# Wildness, Language, and Solitude

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I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wilderness, as contrasted with a freedom and a culture merely civil, - to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization: the minister, and the school-committee, and every one of you will take care of that.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, every one of us will take care of that. We all speak, insofar as we speak, as champions of the human, right?: people taught us to speak, and they teach us still: to speak is to speak out of a shifting human crowd into a shifting human crowd. To speak against the human, or in favor of the inhuman, to speak wildly on behalf of wildness, is already to be embroiled in hypocrisy. To speak is to be engulfed in the human, swept away into the chattering of millions for millennia. Even our silences and solitudes are humanized; even our inmost recesses have been reached by the chatter: we learned by logging and paving the world to log and pave ourselves, until we seem to be perfectly processed, until even our killings are human.

I doubt that Thoreau could have imagined our saturation by the human: I doubt that he could have tolerated our soddenness. There are whole philosophical edifices today in which there is no mention at all of anything that is not a human being or an object made by a human being: Wittgenstein's, Foucault's. There are environments so humanized that it is a pain and an entrapment to be a human being in them; in the concrete and broken glass and broken persons we are so human that we are dying; we have already killed everything else. There are human environments engineered at such a scale that they dwarf the human body, reduce the human to a pure and puny humanity. There are environments to perfectly processed that animal bodies like ours seem disconcerting and unclean in them: gleaming corporate interiors where it is impertinent to be a mammal. There are environments where there are no trees, and environments where the trees are tended as decorations, as ornaments or badges of status. There are environments in which trees must be caged for their own survival, wherein people must be constrained from tearing them out by the roots. There are environments where form follows function so closely that. God help us, there is nothing that is not comprehensible or that stands in excess of the human. There are environments so perfectly and so frozenly humanized that it is impossible to be human in them.

I'd like to say a few words about getting less human, a few words that are self-immolating, words that attack themselves for being words, that attack me for uttering them, attack you for reading them. I'd like to explore whether it is possible to stop being artifacts, or to realize the ways in which we still exceed artifactuality; whether there is a power in us that is not given to us or taken from other human beings, whether we can make ourselves wilder, destroy ourselves as we are, or love ourselves as we are, find again a context in which "the social" takes place: a world to which we are open or which opens us to it. "There is in my nature, methinks, a singular yearning toward wildness. I know of no redeeming qualities in myself but a sincere love for some things."<sup>2</sup> What becomes,

exceeds. We need what we cannot hold or encompass, what demands no recompense and is pitiless and deaf to pity; we need what collapses us into pain and ecstasy, need what we can never know. The cry of the newborn or of the dying is an inhuman cry, primal in its fury or its despair or its suffering or its perfect freedom or its perfect fatedness, an invasion of the human world by the human body. "There may be an excess of cultivation as well as of anything else, until civilization becomes pathetic. A highly cultivated man, - all whose bones can be bent! whose heaven-born virtues are but good manners!... We would not always be soothing and taming nature, breaking the horse and the ox, but sometimes ride the horse wild and chase the buffalo" (A Week, 46).

I have struggled for a long time with the following question - a question that is empty enough because it is a human question: what is the place of human beings in nature? And I have always answered in roughly the same terms: human beings are "part and parcel" of nature, are as natural as boulders. There "ought" to be no distinction between the natural and the artificial: there "ought" to be no distinction between what human beings make and what we find or what finds us. "Civilization does but dress men...Inside the civilized man stands the savage still in the place of honor" (A Week, 281). Why, then, do we (HDT and I) flee the human, hate it, fear it? Why does it arouse our loathing, our claustrophobia? What are we fleeing? Ourselves? What are we fleeing? The people we love? Whence our enclosedness and the sound of bonds rending? If you have not seen that Thoreau hates and fears the human, you need to read again; he is a solitary. "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers" (Walden, 430). Thoreau is the Garbo of the natural, a recluse, a man who criticized architecture and found the greatest sublimity where there were no people. Every walk he took was a walk away from human beings and human things. Famously: "If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again, - if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk" ("Walking," 50). It is interesting that Thoreau appears to associate all human relations with unfreedom: that he thinks to be free is to be alone.

