

Intimacy with Nature: Thoreau´s pedagogy of awakening

*Intimidade com a Natureza:
a pedagogia do despertar de Thoreau*

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Abstract

This paper aims at being an attempt of identifying and better understanding a possible soteriological path in Thoreau´s work, which is going to be called, here, a “Pedagogy of awakening”. Such path, it is going to be argued, aims at a profound experience of integration with wilderness, with Nature, and is fundamentally carved out from Thoreau´s dialogical relationship with the Greek philosophical and mythological tradition. That referred awakening is based upon a set of practices and exercises: attention, study and contemplation.

Keywords: Thoreau. Nature and Spirituality. Soteriology. Greek philosophy and mythology.

Resumo

O objetivo desse texto é uma tentativa de identificar e melhor compreender um possível caminho soteriológico na obra de Thoreau, que será chamado, aqui, tentativamente, de uma “Pedagogia do Despertar”. Tal caminho, como se tentará demonstrar, busca uma experiência de profunda unicidade com a Natureza selvagem, e é construído fundamentalmente a partir da relação dialógica de Thoreau com a tradição filosófica e mitológica grega. Aquele despertar referido, como tentará-se demonstrar, está baseado num conjunto de práticas e exercícios: atenção, estudo e contemplação.

Palavras-chave: Thoreau. Natureza e Espiritualidade. Soteriologia. Filosofia e Mitologia Grega.

Introduction

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) stands today as a sort of patron saint of environmentalism. Living in times of political, economic and territorial upheaval and expansion in United States, in the middle of the Industrial Revolution, in a moment of unprecedented optimism regarding the future, Thoreau strikes a severe blow to that optimism in pointing out the shortcomings of both American democracy - flawed by slavery, consumerism and personal domestication - as well as in the idea of progress, underlying its environmental destruction. A visionary, Thoreau seems to be speaking much more to a 21st century audience than to his contemporaries. A radical democrat, whose influence upon personalities like Mahatma Gandhi to Martin Luther King, Jr., is well known, his ideas and writings seem only now to start being fully appreciated not only as a writer or a naturalist – his contribution to those areas was early recognized, but Thoreau is being read today as a man who founded a sort of soteriological path that is fundamentally based on a close intimacy with Nature. Thus, we shall try, here, to delineate the general characteristics of that “natural pedagogy of awakening”.

“We are constantly invited to be what we are”,¹ Thoreau says. Nature is the ground upon which we flourish into existence: we *are* Nature, according to him. Our singularity is shaped in a dialogical tension and interdependence with the myriad natural beings and phenomena. Alas, most of the time we get it wrong about our true identity for a number of reasons: we extract ourselves from Her, superimposing a plethora of ideological and technological paraphernalia between us. Such a regrettable phenomenon – understandable as it is – hampers and jeopardizes our potential for enlightened and ecstatic life. Because of our adventitious misconceptions about ourselves, we lead insincere lives, alienated from Nature and disconnected from our innermost sources of authenticity. Thus, it seems to follow that, if we could somehow manage to reconnect with Nature and engage in a deliberate and sustained effort of self-knowledge, our problems would, theoretically, be over. There is, though, only

¹ THOREAU, H. D., *Journal*, v. I, p. 191.

one very small problem here: what sort of Nature are we talking about? What sort of *value* are we attaching to Her, so that She becomes our bearing and mirror? Nature, we know, is a slippery concept, and even if Thoreau is prepared to sing Nature's perfection, some unanswered questions still linger, such as, what *aspects* of Nature shall one follow: for a plague, a predator or a tsunami, destructive as they are, are 'natural' as well. Shall we behave like them too? Most of us do, as a matter of fact, both individually and collectively. Most are *fated* – by Nature? – to behave how they do, but maybe not *all of us* are destined to. The problem, thus, seems to be *what* is natural, innate in us and what is not, *i.e.*, what is cultural, ideological, artificial, if one considers a basic dichotomy between us and Nature, which Thoreau certainly did not.

