

# Forest and Philosophy: Toward an Aesthetics of Wood

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*This paper initiates a phenomenological study of the aesthetics of forest and wood in three main phases. First, we consider the modalities of wood's sensuousness and argue against the formalist tradition that restricts aesthetic appreciation to visual forms. Second, we examine the structural, eidetic features of hand-made wooden objects in the "second life" of trees. Third, we engage in reflections on the communities gathered by the first and second lives of trees. These themes outline an aesthetics of the beautiful, the given, and the gathering. We take philosophical inspiration from Merleau-Ponty throughout, and in the end, also Thoreau.*

The *tree simpliciter*, the physical thing belonging to Nature, is nothing less than this *perceived tree as perceived* which, as perceptual sense, inseparably belongs to the perception. The tree simpliciter can burn up, be resolved into its chemical elements, etc. But the sense—the sense of this perception, something belonging necessarily to its essence—cannot burn up; it has no chemical elements, no forces, no real properties. —Husserl, *Ideas I*, § 89

Say that the things are structures, frameworks, the stars of our life: not before us, laid out as perspective spectacles, but gravitating about us. . . . Replace the notions of concept, idea, mind, representation with the notions of *dimensions*, articulation, level, hinges, pivots, configurations.

—Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*

Dedicated to Renee and Marjorie, daughters of workshop and forest.<sup>1</sup>

A story is yet to be told of the relation between philosophy and the forests. Trees, rooted in the earth and towering into the sky, afford one of our most constant and

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1. In addition to my daughters, I would like to thank my colleague, Prof. Cheryl Foster of the University of Rhode Island, herself an international scholar in the aesthetics of nature, who read an early draft of this essay and made several invaluable suggestions that have been incorporated into the final version. I would also like to thank Prof. Ted Toadvine of the University of Oregon, also an internationally recognized environmental philosopher, for his careful reading and valuable suggestions that also have been incorporated throughout.

intimate contacts with non-human nature, and have afforded philosophers with the very metaphors of Being: root, leaf, branch, seed, blossoming, begetting and dying. The second life of trees, transformed into the lumber of architecture and the fine woods of furniture in the hands of builders and woodworkers, have provided the architectural and craft metaphors for understanding the workings of the universe: dimension, interior, exterior, depth, grain, hinges, drawers, doors and locks.

One could write a considerable portion of the history of Western philosophy around these trees, wood and woodworking.<sup>2</sup> It would include Aristotle's acorn and oak tree, Descartes' tree and branches of metaphysics, Berkeley's immaterial falling tree, Husserl's noema-tree, and Heidegger's discussions of the clearing, *Holzwege*, and *autochthony* (rootedness). It would take note of Plato's Demiurge impressing form on matter and philosopher-king guiding the ship of state, and Aristotle's sea-battle, ship of Theseus, and four causes. It would follow out Aristotle's argument in the *Physics* for the distinction between things that exist "by nature" as over against things that are composed not by nature, such as a bed; if one "plants a bed," Aristotle notes, and the moistened wood sends up a shoot, that shoot will not be a bed but a plant and eventually a tree.<sup>3</sup> A major chapter would belong to Vico's *New Science* and his craft paradigm for the theory of knowledge originating from the claim that we can truly understand only that which we have made.<sup>4</sup>

Attention would also go to those philosophical texts where the metaphors of wood have established crucial turns in argument. In arguing for the continuity of our stream of consciousness, for example, William James wrote: "The transition between the thought of one object and the thought of another is no more a break in the *thought* than a joint in a bamboo is a break in the wood. It is a part of the *consciousness* as much as the joint is a part of the *bamboo*."<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre's Roquentin, in the novel *Nausea*, learned Sartre's existentialist meaning of the contingency of existence from the gnarly chestnut tree in the park: "So I was in the park just now. The roots of the chestnut tree were sunk in the ground just under my bench. . . . Then I had this vision. It left me breathless. Never until these last few days, had I understood the meaning of 'existence' . . . . The essential thing is contingency. I mean that one cannot define existence as necessity. To exist is

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2. I express my thanks to David Wood for sharing his essay titled "Trees and Truth (Or, Why We Are Really All Druids)," which sketches a history of the tree as epistemological metaphor in philosophy, from which I have learned much. His essay is published in *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Bruce Foltz and Robert Frode-man (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 32–43.

3. Cf. *Aristotle's Physics*, trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), Book B, Chapter 1, 25–26.

4. Giambattista Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, cited in Leon Pompa, *Vico: A Study of the 'New Science'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 72.

5. William James, *Principles of Psychology*, Volume I, "The Stream of Thought" (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1890). Cited from *Pragmatism: The Classic Writings*, ed. H. S. Thayer (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 143.

simply *to be there*.”<sup>6</sup> Martin Heidegger introduced the example of the cabinet-maker and an apprentice in *What is Called Thinking?* to propose thinking itself as a kind of craft that requires, beyond facility with tools and knowledge, sensitive attunement and response.<sup>7</sup> In the first chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus* titled “Introduction: Rhizome,” Deleuze and Guattari tell us they are “tired of trees.” We should stop believing so much in trees and roots, they argue against the tradition, for trees mean transcendence and upright vertical striving, hierarchical organizations of power. Deleuze and Guattari contend against the tree with more humble vegetation and the rhizome: “long live the multiple;” “grass is the only way out.”

