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Words Addressed to Our Condition: An Enacted Tribute to Calvin O. Schrag

Ramsey Eric Ramsey
Barrett, the Honors College Arizona State University USA
ORCID: 0000-0001-9203-2963

Abstract
This essay pays special tribute to Calvon O. Schrag by enacting a hermeneutic reading of Thoreau's *Walden*. The reading is set up by an engagement with Hadot's understanding of philosophy as a way of life as it can be seen in the fragments of Epicurius, which are echoed throughout *Walden*. Against this backdrop the essay gives an interpretation of *Walden* with sustained attention to the chapter titled "Reading" and the concept of dwelling. This interpretation shows, when seen in the light of "Reading," *Walden* is well understood as a book theorizing hermeneutics as such. So as to extend this understanding to the contemporary pedagogy in another register and vocabulary, the essay moves to a brief encounter with psychanalysis (understood as questioning, words, and interpretation) as articulated by Adam Phillips.

Keywords: words, reading, friends, needs, dwelling, Schrag, Thoreau, Epicurus, Hadot, Phillips

Prologue: Having Been Taught to Read

I have already elsewhere published an essay to share my gratitude for my teacher, Professor Schrag, and delivered it to him in a *Festschrift*.[1] To honor him on this occasion, I publish the essay below, an essay he said he liked when he read an earlier version of it years ago. Since Prof. Schrag's reading of the piece, I have been reworking the essay—trying to make it one that achieves something for hermeneutics by way of American Philosophy.

In an interview with Prof. Schrag (it is still the way of addressing him after all these years that seems most fitting in this context) he states there that continental philosophers of hermeneutics ought not forget there are, as he calls them, "indigenous" American thinkers who deal with philosophical issues in so-called continental ways. By this he meant thinkers such as Emerson (whose "American Scholar" address he much loved and read again and discussed with me just a few years before his passing) or William James (who plays a major role in Schrag's thinking in his wonderful *Radical Reflection*, the book I read as an undergraduate and the exhilaration after which led me to seek out the graduate program where I could study under his tutelage—doing so changed everything in my intellectual life).

Here I take up the work of Thoreau another of the thinkers who belongs to the American Philosophical tradition and who has something to contribute universally to hermeneutics. Of the many classic philosophic texts I read with Prof. Schrag *Walden* is not one of them. However, ever since he taught me how to read, I have read every book thereafter benefitting from his influence. I attempt below to enact these reading lessons as to honor the finest of philosophers and teachers by doing the work of reading he taught me to undertake. It seems understated to say: Prof. Schrag's words from the start and each moment afterward always seemed addressed to my condition.

I. Questions and Occasions

> Thou, a goddess, dost question me, a god, upon my coming, and I will speak my word truly, since thou biddest me.
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> –Hermes to Calypso, *The Odyssey*, Book 5 line 98

[1] Yet one wonders if once is enough; indeed, what number could possibly be enough for all he helped make possible for me and countless other students? See *Experiences between Philosophy and Communication* (SUNY, 2003) my festschrift (along with David James Miller) for Calvin O. Schrag in which appears our lengthy interview with Prof. Schrag and my chapter "Procreation on a Beautiful Medium: Eroticizing the Vectors of Communicative Praxis" pp. 191-200.

It usually begins because someone asked. Even for the gods. Questions have a way of getting things started and hermeneutics and education share a gratitude for this consequence of questioning.[2] Furthermore, those who teach hermeneutics and who read and teach psychoanalytic texts to assist in this endeavor know questioning and interpretation is also at the heart of the cure made of words. This more than mere similarity among these texts shows them to be kindred spirits for the professor looking to disclose the fundamental nature of dwelling.[3] The question how do we make good conversations? is dear to these interrelated efforts at education. It is undeniable language, love, and the questions they raise together are at the heart of something mattering to dwelling and world. These conversations we seek to make good with one another and that are called education are not undertaken simply to show some philosophical erudition or psychoanalytic acumen. Something more important is at stake on each occasion.

