

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 16 (2003)  
  
**Artikel:** Thoreau's flowering of facts and the truth of experience  
**Autor:** Specq, François  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-100008>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 08.07.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## Thoreau's Flowering of Facts and the Truth of Experience

François Specq

*Your greatest success will be simply to  
perceive that such things are . . .*

In an essay written at Emerson's prompting and published in 1842, titled "Natural History of Massachusetts," Thoreau concluded: "Let us not under-rate the value of a fact; it will one day flower in a truth" (*Essays* 22). This statement is characteristic of the early years of Thoreau's career, when his approach to reality was by and large framed within Emerson's theory of correspondences. This theory, which Emerson expounded in his book *Nature* (1836), postulated the existence of a relationship between natural "facts" and spiritual "truths," the world being "a remoter and inferior incarnation of God" (50). Emerson thus adhered to the Neoplatonist faith in an ultimate and transcendent order of reality or beauty toward which everything intuitively aspires – an idea suggested by the organic metaphor of "flowering." Perceptions of the natural world thus pointed – teleologically and theologically – towards a supreme reality, and the sense of human existence, as defined by Emerson in his essays, was to achieve unity with that higher order through a release of one's creative powers, whose symbol and model was the poet:

[T]he poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession. For, through that better perception, he stands one step nearer to things, and sees the flowing or metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multi-form; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form. ("The Poet" 189-190)

Emerson's conception of the world implied that facts should be decoded and redeemed – through generalization and spiritualization, as opposed to their individual statement – to become truly meaningful. What was to be reached

through this assumption of facts into higher meaning was indifferently called science or philosophy.

In this perspective, the enjoyment of nature advocated by Emerson was merely a preparatory step towards the appreciation of the superior reality of the spirit. Emerson never abandoned the material universe, but he was prone to leave aside the immediate aspects of reality to express the forces which animate the world, the circuits of energy and spirit, the power of thought which "dissolves the material universe, by carrying the mind up into a sphere where all is plastic" ("Fate" 270). This dissolution especially affected "Time and Space relations": "Man is greater . . . and the universe less, because Time and Space relations vanish as laws are known" (*Nature* 40). Emerson thus developed a metaphysical vision at the expense of the physical world, perceived as "a dream and a shade" (47). His approach to the world appears to be tinged with a Puritan distrust of physicalness, and more particularly with the heritage of the Puritan typological reading of reality, in which facts were transformed into religious statements.<sup>1</sup>

In his early years, when he was most influenced by Emerson, Thoreau likewise believed "that there is an ideal or real nature, infinitely more perfect than the actual as there is an ideal life of man" (*J* 1:481, November 2, 1843),<sup>2</sup> thus asserting the identity of the "ideal" and the "real" in typically Platonist fashion. Correlatively, Thoreau also adhered to the conception of man's relation to the natural world as dependent upon the pursuit of a means to bridge the physical and the metaphysical so as to achieve a higher level of self-realization:

---

<sup>1</sup> Emerson's theory of correspondences reflected a deep distrust of the material reality of things, as recognized by his contemporaries. For instance Margaret Fuller confided in her *Journal* in 1842: Emerson "does not care for facts, except so far as the immortal essence can be distilled from them. He has little sympathy with mere life: does not seem to see the plants grow, merely that he may rejoice in their energy" (quoted by Rosenwald 90). And Nathaniel Hawthorne noted in 1842 also: "Mr. Emerson is a great searcher for facts, but they seem to melt away and become insubstantial in his grasp" (quoted by Koster 41). One may thus understand why Emerson, in a letter to Fuller (July 19, 1842), confessed his disappointment at Thoreau's "Natural History of Massachusetts," which contained the seeds of the truth of the later *Journal*. One may find an even more direct illustration of Emerson's distrust of facticity in a letter to his brother William of 6 May 1843, where he said about Thoreau that "he is a bold & a profound thinker though he may easily chance to pester you with some accidental crotchets and perhaps a village exaggeration of the value of facts" (Baym 1162).

<sup>2</sup> *J* followed by an Arabic numeral refers to the Princeton edition of Thoreau's *Journal*.

In purer more intellectual moods we translate our gross experiences in to fine moralities.

... The laws of nature are science but in an enlightened moment they are morality and modes of divine life. In a medium intellectual state they are aesthetics. (*J* 1:468, September 28, 1843)

And in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, he defined the "material universe" as "but the outward and visible type" of the immaterial (386), thus directly echoing the language of typology, which was itself an adaptation of Platonism by New England Puritans.

