

# Nostalgia of the Beginnings: A Rewriting of H. D. Thoreau's *Walden*

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## Abstract

Henry David's Thoreau book *Walden* recreates in a literary form the period that the author spent in the woods near Walden Pond. Being a transcendentalist influenced by Emerson's philosophy, Thoreau reiterates the essential role that nature has in the spiritual and moral development of man. In *Walden* the author describes a return to a primordial age in which man lived in a state of wonder before the beauty of the universe and in a permanent communion with it. The sacredness of nature is rendered through ritual gestures that accompany man on his road to revelation. Thus, the period of time spent by Thoreau near Walden Pond acquires the qualities of an initiation during which man rediscovers his self and undergoes a spiritual awakening.

**Keywords:** sacredness, nature, initiation, vision, transcendentalism

In the essay entitled *Nature* Ralph Waldo Emerson considers that man is part of the universe with which he identifies and according to which he shapes his destiny. In this text Emerson utters the famous words: "I am a transparent eye ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the universal being circulate through me." (Emerson, 2005, p. 8). Transcendentalism is a cultural and philosophical movement that represented a form of evolution of the human intellect, believing that man can find in nature a teacher and a guide on the road to spiritual fulfilment. The transparency of the vision is the key element in having access to a world beyond a common human understanding. The eye must be transparent because as a mirror it reflects the beauty of nature, which actually is the beauty of the universe. A clear reflection allows man to go beyond his limited human experience and enjoy the views the universe offers. By acknowledging the beauty of the

world, he recognizes the beauty in his own soul. "In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature." (Emerson, 2005, p. 10)

Emerson considers that by transcending a common human experience man can meet the Over Soul in nature and due to the initiation in the mysteries of the universe he can enter in communion with the supreme power ruling over the world. In this way he returns to a primordial state of wonder in which he is able to partake in the mysteries of the divinity. Not everybody can have such an experience, only the primal man can see beyond the veil of an ordinary human perception. The mission of the primal man is to share the revelation with the others and to make it available to all. The revelation is filtered through his vision, and thus the primal man becomes one with the cosmos. The currents of the universe circulate through the initiated man as he himself is transformed into the recipient of the vision. In the essay titled *The Over Soul* Emerson provides a definition for the position of man in respect to the universe and to his own soul.

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime, within man is the soul of the whole, the wise silence, the universal beauty, to whose every part and particle he is equally related, the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is accessible to us all is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour. It is the act of seeing and the things seen, the seer and the spectacle. We see the world piece by piece, but the whole is the soul. (Emerson, 2005, p. 35)

Emerson defines the Over-Soul as being a supreme underlying unity that transcends duality or plurality. The human soul is immortal and beautiful. All souls are connected at a certain level, though the degree of such a union differs in terms of intensity.

Henry David Thoreau follows Emerson's philosophy, but brings new connotations to it. In his well-known book *Walden or Life in the Woods* Thoreau transposes his life experience near Walden Pond into a meditation on human destiny. The book narrates about the time spent by Thoreau in the woods in solitude. It recounts his existence there in almost one year, while in reality he remained two years. Much of the text reveals the nostalgia of Thoreau thinking of an epoch in which man was close to nature and had a free and affectionate communion with it. In his book dedicated to Thoreau's late career Michael Benjamin Berger thus concludes on *Walden*: "The lyrical and haunting qualities of the book, its symbolic force and mystical tone, are complemented by, and even strengthened through, a heightened sense of detail expressed in sturdy prose renderings of precise observations of nature." (Berger, 2000, p. 4) *Walden* is not only a literary representation of

Thoreau's unique experience; it is also a philosophical, cultural and symbolical reflection of his thoughts and ideas. Nature is one of the main symbols in the book. Emerson referred to it as the Universal Being, believing that there is a spiritual sense in the natural world surrounding man. "The happiest man is the one who learns from nature the lesson of worship." (Emerson, 2005, p. 7) He clearly states that everything must be spiritual and moral as there should be a tight communion between man and nature.