Important, indeed. One thing we might say the study of psychoanalytic theory teaches philosophy, or we might say the use to which those teaching the hermeneutics of dwelling might put psychoanalysis, is as a reminder of what philosophy long ago promised it came into existence to do *viz*., nurturing a way of life. One such philosophical response made in this light, one embodying the virtues of philosophy as a way of life to which I shall turn my attention here is Thoreau's *Walden*. This book about dwelling and reading, about words and world—that is to say, this philosophical book—comes to us, according to Thoreau, because someone asked. On the first page of *Walden* under the first chapter's title "Economy," which is *Walden*'s word for dwelling, we read: "I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life . . ."[4] It ought not surprise anyone who has read this American writer as a philosopher that *Walden* could motivate the French philosopher Pierre Hadot to write an essay on Thoreau or that a passage from *Walden* would be an epigraph to his masterful study devoted to his understanding of philosophy as a way of life.[5]

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[2] See "Quests and Questioning or Again and Again," *Phainomena* 31, no. 120/121(2022): 301.
[3] See Ramsey Eric Ramsey, "Letters on the Hermeneutic Education of Dwelling," *Empedocles: The European journal of the Philosophy of Education* 6, no. 1 (2015).
[4] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* in *Walden and Other Writings*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (Modern Library, 1992), 3.
[5] Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Harvard University Press, 2002) and Pierre Hadot, "'There are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, But Not Philosophers'," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19, no. 3, (2005): 229-237.

Philosophy as a way of life is most often practiced, according to Hadot, by a philosopher undertaking a two-fold task. First a thoughtful diagnosis of what ails our living together well. Following this, and then from within the love of wisdom, a love that can only be occupied by way of conversation, the offering of a therapy for what ails us. To understand this two-fold practice of diagnosis/therapy it serves us to turn to words from Epicurus because I find these and other Epicurean words strewn throughout *Walden*: "vain is the word of a philosopher by which no human suffering is healed."[6]

By way of Hadot's lead, I shall draw together an understanding of philosophy as a way of life through some of Epicurus' words with the hermeneutic education of dwelling provided by Thoreau. Thoreau, who places language, words, and reading at the heart of its project of awakening, will then be brought into a brief conversation with contemporary British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips. In Phillips we find he questions love and words in such a way that his claims about psychoanalysis and poetry are keenly relevant to my educational and hermeneutic concerns.[7]

II. Home, Homemaking, and Homecoming

> "Poetically man dwells" [says the poet]. Do we dwell poetically? Presumably we dwell altogether unpoetically. If that is so does it give lie to the poet's words; are they untrue? No. . . . For dwelling can be unpoetic only because it is in essence poetic.
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> —Martin Heidegger, "'. . . poetically man dwells . . .'"

Simply because we understand the hermeneutic circle is not vicious in no way means we are free from any number of bad circlings. It seldom works to live poorly as preparation for living well. If we are not careful, tragically, the time may not come when we feel ready to give up the preparation, and thus living well would remain ever-waiting. As Thoreau puts a fine point on it: at least the labors of Heracles had an end. Yet when we look at our labors today, they appear as if they will go on forever. Or, at least, until we are at our end. To break the bad circling requires us to look around, to take account of our circumstances, and to find out of what we are made and what has already been made of us by and in our circumstance. A homemaking, both as the making of a house while rendering its costs with an accountant's detail and then

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[6] Epicurus, *The Essential Epicurus*, trans. Eugene O'Connor (Prometheus Books, 1993), 97.
[7] Adam Phillips, "Poetry and Psychoanalysis," *Promises, Promises: Essays in Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Basic Books, 2001), 1-34.

through this conceit taking a look around at circumstance and dwelling, is the keenly observed philosophical diagnosis begun in "Economy" chapter one of *Walden*. This reading, evaluation, and diagnosis of *oikos* shows the dangers of our circumstances and the price it exacts from us when we misunderstand ourselves and choose both the wrong vocations and baser ways of dwelling. "Yet, they honestly think there is no choice left," the philosopher of *Walden* says.[8] He understands this to be but another symptom of our mistaken selves and counters this resignation and hermeneutic exhaustion with a claim that echoes Epicurus: "It is never too late to give up our prejudices."[9]

