Attending to the Lessons of the Pond: Henry David Thoreau’s “Revery”

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Abstract

In the forced labor camp of attention that is society today, many find that being attentive leads to distractedness, their mind literally pulled apart, and to great weariness, their self exhausted by attention to the objects and objectives that demand it. Looking carefully at the inverse, one might suspect, then, that some of what gets called distraction or daydreaming might belong to a deep attentiveness and focus, one that might also be vitalizing. In 1845, for two years, Henry David Thoreau made his life an experiment in such a hypothesis when he stepped back from everyday life in Concord, Massachusetts, and went into the woods to live in the neighborhood of Walden Pond and learn from it.... what? To hoe seven miles of beans? To see the shifting colors and vague shapes on the surface of a lake? Distraction or attention? A waste of time or not just killing time?

I want us to attend to three moments of Thoreau’s life in the neighborhood of the pond: one of working, one of walking, and one of watching while sitting with what one imagines to be a blank stare, unfocused gaze. The three are very different, as different as hoeing seven miles of beans is from wandering in the woods is from sitting patiently.

To us on the outside, to an observer, that is, who sees him engaged in these practices or crafts, as they might also be called, he looks for all intents and purposes to have no intents and purposes. Daydreaming. Absent-minded. Off-track or Lost. In the dark, in the woods. Bored and boring, like those pages about the pond that we read or the ones about the ant battle that we didn’t. That is how he might seem to us. Any thoughts he might have in these reveries are only distractions that we, like the townsmen in Concord, are tempted to say are not real thoughts, flights of fancy that characterize a mind no longer possessed of itself, a mind that needs to get a grip on itself, and attend more vigilantly to more important concerns. Train-schedules, the news, book-keeping and account-balancing, gala celebrating the values of society and the nation—these are some of the many items on the to-do list that he ought to be thinking about. To his townsmen in the village, that list looks to have been forgotten when he hoes seven miles of beans in a field a mile from the village, or walks aimlessly on a saunter in the woods where he hears the thoughts of trees that hold the halo of daylight’s end, or sits patiently staring until the pond dissolves in a confusion of colors. His absent-minded fancies are not properly ordered thoughts, not thoughts ordered properly to objects of real concern, and he admits as much when he calls them “revery” in a few places (e.g. Wa, 105-6). One can hear in the background of the text his townsmen, who, he says on the very first page, asked him directly what he did down there all that time, telling him that he should pay more attention to his thoughts and what he thinks about, so as to stay focused on important things and goals. For thinking, it is supposed, means problem solving and being self-possessed; it is a technique that, managed methodically, lets you get a grip on yourself and see the world more objectively, and when the world appears as an object, it poses far less of a problem.[[1]](#footnote-1)

But what if life is not a problem, not a set of problems to solve nor presented as a problem set? What if the living of life is about something more or other than solving problems? That is an important set of questions Thoreau raises for me. I think it is a lesson he learns to learn when he finds his pond in the woods. It’s not an easy one. For it supposes submission to Walden as a teacher, and that means he has to be in ignorance, in the dark as he so often finds himself in the woods, not seeing or even knowing what he needs. As a student of the pond, he is more like an apprentice than a consumer: a consumer supposedly knows enough already about himself and the world to locate the teacher, really the purveyor or media-agent, who will give him the goods he already knows he wants in order to achieve the objectives he set for himself and if this teacher doesn’t he goes to another. Apprenticed to the pond, Thoreau returns again and again to it, the same pond, frequenting it frequently, learning needs, to need necessities he never knew he needed.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The lessons of the pond are also hard to learn because they concern the living of life and are in some sense of the word, subjective. Learning these lessons is an experiment. Let’s try a life, he says, but these tries are experiments done on himself in the first person, tries at a life that nobody has lived and nobody else can live—unrepeatable experiments, therefore, and also without statement of goals or objectives because they are searching for these. Like experiments, these trials must be begun, and ended, again and again.[[3]](#footnote-3) Though we sense a call to repeat his experiment, to do so means doing it for myself, my own way, starting over again and again. What it would mean to measure the success of an experiment like that, one that can only be done once, repeatedly, since it is a life called my own that is at issue after all? It is precisely the sort of activity that the assessment regime will not admit. Lessons learned by tries like Thoreau’s are hard to learn because they suffer the lack of credibility that comes from measuring up to its demands for measurability and repeatability.

If the lessons of the pond are not about reducing life to a problem set, then learning them calls for a different craft of thinking than that skilled in techniques of problem solving or identifying, producing even, objects in accordance with objectives—a different kind of thoughtfulness, and a different form of attention, maybe not an attention to new things or objects but a new way of attending. My hypothesis is that working in the beanfield, walking in the woods, and watching the pond are practices of this craft, bringing with it a new experience of thinking. That craft can be analyzed in the following three terms:

1. Working in the bean-field: inattentiveness at work.

2. Walking in the woods: a wandering mind.

3. Staring at the pond: Sensible ideas, clear and confused.

***Inattentiveness at work: hoeing seven miles of beans***

Hoeing seven miles of beans is a craft by which Thoreau practices a certain kind of attention: inattentiveness at work.

