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A PENCIL-MAKER'S SPIRITUAL LIFE

HENRY DAVID THOREAU'S SPIRITUAL VIEWS IN THE LIGHT OF VEDANTA

AS SEEN IN "A WEEK IN THE CONCORD AND MERRIMAC RIVERS"

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs / B.A. Thesis

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PREFACE

The essay that the reader encounters at the present moment in the form of a B.A. Thesis is part of a wider investigation that has already spanned five years of research and will plausibly cover several years more. This investigation has primarily been of a literary and academic character as part of a university programme in English philology and literature; but it is likewise the result of a spiritual search that has lead the author to an immersion into the ancient spiritual literature of India and the yogic principles they expound. It is in the light of this spiritual search and this particular inclination to Indian sources that the present study of Henry David Thoreau's work, particularly his book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers* (1849), finds its cause and validation.

Along with Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman were the first American authors who not only embraced Indian spiritual thought through their intellectual inquiry, but also encompassed its teachings and spirit in their own literary output.[1] Of these three authors, Thoreau's case is the most meaningful for the purpose of the present study, as his assimilation of Hindu thought – more specifically known as *Vedanta* – as recorded in his *Journals*, in his published works and in his moral conduct and way of life, had the strongest impact both on himself as a person and writer, and consequently on many of his readers.

In Thoreau's case, the interest in Hindu thought started as an intellectual and literary search through which he was striving to find philosophical and spiritual solutions about his own human nature, society, and existence as a whole; but Thoreau aspired to find philosophical solutions that would at the same time be fruitfully applicable in his practical affairs and way of living. The development of this search can be seen in Thoreau's works, and can be said to find its culmination in *Walden* (1854), where the philosophical and spiritual inquiry found a practical outlet through an experiment that consisted in living in the woods more according to yogic and ascetic principles than to the reigning New England code of social engagement and economic comfort.

Walden conveys an image of Thoreau where his philosophical and spiritual inquiries have matured in the course of many years of study and reflection and which

1 Niaz Zaman Niaz, "Passages to India: India in American Writing 1835-1875", *Literary Criterion* 27 (1992): 116-124.

have finally found the practical and outward character that Thoreau was striving to find. Many of the seeds that were to blossom in *Walden* can be identified in *A Week*, Thoreau's first published book. In this latter, Thoreau includes numerous quotations from Hindu scriptures (at least forty-seven),[2] thus sharing with his readers the original Hindu sources which had been helping him develop his thought and attitudes towards life; through his personal commentaries to these sources Thoreau also shows in which way his individual assimilation of Indian spiritual precepts was maturing.

It is the more meaningful and fascinating to ponder on how deep and pervasive Thoreau's assimilation of Vedantic spiritual thought was, when taking into account that it was an ethnical phenomenon that Americans were encountering for the first time in history. In Thoreau's eyes and understanding, the Hindu scriptures were not a mere cultural manifestation of an exotic and long extinguished culture, but a living and breathing example of spiritual precepts that had preserved their value despite the course of millennia and their geographical and cultural displacement. He decided to examine in full earnest and in his own persona whether those ancient spiritual teachings were still valid and applicable in the New England society of the 1850's. His work gives testimony of the inspiration that guided him, the methods he employed, and the reach and depth of the answers he found.

The present research responds to a search of a very similar nature: an enquiry into whether Vedanta and Indian spirituality are still a living reality that offer spiritual values which might not only answer perennial questions of a philosophical nature, but which might likewise offer practical venues with which to give outward expression to the philosophical and spiritual wisdom they contain in the daily way of living of our twenty-first century westernised society.

[2] See Ellen M. Raghavan and Barry Wood, "Thoreau's Hindu Quotations in a Week", *American Literature – A Journal of Literary History, Cricitism, and Bibliography* 51.1 (1979): 96-98.