So as to give them up it may help to find a bit clarity about some of the detrimental prejudices we might embody today. As prescribed by philosophy as a way of life, let's proceed, then, by pursuing a diagnosis that might allow in its wake a therapy linked to learning how to read. To achieve this, I turn to a still powerful aspect of the work of Epicurus that seems to be echoed on nearly every page of *Walden*'s first chapter *viz*., his well-known discussion of the three levels of human needs. For Epicurus, we remember, the first and fundamental level of the needs of dwelling includes, as we might expect, food, shelter, clothing. These needs he calls both natural and necessary and the pursuit of which honorable and fitting to our nature. Securing these needs provides all our happiness could wish (or almost all as we shall see). But we have trouble drawing the line here, trouble resting in our happiness. "My greatest skill has been to want but little," claims Thoreau.[10] However, the devil is all round, and the seductions seem too compelling to resist for most of us; we want what at first seems but a little bit more.

As a result, luxurious versions meeting these first level natural and necessary needs press themselves toward us and we against them. They take us in because they appear in such an ingenious disguise. They wear a natural cover by referencing their connection to the first level, for they care again for real needs; yet in this manner of meeting them they are wholly unnecessary in the misplaced lavishness of their excess. In our pursuit of them, e.g., too lavish a table, too grand a house, and a closet filled with too much fashion, we are lead away from our flourishing. We do not need psychoanalysis to remind us seductions have persuasive ways of justifying themselves. We always have an out at this level, a kind of defense, a series of reasons why we need this and this and this even as our happiness flees. Put into words our alibis sound something more or less like this in the end: do we not need to eat? have a roof? and

[8] Thoreau, *Walden*, 8.
[9] Thoreau, 8.
[10] Thoreau, 66.

cover our nakedness? Of course we do; nonetheless, we ought beware—it might also be that each new purchase is another self-inflicted wound which in time, perhaps, will be one too many to survive.

While discussing dwelling Thoreau has this to say about such luxuries, in this case that of needing shelter: "I intend to build me a house which will surpass any on the main street in Concord in grandeur and luxury, as soon as it pleases me as much and will cost me no more than my present one."[11] Few are the places in English where one has said "never" so eloquently. Is one able to hear this resounding "never" and not be moved to some reflection? Would that ever a luxury be sought it were measured against and tethered to these lines. As damaging as this second level mistake might be when it leads us further and further from the better possibilities of our dwelling, another level awaits on Epicurus's rendering of the human condition, one worsening our condition still more.

At the third level, we no doubt recall, are those needs neither natural nor necessary and the seeking of these lead us to ruin, even if we were to capture them. Hostage to them—these worthless things—either as goals or as possessions, Epicurus believes, cannot bring the tranquility that is flourishing itself. Fame, unjust power over others, and wealth belong to the road of this unhappiness. Profound is its distance from the simple pleasures so easy to obtain. "I have in mind," says Thoreau, "that seemingly wealthy, but most terribly impoverished class of all, who have accumulated dross . . . and thus have forged their own golden or silver fetters."[12] I need to upgrade my shackles is rather an odd thing to say. Our condition, our dwelling and having to keep dwelling, must meet certain needs. We need not, however, live under their yoke says the founder of the ancient Garden of philosophers. The first level needs–the all-we-really-need–remain necessary but, we are thankful, easy to obtain when we know what is enough. The third level goods are so much more difficult to obtain but this, if read rightly, is evidence of our being blessed, for what is most difficult to secure need not be sought at all.

The mix of second and third level needs is a powerful force and an ubiquitous part of dwelling today. This misunderstanding misshapes our dwelling together by having naturalized itself in our understandings of who we are and what we take to be the requirements of our social relations. Thoreau shares this understanding of the human condition, even if he succeeds in his wish to avoid writing an ode to dejection. Yet, today is more complicated than he could have imagined. If his distrust of the

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[11] Thoreau, 47.
[12] Thoreau, 15.

telegraph marks the height of his worries about communication technologies, then we must wonder what he would believe of the chance the words we share today could have of doing what we desire of them. In a world of unrestrained consumerism, the quiet desperation so famously identified in *Walden* is today rather more noisy. The noise of thoughtless talk broadcast incessantly from all types of devices such that no time is safe from it and every place threatened to be within its range means today the clamor is as loud and persistent as the despair may be pervasive.