As a consequence, the young Thoreau was prone to dissolving the material in the transcendental through the establishment of an analogical relation to the world of spirit, as exemplified by such statements:

I learned to-day that my ornithology had done me no service – The birds I heard, which fortunately did not come within the scope of my science – sung as freshly as if it had been the first morning of creation, and had for background to their song an untrodden wilderness – stretching through many a Carolina and Mexico of the soul. (*J* 1:115, March 4, 1840)

These lines also show how he strove to achieve transcendence through condensing the multiple aspects things presented to him into some essential reality.

The overall result of the Emersonian theory of correspondences was to transcend the material actuality of experience into an equivalent of an inner or superior reality. Through a metaphysical leap from the particular into a universalized form of abstraction, transcendentalism involved a transcendence not only of materiality (or substance) but also of temporality (or situatedness): the poet "poetizes, when he takes a fact out of nature into spirit – – [sic in Princeton edition] He speaks without reference to time or place" (*J* 1:69, March 3, 1839). The writer's achievement, in this perspective, was to glimpse the immutable and intangible that underlie the empirical world.

### Beyond Emersonianism

I would now like to outline Thoreau's move beyond Emersonianism in the 1850s, and more particularly to suggest how Thoreau's later *Journal* reflects his evolution towards a relation to the world which runs counter to the depreciation of experience, materiality, and temporality that I have delineated.



In fact, even during the 1840s, Thoreau's writings were more complex than my brief presentation has suggested. They manifested a self-conflicted character (especially in *A Week*), alternately celebrating the value of facts or their transcendentalization. That divided vision gave way to a markedly different world view in the 1850s. Although the change in Thoreau's approach both to the natural world and to the nature of his journalizing was gradual, the major turning-point was between 1849 and 1851, when he embarked on his devoted study and recording of nature in his *Journal*. A crucial aspect of that change was the transformation of the *Journal* from a writer's repository of ideas for future works to an increasingly autonomous undertaking:

I do not know but thoughts written down thus in a journal might be printed in the same form with greater advantage – than if the related ones were brought together into separate essays. They are now allied to life – & are seen by the reader not to be far fetched – It is more simple – less artful – I feel that in the other case I should have no proper frame for my sketches. Mere facts & names & dates communicate more than we suspect – Whether the flower looks better in the nosegay – than in the meadow where it grew – & we had to wet our feet to get it! Is the scholastic air any advantage? (*J* 4:296, January 27, 1852)

As from late 1850 Thoreau's *Journal* became much more regular, with systematically dated entries, and it eventually came to fill more than 14 volumes and 7000 pages in the printed edition.<sup>3</sup> If there ever was a place where Thoreau managed "to speak . . . *without* bounds," it was in his "*extra-vagant*" (*Walden* 324) *Journal*, which bears witness to the intensity and seriousness of his involvement with nature, and, indeed, to his achieving the "heroic life [he] had dreamed of" (*J* 2:242, ca. April 1846).<sup>4</sup> As a literary project, it ceased to be cannibalized for other works – thus reflecting Thoreau's preference for leaving the flower in the meadow rather than plucking it for a nosegay. Instead of being subservient to separate literary ends, it became a tool for perceiving and relating to the world.

This new function derived from the fact that Thoreau's approach to the natural world simultaneously underwent a deep transformation – partly, as

<sup>3</sup> The posthumous 1906 edition (incomplete), which is gradually being superseded by the new Princeton edition. For an analysis of the transformation of Thoreau's *Journal* in the early 1850s, see Cameron and "Historical Introduction" to *J* 3 and to *J* 4.

<sup>4</sup> Walls interprets Thoreau's increasing passion for nature as a substitute for human friendships and a sublimation of "desire" (123). I believe that, beyond the role played by psychological forces, the poet's craving for the world was more "metaphysical," or rather "ontological," even as it was deeply experiential. What gives particular value and power to Thoreau's endeavor is that it is not limited to the statement of philosophical principles, but embodied in an existential project of the utmost intensity.