INTRODUCTION

The following essay sets out from the premise that Thoreau's writings reflect a deep and rich content of highly spiritual value. Its aspiration is to elucidate the nature of such spirituality as conveyed in the book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers* (1849), and to identify the fundamental similarities it presents with Hindu spiritual thought, namely Vedanta philosophy. References to later works by the author such as the book *Walden* (1854) and the essays "Civil Disobedience" (1850), "Walking" (1851), and "Chastity and Sensuality" (1852) will be included in order to expound the reach and the development undergone by the seminal precepts propounded in *A Week*.

The present analysis of the spiritual inclinations and attitudes propounded by Thoreau in *A Week* will follow a fourfold line of study: first, an exposition of the main contents of *A Week*; second, an examination of the latter in order to determine what Thoreau considers to be manifestations of a spiritual nature; third, an identification of the Vedantic sources quoted by Thoreau; and fourth, an exposition and comparative analysis of the points of correspondence between Thoreau's thought and Vedantic precepts.

Of all of Thoreau's writings, *A Week* is the one that includes the highest number of quotations from Vedantic thought, as well as personal commentaries or reflections on these sources.[3] These commentaries show the repercussions at literary, moral, spiritual, and practical levels, of Thoreau's assimilation of Hindu thought, as reflected in his writings and practical matters. It is important to clarify that there is no intention to try to determine which views Thoreau adopted straight from Vedanta, or influenced him directly, but rather to establish similarities and correspondences. Under this light, it will thus be seen how Thoreau's thought, although in constant development and including numerous digressions, paradoxes, and inner incoherences, reflects precepts and foundations that respond to a cohesive and unitary structure of spiritual character, with remarkable parallelisms and points of convergence with Vedantic thought.

The first chapter addresses Thoreau's life and the context in which his thought developed, particularly in regards to the intellectual and social life of New England

[3] See Raghavan and Wood, 96-98.

(that is, Boston and Concord) in the 1840's and 1850's and with a special consideration of the Transcendentalist movement and the role that Ralph Waldo Emerson played in Thoreau's life. The chapter will also include a section on Orientalism, that is to say, the reception that Hindu thought underwent, first in Europe and then in the United States, as a consequence of the British colonisation of India in the late eighteenth century.

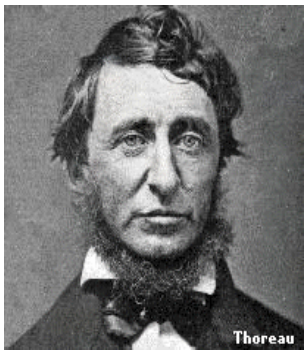
The second chapter deals with the book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*. The chapter offers a contextual overview of Thoreau's whole literary output and places *A Week* within that context. It also offers insight into the method of composition employed by Thoreau, particularly the way the author treated his entries in his *Journal*. Finally, the chapter gives an account of the book's content at its two narrative levels: the narrative of Thoreau and his brother's boat-trip, and the narrative of the author's own flow of thought and state of consciousness.

The third chapter starts by expounding the nature of Thoreau's own spiritual philosophy and attitude towards life, based on an analysis of Thoreau's reflections on spirituality as seen in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers* as a whole. The place of Vedanta within Thoreau's universal, eclectic and open-minded attitude towards spirituality is then analysed through a detailed study of the quotes employed in the chapter "Wednesday" from *A Week*. The conclusions of this examination will then be extrapolated to the wider context of Thoreau's total work and world-view, aspiring to identify the parallelisms and points of convergence that Thoreau's thought as a whole poses in regards to Vedanta. For this purpose, an exposition of the fundamental precepts of Vedanta will be included, based on the spiritual writings of the three most renowned Vedantic authorities of the last 150 years, namely Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) and Sri Chinmoy (1931 –).

The concluding chapter is imbued by a reflective undertone that intends to elucidate the achievement, the value and the limitations of Thoreau's assimilation of Vedantic thought. This reflection addresses an issue which was of vital importance for Thoreau, namely whether the spiritual and philosophical tenets expounded by Vedanta were valid for the society of his day and, further for the present study, whether they still preserve their validity 150 years after the author's death, at the beginning of a new millennium.