1. Thoreau, however, as we all know, was not the first to say that we should reconnect to or live according to Nature. A sizeable portion of Greek philosophical schools had precisely that as their main tenet: Epicureans² and Stoics³ principally. For both of them the main thesis is very similar. We, human beings, *are* Nature, but a very specific piece of work, or Nature. Her main characteristic, as far as that moral desideratum 'to follow Her' is concerned, is that She is, supposedly like us, rational.⁴ Although there are major differences between Epicureanism and Stoicism, and minor ones inside Stoicism's several strands, regarding Nature's nature that is a very uncontroversial statement. Nature is rational and so should human beings also be. We can and should detect how she operates ('Natural laws') and follow, rationally, accordingly. Thus, if we want to be free, wise and happy, we have to follow Her. The problem for us starts exactly here: how can one follow Nature if one does not understand Her or, worse, in case one understands, is one willing to indulge in an *imitatio naturae* and be prepared to imitate or follow, for instance, a predator or a prey? Again, one has to have a very clear – and positive – conception about what Nature is to be willing to follow Her. So, it appears to be the case that, according to Thoreau, if we want to be happy and free, we are invited to be wild: to 'take a walk on the wild side'. Hence, it seems that our best course of action is to try to figure out 'what is wild' – and that, as we will soon discover, is a synonym of the *good*. "How near to good is what is wild! Life

² *Kata physin*.

³ *To homologoumenon tēi physei zēn*. "to lead one's life according to Nature". DIOGENES LAERTIUS, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, p. 195.

⁴ According to the Stoics, specifically, Nature, Zeus, Fate and Reason are synonyms.

consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him”.⁵ Wild is good, tame is bad: that is a fundamental equation for Thoreau. The more domesticated, the more civilized, the worst; the wilder, the best. We lead artificial, corrupted lives because we have distanced ourselves from the source, from the living dynamics of the web of life. The many layers of cultural varnish that both society and we apply all over ourselves cripple our true vitality and veil the most profound, *radical*, subterranean fountains of our existential vigor. It dries the sap, congealing the marrow of life. That distancing spells a misunderstanding about the nature of *some* of us and our original belonging to the wilderness as well. And here we face a double challenge from which there is no avoiding. The first one has to do with the necessary domestication of humans. There is no civilization without domestication, Thoreau knows that; so how can he propose a “return to wildness”, to a more intimate relationship with Nature, when he knows that most of us have a tendency towards tameness?

I rejoice that horses and steers have to be broken before they can be made slaves of men, and that men themselves have some wild oats still left to sow before they become submissive members of society. Undoubtedly all men are not equally fit subjects for civilization, and because the majority, like dogs and sheep, are tame by inherited disposition, is no reason the others should have their natures broken.⁶

To be broken, as Thoreau emphasizes with italics, is the decisive civilizational baptism that integrates one into society. It is the rite of passage that degrades one from one’s natural state into a civilized stage.

2. However, he leaves no doubt whatsoever as to his true calling:

I feel that I draw nearest to understanding the great secret of my life in my closest intercourse with nature. There is a reality and health in (present) nature; which is not to be found in any religion - and cannot be contemplated in antiquity - I suppose that what in other men is religion is in me love of nature.⁷

⁵ THOREAU, H. D., *Walking*, p. 240.

⁶ THOREAU, H. D., *Journal*, v. I, p. 192.

⁷ THOREAU, H. D., *Journal*, v. II, p. 55.