Thoreau, we might say, was out in the woods looking for room, looking for enough leeway that these thoughts, that is to say the proper words, might come to him uninterrupted. The words of *Walden* call each of us back to some better understanding of the first level of needs, which does not mean, as it appears we must still insist, back to Walden Pond: "I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way."[13] We are called back by philosophy as a way of life to learn what it means to dwell—called home, to homemaking, and to homecoming. The where and why of education share an answer in this light: it is from within a debased dwelling that we are called to undertake our education towards dwelling's better possibilities.

III. Reading Lesson

Enter Hamlet reading on a book
Queen: But look where the poor wretch comes reading.
—Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 2 Scene 2

Tenderly to achieve the ethical dwelling we are capable of sharing with one another must become a vocation. One way to respond to this call of love and language is to continue a reading of Epicurus that pushes certain of his claims to show the first-level needs are not exhausted by food, shelter, and clothing. To take Epicurus seriously is to understand friendship belongs to this group of needs as well. Friendship, for Epicurus, is the one need that is allowed, as it were, to be at odds with aspects of his philosophical position. Friendship fits the following description from Epicurus: there are things demanded by our experience that may be said to be disallowed by our theory. The type of friendship that makes its way to the first level of our needs is achieved through a shared love of wisdom, that is to say, of course, through philosophy, which

[13] Thoreau, 67.

is itself achieved in language, through reading the world, and by way of conversation. This understanding of love and language places philosophy, friends, and conversation among life's necessities. "Friendship dances around the world proclaiming to all of us," Epicurus tells those dwelling near him, "to rouse ourselves and give thanks."[14] Proclaiming this gratitude remains among friends to the end.

On his death bed Epicurus is still using words this way, writing to a friend to say how much pleasure is the memory of their past philosophical conversations and how grateful he is to have those memories with him now. This gratitude for one another and for philosophy made in conversation shows the essential nature of hermeneutics to an understanding of dwelling. We ought not wish, Epicurus reminds us, to pretend to be philosophers but to be philosophers really, to be in friendship by way of sharing a world in conversation. This is the possibility dwelling grants us and for this is the deep gratitude and the pure joy that Epicurus has for life itself. Thoreau also embraces this way of understanding dwelling and his call to awaken his near-dwellers shares this overwhelming sense of wonder in the reading of words and world.

If we must, it seems best to cite here the lines, perhaps too often cited if too little worked on, from *Walden* concerning pretending to be a philosopher: "There are nowadays professors of philosophy but not philosophers."[15] We note here these lines follow, and for a number of lines after continue, a lengthy discussion of dwelling and need, marking the dangers of luxury and making a defense of simplicity, a word that shall be repeated later in the text three times in a succession and punctuated by an exclamation point as a maxim for living well. Rather than stay right here certain that we are philosophers and it is only some of our colleagues who only philosophy professors, let's let the passage run on bit longer. The passage goes on to say: "Yet is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but to so love wisdom as to live by its dictates . . ."[16] Furthermore, near the end of this long paragraph we hear this Epicurean echo: "The philosopher is in advance of his age even in the outward form of his life. He is not fed, sheltered, clothed, warmed, like his contemporaries."[17]

It is far from insignificant that in the ancient Athenian Garden the inhabitants addressed one another as friend. Anyone willing to be a friend of wisdom was welcomed–this included women, and men, and free persons, and slaves. They all heard the address "friend" referring to themselves and used it for calling out to all the others

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[14] Epicurus, Fragments, 82.
[15] Thoreau, *Walden*, 14.
[16] Thoreau, 14.
[17] Thoreau, 14.

with whom they would converse. The way Thoreau calls himself a philosopher, the way he names others such, and invites others to become philosophers is done in this spirit of friendship. Philosophy belongs to living and to anyone who wishes to join the conversation and who thinks by living well one thus professes. One's living well among friends is a sufficient peer-reviewed publication record. There is now in this light, we might be led to believe, a pressing need for many many more philosophy professors.

In the paragraph following the one we have been discussing the philosopher with needs met sufficiently, does not seek more or better versions of what meets these needs. She is rather sent on her way in Epicurean fashion to an adventure in thought and words. She departs on the alternative adventure the text calls life. Who would be a philosopher would live well. The philosopher would learn how to read as sign every fact she comes across attempting not simply to make knowledge of it but life. To learn to read is to learn to live a philosophical life (granted, this is not always learned on one's way to a degree in philosophy).

