

Reason Papers

A Journal of Interdisciplinary Normative Studies

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Articles

Preface

Thoreau as philosopher: Why does this theme still seem a bit strange, a bit forced - like an attempt to fob something ungentle off on us? Well, one problem is that most of us met Thoreau too early. We met him in adolescence, and we thought of him then as a quirky nature prose-poet; or, as a rustic rebel whose name connected up vaguely with peaceful political protest. Did we think of Thoreau as a philosopher? - No; we poeticized him; we rusticated him. How, then to reclaim him?

At a time when philosophy is increasingly professionalized, Thoreau is worth reading because he reminds us of the distinction - and of the relationship - between philosophy professed and philosophy lived. Like the Greeks, Thoreau heard philosophy's call, heard philosophy call for a life, heard philosophy call for professing - in Thoreau's case, for writing. What Thoreau understood was that the authority of philosophical writing must always be won anew, word by word, inkling by inkling. The authority of philosophical writing is won anew not by displays of virtuosity, whether literary or argumentative, but by displays of vitality, by finding words that incorporate, and are incorporated by, a well-lived life. Philosophically authoritative words are words that stand face-to-face with a well-lived life; such words and such a life reciprocally implicate one another. Thoreau demonstrates his understanding of this by writing in the first-person and by providing what he demands from others - "a simple and sincere account of his own life." Clearly, this understanding of philosophical authority is dangerous - by that I mean, has its dangers: empty self-obsession, stultifying idiosyncrasy, blank unintelligibility. But perhaps worse than these dangers is the danger that such an understanding of philosophical writing renders philosophy written in its service unavailable to contemporary professional philosophy. Put crudely, the danger is that philosophy written in the service of such an understanding and contemporary professional philosophy will end up out of even spitting distance of one another. To contemporary professional philosophy, Thoreau's writing is writing *ad hominem*, or worse, writing *ad personam*: philosophical writing conceived in a matrix of fallacies, not to be borne. If philosophy as Thoreau writes it and contemporary professional philosophy continue to recoil from each other, philosophy will lose much of what has made it admirable - its stubborn attempts to make ends meet, to keep body and soul together. Philosophy will then exist only as a zombie, or as a ghost, of its former self, demanding either voodoo or exorcism.

Thoreau's philosophical writing alternately provokes and pacifies. It knots together paradox and platitude. Thoreau does not write books to be held at arm's length; he writes books to be either pitched angrily or clutched greedily; or, maybe, both. Thoreau gives and requires a live response, the response of a life. Call this Thoreau's Concordian Revolution: Copernicus taught us that our sun with all its furies is at the center of the galaxy; Kant taught us that our mind with all its categories is at the center of space and time; Thoreau teaches us that our life with all its forms is at the center of things. Kant set reason after reason, because reason is fated to ask itself questions that it cannot answer. Thoreau set life after life, because life is fated to ask itself questions it cannot answer.

Wildness, Language, and Solitude

Crispin Sartwell, University of Alabama

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.¹

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."² What becomes,

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?

II

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."³ 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

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?

III

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

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 unhand-selled 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! 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

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 web 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.

Is forgiveness possible?: The concrete cases of Thoreau and Rushdie (on) (writing) the unforgivable¹

Rupert Read, Manchester Metropolitan University

What can this title mean? It might seem, at first thought, that little could be farther from *Henry Thoreau's* work, at least, from his interests and from the content of what he wrote about, than the concept of forgiveness. Aloneness, ecology, animal nature, political resistance, metaphor, peacefulness and mindfulness, even philosophy, yes; but *forgiveness*? What could have been further from his mind?

Well, but, our modern critical training is such that we can instantly recognize here a double opportunity; firstly, one can claim that the very absence of 'forgiveness' from Thoreau's work, from his writing, is a presence, that there is a pregnant silence here. Secondly, and more specifically (and thus much more plausibly and interestingly *qua interpretational strategy*), one can point out the respects in which Thoreau's work is arguably directed against the very ethico-religious perspectives which would have forgiveness to be a central topic or focus of one's principles (and something which we all ought (to strive to grant and) deeply to desire to receive). For example, one might delineate the elements of Thoreau's thought which work against Christian (and, more broadly, monotheistic priestly) modes of emphasis on being granted (and granting) forgiveness; on charity; on pity; and so forth.