In *Walden* Thoreau describes his life in the forest in very special conditions. He builds himself a house, a humble abode which he transforms into his own vision of the world. It has no door, one room and six chairs: one for solitude, two for friendship and three for society. He makes a beautiful description of it, underlying its symbolic and sentimental values.

When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, my house was not finished for winter. (...) It was suggestive somewhat as of a picture in outlines. I did not need to go outdoors to take the air, for the atmosphere within had lost none of its freshness. It was not so much within-doors as behind a door where I sat, even in the rainiest weather. (Thoreau, 2016, p. 20)

The house for Thoreau is not merely a shelter, it is a way of being in the world, a way in which he identifies with the nature around. In cultural and anthropological terms the house stands for a return to the origins. It is an attempt to recover the innocence and the simplicity of the beginnings. In his book about the sacred Mircea Eliade speaks about the nostalgia of the origins. He considers that by building a house or raising any construction man creates a sacred space, inside which he tries to gather primordial values. According to Eliade, man makes a *temenos* which is the centre of the world, in which all the elements repeat the divine creation of the world. By raising a construction, man reiterates the creation of the world in his own terms. "A house is always a sacred image because it is an imago mundi and the world is a divine creation." (Eliade, 2000, p. 42, my translation)

Identifying himself with the house, man assumes its building and transforms it into the symbol that gives it life. The house is functional and abstract at the same time because it connects both spheres of human existence. The material combines with the spiritual in the attempt to recreate the world as it was in the primordial times. The house that Thoreau builds near Walden Pond has its own characteristics. It has no door so that nature should enter it freely and infuse it with its spirit. Transcendentalism focuses on the deep communion between man and nature, the latter being seen as a companion on the road to revelation. It is only in nature that man can find true liberty of the spirit as there he

can give up all the ties linking him to society. Thoreau considers that human communities destroy the individual because they make man lose the very essence and connection with the spirit of the world. The primal man has the revelation only in solitude because only in such conditions the universe opens to his vision.

By choosing to live a solitary life Thoreau symbolically resembles the people who first travelled to the American west in search of a space that would offer them the freedom of exploring and of knowing the world. The trappers and path finders living in the west were initiated men in all the aspects of their natural environment. They looked at nature in a concrete and useful way, but they also experienced a state of wonder before the beauty unveiling in front of their eyes. Such people understood the importance of nature and, even though many of them were simple, uneducated people, the respect they showed for their surroundings transformed them into guides for others who wanted to settle there or at least have a similar experience. The first explorers of the west assimilated the land and learned to read its signs, thus accomplishing a spiritual communion among them. They embodied Emerson's concept about the freshness of the vision by integrating in nature. In many cases the trappers and path finders of the west cut all links with society as they saw in it a source of moral destruction. Much of their attitude and the pattern they embodied derives from this deliberate rejection of civilisation.

In *Walden* Thoreau recreates the myth of the explorer and colonizer, but enriches it with mythical and cultural connotations. He symbolically returns to the beginnings of mankind, to a primordial time and space in which man was part of the beautiful divine creation. "Both place and time were changed, and I dwelt nearer to those parts of the universe which had most attracted me." (Thoreau, 2016, p. 23) Space is an important concept because it shapes the identity of people. Thoreau chooses to live near Walden Pond as in a personal exile by which he tries to return to the origins and live in the middle of the divine creation. It is a self imposed exile as it presupposes the need of man to change his destiny in order to achieve a higher spiritual goal. During such an exile man acquires a new status that allows him to judge the others from a new perspective and a superior point of view. The final goal of such an exile is accomplishing an inner spiritual quest since a new vision is obtained by delimiting yourself from the world.