Thoreau was, he says, “determined to know beans” that summer by the small “Herculean labor” of diligently hoeing seven miles of rows (Wa, 152). We should hear this statement of resolve in an odd sense, for what does it mean to “know beans” but to know nothing? What sort of objective is he attending to, then? Hoeing seven miles in a determined effort to know beans is an everyday labor or activity brought up against nothingness and reduced to meaninglessness—insignificant work, a meaningless objective, for it is in excess of biological necessity for survival and is economically unproductive as the surplus contributed little and was not brought to market in a way that made a significant difference. The objectives set and the objects produced in pursuit of it were reduced to insignificance by a practice that paid no attention to them and their meaning. Thoreau admits as much: “What was the meaning of this so steady and self-respecting, this small Herculean labor, I knew not... This was my curious labor all summer” (Wa, 146).

From the distance of the pond, then, what the village celebrates, what it tells us we should pay attention to, the objects and meanings it counts publicly as worth our attention, all that appears to Thoreau as empty and does not count. He sees its significance become a puff smoke in the distance that opens when he departs the village and goes down to the woods. “On gala days the town fires its great guns, which echo like great popguns to these woods,” he says. “To me, away there in my bean-field at the other end of town, the big guns sounded as if a puffball had burst” (Wa, 150-151). In the distance made by working resolutely to know beans, not count them all his life, what the public celebrates and asks people in concord to pay attention to appears as so many clouds of air that dissipate—meanings that do not matter, significations that lack weight, puffs of smoke, no longer commanding his attention.

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Engaged in what he calls the “pleasant pasttime” of working for nothing, a certain cheer and gladness appear, not at first his but in the world: “Beans cheerfully returning to their wild and primitive state that I cultivated... / Near at hand, upon the topmost spray of a birch, sings the brown thrasher—or red mavis, as some love to call him—all the morning, glad of your society.... “ (Wa, 149). What Thoreau calls “the liquid joy and happiness” of the pond (Wa, 183) here takes shape in the gladness of things like the beans and the thrasher. The joy that keeps to itself in the watery depths of the pond (“the same liquid joy and happiness that it is to itself and its Maker”) is released in things that appear cheerful and glad in a joyful light during the hoeing. If joy and happiness is in things, in this case, the thrasher and the beans, then the “subject” of happiness is the world that opens in the neighborhood of the pond, not Thoreau. To access that joy therefore, Thoreau must get out of himself, no longer be in himself but in the neighborhood of the pond so as to partake or participate in the happiness that it composes.

This happens during his inattentiveness at work in the beanfield.

One day, or even several, Thoreau pauses from diligently working the earth in his beanfield, and leaning on his hoe, he looks up into the clearing of the field, and finds himself carried away by this, the world composing itself in the joy and gladness of the pond.

When my hoe tinkled against the stones, that music echoed to the woods and sky.... The nighthawk circled overhead in the sunny afternoons—for I sometimes made a day of it—like a mote in the eye, or in heaven’s eye, falling from time to time with a swoop and a sound, as if the heavens were rent.... graceful and slender like ripples caught up from the pond as leaves are raised by the wind to float in the heavens; such kindredship is in nature. The hawk is aerial brother to the wave.... When I paused to lean on my hoe, these sounds and sights, I heard and saw anywhere in the row, a part of the inexhaustible entertainment which the country offers. (Wa, 149-150)

The liquid joy and happiness of the pond rise in waves to saturate the world, making a cheerful atmosphere. The ripples of joy first appearing on the surface of the pond become birds playing joyfully in the air. It is a heavenly sight, a dream even, utopic? Earth and sky fraternize, resonate with each other sympathetically (to use another Thoreauvian term): ripples on the pond, leaves from the tree, birds in the sky, all correspond mutually, making beautiful music together as the world sings into being around the hoeing. Kindred spirits playing together. This is the joy of the pond composed into the gaiety of a world.

In that heavenly place where he hoes beans, what I would call “the neighborhood of the pond” rather than the kingdom of God, Thoreau’s attention is free, free to wander and float where it will, not where he intends it to rest or where he wills it to stay and also not where it is commanded to be fixed. “The hawk is aerial brother to the wave.... Or sometimes I watched a pair of hen-hawks circling high in the sky, alternately soaring and descending, approaching and leaving one another, as if they were the embodiment of my own thoughts. Or I was attracted by the passage of wild pigeons from this wood to that, with a slight quivering winnowing sound and carrier haste; or from under a rotten stump my hoe turned up a sluggish portentous and outlandish spotted salamander...” Hoeing in the free and clear of his open field he does not know what will catch his eye or where his attention will be drawn: all those “or’s”; it could be this or that or that or that. If his attention is free, it is not because he directs it freely. It is because his eye and his mind’s eye are detached, freed from what his will, commanded or commanding, directs him to focus on. He attends inattentively, not intending to stay fixed and focused on an object or objective set before it, and is thereby released from challenges to his power to maintain the object or objective under a vigilant gaze. Inattentive in this respect, and maybe also more relaxed without slacking off, it attends more freely, and more energetically, to what attracts it, as he says “I was attracted by the passage of wild pigeons from this wood to that.” Beyond his intentions to hoe the field, his eye feels the attraction of the wild, wild pigeons, and he is drawn out of himself into the same atmospheric updraft in which the nighthawk and henhawk soar in the open expanse of the beanfield. The lure, the attraction of it, the draw—he lets himself go, into the world, the gladness of the world he finds open “when I paused to lean on my hoe.”