This set of reflections makes Epicurus and Thoreau near-dwellers, which is to say neighbors, and provides a way towards learning to read understood as essential to the hermeneutic condition and to the health of our conversational being-together. Of course, we shall not read the chapter of *Walden* titled "Reading" as mere book list (though there be some virtue in that) nor, as some do, as that strange third chapter that gets in the way of things, that obstructs the movement from the beginning of the book and the real work of *Walden*, something unnecessary between the critique of Concord and its cheap business compared to the riches of and being in Nature. To the contrary, I believe this ought to be interpreted as the key chapter, it belongs right where it is, after a profound mediation on dwelling and the wasting of its possibilities. Reading is, as I shall understand it, the how or by way of which of dwelling. Teaching ourselves to read is to be ever-involved in learning the lesson that the fundamental nature of human-being-together as reading.

The world needs to be read—in any case it is being read all the time. Thoreau understands this and calls the readers of his text to turn their attention to reading the world and their place in it. Early in the chapter he makes claims allowing us to see reading and life itself ought to belong together in our understanding of the human condition: "To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the custom of the day esteem."[18] This task is living itself and the way we are currently reading and are taught to read will not do; the esteemed reading customs of the day have left us bereft. This

[18] Thoreau, 95.

is the link between the first chapters' opening diagnostic on the sad nature of our dwelling (economy) and this chapter's therapy as learning to read philosophically. Were we to learn to read well we would be learning to live otherwise creating a new economy of friendship one fitting to our hermeneutic nature. If memory serves me, Walt Whitman imagines this condition with the phrase City of Friends.

To read in the manner offered here takes what the text calls deliberation. It takes leisure to read. Speed reading is for Thoreau part of the problem: "Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written."[19] It takes time to read well, it takes conversation, it takes imagination. Even then it may take more than we are able to provide or at least we are best if humbled before the attempt. Of the greatest poems the philosopher writes: "only great poets can read them . . . yet this only is reading." Devoting "our most alert and wakeful hours . . ." to reading is the charge left to the reader of this chapter bearing the title "Reading."[20]

We readers await words. The quality of the words coming to us depend, in part, on our being ready to receive them, being ready to meet them upon their arrival. It matters greatly that we are reading well and awaiting words at our best. The quality of reading determines who we are and how we are with others. Reading the chapter as we are, teaches us what is true of poor reading, that it leads to poor conversation and poor thinking. It is inversely the case (we wager nearly everything) for good reading. But reading, conversation, and thinking already say living itself for the philosopher of *Walden* who puts it this way: "It is not all books that are as dull as their readers. There are probably words addressed to our condition exactly, which, if we could really hear and understand, would be more salutary than the morning or the spring to our lives, and possibly put a new aspect on the face of things for us."[21] No reader of *Walden* can miss here the power attributed to words in this passage for nothing could seem to matter more or garners more praise throughout the text than dawn and spring. Yet here words, the right words met in the proper way by the reader, can be "more salutary" than the morning or the spring. It will be words that awaken us. The constant calling of *Walden* is, of course, issued in words. It is a book after all. No doubt we are meant to be readied by these words for those words meant for us, those addressed to our condition. Perhaps some of the words meant exactly for us are among those in *Walden* itself.

Words addressed to our condition can come to us because the hermeneutic nature of dwelling is being able to be addressed at all. The word *condition*, this "with

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[19] Thoreau, 96.
[20] Thoreau, 98 & 99.
[21] Thoreau, 102.

saying" or "speaking with" of the *con dicere* of the human condition, tells us what we need to know about reading and its inextricable link to being-in-the world. Dwelling is the always already being-together of being ever-addressed by others and by world. As dwellers in the world we are always embedded in traditions that are addressing us. In the midst of these traditions, we do not find only the chance of meager repetition but kindred spirits, a community of friends who share good words and who need us as creative and worthy readers. We are assured by Thoreau: "These same questions that disturb and puzzle and confound us have in their turn occurred to all the wise men; not one has been omitted; and each has answered them, according to his ability, by his words and his life."[22] Nonetheless, our moment of the question is our own occasion for it so that we do not merely repeat them nor repeat their responses even as we learn from them and put them into play in our own thinking. A good reading produces a well-crafted echo. An original echo has its own charm we are told as Thoreau contemplates the ringing of a faraway bell.

