BEING ONE WITH NATURE:
THE NATURAL NON-DUAL
EXPERIENCE IN THOREAU*

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Resumo: este artigo objetiva investigar e desenvolver, de forma necessariamente preliminar, alguns dos nexos poliédricos entre espiritualidade, filosofia, poesia e a experiência não-dual com a natureza em alguns pontos da obra poético-filosófica/espiritual de Henry D. Thoreau. Para tanto, destacaremos algumas de suas poesias, iluminando-as com o instrumental analítico oferecido pelo próprio Thoreau em algumas passagens da sua prosa espiritual/filosófica, já que para Thoreau, literatura, mitologia, filosofia e poesia são modulações linguísticas possíveis - e necessariamente incompletas - da impossibilidade de se referir de forma explícita àquela experiência arcaica e simbiótica não-dual com a natureza.


THE BEGINNING

Henry D. Thoreau (1817/1862), whose bicentennial was celebrated two years ago, offers an extraordinarily ample window of opportunity towards a sustained reflection between the sphere of the sacred and Nature. Leaving the center of his hometown, Concord, in Massachussets, and building, with his own hands, a cabin in the woods by Lake Walden, near Concord, to reflect, write, and grow a small orchard, Thoreau elaborates, in a new and highly creative way, a “pedagogy of awakening”, embedded in a set of highly influential

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texts ("A week on the Concord and Merrimack rivers" and "Walden", both written during his sojourn at Walden), where his philosophical, soteriological, political, ethical and environmental reflections have emerged and have, only recently, begun to be fully explored by the Humanities. A pioneer in a careful reading of Eastern’s wisdom traditions and a self-proclaimed heir to the Greeks’ classical paideia of self-knowledge and self-care, his opera, written in a dense vein of poetry, has come to mark a milestone in the confluence of spirituality and Nature. Thoreau, one of the main voices of the American Transcendental movement, whose epicenter was in his native Concord and was led by his mentor end elder contemporary, Emerson, has become one of the articulators of a decisive shift both in American and world Literature. Writer, mystic, environmentalist, natural philosopher, thinker, political activist, Thoreau is, today, a global icon of Environmentalism, radical democracy, self-sustainable agriculture and political autarchy. He lived a life of simplicity and self-sufficiency based on the inherent sacrality of the natural world. An inspiring figure both to Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., Thoreau’s contribution to the field of Religious Studies has only now attracted the attention of specialists, be it in his oriental and classical Greek inclinations, as well as a representative of the philosophical therapy inspired by his intimacy and wonder towards the natural world. His work, a rich kaleidoscope of fluid borders between Philosophy, Literature, Natural Studies, History, Religion and Anthropology, to name just some of his interests, has become a watershed in the history of the relationship between spirituality and Nature. Such multiplicity notwithstanding, very few would deny that Nature is the center around which his thought gravitates. The mosaic of his opera, where poetry, prose, dialogue, journal, scientific essay and travelogue are clearly modes of a primal drive to expressing and actualizing his profound love of Nature, is also a testimony to his creative geniality, whose unfoldings in contemporary Politics, Literature, Philosophy, Environmentalism and Comparative Religion are only some of the fields in which his original contributions are only now coming to be fully appraised. Moreover, well beyond his undeniable literary, scholastic and naturalist contributions, and echoing a venerable tradition that goes all the way back to ancient Greece, among Stoics, Epicureans and Pre-socratics, if we follow closely Thoreau’s discourse, we may be able to see how, according to him, a careful study of nature and intimacy with her - or living according to Nature (physeos homologoumenos), to underscore the epistemological/ethical nexus that translates into Stoicism’s classical formula (DIOGENES, 1995) - is an irreplaceable prerequisite to creating the conditions of possibility to reaching that ecstatic serenity so much sought after throughout the history of Western philosophical therapeutic traditions of self-care. It is the main objective of the following text to explore some of those rich perspectives, with an emphasis on his poetical work, hitherto partially neglected by Thoreauvian academics.
“There was the eye and the sun from the first” (DARK AGES, CEP, p. 91). Thoreau’s luminous fragment of cosmogony unveils the most archaic elements which Nature gestates inside Her womb, still warm and fresh, enveloping in its placenta the All: the gaze and the light. Indeed, what else is necessary? Everything is there, the Whole is contained therein. Everything else is unfolding. Everything else is a myth. Everything else is revelation, an ancient oracle interpreted by countless seers and poets that sing its infinite variations as myriad universes dance on that single ray of light that connects the vertex of the eye and the disclosing sun. The non-duality of subject and object is already there; the complementary tension is ab ovo. The searching eye flirts with the sun, itself the eye of the world, both throbbing in unison. Then, the eye looks to the Other as mirror: self-consciousness arises. The look wants to know, the sun, to reveal. Eye and sun shining, everything else shines after them: appearance, wonder, ecstasy. No “Fiat Lux!” there, neither creator nor creature, only self-creation (autopoeisis) being, since always; both eye and sun coeval, one does not exist without the other. Both are the unique conditions of possibility for everything else to occur, that is, to be known as existing as such; after that, this infinite tale out of light and consciousness begins; the eye coupling with light, spawning dawn and morning, external and internal ones: enlightenments. But the perceived distance of the eye from the sun, however, also suggests the budding of a longing. It already spells a distancing which must be bridged by a return to the common source. The anamnetic process ought to reach the ultimate source, the utmost simplicity; the eye and the light are one and the result can only be an image, the very first one - Nature; Nature looking inside Herself, Her eye meeting Her sun. That first look is innocent, fresh, wild; beyond that primeval rendezvous lies only what cannot be told, what must be silenced: the infinite, the amorphous becoming, that ultimate untamable cosmic wilderness, whose supposed shaping and reducing to the categories of our understanding is one of our ultimate self-delusions. The marriage of the eye and the sun hides, thus, also a buried promise to be genealogically unearthed, a promise of awakening: “If you let a single ray of light through the shutter, it will go on diffusing itself without limit till it enlightens the world” (THOREAU, 2001, p. 11). Thoreau is on the verge of releasing that ray of light, and we are about to be enlightened by it.