That is; in good company with Emerson and Nietzsche, Thoreau can quite easily be read as casting doubt on the salience and centrality and healthiness of certain character-traits that are reckoned to be signs of virtue and piety. Thoreau's critiques of philanthropy and of conventional understandings of 'neighbourliness', for instance, are well-known.

But still, does Thoreau really take this so far as to put into doubt the desirability of forgiving others their sins; can he completely revalue not only (say) philanthropy and pity but even forgiveness (and mercy)? Surely not; surely, the many things for which or for the lack of which he castigates his fellow men, 'even while' holding himself pretty rigorously apart from them, are things he would at least aspire to.

Maybe. But that last sentence hardly rings very definitively true. To get much further, we are going to have to look properly at Thoreau's text(s).

Though that could be difficult or profitless, if his discussions of these matters are entirely indirect at best, insofar as they exist at all.

But we may be in luck. We may not have to wade all through Thoreau's unique treatment of *resentment* etc. to come across what we are in search of, still less its poignant absence. For, and this might surprise even some devotees of the text, there in fact exists one beautiful and concise present-to-hand example in which there is a 'direct' and explicit treatment of the topic of...forgiveness.

we are to speak of forgiveness, Thoreau is perhaps saying, *we might as well* speak of it as involved in the lives of those to whom it can seem desperately alien - our ready-to-hand examples of it are liable to be comparatively unsatisfying, even hypocritical. (The irony, then, is in part that it nevertheless seems clear that we are probably not describing the native Americans's world-view aright if we describe it through a generally Judeo-Christian frame). We ought to think carefully, perhaps, before we claim ever to be forgiving, or even to see forgiving. "Forgiveness", like "neighbourliness" and various other neighbouring concepts, is a word which has become dangerously de-valued. One ought to take the remarks quoted above on the Jesuits and the Indians literally - at least in the sense that their power is such that we must take them deadly *seriously*.

The question I wish to concentrate on in this paper, is not whether forgiving others is desirable. I take it that, *ceteris paribus* (though that clause is going to be of extreme import and complexity here), it *is*. At least, that it *is* for anyone for whom the issue of whether forgiveness is (in the right circumstances etc.) desirable does not generally *arise* - not, I mean, because forgiveness is desperately alien to that person/to their culture (in which case forgiveness would not be desirable (or undesirable), because it would not be relevant), but rather because it is part of a *presumed* background, part of the stream of their life.

No, my question is the connected but also importantly distinct and prior question of whether forgiveness is possible, and, if so, of what it (forgiveness) *is*; what is its nature, in what does it consist? Do we know what we are doing with this concept; do we have a *right* to presume it?

And the route I will take toward answering this perhaps surprising question, the seemingly-bizarre question of whether forgiveness is possible at all, is to look closely at the concept of unforgiveness, of unforgivability. It might reasonably be thought prior to reflection that nothing can be truly eternally, unalterably, unforgivable; in which case very obviously forgiveness will very probably take place pretty frequently. But if it is to be argued that there *is no such thing* in the world as true forgiveness, it must follow trivially that nothing is forgivable. Such that it is natural to consider the category of the unforgivable, and to determine its breadth of application. Let us start with some perhaps unusually clear examples of unforgivability, then, and proceed from there.

What is unforgivable? One example may be Thoreau's; how could one possibly forgive one's own torturers? We don't actually believe that the Indians forgave the Jesuits, except possibly after a *very* new fashion. Surely, the *most* anyone could imagine, let alone expect, would be for forgiveness not to be an *issue* here, as it probably is best said not to be for those who, again like Thoreau's Indians, seem able not to feel bitterness to the point even of treating their torture or execution as some kind of interesting practical exercise.³

What else is unforgivable? Well, what could be less forgivable than betrayal and mentally-torturing maliciousness? Here, then, is another possible (fictional - but how true to life!?! How many of us have not at some point felt betrayed in our love by a friend, or by someone, at least?) example of unforgivability, to enrich our diet. It is I think richly-

*I like butter, I like toast,
You're the one I love the most.*

Give her that message too; if you'd be so kind. There was something demonic, Gibreel decided, something profoundly immoral about cloaking corruption in this greetings-card tum-ti-tum.