The chapter "Reading" no doubt talks of books in general and of classics books in particular and of bad books too easy to read. It talks, too, of reading books and learning to read books and thus addresses what I am calling the hermeneutic education of dwelling. We see this in the beautiful final image of this chapter: a call to forgo funds for another bridge in town in favor of an education in reading. This education will teach a way of reading that will appear an inconvenience to those accustomed to reading quickly. "[G]o around a little there" he says of the inconvenience caused by the forgone bridge so that we might "throw one arch at least over the darker gulf of ignorance that surrounds us."[23] As ever in *Walden* the brilliance is that we are always talking about whatever it is we are talking about and then so very much more as well. Reading books and being readers of more than books and having a profound faith in being bettered by the reading of both is what the remainder of *Walden* is about, if we can suffer such a pithy summary of the next fifteen chapters. *Walden* cannot begin and cannot be the great pedagogical text it is if reading is not made central to living itself, which is my way of saying: *Walden* is nothing if not a theory of hermeneutics in the manner of doing philosophy as a way of life.

We gain confidence in this understating when the next chapter begins. This chapter is titled "Sounds" and focuses our attention on the commitment to listening so dear to hermeneutics. This chapter takes us to the heart, not of the literal recording of the days spent on the pond rather to the beginning (and too the continuation) of a

[22] Thoreau, 102.
[23] Thoreau, 104.

reading of the meaning of the moments spent by the pond. Far from abandoning reading the chapter begins by highlighting its central importance to life itself. To get things started the chapter begins by questioning the reader and the practice of reading itself as it relates to living a life: "What is a course of history or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared to the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen? Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer? Read your fate, see what is before you, and walk into futurity."[24] Or as I have been struggling to say all along: reading is our fate.

IV. In Need of One Another

> The discourse of the unconscious, the operation of the word on the physical and its perception, are wondrous in and of themselves. Opening the window onto those mysteries can in fact make all things new.
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> –Lila J. Kalinich, Introduction to *The Dead Father*

We readers must try by putting strange things to our tongues to see not if but how language and love belong to one another, to see how our conversations put words in our mouths that can have the taste of something new. This way of thinking of words belongs as well to the understanding Adam Phillips has in much of his work and especially in his essay "Poetry and Psychoanalysis." When talking of psychoanalysis Phillips always seems to me to be saying things directly related to hermeneutics and to education. For example, "Psychoanalysis teaches people a way of hearing what they say that enables them to speak in new ways" he writes.[25] Such an education as way of hearing what one (and reading what others have) has said and looking over the words one uses means one often abandons some of the words that seem to be leading one astray. Thus, such conversations are a type of loss. By gaining new words one gives up old ones and as a consequence: "this entails mourning one's old vocabulary, often the words one was brought up on; losing some of one's favorite words for oneself can be a mixed blessing" Phillips goes on to say.[26] What is so for one's own words is so for one's encounter with the words of others. Here we account for some of the resistance to *Walden*'s wake up call. It is not easy to give up beloved words as they are part of

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[24] Thoreau, 105.
[25] Adam Phillips, "Erich Fromm" in *On Flirtation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 131.
[26] Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation*, 131.

oneself especially those very words we were taught were best for us and would help us most in getting along.

We are always underway in this endeavor with words already all around. One goes to poetry and to psychoanalysis, claims Phillips, and I am suggesting also to hermeneutic philosophy in this case *Walden*, looking for better words.[27] However, as we have just seen, looking for other words to take up into a life means making room for them. Shedding beloved words is a crisis as Thoreau understands when he writes: "our molting season, like that of the fowls, is a crisis in our lives."[28] Yet, we do not start from scratch nor can we give up everything all at once. It is an insight as true of hermeneutics and education as it is of psychoanalysis when Phillips maintains: "psychoanalysis is torn between helping people conform and helping them to create revolutions."[29] The occasion for teaching hermeneutics is always one occurring between tradition and novelty, between conservation and critique, between giving up and holding on to certain words. Teaching, consequently, acknowledges reading is always doing many things at once. At its best giving us the chance to conform without being conformist and to be revolutionary without being reckless.