Enlightenment, awakening; together with ‘dawn’, ‘morning’, ‘childhood’, ‘youth’, ‘music’, ‘Spring’, and ‘Greece’, those are some terms in Thoreau’s very particular soteriological thesaurus, his favorite code words for an inconceivable experience that lies at the very heart of his pedagogic process: “I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up” (THOREAU, 1971, p. 388). Thoreau leaves no doubt at all as to his project: awakening us; he is the crowing chanticleer and we are the anesthetized sleeping ones. But every sleeper must awake sometime, the method has already been shown - the pedagogy of the wild, attention and intimacy with Nature. Now, it is incumbent on him to describe the experience of awakening for, how could
we, wretched sleepwalkers, find it, or worse, recognize it, deep in our sleep? Thoreau will describe it as well; however, he shall do so using a very special vocabulary and grammar, a wild one, a “‘gramatica parda’, ‘tawny grammar’, ‘to express this wild and dusky knowledge’” (THOREAU, 2001, p. 249). Thus, we must be alert now to read the signs, the chanticleer will crow and those who are destined to hear and heed shall awake too.

THE MEDIUM: ENLIGHTENED POETRY

Recalling his idyllic sojourn at Walden, Thoreau describes his sacramental practices⁴:

Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did. They say that characters were engraved on the bathtub of king Tching-thang to this effect: ‘Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, and forever again’. I can understand that (THOREAU, 1971, p. 392-3).

me too; morning, simplicity, innocence, Nature, Aurora (Dawn), Greece, purification. The passage powerfully displays the engorged udder from which flows the milk of renewal, Thoreau’s main spiritual delicacy. Along his considerably larger and more sublime bathtub, Walden Pond, were also engraved Spring’s cryptic thawing hieroglyphs that Thoreau was able to read before they melted away on earth; they all spoke of cycle, renewal: regeneration. Nature’s infinite cycles, micro and macroscopic, are segmentations of horizons of events whose interconnectedness escapes us, but Thoreau’s emphasis on attention seems to prepare us, ideally, to the potential fertile and subtle decoding of the encounter of the ‘eye and the sun’, of ourselves with everything else; in fact that encounter hides two possibilities, a perpetual forking of the path: alertness and renewal or distraction and sclerosis: either life or death, memory or oblivion, ascending or descending, light or darkness:

the morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour. Then there is least somnolence in us; and for an hour, at least, some part of us awakes which slumbers all the rest of the day and night… [T]hat man that who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred and auroreal hour than he has yet profaned, has despaired of life, and is pursuing a descending and darkening way (THOREAU, 1971, p. 393).

The undiluted cosmic and epistemological Manichaeism presents us, once again, with the necessary complementariness of polarities. The descending path of oblivion and darkness, which most of us unhappily pursue, coagulates as reified
spiritual, social, political and economical truths which congregate the adherents of ‘cattelicism’ in the domesticated environments of inauthentic and insincere existence. Contrariwise, those who are able to accord to Nature:

all poets and heroes, like Memnon, are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at sunrise. To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. [M]orning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep… [T]he millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive (THOREAU, 1971, p. 393).