The ideological cornerstone of the way is passionately laid out: self/Nature-understanding comes with intimacy with Nature and that, for him, is sacredness itself. Religion, the *re-ligare* (“reconnect”) here is naturalized. The naturalization of the supernatural is a stupendous shift from a tradition that overvalues the beyond and relegates the natural and material world to a subaltern position. That naturalization subverts the old dualistic approach (humans-Nature) and reveals one of the most important features of an immanent and non-dual perspective on existence. The longing look that alights on the landscapes of Nature becomes a look on the body of the Divine: theology becomes physics, and chemistry, theodicy. Intimacy with the natural world upends our cultural inherited values in as much as it dissolves the ingrained duality of “us and the Other” reconfiguring our glance to be able to witness the fluid and interdependent ballet of the Whole, blurring the dichotomies between “self and non-self”. Our domesticated views become wild vistas, enlarged and suffused with the shining component of the *theion*, the divine, vivifying what once was *natural*: whether subaltern, dead or dangerous and strange - into a vibrant and pulsating totality, a cosmic dance in which our psycho-physical frame is engulfed by an undulating high tide of Nature’s sentience. Not even the arcane proximity of ancient societies to the pristine human condition can surpass the immediacy of the lace of conscious light that one may experience in the embrace of Nature; that love of Nature – *physiophilia* – is both *philosophy* and *physiology*: it is Natural Philosophy potentiated by aesthetical and ecstatic *radicalism*, the integrative experience with the single *root* of Being and its infinite branches. The ideal look becomes a necessarily inter- and trans-disciplinary holistic approach that galvanizes mythopoetic diction, qualified and quantified data in an alternative epistemological tress that nomadically shifts its perspective to capture a richer and more diversified pallet of hues that can better delineate the contours of phenomena, so that “truths” become “*topoi*” and “grace”, breathing, a *healthy* breathing, since it marks the confluence of the rhythm of the individual breathing with the systole and diastole of the All. That ideal look is transformed into method, an *extra-vagant sauntering*, a going beyond the accepted and safe perimeter that refuses complicity with the sclerotic and domesticated biases that fence the wilderness of truth and beauty off from tamed civilization.

3. But religion, according to some ancients and Cicero in particular,⁸ is not only *re-ligare*, (“reconnect”) but also *re-legere* (“reread”, “read with attention and intensively”): in Thoreau’s case a rereading of the book of Nature, a sustained, careful and caring look that judges not, but tries to accept, for only acceptance entails understanding and only understanding unveils the patterns which allow us to harmonize with Her, creating that healthy and serene wellness that percolates through the porous membranes separating the interconnected bodies within Her embracing totality. Our savage mother is the only one capable of still fertilizing the best possible culture; only a wild culture, a wild cultivation, a *wild pedagogy* can still redeem us from the narcoleptic state of a technocratic civilization that not only does not care for the wild but diligently deforms it through unrelenting hatred for the *other* that refuses to yield: where only utter and complete destruction will do. Domestication, tameness, submission or destruction: hasn’t this been the most amply adopted political mantra that has historically founded human political action towards the many *others*: humans or Nature? For those who want to build a narcissistic mirror for culture based on Nature, Thoreau has some very strong words:

While almost all men feel an attraction drawing them to society, few are attracted enough to Nature. In their relation to Nature men appear to me for the most part, notwithstanding their art, lower than the animals. It is not often a beautiful relation, as in the case of the animals. How little appreciation of the beauty of the landscape there is among us! We have to be told that the Greeks called the world κόσμος (*cosmos*), Beauty, or Order, but we do not see clearly why they did so.⁹

Notwithstanding their *arts*, their *techniques*, they are degraded to a lower-than-animal existence. Their alienation not only corrupts Nature, it degrades them to a *beastly* life. The unexpected inversion is fascinating: technology bestializes humans into sub-animalistic dimensions! That double corruption of Nature and themselves entails the peculiar narcissistic blunder that it is only technology that can heal our most profound wounds. That is patently absurd, for how can an instrument heal alienated Nature of Herself? How can technique introduce us to that *anamnetic* process of self-knowledge? It cannot. Only philosophy, poetry and intimacy with Nature can. Unless, of course, one

⁸ CICERO, The nature of the God, p. 134.