*Rosy apple, lemon tart,
Here's the name of my sweetheart.*

A...l...l... Gibreel, in disgust and fear, banged down the receiver, and trembled...

...One by one, [the voices] dripped into Gibreel ears, weakening his hold on the real world, drawing him back little by little in to their obscene web, so that little by little their obscene, invented women began to coat the real women like a viscous, green film, and in spite of his protestations to the contrary he started slipping away from her; and then it was time for the return of the little, satanic verses that made him mad.

*Roses are red, violets are blue,
Sugar never tasted as sweet as you.*

And lastly, when...Allie was absent at the ceremonial opening of a freezer food mart in Hounslow, the last rhyme

*Violets are blue, roses are red,
I've got her right here in my bed.*

Goodbye sucker.

Dialling tone.

Alleluia Cone returned to find Gibreel gone, and in the vandalized silence of her apartment she determined that this time she would not have him back, no matter what the sorry condition or how wheedlingly he came crawling to her, pleading for forgiveness and for love; because before he left he had wrought a terrible vengeance upon her, destroying every one of the surrogate Himalayas she had collected over the years...

[W]eeping, she rang [her friend and Gibreel's,] Saladin Chamcha, to tell him the bad news..."⁵

Now, I might be inclined to ask at this point, to strengthen my case: It might be debatable whether Gibreel's actions were really unforgivable; but how could what Chamcha did even be *imagined* to be forgiven? How could one ever forgive a demonic set of actions like that, like the story detailed above? But such questions may even yet in a certain sense be premature; it may be clearer to us that something like the example just given involves unforgivability than it could be clear to us *how* it could imaginably be adjusted so as to encompass the possibility of forgiveness. For again, we do not yet have,

felicitous, can never be enough. *One can always turn out to have been mistaken* in saying, "I forgive you" even sincerely, in appropriate circumstances, *etc.*; while one cannot have been *mistaken* in having said "I promise you".

What is the additional factor? What guarantees an instance of forgiving, makes it authentic? It can seem to be something metaphysical. Recall the sense in which for Hegel, as for many less important and less abstruse theologians and moralists, the right punishment literally cancels out a crime, theoretically literally redresses it, wipes it away. Can we effect a tight comparison between such a view of punishment and a like take on forgiveness?

"But surely we needn't resort to such desperate measures, we need not cite or posit a hopeless metaphysic: the 'additional factor' is the will of the person in a position to forgive; their will must be a good will, and they must be ready not to think ill any more of the offender they are forgiving. That is the 'authenticity' required to validate forgiveness."⁹ Well, indeed, quite probably so; but does this enable us to understand how a particular act that was wrong and has been conceded to be wrong can be removed of its 'sting', of its harmful attachment to the committer of the act? That is to say: having a good and no-longer-angry will seems to be reasonably called a precondition for forgiveness, but does its mention manage to *explicate* or paraphrase or yield comprehension of it even in the fashion which the 'Hegelian' proposal above at least *pretends* to? (Metaphysics is an appealing substitute for a sound and full conceptual/grammatical understanding of a term's use (that is, for instance, one rooted-in-our-lives). It is among other things the latter that we need here).

Even something that looks like a correct 'analysis' of forgiveness does not *satisfy* us. It does not enable us to understand it; any more perhaps than a knowledge of the English language enables someone truly to understand the sentence "Love your enemy."

"But look, you must at least concede that in the case of relatively trivial harms, forgiveness is frequent, straightforward, comprehensible."

But here's the rub: don't we tend to say in such cases, "Forget it/Don't worry about it; *there's nothing to forgive*"? Who is to say that such a locution ought not itself to be taken straightforwardly, literally?¹⁰ The problem that is emerging into focus is this; that one can only forgive when one acknowledges that there is something to forgive. But then how can even a humble and genuine admission of wrong-doing, together perhaps with acts of contrition; how can these lead right into forgiveness, *even of small/middling offences*? For, just insofar as there remains something to forgive, just insofar as the wrong act has not been literally wiped away¹¹ or utterly redressed, it seems that forgiveness has not really taken place; but once there is nothing left to forgive, then there is no forgiveness either.