Child of the Dawn: what a beautiful and precise monicker for Thoreau. But then, aren’t all children ‘children of Aurora’? Aren’t all of them promises pregnant with tomorrow? Isn’t every child a gamble against darkness: a new light, a new beginning? As a worshiper of the Dawn as well, Thoreau affiliates himself to the Orphics whose adherents, repeating Orpheus’ original practice, woke up early and headed to the summits of the mountains to worship the first rays of the sun: renewal, purification ‘by the Dawn’s early light’ and promise in a single gesture. One of the many Orphic cosmogonies begins with the Night, and from Her comes Phanes, the golden Egg of light, which will subsequently become split as Heaven and Earth². Infallibly, every day, those first rays of the rising Sol invictus in the Eastern horizon dispel darkness and bring with them the promise of ‘purification, renewal and awakening’, as the ancient Romans also believed, and those three revelations, at the same time practices and results, might stand for Thoreau’s motto as well. But to be awake among the sleepers is an awkward and solitary position. He necessarily had to look for awakened company elsewhere, in the past, since his contemporaries were, well… deeply asleep. “To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?” (THOREAU, 1971, p. 394). Alas, Thoreau never met a Buddha (an ‘awakened one’ from Sanskrit ‘buddh’, ‘to awake’), although he once reclaimed the Buddha for himself (THOREAU, 1980, p. 55). Had he met one, maybe he could have had the confirmation of his own awakening, since it takes one awakened to recognize another one. That momentous cosmic event, the meeting of Buddhas might be the one chance to understand why the infinite causal plait creates billions of lethargic zombies like us and very few awakened like them. Maybe, who knows, in the economy of the whole, we, the sleepwalkers, are as necessary as the Buddhas: after all, the only absolute precondition for awakening to happen is, first, to be asleep; or perhaps, like Jack Kerouac - another Massachusetts poet-bodhisattva – who once saw in his beloved seclusion atop Desolation Peak, high on the Washington Cascades: we are all destined to become Buddhas one day³. Well, Buddhas, as we all know, are very special, attentive beings. They are always near and
aware of the processes and powers which fashions beings and events, their etiological sensibility being legendary, as Thoreau affirms when he discusses the process of illumination: “Any prospect of awakening… makes indifferent all times and places… [N]earest to all things is that power which fashions their being. Next to us the grandest laws are continually being executed” (THOREAU, 1971, p. 428-9). Be it in Bodh Gaya or at Walden Pond the same undercurrent of potential illumination is flowing. It is only a matter of tuning in consciousness and light: the ‘eye and the sun’; again, we are talking about a pedagogy of the look. Sounds easy, doesn’t it? Well, it isn’t. Like every single Buddha from East and West taught, it is a matter of looking inside ourselves to discover the Whole, as Henry sings in one of his most beautiful and revealing poems, symptomatically named Inward morning (THOREAU, 1980, p. 240):

_Packed in my mind lie all the clothes_
_Which outward nature wears,
And in its fashion’s hourly change_
_It all things else repairs_

_My eyes look inward, not without_
_And I but hear myself,_
_And this new wealth which I have got_
_Is part of my own pelf_

_In vain I look for change abroad_
_And some can no difference find,_
_Till some new ray of peace uncalled_
_Illumines my inmost mind_

_What is it gilds the trees and clouds,_
_And paints the heaven so gay,_
_But yonder fast-abiding light_
_With its unchanging ray_

_I’ve heard within my soul_
_Such cheerful morning news,_
_In the horizon of my mind_
_Have seen such orient hues,_

_As in the twilight of the dawn_
_When the first birds awake,_
Are heard within some silent wood,
Where they the small twig break,

Or in the eastern skies are seen,
Before the sun appears,
The harbingers of summer heats
Which from afar he bears

The eye and the sun; the look and the light: enlightenment, awakening. We keep returning to and revolving around them as Buddhist pilgrims around their shrines, as the wheel of saṃsāra itself keeps revolving around unending and unsatisfied desires. Thoreau can only speak for Nature, Wild Nature as we saw in his passionate words in Walking, because he is Nature: She is his true Self - perhaps ours as well? Describing his ‘Inward morning’, his serene and silent illumination, if we hear close and attentively enough, though, we shall also be able to listen to Nature singing Herself, Thoreau being reduced – or expanded – to Her medium, Her instrument, Her flute: emptied of himself, Nature plays through him a song of awakening… Like his own flute, engraved by himself, that now lies sad, lonely and mute at the Concord Museum, Nature Herself carved him out of Her as a flute, a docile and faithful instrument lying on Her berry lips. The song She plays is enchanting, bewildering: the totality of the Whole is within us; we as Nature conscious of Herself, Thoreau as Nature’s flute, playing his flute for Nature and, with his/Her song, awakening us in the process. If Krishna played his flute in the woods of Vrindavana, under the moonlight by the dark and fast flowing Yamuna bewitching the gopis, Thoreau played his flute by Walden Pond, bewitching its fishes, as a XIXth century version of Saint Anthony’s ‘sermon to the fishes’… Let’s return to the poem, shall we? In it, the equivalence of internal and external is underlined as the different sides of Nature’s garments. His mind ‘packed clothes’, the structure of his understanding that limits and shapes the brief infinity with which external Nature corresponds; the sympathy of within and without, the nexus of light and change leads to awakening: the light dawns, finally; the promise is fulfilled: “We will have a dawn, and noon and serene sunset in ourselves” (THOREAU, 1981, p. 159). External Nature is internalized or, conversely, internal Nature is externalized, transforming Thoreau in a diaphanous membrane that filters and reflects what originally has no topos at all. As a crystal prism, Thoreau captures and redirects the whole gamut of colors and shapes that lie outside, reaffirming the cosmogonic principle – and metaphor – of the eye and the sun, look and light. Fundamentally, what seems to be implicated inside of him is the explicated nature of Nature as light; only light knowing Herself. The whole palette of lights and shadows dances before and inside our eyes. An eerie and serene translucent glow irradiates from nowhere and engulfs us in an iridescent kaleidoscope of diaphanous hues of
consciousness that reflect and mirror the infinite variations of the luminous non-dualistic embrace of the eye and the sun. Horizons fuse and collapse as multiple Northern Lights rise and bend within us: Aurora borealis ignites the light from the East, slowly climbing over night’s dark blue and starry dress, spreading ‘Dawn’s rosy fingers’, if I am allowed to be Homeric here; or as Thoreau enigmatically puts it: “ex Oriente lux, ex Occidente frux” (THOREAU, 2001, p. 237) – ‘From the East, light; from the West, fruit’; one wonders what the ‘Western fruit’ might be...