Although we are readers by endowment we are not by such alone good ones. So too with dwelling. We cannot help but read and dwell but we need to develop our reading abilities to better our ethical place in dwelling. As Thoreau notes we cannot simply wait for our good habits to arrive because, as he writes, they are such: "which a mere lapse of time can never make to dawn."[30] Or again our need for education is put this way by Phillips: " . . . our apparently innate poetry-making talents don't by themselves give us the lives we would prefer."[31] Accordingly we need education. We are in need of one another sharing words and loving wisdom to make our way to the dwelling of which *Walden* believes us capable.

The study of hermeneutics teaches us the world comes to us through interpretation, thus the act of reading the world and words is woven into every practice within dwelling. For this reason we must make both worthy of the worlds we prefer. They must have something of wakefulness in them, some "good enough poetry" as Phillips says nodding to Winnicott. We seek good reading because we, as those Phillips suggests turn to psychoanalysis, have a "belief in words" (or as his stronger version

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[27] Ramsey, "Letters on the Hermeneutic Education of Dwelling," As I say there: *we look for words with other words*. p. 83.
[28] Thoreau, 22.
[29] Phillips, *On Flirtation*, 131.
[30] Thoreau, 312.
[31] Phillips, "Poetry and Psychoanalysis," in *Promises, Promises: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Literature*, (Basic Books, 2002) 12.

puts it: "can psychoanalysis be anything other than a religion of words").[32] Our actions are assisted when the perspectives we gain from good words are able to "put[s] a new aspect on the face on things."[33]

Seeking what he calls the "useable heritage" in America's philosophical past, Curtis White discovers these new faces come from poetic readings of the world's possibilities. White finds in Thoreau and other American Transcendentalists what he finds in European Romantics beginning with Blake *viz.*, imaginative and utopian visions: "they fought not for a place but for a new set of ideas through which to recognize what would count as Real."[34] This is how an act of reading can be an act of resistance (noting that all readings are social and political in some manner or another). The new face might well be a beautiful one but it is also meant to be something else. The poetry and the reading I am suggesting is far from the simple decoration of a life that might get along without it. Instead, these readings and this poetry and their beauty are part of the challenge and the resistance to what currently counts as natural and presents itself thus unchangeable. These resistance readings are challenges to what passes for being impossible to alter by imagining the world otherwise within its real existing possibilities.

In "Life Without Principle" Thoreau tells us what he thinks our bad readings and practices have made of the world and what the consequences of our mistakes are in lines that have this sense of resistance in them:

> This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! I am awakened almost every night by the panting of the locomotive. It interrupts my dreams. There is no sabbath. It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once. It is nothing but work, work, work . . . I think that there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business.[35]

The study of hermeneutics is helpful to this critique by teaching that these ways of being making up what is called here business attempt always to hide the fact that they are based on readings too. Wishing to hide its ground in reading the desperate ways of the world attempt to make themselves appear natural and consequently incapable of being altered. But another world is possible–many other worlds in fact. We are

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[32] Phillips, "Poetry and Psychoanalysis," 6.
[33] Thoreau, 102.
[34] Curtis White, "The Spirit of Disobedience: An Invitation to Resistance," *Harpers*, April 2006, 16.
[35] Thoreau, "Life Without Principle," 748.

constituted by poesies and as such we can always read otherwise, as does Thoreau in the passage above. It follows, then, the world will have to be reread and remade from out of the same addressed condition from which we have made of it what it is today. This remaking is made all the more difficult in a world seduced by the illusion of certainty in human affairs. Our readings and actions are historical responses to events history will alter again in time. That said, we must think beyond what is and is not working. Without dreams and imaginations looking beyond what is, without the leisure to read well everything that has mattered to us in these reflections suffers: poetry, philosophy, life itself. To avoid the worse than criminal ways of being we must in our conversations and interpretive work "open new channels–not of trade but of thought."[36]