"Nowadays almost all man's improvements, so called, as the building of houses, and the cutting down of the forest and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more and more tame and cheap" ("Walking," 53). Why is a forest beautiful and a parking lot ugly? Why does the one draw us (HDT and I) out of ourselves and into God, the other push us into ourselves and away? Not, I guess, in virtue of the fact that the forest is natural and the parking lot artificial. Not, I guess, because the parking lot is created out of destruction: all things are created out of destruction. What do we want when we want wildness, HDT and I? What would we do with it if we had it? If we had it, would we still want it? Could there be a power in wildness that is lost when wildness is tamed? What could it mean to tame wildness, in a world in which people are animals? What is happening when we break what is wild, subdue it: is it wildness breaking wildness wildly? Why does what we break in this way seem to be so flat? Why do the animals we breed seem so predictable or stupid?

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Wildness is dangerous. It threatens us with itself: to live wildly or to live in the wilderness is to live a short life and a painful life. Perhaps, then, to tame something means to make it safe, safe for us. Why then, what is wrong with safety? For God's sake it beats continual endangerment. And yet what we have made safe, humanized, first, bores us. And second, it endangers us too, for there are wild animals in it, even if none but persons: the most dangerous predator of persons. Why is it that we can always humanize trees and animals and mountains and deserts but not always people? Why do we exceed our own grasp?

And, in a situation in which human beings are natural things, what are human beings doing yearning toward nature? What would it mean to be reconciled to that of which we are all along part and parcel? In what sense have we become distanced from nature and is not the possibility of that precisely what I am denying? What do we yearn toward when we yearn toward nature? Does it make sense to yearn toward what is already obviously the case? How have we gotten into the bizarre position of wanting what we already have, of wanting to be what we already are? And what would it be like to come to possess what we never lost, or to become what we never ceased to be?

Alright, that's too many questions, isn't it?

## П

I've calmed a bit now. I wrote that last bit in Manhattan. I felt enclosed in the little apartment where I stayed with a friend and argued about "social constructionism." I felt almost as enclosed when I got outside and the crowds milled and the building lowered. As I say, I think Thoreau was a claustrophobe, that he kept feeling *enclosed* by people and their things, that he kept wanting out. The quotation that opens this essay expresses a disdain, found throughout Thoreau's writings, for human institutions, and their "representatives," or more accurately for the way people get reduced or enclosed into representations by and in institutions, by and in themselves. (That particular claustrophobia connects Thoreau and Foucault, by the way). To tame something is to reduce it to a function, to simplify it toward usefulness, to rub off the raw and inconvenient and living edges. "I love man-kind, but I hate the institutions of dead un-kind" (A Week, 106). "Wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions" (Walden, 459). "In short, as a snow-drift is formed where there is a lull in the wind, so, one would say, where there is a lull in the truth, an institution springs up. But the truth blows right over it, nonetheless, and at length blows it down." Maybe that's why what is tamed is dull in our eyes: it surprises us less because it does what we want. We want what doesn't do what we want. The minister and school committee are tame in this sense like hens: the perfect school committee would not consist of organisms at all but of sheer functions.

So anyway, I took a walk out of the Village looking for an open space where I could breathe. I finally dodged through the traffic on the West Side Highway and walked out onto a pier on the Hudson. There were a lot of people on it. It was made of concrete. And there were chain-link and barbed-wire fences and highway-type barricades. But people had cut up the fences so that they could get out near the water. There seemed to be a gay

side and a straight side; both sides were drinking and drugging sides, and brown bags were making the rounds. The people lying out on the gay side were sunbathing; anyone lying out on the straight side had passed out. I gingerly picked my way through the bodies, hoping to avoid, for a few moments, anyway, solicitations of money or sex. And I looked at the river: there was nothing to occlude my sight until my eye met the Jersey shore. I breathed more fully than I had in a couple of days, all the while keeping one eye cocked for who was approaching. I started wondering if that water down there would give me all I needed of the non-human; I was contemplating a move to New York, wondering what it would be like to live there.