It would also be a matter of interest that some philosophers have also been workers of wood. In his “Autobiography,” Karl Popper tells the story of his two-year apprenticeship to an old master cabinetmaker in Vienna named Adalbert Pösch. Popper describes a large order for thirty mahogany kneehole desks, with many, many drawers as the inspiration for his recognition that he was better suited to philosophy than to French polish. Upon completion of his apprenticeship he looked “for something easier than making mahogany writing desks” and shortly thereafter became a scholar who “could work on a writing desk and yet be preoccupied with epistemology.”<sup>8</sup> We have it from Popper’s students, however, that he continued his cabinetmaking as an avocation and was especially well-known for his clock cases.

Rather than enter into such a history of the relation between philosophy and the forests, I want to initiate a phenomenological study of the aesthetics of forest and wood. This will unfold in three main phases. First will come a consideration of the confrontation with the material of wood itself, with the modalities of its sensuousness; second, a consideration of the structural or eidetic features of hand-made wooden objects: cradles, beds, desks, bookcases, tables, and chairs; third, some reflections on the community of those who work with wood and on the trees that bestow their gifts across the generations and ages. These themes outline the sketch of an aesthetics of the beautiful, the given, and the gathering. Though we will be occupied principally with the second life of trees as they have been transformed into the fine woods of furniture, we will inevitably need to speak of the more complex first life of the tree within non-human nature. I will be speaking as a philosopher, but also as a woodworker who knows firsthand the privileges and pleasures of fine wood, planes and joinery. We hope that we are not overreaching in attempting to raise the humble, intimate objects of everyday

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6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964), 126–27, 129.

7. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1968), 13–15.

8. Karl Popper, “Autobiography,” in *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp, The Library of Living Philosophers (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1974), 3–4.

dwelling into philosophical objects that organize the meanings of place, time and community.

### **The Beautiful: Toward an Aesthetics of Wood**

There is an aesthetic tradition that attempts to distinguish between aesthetic appreciation and sense pleasure. Aesthetic appreciation, it is held by philosophers such as Kant and Santayana, has to do with qualities such as form and balance that comprise what is beautiful. Therefore, only visual forms, such as in painting, and auditory experiences such as in music, could be beautiful and the object of aesthetic appreciation. The reasons a person could give for calling an object “beautiful” could never involve references to the senses of smell, taste, or touch, and the touch of velvet or the flavor of wine or the smell of a rose could not properly be called beautiful. Yet there are good arguments for thinking the formalist tradition in error, and that smells, tastes, and tactile sensations count among the things that can be beautiful.<sup>9</sup> The experience of wood, which itself stands prior to the experience of the well-formed hand-made object, dramatically confirms the convergence of aesthetic pleasure and sense pleasure.

The wooden surface is a tactile, sensuous membrane that meets us as a rough or smooth texture, close kin with the skin of the human body, which awakens the desire to be held, stroked, and caressed. We never recover from the pleasure of the touch of the skin, and to the woodworker, the desire to touch the wood is something similar. There are the rough textures of the various kinds of bark prior to the milling and the sleek sheen of the board fresh from the planer. To touch a board of mahogany or walnut or cherry and run one’s hand over its surface length and width is to be touched in return, to feel its qualities of hardness or softness, flexibility or inflexibility, strength or fragility. The woodworker interrogates the wood through a tactile exegesis. The interrogation senses its breaks, checks, and imperfections which are the marks of its former life before it died and passed into our hands. No board of significant size is ever perfectly clear, but intermittently checked with knots, burls, splits, and warps. The woodworker’s job begins by assessing these imperfections to cooperate with them or eliminate them in rendering a work. Sometimes a check or crack can be pulled together with a butterfly joint, such as those perfected by the great Japanese-American woodworker, George Nakashima,<sup>10</sup> and a magnificent board healed. Sometimes a knot, severe split, or blemish of grain must be cut out with the least possible damage to the strength and beauty of the board.

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9. This tradition which separates aesthetic and sense pleasure includes, for example, Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* and George Santayana’s *The Sense of Beauty*. See the fine article challenging this distinction by Francis J. Coleman, “Can a Smell or a Taste or a Touch be Beautiful?” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (October 1965): 319–324.

10. Cf. John Kelsey, “George Nakashima: For each plank there’s one perfect use,” *Fine Woodworking*, no. 14 (January/February 1979): 40–46. Also cf. “The Butterfly Joint: Double dovetails for strength and beauty,” *Fine Woodworking*, no. 25 (November/December 1980): 72–73.

The woodworker's touch that initiates the dialogue with the wood also comes into prominent play again in the finish. It is a woodworker's pride to achieve as perfect a finished surface as possible, and only the hand can assess the quality of smoothness produced by the final planing, wetting, or sanding. Coniferous, or cone-bearing, trees generally produce softwoods such as pine, spruce, fir, redwood and cedar. Deciduous trees that lose their leaves during the winter months are classified as hardwoods. The joy of the hardwood finish is the depth and richness of the wood that can be brought forth with the penetration of oils and a light protective coat over the surface of the wood. A primordial three-dimensionality comes forward involving the interplay of light, shape, and depth. With such a finish, we can look deeply into the heart of a board.