“Determined to know beans,” Thoreau’s mind is made up, but it is not made up in the sense we usually mean by that. It is made up by the birds in flight it chases after. It is not a distraction to be attracted to all those “or’s.”

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Something that I have been calling inattentiveness is at work in Thoreau’s determined hoeing. This perhaps is why his entry into the field is prefaced with the famous line “It was no longer beans that I hoed, nor I that hoed beans.” Inattentiveness at work in hoeing makes the object before him (beans) vanish, and it suspends the I held by that object—releases the I that maintains the beans as its object when it sets its objective, the goal it intends: “making the earth say beans instead of grass.” But, the hoeing itself remains. When the I and the object of its objective vanish, or when the object that commands the I to vigilant attention vanishes, there remains the hoeing as an event that lets the world rise up around it in beautiful music: “When my hoe tinkled against the stones, that music echoed to the woods and the sky.... It was no longer beans that I hoed, nor I that hoed beans.” That event, glorious, can include me, Thoreau finds, when the inattentiveness at work in hoeing lets him be drawn by and into the attraction of the world, thoughtfully following the attraction of birds in flight.

Released from the object and objective that hold it, the inattentiveness at work in his determination to know beans means therefore a thinking that is not entirely present, not entirely present to the present. The opening line of the chapter, one of the greats in literature, “Meanwhile my beans...,” indicates a memory has interrupted whatever present business was occupying his mind, arising unbidden to call him back to the future work of hoeing. Once hoeing, that inattentiveness arises again with another unbidden memory, when he says “It was not beans that I hoed nor I that hoed beans; and I remembered... if I remembered at all... .” It is as if memory breaks hold of his attention to the task that challenges his present attention, releasing it from the grips of a command to maintain hold over its objects. Interrupted by memory, his mind wanders, drifts away from the present and relaxes from its vigilant attention to the objective that constitutes it. In this void of objects and objectives, he is free to see what there is to see and to follow the ideas that appear to him, birds in flight in this case.

The demands on his attention here in the free and clear of the beanfield are far more relaxed than they are in the village of Concord. This should be initially surprising, for he is after all in the woods, close to the edge of the wild, where one might suppose living to be more challenging than in the cultivated time and space the comfortable life amidst the affluence of concord. But in the clearing in the woods, his attention is not captured by what grabs it. What grabs his attention in its inattentive opening of the field is wild. What is wild cannot be held, nor therefore does it hold him. Attracted by the attractions of the wild, his thoughts follow after the transient and drifting: “the passage of wild pigeons” and nighthawks “like ripples caught up from the pond as leaves are raised by the wind to float.” These are not things that grab hold of our thoughts, capture them and hold our mind fixed on them, but fleeting thoughts, thoughts on the fly, perhaps; they are winged beings, after all, that he speaks about. Indeed the world that attracts his attention, the world his thoughts follow after, is defined by this—that it is wild or rippling, floating leaves, and so is not itself when it is grabbed hold of and kept.

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It is also worth suggesting that to put inattentiveness to work in a mind that wanders like his is to work like a human being—a being that grows tired or exhausted, in body and mind, and pauses to lean on the hoe with which he is at work. It often seems to me as if we think about attention as if it were inexhaustible, ever available and readily commanded, as if I only have to say “pay attention” and you will (I will) because you (I) always can. This might be so for a pure mind, angelic intellect perhaps, but a human being and its attention wearies, drops its guard. Thoreau’s experience welcomes this finitude of human being. “When I paused to lean on my hoe, these sounds and sights I heard and saw.” Thanks to a certain form of inattentiveness at work, the world appears to him in the sounds and sights that attract his free attention. He finds that pleasant and even gladdening, not a lamentable failure to stay focused, keep on track, and remain mindful of the objective but welcomes it as “the inexhaustible entertainment which the country offers”—the country, in contrast to the country, the country that is that Thoreau hears celebrating itself “on gala days” when “the town fires its great guns” (Wa, 150).

***A wandering mind: Walking***

Thoreau also becomes a wandering mind in another of his crafts: “the art of walking,” which is described in an essay published posthumously bearing the simple title “Walking.” Not unlike hoeing seven miles of beans, the craft of walking is practiced when it is reduced to its doing only, a venture out into the void of objects and objectives, attending to nothing at all, really, and in that void seeing what there is to see.

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Walking, for Thoreau, is not means to an end. It’s not attending to the business, for instance, of going to the grocery store to locate what is missing from the larder and coming home with hands full of the goods that make for a satisfied life and a well-stocked refrigerator. Nor is it a project like those of the “neighbors who confine themselves to shops and offices the whole day” (W, 630) attending to the challenges presented by their jobs or the life of buying and selling goods in the market place. Their attention is captured by these demands almost round the clock, or at least, he observes, without regard for the difference between night and day—they are “sitting at three o’clock in the afternoon as if it were three o’clock at night” (W, 630). Walking, he says, finds time in the meantime, when nothing calls for attention and the attention drops its guard, between the news cycles that have thankfully, *per impossibile*, offered a break, when it is “late for the morning papers and early for the evening ones” (W, 630).

