

FIVE

WILDNESS AS POLITICAL ACT



Wilderness living requires both working certainties and practical wisdom. Stories of both are legion and legendary in American pioneer living—and, indeed, in Native American living. But the stabilizing and enabling capacities of these two live in concert not only with their wilderness setting but also with a wilder dimension of human experience. In the past hundred years there has been an extensive harvest from the intellectual fields in which Henry Thoreau worked. Interpretations are occasionally so diverse that I am tempted to think of Thoreau as chameleon. I lay aside this temptation, however, in recalling a steadiness and surety that run through his writing from “A Winter Walk” to “Life Without Principle”: a steadiness of gaze at the always receding virtues of nature, wildness, discipline, and awakening. The essay “Walking,” with its emphasis on wildness, offers a number of paths along which this steadiness might be pursued, and I choose one of them, the condition of political action, as an avenue for the present discussion. I use “political” in its

broad, original sense of dealing with issues of the polis in practically wise ways.

The political dimensions of “Walking” are established in its opening lines: “I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil.”¹ Thoreau, clearly as a partisan, seizes the most American theme, freedom, and challenges our complacency in accepting a limited form of it. In “Life Without Principle” Thoreau put the question as follows: “Is it a freedom to be slaves, or a freedom to be free, of which we boast? We are a nation of politicians, concerned about the outmost defenses only of freedom.”² He then proclaims that he will make “an extreme statement” in order to make “an emphatic one.”³ As in the opening of *Walden*, Thoreau is political but impolitic; he does not mean to be polite. Yet we should note that the extremity of his claim is instrumental to his emphasis on the wild; the extremity is not its own end, and likely is not Thoreau’s aim either. His aim seems rather to be to move us—the polis perhaps, if not the cosmos—in a certain direction: from the civil toward the natural. We see the makings of a political aim, a provocation establishing opposition to the “champions of civilization.”⁴

Thoreau, it seems to me, has a habit, which because of his abrasive voice is sometimes overlooked, of staking out a borderland or mid-world he wishes to work. *Walden*, for example, is occasionally read as an antisocial, back-to-nature story, despite the fact that Thoreau found himself not in an extreme, primitive existence but in a mediating place: “Mine was, as it were, the connecting link between wild and cultivated fields; as some states are civilized, and others half-civilized, and others savage or barbarous, so my field was, though not in a bad sense, a half-cultivated field.”⁵ In “Walking,” he establishes a “border existence” and again moves from the decadence of over-civilization toward the sheer spontaneity of a wild existence, in order, I think, to emphasize the dialectical needs of each. He enacts his own sort of political engagement and he attempts to establish his own sort of compromise in which he does not feel compromised.

“Walking,” I think, marks out the kind of political action or engagement to which Thoreau was always committed: action that, pragmatically speaking, has an effect or makes a difference in some ameliorative direction.⁶ As he put it in *Walden*: “To affect the day, that is the highest of arts.”⁷ The “art of Walking,” however wild, is not aimless for Thoreau; he neither describes nor defends a purposeless anarchy nor an institution of self-gratification. He never advances beyond his claim in “Civil Disobedience” that we are not yet ready for no government at all. Rather, the aim of the walking art, or one of its aims, is to carry out a resistance to the compromised, civilized, and tamed (cowed) status in which we so often find ourselves—benumbed, asleep, and inattentive to our private and social conditions. Thoreau’s resistance is to be carried out by a “fourth estate”: those who practice the art of walking; specifically, the “Walker, Errant” who stands “outside of Church and State and People.”⁸ It is in examining the traits of this fourth estate that I look for the Thoreauvian conditions of acting politically.

“It is remarkable,” Thoreau says, “how few events or crises there are in our histories, how little exercised we have been in our minds, how few experiences we have had.”⁹ Our tame status derives both from the absence of experience and the consequent, enslaving security that tells us not to seek experience. These are the conditions of politic behavior, but not of political action. Thoreau turns to a romance with the Walker Errant—the rover, saunterer, gypsy, outlaw—to recover what Dewey later called the having of “an experience.” Whatever else walkers and saunterers do, they *seek* experience “in the spirit of undying adventure.”¹⁰ And they do so, necessarily, through a kind of wildness. The fourth estate works at the margins of culture; it is not only outside the church and state, but also outside the people—in Emerson’s terms, nonconformist. The Walker thus works the borderland as did the “Robyn” of Locksley whom Thoreau cites, recalling his outlaw existence.¹¹