Thereby, no less than a tangibility, the wood is a visibility, a range of colors and richness of grain. Grain refers to the direction and orientation of the fibers in the wood produced as the cells grow. There are a number of different grain patterns produced by the slower growth of winter wood and the more rapid growth of summer wood, making for patterns that are straight and fine or wavy and coarse, and colors of grain that are light or dark, the winter wood usually producing the wavier and darker colors. Maple is a light-colored hardwood particularly well-known for the variety of its grains, ranging from the spray of darker dots and specks that figure birds-eye maple to the amazing orange striping of the prized zebra stripe maple. Logs are most often cut along their length with the grain of the growth of the tree, and "cutting for the 'boule'" or "plainsawing," which means cutting the log all the way from one end to the other without turning or trimming, is the preferred way to maximize the hidden possibilities of grain in the log. There are other ways to cut a log to disclose different patterns of grain, such as rotary or ribbon cutting for veneer, which spins the log and "peels" a very thin layer of wood, and "quarter-sawing" in which the log is cut at 90 degrees to the growth rings, producing narrower and somewhat weaker boards but ones with a wonderfully even ribbon graining.<sup>11</sup>

Cross-cutting straight through a log to cut it into slabs will show the cross-grain of the wood, which can be especially desirable for working with the root wood of very large trees. Cross-cutting produces a cross-section of the tree, such as we all have seen peering down at a stump, that can be read as the story of a tree's life, from the pith center, which is the first growth of the infant tree from the seed, outward to the bark, the tree's outer protective layer. In between are the growth rings and the visible difference between the heartwood and sapwood. The heartwood is the aged core of the tree closest to the pith center, which has ceased containing living cells, and is darker and harder than the sapwood, which are the more outward rings of the wood containing the living cells that move water from roots to leaves. Tight growth rings indicate the years in which there has been

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11. Cf. George Nakashima, *The Soul of a Tree: A Woodworker's Reflection* (New York: Kodansha International Ltd., 1987), 96–99. It is from this invaluable work that we have learned to speak of the first and second life of trees.

slow growth due to dryness, and wider rings indicate the wet years in which there has been open fast growth. There also can sometimes be discerned “wind shake” rings, which are wavy and indicate the years with great storms and stress during the growth of the tree. It was Leonardo da Vinci who pointed out that the rings also reveal the side of the world to which they were turned, because each ring will be larger to the north than to the south, and the center of the tree is closer to the bark on the south than on the north.<sup>12</sup> By reading the cross-section of a tree we discern the chronology of the tree, its nobility, patience and suffering when droughts or storms or insects beset the lands and when life-giving rains fell in abundance. In relation to these natural chronologies, we are able in reciprocity to measure out the years and historical sense of our own lives.

To see a log of wood split open by the mill saw is to have unfolded before your eyes the inner secrets of the life of a tree and the possibilities for its metamorphosis into a second life as hand-worked object. Sometimes the experience is one of keen disappointment, such as when we find the interior of a promising log eaten away and ruined by bugs or disease. Sometimes we find ourselves in the presence of a magnificent and stunning beauty created over years, generations and centuries of life and growth. Once there was a tree of African mahogany that had made its way across the waters to our continent and a nearby mill that unfolded itself to me under the pass of the saw. The most astonishing, enormous burl with swirls of red and purple in the wood’s brown became visible, and instantly that burl was destined to become the center of the top surface of a mahogany desk. More recently, there was a tree of native Rhode Island walnut that unfolded itself in the mill and in the streaming sunlight could be seen lines of red such as I had never known possible in the dark brown/black tones of walnut. Unusual coloring such as this results from the composition of the soil and water taken up into the tree through its root system. There still seems to be some evolutionary mystery that surrounds the appearance of burls on trees regarding their adaptive function. These are the rounded outgrowths or enlargements on the trunk or branches of trees that make the alignment of the wood fibers into clusters of curls. Usually burling is concentrated in one area of a tree, but sometimes, like with the English oak tree or English walnut, burling may occupy the entire tree, creating some of the most prized figuring known in fine wood. This well may be an example of one of Nature’s “gratuitous beauties”<sup>13</sup> that is part of its play and promiscuity. Such figuring from the first life of trees prefigures the destiny of a board in a second life as hand-made object. An experienced and intuitive

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12. *Leonardo on Painting*, ed. Martin Kemp, trans. Martin Kemp and Margaret Walker (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 178.

13. The term “gratuitous beauty” is that of Holmes Rolston III in “The Aesthetic Experience of Forests,” in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, ed. Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2004), 189: “it is difficult to escape the experience of gratuitous beauty – with autumn leaves, or mountain peaks, or with trilliums unexpected along a woodland path.” This article originally appeared in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 3 (March 1998).

craftsman like George Nakashima “really believes there is one perfect use for each flitch of timber, and his task—his duty—is to recognize it.”<sup>14</sup>

During the first life of trees, we are able to meet with the aromas and scents of the wood in a dense pine or aromatic cedar forest, but in the second life of wood, it is not until the board is cut, sawn, planed, or sanded that we meet with the aromas of the wood. This sacrifice brings forth a resurrection of the scents of the forest, and a woodworker’s shop is a place of smells as fine as those of the kitchens where foods are prepared. For the experienced nose, we can recognize whether it is pine or oak or mahogany or walnut that is being worked, even without looking or touching. There is the fresh fragrance of pine, the dark, charcoal muskiness of walnut, the spicy fruitiness of cherry, the dusty heaviness of mahogany, and the moth and insect-resistant pungency of a cedar lining. I think there is no other fragrance in woodworking so appealing as a shop filled with the nutty, vanilla, sienna bouquet of fresh cut oak.<sup>15</sup> It is always autumn with leaves turning golden, falling acorns and scurrying squirrels where oak is being worked. In the deepest winter we can turn back the seasons with a good fire in the woodstove and a flitch of oak under the saw.