Taking stock, we should recall that an understanding of partial forgiveness cannot, for the sake of understanding the grammar/nature of 'forgiveness', be satisfactory; but our efforts to comprehend and effectually define forgiveness ('complete/full' forgiveness, if you prefer) seem to have reached something of an *impasse*. We have made some negative progress (we now know a little about what forgiveness is not), and a tiny bit of positive

But it also seems as though forgiving is an important human behaviour and attitude, and that it is quite absurd to deny its occurrence. A veritable paradox.¹³

How might this paradox be eliminated? Perhaps the most obvious and best possibility, already hinted at, is a construal of forgiveness as (a) process. Forgiveness is less a thing than a process that must normally be temporally extended, and thus resists analysis, at least along anything remotely resembling traditional philosophical lines.

Well, sure, maybe this is all we can say; but do we now really understand forgiveness any better? Do we understand the *transitions* in this process? I do not think we do. The move toward a processive 'account' of forgiveness is fine, perhaps; but it is essentially a major move away from any substantive account of forgiveness. It is essentially to admit one of my main claims; that, insofar as forgiveness as we imagine it actually occurs, it is incomprehensible, a mystery.

The only other obvious strategy which might avoid this admission is to distinguish rigorously between act and actor ("love the sinner, hate the sin"). Perhaps we might dissolve the paradox by having it be only *acts* whose forgiveness we cannot clearly envision. But it is not clear that this proposal makes sense. As R.G. Collingwood once put it, "[We cannot] escape by an abstraction distinguishing the sinner from the sin. We punish not the sin, but the sinner for his sin; and we forgive not the sinner distinguished from his sin but identified with it and manifested in it. If we punish the sin, we must forgive the sin too..."¹⁴

So far, then, we are no nearer to understanding how the paradox of forgiveness can be dealt with. We are forced back toward a more 'indirect' route. Let us return to examples which *might* enable us to reach a resolution if there is one available, if only we can understand them aright.

Stanley Cavell's strong misreading of 'Walden' as being *about* writing (and about writing (as living) as (a) moral/perfectionistic endeavour) suggests the following: that we might, with profit, consider whether the writing of 'Walden' was a 'speech act' - a linguistic act of a fairly distinctive illocutionary character - that anyone of his time (or, indeed, of other times) who was in any strong sense a subject of Thoreau's powerful 'critique' could really forgive. If one were the object of one of Thoreau's savage and uncompromising indictments, *could* one, in actual fact, forgive the indicter his savagery?¹⁵

Think again of Thoreau's Indians. As hinted above, it seems reasonable to suggest that Thoreau is identifying himself much more closely with them than with their persecutors, who purportedly come with the intent of doing good, of being philanthropic. He does not want to play the language-game of philanthropy, of Christianity - and so he mocks it by having the Indians turn out to be more forgiving and Christian than the Jesuits. What the worldly Jesuit torturers are doing is hypocritical, probably unforgivable. But now, how will a Christian be able to take Thoreau's savage wordly mockery here? Can Thoreau possibly be forgiven for writing as he does? He says that there is no odor so bad as that emerging from the 'consoling' voices and the 'persuasive' fires of Christian missionaries. He says that philanthropy, that Christian good works, ought to be run away from with the

Mahagonny, Babylon, Alphaville. But Gibreel has already named it, I mustn't interfere: Proper London...

Who am I?

What else is there?

...Gibreelsaladin Farishtachamcha, condemned to this endless but also ending angelicdevilish fall, did not become aware of the moment at which the processes of their transmutation began.

Mutation?

Yessir, but not random...changes took place that would have gladdened the heart of old Mr Lamarck: under extreme environmental pressure, characteristics were acquired.

What characteristics which? Slow down; you think Creation happens in a rush? So then, neither does revelation...take a look at the pair of them. Notice anything unusual? Just two brown men falling hard, nothing so new about that, you may think; climbed too high, got above themselves, flew too close to the sun, is that it?

That's not it. Listen:"¹⁸

[We then have an account, the *logos* of Rushdie, of how Chamcha and Farishta mysteriously survive the fall from their wrecked jumbo jet, which ends thus:]

"God we were lucky", [Chamcha] said, "How lucky can you get?"