A few days later I drove home on the Jersey Turnpike. I live out in Maryland, in the cornfields. The first thing I did was walk out to some woods behind my house. It was a perfectly fresh spring day (May 14, to be precise), full of the scent and physical tingle that plants emanate when they are starting to grow. I sat by a creek and prayed. I watched the water, alternating my attention between the braiding patterns and smooth pools (the texture of the flow), the minnows suspended in that medium (and themselves of the nature of water), the stones and mud in the creek bed, the moving reflection of the trees. The sound of water flowing through rock was the sound of my peace ("He who bears the rippling of rivers in these degenerate days will not utterly despair" (A Week, 272)). Admittedly, that peace only lasted for a few moments. I am not good at peace.

Now it's a few days after that, and I'm lonely. My friend in New York is a voice over a wire or a text e-mailed. My kids are not around. I've got no friends around here (I'm not good at that, either). Maybe, I'm thinking, Thoreau wasn't such an isolate after all ("we cannot have too many friends" A Week, 224). So I kind of wish I was back in New York, where there's a restaurant or a bar every few yards, where everybody is so weird that no one notices that I am, too, where there's more than one person. Like Thoreau, I feel lonely and drained by people, but unlike Thoreau, I'm morbid and obsessive rather than "wholesome" when I'm alone too long. I turn on the television; the human voices comfort me. I turn on the stereo; I want to listen to something very human, like Annie Lennox or Shirley Caesar. But it doesn't work all that well, and before long I feel absolutely trapped in the confines of my own head, in the language I speak to myself. The longer I'm by myself, the worse it gets. If it wasn't for taking care of children, I'd go mad (well, I went awhile ago: I'd never come back).

You see the dilemma: can't live with 'em, and though you can shoot 'em, maybe that's not such a hot idea. Besides, there are a lot of them. (If you're wondering, I wasn't all that ecstatic in the suburbs, either). And I definitely can't live without them. I *need* people, need them bad, perhaps worst when I'm working desperately on how to get rid of them. And I love people, too. They're cuddly.

So then we run into the parallel question set of questions. We're embedded in the social. The cornfields are as human an environment as Greenwich Village. We can't escape the social: it made us, is making us, has given us to speak: for it, against it, or about something else. Perhaps, on the other hand, it is possible to speak with some wildness, if the human is not perfectly domesticated, perfectly declawed and deodorized. "In an ancient and dead language, any recognition of living nature attracts us... It is no small

recommendation when a book will stand the test of mere unobstructed sunshine and daylight" (A Week, 74). When I am alone I am still surrounded: connected by memory and projection and by an amazing elaborate web of wires with people all over. I am not alone when I am alone: I carry my parents, my dead brothers and my live one, my friend in New York, my teachers, anyone who has looked on me with love or contempt or amused or unamused indifference. I have been shaped by them, by our human rituals and practices, like a piece of jade carved and polished, as Confucius, that champion of the social, put it. So what does it mean to yearn toward people, to feel alone? In a world where there is no surcease from our permeation by the human, why is there a zone of indifference, disconnection? Why, when I am looked at by someone, can I usually tell that they do not see me? ("It is rare that one gets seriously looked at" (A Week, 52)). What would it mean to get connected to the social networks and social practices in which one is all the time embedded? How could I ever be alone? Why do I usually feel alone when aloneness is an impossible fantasy or nightmare? What would it mean to affirm that I am socially constructed when that affirmation is socially constructed, when there seems to be no "outside" from which to see the social?