1. THOREAU AND TRANSCENDENTALISM

1.1. HENRY DAVID THOREAU (1817 – 1862): A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY [4]



Henry David Thoreau was born in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1817, the third of four children. His parents were John, a farmer and shopkeeper, and Cynthia, who also gave birth to Helen (1812), John (1815) and Sophia (1819). After living some years both in Chelmsford and Boston, the family returned to Concord in 1823, where the father set up a pencil-making business and the mother took in boarders at home, activities which in conjunction brought relative financial stability to the family.

The young Thoreau attended the Concord Academy with his brother John, where he studied French, Latin, Greek, geography, history and science; he later attended the Concord Lyceum, giving great attention to lectures in natural history. His strong scholarly inclination and achievements made him the only of the Thoreau children whom the parents considered appropriate to send to college. In 1833 Thoreau enrolled in Harvard College, the expenses for which his siblings Helen and John, now working as schoolteachers, were willing to pay. He graduated in 1837, having taken several extra courses in European languages and science not required in the curriculum.

During the several years that followed, Thoreau worked as a schoolteacher in various cities, including a school co-founded with his brother John in Concord. In 1839 Thoreau and John embarked on a boat-trip on the Concord and the Merrimac rivers which, ten years later, would find expression in the book of the same title. By this time Thoreau also started working loosely as a surveyor and pencil-maker at the family enterprise, which would become the two main sources of income for the rest of his life. Of some historical importance are Thoreau's pioneering endeavours in the development of new techniques to improve the pencil industry in the US.

[4] See Henry Seidel Canby, *Thoreau: A Biography* (1958); Elizabeth Hall Witherell, "Chronology" (2001), 645-656; and the biographical section of the website http://www.thoreau.niu.edu

Thoreau had started to consider himself as a writer by the same time. In 1837 he had already begun writing his Journal, following Emerson's advice, and meeting with the informal intellectual group of New England Transcendentalists, which met irregularly in Concord at the Emersons'. By 1840 Thoreau was fully engaged with the Transcendentalists and contributed in their quarterly, *The Dial*, whose first issue was published in 1840. During this period he developed strong bonds of friendship with Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Ellery Channing, Margaret Fuller, and Louisa May Alcott, among others.

In 1841 he moved into the Emerson household as handyman and gardener; from Emerson's library he read further into the Greek classics, English poetry and Eastern literature. Through his initial reading of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Vedas*, the *Laws of Manu* and the *Vishnu Sarma*,[5] he was immediately fascinated by Hindu philosophy and spiritual thought; this fascination was to find expression in his personal development and in his literary output as mainly seen in the *Journal*, and in the books *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers* (1849) and *Walden* (1854). This latter, Thoreau's best known work, contains an account of his twenty-six-month experience (between 1845 and 1847) of living in solitude in the woods by Walden Pond, in a cabin built by himself; the book not only includes references to Indian literature, but the attitude and way of living it depicts have inspired various scholars to interpret the whole Walden stay as a yogic experiment in practical living.[6]

Other facts important of mention are Thoreau's interest and love of nature and his strong moral, social and political convictions. These aspects of his personality found expression in many of the lectures he delivered during the late 1840's and 1850's, ideas and themes which with time developed into some of his best known essays, as is the case with "Civil Disobedience" (1849; originally titled "Resistance to Civil Government". In this essay Thoreau expounded on his refusal to pay the poll tax required by the government to finance the war against Mexico, a refusal for which he was imprisoned), "Walking", "The Wild" (which both derive from an original lecture called "The Wild" from 1851), the series of essays written on John Brown

[5] The transliteration of Sanskrit names has developed during the last century and many names are thus spelled differently today than how they were at Thoreau's time. It is thus that the titles found in this paragraph were spelled by Thoreau in the following way: the *Bhagvat-Geeta*, the *Laws of Menu* and the *Veeshnu Sarma*. Other variations will be encountered in the names Krishna (Thoreau: Kreeshna), Arjuna (Thoreau: Arjoon), yogi (Thoreau: yogee), and the same word Hindu (Thoreau: Hindoo). In this essay the modern transliteration is employed.

