The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night
And his affections dark as Erebus:
Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music.

(Shakespeare, Merchant of Venice, V.1.)

Concord of Sweet Sounds
On Thoreau's Walden

Paul H-P
Contents

Preface ......................................................... 1
Introduction ............................................... 7
1. *Walden’s* Promise .................................. 10
2. Reading Rebirth in *Being and Time* .......... 17
3. Revision ............................................... 34
4. *Walden’s* Neighborhood ......................... 50
5. The Concord of Friendship ....................... 66
Notes ......................................................... 77
Bibliography ............................................... 78
Children love to stare at strangers. No two people are wholly alike, and there is a promise of new possibility written on every unfamiliar face. Staring is a first impulse to keep that promise present, and keep open a space for wonder and credulous delight. It is the promise of as yet unimagined ways of life, of the surprise that engenders growth, and so of renewal. The guarantee of that promise is friendship and love. To love another is to never tire of staring—not to learn his or her every quirk and tick, but to always remain strangers. It teaches us ever to be open to surprise, and never to forsake our childlike wonder.

I find the tendency to stare to be common to us all, though one we soon learn to repress, and even forget. From the earliest age we are cautioned that to stare is rude, impertinent, and shameful. We grow to fear scrutiny and judgment, and learn to turn away. But despite persistent reprimand, I have harbored for just as long the secret conviction that to do so is neither shameful nor vain.

Outwardly I now obey the dictates of convention, and keep my eyes downcast in the presence of promising strangers—or else, to confess, I resort to the secret indulgence of a voyeur. Yet, inwardly, I have always maintained that shame consists only in looking away; I regret only my obedience to the norm. Now, I am called to question, have I managed to keep faith with those earliest most earnest impulses, or have I allowed my native hope in the wonderfully unfamiliar face of promise to sour and turn to cynicism and despair? That is, am I still free?

Since I was a child, I have been told that freedom means the unhindered pursuit of my desires. I was told repeatedly that I were free to choose to be whatever I wanted when I grew up. I have always known that, for many reasons, this cliché is a lie. Though imparted in good conscience, and with only the most earnest intentions, I could not help but sense that my parents and teachers were not truly
indulging an unfaltering hope in the possibility my strange new life presented them. Instead, they spoke to me out of consolation, a paltry attempt to resurrect their own fallen aspirations by imposing their dreams onto me. Though as a child I had no words for this belief nor the confidence to speak them, it was always my conviction that such assurances were empty. They did not speak to me from freedom, for they believed that they had already made their choice. For them, that door had closed, and remained open only to those in their early youth. Their hope was but dejection in Sunday dress.

I am writing this now because I still have faith that the door never closes, that no choice is final. I hold that the courage to choose one’s own path through life is born not of hopes outwardly imposed, but those inwardly inspired. I seek to abide my earliest rejection of the vacuously encouraging voices that urged me to choose what I wanted to be, and bestow my trust instead in the voice that confides in me alone. This is the voice of the *call*, from which alone arises a *calling*. This is the condition of my freedom.

It is not arrogance that underlies this conviction. Arrogance advocates only a delusion of staunch control by imposition, not the freedom afforded by promise. I do not flatter myself master of my fate; rather, I seek to accept myself as I already am, in deference only to who I would become, to the life I am called to live. But though I have not lived long enough to stray entirely from the promise of my early youth, each passing year I find myself ever more enthralled by the dictates of convention. My hope wanes; I become more and more complacent, more prone to accept the seeming fate of my forbears. It is a grave, shameful, and desperate tendency, though by no means an uncommon one.

Often, in a Winter spirit, I find myself overrun with such dejected thoughts; yet even when I am most filled with hope, I still cannot help but think that no one, not even a child, can forever trust even the most natural, spontaneous impulse (as, say, that there is no shame in staring at strangers) when *every* other voice stubbornly insists upon the contrary. That is, I hold that we *need* the confirmation of others if we are to remain steadfast by our own
bearings. Our private convictions, no matter how firm, will always dissipate with time if they are never shared. Without such confirmation, we would all eventually resign ourselves to the false security of those narrowly defined modes of life most esteemed by the transient customs of the day; we would come to think that society unanimously demands it of us.

Now just as from the most desolate throes of Winter arise the first early shoots of Spring, it is precisely when I am most confined by this faithless resignation, when I am a stranger to myself, that I am open to the clear and distant exaltation of someone who has shared my hopes and yet never forsaken them. There is nothing so liberating as finding what I thought I lost echoed back to me in another’s words. Alas, it is too rare that two minds align in this way, for even in a crowded world we seldom chance to come so near to each other, and lock eyes.

This is why I find my solace most in books, for I believe a written word can bear interminably the whole promise of a human life—that is, the promise of a whole human life. They forever retain the power to renew us, to re-intimate and reanimate our dissipating private beliefs. *Walden* speaks this soundly, and in my desperation I have overheard it as from afar, approaching:

> 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 of the face of things for us. ... The at present unutterable things we may find somewhere uttered. 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. (“Reading,” ¶12)

I have made mention of warring voices that vie for sway of my intent. One is the voice (or, I might say, the “whole cry of voices”) of custom and convention. It is the voice of my parents reprimanding me for staring shamelessly at unfamiliar faces. It is the voice advocating my assimilation of common modes of life, which dresses
a narrow range of possibility in the garb of sham prudence. It is the voice saying, ‘These are the ways one leads a life, and these are the tasks which that life demands; dabble in the luxury of listening to your heart only so long as it does not distract you from more practical considerations; dream your dreams, but do not fall prey to the illusion that you will fulfill them, for they are just dreams, and would belie your fate.’

Yet, on the other side, “I hear an irresistible voice which invites me away from all that” (“Economy,” ¶15). It is the voice which echoes in the words addressed to my condition exactly, which intimates my own most private, deep-seated convictions. It is the voice that calls me to wholeheartedly mean my promises, and never forsake them of shame. Emerson echoes,

To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,—that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost,—and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment. ... In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another. (“Self-Reliance,” ¶1)

The shame born of persistent reprimand—by which, on my allegory, we learn to keep our eyes downcast and turn away from promising strangers—the shame which affects our complacency and resignation to the “whole cry of voices,” and steers us from our own path, can only be countered by a like admonition. When I hear the voice of genius, my calling, I regret only my obedience to custom and convention. I am justly ashamed only when, in the words of Stanley Cavell, “the writer [I am reading] keeps writing things I know I ought not to have stopped trying to say for myself; and
shows me a life there is no reason I do not live” (*The Senses of Walden*, 49).

The many who assured me as a child that I were free to choose to be whatever I wanted when I grew up could not show me what freedom means, because they had not freely chosen their lives for themselves. They thought that freedom came with age and experience, something you must grow up to secure; they thought that it was a matter of control, of seizing this possible life and not that one; they thought that *who* I can be is determined by *what* I can do, that if I can do anything, I can be anyone. Alas! the child knows, that grownups are only free if they may ever “abide [their] spontaneous impression with [the] good-humored inflexibility” of a child. Let us teach instead, as Emerson does,

> Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. (“Self-Reliance,” ¶3)

> “The society of [our] contemporaries, the connection of events,”
> all those accidental circumstances which inform us to ourselves (what later I call “inheritance”) are not barriers to our freedom, but providence. We would not become free by wholly rejecting them, for then little would be left of us; nor would we do well to let them wholly govern us, for then little would be left for us to choose for ourselves. Our promise, that which exalts us to a whole and higher life, finds its fulfillment only when we sincerely yield to such accidents. This is what it means to find a calling. Our freedom is contingent upon our trust in, and deference to, the authority of the convictions which issue most spontaneously from our private hearts, and not the factitious authority of tradition, convention, and public regard.

> In due course, the resolve to abide our genius will no doubt lapse
into infirmity and mistrust. It is not enough to overcome our resignation but once or twice; ever Winter returns; waxing hope wanes again. The aim of my present project is to show that we must repeatedly renew our resolve, and that to do so we need the grace of friendship.

The true friend frees us for ourselves, admonishes us for our undue obedience to custom and convention, and echoes ever the convictions we know we ought not to have stopped trying to say for ourselves. The “good-humored inflexibility” to abide the spontaneous impulse of our genius needs the confirmation and guarantee of another congenial voice, else our private resolutions would dissipate and recede into obscurity, and the “whole cry of voices” on the other side would sway us that way at last. Congeniality—friendship in the strict sense—is a necessary condition of our freedom. For Emerson, a friend is “a sort of beautiful enemy, untamable” (“Friendship,” ¶19), a gracious stranger who shames us not for our childlike credulity and confidence, but for our childish obedience and resignation.

I hope to orient my reading of Walden by way of this spirit of gracious affinity, a fulfillment, we might say, of the biblical imperative to ‘love thy neighbor.’ The book’s promise relies upon the congeniality of its reader and writer, who are necessarily strangers in Walden’s neighborhood. If we read confidently, closely, faithfully enough, what can we hope of this stranger’s promise?
Introduction

We often mark important junctures in our lives, periods of growth and transition, by the company we keep. The same is true for books, for through written words we may find the most unexpected and congenial friendship. Since my first reading, some years ago now, *Walden* has been just such a companion to me. As I have grown, and sought to make my own path on this sojourn through life, I have returned to it again and again. When I do, I never fail to find my old friend waiting for me there, and each time he exalts me with greater wisdom and beauty and mystery than the last.

I have always been a person of wayward fancy, drawn to so broad an array of trades and practices that I long feared I would never excel at any one. Perhaps the greatest lesson *Walden* has so far taught me is to trust my disposition, and to allow myself to follow out my whims, though I seldom know their purpose or where they lead. In short, it has taught me to keep faith in my calling, no matter how far it may stray from conventional occupations and modes of life. I do not boast that I have found my way at last, for I have not. I know only that, no matter how quickly I tire of any given project, the part of me which once drew me to undertake it attends me still, and the impulse will always visit me again.

The same attraction that led me to read *Walden*, and to reread it, now leads me to share what I found there with you. I aspire to no greater achievement in my life than that I might impart to another whatever motions of spirit have at some time moved me. Fortunately, for my enterprise, I need not seek to match such a great work in elegance, completeness, or wit; I endeavor only to speak from the authority of my experience as a human creature. For where there is truth to my words, you need look no further than your own life to find its confirmation.

Though this project will take new shapes and faces in future iterations, or so I hope, its current manifestation comprises the
following parts:

I will begin by delving into the idea of a calling, or vocation: we each have our own calling; to be free, in *Walden’s* sense of freedom, we must learn to hear that call, and trust it enough to follow it out. First I will distinguish the idea of a vocation from its conventional characterization as a kind of occupation (like that of a teacher, writer, or farmer); then, to further clarify this notion, I will examine its ontological basis in what Martin Heidegger refers to, in *Being and Time*, as the “call of conscience.”

In my analysis of the structure of that call, I hope to bring to light and examine several important ideas: Our future is determined beforehand by the past; no new possibilities of existence come from nothing. Consequently, if we are to change our lives, or choose a path for ourselves which diverges from the norm, we must *modify*, or revise, the possible paths and tasks we have already been given. This kind of modification requires repetition: we must repeatedly modify the given task before us, and leave it behind in this moment, in order to take it up again in the next moment as something of our own. Only in this way may we learn the work that is meant for each of us. This process transpires in conscience, which is a kind of silent, internal dialogue.

In the third chapter, I will return to *Walden* and offer detailed analyses of several key passages, by which I hope to show how the ontological ideas pertaining to my reading of *Being and Time* can inform a more thorough understanding of some of the central ideas at work in *Walden’s* opening chapters. Specifically, I will consider the notions of inheritance, revision, repetition, and letting-alone, each of which constitutes an important piece of the event of the call, and gives rise to a calling.

In the final chapters I will explain how the call, and by extension a calling, relies upon our solitude. Solitude, like conscience, implies a division of self, or internal differentiation, which makes it possible to carry on the kind of dialogue with ourselves which the call implies. This differentiation consists of the relation between two aspects of ourselves, which Thoreau calls the indweller and the spectator. Their
relation is one of outwardness or remoteness, and it is only insofar as we may “stand as remote from [ourselves] as from another” (“Solitude,” ¶11) that we may hear, and so heed, our calling.

Finally, just as we may call upon ourselves in this way, I will consider how we may also call upon each other. There is a peculiar kind of friendship, like that which I have found in reading *Walden*, in which the relation between two people follows from this relation to ourselves. In the end, the true friend is the one who abandons us to the work which is meant for our hands alone—not to tell us what to do nor seek to do it for us, but simply to remind us that we each have our own lives to lead. In this way we may help one another to freely follow our own path.
1. *Walden’s Promise*

On the surface, *Walden* is but a simple account of Henry David Thoreau’s solitary withdrawal into the woods near Concord, Massachusetts, where he lived for two years in a house he built himself, and earned his keep by tilling a few furrows of hardy beans.

Like many such books which have found prevalence in public esteem, its mysteries and promise are often lost on those who press no further in their reading than these first ostensible facts. It can be tempting to take Thoreau’s denunciation of society and advocation of solitude to mean that he would have us each withdraw to some such spot in the woods, and wend our way through life alone. Thoreau knows too well what becomes of the person who forsakes all human company, and we would be wrong to think that this is to his purpose.

Those who tend toward these conclusions often overlook that he is, after all, writing *for us*. For a book which so seldom makes mention of friendship or family, and a writer who so apparently disdains society, it is quite easy to forget that his every word and deed is born of love for his neighbors. It is this love which underlies his epic aspirations and drives his heroic undertakings. The book itself forms the neighborhood of a new society, and it is essential that we understand ourselves as its audience. It is written for us, yet we may only understand it if we receive it in this truly gracious spirit, as a free gift.

I trust you will find all this clear and sound in due time; let me begin my reading by outlining an orientation to *Walden* that I believe will provide us a clue to its greater purpose: First, solitude is a central theme of *Walden* not because Thoreau wishes his readers to impose it upon themselves, but rather because it is already a central theme of human life—I am, in the end, on my own in the world. Solitude is a necessary condition of our freedom, though one that mostly remains concealed from us in our worldly life among others.
The project of *Walden* is not to bring its reader into the condition of solitude for the first time, but rather to make it explicit, to bring us into it anew, and in a particular way.

Second, Thoreau withdraws from society not to isolate himself from it entirely, but to maintain a certain critical distance to it, that he might remain a part of it without it wholly absorbing him, without losing himself in it. For just as solitude is a necessary condition of a whole human life, so too does that life always imply the presence of others with whom we share it. Neither you nor I could be this person without a plurality of others to whom we always stand in some definite relation or another, as neighbors, rivals, masters, children, friends or kin. We can leave outward society behind, perhaps, but nonetheless we can never altogether escape our inherent sociality, nor would it be beneficial to attempt to do so.

Third, the distance he maintains between himself and the society of his neighbors is the same distance he poses between himself and his reader. This distance leaves room for solitude; Thoreau believes, and has convinced me, that in order to come into society without thus leaving our selves behind, we must come into it through solitude. Unlike sheer isolation (which is often what a shallow reading of *Walden*’s sense of solitude amounts to), solitude implies a peculiar internal split or doubleness (to be by ourselves, “beside ourselves in a sane sense” [“Solitude,” ¶11]). This becomes the opening onto a different sense of society, which is precisely the sense indicated above as *congeniality*. We must foremost take up our solitude if we are to maintain a social existence which allows us to keep faith with our own possibilities and aspirations as unique, singular beings. Only in this way can we reconcile the two otherwise contradictory conditions of freedom, solitude and society.