⁹ THOREAU, H. D., Journal, v. II, p. 251.

develops a very peculiarly tame and domesticated view of Nature, that is, a completely artificial and false simulacrum out of it, so that we can pretend to fill out a hole by digging another one. In his own prescient, unique prophetic way, Thoreau shows how technique itself becomes the *instrument* of their debasement, since it is technique that allows them to distance themselves from Nature and deform the landscape, domesticating it to nefarious ends. Such a perversion blinds us to the most sublime aspects of reality. Once again, the Greeks come to the fore, because of their *still wild innocence*. We, ourselves, cannot see how *they* could *see* such a beauty. Nature was there and She is still here; what we have lost was the *innocent*, the *wild* look, that wonder towards the unsurpassed perfection and beauty of reality. That is why a “wild pedagogy” is also, necessarily, a “pedagogy of the look”: a cultivation of the way one looks at the *Other*. It is the eye, the uncultivated eye that deforms and kills before the technique or the weapon; to be capable of dismantling the ideological constructs that have domesticated our vision until the point of inanity; an eye-care, literally: the possibility of retrieving that almost lost Greek, infantile awe-filled glance onto the landscape. The very idea of “landscape”, both external and internal ones, is in itself instructive: the result of the encounter of the eye with the Other, the digestion of the dynamics of the time-space fluid frame; in our case, the deformed landscapes of deforming imaginations. To accept and respect the “Other-Nature” as an axiomatic presupposition to a new – which is in fact *archaic* – wild look one has to shift one’s perspective:

men nowhere, east or west, live yet a natural life, round which the vine clings, and which the elm willingly shadows. Man would desecrate it by his touch, and so the beauty of the world remains veiled to him. He needs not only to be spiritualized, but naturalized on the soil of earth.¹⁰

Thoreau’s italics stress the urgency to change the parameters: we do not need *spirit*, we need *Nature!* Western’s religious tradition is overly emphatic as to the supposed causes of our woes: lack of “spiritualization” and “philanthropy”, among others. Nothing could be more distant from Henry’s perspective; love of ‘spirit’ in inversely proportional to distancing from “earth”. We need a new *spirituality*, one that does not divide and amputate beings from Nature. More than a ‘Heaven’, we need a sacralization of Earth, of Nature:

¹⁰ THOREAU, H. D., A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, p. 307.

“We have to be earth-born as well as heaven-born, γηγενεις (‘earth-born’), as was said of the Titans of old, or in a better sense than they”.¹¹ To be “born from earth” implies assuming the pride and honor of literally being *human*, “created from humus”, a true son of Adam, “clay”. Humus, clay are our most *radical* heritage, our own true nature that was slowly corrupted and falsified by a supposed “heavenly” origin. Such falsification not only hides the natural, biological truth of our nature; it also maligns, defames and subalternize Earth and Her children to an unacceptable degraded hierarchical position. The long history of that falsification was instrumental in creating the divide between us and Nature, which is replicated in our distancing from our fellow natural sisters and brothers: stones, animals, plants and even humans themselves. According to that recovered sanity, which abandons the protocols of inertial theological and metaphysical distorting lenses, there is no need for churches; the *wild* will do if we are able to transform our look: the *re-sacralization of Earth and Nature*.

4. In that light, one could claim that he is basically concerned with raising awareness by presenting us a really *new, fresh perspective* of things that is, also, *therapeutic*; that is why his alternative is a much more radical one: “in short, all good things are wild and free... give me for friends and neighbors wild men, not tame ones. The wildness of the savage is but a faint symbol of the awful ferity with which good men and lovers meet”.¹² It is fascinating to note how Thoreau juxtaposes “the Good” with “the Wild” escaping from millennia of indoctrination that approximates “Good” with either “God”, “Reason” or “Virtue” and, more interesting still, how he notes that “savagery” – in the best possible sense – is still among and inside us in our most decisively human moments, after all: “you have a wild savage in you”;¹³ this savage that lies dormant inside ourselves is, for us, very difficult to connect with; it was different with Henry, as he confided to a certain Mrs. Brown: “I grow savager and savager everyday as if fed on raw meat, and my tameness is only the repose of untamableness”.¹⁴ Savage means untamable, refusing to be domesticated by the plethora of ideological strategies originating from the false and corrupt social and spiritual mores of a sclerotic society. Or, as Nietzsche would say

¹¹ THOREAU, H. D., *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, p. 308.

