,

may not be equated with truth. Rather, *aletheia*, unconcealment thought as clearing, first grants the possibility of truth. For truth itself, like Being and thinking, can be what it is only in the element of the clearing (446).

Drinking lethe, inebriated by lethargy, *aletheia* seems the relation between things – say, between one's thought and the world one thinks of. Such a correspondence skips the space that makes such a relation possible. The figure of lethe is quite apt for mediating whether *aletheia* is truth or truth's condition. Thoreau's insistence on waking up, and Emerson's acquiescent remark about what can seem a sort of a persistent hang-over, detail the stakes of Heidegger's claim to *aletheia* as "unconcealment" or, "as the clearing of presence and presentation in thinking and saying" (447). The burden, then, resides in the ability to achieve *articulation* despite the after-effects of ingesting a disorienting potion. Being in the "clearing," then, would entail recovering from lethe.

Noonday is certainly the end of morning. Indeed, for Emerson, it can also mean midlife; he was forty-one when he wrote the sentence – and died nearing eighty. The incapacity of perception disallows memory, and so Thoreau's insistence that "all memorable events" happen in the morning concurs in the notion that by lunch, we have – already – forgotten those waking hours. If we keep to the timeline of human life, the "morning of life" is the precinct of children. And Thoreau is not a child, and has, and will have, no children, but imagines that the morning will restore to him "innocence" – as if to begin again, be born again. – For many, though, doesn't such restoration mean an initial birth, and not a secondary one – being *born* (because unborn), not *born again* (because insufficiently born)? To what extent does being alive mean being awake? One hears the difference between "being alive" (as a biological description) and "living" (as a critical comment on one's style), so might there be between the life after birth, and the life after waking?

For Thoreau, at his Pond, the morning is a baptismal hour: “I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did” (73). In *The Senses of Walden*, Cavell suggests that reading *Walden* is a kind of baptism: “This is immersion not in the water [of Walden Pond] but in the book of Walden” (*Senses*, 17). A religious baptism, held in a church, is done once. A religious baptism, held in nature, must be repeated, as we make the disinfecting of our bodies a religious obsession at dawn, in our showers. Thoreau quotes from some writing on the side of a King Tching-thang’s bathtub: “Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, and forever again” (73). Yet, the bath water cannot dilute the lethe, and so, as adults we are weary. One imagines here the difference between how the child *plays* in the bath, while the adult often passes through it as a chore. The shower, as a burden of civility – where cleaning is, if for personal comfort, also a way of preempting the shame of offending others, does not speed me to consciousness, but only to coffee. And coffee is no antidote to lethe: it is a drink of speed, not of remembrance. We know that Thoreau dwells in his bath, slowly. The problem of bathing, like the problem of sleeping, is a problem for adults. And we do not figure that either is our “morning work.”

Emerson accuses cloudy vision for the crisis of placement, again, a question of finding a dwelling where clearing is possible.

Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes, as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir-tree. All things swim and glitter. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception. Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again. (Emerson, “Experience” 3:27)

Thoreau draws a complementary image:

After a night’s sleep, the news is as indispensable as the breakfast. “Pray tell me any thing new that has happened to a man any where on this globe,” – and he reads it over

his coffee and rolls, that a man has had his eyes gouged out this morning on the Wachito River; never dreaming the while that he lives in the dark unfathomed mammoth cave of this world, and has but the rudiment of an eye himself. (76-77)

The question being whether there is a *difference* between the two men: one a literalized icon of blindness and self-inflicted debilitation, the other symbolic of a broader dispossession – a metaphysical impairment of Platonic cave dwellers. Like Emerson, Thoreau puns his way to a question of subjectivity by using ocular imagery – an eye for an I. Both being awake and seeing, and their binary pairs sleeping and blindness, center on the eye. With this trope, all of the foregoing is not reduced to some coincidence of literary fancy, but enhanced to show sophisticated and sensitive replies to the enduring problematic of philosophical skepticism. One way of describing that history is to say that it is a perennial mediation on loss – or, termed slightly more dramatically: the tragedy of privation.