In this way we may come to see Thoreau’s withdrawal to *Walden* Pond not as a rejection of society but as enacted dissent. He persistently withholds his consent to its present manifestation. By refusing to submit himself to social convention, he seeks to preserve the possibility of an unconventional society, one which is original—a society of solitary neighbors, of readers and writers. Only through
solitude may we come to know what society is meant to be: one which is germinal to the freedom of its members to each become who we are meant to be, to each find our own calling. This is Walden’s foremost aim: to convince us that there is work which is meant for our hands, to call on us to take it up now for ourselves, and at last to show us how.

Thoreau would not try to convince us if we were not in need of conviction. Walden draws its motive conflict from a common prejudice, a systematic confusion between what I call a vocation and an occupation. We commonly do not trust that there is work meant for our hands—that we have a vocation, a calling—because we misunderstand the nature of work itself.

As indicated by two of Walden’s most frequently quoted claims, this distrust in the possibility of a calling leads to needless despair: “men labor under a mistake” (“Economy,” ¶5); that is, we mistakenly presuppose that a vocation is but this or that occupation, and so “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” (“Economy,” ¶10). If we lose faith in our calling (or never have any to begin with), we lose hope; faithlessness is identical with despair.

When adults told me at a young age that I were free to choose whatever I wanted to be as a grownup, they were not telling me to pursue my vocation. What they meant was that I could choose any occupation; I could be a farmer, a teacher, a doctor, a lawyer. They wanted me to believe that I could elect my fate as one buys a house, perusing the available choices, weighing the benefits of each, and then picking the best fit from a list. But this is a patent misconception; my best fit will never appear on any list; there I will only find better or worse ones. What they never told me, what I hold to be true in my “private heart,” was that, on this analogy, the only truly befitting house is the one I build myself. “There is some of the same fitness in a man’s building his own house that there is in a bird’s building its own nest” (“Economy,” ¶67). To build one’s house is analogous to building oneself; in both instances, the work we are called to serves the same end, to live wholly—to fulfill the promise of a whole human life.
We do not choose our calling. It comes to us from outside; in Emerson’s words, it is “divine providence.” Our choice consists only in whether or not we take it up as our own. This is what freedom means in Walden. To choose to heed our calling demands deliberate work and imagination. The book’s project in “self-emancipation” begins with a revision—a turn of mind, a re-imagination—of the fundamental demands of human life: food, fuel, clothing and shelter. These are the first needs we do not choose; yet we may choose to take them up in a new way, and such is the work of becoming ourselves. The conventional modes of securing these needs are in need of revision, else we are ever hindered by them. This task of revision is the first demand of our calling, and it is a task we first learn through reading, which means learning to listen. By reading and listening we become free to hear our calling. We will delve more into the work of imaginative revision in the third chapter; let us first make clear just what needs to be revised.

We often understand ourselves in terms of what we do, not who we are, or could become. We do not believe that we each have a calling because we are never called to one occupation alone. It is at least unlikely, if not inconceivable, that any one conventional occupation would exhaust all our keenest faculties, and bring our wildest aspirations to full expression. Those who love to teach will find it hard to occupy a station to teach whatever and whomever they please; those who love to cultivate will think they must grow the crops which earn the highest price. On Walden’s reckoning, the farmer lives in servitude, in the interest of delivering his crops to market, just like the Southern slave, or the Irish rail-worker, whose industry Thoreau extols. The former is only comparatively free; he still lives within the confines of the same constricted economy as the latter, subject to its values and conventions, limited to the possibilities it comprises (Cf. “Economy,” ¶51). To take up any occupation, a common mode of employment, is but one possible line of work.

“It appears as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. Yet they honestly
think there is no choice left” (“Economy,” ¶11). The mistake under which we labor, the source of our quiet desperation, is that we fail to imagine that our lives be otherwise. It is a disease of the imagination that strikes us at the root, in the very constitution of our possibilities. It governs our possibilities according to conventional modes of life, which will always be at best an imperfect fit for our particular talents, the unique tendencies of each person's genius.

To judge ourselves by the measure of convention is to be prisoner to prejudice. On this analogy, we are our own wardens. “Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion. What a man thinks of himself, that is what determines, or rather indicates, his fate” (“Economy,” ¶9). The “whole cry of voices” vying for our obedience is far louder in our own heads than in the mouths of the people around us. It is the voice that privately governs us.

The source of our structural confusion between vocation and occupation lies in this sense of governance. Our conventional conception of a vocation is governed by our understanding of an occupation. We thereby generate a logic of opposition: 'a vocation means to be called to some occupation, and no one occupation beckons me; therefore, I have no vocation.' But to be free, the task which occupies us at any given moment must be determined by our calling, and not the other way around. Only insofar as it follows directly from our vocation may we freely choose this-or-that occupation, which will likely give way to another occupation in the next moment, and so on.

In turn, a vocation, a calling, will only make sense to us if we understand how it emerges from the event of a call. It cannot be conceived as a static property or affect, an objective fact of our being. Instead, we must always understand our vocation within the context of a particular call. Just as an occupation is to follow from a vocation, so too is that calling to follow from an ongoing, discontinuous succession of discreet calls. At any given moment, we are called to new tasks, which would unfold in new ways in new fields. The meaning of the labor we are called to here—or, here—accumulates or accrues to the meaning of the labor we are called to in the next
moment, and through each of these discontinuous events a distinct tendency will emerge. A calling, arising from the structural repetition of a call, is nothing more than the greater tendency or bent of each person's genius, which culminates in each moment of genius, in each particular call.

A vocation is but an inflection toward this task and not another. It can never be exhausted by one possible occupation. We are always called to some kind of labor. The call may reach us in every moment in turn, throughout the succession of our various moods and seasons. The possibility of a calling depends upon the fact that every moment opens onto the next, that each new task or project we are called to gives rise to another call. The question is not whether we have a calling, but whether we may hear it and believe it in this moment, and so become free now to take up the work which is meant for our hands.

As Thoreau announces in his unconventional epigraph (its lines taken from the book itself), he wishes to “brag as lustily as a chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake [his] neighbors up.” In other words, he wishes to confront us with the clarity of his own voice, from his own stance in the world, in order to awaken us to the possibility of coming into ours. Thoreau’s calling consists, in part, of showing his readers what a vocation means, by showing us what it means for him to follow out his calling, by accounting for each of the calls he heeds. In reading Walden, we can come to see how heeding the call plays out in the labor of daily life.

It is easy to make the mistake of confusing Thoreau’s work with our own, and this is the mistake which gives rise to Walden’s most common misinterpretations. He would not have us meet him there ashore Walden Pond, to literally build ourselves a house alongside his, and to think that he would have us emulate him is to entirely neglect the purpose of his experiment. Instead, we are to find the Walden of our own natures, wherever, and however, it may appear. The work that is meant for our hands is meant for each of us alone. My vocation will never be the same as yours. What is the same for us
both is the possibility of the call itself. Only insofar as the ontological structure of the call is common to us all can anything like a calling make sense as a possibility. Even more, only in this way can Thoreau coherently (and, yes, even “lustily”) brag from his roost to wake his neighbors up, and so alert us to our own most meaningful work.

While in my experience Walden is thoroughly clear about this possible confusion, I believe it may be helpful to turn, for a moment, away from Thoreau’s factual account of his undertakings toward a more ostensibly ontological examination of the phenomenon of the call itself, the condition of the possibility of a vocation, and so of freedom. The parallels between Walden and Martin Heidegger’s existential analytic Being and Time, despite their disparate cultural origins and eras, run far deeper than the phenomenon in question. My hope is that, through a brief reading of what Heidegger refers to as the call of conscience, these texts may mutually illuminate each other, to our benefit as their readers.
Everyone is the other, and no one is himself.
(Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 128)

2. Reading Rebirth in *Being and Time*
Toward an Ontology of Vocation

Anyone familiar with Martin Heidegger’s seminal *Being and Time* knows that the book is patently repetitious. Heidegger’s reasons for persistently repeating the same basic structural insights go beyond mere pedagogy; they are deeply grounded in the content of the existential analytic itself. *Being and Time* is ultimately aimed at introducing its reader to an “authentic” possibility of existence, one which is genuinely his or her own—that is, the possibility of becoming oneself. A distinct problem underlies this aim: any possibility which is properly mine cannot be given to me by anyone but myself, for it must be peculiar to the circumstances of my particular life, which differs from every other. Yet I am not free to produce any such possibility purely of my own accord; freedom, for Heidegger, consists only in choosing to take up and modify possibilities which have already come down to us from others.

The crux of *Being and Time*, for the purposes of my project, is how our possibilities arise from the repeated modification of those we initially inherit, and how this takes place through discourse. We will ultimately find that authentic possibility arises from the repetition of the call of conscience, a dialogue with oneself which is only possible as a modification of our everyday mode of discourse with others (or, more precisely, of our discursive predisposition). In other words, Heidegger can only show me how to become who I am meant to be if his words (that is, the discourse between the reader and writer of *Being and Time*) can actualize this peculiar kind of
dialogue between me and myself, which I can then resolve to repeat.

If the book is to catalyze this event, it follows that its structure must conform to the structures of possibility and of conscience themselves. Heidegger brings these structures into view through two distinct but internally related phenomenological analyses. One delves into the ontological foundation of possibility in what he calls “thrown projection,” and seeks to reach the root of the problem of selfhood that is outlined briefly above; the other approaches this problem from an “ontic,” apparent, or factual orientation, and seeks to render a transparent account of the conscientious “moment of vision” wherein one may take up the possibility of resolutely becoming one’s “authentic” self.

To further contextualize the following considerations, let us begin with the most fundamental presupposition of Heidegger’s understanding of possibility: *ex nihilo nihil fit*; nothing comes from nothing. This means that all possibilities are constituted *a priori*, “sketched-out beforehand” in our understanding of the world, others, and ourselves (146). In other words, they are largely determined by precedents and past events, by our tradition, history, inheritance, and language. Thus any new possibility—specifically, one which is to be genuinely our own, no matter how radical and unprecedented—must nonetheless arise as a modification of possibilities which have already come down to us, and which therefore maintain themselves within the range of that which is possible *a priori*.

This understanding of possibility gives way to what, in the latter pages of *Being and Time*, Heidegger comes to call our historicality: we are wholly tied to our past, by which we project ourselves upon the possibilities that shape our future. Both within the span of an individual life and the greater historical continuity of many lives, all new possibilities get taken up into the same preexistent context from which they initially emerged as modifications of it. In this way, new possibilities again become given, as part and parcel of the framework of our *a priori* understanding with which they were previously contrasted. This means they are susceptible to being modified again
in the same way, and this is the specific sense for which Heidegger coins the term repetition. “Repetition is handing-down explicitly”: only by repeatedly modifying the possibilities which have been handed down to us, by explicitly handing them down to ourselves, can we each furnish ourselves with the possibility of coming into our own (385). The concepts of repetition and modification (which I later call “revision”) will be central to my reading of Walden.

Heidegger first attempts to make these notions explicit in terms of the project before him: in order to reopen the question of the meaning of Being, he has to take up the philosophical tradition and modify it; his analysis must be at once of the tradition and against it. In the opening pages he calls this activity the “destruction” of traditional ontology, which he contrasts with the “obliteration” or elimination of a priori understanding, which would leave us with nothing at all by which to understand ourselves and to orient our inquiries (19ff). What he calls destruction we might consider more appropriately the deconstruction, articulation, or critique of traditional understanding and convention. In this sense, critique already implies the modification of the possibilities it brings explicitly into view, and through the repetition of critique possibilities are again modified.

In philosophy, for example, the possible inquiries peculiar to each new generation of thinkers arise from that generation’s given tradition. They take up that tradition for themselves, modify it, and hand it down to their progeny in writing; by altering the tradition, they become part of it and extend it, and the next generation then takes it up again in the same way, as given. Thus ideas grow and change over the course of their employment, but rarely does any notion strike us which is so unprecedented as to affect a complete revolution in human thinking. New ideas, in order to be shared and passed on, must be articulated in terms of the tradition from which they arose, else they remain the prisoner of one mind’s fancy only, and die with it.

Thus possibility is circular; our future is determined in advance by our past. This circular structure thoroughly informs Heidegger’s
methodology. The circular procedure of *Being and Time* has been ascribed the popular handle “the hermeneutical circle,” a method he contrasts with the problematic procedure of circular reasoning, instead calling it a “relatedness backward or forward” (7ff). This “back and forth” corresponds to a double-motion or circularity in the nature of our being.

These considerations, which may seem at first abstract, have their foundations in Heidegger’s most fundamental ontology. But the most fundamental facts of existence are also terminally obscure, for they comprise the enigma which lies near the heart of *Being and Time*. The terms of enigma, our two primordial existential facts, are thrownness and projection. The former signifies the fact that we are each already there, thrown into being (hence the “there” of Da-sein, lit. Being-there), and the latter that, at the same time, we are always ahead of ourselves, projecting ourselves onto possibilities. Each term needs the other, yet paradoxically they oppose.

Thrownness is a necessary condition of existence. It comprises everything which is already given, all that has been or already is. It shows itself in every moment, in the sheer constriction to definite possibilities manifest in every given mood or state-of-mind and in our unalterable past (for we always already are in some mood, some circumstance, or another [135]). Our respective traditions, histories, conventions, and language are all radically given to us. We are thrown even into the consequences of our actions and choices past. As Heidegger would say, they are all handed down to us; we are “delivered over” to them (ibid). We do not choose them, we cannot determine them for ourselves, and we cannot get “behind” them: the salient implication of thrownness is that it can never be overcome. We have no choice but to take up as our own that which we are given, to modify it through critique, and to hand it down to ourselves again in repetition. This condition, thrownness, will resurface in my later analysis by way of what Thoreau calls “inheritance.”

The complement and opposite of thrownness, which always comprises the past, is projection, the ontological foundation of our
“futurity.” Projection is the modus operandi of the faculty of understanding (145). As beings which understand, we are always projecting ourselves onto possibility; our understanding is “altogether permeated” with it (146). Possibility, for Heidegger, is nothing like mere logical possibility, less than reality or actuality. The possibilities by which we understand ourselves do not lie dormant before us, waiting to be discovered, nor do they hover above or around us, to tantalize us with something we ought to be. We do not elect ourselves from a list of free-floating possibilities “in the sense of the ‘liberty of indifference,’” nor do we “begin” an isolated self, merely possible, and then turn to make a choice (144ff). As thrown, we are cast into possibilities. They constitute the rudiment of existence. Only because we are fundamentally beings which understand, and whose understanding is essentially projection —only because we already are what, or who, we become—can we say to ourselves, “Become what you are,’ and say this with understanding” (145).