In the case of Thoreau the period spent in the woods near Walden Pond starts as a self-imposed exile and ends with a moral and spiritual assimilation of nature, which becomes a home for the narrator. His nostalgia for a state of wonder corresponds to the wish for a return to the primordial age of universal communion. Although he returned from Walden after two years spent there, Thoreau never actually left it as it had become an essential

part of his self. His exile turns into a blessing since he is given the chance to explore and to know himself. The narrator experiences a deep sense of joy in becoming part of the natural surroundings.

Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity and I may say innocence with nature itself. The man who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred and auroral hour turned than he has yet profaned, has despaired of life and is pursuing a descending and darkening way. (Thoreau, 2016, p. 24)

The things he does constitute the way in which he assimilates nature and integrates himself in it. Fishing in the lake, walking in the woods and admiring the trees or the birds are among the most frequent activities. Catching a fish in the lake is a ritual, reiterating the mythical act of being in contact with nature in the beginnings of mankind. In his book about anthropological structures Gilbert Durand considers that "the fish almost always has the significance of reevaluating the primordial instinct." (Durand, 1977, p. 266, my translation) The activity of fishing belongs to the nocturnal symbolism of the image because it implies mysteries and unexpected events. At the same time fishing in the lake offers the narrator the chance to establish a communion with the essence of the universe. Eliade explains that water is the primordial element, the universal matrix since all creation begins there and ends there.

In all religious systems waters preserve their function. They disintegrate and abolish forms, being purifying and regenerating at the same time. They precede creation and absorb it, being unable to go beyond their unique type of existence which is the one of manifesting themselves in shapes. (Eliade, 2000, p. 99, my translation)

While living near Walden Pond Thoreau reiterates the ritual gestures of the primordial man who used the products nature gave him and identified with natural cycles and phenomena. He recreates the image of a symbolical Paradise in which man was in permanent communion with the divinity. The nostalgia Thoreau feels corresponds to the need of man to return to that state of harmony which characterized man's condition before the Fall. *Walden* becomes for Thoreau a Garden of Eden whose beauty is perceived in the descriptions of the natural surroundings. The seasons during which he lives in the woods are a source of joy and permanent discoveries as each of them comes with its own beautiful characteristics. *Walden* is a celebration of life seen in its essential and profound meanings. Returning to a simple way of life is the path towards a renewal of the human self.

In *Walden* Thoreau looks at nature with fresh eyes and assimilates it into his own soul. He acknowledges that the rhythms of the natural cycles are also the rhythms by which his own life is shaped. The human self cannot exist outside these manifestations of the universe since man is part of the great changes occurring around him. By permanently seeking the essence of the world, man is able to know himself and learn a moral lesson. Returning to the origins implies going back to a mythical time in which man walked freely in the company of animals or birds and enjoyed divine guidance. In *Walden* Thoreau narrates about his vicinity to the birds. "I suddenly found myself neighbour to the birds; not by having imprisoned one, but having caged myself near them." (Thoreau, 2016, p. 30)

The forest itself receives a special connotation. Durand considers that it is an image of intimacy, resembling a house or a cave. "The closed landscape of a forest is a sacred place. Any sacred place begins with the sacred forest." (Durand, 1977, p. 306, my translation) In his turn Eliade analyses the concept of the forest in the context of sacred nature. He considers that any journey through the forest implies partaking in the cyclical rhythms of the universe. A sacred understanding of nature helps the initiated man decipher different aspects than a common person can do. "The deepest and most intimate structures of the universe are unveiled due to sacredness. The believer discovers in them the mystery of life and creation, of renewal, youth and immortality." (Eliade, 2000, p. 115, my translation)

During the time spent in the woods Thoreau returns to that *illo tempore* in which man was in a direct and permanent contact with nature. In that time man was initiated in the stages of natural evolution, being fully aware of his place in the universe. The house he builds has no doors as he wants to let nature enter it freely. Thus, he discovers the regenerating capacity of nature in a state of complete freedom. Transcendentalism insists on the communion between man and nature as there cannot be just a unilateral relationship. It is a reciprocal situation as both participants are implied.