¹² THOREAU, H. D., *Walking*, p. 246.

¹³ THOREAU, H. D., *Journal*, v. II, p. 210.

¹⁴ *Apud* RICHARDSON, R. D., *Henry Thoreau*, p. 112.

some years later in a similar vein: “Our own wild nature is the best place to recover from our un-nature, our spirituality...”.¹⁵ Nature, Wildness – internal or external – is the fountain whence creativity may surge, where regeneration and renewal is to be found. It is that savage inside ourselves that he is trying to awaken; it is wilderness that fertilizes us: “It is vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. It is the bog in our brain and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us that inspires that dream”.¹⁶ It is the vigor of Nature, the bog inside us that we should try to tap, but how could we possibly do that? It is time to turn to specifics.

5. “Walden - Yesterday I came here to live. My house makes me think of some mountain houses I have seen, which seemed to have a fresh aureal atmosphere about them, as I fancy of the halls of Olympus”.¹⁷ Those are the very first words written by Thoreau at Walden Pond on July, 5th 1845, after spending his first night at his cabin. Interestingly, “wildness” (= Walden), “aureal” = “dawn” and Olympus, the home of the Greek Divines are related. The freshness of the wild, of the awakening hour of the day and the home of the divines of his beloved Arcadian Greece get entwined and are seen from a culturally constructed viewpoint, a house. His hut, his social *minimum*, his *burrow*, was to become his outermost clothing, a thin and malleable fluid membrane that marginally deformed the landscape and did not separated him from Nature, rather, as he would say later on, engaged him inside Her. Apart from everything else that might be said about his going to Walden, there is no denying that his “experiment” is, first and foremost, a getting closer to Nature, an approximation and more: a returning. Walden Pond and its woods are among his first memories, Thoreau having been previously there when he was still a child. Therefore, he is not only returning to Walden. He is returning to an apparently lost world of *innocent wonder* and *wilderness*, exactly the two pivots around which his life – and his wild pedagogy – would thenceforth gravitate. He is embarking, thus, on an *anamnetic* journey not only towards his past; far more important, he is embarking on an adventure towards *arche*, the origin, the genesis, “*wilderness within*”, an interior dawn, a golden Greek beginning. Somewhere down on the woods paths of his memories lies the

¹⁵ NIETZSCHE, F., *Twilight of the idols*, p. 156.

¹⁶ THOREAU, H. D., *The Journal of H. D. Thoreau in fourteen volumes bound as two*, v. IX, p. 43.

¹⁷ THOREAU, H. D., *Journal*, v. I, p. 361.

savage he was trying to connect not only genealogically but, principally, ontologically; that lost Greek look, that lost kid's awe – the savage was there, he felt, lurking somewhere inside him. Outside, down on the woods' paths lies Nature. By the end of his sojourn at Walden, he was to discover that there was no inside and no outside within Her, but that would come later on: first things first. The goal he was aiming at through that intimacy with Nature is explicit in the immediately next entry of his journal, July 6th:

I wish to meet the facts of life – the vital facts, which are the phenomena or actuality the Gods meant to show us – face to face, and so I came down here... in all studies we go not forward but rather backward with redoubled pauses. We always study antiques with pause and reflection. Even time has a depth, and below its surface the waves do not lapse and roar... - one emancipated heart and intellect! It would knock off the fetters from a million slaves.¹⁸

The most important facts of life, those divine ones which the Gods – not *God*, mind you – want to show us: wisdom, serenity, fruits of that genealogical *anamnetic* itinerary, lie beneath and beyond temporality in a realm of awakened freedom. An awakening that might multiply exponentially, shattering social, political, economic and spiritual bonds that bounded all sorts of slaves, and many a type they were. Suspended above Time but deeply rooted in Nature, Thoreau will slowly and dexterously weave his “soteriological” agenda; the first point, immersion in wilderness.