Thrownness, the fact that we are, Heidegger calls facticity; the projection of possibility he calls existentiality. They are conditions of our being, not events that precede and follow one another in linear succession. Facticity and existentiality are “equiprimordial”: they inhere simultaneously in every moment, interdependent even as they diverge. We are already absorbed in definite possibilities, thrown into one project or another, and thereby always letting other projects, or possibilities, pass us by. There persists a kind of double motion, or dynamic tension, between these two paradoxically complementary and oppositional terms. We always already are what, or who, we become—that is, we are in each case that which we are not yet, “thrown possibility through and through” (144).

At the nexus of these terms (facticity and existentiality), the foremost ontological implication of our enigmatic double-constitution, is a radical impotence or nullity which Heidegger calls “guilt.” To say that we are that which we are not yet is to say that we are guilty, at the heart of our being. Guilt, in this sense, is void of moral connotation (thought not, perhaps, of moral implication); it
signifies nothing more than the inevitable and fundamentally irreconcilable discrepancy between the fact of our being as we already are (facticity) and the being which we project, by which we understand ourselves (existentiality). “Dasein constantly lags behind its possibilities”: as thrown, we never have control over ourselves from the ground up, but are delivered over to ourselves in order to take up this ground (284ff). This is the condition of our freedom; we are free only insofar as we are free for our “guilt”—only insofar as we project our possibilities from out of, and in accordance with, our “ownmost Being-guilty” (288).

Guilt, in Heidegger’s terminology, marks the ontological basis of the central problem of the constitution of authentic possibility which Being and Time seeks to resolve. Freedom does not consist in freedom from our constriction to possibilities which are constituted a priori; this is a fantasy, for guilt simply means that this constriction is inevitable. Rather, freedom means freedom for those possibilities, through the disclosure of our guilt. It means coming face-to-face with our constriction to thrown possibility as such, as the basis from which we must project the possibility of authenticity. But while guilt is an ontologically decisive phenomenon, it mostly remains hidden from view. We are guilty, subject to the implications of our existential nullity, yet rarely is this nullity disclosed explicitly. Thus Heidegger’s aim to free his reader for his or her own possibility demands that he create the context for the explicit disclosure of the reader’s “ownmost Being-guilty.”

Our guilt is manifest in two ways. In everyday life, existential guilt is disclosed by the disparity between ourselves and others. It arises from an understanding of ourselves which is determined, or governed, by our understanding of them. Heidegger calls this phenomenon “distantiality,” a kind of rivalry that misleads us from our own possibilities (124). The other mode of disclosure of our guilt takes place in the call of conscience, which Heidegger maintains is possible only when we come face-to-face with death, the ultimate condition of our finitude and the final meaning of facticity. It is this disclosure of guilt in the lee of death by which we first
become free for authentic possibility. But both of these phenomena, distantiality and conscience, are closely interrelated: the latter is possible only as a modification of the former. Let us consider each in greater detail.

To understand these phenomena, we must first understand their preconditions, which requires that we return again to one of Heidegger’s fundamental ontological insights. In perhaps his most radical divergence from traditional ontology, Heidegger emphasizes repeatedly that our being already implies and opens onto the being of others. This runs contrary to the traditional conception of the self as an isolated Cartesian subject, most famously formulated in Descartes’ primary and insoluble “I think,” which then relies upon the notion of empathy as a bridge between subjects, a doubling or extension of the self which first makes encounters with others possible. Heidegger calls our primordial relation to others Mitsein (lit. “Being-with”), a term meant to complement Dasein, for Being-there means being there with others (“Dasein is essentially Mitsein” [120]). It is does not require the presence of others to ratify it, but signifies instead that we are, by nature, always open to others; our existence comprises an inherent sociality. We do not encounter others as an extension of or analogue to ourselves, which would mean that our disclosure of them relies upon a disclosure of self, but the other way around: we understand ourselves in terms of a world which we always share with others. It is our being as Mitsein which allows us to encounter others, and to be encountered, at all.

To further clarify this notion, it may be helpful to introduce some basic principles of Hannah Arendt’s political philosophy. An astute student of Heidegger, she was as attentive as anyone to the ontological priority and broad implications of Mitsein. In The Human Condition, she expresses this idea (though only tacitly) with characteristic elegance as the foremost condition of political existence, which she believes is inseparable from human nature. For Arendt, human life necessarily implies a plurality of human beings between whom a political space may first appear. It is only in terms of this plurality that we may each be singled-out as this person. The
possibility of being a self is constituted by singularity, which presupposes plurality.

We would not be amiss to cite Mitsein as the ontological foundation of Arendt’s fundamental political concept, for it signifies nothing more than the differentiation or interrelation of my singularity and our plurality. This is a difference we each carry within us, arising from our own being, and not first from an encounter with others. Heidegger explains, “By ‘Others’ we do not mean everyone else but me—those over against whom the ‘I’ stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does not distinguish oneself—those among whom one is too” (118). Arendt concerns herself primarily with the political implications of Mitsein, our inherent sociality, and Heidegger proceeds instead toward an ontology of the self; yet both rely equally on the presupposition that our being always already implies an openness to being, both to the being of others and of ourselves.

This constitutive social relation maintains itself and becomes manifest through discourse. Mitsein is fundamentally a dialogical relation. Discourse [Rede], which Heidegger first introduces as a translation of the Greek logos, is a necessary condition of our intelligibility. As beings which understand, for whom projective understanding is constitutive, our tendency toward discourse is inseparable from our existence, a fact that traditional ontology neglects when conflating existence with objective presence (whereby our discursive tendency is reduced to a mere property of being). The intelligibility of the world gets articulated through discourse, and our understanding of everything we might encounter in the world relies upon this articulation, including other people (161). Ontologically, discourse is prior to and underlies language; in its most rudimentary form, it does not rely upon linguistic utterance, but merely upon Mitsein as our understanding openness to being.

Mitsein, this internal dialogical relation, is not first made possible through dialogue with others, but instead forms the ontological basis of dialogue itself. It is dialectical; as such, it is a necessary condition of the modification of possibility through repetition.
Repetition, in the strict sense outlined above, is a dialectic event, a discursive exchange. The modification of possibility can take place either in a dialectical exchange between oneself and another, which gives rise to the aforementioned phenomenon of distantiality, or else it can take place in an internal exchange with oneself, the call of conscience.

As I have said, Mitsein primarily signifies our openness to being, through which we may be open to others and to ourselves. This openness, when conceived as an attribute of discourse, is characterized by hearing. We are open to others because we can hear them. To return this analysis to our foregoing discussion of the constitution of possibility, we see that hearing serves as the way in which given possibilities (those which are handed down to us) are received. Hearing is our discursive capacity for the reception of possibility.

The central problem which Heidegger seeks to resolve in *Being and Time* can be recast in terms of the constitution of possibility through discourse: just as we are constricted to those possibilities which inhere in our a priori understanding, which are all given to us and therefore cannot initially be authentically our own, so too does our hearing (conceived existentially) depend upon an a priori understanding of that which can be communicated. Everyday discourse, talking with one another, is possible only because we already understand the words being spoken. Our predisposition to discourse implies a prejudicial understanding; what we can hear is determined beforehand by what we have heard. The possibilities we project, by which we understand ourselves, are those into which we have already been thrown.

At this juncture, it is crucial to emphasize that these observations about our inherent sociality or discursive predisposition are structural. They pertain to the structure of existence as thrown projection, and only on this basis do we see them operate in any given “ontical” circumstance, or particular discourse. To say that we hear is to say that hearing, as openness to being, is a capacity inseparable from our nature as social or political beings. It does not
depend upon the factual presence of another with whom we speak. We are always hearing, in some mode or another; as Heidegger would say, when there is no one to listen to, or when we fail to hear another who is speaking to us, our hearing is still operative, only in its deficient mode.

Hearing pertains to the ontological structure of our discursive tendency. But ontically, in everyday, thrown discourse, it maintains itself in some definite mode or another as listening to someone. Who we can listen to, like the words we can hear, is determined a priori. It always precludes other modes of hearing; listening to someone else necessarily means listening away from ourselves, and the reverse. This should be sufficiently clear if we recall that thinking, which Arendt defines as a dialogue with oneself, precludes talking. So too when we are talking with one another, we are listening away from ourselves. We can each surely recall experiences of this, when we have been prodded into solitary thought in mid-conversation, and suddenly realize after a brief interval that, in listening to ourselves, we have failed to hear the other’s intervening words.

Heidegger spends a great measure of his existential analysis accounting for the way that we listen. Because hearing is primordially bound up with understanding, our understanding of ourselves is determined in large part by those whom we listen to. The vast majority of the time, we listen to others, and away from ourselves. Ontologically, these others are not specific individuals, but rather the “public” understanding of the world which inheres in tradition, history, norm and social protocol. For the most part, we understand ourselves in terms of, through, and against the possibilities described and exemplified by those with whom we share the world. These possibilities are fundamentally prescriptive, scripted in advance by public projection. Whenever we engage in routine tasks and everyday projects, we are following such a script; we tie our shoes as one ties one’s shoes, use words that one uses, read the newspaper, remark about the weather, and concern ourselves with goings-on as one does. This “one” [das Man, often rendered “the ‘They’”] is not someone, not a sum of individuals or a definite
entity we encounter at social gatherings that determines the proper way of conducting oneself. It is an ambiguous collection of given norms and conventions, whose authority lies in the very ambiguity of its source. To recall my opening analogy, it is the “they” which dictates that it is rude to stare at strangers, or that we are what we do, our respective occupations.

The “they” is perhaps the most peculiar and perplexing notion in *Being and Time*, though it is one which follows from the analysis of Mitsein and the ontological structure of thrown projection. Conventions can be handed down to us so seamlessly because we are essentially conventional beings; we always understand (project) ourselves in terms of that which is handed down, to which we are delivered over in our thrownness. Let us consider Heidegger’s words on the matter:

> There is constant care as to the way one differs from [others], whether that difference is merely one that is to be evened out, whether one’s own Dasein has lagged behind the Others and wants to catch up in relationship to them, or whether one’s Dasein already has some priority over them and sets out to keep them suppressed. The care about this distance between them is disturbing to Being-with-one-another, though this disturbance is one that is hidden from it. (126)

> Heidegger calls this hidden disturbance “distantiality” (ibid). It implies that, for the most part, we are subject to others (to the “they”); we maintain ourselves in an understanding which is determined by the possibilities which “they” prescribe. The more we listen to them, the more obscure the prescriptive nature of “their” conventions becomes, and the more we become subject to them. Because “Dasein is essentially Mitsein,” because we understand ourselves primarily in terms of our relation to others, we are “in thrall” (*hörig*, related to *hören*, to hear) to the possibilities which “they” hand down to us (163). Our existential guilt is mostly manifest in our distantiality; the discrepancy between our thrownness and projective understanding primarily maintains itself in the discrepancy between ourselves and “them.” Because our
subjection to convention is directly related to the ambiguity with which it is given to us, and the complacency with which we accept it, our guilt gets obscured and kept hidden. Our predisposition to discourse, when directed toward the “they,” means that we listen exclusively to the voices of convention and flee our guilt (which is the condition of our freedom). Above all, our distantiality misleads us, for in our thrall to the conventional possibilities handed down to us by others, we hinder ourselves from taking up those which are genuinely our own.

The opposing or alternative phenomenon to distantiality is conscience. Like distantiality, conscience is fundamentally discursive. Where the former is a dialogic relation between ourselves and others, the latter signifies a dialogic relation within oneself. This dialogue operates in the mode of a call. By characterizing conscience as a call, Heidegger makes way for an explication of conscience as a modification of the everyday mode of discourse. Whereas we are mostly subject to the possibilities dictated by the “they,” in conscience we become subject to ourselves. To become subject to oneself is to first become free; our listening to others gets broken off by our overhearing ourselves, as something of our own, as our “ownmost possibility.”

The key to understanding Heidegger’s conception of conscience is this turn from others toward oneself, a modification of the fundamental, structural tendency of hearing. Hearing, as openness to being, means that even as we are absorbed into possibilities which are inherited or given to us, we are also simultaneously capable of overhearing ourselves, of listening to our own modified rendition of those possibilities. Overhearing allows us to call ourselves to new possibilities. This call interrupts that which we are listening to (the “they”) in order to cast us back upon ourselves. It calls us away from “them” and toward our guilt.

The call is both a summons and an attestation—it summons us out of our ambiguous subjection to the public understanding of possibility and up to our own guilt, and it thereby attests that we are guilty, that we are the possibility of becoming who we already are.
But, most of all, conscience is an admonition. It does not tell us who to become nor how. Though ontologically characterized as a mode of discourse, it never speaks per se, but only serves as a negation or interruption of conventional, prejudicial discursive understanding. The content of the call itself is nothing more than the sudden, silent declaration, “Guilty!” (281). Conscience is experienced as a feeling of nullity, or perhaps perplexity, which arises from our existential guilt.

The call of conscience presents us with a choice, though this does not necessarily imply that we do in fact choose. It calls us to the choice of “having-a-conscience as Being-free for [our] ownmost Being-guilty” (288). We are guilty; we are always not yet the ground of our being. To say that we have become conscientious—that we have chosen possibilities which are authentically our own—is to say that we allow our selves to “take action in [ourselves] in terms of the potentiality-for-Being which [we have] chosen” (ibid). Everyday language takes choice to be a “seizing” of possibility, action to be “execution.” But authentic possibility is only realized as an action of allowance, a letting-take-place. We never overcome our inheritance, tradition, or the dictates of convention, but only let ourselves take them up as our own, in a new way, by letting them go. This kind of allowance is decisive for an understanding of Walden, and we will revisit it in the next chapter.

To reiterate, the call of conscience is an admonition that summons us to the fact of our existential guilt, in order that we may allow ourselves to take up those possibilities which have been given to us, in our thrownness, as possibilities which are genuinely our own. Modification, a fundamental component of the ontological structure of possibility, is best defined in precisely this sense: in taking up as our own that which is handed down to us, we are explicitly handing it down to ourselves as a modification of that which was initially given. We never become free by wholly rejecting our past (our traditions, conventions, and inheritance), and we cannot forge our possibilities of existence from nothing; freedom consists only in our coming into ourselves as we already are.
But even when we are most conscientious, we are still so concerned with our distansiality—so accustomed to convention, which belongs to us as thrown, projective beings—that we are always falling back into our everyday tendency to listen away to the “they.” Our subjection to prescriptive conventions has an inertia of its own, which can never be ultimately overcome. One implication of our inherent guilt is that we will always remain caught between facticity and existentiality. The discrepancy which maintains itself there disturbs us, and so it always tends to lead us back into the ease, comfort and solace of conventional understanding, which disburdens us of our guilt.

This means that we never at last become conscientious or authentic; conscience is not a state of being which, once achieved, may be maintained indefinitely. As a mode of discourse, it is a discontinuous exchange. The outcome of the call of conscience, if we heed the admonition it allows us to overhear, is simply a disclosure of our guilt. It brings us face-to-face with the fact that we are not yet the ground of our being, and that we have work to do if we are to take up that ground as our own, to become “authentic.”

When we understand ourselves as guilty, we want to be conscientious. We want to become free for our guilt, as the condition of the possibility of becoming genuinely our own. Ultimately, the meaning of the call is manifest as “wanting to have a conscience,” wanting to be called (288). It means that we are intent to listen to ourselves, that we are open to and ready for authentic possibility.