Walls has claimed, as a result of his reading of Alexander von Humboldt's works in 1850 (see especially Walls 134-147). What Thoreau came to reject was the metaphysics of transcendentalism, not its moral or ethical intent. He departed from a world view in which phenomenal nature functions as a transparent symbol opening onto the supreme reality of the ideal. Idealism's sense of man's alienation in the material world, in particular, proved impossible to reconcile with his growing engagement with nature. During the 1850s, in an increasing manner, experience no longer appeared to be subjected to the unfolding of a divinely ordained universe in which facts were but subservient to spiritual truths, but it became a complex response to a more undetermined world in which the perceiver plays an essential part.<sup>5</sup>

### The truth of experience

While in Emerson's view experience pointed toward a revelation of the underlying – or overarching – metaphysical unity of the world, and while art functioned as a manifestation of aesthetic and spiritual truth, Thoreau insisted on the intrinsic value of experience: the entry of January 27, 1852 (*J* 4:296) quoted above is thus an explicit recognition of the primacy of experiential facts. In other words, "truth" was no longer to be reached beyond one's experience of the world, but within experience itself. Experience thus ceased to mean alienation but rather joy and liberation (if occasionally tempered by anxiety about the daunting massiveness of reality):

Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality which surrounds us. (*Walden* 96-97)

---

<sup>5</sup> It is necessary to stress that this move was gradual. In 1852, for instance, he could still marvel at the discovery that "the year . . . is a circle" and that "every incident is a parable of the great teacher" (*J* 4:468, April 18, 1852). Indeed, he may never have abandoned his faith in some sort of divine immanence in the world, although he certainly qualified it as time went on.

Thoreau thus eloquently pleaded for the situatedness of all knowledge and significance, as well as for the total engagement required of anyone eager to enjoy an authentically *poetic* relation to the world.<sup>6</sup>

Thoreau's later *Journal* reverses the sense of *ascesis*, as though reaching truth no longer was at the expense of physical density, or substance, but rather required one to engage ever more deeply with the litanies of the visible and the tangible. As he craved for "a perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality which surround[ed]" him, Thoreau was not after a higher reality, but a deeper reality – "Let deep answer to deep" (*J* 8:176, June 5, 1854). The higher plane to be reached thus was not that of the ideal or the symbolic, but of temporal *co-existence*. Thoreau grew skeptical of the redemptive promise of the eternity of the symbol, but he believed in the redemptive value of true acts of perception:

Your greatest success will be simply to perceive that such things are . . . ; if it is required that you be affected by ferns, that they amount to anything, signify anything, to you, that they be another sacred scripture and revelation to you, helping to redeem your life, this end is not so surely accomplished. (*J* XII:371-372, October 4, 1859)<sup>7</sup>

In this passage, which is deeply imbued with religious vocabulary, Thoreau makes meaning primarily personal. Through his requirement that things "signify [some]thing *to you*," that they be "another . . . revelation *to you*" (my emphasis), he substitutes personal significance for pre-determined theological interpretations as the only valid criterion for assessing the value (or "success") of experience. His suggestion of the redemptive power of the individual's attention to the material world counters the modern tendency of humankind to sever itself from the physical world, thus providing the rationale for his environmental thought, notably his conception of man's place in nature as defined in "Chesuncook," the second part of *The Maine Woods*.

The supreme achievement is to be of the world, not against it, and this, Thoreau insisted, is an act of love: "My Journal should be the record of my love. I would write in it only of the things I love. My affection for any aspect of the world" (*J* 3:143, November 16, 1850). The primacy of "Love" is essential as it detaches Thoreau's quest for meaningful experience from a mere search for meaning. Indeed Thoreau kept insisting on a relation to the world

<sup>6</sup> On this relation, which I call the "poetic condition," see my *Le savant, le poète et le jardinier*.

<sup>7</sup> *J* followed by a Roman numeral refers to the Torrey and Allen edition of Thoreau's *Journal*.

that was not merely intellectual, but intensely sensuous, providing what William James called "the richest intimacy with facts" (*Pragmatism* 13):

I begin to see such an object when I cease to *understand* it – and see that I did not realize or appreciate it before – . (J 3:148, November 21, 1850)

A fact stated barely is dry. It must be the vehicle of some humanity in order to interest us. . . . It must be warm, moist, incarnated, – have been breathed on at least. A man has not seen a thing who has not felt it. (J XIII:160, February 23, 1860)

Thoreau's reference to the dryness of facts here no longer serves to justify their redemption through their spiritualization, but rather acts as a foil to his advocacy of a deeply sensuous relationship with nature that was rejected by religious and scientific thought alike. He dismisses both traditional religious-philosophical disdain for physical nature and modern science's vacuous blend of empiricism and rationalism.