To insure health, a man's relation to Nature must come very near to a personal one; he must be conscious of a friendliness in her... I cannot conceive of any life which deserves the name, unless there is a certain tender relation to Nature... unless Nature sympathizes with and speaks to us, as it were, the most fertile and blooming regions are barren and dreary.¹⁹

Love of Nature and friendship with Her – *physiophilia* – is the condition *sine qua non* for starting the adventure of self and Nature knowledge. Intimacy manifests itself in mute accordance, the silent harmony that does not need to be

¹⁸ THOREAU, H. D., Journal, v. I, p. 362.

¹⁹ THOREAU, H. D., The Journal of H. D. Thoreau in fourteen volumes bound as two, vol. X, p. 252.

explained or articulated. However, it must be a two-way road: our friendship with Her and Her sympathy with us. Her sympathy with us is given, but our proximity to Her exacts an effort from us, since our long-gone nearness to Her is just an exiled longing. The effort is also necessary to overcome Her defamation and our misunderstandings about ourselves. Maybe forced in the beginning, nearness engenders familiarity, then intimacy; but if intimacy is not mutual, it is not intimacy but accompanied solitude. The demanded tenderness is the human counterpart of the radicle's soft vigor and connection to earth. We may imagine that in the beginning, the contact of a budding root with earth may not be comfortable: earth probably resists, but as contact and co-terminality grow, borders and limits melt. We are not plants, though, albeit also being related to them: cousins, no less; in that familiar intimacy not everything is said, the unsaid being perfectly *felt*. Tenderness, friendship, sympathy and love engender life, and life far from Nature is not life properly, but a slow death. The death of fertility: sclerotic culture. Healthiness, wellness can only be found at the source, where life blooms. Intimacy with Nature teaches one how to accord with Her. They way to fertility and bloom lies in connecting to Nature, both inside and outside us.

6. "Next to Nature, it seems as if man's actions were the most natural, they so gently accord with her".²⁰ We are Nature, but of a very special type. A type of Nature that forgets it is Nature; thus, as a starter, the first demand is necessarily a step back, and not one forward; in that therapeutic anamnesis, in order to advance, we must be prepared, first, to return: a return to Her bosom. There, in sympathy, in communion, one may start to discern Her moods and traits, cycles and ruptures, creation and destruction, incorporating this fierce wisdom to our praxis. More important, studying Her, we can discover who we really are:

how important is a constant intercourse with nature and the contemplation of natural phenomena to the preservation of moral and intellectual health... The philosopher contemplates human affairs as calmly and from as great a remoteness as he does natural phenomena. The ethical philosopher needs the discipline of the natural philosopher. He approaches the study of mankind with great advantages who is accustomed to the study of nature.²¹

²⁰ THOREAU, H. D., *Journal*, v. I, p. 281.

²¹ THOREAU, H. D., *Journal*, v. II, p. 193

Packed here lie some remarkable orientations about his methodology, contents and ends. In fact, the whole project of *Philosophia Naturalis* is laid bare in those few lines. Thoreau's synthesis delimits the radium and reach of his method: intercourse with Nature, Her contemplation and self-contemplation, *in summa* – “*Gnothi sauton and study Nature*”. The two goals are not different, they are simply different stages of the same “*therapeia*”, in Greek: *care, attention, healing*; three fundamental words of Henry's vocabulary. “Intimacy with Nature” *means* care, attention and healing: method, goal and result in a nutshell. To study humans as integrally “Nature”, ethologically, is not only tremendously sophisticated methodology, it is downright revolutionary *today*. His sensibility in terms of transferring to everything human the then unheard-of ethological model demonstrates Thoreau's extraordinary ecological perception and, Wallace and Darwin's revolutionary Biology notwithstanding, Thoreau's combination of *Natural Philosophy*, self-knowledge, politics, poetry, myth, history *et al*, amplifies significantly the scope of a purely biological approach to the human phenomenon, embracing art, wisdom and science in an natural, anthropocosmic, holistic philosophy that, idiosyncratic as it may seem, presents us with the double challenge of therapeutic self-knowledge and caring intimacy with Nature, whose method, contents, scope and result could certainly be regarded as revolutionary as well:

the scenery, when it is truly seen, reacts on the life of the seer. “How to live. How to get the most of life. As you were to teach the younger hunter how to entrap his game. How to extract its honey from the flower of the world. That is my everyday business.”²²

And an amazing business it is. The interdependent complementariness of landscape and eye, of both subject and object, *when correctly observed*, both as non-dual modes of Nature, opens a magnificent window of opportunity towards natural, wild pedagogies. Nature teaches one *how to live*. An intimate, caring and attentive look is also openness to the Other, an openness that must attend in vigil to learn to transform the simple acts of life into theurgic empowerment, when the prosaic turns epiphanic. The distance from both extremes of the band of potential human experience – the prosaic and the epiphanic – is bridged and overcome by that aware openness that does not relegate the Other, whomever or whatever the Other happens to be, to a

²² THOREAU, H. D., *Journal*, v. II, p. 470.

subaltern position: the Other can teach us *if, and only if*, we are willing to engage intimately Her or him or it, with care and attention:

No method or discipline can supersede the necessity of being forever on the alert. What is a course of history, philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen.²³

To be alert means to be in a vigilant and expectant mood towards the unknown; it demands an openness to experience, a *sui generis* seeing that refuses to introduce anything in the gaze, a look as pure as possible, an *innocent* look

7. A wild pedagogy, as stated earlier, is perforce a pedagogy of the look. However, in this case, it is also at the first stages necessarily negative: one has to unlearn how one looks at things so that the obsidian of our pupils becomes once again transparent: a transparent crystal globe, as Thoreau's guru, Emerson, might have said. The inevitability of the look, the iron bond that connects subject and object, ought to be tended with a special collyrium, though: attention. Our unfocused, impatient glance does not have the discipline to *really* look *and* see. Neither the arts and humanities nor society or routine can replace the sympathetic openness and patience that the empty look demands. Empty, not vacuous, since vacuous is the look that cannot see through the many ideological layers that have, hitherto, deformed the viewer, the viewing and the view: "How much virtue there is in simply seeing! ... [We] are as much as we see. Faith is sight and knowledge. The hands only serve the eyes...; what I saw alters not".²⁴ Our identity is construed by what we have seen, for to be able to *see* means to be already sympathetically connected and open to the Other: it is this dialogical tension of the landscape and the eye that shapes us and feeds us:

"The art of life! Was there anything memorable written upon it? By what discipline to secure the most life, with what care to watch our thoughts. To observe what transpires, not in the street, but in the mind and heart of me!"²⁵ Thoreau's continuous exercise of self-search demands a sustained

²³ THOREAU, H. D., *Walden*, p. 411.

²⁴ THOREAU, H. D., *Journal*, v. I, p.80.

²⁵ THOREAU, H. D., *Journal*, v. II, p. 469.

tension between interior awareness and external observation, both, ultimately, translating into care. That discipline is an everlasting one, the important thing being, as we well remember, the quest itself:

Let me forever go in search of myself; never for a moment think that I have found myself; be as a stranger to myself, never a familiar, seeking acquaintance still. May I be to myself as one to me whom I love, a dear and cherished object. What temple, what fane, what sacred place can there be but the innermost part of my own being. The possibility of my own improvement, that is to be cherished.