How strangely sounds of revelry strike the ear from over the cultivated fields by the wood side, while the sun is declining in the west. It is a world we had not known before. We listen and are capable of no mean act or thought. We tread on Olympus and participate in the councils of the Gods (THOREAU, 1981, p. 55).

From dawn to dusk, from East to West the pathway of the sun marks the semicircle of ecstatic awareness that burns his soul. His clairaudience appears to be light-related as well, the setting sun triggering a panaesthetic response from his sensibility. Moreover, either as an Eastern serene awakening or an Olympian enthusiasm (from Greek en + theos + ousia: ‘possessed by a God’), Thoreau can savor the different available ecstasies in the divine menu of existence; further, from Buddhas’ Eastern light to Greek’s Olympian clarity, Thoreau’s paresthesia becomes panaesthesia as his apotheosis turns light into music:

Sometimes we are clarified and calmed healthly as we never were before in our lives, not by an opiate, but by some unconscious obedience to the all-just laws, so that we become like a still lake of purest crystal and without effort our depths are revealed to ourselves. All the world goes by us and is reflected in our deeps. Such clarity! Obtained by such pure means! ... [w]e live and rejoice. I awoke into a music which no one about me heard... I feel my Maker blessing. To the sane man the world is a musical instrument. The very touch affords exquisite pleasures (THOREAU, 1980, p. 268-9).

Clarified, calmed, lake of crystal, our depths revealed to our selves, reflected in the deeps: clarity, purity, joy, music, blessing, instrument; Thoreau will exhaust his vocabulary and I mine before we can describe what is going on here... music and light comingle: the mirror-like soul becomes a crystalline pond of light, a microcosmic Walden (THOREAU apud WALDEN, 1971, p. 463-5) and music, Thoreau’s closest experience to the divine, as we shall soon see – or listen - becomes the voice of the enlightened one. The awakened become instruments: harps and flutes played by Nature’s hands and lips of light. His particular music has a lot to do with Pythagoras’ music of the spheres.
After a still winter night I awoke with the impression that some question has been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to answer in my sleep, as what-how-when-where... but there was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking at my broad windows with serene and satisfied face... I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight... then to morning work. First I take an axe and pail and go in search of water (THOREAU, 1971, p. 547).

Like the proverbial Zen enlightening/enlightened routine – both are the same – of cutting wood and carrying water, Thoreau’s morning, enlightened work, starts well before picking his axe and pail. How to answer an unasked question? The koan-nature unasked question gets an unanswered response by Nature and light – satori; the passage is redolent of those Zen passages where brooks and mountains sing the praise of awakening. The needless and futile unenlightened questions posed by us and addressed to us in our vain chattering during the long night of the soul - that is, our whole life long: who, when, what etc., are naturally answered by Nature and light from foolish questions that stem from our interior darkness to the luminous answers of an enlightened Nature: which better roshi to have a mondo with? After the masterful answer, the silent and lucid clarity that flourishes from the blurred interstices of our non-duality with Nature emerge as practice: cut wood, carry water; authorless actions that sing the mantra of every Buddha: “simplicity, simplicity, simplicity” (THOREAU, 1971, p. 395) Simply like that. To celebrate the event, a Zen-like poem:

\[
\begin{align*}
I & \text{ arose before light} \\
& \text{To work with all my might} \\
& \text{With my arms braced for toil} \\
& \text{Which no obstacle can foil } \\
\end{align*}
\] (THOREAU, 2001, p. 539)

Steeped in light - that seems to be Thoreau’s outer language garment to point to the result of his specific anamnetic process. However, he sometimes despairs of the absence of that liquid fire running through his veins. The longing stemming from the long nights of the soul exasperates him: to suffer from the valleys after experiencing the peaks depresses him... Nature and dawn, the eye and the sun, though, are still the basic motives when he is able to experience that ecstatic enlightenment, as in his Stanzas (THOREAU, 2001, p. 529):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Nature doth have her dawn each day,} \\
& \text{But mine are far between;} \\
& \text{Content, I cry, for sooth to say,} \\
& \text{Mine brightest are, I ween.}
\end{align*}
\]
For when my sun doth deign to rise,
Though it be her noontide,
Her fairest field in shadows lies,
Nor can my light abide.