[6] See Claude Gayet, *Thoreau's Intellectual Development*, 48-52; Alan Hodder, "Ex Oriente Lux: Thoreau's Ecstacies and the Hindu Texts"; Raymond Benoit, "*Walden* as God's Drop"; and William Bysshe Stein, "*Walden* and the Bhagavad Gita".

(dating from 1859 and addressing the topic of slavery, including "A Plea for John Brown", "Martyrdom of John Brown", and "The Last Days of John Brown", as well as the essay "Slavery in Massachusetts" from 1854), and the essays "Love" and "Chastity and Sensuality" (originally enclosed in a letter to Harrison Blake in 1852).[7]

Thoreau spent the last years of his life actively engaged as a surveyor, naturalist and lecturer, which enabled him to travel widely. During this time he became more committed to supporting the cause of slaves and Indians, which found expression in his lectures and writings. After catching a cold that quickly turned into bronchitis in late 1861, Thoreau fruitlessly tried to recover his health by travelling to milder weather; his condition was aggravated by his chronical ailments due to tuberculosis. Resigned to his fate and confined to his house in Concord, he concentrated all his efforts in preparing the texts that would remain after his death. Until his death in 1862 he continued receiving visitors and working intensely on his writings.

1.2. RALPH WALDO EMERSON AND THE TRANSCENDENTALIST MOVEMENT

Although Thoreau's demeanour is more aptly to be described as that of an individualist rather than that of a stark Transcendentalist, the development of the Transcendentalist movement in New England and Thoreau's growth both as a person and a writer are bound together. Thoreau first met the group in 1837, and by 1838 was already considered to be a member – the youngest one.[8] Nevertheless, although Thoreau shared the fundamental aspirations of the Transcendentalists, such as their broad eclecticism, their personal reflectiveness and their search for eternal truths, Thoreau was more of an individualist in the sense that his stubborn and critical attitude towards life was never appeased by structures of a dogmatic or doctrinal nature; his eclectic and widely open mind always searched for answers to existential

[7] See the sections "Chronology" and "Note on the Texts" from *Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems*, pp. 645-674.

[8] See Canby, 83-85.

questions as related to the individual human being and in this case to his own persona. As he states in *Walden*:

> I would not have any one adopt *my* mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find and pursue *his own* way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbour's instead.[9]

In his individual search for *his own* way, Thoreau found great inspiration and encouragement from Emerson and the Transcendentalists, particular during his twenties, although whatever he learnt from them he would naturally mould and use in his own way, influenced by his personal readings. In his biographical book, and based on Thoreau's *Journals*, Henry Seidel Canby goes as far as to assert that among the most influential readings in Thoreau's twenties were Emerson's essay "Nature" (1840) and the *Bhagavad-Gita*, both books that "went down into his consciousness and gave him a new birth".[10]

This new birth was for Thoreau a birth of a philosophical and spiritual type. For quite like the Transcendentalists, whom he started to meet in 1837, Thoreau was looking for answers of an existential and spiritual nature which were not to be found either in the literature nor in New England's Puritan society of the early nineteenth century. It is within this context that Transcendentalism found its beginnings in the late 1820's, encompassing a group of intellectuals who were dissatisfied with the rationalist and conservative institution that Unitarianism had become. The Transcendentalists, many of them having been Unitarian ministers at some point, opposed to the religiosity propounded by Unitarianism, which in their eyes seemed to be false due to a lack of true spirituality and emotion; instead, they advocated for a more personal and intuitive – however more real at the same time – experience of the divine.[11]

Thus is this concept of the "divine" and the "divinity in man" one of the main topics pervading several of Emerson's best known essays, such as "Nature" (1836), "The Over-Soul" and "Self-Reliance" (both from *Essays: First Series*, 1841), all of which propound reality as being a composite of soul and nature, where man has the

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[9] Thoreau, *Walden*, 59.