The walking he practices is also not a tour or a tourist activity. The ideal, he says, is “to go forth even on the shortest walk... in the spirit of undying adventure never to return” (628). It takes shape in “not a circle, but a parabola, or rather like one of those cometary orbits which have been thought to be non-returning curves” (W, 637). It is not a quest to see sites or a way to be the one who saw the sights that everybody says one should see so that one can be part of the crowd or maybe even have a bit more social capital than those others like me who can’t afford the time or money to go on the great tour that I did. A few souvenirs brought home, the more exotic the better, serve well the end of marking my distinction from those with whom I am together in mutual envy. The art of walking, by contrast, Thoreau says, does not pay attention to what they say you should see nor does it seem attentive to seeing what others see. It brings nothing home and, ideally, does not return to the same homeland it left.

It also, he says, “has nothing in it akin to taking exercise” (W, 631). There is no counting steps, tracking calories, or sharing routes as part of a project make me as healthy as they want me to be. A walk, for Thoreau, offers freedom from keeping track of anything like that, a chance to lose track of your self and to relax attention from vigilantly monitoring numbers and quantities that constitute the object of the happiness industry. While on walks, some of his fellow townsmen, he says, have been “so blessed as to lose themselves for half an hour in the woods,” but the blessing of losing track of one’s self in the woods is not one most people want to receive, he says. The city dwellers, townsmen, quickly turn their attention to getting back on track and “have confined themselves to the highway ever since” (W, 629), more secure path to definite objectives. They prefer having objectives and the tracks that lead to them, and have dedicated their attention to tracking them and keeping track of the numbers that assess progress.

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When walking is brought up against a nothingness of purpose or objective (personal, social, or physical), Thoreau calls it “*sauntering*,” a venture “*à* *la Sainte Terre*”(W, 627), with maybe a touch of insouciance. Walking brings him into the holy land, like hoeing seven miles of beans in a field brings him to heaven on earth, and this craft involves a similar inattentiveness that releases his mind to be made up yet free from what might capture the attention. It is best done at dark, he says in *Walden*, in the night when objects and objectives cannot command your attention and direct your steps methodically—“when my feet *felt* the path which my eyes could not see, dreaming and absent-minded all the way, until I was aroused by having to raise my hand to lift the latch” (W, 160). Having become a wandering mind, either hoeing in the field of beans or going for a walk in the darkness of the woods, he leaves the “quiet desperation” (Wa, 8) of attentions captured in concord by the many signs “that were hung out on all sides to allure him,” soliciting his attention, “some to catch him by the appetite... some by the fancy” and others by “a standing invitation to call at every one of these houses, an expectation to arrive at about these times” (Wa, 159). The clamor for attention in “The Village” is sometimes so great, he observes, that men in concord cannot even sleep half an hour without waking to ask “What’s the news?” their attentions so grabbed and captured that “after a night’s sleep the news is as indispensable as the breakfast” (Wa, 88-89). Hoeing beans or walking frees Thoreau’s attention. Not captured, it is wild and roams freely in the emptiness or open of the fields or else in the thick groves and dense foliage of the forest.

Thoreau experiments with this free attention in his walks. Much of what he sees is wild. And wonderful. Here are two examples from the end of “Walking.”

We had a remarkable sunset one day last November. I was walking in a meadow, the source of a small brook, when the sun at last, just before setting, after a cold gray day, reached a clear stratum on the horizon, and the softest, brightest morning sunlight fell on the dry grass and on the stems of the trees in the opposite horizon and on the leaves of the shrub-oaks on the hillside.... The sun sets on some retired meadow, where no house is visible, with all the glory and splendor that it lavishes on cities.... We walked in so pure and bright a light, gilding the withered grass and leaves, so softly and serenely bright, I thought I had never bathed in such a golden flood... like the boundary of Elysium... So we saunter toward the Holy Land.... (W, 662-663)

I took a walk on Spaulding’s Farm the other afternoon. I saw the setting sun lighting up the opposite side of a stately wood pine. Its golden rays straggled into the aisles of the wood as in to some noble hall. I was impressed as if some ancient and altogether shining family had settled there.... I do not know whether I heard the sounds of a suppressed hilarity or not. They seemed to recline on sunbeams. (W, 659)

Just as inattentiveness at work in hoeing to the point of exhaustion lets the world be composed in gaiety so too does the wandering mind on a walk in the field step into a wonderful or glorious world, one that might even be called “Elysium,” a “Holy Land,” or at least a neighborhood composed in “hilarity,” in other words, in cheerfulness or merriment.

The wandering mind becomes a mind given over to wondering and the wonders that might be seen in wondering. Why should we doubt him? Do we have to be so suspicious?

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In his seeming inattentiveness, there is a lot to see, and the walker, a wandering mind, is more thoughtful, Thoreau tells us, than the man confined in the village, attending vigilantly to the objects and objectives, the lists and schedules, screens and signs, that command his attention. Sensing what Heidegger stigmatized as the growing thoughtlessness of the age, Thoreau connected our thought poor minds with deforestation and the disappearance of the wild from an ever more manageable and managed world of objects commanding our attention. Just as fewer and fewer pigeons from afar visit us in New England now that “our forests furnish no mast for them,” he says, so too do “few and fewer thoughts visit each growing man from year to year, for the grove in our minds is laid waste, -- sold to feed unnecessary fires of ambition, or sent to mill, and there is scarcely a twig left for them to perch on. They no longer build nor breed with us” (W, 660). Thoughtfulness is a matter of being visited. Visitation is necessary for the mind to grow full of thoughts, he says, because thoughtfulness is born, not made, and that means it is the issue of an intercourse with the outside or the world. On the other end of visitation is, of course, welcoming: for the mind to be visited, it must be open and welcoming. When his attention is commanded by objectives (unnecessary ambitions) and the effort of maintaining them present to him, his mind risks becoming so full of objects that it can never be visited, neither by thoughts nor wild pigeons. We are no longer open places where thoughts can take root and grow, perch and soar. “Our winged thoughts are turned to poultry,” he says, whereas we might “elevate ourselves a little more,” by becoming the wandering mind whose inattentiveness is at work in its determination to know beans or sauntering in the fields and groves.