From Delphi's walls to Freud psychoanalysis, "*Gnothi sauton*", "know thyself", has been one of the most important practices of self-care of the Western world. The invitation to know ourselves lies at the very basis of Western philosophy and it is celebrated as the best tool to achieve serenity and wisdom. The result of the discipline has been variously interpreted: "know your limits", "know you are not a God", "cultivate yourself". Together with the other Delphic maxim "*meden agan*", "nothing in excess", they form the nucleus of Western classical wisdom; the unanimous convergence of all diverse traditions and schools of thought, that recipe for *eudaimonia* cannot be seen as an egotistical self-centeredness. On the contrary, as Thoreau himself explains in the sequel of the above quote, self-knowledge is fundamental not only to "know who we really are"; as Thoreau remarked, the project is open-ended and inconclusive, but it is also extraordinarily important in terms of self-transformation and intersubjective relationships: "Oh my dear friends, I have not forgotten you. I will know you tomorrow. I associate with you my ideal self".²⁶ Self-knowledge is a propedeutic, prophylactic measure that helps that cleansing process: first to know ourselves and then get acquainted with the Other, already transformed, already relatively freed from the burden of tradition. It is decisive to know who we really are first and, in the process, to better and prepare ourselves for a more convivial and fraternal relationship with the Other, whoever or whatever that might be. In this light, self-knowledge is a *political* instrument as well, in as much as it produces a better neighbor, citizen and fellow human being. Self-knowledge is, therefore, an exploration of the unknown inside ourselves, an adventure to those interior wildernesses which we most of the times do not dare to face, nor visit. It is a sauntering towards

²⁶ THOREAU, H. D., *Journal*, v. II, pp. 314-315.

our interior outbacks and dark woods: self-knowledge is *wild pedagogy too*, as Thoreau puts it in the concluding pages of *Walden*, commenting on a stanza by William Habington:²⁷ “In spaces of thought are the reaches of land and water, where man go and come. The landscape lies far and far within and the deepest thinker is the farthest travelled”.²⁸ As Heraclitus said, “Nature likes to hide”: ours to ourselves probably much more so. But he also said “I searched into myself”²⁹ and “All men have the capacity of knowing themselves and acting with moderation”³⁰. From the wise man of Ephesus, who lived in the sacred woods of Artemis playing ball with the kids, to the forest sage of Concord who lived in the sacred woods of Walden running huckleberry parties with the kids: the abyss of the soul is exactly the same, yet completely different.

Conclusion

Live in each season as it passes; breath the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit and resign yourself to the influences of each. Let these be your only diet-drink and botanical medicines... [;] open all your pores and bathe in all the tides of nature, in all her streams and oceans, at all seasons. Miasma and infection are from within, not without... [G]row green with spring – yellow and ripe with autumn... [,] for all nature is doing her best each moment to make us well. She exists for no other end. Do not resist her... [;] nature is but another name for health.³¹

In a certain sense the best image for Thoreau’s Nature is renewal. The whole of his writings may be read in that sepia light: *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, *Walden*, his essays and maybe principally his *Journal* can be seen as a recurrent ode to Nature’s perennial regenerative powers. Physically, politically, intellectually and spiritually, Nature is continuously teaching us about reformation, renewal, renovation: *re-creation*. To follow Nature means to be willing to embrace the chaotic and regular cycle of creation and destruction: chaotic because to the individual,

²⁷ “Direct your eye sight inward, and you will find
A thousand regions of your mind
Yet undiscovered. Travel them up, and be
Expert in home-cosmography”.

²⁸ THOREAU, H. D., *A Walk to Wachusett*, p. 44.

²⁹ HERACLITUS, *Fragments*, p. 155.

³⁰ HERACLITUS, *Fragments*, p. 153.

³¹ THOREAU, H. D., *Journal*, v. II, p. 501.

microscopically, sudden change may come unexpectedly; regular because the round of the seasons teach us that day follows night; summer, winter; and life, death. To able to accept and harmonize with change, to renew one self and, in the process, renew society, this effort, this sustained tension in the quest of individual spiritual freedom and its social corollary, political liberty, this pregnant dawn of infinite promises culminates in one experience: awakening.

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