One of the deepest of Thoreau's insights was his recognition that a perfect state of awareness could only be achieved through striking a balance – or more exactly living "a border life" ("Walking," *Essays* 173) – between knowledge and ignorance. Throughout the 1850s, he entered in his *Journal* reflections on the necessity of alternately learning how to know, and how not to know, as exemplified by these two entries:

How much of beauty – of color, as well as form – on which our eyes daily rest goes unperceived by us! No one but a botanist is likely to distinguish nicely the different shades of green with which the open surface of the earth is clothed, – not even a landscape-painter if he does not know the species of sedges and grasses which paint it. With respect to the color of grass, most of those even who attend peculiarly to the aspects of Nature only observe that it is more or less dark or light, green or brown, or velvety, fresh or parched, etc. But if you are studying grasses you look for another and different beauty, and you find it, in the wonderful variety of color, etc., presented by the various species. (J XIV:3, August 1, 1860)

It is only when we forget all our learning that we begin to know. I do not get nearer by a hair's breadth to any natural object so long as I presume that I have an introduction to it from some learned man. To conceive of it with a total apprehension I must for the thousandth time approach it as something totally strange. If you would make acquaintance with the ferns you must forget your botany. You must get rid of what is commonly called *knowledge* of them. Not a single scientific term or distinction is the least to the purpose, for you would fain perceive something, and you must approach the object totally unprejudiced. You must be

aware that *no thing* is what you have taken it to be. In what book is this world and its beauty described? Who has plotted the steps toward the discovery of beauty? You have got to be in a different state from common. Your greatest success will be simply to perceive that such things are. . . . (J XII:371, October 4, 1859)

For Thoreau scientific knowledge was both necessary and dangerous, an idea summarized in his statement that “[w]e hear and apprehend only what we already half know” (J XIII:77, January 5, 1860). The essential word is “half,” as opposed to complete ignorance, which prevents us from perceiving, and to full “knowledge” of the idealist or scientific type, which precludes any true knowledge, as it tends to substitute what it “knows” for the direct encounter with the thing itself. If you don’t know, you won’t see; but if you know, you tend to substitute knowledge for experience: hence “Learn science and then forget it” (J 4:483, April 22, 1852), a process which paves the way for “a true sauntering of the eye” (J 5:344, September 13, 1852). Truth lies not in a misguided faithfulness to appearances reduced to a dead set of visible properties, but in perpetually renewed experience, in the fluidity of knowledge:

I do not know that knowledge amounts to anything more definite than a novel & grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we had called knowledge before. An indefinite sence [sic] of the grandeur & glory of the Universe. It is the lighting up of the mist by the sun. (J 3:198, February 27, 1851)

Thoreau’s commitment to daily observation is thus elevated to a faith, and his celebration of the unsteadiness of knowing defines his approach to nature as a deeply religious – even mystical – experience. Thoreau’s *Journal*, simultaneously taking the “book of nature” and its religious substratum as a model and as a foil, makes clear that there is no pre-existing text to be deciphered, even as it offers its own version of such a book.<sup>8</sup>

As Thoreau’s engagement with the natural world aimed to explore the inner workings of consciousness – what he called “the mysterious relation between myself & these things” (J 4:468, April 18, 1852) –, he insisted on the observer’s ever-shifting relation with the external world, and on the centrality of the process of perceiving to the emergence of “reality”:

---

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of the meaning and history of the notion of the Book of Nature, see St. Armand, “The Book of Nature.”



There is no such thing as pure *objective* observation. Your observation, to be interesting, *i.e.* to be significant, must be *subjective*. The sum of what the writer of whatever class has to report is simply some human experience, whether he be poet or philosopher or man of science. The man of most science is the man most alive, whose life is the greatest event. (J 8:98, May 6, 1854)

Committed to a process of “worlding” or world making “by the interaction – the ‘dance’ – of the creative self and the world” (Peck 123), Thoreau repeatedly made clear the importance of the “intention of the eye” (J XI:153, September 9, 1858) in the construction of reality – the essential part played by the observer in the creation of the reality that he sees and *inhabits*. Thoreau’s *ethos* was inseparable from his concern with *oikos*, or our dwelling-place, and this is where his epistemology and his environmental advocacy intersect. He must have felt uncomfortable with the support the dematerialization of nature ultimately lent to the enterprises bent on subjugating it: the submission of “facts” to the empire of thought may indeed appear as just another way for justifying the claim of what Emerson called the “kindgom of man over nature” (*Nature* 55).