If the touch, sight, and smell of wood offers pleasures kindred to those of the places of love or the kitchens of good food, we must admit that the preparation of food rewards us in a way that fine wood in its second life cannot. When we are finished cooking, then comes the pleasure of the eating. When we finish a cabinet or table, we cannot eat it, for we are not insects or worms. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that from the first life of trees there come to us a rich array of ways in which wood enters into the flavors of food and drink. The dried bark of the small sassafras tree of Tasmania, Australia and Brazil makes a fine-tasting tea with excellent medicinal properties, and the dried root of the sarsaparilla, native to tropical America from Jamaica and Mexico to Peru, combined with tonic produces the flavor of root beer. The root of the White Heath tree gives us the brier that is used in the making of fine pipes, chosen for its often wonderful figuring and its resistance to high temperatures as well as the flavor of the brier that mingles with the tobacco. Cedar is used in the “planking” of salmon as it grills and fragments from the mesquite tree, first soaked in water and then thrown onto the live charcoal, flavor smoked meats and fish.

The oak tree plays an important role in the production of scotch whiskey and red wines. By law, the casks used for maturing Scotch must be made of oak, and the preferred type of wood for making the staves of casks is American oak, probably due to its straightness of grain with little burling. A very small quantity of Spanish oak is used by a very few Scottish distilleries for the maturing of Scotch with a sherry finish. In discussing this law and tradition, Charles MacLean

14. John Kelsey, “George Nakashima: For each plank there’s one perfect use,” 41.

15. This essay is dedicated to my two daughters, the older of whom, Renee, surprised me by writing an essay recalling, among her earliest childhood memories, the scents of the woodworking shop.

writes: "What is certain is that the casks in which the whiskey matures are much more than storage vessels. Wood makes a vital—perhaps 'the' vital contribution—to the character and flavor of the final product."<sup>16</sup> The inside walls of the casks are first charred in order to prepare them for the release of vanillin into the liquor. After charring, the casks are first used for maturing bourbon or sherry, usually bourbon. In turn, the flavor of the first incumbent lingers in the wood and re-emerges, along with the compounds of the wood itself, in the aroma and flavor of the mature whiskey. Charred wooden casks are similarly essential to the flavoring of red wines and the oak barrels of southern France made from regional species are much prized in the production of the Pinot Noir and other fine reds.<sup>17</sup>

The acoustics of wood are equally compelling. Wood sings. It sings in its first life with the rustling sounds of the wind in its leaves, the creaking of its branches, and the songs of the birds to which it lends habitation. It sings in its second life as the musical instruments that abound with the sonorities of the wood, from drums to string instruments to woodwinds. My own brush with the acoustics of wood came through the desire to create a music box that would bring forth the deepest sonorities from a fine Swiss musical movement. One quickly discovers the tradition that generations of musical instrument craftsmen have handed down over the centuries, that it is the wood of spruce that makes the best soundboards and the wood of maple that makes the best cases with the richest resonance of tone and least distortion. Since the 1600's, the traditional materials used in violin-making have remained unchanged. Quartersawn maple is used for the back, neck, head and sides, and straight-grain spruce for the top. The fittings - pegs, tailpiece and fingerboard - are usually made of ebony, and the bridge that supports the strings must be maple or sycamore.<sup>18</sup> The variations in thickness and secrets of the shellac finish have established the Italian makers, Amati, Stradivari, and Guarneri as the paradigm of excellence among the craftsmen of the strings. In the making of classical guitars and lutes, the woods of spruce and maple remain constant, and variations in sound and beauty derive from the rose and rosette patterns created in the center of the top soundboards, as well as the thin wood edgings called purfling.<sup>19</sup>

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16. Charles MacLean, *The Mitchell Beazley Pocket Whiskey Book* (London: Reed International Books Limited, 1993), 18. I owe this lead regarding the importance of wood to the flavor of whisky to my colleague, Prof. Albert Silverstein, long-time member of the Single Malt Society.

17. I have already thanked Prof. Ted Toadvine above for his valuable suggestions, but he in particular deserves credit for his knowledge of wine production and for pushing me to better recognize the flavors of woods.

18. Harry S. Wake, "The Shape of a Violin," *Fine Woodworking*, no. 15 (March/April 1979), 40.

19. Cf. Lyn Elder, "Lute Roses," *Fine Woodworking* 2, no. 1 (Summer 1977), 38-41; Al Ching, "A Not-So-Classic Rosette for Classical Guitars," *Fine Woodworking*, no. 28 (May/June 1981), 51; and, William R. Cumpiano and Jonathan D. Natelson, "Guitar Binding and Purfling," *Fine Woodworking*, no. 28 (May/June 1981), 52-55.

Though we have worked our way toward a phenomenology of the sensuous modalities of wood one by one, no one should think that the aesthetic and sense pleasures of fine wood are experienced singly in the various registers from touch to sound. In some instances, such as for sound which is not available until the instrument is finished, or flavor which must be produced indirectly through a process of manufacture, the sensuousness of the material is approached in a temporally emergent, rather than discrete experience. Yet for touch, sight and smell, and subsequently flavor and sound, wood awakens and stirs our senses simultaneously and kinaesthetically as a global experience of the first and second life of trees. We might best say that the unity of this sensuousness has a sculptural sense, a figuring of color, light, shape, depth and age that we must carefully attend to in all its registers before we begin to fit the wood together into a cabinet or table according to our forms and purposes. The craftsman interrogates the wood with the same wonder and attention that the sculptor studies the stone before the first chiseling and the painter studies the landscape before the first brush stroke, in order that the wood itself may speak.