Loss implies the absence of a prior presence. And so, to say that I have lost the world conjures the habit of believing that I once had it – though, we're more accustomed to say, knew it. But this isn't quite the scenario Thoreau and Emerson have been painting with their metaphors of drinking lethe and bathing, waking and sleeping, seeing and being blind. Indeed, Thoreau and Emerson write of our epistemic condition as being one in which knowledge of presence or the present has not yet come into view – hardly a novel idea for two Harvard graduates saturated in the Platonism of their day. Thus, to endure a tragedy of privation would mean to lose something known, or possessed, or otherwise present or presented. Yet, if these sleeping eyes admit anything, it's that the world is still in question for us. In *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell has characterized this as "the threat of skepticism," as "the possibility that the world we see is not the world as it is, that the world is not humanly knowable, or shareable" (*Pursuits*, 271). If I don't know the world, or, say know you, what can be said for my aspirations to share the world *with* you?

The idea of sharing experience is another way of describing the so-called “problem of other minds” that has been so persistently an epistemological puzzle – from John Stuart Mill to Norman Malcolm – one that is grounded, at last, on certain extraordinary uses of language, and by extension certain exceptional expressions of doubt and skepticism; Descartes famously courts such indulgences. For Wittgenstein, the problem with the problem of other minds is grammatical. Along the same lines, Nietzsche asked a few decades earlier in *Beyond Good and Evil*: “Should philosophers be permitted to rise above faith in grammar?” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, “The Free Spirit,” 47). This question alone reveals the stakes of Wittgenstein’s consideration of the so-called private language argument. The possibility of sharing experience doesn’t lay in the fabrication of individualized brands of Esperanto, but in the admission – however critically applied – that language and thought are one, and thus that the generation of meaning is an afterimage of language games, not the outgrowth of my private playing with grammar (See *PI* §329).

What sort of life does Thoreau take up at Walden? His neighbors believe it is some politics of asceticism. But is his life there a privation of basic necessities or the emphasis of them? Does his condition denote lack or the better use of what is supplied? Consider, for example, how much time he spends accounting for his goods and materials. There is an evident preoccupation with economy – indeed, this is where the book begins; we might say, where it awakens or dawns; still his approach seems a foreign or deeply idiosyncratic way of balancing one’s books. What may appear to be Thoreau’s frugality is, arguably, a sign of his mindfulness, which is to say, a measure of his wakefulness. Cavell says that the “task of Walden as a whole” is to “discover how to earn and spend our most wakeful hours – whatever we are doing” (*Senses*, 5). He continues: “morning may not be caused by sunrise, and may not happen at all” (*Senses*, 5). Thoreau’s implication that economy is a science of lucidity – a way of counting and accounting for waking life – is not heavily veiled, especially given that he dedicates more time

to the subject of economy than to any other; the first is the lengthiest chapter in his book. Most people live without having life dawn. Economy, as an orientation of consciousness, thereby becomes a practice of accounting for being awake in the world, being born to account for it – but then economy isn't a method for remembering either.

The ocular metaphors, usually coupled with topographical tropes, reveal another way of seeing the work at hand. Concerning the fate of the eye/I, Emerson and Thoreau speak – depending on where you look in their texts – variously with the expectation of recovery, with acquiescence to a terminal situation, and with ambivalence. Yet, an agreement stands: we have lost something, and this puts us at a loss, and by consequence of this privation, we are lost. Emerson began "Experience" asking "Where do we find ourselves?" (Emerson, "Experience" 3:27). Thoreau, in his chapter "The Village" provides a brief theory of how such finding gets done.

...not till we are completely lost, or turned around, – for a man needs only to be turned around once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost, – do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of Nature. Every man has to learn the points of compass again as often as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction. Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations. (139)

This passage does a lot of work: it signals that the kind of thing Thoreau is up to in setting out to settle at Walden is precisely to "get lost." One hears the phrase also as if Thoreau is a pest that society wished to be rid of, or as if he elected to rid himself of society's economy, and its slumber. The passage reminds us that it takes very little for us to become disoriented, and once we are, that it requires much labor to recover ourselves; it admonishes us to mark our way out of skepticism by taking notes (another way of accounting), which

in turn will serve as a map. *Walden*, all of a sudden, appears topographical – not written as a guide through the woods of Walden Pond, but as a guide through the thickets that define life and the consciousness we claim of and for it; and perhaps most peculiarly, it tells us that the kind of discovery that we seek – the discovery of, or awakening to, the self – is first about accounting for what is lost, and how we relate to its absence. How strange then that in assessing this loss, we are apprised of our possessions – namely, “the infinite extent of our relations.” *Walden*, therefore, is a journal of a man who lost the world in order to find himself (an inversion of Mark 8:36?), who, in other words, transformed his privacy and privation into a society and an abundance. It is now cliché to instruct the youth: “go away to find yourself.” The results vary. But one possibility is that in living without people, things, the familiar stimulates a new perception – an awakening – to what is present. This consciousness, perhaps heightened – but then where does one begin to define the degrees of consciousness? – makes it quite difficult to see anything but richness and diversity, potency and plenitude. One does not mourn what is lost, because the morn admits no loss. We simply cannot remember what it is we were supposed to be mourning. Again, “all memorable events, I should say, transpire in morning time and in a morning atmosphere.” Listen as Thoreau shares how his privacy is not a privation:

I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant. But I was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood, and seemed to foresee my recovery. In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature ... as made the

fancied advantages of human neighborhood
insignificant, and I have never thought of them since.
(107)

Being without others does not mean being alone; even as it is evident that one can feel alone in a crowd. Emerson describes the awareness of solitude "in the midst of a crowd" as a virtue. For Thoreau, being alone does not mean feeling lonely: "Why should I feel lonely? is not our planet in the Milky Way?" (108).

Let us say, then, that Thoreau is comfortable with his solitariness, and that he is not troubled by various losses. This seems as much a result of confidence as insight, and they might both spring from the same ecstatic relation to being awake, if also, being without others. But can Thoreau's stoical resolve be shared with others? *Walden* seems the most intuitive answer that it can. Though we can say with assurance that the text *Walden* is shared (copies can be handed out), to what degree can we say that his experience can be shared, or copied? Isn't the point of *Walden* that the public is being denied, made outcast to this individual? Thoreau was not banished to the woods: he hired himself to the task. It was the public that was put out, though, by means of his recession (or, is it secession?) from them. Thoreau's retreat was anything but a collapse; the withdrawal was confirmation of new profits. And as history has made him, a new prophet.

Thoreau inverts the conventional lamentation that accompanies loss and lostness. Both privations are grounds for habitation and habilitation. He achieves this reversal by changing the criteria for, as Cavell has said in *The Claim of Reason*, "living our skepticism" concerning the world and other minds [See *The Claim of Reason*, *passim*]. Descartes wanted to prove that others existed, and said that he existed because he thought – and said – he did. Thoreau has, it appears, no need of making these justifications. He is neither panicked by skepticism, nor solipsism, as he writes:

We are the subjects of an experiment which is not a little
interesting to me. Can we not do without the society of

our gossips a little while under these circumstances, –
have our own thoughts to cheer us? (109)

And soon after:

So also, owing to bodily and mental health and
strength, we may be continually cheered by a like but
normal and natural society, and come to know that we
are never alone. (111)

The fate of loss and being lost is not despondency, but inspiration –
cheer. The consequence of privacy and privation is not isolation but
community – here occasion by communion between nature and one's
nature.



I conclude by thinking how Thoreau's experiment at Walden Pond ended
– after two years, two months, and two days. Would it be odd, perhaps to
the point of unsettling all that I have said, to say that Thoreau is called
off the land, from the water, by others?

Emerson was preparing to depart for England to fulfill an invitation
to give a series of lectures on *Mind and Manners in the Nineteenth
Century*. Thoreau was invited by Emerson's wife, Lidian, to move into
the house on the Cambridge Turnpike while Emerson was away. There
was precedent for Thoreau to stay at Bush, but this would be for a long
period of time, and in Emerson's absence. While Emerson was abroad –
about ten months – Thoreau took over the Emerson household, living
with Lidian and the children.

It is the eminent privation of Emerson's absence that draws Thoreau
off the land at Walden Pond. Here is a lesson in what Emerson terms
compensation: that which enables us to see tragedy and loss as positive
influences and exchanges, presently and subsequently. Emerson writes:

Thereby I make the discovery that my brother is my
guardian, acting for me with the friendliest designs, and
the estate I so admired and envied is my own. (Emerson,
"Compensation" 2:72)

It is just this sort of converted perception that sees the "compensations of calamity." Again Emerson:

The death of a dear friend, wife, brother, lover, which seemed nothing but privation, somewhat later assumes the aspect of a guide or genius. (Emerson, "Compensation" 2:73)

In mourning we study our privations, and dwell on their denials, omissions, and dreaded deprivations. But in the morning we find the possibilities are not lost. "Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our Genius ... to a higher life than we fell asleep from" (*Walden*, 73). For Thoreau, mourning is easily shareable; morning is not. Emerson said that "I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature" (Emerson, "Experience" 3:29). That is a deserved grief – after the loss of a wife, a son, and two brothers – but it is also *Walden* stated in miniature. Real nature is not accessible through mourning, but rather through the morning: the space of awakening, the proper horizon for cheer.

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