While living in the woods Thoreau changes position. In the beginning he was the disciple, learning from nature how to enjoy it spiritually. In the end he becomes the master able to teach his contemporaries about the wilderness. He offers them an exemplary story about the beginning and the evolution of man in relationship with the universe. He embodies the type of primal man Emerson talks about in his essay *The Poet*. According to the philosopher, the poet is the interpreter of the messages of the universe for the common people. Thoreau chooses the most characteristic aspects of nature and turns them into an image of his own perception. Walden woods become a representation of sacred space seen as wilderness. This concept corresponds to a space of imagination and unexpected encounters. In the period spent there Thoreau meets a Native American

and a fugitive African-American slave. They belong to marginal social categories, which transcendentalism endows with superior knowledge. They preserve the innocence of the beginnings when the world was not yet tainted by evil. Thoreau learns spiritual lessons from them which in his turn he shares with others.

In *Walden* Thoreau places wilderness in opposition to society, rejecting the material world and choosing the freedom of nature. Walden woods identify with a sacred space which forms a parallel world to the real one. Eliade considers that sacred space is fragmentary, as it is made of islands of sacredness opening to the one searching for a deeper meaning. "Any sacred space implies a hierophany, a breaking out of the sacred in the world whose result is the delimitation of a territory from the cosmic environment and an essential transformation." (Eliade, 2000, p. 23, my translation) Walden woods are an instance of the sacred in whose limits the world is reshaped according to its specific rules. From an imaginary projection of dreams and ideals Walden becomes the concrete manifestation of the sacred. It is a world within another world, a microcosm functioning on its own rules.

Thoreau recreates Walden into a mythical place which is a representation of the beautiful divine creation. The world the narrator creates for himself is seen as a projection of his own self. He identifies with the nature around which is seen as a reflection of the narrator's views. Walden woods is not just the forest outside the town of Concord, it is an imaginary construct in which the thoughts and the visions of the narrator take shape. Thoreau does not rely only on exterior elements to describe this space, he finds in himself the exemplary model for his world. It is a very personal view that he has in which the song of the birds and the beauty of the lake originate in his own feelings and emotions.

Time is organized in the cycles of seasons which repeat the primordial pattern. It depends on the natural phenomena occurring in the woods during the narrator's life there. Snow, rain, mist or sunshine are part of such events which confer special connotations to the text. Like space, time has a sacred meaning. Eliade considers that sacred time has a circular, reversible form, it is "a sort of mythical present which is retrieved through rituals." (Eliade, p. 2000, 55, my translation) Time is measured according to the activities performed by man in different specific moments. Strolling in the woods after a shower of rain or walking on a snowy day to the pond do not stand for simple actions, they are ritual gestures due to which man returns to a primordial age in which time was abolished and he lived in the presence of the divinity. The Walden that Thoreau imagines is an idealized projection of reality as it has the beauty and the perfection of the primordial world not yet

tainted by evil. Sacred time is the time of the beginnings when the world was built and to which man continuously wants to return. To find again the time of the origins implies a ritual repetition of the divine act of creation. Walden itself becomes thus a cosmogony as it is the creation of the narrator's imagination.

While living in Walden woods, Thoreau lives an epiphany, a moment of being during which he has the revelation of mythical time. He views the nature around as formed by elements to which he can relate spiritually and which contribute to his personal development. The narrative becomes direct and sincere, changing into a confession about the beauty of nature and the place of man in the universe. "Mythical and sacred time as the time of the beginnings does not flow as it is made of an eternal present which can be permanently recovered." (Eliade, 2000, p. 68, my translation) The house Thoreau lives in is the centre of this world as it gives stability and unity to the newly shaped space. Eliade considers that the nostalgia of the beginnings has a spiritual connotation. "Man wants to live again in the beautiful, fresh and clean world as it used to be at the dawn of creation." (Eliade, 2000, p. 71, my translation) Transcendentalism underlines the need of man to regain that state of wonder which existed in the beginning. It was a state of innocence in which man was able to see and to enjoy the presence of the divinity.