Thus, a phenomenology of the beautiful that attends to the materiality and sensuousness of wood takes its orientation in perceptual exploration as developed in the ontology of visibility and invisibility elaborated by Merleau-Ponty. Like the aesthetic appreciation of a work of art, the aesthetic appreciation of nature requires fully embodied perceptual attentiveness to the sensory meanings (*sens*) that present themselves. Far from casual, everyday perception, this sort of perceptual attentiveness and interrogation requires the effort, education, and skill of seasoned “seeing as” that is essential to the whole range of aesthetic appreciation. This is not a matter of “consciousness” that touches and feels, but of the experienced hand as an “outer brain of man,” as Kant put it,<sup>20</sup> or as the “mind of the body,” in Aristotle’s phrasing. Merleau-Ponty drew a distinction between the ‘natural perception’ of everyday life that glimpses things and only “alights on things sufficiently attentively to discover in them their familiar presence” in contrast with a ‘primary perception’—sometimes he even says ‘primordial perception’—that pays “a metaphysical and disinterested attention” to things.<sup>21</sup> He never believed, nor do we as appreciators and workers of the wood ever believe, that this sort of primary perception achieves perfect coincidence with trees, forest, and the world, for our perception is always anchored in our bodily style with its customary spatial levels and sedimented temporal history. The thing and the world, as well, comprise an inexhaustible richness and depth. As there has been a longstanding dispute regarding the relationship of aesthetic appreciation with sense pleasure, so there has more recently emerged a dispute between those who defend a cognitivist, science based theory of aesthetic appreciation as over

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20. Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1964), 316.

21. *Ibid.*, 322f.

against those who defend a theory of direct engagement. The perceptual approach that we have pursued here correlative with the ontology of Merleau-Ponty entails that we will best understand aesthetic experience as this sort of perceptual engagement with things and the world.<sup>22</sup>

### The Given: Toward an Aesthetics of Woodworking

The attentive cabinetmaker, like the aesthetic philosopher, never loses the original sense of the forest and keenness of its sensuousness, for here derives a “fierce peace” that is hesitant to name, classify, or speak at all, such as that described by Barry Lopez in “Children in the Woods.”<sup>23</sup> It is an enchanted experience to be led deep into a woods by a small child to her secret playground in and under the spreading branches of an ancient beech tree of immense girth that could only have been formed from life and growth since pre-Revolutionary times. One feels led by an angel, transported across time and place to an “elsewhere” that graces us with its peace in which we both lose and find our self.<sup>24</sup> As much as for the painter, the caring craftsman experiences a reciprocity with the wood in which it is no longer decidable who is speaking and who listening. We remember the words of Paul Klee that inspired Merleau-Ponty in *Eye and Mind*: “In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me . . . . I was there, listening. . . . I think that the painter must be penetrated by the universe and not want to penetrate it.”<sup>25</sup> There are some furniture forms that seem to force the material, conforming it to a pre-established hegemonic style. It is another matter to keep silence, to respect and wait on the wood to speak, “Talking to me, not through me, recognizing that it is I [the wood] alone who lets you sing wood music. Hitherto shadowy and dumb, I speak to you now as your indispensable medium.”<sup>26</sup> For this sensitivity and respect owed the wood itself, Heidegger proposed the cabinetmaker as an example for understanding thinking itself as a craft.

22. The position taken by Emily Brady in this debate between science based and non-science based approaches to the aesthetics of nature seems to us appropriate. Brady argues for an aesthetic that takes its orientation from Kant and stresses perceptual attentiveness and exploration in addition to four modalities of imagination: exploratory, projective, ampliative, and revelatory. Cf. “Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature,” in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, 156–69. Also cf. her book, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003). Brady’s position stands in opposition to that of Allen Carlson and somewhat to that of Holmes Rolston III. Cf. Allen Carlson, “Appreciation and the Natural Environment,” in *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, 63–75; and, Holmes Rolston III, “The Aesthetic Experience of Forests,” cited above.

23. Cf. the conclusion of Barry Lopez’s “Children in the Woods,” *Crossing Open Ground* (Picador, 1984), 151.

24. For the wonder of this experience, I also dedicate this essay to my younger daughter, Marjorie, who at the time of that astonishing afternoon when she led me into her secret forest playground, was 6 years old.

25. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 129.

The learning of an apprentice is not mere practice to gain facility with tools, nor acquiring knowledge about the customary forms of furniture. If he is to become a true cabinetmaker, Heidegger writes, “he makes himself answer and respond above all to the different kinds of wood and to the shapes slumbering within wood—to wood as it enters into man’s dwelling with all the hidden riches of its nature.”<sup>27</sup> Without this response to what slumbers within wood, the craft will be only busywork or business. Heidegger did not hesitate to suggest that the wood “speaks” in quite a similar way that genuine thinking occurs only when a certain subject matter speaks to a subject: “Thinking is thinking only when it pursues whatever speaks *for* a subject.”<sup>28</sup>