Heidegger calls our readiness for conscience “resoluteness.” Conscience does not solve the problem of our guilt. It does not absolve us of our radical impotence as thrown projective beings and so secure our freedom. It only resolves this particular moment of conflict (the agon of angst), by readying us for the next. “Resoluteness, by its ontological essence, is always the resoluteness of some factual Dasein at a particular time” (298). Resoluteness means that we are delivered over to our guilt, thrown into the range of possibilities that arise from this moment, in order to take them up.
and project ourselves onto them again in the next. Each action we choose becomes the site of another choice: we may let go of our determination to “see the thing through” in order to now take up this new ground as the basis for another moment, to be called again. When we are resolute, wanting to be called, we are ready for the repetition of the moment of conscience. We are ready to repeat the modification of possibility through another discursive exchange.

One of Heidegger’s central concerns in *Being and Time* is how the modification of possibility in conscience takes place through, over, and against our everyday existence. A precondition of conscience is our ability to run aground upon the preexisting understanding of ourselves and of others into which we are thrown, to be anxiously cast back upon ourselves in our uncanniness (our sheer givenness), which is intrinsically related to mortality.

Many students of Heidegger have remarked on his preoccupation with death. He believes that our guilt garners its final meaning from the fact of our finitude as mortal beings. His interest does not lie so much in the event of death itself, as it corresponds to the biological death of the body, for this is a phenomenon which, strictly speaking, none can experience. Rather, his fascination is with the phenomenon of death as it is manifest in the course of life, in the experience of existential anxiety [*Angst*] (265ff). Anxiety is the state of mind which corresponds to the interruption of (or running-against) our public understanding of ourselves, which always takes place in lieu of the revelation of the fact of our finitude. It is itself a kind of “soft” death, death as it is experienced in life: the certain yet indefinite possibility of the impossibility of existence.

Ontically, in everyday life, anxiety is the touchstone of authentic possibility, for in facing our death, we come to face ourselves as something which is our own and no other’s. Our “soft” death becomes the occasion for a turn or modification of our life, a second birth. The call of conscience arises from existential anxiety as the disclosure of our guilt in light of death. To remain open to the repetition of that call means, at last, to be reborn, again and again.

Let us return now to the problem with which our present
investigation began. *Being and Time* is Heidegger’s response to the problem of authentic possibility. His aim is not strictly to gain insight into the structure of human existence, but also to create the context for us, his readers, to gain insight into ourselves. The central problem of the book lies in the fact that we mostly understand ourselves in terms of possibilities of existence which we have inherited through tradition, convention, history and language. This understanding not only keeps us from illuminating those possibilities which are uniquely meant for us, but even hides from us the fact that, as subject to public understanding, we are not free. Heidegger hopes that, through a well-grounded discourse with his readers, he may reveal to us the enigmatic nature of our subjection. This revelation first shows us what freedom means, and so may become the occasion for conscience.

Heidegger cautions, “we must first let the full enigmatical character of this Being [which we each are] emerge, even if all we can do is to come to a genuine breakdown over its ‘solution,’ and to formulate anew the question about the Being of thrown projective Being-in-the-world” (148). We have a natural impulse to “solve the problem” with which existential guilt presents us. This impulse is presuppositional; it presupposes that the paradoxical, simultaneous back-and-forth of “thrown projective Being-in-the-world” can be fixed or corrected, like the errant tendencies of a child. Through our analysis we see that existential guilt is not a problem to solve, but rather a discrepancy to repeatedly resolve by way of a discursive modification of possibility through conscience.

The kind of “breakdown” or radical perplexity (like the Greek *aporia*) which Heidegger advocates here is a necessary condition of the possibility of conscience. It corresponds to the interruption of our distantial subjection to public projection, to the breaking-off of our listening to the “they.” In his analysis of “idle talk” (*Gerede*, the mode of discourse which corresponds to our listening away to the “they”), Heidegger describes this breakdown as “foundering” upon the purported meaning of the words we hear and read (169).

There is a necessary connection between foundering and
founding, between becoming perplexed by our guilt and thereby endeavoring to build a foundation for ourselves. Conscience betrays to us that we are not yet the ground of our being, that we are thrown into that ground in order to project our possibilities from it; it shows us that, to become free, we must endeavor to take up that ground as our own. This is why our possibilities are in need of repeated modification, or revision. To take a prominent example from Walden, this is why Thoreau wishes us, his readers, to become perplexed by our inherited, conventional methods of securing shelter. In order to build ourselves a well-grounded house—in order to become truly our own—we must begin at the foundation we have been given, by bringing it explicitly into view, and then build only according to the necessity and unique character of our own, individual lives.

In order for a book, be it Being and Time or Walden, to create the context for its reader’s revelation of authentic possibility, it must allow us to founder upon its meaning. Only when we have become truly perplexed, enthralled by our guilt (that nullity at the nexus of facticity and existentiality), are we free to work out the meaning of the words for ourselves, and so to take them up as our own. To make them out for ourselves—to truly read, in the sense of explicitly handing down a new understanding of possibility—means, in a sense, to write them ourselves, just as to understand what it meant for Thoreau to build his house we must build our own. Writing is a modification of the mode of discourse of reading. Only through the repetition of the dialogic modification of possibility, through rereading and rewriting, repeatedly handing-down and taking-up, may we allow each other to come into those possibilities which are meant for each of us alone. Only in this way may the dialogue between reader and writer deliver us over to the possibility of rebirth.
3. Revision

Like the structure of possibility in my reading of *Being and Time*, the condition of freedom in *Walden* turns upon the modification of what Thoreau calls our *inheritance*. New possibilities arise only as modifications of those we have been given—those we have inherited from the “they,” through tradition, convention, history and language. A vocation is not something utterly void of inherited or conventional tendencies, but rather consists in their modification, or *revision*.

As we have discussed, a calling is not a static fact or property of being. Instead, it is best conceived as the greater tendency or bent that emerges from the structural repetition of discreet calls over time. Through Heidegger’s analysis, we found that the call of conscience has its basis in the ontological structure of thrown projection, and that the call itself is not a solution or fix to the “problem” of our existential guilt, but serves only to bring us face-to-face with our guilt as such. When we are privy to that call, what comes next is up to us. We have to choose: will we efface the implications of our guilt, disregard the voice of conscience, and say “it was nothing”; or will we listen intently, and resolve to take up the work we are called to *there*, in that moment?

*Walden* is written to ensure the greatest chance that we will find ourselves at just such a juncture, and in this chapter I will examine what Thoreau believes it means to answer the call. As I have suggested, the first task of our calling is to make our inheritance explicit, so that we may modify it and hand it down to ourselves. As further evidence of their internal connection, Thoreau introduces the concepts of “inheritance” and “calling” side-by-side:

> I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of. Better if they had been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolf, that they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in. (“Economy,” ¶4)
What Thoreau here calls inheritance is structurally akin to Heidegger’s “thrownness” and what I call convention. The salient characteristic is that these are all already given; they indicate everything we come into without choice. The farmer’s heir does not freely choose his trade; what he thinks is his fortune, to have inherited so much, unfortunately constricts the possibilities by which he understands himself. His implements are impediments to a clearer vision. He takes up his occupation out of complacency, not deference to what Emerson calls “divine providence,” and so it cannot be fully congruent with his vocation.

The alternative possibility to this complacency is the freedom from prejudice, from the seeming necessity of inheritance, that would allow Thoreau’s townsmen, and us, his readers, to hear our calling, to see what field we are called to labor in. It is not a matter of choosing between, say, furrowed flat, pasture, or woodlot; what we need clearer eyes to see is what a field means, and what labor means, that is, what meaning follows from the labor we are called to there.

Thoreau gives us a clue here, a touchstone by which to understand what kind of thing a calling is, and so what freedom is, by alluding to the story of Remus and Romulus. They too were heirs by blood, but having been raised “in the open pasture,” without the influence of any knowledge of their birthright, they were not so encumbered by their inheritance so as not to fulfill their calling. Legend tells us they were natural rulers, but their domain was not constricted from the outset to their feudal estate. So it was that they founded Rome, a “city on a hill.” As with all of Thoreau’s allusions, we could spend a great deal of time reading into the story of these brothers and their respective fates, but let’s limit ourselves here to a simpler point: not that we should lament our inheritance, or reject it, but that we need clearer eyes to see it; to heed our calling means to undergo a revision, a modification, of that which is given us, our inherited trades, conventions, names, and words.

_Walden_ presupposes at the outset that, while no one but ourselves may see what field we are called to labor in, it is necessarily possible for another to illuminate it for us, that we may see it clearer, revise
our view. “Ye are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid” (Matthew 5:14). The Puritan ambition to build a city on a hill in the New World was a revision of this line from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount; Walden’s ambition might be called a revision of Thoreau’s inheritance of the Puritan project, to build a city of words.

Walden’s first and longest chapter, “Economy,” seeks to address its readers to our inheritance. We have all inherited much of ourselves. Our manners and expectations are largely those we have been taught; our skills, various occupations, and undertakings tend toward what we have seen done by others. Even our understanding of possibility relies mostly upon things which have been communicated to us by others—that is, things which can be said, possibilities which fall within the limits of language; language itself is an aspect of our inheritance (Cf. Being and Time, §34). We are our accidents: our names, bodies, and words, “the society of [our] contemporaries, the connection of events.” We cannot reject our inheritance because we are vested in it. It forms our flesh.

To heed our calling means to take up our inheritance, to hand it down to ourselves again through revision, through the repetition of modification. Our inheritance is all that we do not choose; yet it is still a matter of choice. This is what Emerson means by the words, “accept the place the divine providence has found for you”: to accept our inheritance as providence we must first make it explicit, take it up explicitly, as something of our own. This is the nature of a vocation; only in this way do we first become free. This kind of acceptance requires congenial grace, which is the subject of my final chapter. First let us make the problem of inheritance clear.

The problem of inheritance is one of false necessity: “men labor under a mistake. … By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal” (“Economy,” ¶5; cf. Matthew 6:19-21). The mistake which leads us to lives of quiet desperation is fundamentally prejudicial: we presuppose that our inheritance necessarily dictates our fate. “The
whole ground of human life seems to some to have been gone over by [our] predecessors, both the heights and the valleys, and all things to have been cared for” (“Economy,” ¶13). We judge ourselves on the basis of judgments that have been handed down to us; we believe them to be necessary, though we have no basis to trust them but the word of those to whom we defer. In Heideggerian terms, we are delivered over, thrown, into the possibilities comprised by the public projection of the “they.” This problem isn’t new: “undoubtedly the very tedium and ennui which presume to have exhausted the variety and the joys of life are as old as Adam” (ibid); it is our nature, and not some historical event, to “presume to have exhausted” our possibilities (we are “guilty”). But this problem is no less surmountable on account of its duration, for “man’s capacities have never been measured; nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried” (ibid).

The hallmark of our constriction to inherited possibility is its insidious inconspicuousness. Our prejudice inoculates itself against its own undoing, for there has been no trial nor appeal, and we are so afraid of presuming too much of ourselves that we sooner lament our failed labors than wonder why we should undertake them at all. It seems as though the whole ground of human life were already sited, surveyed, decided and settled, so that I have only to sit on my humble plot of dirt and pass the time, as one does (“as if you could kill time without injuring eternity” [“Economy,” ¶9]). Why should we judge ourselves so lowly, in accordance with prescribed norms or the vogue, if we have no means to evaluate their pertinence? How can we justly maintain opinions of ourselves when the unproven criteria of our judgments do not arise from our own ground? We fetter ourselves with a common, narrow view of life, and only a feat of the imagination will overcome it.

The crux of the problem of inheritance is governance, which I have already discussed briefly. The misfortune of Thoreau’s townsman, who inherited a farm, is that he allows his inheritance, not the unique bent of his genius, to govern his understanding of possibility. Thus he resigns himself to one occupation, and ignores
his calling; “he dismisses without notice his thought, [his genius,] because it is his” (“Self-Reliance,” ¶1). He cannot accept the place the “divine providence” has found for him because he allows the presupposition underlying his seeming fate to remain hidden; he inconspicuously subordinates himself to it, and so complacently labors under a mistake, leading a life of quiet desperation.

This problem is the basis of the salient concern of romanticism for sincerity. Sincerity requires deference to an inborn authority, that we be governed by genius, inspiration, and insight. The field we are called to labor in is always here, next to us, arising as a modification of the means we inherit. The question is whether we may see it clearly, explicitly; whether we may sincerely mean what we say, what we find to be true in our “private heart”; whether we may accept it providentially, and confide ourselves childlike to the genius of our age. An occupation occupies us—seizes us, governs us, imprisons us—so long as we fail to sincerely account for its authority to hold sway over our lives. With faith and confidence, we may take up this labor, our occupation at this moment, merely on the authority of that call which directly issues from, and pertains to, our own, natural constitutions (however broad and varied they may be). So again we may attentively, resolutely take up whatever new labors we are called to in the next moment, and the next;—only then shall we find our calling. Only then are we truly free.

As I have said, our constriction to inherited possibilities—our inconspicuous absorption in convention and tradition—amounts to a disease of imagination, and only through imagination may we overcome it—that is, set it aside. The work of imagination is revision, the transfiguration of one task, or field, into another. This is Thoreau’s most remarkable gift, to reorient all his labors—building a house, hoeing beans, keeping account, walking, bathing—to the task of becoming himself. Each is the labor meant for his hands, in its own way, in its own field; each tends toward the same ambition, to sincerely mean his words and deeds. His every undertaking culminates in his words for it. He is constantly showing his readers how the process of imaginative revision (like
Heideggerian modification) operates in daily life. I would like to closely consider one such passage, which I believe will illustrate more vividly what radical reorientation or revision means in practice; in this case, by a modification of conventional understandings of economy. Surveying is one of Thoreau’s many trades and talents, and it is a thorough and sincere account of what such labor means with which he begins Walden’s second chapter, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For”:

§1 At a certain season of our life we are accustomed to consider every spot as the possible site of a house. I have thus surveyed the country on every side within a dozen miles of where I live. In imagination I have bought all the farms in succession, for all were to be bought, and I knew their price. I walked over each farmer’s premises, tasted his wild apples, discoursed on husbandry with him, took his farm at his price, at any price, mortgaging it to him in my mind; even put a higher price on it— took everything but a deed of it— took his word for his deed, for I dearly love to talk—cultivated it, and him too to some extent, I trust, and withdrew when I had enjoyed it long enough, leaving him to carry it on. This experience entitled me to be regarded as a sort of real-estate broker by my friends. Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly. What is a house but a sedes, a seat?—better if a country seat. I discovered many a site for a house not likely to be soon improved, which some might have thought too far from the village, but to my eyes the village was too far from it. Well, there I might live, I said; and there I did live, for an hour, a summer and a winter life; saw how I could let the years run off, buffet the winter through, and see the spring come in. The future inhabitants of this region, wherever they may place their houses, may be sure that they have been anticipated. An afternoon sufficed to lay out the land into orchard, wood-lot, and pasture, and to decide what fine oaks or pines should be left to stand before the door, and whence each blasted tree could be seen to the best advantage; and then I let it lie, fallow, perchance, for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.

