

Mythic Buds in Thoreau's Journal

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As I live now so shall I reap. If I grow pines and birches, my virgin mould will not sustain the oak; but pines and birches, or, perchance, weeds and brambles, will constitute my second growth.

—*Journal*, I, 34.

NATURE'S facts and the poet's spiritual interpretation of them are of considerable importance particularly during the first fifteen years or so of Thoreau's *Journals* as opposed to the last several years where we find an increasing appreciation of facts for fact's sake such as pitch pine growth rings and varying pond temperatures. I should like to concentrate here upon the general period of composition of *A Week* and *Walden* when Thoreau elaborately spiritualized natural facts in his transcendental *Journal*. Analogy is the key to his spiritualization process, but, as Thoreau admonishes, "It is more proper for a spiritual fact to have suggested an analogous natural one, than for the natural fact to have preceeded the spiritual in our minds."¹ His nebulous thoughts are given crystalized expression by the natural world. "My thought is a part of the meaning of the world," Thoreau observes, "and hence I use a part of the world as a symbol to express my thought."²

Just how does this analogous process work? Early in the *Journal* Thoreau explains: "To-day I feel the migratory instinct strong in me, and all my members and humors anticipate the breaking up of winter. If I yielded of this impulse, it would surely guide me to summer haunts. This indefinite restlessness and fluttering on to perch do, no doubt, prophesy the final migration of souls

out of nature to a serene summer, in long harrows and waving lines in the spring weather, over what fair uplands and fertile Elysian meadows winging their way at evening and seeking a resting-place with loud cackling and uproar!"³ Here the transcendental poet has fused a natural migratory instinct with the spiritual longing of the human soul reminiscent of William Cullen Bryant's poem "To a Waterfowl." The analogizing process is indeed a discovery for Thoreau which will become throughout the early and middle years of the *Journal* a dominant stylistic feature. Souls whose depths are never fathomed are likened to deep dark ponds and thoughts flowing deep have their analogy in river currents. Manhood is linked to "bud following hard upon leaf,"⁴ while children appear "as raw as the fresh fungi on a fence rail."⁵ Geniuses are like heat lightning and creative souls translate into generative green colors. The sky "is the symbol of my own infinity" and a chamois pass is the steep and arduous years of life. "Floating in still water," Thoreau writes, "I too am a planet, and have my orbit, in space, and am no longer a satellite of the earth."⁶ Death and sunsets, sin and landscape shadows, happiness and floating spider's webs, truth and fungi's sporules, thoughts and mountain chains, blood's circulation and cataracts, a friend's inner glow and the glow of flowers all become fused in Thoreau's transcendental analogy. These very analogies will develop into myths and mythic structures of his major books, *A Week*, *Walden*, *Cape Cod* and *The Maine Woods*. His transcendental intuition steeped in Emerson and Swedenborg, tells him that "all nature will *fable*, and every natural phenomenon [will] be a myth."⁷ In an earlier historical period the Thoreauvian thought process manifests itself in Paracelsus, John Donne, Robert Herrick, or Henry Vaughan. Perhaps this helps explain his affinity for British metaphysical poets emulating the planes of universal correspondence.

"How important is a constant intercourse with nature

and the contemplation of natural phenomena to the preservation of moral and intellectual health," claims Thoreau, for "He approaches the study of mankind with great advantages who is accustomed to the study of nature."⁸ Intercourse with nature is important because the poet, or transcendental translator, needs the natural world for his language and more fundamentally for his spirit which must fuse with the elements. Lake Cochituate serves as a case in point: "Dear to me to be in, this sand; fit to preserve the bones of a race for thousands of years to come. And this my home, my native soil; and I am a New Englander. Of thee, O earth, are my bone and sinew made; to thee, O sun, am I brother. It must be the largest lake in Middlesex. To this dust my body will gladly return as to its origin. Here have I my habitat. I am of thee."⁹ At this stage of his life he was unable to sever facts from poetry, and, as he explains, he had difficulty in distinguishing between his commonplace-books for facts and for poetry. Certainly the *Journal* from 1837 to 1857 is such a fusion.