[10] Canby, 199.

[11] See Canby, 83-98; Robert Kuhn McGregor, *A Wider View of the Universe* (University of Illinois Press, 1997) 33-54, and the section "Transcendentalism" of the website http://www.thoreau.niu.edu

special faculty of experiencing this spiritual aspect of the divine in matter through his consciousness and his intuitive perception of higher realms. In Emerson's particular case, his essential interest was in understanding the relationship between the human individual and the quality of the divine. Emerson understood this concept of divinity as God, a Universal Spirit and Mind, an Over-Soul, which was manifested both in Nature and the cosmos, as well as in the soul of the individual human being. Emerson's philosophically and spiritually oriented quest aspired to find answers to questions such as the following: How can the individual approach and have a real experience of God, be closer to Him and act in a divine way while being on earth? [12] Thoreau was deeply influenced by the answers suggested by Emerson in his writings but never remained as a mere follower of the latter's teachings, rather striving to find his own answers to similar questions. The following passage, taken from Thoreau's *Journal*, echoes his deep Transcendentalist trends as he talks about the purpose of his stay at Walden Pond:

> 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 [...]. Life! Who knows what it is – what it does? If I am not quite right here I am less wrong than before – and now let us see what they will have.[13]

The main point of divergence between the Transcendentalist search for the spiritual and the ways posed by the religious codes available to laymen in New England in the 1800's was the emphasis laid on the direct perception and experience of the divine, an experience which Emerson considered to be out of the reach of the reasoning mind and in the realm of intuitive perception. Here are to be found the seeds of the same search that in Thoreau was to blossom as the practice of contemplative disciplines through which he claims to have stopped "[his] habitual thinking […]" and "see, smell, taste, hear, feel, that everlasting Something to which we are allied, at once our maker, our abode, our destiny, our very Selves".[14] This direct intuitive and contemplative approach and experience of the divine was greatly influenced by the Transcendentalists' assimilation of Orientalism and Hindu thought.

[12] See McGregor, 39–44 and Gayet, 20-36.
[13] Quoted in McGregor, 60-61.
[14] Thoreau, *A Week in the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*, 173.

1.3. ORIENTALISM, VEDANTA, AND THE TRANSCENDENTALIST MOVEMENT

European interest in Hindu culture, including its thought, religious philosophy and spirituality, emerged shortly after the British colonisation of Indian territory in the late 1700's. The East India Company, aspiring to have a better understanding and more effective ways of ruling and financially running the territory they had claimed possession of, had deemed it a good asset to translate ancient writings that would enable them to foster a stronger relationship with the culture and their new subjects, particularly regarding ethical and legal codes of conduct (it is therefore that the *Laws of Manu* was one of the first texts to be translated). The academic interest shown by several British scholars and linguists in the Sanskrit language and its literature was then fruitfully nurtured and sponsored, which resulted in the foundation of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, whose first president was Sir William Jones (1746-1794); the founding of the society marked the beginning of modern Orientalism.[15]

Among the first and the most influential translations of Hindu texts were those of the *Laws of Manu (Manusmrti)* by Sir William Jones and that of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Samkhya Karikas* by Charles Wilkins (1749-1836), who had been Jones's tutor in the study of Sanskrit. Both of these translations were to reach, and have a great influence on, the transcendentalists in New England, particularly on Emerson and Thoreau.