Based on a recognition that there is thus no objective, rational, stable image of the world that one may cling to or strive for, Thoreau’s *Journal* invites us to a dizzying, unsettling encounter with the sheer enormity of the universe, restored to its full substance and temporality. Thoreau resisted idealism, because it works towards the clarification of boundaries, and thus entails the transparency or dissolution of the material world. What he clearly relished was the gravitational pull of substance.

### Substance vs. shadows

If the subservience of facts to a supreme order of reality drains them of any vitality and density of their own, Thoreau’s *Journal*, on the contrary, displays a wonderful sense of physicality and situatedness – embodying Thoreau’s dictum that “the constant endeavor should be to get nearer and nearer *here*” (J XI:275, November 1, 1858).

Imbued with a proto-darwinian sense of the inadequacy of essences,<sup>9</sup> Thoreau felt more and more drawn towards a full engagement with compel-

---

<sup>9</sup> On March 8, 1860 – just after his reading of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, first published in London on November 24, 1859 – Thoreau emphasizes that “*nature is a becoming*” (J XIII:183). Walls notes that “even before the publication of *Origin of Species*, Thoreau was

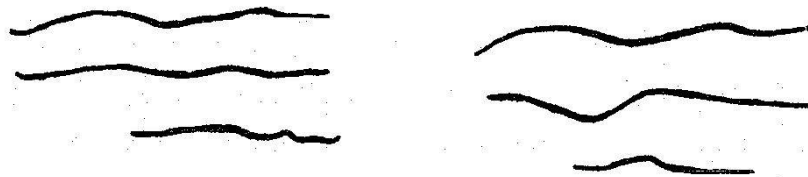
ling physical presences, as opposed to a theological essentialism for which essences exist in a superior or divine order of reality. Indeed, for Emerson – whose world was still fundamentally pre-darwinian, as Brown has made clear in *The Emerson Museum* –, “substance” was on the side of God, while nature appeared as the “scoriæ of the substantial thoughts of the Creator” (*Nature*, in Emerson 38-39). And if Emerson repeatedly emphasized “transparency” as the unveiling of the supreme reality of the world, Thoreau delighted in the luminous opacity of “facts.” Thoreau’s sense of nature as substance prevails throughout the *Journal* of the 1850s, whether in “botanical descriptions,” for instance, or more “elaborate” scenes, which may be less easily excerpted. The following passage from the entry of January 27, 1860 (*J* XIII:109-111) provides an example of the numerous descriptions which also include rough sketches or drawings:

Now I see, as I am on the ice by Hubbard’s meadow, some wisps of vapor in the west and southwest advancing. They are of a fine, white, thready grain, curved like skates at the end. Have we not more finely divided clouds in winter



than in summer? flame-shaped, asbestos-like? I doubt if the clouds show as fine a grain in warm weather. They are wrung dry now. They are not expanded but contracted, like spiculae. What hieroglyphics in the winter sky!

Those wisps in the west advanced and increased like white flames with curving tongues, – like an aurora by day. Now I see a few hard and distinct rip-



ple marks at right angles with them, or parallel with the horizon, the lines indicating the ridges of the ripple-marks. These are like the abdominal plates of a snake. This occupies only a very small space in the sky. Looking right up overhead, I see some gauzy cloud-stuff there, so thin as to be grayish – brain-like, finely reticulated; so thin yet so firmly drawn, membranous. These, methinks, are

---

working along lines that can only be described as Darwinian” (189). The Darwinian revolution notably implied forms of reasoning based on the notion of populations rather than essences.



always seen overhead only. Now, underneath the flamy asbestos part, I detect an almost imperceptible rippling in a thin lower vapor, – an incipient mackerelling (in *form*). Now, nearly to the zenith, I see, not a mackerel sky, but blue and thin, blue-white, finely mixed, like fleece finely picked and even strewn over a blue ground. The white is in small roundish flocks. In a mackerel sky there is a parallelism of oblongish scales. This is so remote as to appear stationary, while a lower vapor is rapidly moving eastward.

Such clouds as the above are the very thin advance-guard of the cloud behind. It soon comes on more densely from the northwest, and darkens all.

No bright sunset to-night.