Botanical, zoological, and geological facts are translated into human truths. For example, look what he does with the botanist Gray's discussion of roots and branches: "So the mind develops from the first in two opposite directions: upwards to expand in the light and air; and downwards avoiding the light to form the root. One half is aerial, the other subterranean. The mind is not well balanced and firmly planted, like the oak, which has not as much root as branch, whose roots like those of the white pine are slight and near the surface. One half of the mind's development must still be root,—in the embryonic state, in the womb of nature, more unborn than at first. For each successive new idea or bud, a new rootlet in the earth. The growing man penetrates yet deeper by his roots into the womb of things. The infant is comparatively near the surface, just covered from the light; but the man sends down a tap-root to the centre of things."¹⁰

Thoreau, in composing his *Journal*, fully applies the transcendental formula to even the most scientifically labored fact.

F. O. Matthiessen, Koh Kasegawa, David Mason Greene, Kathleen D. Brogan, and others have skillfully analyzed mythic structures in *Walden* and *A Week*. They have pointed out that seasons (yearly and daily) and river journeys form the basis of myth. It remains to be said how Thoreau's *Journal* is a vital record of myths in the bud as well as of the poet's state of mind during the mythic process. Here we can see the germinal stages of mind and its literary product that significantly relate to Thoreau's grand accomplishments. First let us examine the poet's creative state where Thoreau fuses with nature to form spiritual analogy.

If we can trust Black Elk's description of Crazy Horse during his spiritual trances, we can assume that Henry Thoreau experienced a similar "floating" sensation: "If with closed ears and eyes I consult consciousness for a moment, immediately are all walls and barriers dissipated, earth rolls from under me, and I float, by the impetus derived from the earth and the system, a subjective, heavily laden thought, in the midst of an unknown and infinite sea, or else heave and swell like a vast ocean of thought, without rock or headland, where are all riddles solved, all straight lines making their two ends meet, eternity and space gambolling familiarity through my depths. I am from the beginning, knowing no end, no aim. No sun illumines me, for I dissolve all lesser lights in my own intenser and steadier light. I am restful kernel in the magazine of the universe."¹¹ After Thoreau reaches his nirvana where eternity and space become "gambolling familiarity" through his depths, he then tells us how the transcendental mind creates: "He must be something more than natural, even supernatural. Nature will not speak through but along with him. His voice will not proceed from her midst, breathing on her, will

make her, will make her the expression of his thought. He then poetizes when he takes a fact out of nature into spirit. He speaks without reference to time or place. His thought is one world, hers another. He is another Nature—Nature's brother. Kindly offices do they perform for one another. Each publishes the other's truth."¹² The writer of the *Journal* gives us deep insight into the mystical process of spiritual analogizing in which his mind reaches the state where time and matter fuse, where, as Albert Einstein also conceived, ends of straight lines meet. From this state nature speaks "along with him" because he has inexorably become a part of her. Naturally the world, then, becomes a symbol to express his thought. Here we have one of the clearest depictions of the transcendental process.

Buds of seasonal, fluvial, and animal myths further developed in *Walden* and *A Week* and other essays, abound in the *Journal* from the 1830's to the 1850's. Such buds help explain why Thoreau would develop mythic structure to the extent that he did in his book-length essays. As early as 1837 we found the following passage: "How indispensable to a correct study of Nature is a perception of her true meaning. The fact will one day flower out into a truth. The season will mature and fructify what the understanding had cultivated. Mere accumulation of facts—collectors of materials for the master-workmen—are like those plants growing in dark forests, which 'put forth only leaves instead of blossoms.'"¹³ The second and third sentence will become structurally thematic in *Walden*. Facts flower out into truths and seasons fructify understanding. Mythology precedes regular poetry as frost precedes spring, Thoreau states in *Walden*.¹⁴

In the same year, 1837, Thoreau writes,

March fans it, April christens it, and May puts on its jacket and trousers. It never grows up, but Alexandrian-like 'days its slow length along,' ever springing, bud following close upon leaf, and when winter comes it is not annihilated, but creeps on mole-like under the snow,

showing its face nevertheless occasionally by fuming springs and watercourses.