### Ш

What I'd really like to do is leave all those questions sitting there as questions; there's a certain wildness to them as questions; to answer them is to tame them. But I guess I'm not able, finally, to do that. I'm a philosophy professor after all, pathetic as that is. So here's my personal dilemma. I hold that man is as natural as a wolf or a buffalo. I can deploy no distinction between the natural and the artificial. But in fact I use that distinction all the time. I think of the traces of the human in the woods as pollution. I'm more at peace in "unspoiled" nature than anywhere else, except perhaps in the bedroom of my lover (often I'm not at peace there, either). I think the distinction is incomprehensible, indefensible. But the distinction is decidedly active in my life, determinative of such decisions as where I will live and where I will travel. Obviously, my own tensions do not bear on the legitimacy of the distinction per se, but I'm not that interested, any more, in the legitimacy of distinctions per se; I'm trying to figure out how the hell to live without hypocrisy. For that, I guess, it could be enough to leave the questions as questions and keep doing what I do, but maybe you're expecting a philosophy paper.

Well, then, let's try this: the natural/artificial distinction, which amounts, finally, to no less than the claim that human beings are separated by an insuperable gap from the order and disorder of nature, that is, from the world, is indeed a complete mess. It is a delusion. We are fully fused with the natural environment, are without remainder of the earth. But delusions have concrete effects; in this case, they have effects made of concrete. How we think of ourselves in relation to the earth actually effects ways of being on the earth. The Western tradition conceives of a separation, conceives of the earth as inanimate and unintelligent, and of ourselves as animate and intelligent. It conceives of the earth as means, persons as ends. It conceives of human action technologically, or according to the canons of 'practical rationality.' So we want to *liquidate* means into ends: to regard something as a mere means is to want to *annihilate* it into our end. The means are always simultaneously what enables us toward the end and what constitutes the barrier to the end: it is the recalcitrance of means, their opacity, their intrinsic character, that constitute them

as something to be overcome even as, in their character as means, they are what enables us to overcome them. Now we are in precisely that relation to the wild earth. It is what we use for our purposes, and it is what frustrates the immediate realization of our purposes. The stubborn physical thereness of the wild earth, when it is regarded as a means, is a continual barrier, whereas we experience our own purposes and our own linguistic representations as liquid and transparent: their transportation to "mental reality," the feeling we have that they are already tamed and humanized, that they are "human" purposes and representations, gives us a great feeling of comfort or of ease, even as it increases our frustration with what exceeds the human.

Again, that's a delusion; we are also recalcitrant to the operations of our own will. And our representative and linguistic capacities are received from the earth: are not, finally, human. But this structure of being, this way of life, sets the human against what is wild. First, it seeks to tame or humanize the self, to reduce it to purposiveness. Second. it seeks to humanize other human beings, to make them useful, to reduce them to functions and institutions. Third, it seeks to humanize nature, to break its wildness toward comprehensibility, to make it functional. "Practical rationality" is about one thing: domination. It plays for domination in every possible arena: in the self, in the social, in the more-thansocial. And it plays domination through the structures of consciousness: through the formulation of ends and the administration in imagination of means: it requires language and reduces consciousness to language. Hence "detachment": the structure of representation in the West is a structure of detachment. And hence, out of delusion, annihilation: we seek to flatten, destroy, process toward perfect utility. So we begin to experience ourselves as things that dominate and destroy the earth, begin to experience ourselves as distanced, dominating, and, finally, as destructive. What we think of as our destruction is perfectly real; we pave over, we spew toxins, we replace what's there with what we put there. But it cannot, finally, be a matter of the supernatural destroying the natural, of consciousness destroying the inanimate, because consciousness is an animal function and the earth is animate. If there is a "solution" it is not in establishing a connection of the human and the natural; that was never broken. It is not in preserving resources; that's just a more circumspect version of the same old shit. The solution is ripping apart practical rationality, showing it to be delusory, finding a new way to be.

Now that, I propose, is something that wilderness can teach us. To walk into a serious wilderness (which is admittedly a whole lot more difficult than it was in 1850) is to be overwhelmed by what stands in excess to our purposes; it is to enter a place where human purpose is puny. In the wilderness we experience the powerlessness not only of ourselves (an experience which can be had all day every day anywhere: try dealing with the IRS or the Transit Authority; try dealing with your own desires), but the powerlessness of the human quite in general. Wilderness stands so obviously in excess to human purpose, is so obviously indifferent to human purposes, that perhaps we can get a little more indifferent to our own purposes there, stop struggling to reduce everything to a means which we can annihilate into ends.