The “nature” that Thoreau’s *Journal* describes, or rather *translates*, in the medium of writing is movement, gravity, shape, growth, decay, color, mass, atmosphere, and light – infinitely substantiated by renewed perception.

Because the relation between the observer and the world is largely freed from any commitment to connecting with metaphysical truths, facts cease to be closed face-to-face encounters between the spirit and the super-real, but unceasing and open exchanges between an individual’s consciousness and the manifold plenitude of the material world. Thoreau’s objects, like Cézanne’s Montagne-Sainte-Victoire, once disconnected from any search for supra-reality, float immeasurably before us, outside the world of defined locations, but nevertheless intensely substantial. The Concord of Thoreau’s *Journal* is no more Concord than Cézanne’s Montagne-Sainte-Victoire is located near Aix-en-Provence in Southern France: it is both deeply material and suffused with ontological reality.<sup>10</sup>

### Experience as instancing

Concomitant with a rejection of Platonist or Neoplatonic supra-reality comes a celebration of becoming versus being.<sup>11</sup> Thoreau’s purpose is emphatically not to talk of essences, but to devote himself to the presentness of things: “That which presents itself to us this moment occupies the whole of the present and rests on the very topmost point of the sphere, under the zenith” (*J* XIV:119-120, October 13, 1860).

<sup>10</sup> Because Thoreau’s nature is so deeply perceived as substance, Thoreau is no post-modernist, even if he conceived of nature as constructed by the process of perception.

<sup>11</sup> Neoplatonic philosophy also envisioned a form of becoming, as phenomenal data were processed into a higher level of unity and spirituality, but it was an abstract, not a physical, becoming.

In the reciprocally constructing relationship between man and nature, Thoreau came to insist not only on the process of perception, but on nature itself as process: through “drenching” in time he aimed at keeping awake to the immediacy of nature’s temporally dissolving forms, like those he saw in the evening sky, for example. Thoreau conceived of reality as process rather than as an entity circumscribed in a hierarchical and atemporal relation between the material and the spiritual. In the *Journal* of the 1850s, each entry is a celebration of the act of perception, and “facts” have become perceptual events – “My walk is so crowded with events – & phenomena” (*J* 3:24, June 7, 1851). Thoreau’s unerring commitment to the natural world was meant to elicit particularity, not generalization, and he celebrates experience as instancing: “Ah give me pure mind – pure thought. Let me not be in haste to detect the *universal law*, let me see more clearly a particular instance” (*J* 4:223, December 25, 1851).

Thoreau’s endeavor was not to be “transported out of the district of change” or to make “Time and Space relations vanish” (Emerson 47, 40) – in other words to dissolve reality –, but to engage with them, with the physicality of the world, to cleave to it even. Vision, for Thoreau, was synonymous, not with Emerson’s moments when “the universe becomes transparent and the light of higher laws than its own shines *through* it” (*Nature*, in Emerson 38, my emphasis), but with encounters with the “thing itself,” unmediated by any system or dogma. Extending the Transcendentalist faith in the self-transcendence of the individual to the world itself, as the latter answered the perceiver’s awareness, Thoreau brought to its ultimate conclusion his recognition that “each object appears wholly undescribed to our experience” (*J* 4:421, April 2, 1852). What he sought was the timelessness of poetic or epiphanic experience, not the eternity of the symbol or the immutability of science’s signs of reality. His search was for the moment when *chronos* is turned into *kairos* – true experience being both timeless and timely:

Some, seeing and admiring the neat figure of the hawk sailing two or three hundred feet above their heads, wish to get nearer and hold it in their hands, perchance, not realizing that they can see it best at this distance, *better now, perhaps, than ever they will again*. (*J* XIII:194-195, March 15, 1860; my emphasis)

Forsaking any search for truth behind or beyond appearances, Thoreau, through his *Journal*, sought not to control nature’s reality, but to co-exist – or maybe even to be co-extensive – with it, to participate in its process. While he first envisioned a desirable facts-as-truth reduction, he progressively came

to adopt a relatively de-transcendentalized view:<sup>12</sup> he no longer sought representativity, but instancing, sensations and thoughts born of chance and situatedness:

I see a small flock of blackbirds flying over, some rising, others falling, yet all advancing together, one flock but many birds, some silent, others tchucking, – incessant alternation. This harmonious movement as in a dance, this agreeing to differ, makes the charm of the spectacle to me. One bird looks fractional, naked, like a single thread or ravelling from the web to which it belongs. Alternation! Alternation! Heaven and hell! Here again in the flight of a bird, its ricochet motion, is that undulation observed in so many materials, as in the mackerel sky. (*J* XII:44, March 13, 1859)