It is worth mentioning that although British scholars were pioneers in the translation of the Hindu texts, it was in Germany and in the United States where the newly rediscovered wisdom of India was first received and assimilated. German philosophers and romantic poets and writers were the first to strive to incorporate Hindu philosophy and spirituality into their own intellectual world, and saw India as a remnant of Europe's golden age, where wisdom and philosophy, reason and feeling, art and religion, science and imagination lived in harmony.[16] It is thus that figures such as Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), the Schlegel brothers (circa 1770-1830) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1781-1860) were deeply influenced by Hindu thought. Also worth mentioning is Max Müller (1823-1900), who, after having settled in Oxford,

[15] See Hodder , 405 and Steven Adisasmito-Smith, "The Self in Translation" (1999): 167-170.
[16] See Hodder, 406.

worked on an extensive translation of the *Vedas* and was one of the leading personalities in the development of comparative mythology.[17]

In the United States, it was the Transcendentalists who first received Hindu thought with an open and thirsty mind,[18] both through German philosophy and through the direct Hindu texts in translation.[19] The initial response to this newly rediscovered ethnical and cultural wealth was divided; on several occasions the East was associated with barbarism and lack of civilisation, as some of the first Journal entries of both Emerson and Thoreau testify. However, thorough study and final immersion into the world of Hindu thought gave the young liberals of Concord a source of philosophical and spiritual wisdom where they could look for the existential answers they had so long been looking for. This initial fascination was soon to be recorded by both Thoreau and Emerson in their Journals and would also find an echo in the geographical, intellectual and spiritual expansiveness of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855). How much value and importance Vedanta acquired in Thoreau's life and way of thinking can be perceived from the following quotes taken from *A Week* and from *Walden*:

> In comparison with the philosophers of the East, we may say that modern Europe has yet given birth to none [...]. *Ex oriente lux* may still be the motto of scholars, for the Western world has not yet derived from the East all the light which it is destined to receive thence.[20]

> In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonal philosophy of the *Bhagavat Geeta*, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions.[21]

Although the reception that Thoreau and Emerson gave to Vedanta showed initial differences, which became more accentuated with the course of the years, there were some essential elements that permeated the thought of both thinkers – and of the Transcendentalists as a whole – in a similar way. Foremost were the concepts of *Brahma* and *Atman*, that is, the universal soul (Brahman) which unfolds itself in the

[17] See Schopenhauer's works *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* and *Parerga und Paralipomena*, and Müllers translation of the *Rig Veda* and the series *Sacred Books of the East.*

[18] For an in-depth analysis, see: Arthur Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A Study of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott.* Columbia University Press, New York, 1932.

[19] See Zaman, 117-118 and Hodder, 407-408.

[20] Thoreau, *A Week in the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*, 143

[21] Thoreau, *Walden*, 74.

manifestation of the individual soul (Atman) and prefigures Emerson's vision of the Over-Soul, manifested also as the divinity inherent to the individual man. According to Vedanta, as it is clearly illustrated in the *Bhagavad Gita,* the perception of this universal soul and of its oneness with the individual soul can only be achieved intuitively, either through contemplative or through yogic practices. Both Emerson and Thoreau believed in the practice of contemplative exercises, the former on a purely intellectual basis, but the latter even striving to embrace, according to his own capacity and interpretation, the tenets and attitudes propounded in *yoga*:

> Free in this world as the birds in the air, disengaged from every kind of chains, those who practice the yoga gather in Brhma the certain fruit of their works [...].
> Depend upon that, rude and careless as I am, I would fain practice the *yoga* faithfully [...].
> The yogi, absorbed in contemplation, contributes in his degree to creation: he breathes a divine perfume, he hears wonderful things. Divine forms traverse him without tearing him, and, united to the nature which is proper to him, he goes, he acts as animating original matter […].
> To some extent, and at rarer intervals, I am a yogi.[22]

The place that *A Week* occupies within the spectrum of Thoreau's intellectual world and literary output is of particular importance. It is the book in which Thoreau includes the greatest number of Hindu quotations, along with his personal interpretations, and it as well gives instances in which the author himself describes not only his intellectual and philosophical stance in respect to Vedanta, but also depicts moments of deep reflection and contemplation that can be equated to the yogic practices that would find an expressly extroverted voice in *Walden*. These aspects shall be analysed in more depth in the following chapters.

[22] Thoreau, letter to his friend Harrison Blake, 1849. Quoted in: Neila Seshachari, 87-88.