Though the wood speaks, yet the worker of wood eventually must speak as well and take responsibility for the second life of the trees. The philosopher, like the woodworker, must “wake up and speak.”<sup>29</sup> He must measure and fit the wood together. It might seem that thereby the woodworker becomes the geometrician *par excellence*, and it is true that one must be on intimate terms with mathematics and the geometrical laws of the square, triangles, rectangles, and circles.<sup>30</sup> Our shops and toolboxes are filled with the practical instruments of geometry. Yet, ultimately it will not be the geometry that triumphs, but the forms of the human body and our lives together. In woodworking, our “language of means” may be geometry and its tools, but the “language of ends” comes from the forms and life of the human beings that will inhabit our houses, sit in our chairs, and eat at our tables. The “geometrical-conceptual” organization of space enters into creative combinations with the “topological-participational” space of our bodily comportment.<sup>31</sup> A desk or a dining table is 29 to 30 inches high, and the seat of a chair 17 to 19 inches high, but this is because a desk, a table, and a chair are the obverse side of a living human body with tasks to perform or in need of rest.

In fitting the wood together to make a piece, the woodworker becomes known for the integrity of his joints. Joinery really defines the cabinetmaker’s craft. It is not possible that there be a piece of furniture without the smooth transitions from one board to another created by the joint. Here we approach something like an eidetic feature of cabinetry. The mortise and tenon joint is the staple of woodworking that enables us to stabilize wood fitted together at right angles to form

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26. Derek Mahon, “Table Talk,” in *The Hunt by Night* (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 1983), 27.

27. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 14.

28. *Ibid.*, 13.

29. This is how Merleau-Ponty described the philosopher at the end of his Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France. Cf. *In Praise of Philosophy*, trans. John Wild and James Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 63.

30. For an article on the importance of geometry to the workshop, cf. C. Edward Moore, “Shop Math: With a little help from Pythagoras,” *Fine Woodworking*, no. 22 (May/June 1980), 68–70.

31. Cf. Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 142.

the carcass frame of most furniture. The fit of these joints must be true or the strength and integrity of the work will be compromised. A joint that is too tight will, over time, split, and one that is too loose will open up as the glue loses adhesion during aging. Panels rabbeted into the mortise and tenon frame need to be let float without gluing, for the cells of wood absorb moisture and expand during periods of high humidity and contract again during low humidity. Though the tree has died and its moisture dried out in becoming lumber, there remains a crucial relation between the wood and water. The joiner must gauge how the wood will “breathe,” and as the old woodworkers would say, must be able to “think like water” and create the tolerances in the joinery accordingly.<sup>32</sup>

The effects of water on the expansion and contraction of the joints must also be taken into account in joining the boards that will become the wider top surface of a piece. The worker must read the end grain of the boards as they have been cut from the circular rings of the tree, being sure that the boards joined together for the surface will “breathe” as a unity, and not pull against each other. The ideal figuring of the top is created by “bookmatching” the joints, creating symmetrical patterns of graining that make the joints disappear into the figures of the grain itself. Bookmatching can be created by keeping the boards in numerical order as they originally come from the mill saw, or where this is not possible, by “resawing” a thick board into narrower boards that will be placed next to each other as the pages in a book, unfolding a symmetrical figuring. There is also great pleasure, when making the sides of a small case or box, to cut the sides from one single board, creating a continuous graining as it runs all the way around the piece, recapturing the figures of the single, straight board in a four-sided rectangle.

The dovetail is the preferred joint for the sides of drawers because it will tolerate the push and pull of wear over the years without pulling apart, as might a mortise and tenon under similar stress. Sometimes a piece of cabinetry will require a kind of joinery in which the intersection of the joints is not stabilized, but needs to move. The hinged joint answers to this need in the joinery of doors, drop leaf tables, gate leg tables, and moving shelf systems. With the hinge we come to another eidetic feature of furniture that demonstrates the fluidity of transition from interior space to exterior space. Not only in modern philosophy, but in our best social scientists, philosophers of social science, and philosophers of history, the inside has inevitably been set in opposition to the outside, consciousness to thing. Yet inside and outside are not two unalterably opposed realities, but flow into one another and out again as two sides of a single fold. What was

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32. There is a longstanding controversy with religious overtones regarding cutting the tails of tenons all the way through the work or leaving them blind, hidden and invisible inside the mortise. By stopping the tenon inside the mortise, we are able to hide the unseemliness of end grain protruding and marring the finished surface. However, it is easy to see that this also provides an opening for the unscrupulous woodworker to become sloppy in the fit of the joints. The Puritan woodworking manuals forbade blind joinery as an opening to dishonesty and offense against God. Cf. C. W. Hampton and E. Clifford, *Plane-craft: Hand Planing* (Sheffield, England: C. & J. Hampton, Ltd., 1959), 31.

exterior becomes interior and what was under becomes what is above. There is a crossing over from inside to outside, from intimacy to strangeness, in the hinges of our furniture and houses and in the flesh of our bodies and relationships.<sup>33</sup> The movement of hinges and the fluid transition of inside and outside means that it is better to say, not that our inner and spiritual life is inside us, but in front of us in the places with which we dwell and the relationships we treasure, or that it is above us in the sky that lightens and the stars that burn, or that it is beneath us in the shadows of the dusk, the earth and water that sustain, and the memories of graves and dead loves. As happened naturally and almost willy-nilly in his discussion of concepts and their limits in *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida began to speak of the hinge—"but what is a hinge?"<sup>34</sup> Philosophy would best draw its meditations nearer the transitions and interrelationships made possible by the movement of the hinge, away from the hierarchies, systems, and limits of classical metaphysics. This is why Merleau-Ponty wrote that the notions of concepts, ideas, and minds need to be replaced with the notions of "dimensions, articulations, levels, hinges, pivots, configurations." Then we will say that "the things are structures, frameworks, the stars of our life: not before us, laid out as perspective spectacles, but gravitating about us."<sup>35</sup>