So let it be with man,—let his manhood be a more advanced and still advancing youth, bud following hard upon leaf. By the side of the ripening corn let's have a second or third crops of peas and turnips, decking the fields in new green. So amid clumps of *sere* herd's-grass sometimes flower the violet and buttercup spring-born.¹⁵

What is man but a thawing mass of clay asks Thoreau in *Walden*. If man is truly to be awake, to be reborn, or "spring-born," he must be aware of his divine correspondence with nature. Nature's seasons and man's seasons are fundamentally similar; that is, man, like nature, can have rebirth *in* his life during the regenerative springs of his inner season. "Your head so much concerned with outer, Mine with inner weather," writes Robert Frost in "Tree at My Window." Because the seasonal process is eternal, so is its lesson. *Walden* becomes the world's grand articulation of this philosophy.

The importance of dawn in *Walden* is prefigured early in the *Journal*: "It would be well if we saw ourselves as in perspective always, impressed with distinct outline on the sky, side by side with the shrubs on the river's brim. So let our life stand to heaven as some fair, sunlit tree against the western horizon, and by sunrise be planted on some eastern hill to glisten in the first rays of the dawn."¹⁶ The dawning of our continent and its potential mythological contributions to world culture portrayed in "Walking" is also prefigured in the early *Journal* where Thoreau employs the metaphor of palm and banyan and pine and oak to represent oriental and occidental cultures respectively: "I like to read of the 'pine, larch, spruce, and silver fir,' which cover the southern face of the Himmaleh range-or the 'gooseberry, raspberry, strawberry,' which from an imminent temperate zone overlook the torrid plains. So did this active modern life have even then a foothold and linking place in the midst of the primeval stateliness, and contemplativeness of the plain. In another era the 'lilly of the valley, cowslip,

dandelion,' were to work their way down onto the plain, and bloom in a level zone of their own, reaching round the world. Already has the era of the temperate zone arrived, the era of the pine, and the oak, for the palm and the Banyan do not supply the wants of the foremost races. The lichens too on the summits of the rocks are to find their level ere long."¹⁷

If we can assume that Thoreau's first person singular in both *A Week* and *Walden* has mythic proportions transcending the literal Henry Thoreau, this type of "super I" reminiscent of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" has its budding development early in the *Journal*: 'I may be a logger on the head waters of the Penobscot to be recorded in fable hereafter as an amphibious river-god, by as sounding a name as Triton or Proteus; carry furs from Nootka to China, and be more renowned than Jason and his golden fleece; or go on a South Sea exploring expedition, to be hereafter recounted along with the periplus of Hanno. I may repeat the adventures of Marco Polo or Mandeville."¹⁸ It is in such a spirit that *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* is written in which he and his brother John become argonauts on the American odyssey. The river itself assumes mythological significance.

At the very outset of the *Journal* Thoreau writes, "There goes the river, or rather is, 'in serpent error wandering,' the jugular vein of Musketaquid. Who knows how much of the proverbial moderation of the inhabitants was caught from its dull circulation?"¹⁹ He is suggesting here that the natural world actually influences the mentality of New Englanders not unlike Frank Waters' notion of the psychic land of the American West; that is, the land psychically affects its inhabitants. But more importantly, Thoreau, as early as 1837, begins to view the mythic proportions of the Concord River. He creates another river analogue that approaches the mythic duplicity of Hemingway's story "The Big Two-Hearted River":

"A man's life should be as fresh as a river. It should be the same channel, but a new water every instant. Some men have no inclination; they have no rapids nor cascades, but marshes, and alligators, and miasma instead."²⁰ The brothers Thoreau, during the journey on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, philosophically acquired "new water every instant," as this *Journal's* bud myth suggests. They left Concord, Massachusetts to arrive at concord.