Thoughtful, the walking mind does not think on its own; it does not make up its own mind, as it were, but it’s mind is made up. Thoughts come to it, like wild pigeons, having their origin outside it but perching in the open and welcoming mind. Thoreau tells us of this. Sauntering, inattentiveness to present objects freed his mind: “there was no noise,” “the wind lulled,” “hearing was done away” (W, 660). And yet, in the silence of the open field that remains when he is inattentive to all the noises around him, he “detects... the finest imaginable sweet musical hum... the sound of their thinking” (W, 660). “Their thinking.” The trees. The thoughts of the trees. What he calls their thoughts fill him, and he becomes thought-ful. Their thoughts are his thoughts in the sensible mind that thinks under the influence of the thoughts it hears outside inside it.[[4]](#footnote-4) This is what he means by “their cohabitancy,” as if my thoughts con-sisted with them rather than ex-isted as objects of a mind possessed entirely of itself. “Recollecting my best thoughts,” he says, means becoming “again aware of their cohabitancy.”[[5]](#footnote-5) When my thoughts are theirs, thinking is at its best, “winged thoughts,” in other words, issue of the intercourse between me and the trees. On the other hand, when he thinks his own thoughts into being, his mind is fallow, “winged thoughts... turned to poultry.” Being thoughtful, Thoreau finds, requires attending to this origin of thinking outside a self-possessed mind, in the trees, for instance, which means being inattentive to the demands of present evidence and objects and signs in the village, letting all that noise fall into silence in order to hear the origin, faded and passed away. Memory, inattentiveness to the present, is again called for, a referring back to the origin, that interrupts the mind made up entirely by what captures it in the present.

That thinking is a free cohabitancy, not entirely self-possessed nor entirely captured by objects, is confirmed by the inverse case, when my thoughts are the worst. There is a famous, also cryptic, remark at the end of Thoreau’s essay “Slavery in Massachusetts” where he says “I walk toward one of our ponds; but what signifies the beauty of nature when men are base? ... The remembrance of my country spoils my walk. My thoughts are murder to the state, and involuntarily go plotting against her” (SiM, 712-13). I can’t get politics out of my head, he seems to say. The news is too insistent. It has turned all my thoughts to hatred and venom. It has corrupted my walk. I cannot wander, much less wonder. It’s a Nietzschean moment, one where he struggles with forces of vengeance and resentment rising up in him and dominating his mind.

***Clear and confused: Sensible ideas of the pond***

The sensible thoughts of a wandering mind are also what come over him when he sits and looks closely at the pond, frequently from the distance of a hilltop stump or log. While the pond appears clearly thanks to his close attention to it in all its singular details, it is not distinct, for it belongs to the “cohabitancy” or middle ground of what he calls “sympathy with nature.” There is, in these “winged thoughts,” in this case of the pond, formerly of the trees, a certain kind of indistinction or con-fusion where my thoughts are not distinct from those that have their origin outside me, in the world, the sensible world even. Sitting, attending to the pond, like when he saunters, Thoreau becomes more thoughtful, more full of thoughts, the more he thinks under the influence of the world he senses before and outside him.

Heidegger tells us something similar. He tells us that the tree appears in the field. We must go there to find it. The same is true of the pond: to find it, Thoreau goes “down to the woods,” as he puts it, and attends to it there. The pond is, after all, in the woods, not our head, as Heidegger said of the tree that stands in the meadow.[[6]](#footnote-6) It is not in consciousness as an object constituted by information provided in all the various analyses and diagnostics of those who can count it up for us. Nobody will see it without going down to the woods, and that means getting off the tracks, leaving the fast track and straight path of the highway, and walking, wandering, really, in thicker, denser, woods or clearings where there is no path at all, until after he walks it. We should not on this point forget that *Walden* bears the subtitle *Life in the Woods,* as if Thoreau knew well that an apprenticeship to the pond meant he had to be willing to live in the woods, that so long as you are not out of the woods you still have a chance to find the pond and maybe learn its lessons.Most of the time we don’t, though, stay in the woods to find it. Instead, we bring our pond before us with the turn of the cock or twist of the spigot (Wa, 182), or else we hasten by it on the train to Fitchburg whose cars “never pause to look at it” (Wa, 183).

“Not being out of the woods,” English speakers know, means being a bit confused and in danger. The pond in the woods appears, clearly it does, in Thoreau’s confused ideas (we’ll see that in a minute) and in danger, his and its: the ice might break beneath him at any moment as he crawls over its watery depths, and the oblivious railroad might clear ever more trees, sink them to the bottom of the pond, until soon “the dark surrounding woods, are gone and the villagers... scarcely know where [the pond] lies” (Wa, 182). The pond in your head and the pond of everyday use are neither confused nor in danger: it will never run dry, it is bottomless (they say famously in *Walden*) and always available, forever in a permanence we assume unquestioningly every time we turn the lever to use it, and we all understand how to use it, there is no confusion there, all of us can understand and relate to what each of us and the others have to say about it, there is no confusion there, either.