Journal writing was above all the means Thoreau used to prolong and deepen his passage through life. Taking heed of the mobile, fluid, and luminous character of his experience, he spreads, divides, rhythmically marks, abundantly sweeps or stratifies time, producing a richly textured *timescape*. Thoreau's journal writing, like music, makes time perceptible. It dramatizes transitoriness, and to read his *Journal* is to engage with duration, succession and motion. What delights him in nature are the variations it plays on a theme: nature was indeed the central *motif* of his work, both in the musical sense of the word, and as his motivation or ground for living.

Thoreau was paradoxically empowered to reach maturity by an increasing sense of human finitude and of the limitations of all tools meant to subjugate the physical world – whether they are aesthetic, linguistic or scientific. The *Journal*, as it questions any stable picture of the world and attempts to break with traditional notions of unity and harmony, rejects any kind of frame. In adopting instead a non-perspectival structure, it creates a new many-faceted unity as a formal translation of nature. As for Thoreau's sense of the inadequacy of language, it is a logical consequence of his sense of the inadequacy of essences. Finally, the desired comprehensiveness of science recedes before the recognition that no ultimate order of reality is attainable, because of the fluid or dynamic character of knowledge. As a result Thoreau was bound

---

<sup>12</sup> Thoreau never ceased to define himself as a Transcendentalist. It is interesting to note that, when he refused to join the Association for the Advancement of Science in 1853, he motivated his decision by an appeal to the apparently Emersonian faith "in a science which deals with the higher law," and described himself not as a scientist but as "a mystic – a transcendentalist – & a natural philosopher to boot" (*J* 5:469, March 5, 1853). He then remarks that "a true account of my relation to nature should excite their ridicule only" (*J* 5:470, March 5, 1853). That "true account" is the truth of his experience as recorded, not by any extrinsic work, but by the open-ended interweaving of world and consciousness offered by the *Journal*.

to face the profoundly unsettling but rewarding indeterminacy of his engagement with the physical world: it is the very fact that nature ultimately resists our understanding that holds it open to continued perception and thus to freedom. In this respect Thoreau's *Journal* was a tool not only for perceiving the world, but for attaining freedom – for achieving “the poetic condition.”

## References

- Baym, Nina et al. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 4th ed. Vol. I. New York: Norton, 1994.
- Brown, Lee Rust. *The Emerson Museum: Practical Romanticism and the Pursuit of the Whole*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Cameron, Sharon. *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journal*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*. Ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris. New York: Norton, 2001.
- James, William. *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. New York: Longman Green and Co., 1907.
- Koster, Donald. *Transcendentalism in America*. Boston: Twayne, 1975.
- Peck, H. Daniel. *Thoreau's Morning Work: Memory and Perception in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, the Journal, and Walden*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.
- Rosenwald, Lawrence. *Emerson and the Art of the Diary*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Specq, François. *Le savant, le poète et le jardinier: Le Journal de Thoreau et la condition poétique*. Thèse de doctorat [PhD dissertation]. Paris: Université Paris 7, 1995.
- St. Armand, Barton Levi. "The Book of Nature and American Nature Writing: Codex, Index, Contexts, Prospects." *ISLE (International Studies in Literature and the Environment)* 4.1 (Spring 1997): 29-42.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. Ed. J. Lyndon Shanley. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971.
- . *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Ed. Carl F. Hovde et al. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- . *The Essays of Henry D. Thoreau*. Ed. Lewis Hyde. New York: North Point Press, 2002.
- . *Journal*. Various editors. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981-2002. 7 volumes to date: vol. 1, 1837-1844 (1981); vol. 2, 1842-1848 (1984); vol. 3, 1848-1851 (1990); vol. 4, 1851-1852 (1992); vol. 5, 1852-1853 (1997); vol. 6, 1853 (2000); vol. 8, 1854 (2002). [referred to as *J* followed by volume number in Arabic numerals]
- . *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*. (Eds. B. Torrey and F. H. Allen. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906). In *Fourteen Volumes Bound as Two*. New York: Dover, 1962. [referred to as *J* followed by volume number in Roman numerals]

Walls, Laura Dassow. *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.