It is difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man. We habitually presume his presence and influence everywhere. And yet we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast and drear and inhuman, though in the midst of cities. Nature was here [in the forests of Maine] something savage and awful, though

beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden, but the unhandselled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor waste-land. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made for ever and ever, - to be the dwelling of man, we say, - so Nature made it, and man may use it if he can. Man was not to be associated with it. It was matter, vast, terrific, - not his Mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on or be buried in. - no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there. - the home, this, of Necessity and fate. There was there felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. It was a place of heathenism and superstitious rites. - to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we... What is it to be admitted to a museum, to see a myriad of particular things. compared with being shown some star's surface, some hard matter in its home! I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one, - that my body might, - but I fear bodies. I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! - Think of our life in nature, - daily to be shown matter, to come into contact with it, - rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Who are we? where are we? (The Maine Woods, 645-46).

That is an amazing passage. It says, first, that to experience wilderness is to experience the world as indifferent to our ends, as not made for our sakes and not transformable by will, or rather, only transformable by an incredibly long, elaborate process. We may use it if we can, but it was not made for us. To experience wilderness is to be dwarfed and it is to be dwarfed in a particular way: by fate. For if there is one thing that we could pit against practical rationality, it is fate, and traditions that emphasize fatality are always opposed to the annihilation of the world into means, always hold that to be an illusion. To experience fatality is to experience the dissolution of the delusion of agency, hence of the delusion of human detachment from nature. You can reconcile yourself to fate, or to what is fated, or what comes to you as a fate, but you cannot use it. That makes you wild, kin to rocks, because to be tame is precisely to enter into the "freedom" of agency and the reduction toward use. (It is this "freedom of the will" that separates us inexorably from nature, right?)

The perfect contrast here would be of the natural history museum to the Maine woods, the structure of taxonomic representation and purification and humanization to the bewildering or overwhelming surface of a star. The former displays the organization of things simultaneously for appreciation and for possible use, assures us of our power and of the victory of the human. It demystifies, educates. The latter overwhelms our categories and resists our uses, bewilders us into a realization of our vast and beautiful ignorance, assures us that somewhere there is a surcease from our own power, an effortless resistance to our wills, shows us our own wildness. And hence it brings us face to face with our own complete actuality and physicality, lets us experience ourselves again as bodies. That means that it brings us into identity with it, lacerates the delusion of distance imposed by the structure of language and representation as it breaks our wills, teaches us the mysteries of our bodies, teaches us our unfreedom, reconciles us with the world. *That* is why we need wilderness: not because it is more nature than Manhattan, but because it teaches us

animality and fatality, let us experience Manhattan too as wild. "I have been into the lumber-yard, and the carpenter's shop, and the tannery, and the lampblack-factory, and the turpentine clearing; but when at length I saw the tops of the pines waving and reflecting the light at a distance high over all the rest of the forest, I realized that the former were not the highest use of the pine. It is not their bones or hide or tallow that I love most. It is the living spirit of the tree, not its spirit of turpentine, with which I sympathize, and which heals my cuts." (*The Maine Woods*, 685).

Wildness is, thus, associated by Thoreau with *life*; that's why it's a perfect pole to institution. Our power is a killing. Our separation from the disorder of nature in imagination is an imagination of death, because we have our life in our bodies and because we are bodies on the living earth. When we "control" something, that usually means, in practical terms, that we reduce the life within it, or appropriate its life to ourselves. "Whatever part the whip has touched is thenceforth palsied" ("Walking," 67). When we "control" ourselves we distance ourselves from ourselves, purport to become wills instead of bodies, reduce the life within us. "Life consists of wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him. One who pressed forward incessantly and never rested from his labors, who grew fast and made infinite demands on life, would always find himself in a new country or wilderness, and surrounded by the raw material of life. He would be climbing over the prostrate stems of forest-trees" ("Walking," 62).