2. *A WEEK ON THE CONCORD AND MERRIMAC RIVERS*

2.1. A WEEK WITHIN THOREAU'S WORK

Although *A Week in the Concord and Merrimac Rivers* was published in 1849, five years before the publication of *Walden* in 1854, these two works, the only two books that appeared during Thoreau's lifetime, had a similar time and process of conception during his stay at Walden Pond between 1845 and 1847. Nevertheless, unlike *Walden's* great popularity, *A Week* failed to sell in Thoreau's days, much to the author's disappointment,[23] and still remains quite unknown in comparison to his other works.

Thoreau's place within nineteenth century North American literature is undisputedly due to *Walden* and several of his essays, such as "Civil Disobedience", "Walking", "The Wild", "Slavery in Massachusetts", and the series of essays on John Brown. These works encompass the themes for which Thoreau has mostly become known, namely his deep interest and close relationship with nature; his views on practical, natural and simple living; and his civil and moral attitudes, particularly of a critical and non-conformist nature, both towards the reigning code of conduct of the New England Unitarian society of the time and towards slavery.

Poetry was of great significance to Thoreau. He wrote more than 200 poems, mainly between 1837 and 1845, eighty-five of which were published during his lifetime. The majority of these published poems were included in *A Week*, while others appeared in *Walden* and in several of his essays. Thoreau virtually stopped writing poetry after 1846 and never collected his poems; the drafts contained in his *Journal* are the only ones that survived. [24]

[23] In an often quoted entry of his *Journal*, Thoreau wrote the following: "I now have a library of over 900 volumes, 700 of which I wrote myself". Due to the commercial failure of his first book, the author was forced to store in his home the unsold copies of the book that were being kept in the publishing company's warehouse. Despite his disappointment and efforts to make the book more accepted among New England readers, *A Week* never got the reception Thoreau reckoned it deserved.

[24] See Hall Witherell, 663.

2.2. *A WEEK* : METHOD OF COMPOSITION

Several scholars have argued that the lack of popularity enjoyed by *A Week* is due to various clearly identifiable factors, mainly its digressive and discontinuous style and its deeply philosophical nature.[25] This has been an issue of considerable interest for Thoreau scholars, as the book not only contains the majority of his poetry that was published during his time, but also numerous quotations from the eclectic reading materials that were the most influential in contributing to shape Thoreau's mind. Although on its surface the book narrates the trip that Thoreau and his brother John made along the Concord and Merrimac rivers in 1839, it is more a deep philosophical discourse that evinces the nature and line of thought that characterise Thoreau as a person and author and, consequently, his literary output. It is thus that the story unfolds on two levels: the surface level of the narrative itself and the level corresponding to the author's flow of consciousness.

The book tells of the one-week boat trip undertaken by Thoreau and his brother John, from their Concord Town and back. It is divided into seven sections, one for each day of the week of the journey, with the apparent intention of giving a clear description of each day's events. However, the narration of the trip occupies only a minuscule fraction of the book's content, for it is mainly the nature of the author's thoughts and stream of consciousness that constitutes the core of the book. As an eloquent example of this, it is worth noticing that Thoreau never mentions his or his brother's names, calling the characters "we", "we two, brothers and natives of Concord", "one of us", "I" and "the other". As John McPhee asserts, "by rough word count, most of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers* is ninety per cent digression and ten per cent narrative. Near the end, the ratio is even more lopsided".[26]

For Thoreau, the trip recorded in *A Week* is the surface thread that permitted him to weave the vast tapestry of thoughts and passages that he had collected in his *Journal*. Thoreau's, as well as Emerson's method of composition, was primarily based on the reflections and quotations that they daily entered into their journals with monastic discipline. It was actually by Emerson's advice that Thoreau had started writing his *Journal* in 1837.[27] Their journals were thus filled with inconsecutive sentences and brief paragraphs reflecting the flashes of perception and intuition from

[25] See William Bysshe Stein, "Thoreau's First Book: A Spoor of Yoga", 5 and Hodder, 404.
[26] See John McPhee, "Introduction" to *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*.
[27] See Canby, 190-192.

which they sprung, in many occasions as pictures of deeply felt realities and with categorical value that was more the unfolding of a spiritual truth than of a reasoning mind. Interspersed in their journals were likewise quotations from the books they most thoroughly read and studied. All of these materials were then revised, re-worked and re-arranged for the composition of their public writings, as is the blatant case of Thoreau's *A Week*.