§2 My imagination carried me so far that I even had the refusal of several farms—the refusal was all I wanted—but I never got my fingers burned by actual possession. The nearest that I came to actual possession was when I bought the Hollowell place, and had begun to sort my seeds, and
collected materials with which to make a wheelbarrow to carry it on or off with; but before the owner gave me a deed of it, his wife—every man has such a wife—changed her mind and wished to keep it, and he offered me ten dollars to release him. Now, to speak the truth, I had but ten cents in the world, and it surpassed my arithmetic to tell, if I was that man who had ten cents, or who had a farm, or ten dollars, or all together. However, I let him keep the ten dollars and the farm too, for I had carried it far enough; or rather, to be generous, I sold him the farm for just what I gave for it, and, as he was not a rich man, made him a present of ten dollars, and still had my ten cents, and seeds, and materials for a wheelbarrow left. I found thus that I had been a rich man without any damage to my poverty. But I retained the landscape, and I have since annually carried off what it yielded without a wheelbarrow. With respect to landscapes,

‘I am monarch of all I survey,
My right there is none to dispute.’

§3 I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only. Why, the owner does not know it for many years when a poet has put his farm in rhyme, the most admirable kind of invisible fence, has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk.

§4 The real attractions of the Hollowell farm, to me, were: its complete retirement, being about two miles from the village, half a mile from the nearest neighbor, and separated from the highway by a broad field; its bounding on the river, which the owner said protected it by its fogs from frosts in the spring, though that was nothing to me; the gray color and ruinous state of the house and barn, and the dilapidated fences, which put such an interval between me and the last occupant; the hollow and lichen-covered apple trees, gnawed by rabbits, showing what kind of neighbors I should have; but above all, the recollection I had of it from my earliest voyages up the river, when the house was concealed behind a dense grove of red maples, through which I heard the house-dog bark. I was in haste to buy it, before the proprietor finished getting out some rocks, cutting down the hollow apple trees, and grubbing up some young birches which had sprung up in the pasture, or, in short, had made any more of his improvements. To enjoy these advantages I was ready to carry it on; like Atlas, to take the world on my shoulders—I never heard what compensation he received for that—and do all those
things which had no other motive or excuse but that I might pay for it
and be unmolested in my possession of it; for I knew all the while that it
would yield the most abundant crop of the kind I wanted, if I could
only afford to let it alone. But it turned out as I have said.

§5 All that I could say, then, with respect to farming on a large scale—I
have always cultivated a garden—was, that I had had my seeds ready.
Many think that seeds improve with age. I have no doubt that time
discriminates between the good and the bad; and when at last I shall
plant, I shall be less likely to be disappointed. But I would say to my
fellows, once for all, As long as possible live free and uncommitted. It
makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the
county jail.

§6 Old Cato, whose ‘De Re Rusticâ’ is my ‘Cultivator,’ says, and the only
translation I have seen makes sheer nonsense of the passage, “When you
think of getting a farm, turn it thus in your mind, not to buy greedily,
nor spare your pains to look at it, and do not think it enough to go
round it once. The oftener you go there the more it will please you, if it
is good.” I think I shall not buy greedily, but go round and round it as
long as I live, and be buried in it first, that it may please me the more at
last. (“Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” ¶1-6)

I find this passage too rich to include without keeping it in its
entirety. Let us consider it piece by piece. Thoreau’s characteristically
witty turns of phrase are hard at work in the opening lines, carrying
on the work of the preceding chapter, “Economy,” by re-articulating
common economic terms (buying, pricing, mortgaging, deeding,
cultivating, brokering). What may seem at first a lighthearted,
humorous flight of fancy gradually betrays the wholehearted
sincerity underlying his speculations. He spares no time cutting
through the artifice of our presupposed notion of ownership, driving
straight down to its root. What is a house, a farm, a parcel, but a seat
or stance, a roost from which to make out the lay of the land? He
submits to us, is there a true difference between the squatter’s right
to spend a passing hour there, and the farmer’s, where he has had to
make a living to secure the same privilege? What is a mortgage or a
deed but one’s word to another?

Where we first might take his purchase of farms to be abstract, a
sheer ephemeral conceit, or an exercise of imagination only, we come to see it is in effect the same to sit anon and enjoy the land which radiates from us here as to sign our names to guarantee that seat in future days. The former sense of ownership follows from, and is governed by, our most tangible, immediate disposition toward the world—its “aroundness,” its radiance—to which I have no more claim than you. “Wherever I [sit], there I might live”; wherever I am, there wherein I dwell at present, cannot be separated from me, but attends me always. It is the “there” of “Being-there” (Da-sein). Through a revision of the latter legalized sense of ownership, we recognize it as but the calcification or absolutization of that primordial fact, no more bona fide than the former, and retaining no greater advantage but that we “might be unmolested in [our ongoing] possession” of what is, by nature, already ours.

Thoreau knows that he is attempting to radically redefine one of our most deeply-engrained inherited notions, one which governs nearly every aspect of our lives and will not easily be relinquished. He knows that it will take more than a few lines to engender in his reader a sincere assent to the claim that “a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.” This is a further clarification of his earlier advocation of “what we should call voluntary poverty,” a requirement for a free, sincere life, an unequivocal dictate of wisdom herself (“Economy,” ¶20). The exercise in imagination which he exemplifies for us is not some subtle, theoretical experiment to be entertained in thought, but a wholly practical matter, a genuine means to “solve some of the problems of life” (ibid). To assuage our conventional incredulity of such a radical redefinition of wealth and poverty, he turns in the second paragraph of the above passage to a much more literal example of his undertakings in real estate brokerage.

Though he confesses to have had “but ten cents in the world,” we may take his purchase of the Hollowell farm in the more conventional sense, for by agreement, he was only a deed short of “actual possession.” In releasing the farmer before all was finally settled (let us forego scrutiny of his presumption about the man’s
wife), he had to all practical purposes bought the farm and sold it back, “mortgag[ed] it to him in [his] mind,” and shown that despite all the ado such transactions are reducible to but a simple turn of mind, a trick of the imagination only. In the end, perhaps this vignette is enough to generate a revision of our presuppositions about ownership. We would do well to recall this lesson in simplicity when we find ourselves entrenched in the complexities of conventional business practice.

I chose to present this passage because it is perhaps the clearest illustration of the ontological structure of the call of conscience, and its relation to a calling, through inheritance, modification, and repetition. Thrown possibility, in Heidegger’s vocabulary, is what Thoreau calls the discrimination of seeds. The action of allowance, of letting our “ownmost Self take action in itself in terms of the potentiality-for-Being which [we have] chosen” (Being and Time, 288), means to let our field lie fallow, to let it alone. This claim is not entirely intuitive, and important enough that I find I should justify it at some length.

In recounting his close call with actual possession, Thoreau uses the occasion to call us to question: What is it really that ownership affords us? Where can we locate the actual value of those things we labor so diligently to possess? What is the cream of the crop, so to speak, that we reap from our possessions at last? What is the landscape he retains, the poet’s harvest, the “abundant crop” that a fallow field yields? Thoreau begins answering these questions by offering a little self-description in the third paragraph; the poet he has seen frequently withdraw, “having enjoyed the most valuable part of the farm,” is himself. Though not rendered in rhyme, his account of the attractions of the Hollowell farm in the fourth paragraph is his “admirable kind of invisible fence.” He needs no wheelbarrow to carry off what it yields because its yield is his words. These comprise the possibilities it affords him; these are the seeds he readies. He lists them each by name: its complete retirement, bounding on the river, ruinous state, the signs of its neighbors, the recollection of it from his youth. These are the things that called him
to that particular farm. He culls it in imagination, and skims these from the top. Once abstracted, or separated, from it, he is free to keep these possibilities aforethought, to allow them to inform his revision of every other farm, or site for a house, or seat, without incurring any greater expense. His “seeds” are a metaphor for possibility.

Proceeding from my claim that this passage consists of Thoreau’s factual ("ontical") account of the call of conscience, let us review the structure of that call piece-by-piece. Recall from chapter two that our lives, according to Heidegger, form around the structural relationship between thrownness and projection, facticity and existentiality; we are thrown possibility. We project ourselves onto possibilities which are constituted a priori by that which is already given; they are handed down to us. As thrown, we are delivered over to our inheritance. In this example, Thoreau has inherited both the possibility of conventional ownership and the possibility of owning this particular farm, and not another. These are the possibilities he must revise if he is to take up what called him to this farm without thus constricting himself to it and thus relinquishing his freedom.

Because it comprises our understanding, our inheritance as such is always initially hidden from us. It does not form one set of possibilities among others, which we may examine and then choose between; instead, it comprises the whole range of our possibilities, the full extent of our understanding of ourselves. In the first instance, the possibilities we inherit are handed down to us by the public “they,” and our understanding of ourselves is constricted to public projection, what Heidegger calls distantiality. When in conscience we seek to overcome this constriction, we do so by making our our inheritance explicit, in order to take it up, modify it, and hand it down to ourselves—to re-inherit it and project new (or revised) possibilities from out of that which we have then given ourselves. We are still always delivered over to our inheritance; our task is to become heirs of ourselves.

We can trace the germination of the possibility that the Hollowell farm presented Thoreau to its origin in his “earliest
voyages up the river.” His longstanding attraction to the farm bespeaks its providence; the farm itself is part of his inheritance, part of his understanding of himself, one of the possibilities into which he has been thrown. It is this longstanding attraction which accounts for his impulse to buy the farm. But here a problem arises: he presupposes that, in order to choose to take up the possibility with which the farm presents him, he must actually possess it exclusively for himself. This presupposition governs him in two ways: first, that in order to enjoy the benefits of the farm he must take it on entirely, like Atlas, and carry it all himself; and second, that the possibilities which this particular farm present are peculiar to it, that they may only be taken up part and parcel with the rest of the encumbrances that come with the farm itself. In other words, he is subject to the prejudice that only the true owner may fairly carry off what this farm yields, no matter the crop. This prejudice, too, is inherited; we see his inheritance at work in his presupposed understanding of ownership. The possibility of his possession of the farm is governed distantly; he is subject to a conflation of the public, conventional understanding of economy—that of the “they”—with his own, private economy, the sense of ownership which follows from his natural, poetic constitution.

As we have discussed, the authority of this inherited presupposition to hold sway over Thoreau’s life depends upon its inconspicuousness. He remains subject to it only so long as it remains hidden. To free himself from it, he must be able to see it clearly, to revise his view. The function of the call of conscience is to bring him face-to-face with his subjection, to disclose his existential guilt (which is essentially reducible to the fact that he operates under a presupposition in the first place; Heideggerian guilt means nothing more than that we are all subject to thrownness or inheritance). Ontologically, this takes place through overhearing; at first, Thoreau listens away to the public understanding of the “they,” the “whole cry of voices” advocating that he buy the farm as the only means of taking up the possibilities present there. To forego the limitations of this understanding and the consequences of such
ownership, he must be able to overhear himself, the voice of his genius, calling him the other way. It sounds as a revelation of something he “knew all the while,” in this case, “that it would yield the most abundant crop of the kind [he] wanted, if [he] could only afford to let it alone” (¶4).

The call of conscience, as presented in this passage, takes place when the farmer offers Thoreau ten dollars to call off the sale. Upholding their prior agreement, by which Thoreau is the new owner of the farm, the farmer follows the same conventional business protocol upon which that agreement was originally made by offering to pay to be released. It “surpassed [Thoreau’s] arithmetic to tell, if [he] was that man who had ten cents, or who had a farm, or ten dollars, or all together”; his calculations, based upon his inherited understanding of the possibility of ownership, fall short and founder. The presupposition formerly holding sway over his possibilities is suddenly rendered inert; it falls aside, inadequate, inappropriate to the facts before him. He is called to face the sheer absurdity of the circumstance, for his desire to own the farm contradicts his motive for doing so: Thoreau thinks that the only way for him to take up the possibility which the farm presents him is to buy it outright, to keep the farmer from making any more of his “improvements”; to allow the farm to fallow, to go to seed, so to speak, he brokers an agreement to occupy it, to take it upon himself. This hidden assumption, like that by which the farmer reckons himself in debt for rescinding his word, becomes conspicuous, and calls Thoreau to consider the absurdity of the entire economic framework in accordance with which they struck that deal in the first place. He sees that the possibility which the farm presents him, as a possibility, is contradicted by the commitment—the constriction of possibility—which ownership inherently implies.

This feeling of perplexity brings him face-to-face with his inheritance as inheritance; his presupposition, whose efficacy depends upon its inconspicuousness, becomes conspicuous, and so loses its significance as a presupposition, secretly governing him. This leaves him free to make a choice: will he abide his private
conviction, his spontaneous impulse, that conventional notions of ownership are unsound, and follow out the implications of that conviction, wherever they may lead; or will he seek to efface his own impulse in favor of convention, take the ten dollars, and gloat of his success by the measure of deluded public esteem?

The choice which conscience presents us, by calling us out of our inconspicuous subjection and up to the perplexity of our existential guilt, is the choice of a revision of possibilities to which we have already been delivered over. We see that a new possibility emerges from Thoreau’s revision of the field he is called to labor in, by way of the modification of what retaining a landscape means, a turn from the harvest afforded by ownership in the strict sense to the poet’s harvest. He sees that to heed the dictates of his genius, to let the farm alone, to “fallow, perchance,” means to let it go, to leave the farmer to carry it on, and not to hinder himself by committing to it.

On my reading, this process of imaginative revision culminates in the last lines of the fourth paragraph: “To enjoy these advantages I was ready to carry it on; like Atlas, to take the world on my shoulders—I never heard what compensation he received for that—and do all those things which had no other motive or excuse but that I might pay for it and be unmolested in my possession of it; for I knew all the while that it would yield the most abundant crop of the kind I wanted, if I could only afford to let it alone. But it turned out as I have said.” Where at first glance the word “but” in the last sentence might seem a concession that his enterprise in brokerage was a failure, on a second reading its inflection changes: he was ready to carry it on, but it turned out that to let it alone meant to leave it be, and simply carry it off in his mind instead. So it turned out as he has said. He is not conceding failure, but revision.

Thus the farmer unknowingly frees Thoreau to revise his inheritance, to explicitly hand down to himself the landscape that was given him on those earliest voyages up the river, which will allow him, in turn, to take it up again through repetition, through repeated revision. The conclusion, or rather resolution, of Thoreau’s near-brush with “actual possession” is what Heidegger calls
resoluteness. It is his readiness to be called again. Thoreau accounts for this outcome in the fifth paragraph, as I have already suggested, through a metaphor of seeds: “Many think that seeds improve with age. I have no doubt that time discriminates between the good and the bad; and when at last I shall plant, I shall be less likely to be disappointed.” The revision of his inheritance amounts to the discrimination of good seeds from bad. These comprise the landscape he retains; these are the possibilities he hands down to himself, explicitly, in words, as a modification of that which was initially given him. He retains only the inherited possibilities, the seeds, most germane to the person he is meant to become. Time alone does not distinguish our most befitting possibilities; the age of our seeds is but a consequence of the repetition of their discrimination, of the repeated modification of our possibilities over time. We are our possibilities; we are who we become. The task of our calling, of becoming our own, culminates in the possibilities which outlast the rest, in the endless, discontinuous cycle of revision throughout the succession of our moods and the seasons of our lives.