Even a book such as *Walden*, which so often seems so sure of itself, knows better than think its reading has exhausted any one text or occasion. Moreover, it considers this a virtue. Of its own words it has this lament: "in this part of the world it is considered a ground for complaint if a man's writings admit of more than one interpretation."[37] For a hermeneutic philosopher such as the one in *Walden* this part of the world, is the literalist world the one made by narrow ways of reading that have overtaken so much of our thinking; it is a real danger if this part of the world becomes nearly everywhere in the world. So as to read well one needs to be able to draw from a rich and varied reservoir of responses thus responding to the particular questions raised by each occasion. The hermeneutic education of dwelling needs to show the dangers of literalism and how unhealthful it might be to wish the ambiguity of the world away. Neither rigid nor capricious, good reading must be as creative as it is well informed. "The universe is wider than our view of it" we read in *Walden*.[38] Nonetheless, our views are still the only worlds we have and thus call for our readings to be worthy of our being together with one another.

As is more than clear by now the practicing hermeneutic philosopher of *Walden* believes we are not as accomplished readers as we are capable of being. He may well be correct in uncovering a major reason why this is so when he looks around at what conditions us and comes the evaluation: "We know not where we are."[39] Too few of us have looked six feet above us or six feet below us he says and suggests were we to have done so we would have some sense of where we are. On my reading, as a text in hermeneutic theory, *Walden* looks deeply in both directions and locates human being

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[36] Thoreau, *Walden* 301.
[37] Thoreau, 348.
[38] Thoreau, 301.
[39] Thoreau, 311.

in its understanding of ethos. Below, always hailed by the address of others and the world, it finds reading and words at the heart of the human condition. This always already of being addressed demands of us our most accomplished interpretive work. Above he finds the imagination the education of which allows one to read beyond mere facts. Here one can play with the world's possibilities that ought to be, which, however, have not yet been actualized. Education, needless to say, can play a significant role in looking in both directions.

The professor of a hermeneutics of dwelling may not encourage the same type of free-association of the psychoanalyst but indeed she tries to keep open a well-tended space where students and she together feel free to associate, to allow themselves to be led by the reading and to take it places on what might seem at first nothing more than a whim. A little faith is needed. Philosophical conversations often lead us best when we risk an interpretation, when what comes to us from listening to words is shared and contributed to the goings on of each attempt at education. In the face of the newest plans for cost effective and efficient teaching, to stand our ground with respect to the hermeneutic education of dwelling it will take courage to avoid becoming what in *Walden* is called: "improved means to unimproved ends."[40]

V. Coming to a Sense of Reading

> Poetic thinking commemorates rather than represents; it proceeds by way of showing rather than referring, it is a setting-forth instead of an explaining, and it is evocative rather than demonstrative.
>
> –Calvin Schrag, *God as Otherwise than Being*

Thoreau suggests a dawning should lead the senses; it asks the seer to look from the surface of the pond to its bottom and read meaning at every level, at every depth. To hear the sounds that swirl all around is more than just being able to identify their source–it also includes a recording of their meaning such that one hears the owl only when one risks an interpretation of what his hooting might say about dwelling. And so on to each of the rest. The contact with all that touches us the wind on our face, the wood in our hands, the earth beneath our soles is also what we shall understand somehow. There is a hint of utopia in every sweet scent and lessons not to be ignored in pungent ones. As well with taste; the sour woodchuck has its say as well as the cool

[40] Thoreau, 49.

morning drink at the pond's edge or even a fresh-baked pie at Emerson's house (where, by the way, Thoreau arrived not as hypocrite but as a friend; he came "for friendship" and not the food Emerson's son tells us).

Thoreau means to awaken readers to reading in its broadest sense; such an awakening will restore us to our senses. Ethics, for Thoreau, is to awake to and stay awake within dwelling. The awakening certainly begins with a liberation of the senses achieved by reading lessons from our experiences and encounters with world and with others making all of these themes for philosophical conversation with friends. Dulled these many years, our senses are waiting, he has faith, for something to move them. To act aright we must be able to look over here and over there, to hear the saying of everything that has a say, and to touch and be touched. To achieve the best of our dwelling we must be able to take in the scents given off by this and then that, and most of all to have our taste challenged by welcoming strange sounds to our ears and putting strange things to our tongues.