Sometimes I bask me in her day,
Conversing with my mate;
But if we interchange one ray,
Fortwith her heats abate.

Through his discourse I climb and see,
As from some eastern hill,
A brighter morrow rise to me
Than lieth in her skill.

As ’t were two summer days in one,
Two Sundays come together,
Our rays united make one Sun,
With fairest summer weather

Poetry, we remember, is the sacred language per se according to Thoreau; together with music, they are the only media capable of speaking of the unspeakable, of pointing out what no one, including the poet, can see: the poet can only, literally, divine. Although I am not a specialist, I believe Thoreau's poetry is unduly maligned; it strikes me as a powerful instrument to express his most intimate epiphanic moments in a particularly rich naturalistic vein. Yes, he is neither a Wordsworth nor a Whitman, yet I believe his poetry has a very distinct and pungent flavor of wet earth and rugged beauty that, even if does not have the fluid mesmerizing music of those two Nature-singing masters, it serves him perfectly well in describing Nature as a conscious ocean of light. For instance, in one of his most intriguing poems, the itinerary is mapped out in detail and the end of the journey in the quest of awakening is clearly spelled:

I'm guided in the darkest night
By flashes of auroral light
Which over dart thy eastern home
And teach me not in vain to roam.
Thy steady light on t’other side
Pales the sunset, makes day abide,
And after sunrise stays the dawn,
Forerunner of a brighter morn.
There is no being here to me
But staying here to be
When others laugh I am not glad,
When others cry I am not sad,
But be they grieved or be they merry
I'm supernumerary.
I am a miser without blame
Am conscience stricken without shame.
An idler am I without leisure.
A busy body without pleasure
I did not think so bright a day
Would issue in so dark a night.
I did not think such sober play
Would leave me in so sad a plight,
And I should be more sorely spent
Where first I was most innocent
I thought of loving all beside
To prove to you my love was wide,
And by the rites I soared above
To show my peculiar love (THOREAU, 2001, p. 539-40)

Among others, Chan / Taoist hermit-poet Han-Shan (Cold Mountain)⁶ comes to mind as an apt parallel to Thoreau’s enlightenment songs, since both poets – and many others who sang enlightenment - reveal a universe where light and darkness, pain and joy, depression and elation and every other punctuated dichotomy are solved in a narratological non-dual continuum that eclipses the apparent contradictions in a larger perspective or, as Rudolf Otto precisely said long ago: the coincidentia oppositorum reveals the true nature of the mysterium tremendum et fascinans. Besides that, both Thoreau and Han Shan in-corporate and actually become Nature: Walden and Cold Mountain. Again, a sepia chiaroscuro technique is particularly efficient in blurring the perceived polarities into a dynamic counterpoint of discontinuous strata of light and sound. Such an aesthetic poly-phonic/ophtalmic shuffling of data registers disconcerts those who try to approach those singers with a preconceived set of principles derived from reified substantive and autonomous individualities: in Han-Shan case, insubstantial (an tman) non-duality and in Thoreau’s substantial interdependence help to collapse the imaginary reified rigid borders between beings and phenomena.

Light, however, is far from being the only literary trope that exhausts Thoreau’s extensive epiphanic vocabulary; expressions like ‘childhood’, ‘youth’, ‘music’, ‘Spring’ and ‘Greece’, we shall soon see, are different images that characterize the vigor of proximity, closeness, nearness to that original, archaic spring
of beauty, power and revelation. Those terms enshroud the fountain that irrigate Thoreau’s texts with a fluid tenderness, a soft plasticity that accounts for the flexible force that permeates his vision of optimal relationship with Nature: “Children, who play life, discern its true law and relations more clearly than men, who fail to live it worthily, but who think that they are wiser by experience, that is, by failure” (THOREAU, 1971, p. 398). Experience, we saw earlier, is completely dispensable for happiness, both the socially inherited type as well as the individual experience of one’s life. Experience is a beam that lights the rear, illuminates in hindsight, and since life is a continuous experiment there can be no recipe for either enlightenment or serenity. Children, however, adopt an unconscious ludicrous seriousness to approach life that transforms existence into a game. A very serious one at that, as anybody who has watched children at play is familiar with. This playful seriousness mixed with the absolute novelty that transforms every single experience in a uniquely virgin happening, puts them in touch with that subjective radicle at the heart of each and every perceived phenomenon. Innocence of the look is openness: “I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born” (THOREAU, 1971, p. 400). Lost innocence is a terrible thing. It corrupts our view inasmuch as we cannot approach things in that ideal openness, always looking at things sideways. It also desecrates life’s intrinsic sacredness in an-aesthetic and mechanical repetitions. It might be the case of ascribing to Thoreau an aesthetical justification to life, had not he himself alluded to something intangible even by art, or better still, somewhere art itself cannot reach, only point to. I believe one of the most memorable entries of his Journal and a fundamental key to understand much of Thoreau’s life and mission is an emotional, Wordsworthian rendering of his ecstatic experience as a child that deserves to be quoted in full:

Methinks my present experience is nothing; my past experience is all in all. I think that no experience which I have today comes up to or is comparable with the experiences of my boyhood - and not only this is true - but as far back as I can remember I have unconsciously referred to a previous state of existence. “For life is a forgetting,” etc. Formerly methought nature developed as I developed and grew up with me. My life was ecstasy. In youth, before I lost any of my senses, I can remember that I was all alive, and inhabited my body with inexpressible satisfaction, both its weariness and its refreshment were sweet to me. This earth was the most glorious musical instrument, and I was audience to its strains. To have such sweet impressions made on us, such ecstasies begotten of the breezes! I can remember how I was astonished. I said to myself, · I said to others ‘There comes into my mind or soul an indescribable infinite all absorbing divine heavenly pleasure, a sense of elevation and expansion, and I have had nought to do with it. I perceive that I am dealt with by su-
perior powers. This is a pleasure, a joy, an existence which I have not procured myself - I speak as a witness on the stand and tell what I have perceived’. The morning and the evening were sweet to me, and I led a life aloof from society of men. I wondered if a mortal had ever known what I knew. I looked in books for some recognition of a kindred experience but, strange to say, I found none. Indeed I was slow to discover that other men had had this experience, for it had been possible to read books and to associate with men on other grounds. The maker of me was improving me. When I detected this interference I was profoundly moved. For years I marched as to a music in comparison with which the military music of the streets is noise and discord. I was daily intoxicated and yet no man could call me intemperate. With all your science can you tell how it is, and whence it is, that light comes into the soul? (THOREAU, 1984, p. 306-7).

I wonder if either in Eastern or Western lay literature such an extraordinary description of an ecstatic testimony is to be found. It is not only emotionally pungent and astonishingly rich in any whatsoever way one cares to look at it; it is also unbelievably painful and impossible not to sympathize with someone who knew and fell from such an exalted state. I would like to proceed slowly here, since we are approaching the region of delicacies.

It is difficult not to imagine Thoreau as a four-year-old kid, holding his mother’s hand and walking through Walden Woods enveloped in light, one of the first experiences in his life he can recall. It is impossible not to relate the sheer magic of his remembrance with the echo of one of William Wordsworth’s masterpieces, ‘Odes on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’ (2004, p. 340):

There was a time when meadow, grove and stream,
The earth and every common sight
To me did see’m
Apparelled in celestial light...

The Wordsworthian tint almost carries us away and disguises a very important allusion to ‘previous states of existence’. That is intriguing. Thoreau’s reticence about reincarnation notwithstanding, his chain of ‘remembrance’ – even from previous existences – seems to confirm the importance of the anamnetic process towards the archaic kernel, the hardcore of existence, for ‘life is forgetting etc’, or, in Wordsworth’s words: “our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting...”. If life is sleep and forgetting, remembering allows us to retrieve, at least in the realm of an incandescent pedagogical anamnetic memory, the lost magic glow that envelops the world from a childish look. Again, the look and the light mark the experience of non-dual singularity: a culminating vortex of light and beauty, whose intersecting rays condense as silent wonder; a sensual overflowing of luminosity both from inside and outside that ignites his senses to such an ex-
tent that they were burnt. Thoreau’s literal sensual ecstatic burnout serves as an apt metaphor to suggest his life work might also be considered as an attempt to reenact the conditions of possibility towards the lost ecstatic existence of his early childhood. In a certain sense we could understand all of his ulterior works as a huge Proustian memoir that ideally might recreate an ‘instasy’, an internal simulacrum of ecstasy, as the actual reality seems to rob him of the experiencing of its past deeply felt magic. His childhood had, thus, the distinctive and unique miracle of recurrent epiphanic moments, as he recalls somewhere else: “My imagination, my sense of the miraculous, is not so excited by any event as by the remembrance of my youth” (THOREAU, 1984, p. 33). Such a blessed childhood, bathed continuously in a halo of ecstatic light may have helped him to develop his belief that “every child begins the world again, to some extent” (THOREAU, 1971, p. 344-5), his internal child, like his internal savage – if both are not the same, seem to be redirecting him continuously to that genealogical fountain of sacredness. Such a unique experience, shared by none of his acquaintances, appears to have isolated him even more in his secluded and solitary, innocent and incomprehensible, quizzical halo of light that gently envelops his nature: religious people would gladly die for a fraction of that shroud of luminous wonder. In his case, though, the obvious gratuity of the phenomenon, described as objectively as possible, paired with the marionette-like sensation, create an environment of inevitability that adds a precious luster to the intoxication by gyration in a whirlwind of earthen- and breezes-begotten magic. Winged by heavenly pleasures, the elevation and expansion inflate his detached testimony so that the epiphanic ardor becomes infectious and an unavoidable dizziness makes it impossible to locate its source. Lastly, the skepticism over instrumental science derides the possibility of explanation: the only alternative is retracing the steps to the beginning; the iridescent mythopoetic embryonic in illo tempore: the meeting of the light and the soul; an unashamed and necessary reinstatement of the original awe, the luminous wonder of mystery towards that archaic spermatic fecundation of the eye by the sun.