When we consider the site where Thoreau built his house on the shore of Walden Pond, we can see that he is again taking up the possibilities, the “seeds,” presented by the Hollowell farm—its “complete retirement,” proximity to water, neighboring inhabitants, and so on (¶4). Just as he had to leave the farm to continue the voyage of his life, he has to leave Walden too. His calling is never exhausted by any one set of possibilities, but instead demands only that he retain his freedom, that he resolve to heed each call anew, and never constrict himself to one possible occupation or mode of life which would impede a clearer view. His resolution of this call, of this moment of revision, already implies the next. To live “free and uncommitted” means to repeatedly resolve ourselves—not to maintain ourselves in the groundless freedom of indifference, nor avoid resolution, but to always remain open to the possibility of revision, growth, and change.

Just as Thoreau must leave Walden, we too must leave Walden, in order to live and to write our own. Walden calls us, at last, to
explicitly hand it down to ourselves, to modify it and take it up again in the unending repetition of resolution. The task of becoming ourselves is never finished. Our seeds are always germinating. The possibility of rebirth, of dawn, of Spring, is ever-present: “All change is a miracle to contemplate; but it is a miracle which is taking place every instant” (“Economy,” ¶16). Today is but the harbinger of tomorrow’s dawn, and we are but the promise of who we are meant to become. Every ending is a new beginning; “the sun is but a morning star” (“Conclusion,” ¶19).
4. *Walden’s Neighborhood*

At any given moment we find ourselves limited to particular circumstances. It is easy to believe that they are necessary, and that we should maintain the *status quo*. But our calling is never ultimately fulfilled; it is only the promise of who we could become. The labor we are called to, the task of revision, is never complete. Yet we want answers to questions, solutions to problems; we want results, and we demand them of ourselves and those around us. We must learn to keep our questions open, and regard our lives as perpetual experiments. For this we need help from outside, to remind us that our possibilities are never exhausted, that we are due for change.

We have seen, by Thoreau’s example, what revision means. In the remainder of this project, I will examine how *Walden* seeks to prepare us to persist in that ongoing task. First, we must understand how the call of conscience transpires in solitude, which implies a kind of neighboring or friendship with myself—that I may call upon myself. Second, we will learn how our capacity to become neighbor to ourselves can give rise to a peculiar kind of friendship with others, one by which we may call upon each other in this way. Only through the grace of true friendship may we hope to *always* remain open and attentive to our calling.

In solitude, I am privy to my most sincere and lucid insights. Every night, as I fall asleep, I am audience to a lengthy series of dignified resolutions, to be carried out the coming day. It is when I am most honest with myself about my shortcomings, and most hopeful that I may shed the hindrance of my prejudices and embark upon each of my endeavors with the same clarity, deliberation, and integrity with which I nightly confirm my resolve. Yet I tend to sleep late; I too often arise to a day already underway, and miss the dawn. In clamorous haste I set to catch up with the steepening angle of the sun, and fall back readily into the convenience and expediency of over-worn routines and patterns of thought. My quiet resolutions
dissipate in the commotion. I spare no ear for them.

This tendency to fall back into the rote path of convention, tradition, and norm—in short, of our inheritance—ever repeats itself in the cycle of our moods and seasons. It is a natural, inevitable and even necessary function of everyday life. For if, at every turn, we were to undergo the kind of extensive revision of our inherited notions which Thoreau exemplifies in the passage above, we could never proceed with the thousandfold simple tasks which daily life requires; so, too, if we were to critically examine and revise our view of the meaning of every one of our words before speaking, they would seldom leave our lips. We need formulae, rules, protocol, and linguistic convention to administrate our everyday tasks so that we may spare our minds such taxing, mundane work, and perhaps lend our focus and attention to more lofty ends.

Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” is addressed most acutely to this condition, which he calls conformity. Heidegger, too, was well aware of it, and spends a great deal of his existential analytic examining what he calls falling, a structural tendency of thrown-projective beings to lapse back into the everyday, public projection of the “they.” Falling signifies an inevitable relapse into distanciality, our tendency to inconspicuously maintain ourselves within the range of inherited possibility.

Falling, our tendency to lapse into conformity and rote paths throughout everyday life, has an inertia of its own, like a river flowing out to sea. The problem is not so much that we are all given to this tendency, as that it can draw us away from ourselves—away from our authenticity, as Heidegger would say, or from our genius, in Emerson’s terms. It has a dissipating effect on our private convictions; “it scatters [our] force ... and blurs the impression of [our] character” (“Self-Reliance,” ¶10). Heidegger describes it as a leveling-down or dispersal of possibility (Cf. Being and Time, 127; §38). When we listen away to the “they,” we maintain ourselves within the range of “their” constricted possibilities, and the voice of genius grows ever slighter.

The irony of our conformity is that our want of expediency and
ease becomes the source of our very constriction; to revisit Thoreau’s example of this, it is his conformity to conventional business protocol by which he would fetter himself with the acquisition and possession of property. By allowing those conventions to govern him, he would expend a greater measure of his life than would be required were he to rely only on his own impulse, to live free and uncommitted. It is practical, no doubt, not to perpetually reconsider the best way to tie one’s shoes, or wash the dishes, but more often than not we must take heed, lest we save ourselves a little deliberation at the expense of our freedom and sincerity. To put it differently, by accepting the “seeming fate” of a limited occupation or common mode of employment, we lose the possibility of a calling. We conform ourselves to what we are, and so lose the freedom to become who we are meant to be.

The gravest threat of our conformity is the capacity of its inertia to entirely overcome us. We may become so accustomed to convention that we forget there is another way; so enthralled by the din and chatter of the “they,” the “whole cry of voices” both in our ears and in our heads, that we altogether lose the sound of our calling, that voice which speaks only in the confidence of our private hearts. Walden warns that the final consequence of conformity is faithlessness and despair. Our subjection to convention grows ever more inconspicuous until we are wholly absorbed by it. Having nothing left by which to measure its authority to hold sway of our lives, we resign ourselves to it. With the dissipation of our wholehearted impulses, the emptying-out of our “ownmost possibility,” we lose the necessary condition of hope and of freedom; on Walden’s reckoning, we are as good as dead. This is the condition from which the call summons us; this is the circumstance from which Walden seeks to free its readers, and so bring us into the possibility of rebirth.

Falling, or conformity, signifies the way in which we are governed by inheritance and convention. These are fundamentally presuppositional: they hold the authority to govern our possibilities in proportion to their inconspicuousness. A presupposition can
govern us, as a presupposition, only so long as it remains hidden. The implication of Heidegger’s claim that we are “guilty,” in the terminological sense, is that we tend to project possibility presuppositionally, that the structure of possibility itself relies upon tacit assumptions. The call of conscience reaches us when we are most given to this tendency, in order to make it explicit, to reveal the presuppositions that have been governing us. It approaches us as from afar, from outside the narrow view afforded by inheritance, opening a new range of possibility that lies along an oblique tangent to our “distantial,” everyday understanding of ourselves. The possibilities we project in the lee of the call of conscience are always tangential modifications of presuppositions that the call has revealed. Conscience calls us to explicitly modify our inheritance, to turn, for example, from an inherited, conventional conception of ownership, toward the sense in which the poet owns the farm he puts in rhyme.

It is never enough to be called but once or twice. Falling, as an inevitable existential tendency, means that we will always lapse back into subjection to our presuppositions. The resolutions we make in the intimate quiet of night fade and disperse by day. Faith and certainty give way to skepticism and doubt. The clearest and most seemingly steadfast revelations of our greater moments dissolve in the next to smoke and ash. We need the constancy of routine, of rules and conventions and norms, to make it from one day to the next; in short, we need to make assumptions, to deliver ourselves over to presuppositions, in order to continue moving along the path of life. Everything revealed will be veiled again; we must always dig, sift, weigh, and clear a way through the persistent clutter and chatter of our past to find that richest vein near the heart of our private earth. The repetition of revelation, of the call of conscience, is a lifelong task, and in my experience there is none who can indefinitely persist in it without a little help from outside.

I wish to bring to light and examine a problem to which I have only alluded above. It might seem that, by invoking the call of conscience as the means of revealing, and so overcoming, our
presuppositional understanding, I am only begging the question. For how are we to gain clearer eyes to see the field we are called to labor in if we are, by nature, limited to our present field of vision? How are we to call ourselves to come face-to-face with our presuppositions if, as presuppositions, they are necessarily hidden from us? We have carefully examined the structure of the call, both ontologically and by way of Thoreau’s factual account, through inheritance, modification, and repetition. Yet we cannot understand the phenomenon in question unless we make clear the origin of that call; the final goal of my present project is to show how the call, and by extension our calling, our freedom, requires the presence of another voice, a congenial friend—a “beautiful enemy”—who may free us to reveal ourselves to us. That is, without others who may call us to account for our means of constituting the possibilities which comprise our being, and so bring us face-to-face with our presuppositions, we could never become free.

This is the significance of my opening claim, that children love to stare at strangers. When we abide our childlike impulse to stare at unfamiliar faces, it is because there is a promise of new possibility written there, and to stare is a first attempt to keep that promise present. *Walden’s* promise consists in the possibility of showing us how to take up the work that is meant for our hands, to see with clearer eyes what field we are called to labor in. But it is not enough to be told what a calling is, through an account of the call the writer heeds; nor can anything like a calling be imposed on us from outside. Another may only invite us to it. We must write our own story alongside his. To do so means we must learn to listen, that we may learn to speak; reading and writing, speaking and listening, are one and the same in the end. By reading, hearing, the writer speaking in his own voice, we learn what it means to speak in our own voices, and in turn we may engender this capacity in others.

Recall from the second chapter, regarding *hearing* as our discursive capacity for the reception of possibility, that the possibilities by which we understand ourselves are determined in part by who we listen to—whether we listen to ourselves,
conscientiously, or to others, distantly. This may seem to contradict my claim above that the call of conscience requires the voice of another. This seeming contradiction corresponds to my earlier discussion of solitude and society as simultaneously necessary conditions of our freedom. In the latter case, I hinted that the resolution of these seemingly contradictory conditions lies in the fact that solitude, unlike loneliness or isolation, implies a certain, peculiar opening onto society, for it means to be “beside oneself in a sane sense,” to keep company with oneself. Though the work of imaginative revision—the foremost task to which our calling calls us—takes place in solitary thought, it nonetheless relies upon the grace of friendship for its initiation and actualization. Ontologically, this friend is one whom we each carry within us, with whom we speak in the dialogue of conscience (“the voice of the friend whom every Dasein carries with it” [Being and Time, 163]). Thoreau refers to it as the spectator: “a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it” (“Solitude,” ¶11).

It is my conviction, and one I intend to explain at length, that this internal differentiation, a “doubleness” as a kind of alterity or otherness (in contrast to duplication or imitēsis) serves as the ontological foundation of the possibility of the peculiar friendship of reader and writer, which is the condition of our freedom. This implies that another may invoke my conscience, not by taking it over (which would no doubt sound a frightening prospect), but by echoing outwardly my own calling upon myself, and so bring it forth, sounding it clearly as a chanticleer in the morning, bragging lustily from his roost. This is the assumption underlying my claim in the introduction that we need the confirmation of others to remain steadfast by our own bearings; it is a response to the “problem” of falling, our inevitable tendency toward conformity. When Thoreau calls upon his readers—when, as I earlier quoted Cavell, “the writer keeps writing things I know I ought not to have stopped trying to say for myself” (Senses of Walden, 49)—his words sound in concord with my own private convictions, my genius. This concord is what I
call *congeniality*; it is a necessary condition of the possibility of *Walden’s* aim, to free us, its readers, for ourselves.

To prepare the way for a closer examination of the notion of congeniality, let us set the context by gaining a clearer understanding of *Walden’s* sense of neighborhood, the neighborhood of reader and writer, which follows from this sense of solitary company and comprises the unique relationship to others that the call implies and relies upon. Thoreau draws a distinction between two discreet senses of society, the “near neighborhood of man” on one side (“Solitude,” ¶4), the society found in pubs and meeting-houses, and in the polite chatter and gossip found in passing in the street; and on the other side, the neighborhood that he hopes to engender between himself, as the writer, and his reader. He emphasizes many times in many ways that the freedom to become who we are meant to be, to follow our calling, depends upon our ability to enter this peculiar neighborhood together. To find the field we are called to labor in, the neighborhood Thoreau has in mind when describing “where [he] lived, and what [he] lived for,” we must undergo a revision of the kind of distance which separates neighbors.

What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary? I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another. What do we want most to dwell near to? Not to many men surely, ... but to the perennial source of our life, whence in all our experience we have found that to issue, as the willow stands near the water and send out its roots in that direction. This will vary with different natures, but this is the place where a wise man will dig his cellar. (“Solitude,” ¶5)

We would come no closer to entering upon *Walden’s* neighborhood if we were to travel to and build ourselves houses ashore Walden Pond. What we should seek instead is the Walden of our own natures, and whet our roots with the water that springs perennially there. On revision, we see that the distance which separates us is measured, not in miles, but by how nearly we dwell to the source of our respective lives. The place whence our life issues is
different for each of us—and so too is the labor we are each called to there in turn—and so to draw nearer to it means to withdraw from the society which would distract us, the “whole cry of voices,” the “they”:

Both place and time were changed, and I dwelt nearer to those parts of the universe and those eras in history which had most attracted me. Where I lived was as far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers. We are wont to imagine rare and delectable places in some remote and more celestial corner of the system, behind the constellation of Cassiopeia’s Chair, far from noise and disturbance. I discovered that my house actually had its site in such a withdrawn, but for ever new and unprofaned, part of the universe. If it were worth the while to settle in those parts near the Pleiades or the Hyades, to Aldebaran or Altair, then I was really there, or at an equal remoteness from the life which I left behind, dwindled and twinkling with as fine a ray to my nearest neighbor, and to be seen only in moonless nights by him. (“Where I Lived and What I Lived For, ¶13)

While this is precisely the kind of seeming mysticism which has arguably prevented Walden’s acceptance as a major philosophical achievement, we would do well not to take his words too lightly, for our understanding of this sense of distance or remoteness is crucial to the book’s project, to awaken us to the field we are called to labor in. Every moment and place opens onto it; “Olympus is but the outside of the earth everywhere” (“Where I Lived...,” ¶8). It lies along the oblique tangent whence arise our modifications of inherited possibility—a place outside of place, a time outside of time. It is always next to us, but in neither a spatial nor worldly sense; it is therefore immeasurably distant from the near neighborhood of our contemporaries. But when we find ourselves awakened to that place by the call, we will not be alone: “Confucius says truly, ‘Virtue does not remain as an abandoned orphan; it must of necessity have neighbours’” (“Solitude,” ¶10). We are neighbors, in Walden’s sense, when we dwell “at an equal remoteness from the life which [we have each] left behind,” when we have both withdrawn from the field we have learned, in conscience, to let alone. Walden addresses us from
this outward stance, in order to address us to our own outsideness, to our own private opening onto the celestial neighborhood where wise men and women will dig their stellar cellars.