As we cannot imagine any furniture without joints nor any movement in the joints without hinges, we cannot imagine a desk or a dresser without drawers. A desk without drawers is a table, and a dresser without drawers is a chest.<sup>36</sup> On the one hand, drawers are about classifying things, and in the well-made proportions of a desk or filing cabinet drawer can be enough room to house reliably at our fingertips an entire world of pre-formed ideas and expectations without a bit of haziness.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, the drawer can become the symbol of the dull clerical or administrative spirit, and it is easy for a woodworker to understand Karl Popper's frustration in producing thirty knee-hole desks with the repetition of at least some one hundred-eighty drawers. Against such a "dry rationalism," Henri Bergson protested when discussing memory in *Creative Evolution*. "Memory," Bergson wrote, "is not the faculty for classifying recollections in a drawer, or writing them down in a register. Neither register nor drawer exists."<sup>38</sup> If we slacken our grip on the classifying metaphor of the drawer, we also know that

33. For further elaboration of the meaning of interior and exterior in the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, cf. my essay entitled "Inside and Outside: Ontological Considerations," in *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World*, ed. Dorothea Olkowski and James Morley (Albany, NY: Humanities Press, 1999), 25–34.

34. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xvii. Also cf. xxv.

35. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 220, 224.

36. I owe to Prof. Ted Toadvine the knowledge that in the history French furniture making, dressers and tables as distinct items of furniture evolved from chests.

37. Cf. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maraia Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 77.

38. Cited in Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 75.

drawers are about intimacy. These are places of depth, darkness, and secrets. The drawers of desks, dressers and chests are the storehouses of our daydreams and memories, and the intimacy of our personal lives would be impoverished without these places. The locked drawer that the woodworker creates is witness to our need for secrecy and speaks less about the violence of possible theft than the human desire for hiding places. A tumult of dreams and memories floods over us when we unlock a drawer filled with old correspondence or photographs, or when we open the perfumed dresser drawer of a departed love. The human spirit is enlarged in the company of friends, but the human heart also needs its places of privacy and intimacy, away from the eyes of the world, where we place and protect our dreams and memories. Like the nests of birds and the shells of snails, like the small corners and nooks of a house or garret where we curl up to remember and dream, the making of drawers affords the cabinetmaker the opportunity to participate in an “aesthetics of hidden things”<sup>39</sup> and a philosophy of solitude.

### **The Gathering: Toward Community in Wood**

If we have been led to considerations of intimacy and solitude, this needs to be set within a larger relief of the communities of wood and woodworking. The first and second life of trees have, over the years, provided the social bonds and organizing principles of some well-known communities, the best known of which is the Shakers.<sup>40</sup> The uniqueness of the Shaker style of design is its unusual simplicity and integrity. In the words of Joseph Meacham, “all things ought to be made according to their order and use.”<sup>41</sup> Decoration of any kind was shunned, and inferior workmanship, superfluous turnings, applied veneers, and carvings were viewed as wasteful and distracting. The statutes of the community forbade any craftsman to write or print his name on any article of manufacture. The vocation of the wood and honesty and earnestness of the work were to be the only things visible in a piece, not a name or trademark. Each tree and board were thought to have a unique calling and the craftsman was trained to respond to this call. A Shaker elder, planting his orchard, remarked: “A tree has its wants and wishes and a man should study them as a teacher watches a child to see what it can do. If you love a plant, take heed to what it likes. You will be repaid by it.”<sup>42</sup>

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39. *Ibid.*, xxxvii–xxxviii.

40. Led by Mother Ann Lee from Manchester, England, the Shakers or “shaking Quakers” arrived in New York in 1774 and established their founding community at New Lebanon. By 1850 there were eighteen Shaker colonies in existence, eleven in New England and New York, and the others in Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky. From a high of 6000 or so members in 1850, their numbers dwindled to about 1000 at the turn of the century, and by the 1970s only two communities were still in existence with about two dozen members at Canterbury, New Hampshire and Sabbathday Lake, Maine. Yet, even as the communities themselves disappeared, interest in their furniture and principles of handcraft has continued to grow steadily, and manuals on their furniture abound. Cf. *Religion in Wood: A Book of Shaker Furniture*, ed. Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973).

41. Cf. Alan Gowans, “The Forces Behind the Forms,” in *Religion in Wood: A Book of Shaker Furniture*, 12.

The Shakers believed that the forms of their furniture were designed in heaven, the patterns transmitted to them by angels, and the furniture the Shakers produced bears a timelessness that unites the generations.<sup>43</sup>