When Thoreau apprentices himself to the pond in the woods, however, he goes there and frequently to stay alongside it. It will “not much concern one who has not long frequented it,” he says (Wa, 166). He describes its appearance most memorably in a chapter, “The Ponds,” dedicated to the many ponds found in the woods surrounding Concord. How it is seen to be in the sensible thoughts of a wandering mind still in the woods is differently, each time, hence the call for a frequent attention. For frequenting it means, of course, returning to it and therefore having left it, let it go. Frequent attention is attention that is interrupted, releases what it watches over, but is drawn to it again when a memory interrupts its present and the present objects that capture attention.

To one who stays in the woods attending to it frequently, the ordinary pond is nothing substantial—“a single glass of its water held up to the light is as colorless as an equal quantity of air” (Wa, 168)—nothing itself but the relations of earth and sky, atmosphere and ground, viewer and viewed, that give it color. The pond he sees in his frequent attention to it therefore appears as a shifting, ephemeral, and ultimately insubstantial thing. “*Viewed from the hilltop* it reflects the color of the sky; but near at hand it is of a yellowish tint,” Thoreau reports, then continues by unsaying what has been said. “In some lights, *viewed even from a hilltop*, it is of a vivid green next the shore. Some have referred to this as a reflection of the verdure; but... it may be the result of the prevailing blue mixed with the yellow of the sand... When much agitated, in clear weather, so that the surface of the waves may reflect the sky at the right angle..., it appears at a little distance of a darker blue...” (Wa, 167). Thoreau goes on to describe that nothing which is the pond as it appears in the woods when he pays close attention to it. It is difficult to picture and in fact might not even be a picture at all, which is why I and many other readers have such a hard time with these pages: we just don’t get the picture, and our mind cannot bring the thing to stand, still and stable, before us.[[7]](#footnote-7) It might be too nuanced a vision, far more nuanced than a pond known, simply and only, even when known to be bottomless: things that appear nuanced are hard to place or set before us in a stable way, making them solid and substantial.

A sensible attention to the pond, in the singularity of all its nuances, calls for language that is maddening. Thoreau’s is ever qualified: not “green” but “*dark* green,” not “blue” but “*vitreous* green*ish* blue.” None of the words gets it right, nor does the sum of them. One senses precisely in the intended precision of the language that the pond escapes it, that his close attention to it leads Thoreau to the point where he cannot secure it before him or hold it stable, as its colors shift and twinkle, shimmer in play relative to one another. His attention to exact description, like the disenchanting acts of measuring the pond,[[8]](#footnote-8) leads to a thing that does not subsist, is not grasped in the language that names it, is not an object. One has to revisit the pond over time, many times, and revise the description of it, attending to it frequently, in order to come to the ordinary one there in the woods.

Conveyed largely by the sensation of colors that constitute its appearing in the woods, the ordinary pond does not appear simply blue or green but in various shades or tints—such as “a matchless and indescribable light blue,” a tint “more cerulean than the sky itself,” a “dark green,” and so on (Wa, 167-68). Ever qualified, appearing in nuances that shade away from the primary and ideal, never just blue or green, the Walden of Thoreau’s world appears in tints and shades that lend it detail and particularity, approaching it in its singularity. The appearing of the pond is constituted by the play of colors relative to one another, “a vitreous greenish blue,” for instance, existing in no way as a substantial green or blue independent of each other, but a slow blur or blend of colors becoming indistinct. Attention to the pond sees it dissolve in a play of colors. What appears clearly in his sensible attention, the “cohabitancy” of thought, is not seen so distinctly, then. The “greenish blue” Thoreau sees in the woods, for instance, is not a distinct idea of a color. The “-ish” marks that, but so too does the use of one color, “green,” adjectivally to qualify or characterize another, “blue.” He cannot describe distinctly the differences between his sensations in such a way as to constitute them as a certain object, an object of which he is certain.

This is an example of a relaxed attention. Though exacting in its precision, it relaxes from the demand to constitute objects, distinct objects, and hold them vigilantly present under its gaze by rigorous adherence to a method. The pond in the woods flickers and shifts, shifts and shimmers, as the colors that constitute its appearing exceed their edges, blend and slide into one another: it is indeed liquid, the pond, and ephemeral. But his relaxed attention does not seem troubled or worried, challenged or set upon, by this.

One might even imagine Walden to be one of what Nietzsche called the “iridescent uncertainties” admired by the Greeks—adorers of appearance, believers in forms, who were, he says, “superficial out of profundity,” in contrast to the Egyptian youth who, suspicious of surfaces and appearances, “endanger temples by night... [and] want to unveil, uncover, and put into a bright light whatever is kept concealed.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Thoreau’s relaxed attention, like those Greeks, lets the pond be (a wonder) in one of his confused sensible ideas (uncertainties) where it shimmers wonderfully (iridescent). In contrast to those Egyptian youth who suppose that iridescent uncertainties are in need of further clarification in order to reach a distinct object, hidden or concealed beneath the glimmer and glow, the aura of mystification, the pages of *Walden* give evidence that Thoreau sees this shifting thing clearly, even without a distinct idea. The clarity of this indistinct idea can be, he says, particularly “vivid,” as the pond appearing in the woods gives him to see a “vivid green... the result of the prevailing blue mixed with the yellow of the sand” (Wa, 167).