### IV

What's hopeful about our entrapment in the human conceived as being a matter of linguistic representation and of practical rationality is precisely that it is a delusion. We are wilder than we think we are: even the natural history museum and the parking lot and the accountant are wild. That is easy to see when you note the physical recalcitrances of the museum or the parking lot, the opacity of the matter that make them, the fact that we've worked with rather than directly against that matter if we've been able to make anything at all. Think of every aspect of the accountant that is not pure accounting: his organs, his hair, his vices, his stupidities, his loves. Perhaps we can recover a sense of what, in language, evades or compromises the social, or recapture a sense of the wildness of language, the ways it already exceeds the human and makes use of the non-human, is bequeathed fatality by the non-human. After all, language is itself a recalcitrant medium. Maybe we are suspended in it like fish in water, but sometimes the water is muddy, sometimes the fish is swept away or dashed to bits or beached or all three in the flood. Even if language is human, it has all the beautiful stupidity and resistance to will that is found in the human, that is found everywhere in nature.

Many times in his writings, Thoreau compares writing to farming:

You shall see rude and sturdy, experienced and wise men, keeping their castles, or teaming up their summer's wood, or chopping alone in the woods, men fuller of talk and rare adventure in the sun and wind and rain, than a chestnut is of meat; who were out not only in '75 and 1812, but have been out every day of their lives; greater men than Homer, or Chaucer, or Shakespeare, only they never got time to say so; they never took to the way or writing. Look at their fields, and imagine what they might write, if ever they should put pen to paper. Or what have they not written on

the face of the earth already, clearing, and burning, and scratching, and harrowing, and subsoiling, in and in, and out and out, and over and over, again and again, erasing what they had already written for want of parchment. (A Week, 9).

Even writing, after all, makes use of the physical: is the physical act of a physical body using physical bodies (yes, even at the computer). Farming changes the landscape, "humanizes" it, but farming is a continual mutual physical adjustment of land and man: farming is, or may be, a *devotion* to land. It brings forth things for us out of the land, and transforms the land into something that brings forth things for us. But it works in and with fatality: farming that does not acknowledge the seasons, the drought, the deluge, the character of the soil, is hopeless. What compromises practical rationality is not a letting-go of ends, but a devotion to means, a love of the land and of the process of altering it and being weathered in one's alteration of it. But then if we thought of farming as a kind of writing, or writing as a kind of farming, what would we be thinking?

The weapons with which we have gained our most important victories, which should be handed down as heirlooms from father to son, are not the sword and the lance, but the bush-whack, the turf-cutter, the spade, and the bog-hoe, rusted with the blood of many a meadow, and begrimed with the dust of many a hard-fought field... In Literature it is only the wild that attracts us. Dullness is but another name for tameness. It is the uncivilized free and wild thinking in "Hamlet" and the "Iliad," in all the Scriptures and Mythologies, not learned in the schools, that delights us. As the wild duck is more swift and beautiful than the tame, so is the wild - the mallard - thought... A truly good book is something as natural, and as unexpectedly and unaccountably fair and perfect, as a wildflower discovered on the prairies of the West or in the jungles of the East. ("Walking," 64)

If we could stop thinking of language as something that distinguishes us from or in the order of nature, and start thinking of it as a craft by which we sense our connection to the earth, we could write wildly on behalf of wildness, and do it without hypocrisy. If we could learn to take comfort in the human not for its dominance or its "humanity," but for the more-than-human fate and the webt of connectedness that makes us what we are, gives us to speak, and pulls us toward one another and toward death, we could learn to let the world be. That would be a lesson of love.

### Endnotes

- 1. Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," reprinted in *Civil Disobedience and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1993), p.49.
- 2. A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, reprinted in Henry David Thoreau (Library of America, 1985), p.45. Further page references are to this volume unless otherwise noted.
- 3. "Life Without Principle," reprinted in Civil Disobedience and Other Essays, p.89.