CONCLUSION: BECOMING NATURE

“To be serene and successful we must be at one with the universe” (THOREAU, 1971, p. 310-11). Serenity, calm and quiet: ‘Hesychia’ in Greek. Not only a specific goal for the Pythagoreans and the Eleatic school – and for Western’s philosophical tradition as a whole, but one of the most obscure Goddesses of Hellas as well. According to Pindar (VI-V b.c.e), the Theban lyric poet, She is the daughter of Dike, Justice. In Rome She was called Quies, the ‘Quiet one’ or ‘Silentia’, the Silent one. It is tempting to understand ‘serenity’, ‘calm’ as the result of the behavior of the just person (‘dikaios’), however, Thoreau leaves no doubt as to the real origin of ‘serenity’ and ‘success’: the experience of non-duality with the Cosmos, with the All. But are we not already ‘one with the universe’? Are we not already woven, inextricably imbricated into the
veins and tendons of Nature? Yes...and no. Yes, we are Nature and no, we are not conscious of the fact. For all of those reasons we saw along this essay, we are forgetful of that. Our cosmic umbilical cord was severed by the scissors of techniques and those ideological layers of varnish that transformed us into strangers in our own home. No, we are not Nature anymore and that is the problem. We, as instruments, are out-of-tune, we have to be retuned, for our pitch is not a natural one anymore, we are hybrids that operate in varying cyclothimic frequencies whose final results are our poor lives of ‘quiet desperation’. Our distancing, our separation begins early on:

In a sense the babe takes its departure from Nature as the grown man his departure out of her, and so during nonage is at one with her, and as a part of herself...[I]t passes through Nature to manhood and becomes unnatural, without being as yet quite supernatural...[H]is actions do not adorn Nature nor one another, nor does she exist in harmony but in contrast with them. She is not their willing scenery. We conceive that if a true action were to be performed it would be assisted by Nature, and perhaps be fondled and reflected many times as the rainbow (THOREAU, 1981, p. 232).

The colors of the rainbow collect the whole gamut of the visible frequencies of light when they dance their way through the rain. The harmony of plurality in the One, ‘e pluribus unum’, the intrinsic richness of the differences is squandered by the sclerotic pulling force of social mores and monies. Our familiarity with the Whole, our belonging to the All has to be retraced, recovered and retrieved. That anamnetic process, we have seen, can be modalized in different ways in diverse contexts: here, once again, childhood’s innocence, that toothless wilderness – just to contrast it to the toothless sclerosis – is the arche, the lost Grail of our symbiotic interdependence with this infinite web of light whose serenity is one of the rewards, as Thoreau beautifully paints in his communion:

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whip-poorwill is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled (THOREAU, 1971, p. 425).

When one’s body becomes only one sense, it means that one’s whole sensibility is tuned in an about-to-snap tension that necessarily deterritorializes both sense data and sense itself. One is not anymore, one ceases to be: only Nature is. As his elemental frame promenades through beauty dense of consciousness
and slowly dissolves, only tenuous and diaphanous sympathetic bonds allow
us to perceive the contours of sense and sense data drafting blurring fluid
limits that galvanize a spiral of elements and conscious light that can only
tentatively be called ‘Thoreau’; ‘His’ serenity is not actually ‘his’ anymore:
how could it be? It is Nature-conscious-of-Herself that saunters inside Her-
self now, by the shores of Her own eye, Walden, that drop of light on Her
eternal face. Delight and serenity fuse as The Maiden progresses among Her
creatures, other aspects of Her: the frog, the whippoorwill and that breath-
less and serene and smiling translucent figure once called Thoreau. No, he
is not anymore:

*I cannot come nearer to God and Heaven
Than I live to Walden even
I am its stony shore,
And the breeze that passes o’er;
In the hollow of my hand
Are its water and its sand,
And its deepest resort

The transfiguration is complete. ‘He’ cannot help but assume ‘his’ old/new perso-
na, Nature. The masks fall, the anamnetic process is over. He’s back home,
hugged by The Maiden…it is difficult to proceed here, since words become
wobbly and refuse to yield sense; letters become little dancing sparkles of
light: She is he/im discovering to be Her. He was always Her/She forgotten-
of-Herself as him. Thoreau merges with Walden and then with the whole of
Nature. Their total interpenetration transforms Thoreau’s voice in Nature’s
stream-of-consciousness extrapolating throughout Her senses and looking at
herself internally with Thoreau’s eyes. The promise is fulfilled, non-duality:
en panta, ‘everything is One’, as the ancients said; the inward morning has
finally dawned, serenely.