The Walker Errant thus initially exhibits the seeking of experience; in a lengthy overture, Thoreau brings this seeking into relation with the American frontier experience. Like Frederick Jackson Turner, he

sees in this frontier experience the “wilding” of American democracy. Just after this, he pauses, and begins again, calling himself back to his initial intention: “The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World.”¹² This second beginning also asserts a political aim, a call to action in the interest of the preservation of the world. Maintaining his poet’s privilege, and perhaps fearful of narrowing the possibilities of *our* lived wildness, Thoreau seems intent to offer no connotative account of the wild. Like Emerson, he defines only provocatively, through metaphor and example. Leo Stoller, however, offers a reasonably sober heading in defining Thoreau’s wildness:

The Wild is whatever lies beyond the law already formulated, the institution already established, the pursued already overtaken. Its purpose is to be negated, to free man for the still wilder reach beyond it, and thus furnish its part toward his soul.¹³

From the Walker, then, we are first to draw both the seeking of experience and the wildness that governs the fourth estate. Again, the Walker stands not only outside the church and the state, but also outside the people. In following the Walker’s discipline, we each may awaken to our own fourth estate; we may outlaw ourselves from ourselves. As Stoller puts it: “Each man’s mind, moreover, encloses a potential bit of this revolutionizing genius, his own ‘wild savage’ . . . which is the germ to be strengthened and liberated.”¹⁴ Encounter with our own dimensions of wildness is the central condition for our being able to act, and thus to act politically.

The Walkers and saunterers to whom Thoreau introduces us exhibit still a third trait that attends the condition of political acts; they live in an attitude of commitment. In coming to this trait, Thoreau works an important distinction in passing: “They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean.”¹⁵ There are, then, two sorts of non-Walkers: those who have been “committed” to civilization (those institutional-

ized) and walk not at all, and those who walk in an uncommitted and directionless fashion.¹⁶ The Walker Errant, however, is a crusader: “Every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels.”¹⁷ This seems to me the sort of commitment that we, in our relatively safe culture, presently wish to avoid for fear it may require us to do something or may in fact lead us to a political act. In an age of mass communication, we have become ever more complacent, more driven by our conventional mores, even as we proclaim ourselves to be freer. Thoreau’s crusader, as he sees it, is not a mad person, but one disciplined to attend to her wildness and willing to face the consequences this attention may entail. Witness his attempt to defend John Brown’s sanity against those who, then and now, believed Brown’s violent abolitionist undertakings were too extreme. This is the Walker’s commitment. What sound to us like hard words are indicative of the post-Socratic strand in Thoreau’s thinking:

If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again—if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man—then you are ready for a walk.¹⁸

This committedness of Thoreau’s Walker reminds us not only that Thoreau himself, with his tuberculosis, was living in the face of death, but also of the experiential truth, for many of *my* “baby boomer” generation, of the words we heard earlier: “How few experiences we have had.”¹⁹

Thoreau’s romance with Walkers and saunterers has, as have *Walden* and “Civil Disobedience,” led more cynical readers to see Thoreau as an advocate of irresponsibility. Heinz Eulau, for example, portrays Thoreau as a kind of unphilosophically inclined anarchist: “Thoreau’s whole political philosophy was based on the theoretical premise of individual conscience as the only true criterion of what is politically right and just.”²⁰ There is a truth in this, and the romance Thoreau fosters, however compelling, seems to move in the direction of authorizing an irresponsibility toward a culture’s conventions.

"There is something servile," says Thoreau, "in the habit of seeking after a law which we may obey. . . . a successful life knows no law."²¹ This, however, seems to me to be the central irony of the text, beginning with the opening distinction between a "civil" and an "absolute" freedom. On the one hand, we are not "responsible" in the eyes of conventional "laws." On the other hand, it is precisely our ability to be "superior to all laws" that, for Thoreau, establishes the conditions of our freedom and, consequently, our responsibility. We are responsible when *we act*, not when we merely behave.

The upshot, then, of the example of the Walker Errant is to take us in the direction of our freedom and responsibility. An apprenticeship to Thoreau's walking and "wilding" places several demands on us. He suggests an initial step in the right direction in describing his townsmen who could recall walks "in which they were so blessed as to lose themselves for half an hour in the woods."²² Getting lost, I take it, suggests at least a necessary independence, a semi-chosen solitude. Those of us who have been lost perhaps recall the initial fear and excitement, the rush of an awakening to our own senses and condition, and, in time, an awareness of the novelty of the place in which we *find* ourselves. This experience of lostness seems to me to be one requirement en route to finding one's own wild dimension; as Thoreau remarks in his search for wild apples, "You must lose yourself before you can find the way."²³ Getting lost also indicates, I think, the necessary loss of one's social self; to lose oneself is to cast off, at least in part, the civilized being one has become. Leaving behind this routinized, stabilizing, but compromised self is akin to Thoreau's later comment about our names of convenience—our *given* names. In losing ourselves, we put ourselves in a better position to earn or to own our names; it is in this sense that "our only true names are nicknames."²⁴ This is a truth that other cultures, including many Native American cultures, have long acted upon.