We should speak of the nature of the social bond itself that can be produced by the forests among those who work with its gifts. Much of the social bond comes from a respect for the wood itself. Trees are the most eternal living things in the universe, and it is a privilege and responsibility to give second life to these majestic creatures. When Husserl needed an example to persuade us of the ideal timelessness of noematic meaning (*Sinn*), it is surely not an accident that he wrote of the noema-tree that could not be burned, as cited in our opening epigram.<sup>44</sup> The age and endurance of some of these trees inspires an awe that is near to worship of the ancient spirits of the trees, and sacred groves have been established and protected. Trees that witnessed the founding of America still survive.<sup>45</sup> Beeches from the time of Robin Hood still populate the forests of England, with their smooth, gray bark now carved with initials, dates, hearts and arrows. The Sequoia redwoods of southern California achieve ages between 600 and 1300 years, the cedars of Lebanon and olive trees of Israel are 2000 to 3000 years old, witness to the events of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, and the Yaku sagi cedars on the island of Yaku off the coast of Kyushu, Japan are over 5000 years old, dating from the time of the Vedic sacred writings. In the forests, we encounter a “deep time” that is paleontological. Holmes Rolston III has spoken of his awe in encountering the Petrified Forest in Arizona where tens of thousands of rock logs are strewn across the desert, “relics of trees living when the region was tropical forest 225 million years ago.”<sup>46</sup> Bachelard has written of the immensity of the forest, which on the one hand is about spatial depth “going deeper and deeper into a limitless world,” and on the other hand is also about temporal depth: “the forest is *immediately sacred*, sacred by virtue of the tradition of its nature, far from all history of men.”<sup>47</sup>

The community experience of woodworking is thus an experience of “the given.” Together with the gift of the wood we also receive the givens of the tools and problem-solutions of generations and centuries of craft workers. The tradition of the hand plane, for example, goes back to the ancient Egyptians and Romans, and together with it the implements and techniques of sharpening.<sup>48</sup>

42. *Religion in Wood*, x.

43. Alan Gowans, “Spiritual Functionalism in Shaker Furniture,” in *Religion in Wood*, 17.

44. The quotation is from Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, vol. 1, trans. Fred Kersten (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1982), 216.

45. Cf. Charles Edgar Randall and Henry Clepper, *Famous and Historic Trees* (Washington, D.C.:The American Forestry Association, 1977).

46. Holmes Rolston III, “The Aesthetic Experience of Forests,” 183–84.

47. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 185, 186.

48. Cf. “The History of the Plane,” in *Planecraft*, 8–9.

Having been given so much, the woodworker respects and cares for those for whom the furniture is built, and desires to give in return as well-crafted hand-made objects as possible. Once I was searching for a special wood to make some small gifts for persons for whom I cared, and a local woodworker gave me some beautifully figured boards of walnut. I thought I should pay him, but instead he asked me to make two or three of the gifts for him as well. The walnut was grown by another Rhode Islander who is a stranger to me but who planted five walnut trees when he was young. By the time the trees could be harvested, he felt too old and tired to work the wood, and gave the trees to the Saunderstown woodworker, who had them cut and milled, and who in turn gave some of the wood to me. In this way, when the gifts were made they came into the hands of family and friends three times given, passed through three sets of woodworkers' hands and never sold. Such experiences that blend place, time and craft with the givens of the trees are far from everyday. But in such experiences are conjoined all the pleasures of the wood and the pleasure of a bond with others that is a sometimes visible, and if not visible, always an invisible, embrace.

"Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build," Heidegger has famously written. Speaking of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, he wrote that "it designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time. A craft which, itself sprung from dwelling, still uses its tools and frames as things, built the farmhouse."<sup>49</sup> At Walden, Henry David Thoreau built not only his humble and honest hut, but also part of his simple, spare furniture: a bed, a table, a desk, and three chairs.<sup>50</sup> Though he writes that "none is so poor that he need sit on a pumpkin," yet the life of simplicity for which he advocated is hostile to an excess of furniture: "Furniture! Thank God, I can sit and I can stand without the aid of a furniture warehouse."<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, as his own carpenter, Thoreau argues that there is the same fitness in building one's own house that there is in a bird's building its own nest. Who knows, he asks, if human beings "constructed their dwellings with their own hands . . . the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing as they are so engaged?" Architectural beauty grows gradually from within outward from the character of the indweller, Thoreau finds, out of some "unconscious truthfulness and nobleness," and whatever architectural beauty is produced will be preceded by a "like unconscious beauty of life."<sup>52</sup> Therefore, it was not at all accidental that Thoreau ended *Walden* with a metaphor of life drawn from forest and furni-

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49. Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1977), 338.

50. Cf. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 62. Thoreau does not specify which pieces he made himself; he notes that "the rest cost me nothing," and adds that "there is plenty of such chairs as like best in the village garrets to be had for taking them away." This may imply that it was the chairs that Thoreau did not make.

51. *Ibid.*, 63.

52. *Ibid.*, 44, 45–46.

ture. To be precise, it is the penultimate metaphor, for he truly concludes the book with the metaphor of the sun at dawn. But it is the forest and furniture that gets him to that dawn. The story is of a strong and beautiful bug that came out of an old apple-tree table that had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty years, first in Connecticut, next in Massachusetts. The glorious insect emerged from an egg deposited in the living apple-tree many years earlier while it was still in its first life before it was harvested. For sixty years after the creation of the second life of that apple-tree as a kitchen table, the beautiful bug had lain dormant abiding its time buried within the wood. Thoreau asks: Who does not feel his faith in resurrection and immortality strengthened by hearing of this? "Who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodenness in the dead dry life of society . . . may unexpectedly come forth from amidst society's most trivial and handselled furniture, to enjoy its perfect summer life at last!" Then, from forest and first life to furniture and dwelling in second life, Thoreau gives us the dawn. "Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star."<sup>53</sup>

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53. *Ibid.*, 324–25.