Animal fables so beautifully woven in *Walden* as seen in the hound, bay-horse and turtle-dove passage or in the Antiad passage have their elemental roots in the *Journal* as early as 1837. One such suggestive but not fully developed bud myth involves a fox; "While I write here, I hear the foxes trotting about me over the dead leaves, and now gently over the grass, as if not to disturb the dew which is falling. Why should we not cultivate neighborly relations with the foxes? As if to improve upon our seeming advances, comes one to greet us nose-wise under our tent-curtain. Nor do we rudely repulse him. Is man powder and the fox flint and steel? Has not the time come when men and foxes shall lie down together?"²¹ The suggestiveness of flint and steel coming together to create a spark which will unite man with nature has all of the ear-markings of more fully developed mythic passages of later years. And the singing of birds becomes yet another bud: "An early morning walk is a blessing for the whole day. To my neighbors who have risen in mist and rain I tell of a clear sunrise and the singing of birds as some traditionary mythus."²²

In many instances Thoreau employed *Journal* passages to help create the entire mythic structure of *A Week* and *Walden*. The silence fable²³ is a case in point. I do not mean to imply that the buds did not sometimes come to bloom within the pages of the *Journal*; that was inevitable. But the preponderance of mythic jottings points toward a major preoccupation of Thoreau, a pre-

occupation which will flower with his major writings.

In 1841 Thoreau wrote: "My Journal is that of me which would else spill over and run to waste, gleamings from the fluid which in action I reap. I must not live for it, but in it for the gods. They are my correspondent, to whom daily I send off this sheet postpaid. I am clerk in their counting-room, and at evening transfer the account from day-book to ledger. It is as a leaf which hangs over my head in the path. I bend the twig and write my prayers on it; then letting it go, the bough springs up and shows the scrawl to heaven. As if it were not kept shut in my desk, but were as public a leaf as any in nature. It is papyrus by the riverside; it is vellum in the pastures; it is parchment on the hills. I find it everywhere as free as the leaves which troop along the lanes in autumn. The crow, the goose, the eagle carry my quill, and the wind blows the leaves as far as I go. Or, if my imagination does not soar, but gropes in slime and mud, then I write with a reed."²⁴ Nature is his source, spiritual analogue is his method, and myth his product. When he lets go of the bough he has written on, it springs up to heaven with man and nature fused. Friendship and oak roots intertwined, the infinite expanse of our being and thunder, history and the westward course of the sun, and thoughts and fern fragrance blend inexorably into pure Thoreau.

And what of death? It too has mythic significance in the literal blending of the body with earth: "May we not suffer our impurities gradually to evaporate in sun and wind, with the superfluous juices of the body, and so wither and dry up at last like a tree in the woods, which possesses a sort of embalmed life after death, and is as clean as the sapling or fresh buds of spring!"²⁵ And sounding like the youthful William Cullen Bryant, Thoreau writes in his *Journal*, "I anticipate a more thorough sympathy with nature, when my thigh-bones shall strew the ground like the boughs which the wind

has scattered.—Thus troublesome humors will flower into early anemonies, and perhaps in the very lachrymal sinus, nourished by its juices, some young pine or oak will strike root.”²⁶ New buds come forth from dead bodies or from bodies of life. Buds may well be the transcendental symbol of where the two ends of a straight line meet, as both come full circle in a mythic realm where life and death fuse.

NOTES

¹Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston, 1906), I, 175.

²*Journal*, X, 410.

³*Journal*, I, 176.

⁴*Journal*, I, 30-31.

⁵*Journal*, I, 94.

⁶Henry David Thoreau, *Consciousness in Concord: The Text of Thoreau's Hitherto "Lost Journal,"* ed. Perry Miller (Boston, 1958), p. 149.

⁷*Journal*, V, 135.

⁸*Journal*, II, 193.

⁹*Journal*, III, 95.

¹⁰*Journal*, II, 201.

¹¹*Journal*, I, 53-54.

¹²*Journal*, I, 74-75.

¹³*Journal*, I, 18.

¹⁴Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Sherman Paul (Boston, 1960), p. 210.

¹⁵*Journal*, I, 30-31.

¹⁶*Journal*, I, 140.

¹⁷"*Lost Journal*", p. 160.

¹⁸*Journal*, I, 130.

¹⁹*Journal*, I, 10.

²⁰*Journal*, I, 347.

²¹*Journal*, I, 89.

²²*Journal*, I, 134.

²³See *Journal*, I, 68-69, and *A Week* (Boston, 1893), pp. 517-518.

²⁴*Journal*, I, 206-207.

²⁵"*Lost Journal*", pp. 189-190.

²⁶"*Lost Journal*", p. 215.