Appearing with such vividness, the pond is given to be seen in a clarity that is perhaps too clear to be certain what it is. Vividly present, the pond appears too clearly to have it subsist in the present before him. “Walden is blue at one time and green at another” (Wa, 167). Is it blue? Is it green? Sometimes more of one, sometimes more of the other. He does not, indeed apparently cannot say just one or the other with distinctness. It shimmers, iridescently. It’s a dazzling sight, but one that leaves Thoreau in a sense confused about the ordinary pond, “the liquid joy and happiness,” he has found there in the woods. He has only a confused idea of it, and yet the confusion in which the pond appears in the woods is precisely the mode by which the ordinary pond outside his head is welcomed. In fact, his confused idea is a sensible one, perhaps even the only sensible idea: it is how the ordinary pond appears in the woods, not the fabulous one in our stories, not the sensational one utterly lacking in sensation (it’s bottomless, they say), but the ordinary one appearing in sense and sensation when he attends to it frequently.

**Conclusions**

These days it’s hard paying attention. Not just because there is so much to attend to that our minds are scattered, dispersed in the many and pulled apart, literally distracted—but also because we are always being asked to pay attention to one object or objective or another. Vigilant all the time is hard way to be. Count your steps each day. Keep track of your carbon footprint. Manage your instagram identity or your facebook profile. Respond to postings and ongoing notifications that multiply the more you respond. Buy this; watch that; join this; don’t miss that. Know what you want to be when you grow up so that you can choose the right college and then the right major and all the right courses so that everything counts, for it must count since we have to give an account of ourselves to the ever insistent assessment regime. Stay focused, fixed on the objective. Pay attention, listen to me and to us. It is tiring, very tiring to attend so vigilantly to these objectives and objects all the time. Being a good consumer, too, of everything that is anything, demands ever greater attention. Life become managed consumption, life become administered assessment, the fatigue can be very real—at least for a human being. There are of course methods and programs that are proposed to lighten the load, making it easier for us to attend, it being easier for a mind to attend to the method than to the thoughts that come over it. There are also a lot of devices that can lighten the load, technologies that attend for us by counting and monitoring then blinking and buzzing, but those blinks and buzzes only command my attention all the more, capturing it, you could say, holding it still and filling it with the object constituted by the counting and monitoring.

Thoreau’s craft of thinking might be attractive in this context. For several reasons, three at least, which I will only sketch here.

*It is enjoyable*. That’s not unimportant. It might seem trivial and foreign to many of us who are experts in one field of knowledge or another and are accustomed to putting our minds to work, hard at solving problems, unmasking difficultly hidden truths, and staying focused on our objectives, but Thoreau’s attention is more relaxed, though exacting in its precision, and he enjoys his experience of thinking. We should not under-estimate the affective register in which his moments of thoughtfulness are frequently cast. The opening lines of “Solitude” describe one of the reveries of his wandering mind this way: “This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature. As I walk along the stony shore...” (Wa, 122). Then later when he sits in the doorway, confined inside by the rain outside, he describes his sensible attention this way: “In the midst of a gentle rain, while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature” (Wa, 124). Delicious. Delight. Gentleness. Sweet and beneficent. Could thinking give us over to experiences colored that way? Should we give a little more consideration to color or mood when we think about the experience of thinking?

There are other passages where what Thoreau enjoys in his reverie is not so pleasurable, as in the sounds he listens to attentively when he first enters Walden, the sounds that are something like the gateway to the neighborhood of the pond. These include “the distant lowing of some cow in the horizon beyond the woods,” the whip-poor-wills who “chanted their vespers for half an hour,” and lots of owls, screech owls who “take up the strain, like mourning women their ancient u-lu-lu... their wailing hymns or threnodies... *Oh-o-o-o-o that I never had been bor-r-r-r-n!* sighs one,” hoot owls that make “the most melancholy sound in Nature, as if she meant by this to stereotype and make permenent in her dying choir the dying moans of a human being” (Wa, 118). There’s more, but I will spare you. The point is that any conception of reverie as enjoying only thoughts of pleasant matters and positive emotions should be dismissed upon hearing such passages. It could be that being thoughtful gives him over to an enjoyment, even of unpleasant thoughts and troubling emotions.

*It gives time*. When he says, most famously, that “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” (Wa, 8), he suggests to me that perhaps life in concord has become nothing more than killing time. “I don’t want to be killing time all my life,” he seems to say when he stays in the woods and learns the lessons of the pond. “That is desperation at work, desperation keeping itself busy. I want to have time.” What we do to save time kills it, makes it such that we never seem to have any, and we do not want to be killing time all our life. Thoreau’s most notable example of this is the train[[10]](#footnote-10)—whose ever accelerating velocities appear to save time but in fact result in a culture of speed that experiences time chiefly in the mode of not having any, effectively killing it, making it unavailable, dead time all the time. Speed makes haste of life, he suggests, not more of it. In the neighborhood of the pond, by contrast, “I made no haste in mine, but rather made the most of it” (Wa, 40).