I know the truth, obviously, I watched the whole thing. As to omnipresence and - potence, I'm making no claims at present, but I can manage this much, I hope. Chamcha willed it and Farishta did what was willed.

Which was the miracle worker?

Of what type - angelic, satanic - was Farishta's song?

Who am I?"¹⁹

[And here is 'the authorial voice' again, in the allegory of the birth of Islam (in God (or is it God? how could one tell? - the central theological question in 'The Satanic Verses') talking through Gabriel/Gibreel) given us under the heading, 'Mahound' (cf. 'Mohammed'):]

"Question: What is the opposite of faith?

Not disbelief. Too final, certain, closed. Itself a kind of belief.

Doubt.

The human condition, but what of the angelic? Halfway between Allahgod and homosap, did they ever doubt? They did: challenging God's will one day they hid muttering beneath the Throne, daring to ask forbidden things, antiquations. Is it right that. Could it be argued that...// [But] Angels are easily pacified; turn them into instruments and they'll play your harpy tune. Human beings are tougher nuts, can doubt anything, even the evidence of their own eyes. Of behind-their-own-eyes. Of what, as they sink heavy-lidded, transpires behind closed peepers...angels, they don't have much in the way of a will. To will is to disagree; not to submit; to dissent.

I know: devil talk. Shaitan interrupting Gibreel.

Me?"²⁰

[Above, Rushdie toys explicitly with the satanic voice being his. As again, perhaps, here]:

invasion of the private by the public in a modern world whose intellectual elites *at least* ought to know better.²³)

Again, then: Should we not try to read Rushdie's works as though the (possible) death of their author has no relevance to them? And this is certainly what Rushdie himself has asked us to do.²⁴

And indeed, I think we should - try. It is, of course, difficult - try reading "Pale Fire" without thinking of Zembla. 'The Satanic Verses' is unavailable - irrecoverable - in its pre-(anti)-religious-propaganda state; but that by no means implies that we have to treat it as that *and nothing else*, that we have to regard it as a focus for historical study as the centre-piece of a famous dispute, and (e.g.) mine it reductively for salacious evidence for Rushdie's guilt! For it is: a great *novel*, a uniquely-valuable *dramatic* meditation on the concepts of revelation, of forgiveness, of personal change; and it is often very funny, or quirky, or beautiful, besides.

So, we certainly ought to (try to) read 'The Satanic Verses' as much more than the premonition of a death sentence.

But we can hardly help it if we read it as that too.²⁵

And, while we surely ought most vociferously to defend Rushdie's right to publish, and even more so given that what he has written here is arguably not bad art, but great art (for bad art shades into not being art at all, and thus not being so worthy of defence; the greater the art, the more vigorously the rights of all of access to it must be supported and preserved), and while we ought therefore I think to speak out against those (such as John Le Carré) who serves as apologists for the *fatwa-istas*, and engage, if necessary, in Thoreauvian risks to preserve the possibility of loudly saying the unpalatable, of pursuing one's vision (e.g.) of free art and of a free, just, secular society; *nevertheless*, one ought perhaps simultaneously to maintain that Rushdie must in some sense - perhaps in a sense familiar to readers of Cavell - take *responsibility* for his words. What does this amount to? It amounts, among other things, to recognising plainly that the *genre* of the novel does not provide *carte blanche*, that Kundera's (and Rushdie's) dream of art as non-truth without consequences is an unrealizable ideal (at least, that its realisation would have many costs - e.g. the elimination of the category of the novel rightly legible as having a moral point (compare for example Rorty on Nabokov and Orwell; and note, as I have already implied, that Rushdie and Kundera do not 'escape' being morality-minded, and, PLAINLY, dramatise *ideas*, including political and religious ideas, in their texts)); above all, that Rushdie's act of writing must have *been predictably unforgivable* (as far as many, from particular communities, are concerned). Yes, in regretful sum: Rushdie's act of writing 'The Satanic Verses' was, for many adherents of one of the world's leading religions - and must have been known ahead of time, to a considerable extent, to have been - unforgivable, heretical, satan-esque.

The pessimistic conclusion that I draw from my general arguments, and from the specific case both of the drama enacted in the pages of 'The Satanic Verses', and from the very fact of the book's composition (of the self-conscious composition of a book like that), and from the lovely irony in and of the example from Thoreau with which I began,