And with the dawn, we approach the end of our trail, through deep darkness, many
perils and beauty, for ours was a track during the night of the soul, when our
sleep is most profound. But our guide was a reliable one, wasn’t he? We can
still see his footprints ahead of us in the thawing clay of Spring. Yes, our
guide: who is he, after all?

In one of his most intriguing poems, Great Friend, our guide seems to be looking at a
mirror, dreaming of and looking for a man which he already is:

*I walk in nature still alone
And know no one
Discern no lineament nor feature*
Of any creature.
Though all the firmament
Is over me bent,
Yet still I miss the grace
Of an intelligent and kindred face.
I still must seek a friend
Who does with nature blend,
Who is the person in her mask,
He is the man I ask.
Who is the expression of her meaning,
Who is the uprightness of her leaning,
Who is the grown child of her weaning
The center of this world,
The face of nature,
The site of human life,
Some sure foundation
And nucleus of a nation
At least a private station.
We twain would walk together
Through every weather
And see this aged nature
Go with a bending stature (THOREAU, 2001, p. 601).

Thoreau, Nature’s double, looking deep inside the mirror, unveils his true face: he is the one that blends with Nature, his true and expanded Self finally recognized; he is one of the infinite masks She wears in the cosmic game of hide-and-seek. As Heraclitus reminds us, She likes to hide, and which better place to hide than inside Her creatures, Her infinite masks that unconsciously and most of time revolt against Her unalterable and incomprehensible decrees and those very few who, like sleepers, are only waiting for a Chanticleer to announce a new morning and an internal awakening? He is the Chanticleer, the one who in crowing awakens us; it is he who expresses Her meaning, for as we saw earlier on, he is not only Her first and foremost champion, but Her true voice, Her flute, hanging from Her full lips and being played by Her warm and mellifluous breath; he is the uprightness, the moral column, the vertex of Nature’s Self-knowing eye; he is the grown child who knew he lost something long ago and worked so hard to retrieve it, who used to buoy in Her infinite sea of serene light; he is the center of this world, the pivot around which She gravitates in myriad forms always inviting him to know himself and study Her; he is Her face, one of Her last masks, one of Her true and innermost self-disguising doubles who is perennially willing to embark in Her wildest adventures; he is the radicle, the budding vigor of enchanting and bewildering and untamable life; he is the foundation,
the dissident, for true democracy relies on dissidents and not on sleepwalking conformists; he is a deeply-set pile for the building of a true nation, a nation, many nations, of true, sincere and authentic women and men, and not a bunch of cowardly sclerotic simulacra of grotesque consumerism that bow slavishly to the State’s sitting puppets of the economic, political and ideological powers that help to deform both human and Nature like a merciless predator: he is you and me; he is the wild one, the forgotten one: Nature. She is Henry David Thoreau.

BEING ONE WITH NATURE: THE NATURAL NON-DUAL EXPERIENCE IN THOREAU

Abstract: this article aims at inquiring into and developing the polyhedral nexus between spirituality, philosophy, poetry and the non-dual experience with nature in some passages of the poetical, philosophical/spiritualistic writings of Henry D. Thoreau. Therefore, we shall highlight some of his poems, utilizing some passages of his spiritualistic and philosophic prose to shed some light on his poetry, since, according to Thoreau, literature, mythology, philosophy and poetry are feasible linguistic modulations – and necessarily incomplete – to describing that archaic and symbiotic non-dual experience with nature.

Keywords: Nature. Experience. Thoreau.

Notes

1 According to Thoreau, an unspecified dictionary defines sacramental as an “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace” (THOREAU, 1971, p. 377). It is important to bear in mind the correspondence between the internal and external is relevant here to fully understand the sequence of the text.

2 Cf. The Orphic Hymns (2013). The Derveni Papyrus, which he could not possibly know, for it was discovered in 1971 in Derveni, near Tessalonikki, also comes to mind. There is a strong possibility of his being acquainted with the Orphic hymns in Emerson’s library.

3 A recurrent theme in Kerouac’s Desolation angels, Lonesome traveler and The Dharma bums.

4 This is a variant stanza only found in Thoreau (1981, p. 291).

5 Most scholars, unfortunately, disregard and quickly dismiss Thoreau’s poetry; unnecessarily embarrassed, they hurry past it as if it were a beggar at the door of a feast.

6 There are excellent translations of Han-Shan in English. Gary Snider’s and J.P. Seaton’s are among the best.

References