This curious revision of the senses of nearness and distance which constitute neighborhood gives rise to a new understanding of the relationship between reader and writer. Thoreau is explicit about this from the very opening of the book, and we are now in a position to understand his meaning when he says,

I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me. (“Economy,” ¶2)

Thoreau makes plain a moment later that this requirement is addressed not to the “Chinese or Sandwich Islanders” (the inhabitants of one kind of distant land), but to “you who read these pages, who are said to live in New England.” It should not take a great stretch of imagination to see that “distant land” is meant here in precisely the same sense as the “outside of the earth,” the remoteness, distance or withdraw which forms the basis of Walden’s neighborhood. With the last clause, Thoreau establishes that this distance is a necessary condition of our simplicity and sincerity, terms which signify our deference to genius, our “authenticity.” It is through rendering a sincere account, then, that our relationship as readers and writers is to be understood, that we become “kindred from a distant land”; the writer of Walden, by offering his account, is engendering a kinship with his reader, a kinship which requires simplicity and sincerity, and which implies a mutual exchange, that the reader write and the writer read, each from his or her own place in that outer sphere.

The salient peculiarity of this early and telling passage is its sense of requirement. On what authority is Thoreau invoking this demand of every writer? As I have stated before, his greatest knack is for the revision, or transfiguration, of each of the tasks he accounts for in
accordance with the foremost task of becoming himself; building his house, like writing *Walden*, is the work Thoreau undertakes as what it means for him to heed his calling, and so become who he is meant to be. To be a writer, in this sense, is simply to take on an *authorial* role in one’s own life, to write one’s own story, sincerely. It is this sense of authority in which I take Thoreau’s “requirement,” that writing *means* simply and sincerely accounting for oneself, whether or not that involves marking words on a page. On my reading, the authority of this requirement is that of genius, a realization of Emerson’s claim, “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,—that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost” (“Self-Reliance,” ¶1). Thoreau’s requirement of every writer makes no sense if taken as a forcible imposition of ideology; let us take it instead as an invocation of “universal sense,” an early and ostensible enactment of his original proposition “to brag as lustily as a chanticleer... if only to wake [his] neighbors up.” This particular sense of universality, which I hold to be more accurately understood as *impartiality*, will become crucial for our discussion of congeniality in the next chapter.

In the chapter entitled “Solitude,” *Walden’s* neighborhood—immeasurably distant from the “near neighborhood of man”—takes shape next to us:

Any prospect of awakening or coming to life to a dead man makes indifferent all times and places. The place where that may occur is always the same, and indescribably pleasant to all our senses. For the most part we allow only outlying and transient circumstances to make our occasions. They are, in fact, the cause of our distraction. Nearest to all things is that power which fashions their being. Next to us the grandest laws are continually being executed. Next to us is not the workman whom we have hired, with whom we love so well to talk, but the workman whose work we are. (“Solitude,” ¶6)

This passage begins to lay out the implications of his earlier
attempts to create a tangential sense of neighborhood, which takes shape by way of the “workman” metaphor. Thoreau’s distinction between two senses of neighborhood is meant to provide a context for us to understand just where to locate this nextness, to provide his readers with an opening, a point of access, to a different sense of self. This is one of his iterations of my earlier mention of distinct voices vying for our intent, one, that of genius, “the workman whose work we are,” which elsewhere Thoreau calls the indweller; the other, “the workman whom we have hired,” the “whole cry of voices” of convention, tradition, and norm. This is the voice of the “they,” publicly delegating possibility, secretly governing us, demanding our conformity.

Because the workman metaphor may seem a little obscure, it is easy not to recognize just how radical a claim Thoreau is making in that sentence. He is reorienting two radically different senses of self by way of their proximity. The first sense, as I have suggested, the “workman whom we have hired, with whom we love so well to talk,” signifies the sense of self which we are wont to conceive as nearest to us. It is the “I,” the factual ego, the hallmark of self-constancy. In Heidegger’s terminology, it is the “they-self,” as distinguished from the authentic Self. Recall that the “they,” the “whole cry of voices,” speaks as loud in our heads as in our ears. “Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion” (“Economy,” ¶9), of which the latter is simply the internalization of the former; in Cavell’s words, “What we know as self-consciousness is only our opinion of ourselves, and like any other opinion it comes from outside; it is hearsay, our contribution to public opinion” (Senses of Walden, 107). This sense of self, Heidegger’s “they-self,” is not an entity that we may be and ought to avoid. We are the they-self; our everyday existence transpires in this public mode.

This was the result of Heidegger’s analysis of Mitsein [Being-with], our primordial openness to others and to ourselves: the everyday “who” of Dasein is comprised by the “they”; we carry “their” voice within us, and mostly maintain ourselves within the range of publicly projected possibility (Being and Time, 129). To say
that “I am” is to invoke a public understanding of self; the “I” that speaks is the they-self, which understands itself in terms of what it does, not who it could become. This invocation of self is self-concealing; by appearing to be something of its own, the “I” that maintains itself throughout our experiences cuts us off from seeing that we are not the ground of our own being, that we are guilty, and as such may become free for the other sense of self, the “authentic” self.

To continue drawing from Heidegger, the fact that, as the “I” which stands at the center of my experiences, I am delivered over to the “they,” does not mean that “I” must overcome “them” to become free. On the contrary, the implication of our existential guilt—the fact that we are possible, that we are not yet who we become—is that we are always falling back into the constricted view of the world which the “I,” the they-self, comprises. When, in conscience, I become resolute in the face of my guilt, it is not in this sense of self. Falling, or conformity, is simply our tendency to fall back into that view, or stance, which the “I” marks out; and conscience, therefore, means to be called out of it. This is why we are never at last and forever authentic, why any “taking-action is necessarily ‘conscienceless’” (Being and Time, 288): the authentic self, who we are meant to be, is realized only in its perpetual becoming; it is the next self, who I am always not yet. The revelation of self in conscience is ecstatic; it “makes indifferent all times and places.” It is inevitable that we will fall back into our everyday selves, which often feels like a return or recovery of self; resoluteness, “wanting to have a conscience,” as Heidegger says, means our resolution—as the everyday they-self to whom we return in the lee of the moment of conscience—to remain ready to hear the call, and so to remain ready to let ourselves alone again, and again.

Thoreau’s revision of the kind of nearness which forms a neighborhood takes a new shape in the metaphor of the workmen, where it is the measure of our distance from our selves. The sense of self which is nearest to us is not the “I,” the factual or empirical self, but “the workman whose work we are,” the unattained self to which
we are called. As I alluded above, this is the aspect of ourselves which Thoreau calls the indweller, his analogue to what Emerson calls genius. He introduces this idea in the chapter “Economy,” when metaphorically relating architecture and house-building to the task of building ourselves, heeding our calling:

What of architectural beauty I now see, I know has gradually grown from within outward, out of the necessities and character of the indweller, who is the only builder,—out of some unconscious truthfulness, and nobleness, without ever a thought for the appearance; and whatever additional beauty of this kind is destined to be produced will be preceded by a like unconscious beauty of life. (“Economy,” ¶68)

These two distinct and divergent senses of self stand in indirect opposition to one another, and cannot be conflated or reconciled. Nor are they present beside one another, as though we were free to choose between them. They preclude each other, for in the self-consciousness of the “I,” with its publicly limited range of possibility, the indweller gets concealed; and when, in conscience, we are called to ourselves, the “I” falls away, or gets passed over, and we are left to the task of unconsciously building, of becoming that next self. The question of freedom, then, does not concern the choice of one kind of self over another, just as a calling does not consist in the weighing and election of one occupation among others. It takes shape instead as a question of access to that aspect of ourselves whom Thoreau calls the indweller.

We have answered this question, in one sense, through an analysis of the call of conscience, which we could call the event of access to the indweller. But what, ontologically speaking, forms the point of access, the entry or opening onto this unconscious aspect of ourselves? If we are to conceive of the indweller, our genius, as perpetually next to us, who are we that neighbor it? We know that it is not the “I,” the they-self or factical ego; yet the prospect of neighboring clearly implies some means of self-disclosure or self-consciousness. To put it another way, if the call of conscience is a kind of discourse, that we may summon ourselves out of our
distantiality, then this discourse must take place between some two aspects of ourselves; and if the they-self must fall away to give way to the possibility of our authenticity, then the ego, the “I,” cannot fill one of these discursive roles. So who are we when we are neighbor to our unattained selves, the indweller in each of us, who we are meant to become? Who are we when we dwell nearest to the perennial source of our life, our genius, the workman whose work we are?

As I have already suggested above, Thoreau answers these questions with the notion of the spectator. Walden’s sense of neighborhood takes shape in the relation between spectator and indweller, builder and witness. He explains this internal relation, a split or doubleness of self, most explicitly in his chapter on solitude:

> With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent. We are not wholly involved in Nature. I may be either the driftwood in the stream, or Indra in the sky looking down on it. I may be affected by a theatrical exhibition; on the other hand, I may not be affected by an actual event which appears to concern me much more. I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you. When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned. This doubleness may easily make us poor neighbours and friends sometimes. (“Solitude,” ¶11)

All of the passages quoted earlier regarding the sense of distance or remoteness which forms the basis of Walden’s neighborhood culminate in these lines. The spectator marks the ontological opening or point of access to the indweller, the next self to which our calling summons us. The doubleness or split of self which Thoreau here describes signifies a divergent sense of self-consciousness than that of the everyday “I.” This is the sense of consciousness most akin
to its etymological cousin conscience, in the original sense of “to know with oneself.” The kind of doubleness at issue here is nothing like a duplication of self as mimesis, which is implied by the traditional concept of empathy as a bridge or link between empirical subjects, a projection of self onto another, “myself with myself.” Rather, the spectator is that part of us which stands ever remote from us; I am the scene of appearance, and the stance of the spectator is always outside, looking in. Thus when, in conscience, I am in discourse with myself, summoning the they-self, or factical self, out of its inconspicuous subjection to convention and inheritance, I am “beside myself in a sane sense,” in thrall not to the “they” but to my genius, the unconscious indweller, by way of the spectator. I am witness to my own “spontaneous impression,” the convictions I hold true in my “private heart.”

I could not put it more simply or clearly than Cavell, who explains, “We are to reinterpret our sense of doubleness as a relation between ourselves in the aspect of indweller, unconsciously building, and in the aspect of spectator, impartially observing. Unity between these aspects is viewed not as a mutual absorption, but as a perpetual nextness, an act of neighboring or befriending. ‘This doubleness may easily make us poor neighbors and friends sometimes,’ because we have bestowed elsewhere our extent of trust and freeing and aid and comfort—or what looks to be elsewhere, given our current poor ideas of distance and nearness” (Senses of Walden, 108). Conscience is not a state of agreement with oneself to be maintained indefinitely, but an act of befriending, a task; this is the labor we are called to in Walden’s neighborhood.

To return to my earlier example, when Thoreau was brokering the Hollowell farm, it was the expression of the spectator who revealed to him the absurdity of his deference to public business convention. When it “surpassed [his] arithmetic to tell” just where the deal with the farmer had strayed, his inadequate calculations were that of the they-self, based upon the authority of his inheritance; this was the aspect of himself which was surpassed, and gave rise in its stead to the more sincere accounting of genius, advocating voluntary poverty.
It was the spectator, beside him in a sane sense, which revealed the insanity of his presuppositional desire for ownership, and so called him out of his constriction to that inherited possibility. As Heidegger explains, the authentic self arises, ontically, as a modification of the they-self (*Being and Time*, 130); the “I,” the everyday “who” of Dasein, which we are wont to believe, above all, remains constant throughout all experience, gets modified as the next self, the possible self who we would become. In this ecstatic moment of modification through conscience, it is not “I” who remain constant; only the spectator, observing from outside, remains.
5. The Concord of Friendship

At this juncture, it should become intuitively clear that congeniality, by which I indicate the capacity of another to invoke my conscience, depends upon a relation to each other which follows from and is analogous to our neighboring ourselves, as the spectator of our own lives. No one else can tell me what my vocation is, for this would amount to imposing freedom, a contradiction in terms. The greatest gift we can bestow upon one another, the only truly free gift, is to show each other what heeding the call means, and so what finding a calling means. My vocation will never be the same as yours; what is the same, what we hold in common, is that we may each be called upon, in our own turn. “The place where that may occur is always the same, and indescribably pleasant to all our senses”: the call transpires only in the neighborhood of spectator and indweller, of witness and genius.

The assumption underlying my claim that we may play this role for one another is that the spectator is “no more I than it is you”; that “by a conscious effort of the mind ... I can stand as remote from myself as from another.” The principle by which this stance can be shared is impartiality. Only through an impartial view of my inheritance, to which “I” am always partial, may I undergo the kind of revision which gives rise to the expression of genius; only by way of this impartial stance may Thoreau call upon me, or I upon you, to take up the task of imaginative revision for ourselves.

Citing impartiality may seem to hark to more traditional conceptions of conscience, which characterize it as a universal voice, like that of God or of reason. But the stance of spectator is neither an objectively universal nor omniscient view. To define impartiality, it may be useful to consider the Kantian distinction between the objective universality of determinative, empirical judgments he describes in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and the subjective universality of aesthetic judgements laid out in the *Critique of*
Judgment. The former signifies the rational subsumption of particulars under universal categories of understanding, and as such carries objective necessity; whereas the latter pertains to judging particulars for which no universal categories apply, and its criteria is not rational understanding, but a common sense (as sensus communis). As Kant explains,

We must [here] take sensus communis to mean the idea of a sense shared [by us all], i.e., a power to judge that in reflecting takes account (a priori), in our thought, of everyone else's way of presenting [something], in order as it were to compare our own judgement with human reason in general and thus escape the illusion that arises from the ease of mistaking subjective and private conditions for objective ones, an illusion which would have a prejudicial influence on the judgment. Now we do this as follows: we compare our judgement not so much with the actual as rather with the merely possible judgements of others, and [thus] put ourselves in the position of everyone else.

(Critique of Judgment, 160)

For Kant, this is why aesthetic judgment is peculiarly human capacity. The faculty which makes this kind of common sense possible, by which we can represent the “merely possible judgments of others,” is not that of empirical determination, but imagination. He continues a little later,

The following maxims may serve to elucidate its principles: (1) to think for oneself; (2) to think from the standpoint of everyone else; and (3) to think always consistently. The first is the maxim of an unprejudiced, the second of a broadened, the third of a consistent way of thinking.

(ibid)

These are the conditions of impartiality. To take an impartial stance, that of “everybody else,” is not to defer one’s judgment to the judgments of others, which would be nothing more than prejudice, but rather to broaden one’s own standpoint in order to ensure its internal consistency.

Hannah Arendt, in her Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, offers two helpful quotations on this matter, taken from Kant’s
personal correspondence:

You know that I do not approach reasonable objections with the intention of merely refuting them, but that in thinking them over I always weave them into my judgments, and afford them the opportunity of overturning all my most cherished beliefs. I entertain the hope that by thus viewing my judgments impartially from the standpoint of others some third view that will improve upon my previous insight may be obtainable. (Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, 42).