In *Walden* Thoreau combines the transcendental doctrine with his own vision of the world. He believes that the sacredness of nature can be revealed by an exemplary life in which man becomes an equal to nature on his path to initiation. If the initiation is complete man acquires a new identity, which allows him to join the rhythms of the universe. Such an initiation takes place on the vertical line as it brings sacred knowledge. It is favoured by the wish of man to go beyond his common human limits. If the initiation is on the horizontal line, then nothing happens and no change is seen. Revelation does not occur and man remains trapped in his limited existence. In *Walden* Thoreau gains initiation due to the awareness that genuine existence can be obtained only in the middle of nature. The house as a centre of the universe and the trees as symbols of the sacred space surround him in his journey. Eliade believes that the house is a microcosm, a replica of the universe and of the human self at the same time. Life occurs on two levels: the common existence, which is characteristic for the majority of human beings, and the special one during which revelation occurs. They correspond to the two types of initiation that man may have. Sacred knowledge is obtained when man willingly chooses to abandon all ties with the known world and adopt a new perspective on it. The fresh vision Emerson talks about identifies with the second type of initiation occurring on the vertical line. Thus, man becomes aware of his privileged place in relationship to the universe.

By choosing to leave society behind and begin a new life in the woods Thoreau achieves a passage from the inferior level of common people to a solitary yet spiritually rewarding life. He accomplishes a rite of passage that takes place in a double direction. Such a rite, as it is analysed in Van Gennep's book, is made up of three stages. The first one stands for separation as a proper passage can happen only if the protagonist decides to abandon all his links with the common world. Only then can he fulfil the second stage, which is the one of transition. During this period he learns about his capacity to reach a superior level of understanding. This stage is an intermediary one as the protagonist is on the threshold of experience. The third stage is the one of reincorporation, a stage in which the person performing the ritual acquires a new identity. Due to the new status that he gains, the participant in this ritual can share with the others the revelations that he has. Due to this accomplishment man is able to master his capacity in order to enter in communion with the universe.

In *Walden* Thoreau performs a rite of passage as he willingly separates himself from society and chooses to live in Walden woods. A solitary existence offers the path towards revelation. At the same time the narrator returns to the sacred since the new identity he gains allows him to see and understand the beauty and the mysteries of the universe. The return to the sacred also presupposes the return to the origins as in that primordial age man always lived in the presence of the sacred. His existence was sanctified by the close communion with the divinity. The life lived by Thoreau near Walden Pond restores the model of an ideal time spent in a world delimited by the boundaries of the sacred. Eliade considers that by retreating in solitude man is able to perceive the universal connotations of the world. He no longer sees fragments of the universe around, he perceives the unity of the creation that surrounds him. The double direction in which the rites of passage take the narrator in *Walden* consists of both the return to the sacred and the sharing of this unique experience with others.

In his essays Emerson considers that the primal man needs to return to the community in order to fulfil his mission. The initiation he goes through allows him to have a new and fresh vision of the world. The purity of the vision identifies with the purity of the soul. In *Walden* Thoreau is the contemplating man who is able to return to the sacred and share its beauty with the others. He provides the example of a spiritual awakening due to which man is able to perceive the signs of the sacred around him. Spiritual awakening presupposes the relationship between man and nature, which is seen as a mirror reflecting human emotions and a moral evolution. In *Walden* Thoreau reiterates the story of the eternal return, of man's longing to integrate himself again in the world

of the sacred. "What we are, that only can we see", stated Emerson in relation to man's vision and communion with nature. In *Walden* Thoreau achieves the dream of man to live again in the realm of the sacred surrounded by nature. The nostalgia of the beginnings becomes the accomplishment of the initiated man capable to see and assimilate the wonders of the universe.

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