The initiating lostness, thus, has important positive meaning for *our* moving in the direction of wildness and freedom. At the same time, it suggests something about the environment in which we might find ourselves. "Politics," Thoreau says, "is but a narrow field": one,

we imagine, that constrains not so much by actual legislation (the state)—though that, too, occurs—but by its social habits, its practical demands (the people). What is required for us to find ourselves is, at the least, a wider field. “To preserve wild animals,” says Thoreau, “implies generally the creation of a forest for them to dwell in or resort to. So it is with man.”²⁵ The disjunction between “dwelling in” and “resorting to” keeps open Thoreau’s own compromise within the context of his extreme statement. The “forest” here seems to be the wider field and suggests three sorts of wild spaces that might preserve our freedom and agency as persons: a space in the soul to house the “wild savage in us,” a social space where one’s “friends and neighbors” can be “wild men,” and a natural space, a wilderness. Thoreau indicates, in his own indirect ways, an order of reciprocal dependence. The natural space enables the social space that encourages the soul space; and it is the soul space alone—the finding of which seems to me to be the task at hand in “Walking”—that is able to generate a wilder social space and a commitment to wilderness. If this seems too structured a reading of Thoreau, it is at least clear that he fears the loss of both our individual wildness and the natural environment that might inspire it:

But possibly the day will come when it [the landscape] will be partitioned off into so-called pleasure-grounds, in which a few will take a narrow and exclusive pleasure only—when fences shall be multiplied, and man-traps and other engines invented to confine men to the *public* road, and walking over the surface of God’s earth shall be construed to mean trespassing on some gentleman’s grounds.²⁶

Perhaps Thoreau had in mind something like Jack Kerouac’s 1956 experience retold in “The Vanishing American Hobo”:

I was surrounded by three squad cars in Tuscon Arizona at 2 AM as I was walking pack-on-back for a night’s sweet sleep in the red moon desert:

“Where you goin’?”

“Sleep.”

"Sleep where?"
 "On the sand."
 "Why?"
 "Got my sleeping bag."
 "Why?"
 "Studyin' the great outdoors."
 "... why dont you go to a hotel?"
 "I like it better outdoors and its free."
 "Why?"
 "Because I'm studying hobo."²⁷

The Walker Errant, like the vanishing American hobo, seems to have lost something of the wider field and its possibility so long as sheriffs "having nothing to do in the middle of the night with everybody gone to sleep . . . pick on the first human being they see walking."²⁸

The wider field, the wilderness, that Thoreau calls for in an apprenticeship to walking, and so to political agency, has the task of presenting us with possibilities. There is no agency without possibility. As Thoreau says in "The Old Marlborough Road:"

What is it, what is it,
 But a direction out there,
 And the bare possibility
 of going somewhere?²⁹

It is in the achievement of actual possibilities that we can arrive at the threshold of political action.

Here, in sustaining an attendance to our own wildness—in maintaining an attitude of wildness—is the difference Thoreau finds between civil and absolute freedom. Civil freedom is the liberal's negative freedom in which, if we behave, we can live an undisturbed life. However, as Thoreau saw it, the need to behave meant another sort of slavery and loss of freedom: "Even if we grant that the American has freed himself from a political tyrant, he is still the slave of an economical and moral tyrant."³⁰ The movement toward the wilderness that Thoreau speaks for initiates two freedoms. First, it provides an enhanced negative freedom by removing some of the social constraints placed on the tamed, social self. More important, it condi-

tions the possibility of an empowerment to act on one's own: "The man who takes the liberty to live is superior to all the laws, by virtue of his relation to the lawmaker."³¹ Only at this juncture does one become responsible and able to act politically. "Action from principle," Thoreau maintained, "the perception of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything that was."³²

Much has been written of the inconsistency Thoreau generated through his dual allegiance to his own civil disobedience and to John Brown's act at Harper's Ferry. My guess is that he was more interested in the agency and responsibility exemplified in both instances. His aim, I think, was not to defend a generic political stance, but to seek the possibility of amelioration of human culture through responsible political agency. In part, then, I take "Walking" as an attempt to establish the wilder borderland that could underwrite this agency. To put it another way, one might say that the essay is, from one angle of vision, the poetic suggestion of a discipline prefatory to political action.

In conditioning political action with wildness, however, Thoreau reveals the risks of commitment. In "Civil Disobedience" he was confident in his moral commitment to the rejection of a government that condoned slavery. But life inevitably entertains more ambiguous cases. How, then, does one mark off one's borderland? When does wildness need to be recalled or constrained by civilization? Dewey is in step with Thoreau in suggesting that the answers are "had" experientially—we develop a feel for or a sensitivity to excess if we live well in the borderland. In the next chapter, I want to explore a moment in American cultural history that reveals both the efficacy of wildness and its attendant dangers.