And in a subsequent letter,

[The mind needs ... to maintain its mobility] that it may be enabled to view the object afresh from every side, and so enlarge its point of view from a microscopic to a general outlook that it adopts in turn every conceivable standpoint, verifying the observations of each by means of all the others. (ibid)

It is this capacity to “enlarge” or “broaden” our view through imagination, to assume “every conceivable standpoint,” which affords the possibility of revision and allows us to overcome our prejudices, our inheritance. This is the role of spectator. It does not mean that others need be literally present beside us, with whom we communicate and compare our judgments—on the contrary, the work of imaginative revision, of comparing our partial judgments with the “merely possible” judgments of others, can take place only in the quiet company of solitary thought. It means simply that we abide the maxims of shared sense, which imply that our observations possess “general communicability” that they be subject to what Kant calls “the test of free and open examination” (ibid, 40).

But while this activity is strictly solitary, we nonetheless need to be able to formulate into words and communicate our view to others. This is how we both ensure and engender the impartiality of our judgments. Arendt’s lectures, from which the above quotations have been taken, seek to establish that the political freedom to write and speak, and thus communicate our solitary insights, is necessary for the freedom and “mobility” of the mind: “it is of course by no
means true that you need or can even bear the company of others when you happen to be busy thinking; yet, unless you can somehow communicate and expose to the test of others ['the test of free and open examination'], either orally or in writing, whatever you may have found out when you were alone, this faculty exerted in solitude will disappear” (ibid). “Hence,” says Kant, “we may safely state that the external power which deprives man of the freedom to communicate his thoughts publicly also takes away his freedom to think, the only treasure left to us in our civic life and through which alone there may be a remedy against all evils of the present state of affairs” (ibid, 40).

When we learn how to render what Thoreau calls a “simple and sincere account” of our lives, from the impartial stance of the spectator, we free ourselves for the possibility of a kind of agreement, a harmony of mind or concord, with those that may hear us. Only in this way may we become kindred, and enter upon the sense of neighborhood or society which Walden hopes to engender between writer and reader.

This is precisely what Emerson has in mind when he writes, in the opening paragraph of “Self-Reliance,” “Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense.” The kind of universality he invokes is not that of objective validity, but of impartiality. It is by speaking sincerely that we invoke our genius, and while the beauty of that which is spoken is unique and peculiar to the indweller, the voice in which it is spoken is no more “I” than it is “you.” This is “the voice of the friend whom every Dasein carries with it,” which speaks in the dialogue of conscience; it is the voice of the call, which attests our calling. It is always nearest to us, speaking in confidence. You and I are but the ears that might hear it—or rather, overhear it—and so become free.

To assume the stance of spectator, to become neighbor to ourselves, requires that we withdraw from the near neighborhood of our contemporaries and into solitude. The task of imagination, to assume a “third view” by adopting every conceivable standpoint in turn, may only take place in the field which opens to us when we are
alone. We need the quiet found only in remoteness if we are to learn
to ignore the “whole cry of voices” of inheritance and convention,
and listen another way. But because we are fallen, because we are by
nature conformists and tend to flee our “guilt,” we need the
beneficence of grace if we are to maintain our conscientious resolve. We
are beings of Winter and of night, so often dead asleep, awaiting the
chanticleer’s clarion call to awaken us, to be reborn.

To explain what I mean by grace, I wish to return to a line of the
passage from “Solitude” included above, which I believe may be
easily misinterpreted: “With thinking we may be beside ourselves in
a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof
from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad,
go by us like a torrent” (¶11). A common and grave mistake consists
in a misunderstanding of this kind of conscious effort. It is important
to see that “I” do not choose to take an impartial stance, for this is
the sense of self which is by nature partial to its limited experience,
the empirical ego, the everyday “they-self.” Nor is the sense of agency
implied by “conscious effort” to be conceived as the evaluation and
selection of discreet possible ways of existing. Rather, the kind of
agency implied here is choice in the Heideggerian sense, “letting my
Self take action in myself”; it is an action of yielding or allowance, of
choosing to let alone, of allowing my field to fallow. Accordingly,
this sense of consciousness, a term we may define generally as “to be
in dialogue with oneself,” means listening, as being open to the grace
of another voice. The conscious effort of the mind by which we may
assume the stance of spectator is equivalent to Heideggerian
resoluteness, “wanting to be called.” We do not choose to call upon
ourselves, just as we do not choose the work of our calling. The call
comes from outside, from that place which is always next to us, in
neither a spatial nor worldly sense. Our task is only to ready
ourselves for it by resolutely listening, to remain open to it, that we
may be free to sincerely take up the work we are called to.

To return to a more intuitive example of this misinterpretation of
the agency needed to heed the call, recall from the opening pages the
cliché that children are free to choose what they want to be when
they grow up. This presupposes a limited view of choice, implying, as I have said, that the choice of one’s life is like the choice of a house, a self-conscious evaluation of possible predefined occupations. The fundamentally misleading presupposition underlying this notion is that “I,” in the sense of the partial “they-self,” can overcome myself—that the same aspect of myself which is determined by my inheritance can overcome it. This implies that self-emancipation consists in self-mastery, that I can get behind and control the circumstances which make me what I am. It amounts to the “they” dictating its own renunciation, like the old confounding platitude to “lift oneself up by one’s bootstraps.”

On this assumption, I would altogether conceal my nature as possible; I would wholly deliver myself over to a public interpretation, in thrall to the “they,” and so preclude the possibility of listening another way. By attempting to empirically determine my occupation, I would utterly obscure the possibility of a vocation. I would have no basis to trust myself, “to believe that what is true for [me] in [my] private heart is true for all.” I would have no reason even to believe that there is cause for belief, that there is such thing as a “private heart” at all. I would “labor under a mistake,” faithless, and so lead a life of “quiet desperation.” I would become the living dead.

Our freedom depends upon our faith, faith that there is work which is meant for our hands, that we have a vocation. Faith in our calling, like the call itself, is not something we can impose upon ourselves nor anyone else. It must be engendered through the repetition of the event of the call, an event which depends upon our ability to overhear the voice of the spectator or friend, echoing from outside what we quietly confide in our private hearts.

The paradigm for this sense of hearing is reading. By learning to read we learn to listen. “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 of the face of things for us” (“Reading,” ¶12). Thoreau explains that salutary reading, reading
“in a high sense,” is a constructive, free, and freeing enterprise. As such, it requires that we listen intently, faithfully, the kind of conscious effort of the mind discussed above—not that we follow along the surface of the words, nor take them at face value, but that we allow them “the opportunity of overturning all [our] most cherished beliefs.” It means that we accept them as providence, yield to them, and so afford the possibility of taking them up as our own. To truly read Walden, we must write our own; we must build our selves, our houses, alongside Thoreau’s, in Walden’s neighborhood. Only in this way may we receive its words in the spirit of gracious affinity in which it was written; only in this way may we come to accept it as a free—and thereby freeing—gift. It is no mere coincidence that the words “free” and “friend” share a common origin.

As we found in the analysis of Mitsein in the second chapter, our being comprises an inherent sociality, a primordial opening onto others that we each carry within us. This internal dialogical relation is the ontological foundation of any discourse we can carry on with another, and so forms the basis of speaking and listening, reading and writing. We have seen that this relation can be manifest in two ways: either in distantiality, whereby we listen to the “whole cry of voices” of convention, tradition, and the “they”; or in conscience, when we neighbor ourselves, and are privy to the spontaneous impression of genius. The former mode is that of self-consciousness, of the constricting, governing voice of private opinion. The latter is what we have come to characterize as the doubleness of spectator and indweller, our ecstatic nextness to ourselves. It is by way of this doubleness that we may partake of an impartial shared sense, which in turn forms the basis of the possibility of true friendship.

In the first chapter I offered a preliminary reading of Walden’s themes of solitude and society. There I suggested that we are to take Thoreau’s withdrawal from the village not as an act of altogether shunning or rejecting society, but as the first step in establishing a different kind of social relation. Through the foregoing analysis, we see that solitude does not imply utter isolation, but instead provides
a discreet opening onto the kind of neighborhood which *Walden* seeks to engender with its reader. Entering this solitary society involves a modification of the distance and nearness which separate neighbors, by which we may reinterpret our relation to others as analogue to our relation to ourselves in the aspects of indweller and spectator. While the character of the indweller is unique to each of us, and “will vary with different natures”—for this is what makes me sincerely *me*—my relation to it, the stance which would afford my view of it, is always the same, and no more mine than yours. This is the stance, or place, that Thoreau has in mind when he says, “I desire to speak somewhere *without* bounds; like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments” (“Conclusion,” ¶6).

A truly free society, on *Walden*’s account, would have to guarantee its members the possibility of speaking without bounds, and it would be our duty to uphold that guarantee. The political purpose of Thoreau’s withdrawal to *Walden* Pond, his sense of civil disobedience, is not to suggest that we are to oppose society as such, but rather that we “maintain [ourselves] in whatever attitude [we] find [ourselves] through obedience to the laws of [our] being, which will never be one of opposition to a just government, if [we] should ever chance to meet with such” (“Conclusion,” ¶3).

These considerations culminate in a sincere understanding of *Walden*’s promise, which finds its fulfillment in the act of reading *Walden* itself. When we read carefully, attentively—when we undertake to read the book as “deliberately and reservedly” as it was written (cf. “Reading,” ¶3)—we may dwell *next* to its words; we become as its spectators. Only in this way may we draw near to what could be called a common origin, the basis of a shared sense, whereby our nearness to each other is reoriented by way of our respective nearness to the perennial source of our distinct lives. The words which issue most directly from this source pertain to each of us equally, for the expression of genius affords universal sense. As Emerson would say, in *Walden*, as “in every work of genius[,] we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty” (“Self-Reliance,” ¶1). Its words surpass
our everyday, public understanding and drive right through to our hearts. We do not heed its lessons as we would our parents’ scolding (as when we are reprimanded for rudely staring at strangers), for it does not reach us from without, but from within. It echoes “with masterly good sense what we have thought and felt all the time” (ibid). In the sound of this echo we overhear the like expression of our own latent convictions, the truth afforded only by genius—the beautiful, unconscious constructions of the workman in each of us, whose work we are.

This is the call, as it arises in the course of reading. In the echo of another impartial voice, a concord of spirit sounds so clearly as to cut through the din of public and private opinion, and “they” fall away; we hear another voice, as from afar and yet next to us, which exalts us to a broader view of our lives. In that ecstatic moment, we are privy to the shared truth that we are each who we are meant to become. We are congenial to one another; we are kindred. We learn, by the grace of a stranger, to stand as remote from ourselves as from another, how to become as a stranger to ourselves. This is what it means to become free.

It is an old fantasy that, through some excess of attention, diligence, or intent, one might secure a lasting and interminable state of authenticity or genius, and verge as nearly as possible upon eternity in this mortal life. But the human creature is not a static being. We do not achieve ourselves, and can never finally fulfill our calling. The task of becoming who we are meant to be is never complete, but only resolved from one moment to the next. The next self is realized only in its perpetual becoming, in the rhythm of the repetition of the call. The grandest inspirations of our most elated moments, the resolutions that seem so steadfast in our broad, dilated and generous moods, may seem but a thin, vaporous and dissipating conceit in the next. It is not enough to be born but once or twice; to live truly, to fulfill the promise of a whole human life, we must allow ourselves to die again and be ever reborn.

We are “falling”; we are “guilty.” We may be bold, beneficent and free; we may be sneaking, coy, and retributive. We are always using
our clearest insights to quietly affirm our darkest and most wellhidden prejudices. Emerson writes,

Our moods do not believe in each other. To-day I am full of thoughts, and can write what I please. I see no reason why I should not have the same thought, the same power of expression, to-morrow. What I write, whilst I write it, seems the most natural thing in the world; but yesterday I saw a dreary vacuity in this direction in which now I see so much; and a month hence, I doubt not, I shall wonder who he was that wrote so many consecutive pages. Alas for this infirm faith, this will not strenuous, this vast ebb of a vast flow! I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall. (“Circles,” ¶10)

Our task is not to overcome or outgrow this tendency, this ebb and flow (like the back-and-forth of thrown projection), but to accept it providentially. We are, by nature, constricted, familiar, and given to routine; yet we are volatile, and we are strange.

This is to be the meaning and the purpose of our words. We are to write and read, speak and listen, that we may climb out of our present, lowly condition into ever higher circles of understanding and imagination; for this we need the free concord of congenial friendship; we need grace. “The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement. Their truth is instantly translated; its literal monument alone remains” (“Conclusion,” ¶6). We should read and write, simply and sincerely, so as to be perpetual living testaments to the truth of the words, to continually reanimate and re-intimate them to each other.

When, in reading, we become neighbors, we are to be each other’s antagonists, or beautiful enemies, as Emerson says, calling each other out of our constriction. We become strangers again; our promise is fulfilled only in its repeated affirmation. “The way of life is wonderful: it is by abandonment” (“Circles,” ¶32). We are not to invoke and reiterate the dictates of others, but to speak the latent convictions of genius, and so abandon each other to the facts of our respective lives, to let each other alone.

To abandon means to let alone, to “fallow, perchance”—not to renounce our failures or desert our past projects, but to allow their
revision through repetition. No measure of age or experience can bring us any closer to ourselves, nor to one another. Success and failure have no bearing on the work which is meant for our hands; the outcomes of our past projects and relationships, be they what they may, will always be projected anew. Our task is to leave them behind, to let them go, only so that we may remain attentive to what, or who, comes next—the next step, the next self.

I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond-side... It is true I fear that others may have fallen into it... The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world—how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity!

(“Conclusion,” ¶4)

To read Walden means at last to leave it behind, to let it go. We have several more lives to live. We should not seek to secure actual possession of the field that opens to us there, and make a rut of the path our minds travel through it. We should only retain the seeds we readied for it, that we may plant them another day, in another discourse, with another friend.

In this way we learn to have faith that we may always yet be surprised, and know we are always as children in this world. With confidence and hope we learn to stare shamelessly into the unfamiliar face of promise and new possibility; every friend becomes a stranger, and every stranger is a friend. In wonder we are reborn, together.
Notes

1. To accommodate a vast number of reprinted editions, I will make references to Walden by chapter title and paragraph number.

2. This is one of many junctures where Heidegger has informed my reading of Walden. Human finitude is existentially decisive in Being and Time; it is being-towards-death that first individualizes Dasein as free for its “ownmost possibility.” Although being-towards-death is inherently solitary, in a peculiar sense it also implies the presence of a witness—the voice of conscience, a friend, we might say—from whom the call of conscience issues. (Cf. Christopher Fynsk, “The Self and Its Witness.”)

3. For more about Heidegger’s distinction between “ontic” and “ontological,” cf. Being and Time, 11.

4. Dasein, though difficult to translate adequately, is a term so ubiquitous in Being and Time it is often rendered in the original German. It should be read as essentially synonymous with “person” or “human being,” the most notable difference being Heidegger's aversion to the connotations which have accrued to such terms throughout the philosophical tradition. He also makes use of its etymological construction to characterize the “being” [sein] of the “there” [da] and relate it closely to complementary terms such as In-sein [Being-in] and Mitsein [Being-with]. The term Dasein is meant to stand in contrast to prior conceptual designations of human beings such as that of the “rational animal,” traditionally attributed to Aristotle.

5. I allude here to the work of Stanley Cavell, whose “little book,” The Senses of Walden, sought (among other things) to place Thoreau's endeavor in the context of the Puritan migration as the paradigmatic event within which to understand Thoreau's own transcendental ambitions. (Cf. The Senses of Walden, 10ff.)
Bibliography