Thoreauvian attention, his reverie, dull and boring, aimless and wandering, confused, takes time, and that is a good thing—because it means it has time to take. Walking, for instance, in contrast to the train, does not save time, it takes time, it takes more time, but that is precisely what he wants: to take time, for it means he has been given time. Where was time offered to him so that he could take it? Hoeing, walking, and sitting receive time that he can take so that he can take his time. That makes more, not haste, of life.

He tells us as much when he speaks of his reverie in the opening pages of “Sounds,” writing “Sometimes in a summer morning, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery... while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house.... until by the noise of some traveller’s wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons... They were not time subtracted from my life but so much over and above my usual allowance” (Wa, 105). His “revery,” moments of thoughtfulness when inattentiveness is at work sitting in the doorway, adds time to his life, he says. It removes him from the time that he says is ever lapsing, which I take to mean time that is not available to him, not just time in its passage but time that runs away from us before we can enjoy it—in a sense, time we cannot take because we have conquered it by speed, making haste of our life not more, like a traveler concerned to get somewhere he is not on a wagon that goes faster than a walk. The “revery,” be it walking or sitting, by contrast, takes time. That’s what it means to add it to his life. It makes more, not haste, of life.

*And, it is therapeutic or healing*. That *Walden* is a work of recovery or renewal is fairly widely accepted, even if the nature of that recovery and the concept of health it implies remain less clear. Much of what I have said about the crafts of working, walking, and sitting support that reading, while also offering some way to think, hesitantly and tentatively, I admit, and therefore very cursorily, about the nature of that renewal. Living in the neighborhood of the pond through these modes of attending to it is vitalizing, invigorating even. Thoreau appears there as nothing if not ebullient.

We might recall that confused ideas of the pond appear particularly “vivid” in the mind of Thoreau, and “vivid,” in fact from *vivere*, means lively and vigorous. His ideas of the pond are lively, then, enlivening him just as his walks are, many have observed, unusually enthusiastic. This liveliness and enthusiasm characterize the “cohabitancy of thought.” A mind whose thoughts are originally theirs is one acted on from the outside, and a mind acted on from outside is perhaps not just passive but one activated, too. Lively and enthusiastic, thanks to its activation by thoughts that originate outside it.

Along the same lines of activation and enlivening, the inattentiveness at work in the beanfield is the awakening of desire in the thoughts of a being, Thoreau, no longer held by the objects and objectives that, capturing its attention, hold it in “quiet desperation” or in the great weariness that overcomes him with “tedium and ennui” (Wa, 9) in concord leaving him in a “torpid state” like the striped snake that lies on the bottom of the cold stream at the start of his experiment (Wa, 39). While hoeing inattentively, desire awakens in response to the attractions of the birds and he is attracted to them. Thoughts in the form of desire, finding something attractive and following it, these counter the “tedium and ennui” of concord.

But what if it all is just a dream? Sometimes it sounds that way, like he is just dreaming, the final scene of “Walking,” especially, but also the heavenly beanfield. But is dreaming also enlivening? It can be—for instance, in the analytic situation when the thoughts of a thinking patient freely associate and meet the free floating listening of the equally inattentive analyst who listens to nothing in particular. Together they create the dream that neither one of them had or is, yet becomes the awakening of new life in a patient held captive by complexes that hold his attention fixed in and on certain states of his being. “Cohabitancy of thought”? The final scene of “Walking,” too, is a dream composed like that as Thoreau, listening to nothing, hears the silence in which the thoughts of the trees become his, elevating him leading him to his best thoughts.

Dream on.

1. In the history of philosophy, this is perhaps best encountered in Descartes’ first two beginnings of thinking: the method (especially, *The Rules for the Direction of the Mind* and *Discourse on the Method*)and the ego (especially, *Discourse on the Method* and *Meditations*). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Learning the “*necessary of life*” is an important part of what leads him into the woods down to the pond (Wa, 11). His account makes clear to me that this will mean learning to have what is had in need. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me; but it does not avail me that they have tried it.... We might try our lives by a thousand simple tests” (Wa, 9-10). Let’s give it a try, this thing called life, he seems to be saying, and what we will be trying is to experiment, to learn to try a trial, a test, that like all experiments needs beginning, and therefore ending, again and again, a thousand times and more. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thinking under the influence? He is addicted? [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. To the point that losing their thoughts even means losing myself, remembering them recollecting myself: “They fade irrevocably out of my mind even now while I speak, and endeavor to recall them and recollect myself” (W, 660). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In philosophy, especially in a post-Heideggerian tradition, we might say that the pond does not appear to a representational subject. I cannot place it before me; it is not determined by the picture I make to bring it before me. Samuel Weber begins an important essay on Heidegger and representation with the remarkable line: “Do you get the picture?” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Examples found elsewhere in *Walden* include: sounding its depths to experiment with the received word and inherited belief that it is bottomless or infinite; measuring its dimensions to draw up a map; recording the temperature of the waters at different times of day and relative to that of other ponds. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Preface to the second edition of *Gay Science*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It would save time to take the train to Fitchburg, his imagined interlocutor in Concord says. But, Thoreau points out, you lose your time making the money for the ticket. Walking, by contrast, does not save time, it takes time, it takes more time, but that’s precisely what he wants: to take time, for it means he has been given time. Where was time offered to him so that he could take it? Hoeing, walking, and sitting receive time that he can take so that he can take his time. That makes more of life, not haste. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)