It is thus that *A Week* unfolds itself as a discontinuous narrative containing a plethora of personal philosophical reflections, quotations, poems, aphorisms, historical accounts, humorous comments, as well as travelling anecdotes, which constitute a true intellectual pantheism of sources and mixture of genres that seems to lack structure and coherence, and gives it its digressive and even inconsistent character.

2.3. *A WEEK* : NARRATIVE AND FLOW OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The journey begins on a Saturday, "the last day of August, 1839", when the brothers leave Concord Town on their home-made boat, and finishes on the following Friday upon their arrival back home. The book opens with an introductory chapter entitled "Concord River" and it is then divided into seven chapters which correspond to each day of the journey.

Thoreau's style is highly digressive and interspersed, and each chapter not only narrates the progress of the journey but also, and mainly, addresses a plethora of topics in mixed styles that constitute a whole reflection on existence, including meditations on spirituality, culture, theology, religion, philosophy, literature, poetry, geography, art, nature, history; the frequent recourse to quotations nurtures the writer's intellectual endeavours. It is thus that the book develops on two narrative levels, the superficial level of the boat-trip and the deeper and most predominant level that traces the mind and flow of consciousness of the writer. This compositional structure and style of the book makes it difficult to follow the story of the journey and points out to an arbitrary or random organisation of topics on behalf of the author. However, an analysis of the content and intention of each chapter will reveal a certain conceptual organisation which the author intended to portray in his precise inclusion of topics per chapter.

Concord River

"Concord River", the book's opening chapter, sets the atmosphere and tone that will pervade the book as a whole. Behind the apparent purpose of the chapter, which is to introduce the setting and describe the natural surroundings in which the trip is about to take place, there is an underlying reflective tone which finally overtakes the surface voice of the narrative with its philosophical and metaphysical ponderings on issues such as eternity, the flow of time, the dichotomy of the heavenly and the worldly, geographical space and ubiquity, and the soul of the river, along with minute descriptions of the landscape and the natural setting. It includes an original poem and two poetical quotations. The spiritual and philosophical character of the book is thus clearly presented at its very opening, which as a whole gives the reader a substantial foretaste of the seven chapters to come:

> As yesterday and the historical ages are past, as the work of to-day is present, so some flitting perspectives and demi-experiences of the life that is in nature are in time veritably future, or rather outside to time, perennial, young, divine, in the wind and rain which never die.[28]

Of particular significance is the role given to the figure of the river, as it epitomises the double narrative level characteristic of the whole book; namely, the river as a physical body of water without geographical restraints, and as the perennial current in flow, whether of life, space, time, or destiny, which the human being embarks upon almost as an act of faith, not knowing what awaits him:

> The Mississippi, the Ganges, and the Nile, those journeying atoms from the Rocky Mountains, the Himmaleh, and Mountains of the Moon, have a kind of personal importance in the annals of the world. The heavens are not yet drained over their sources [...]. Rivers must have been the guides which conducted the footsteps of the first travellers [...]. I had often stood on the banks of the Concord, watching the lapse of the current, an emblem of all progress […]. I decided to launch myself on its bosom, and float wither it would bear me.[29]

One of the most evident stylistic traits of the book, and perhaps the one that most effectively gives it its narrative coherence, is the way in which Thoreau presents the progress of the journey itself. This is done both at the outset and the end of each chapter, as Thoreau uses the beginning and close of each day to update the reader with

[28] Thoreau, *A Week*, 8.
[29] Thoreau, *A Week*, 12-13.

the development of the journey: the break of day thus becomes the time for making preparations for the course lying ahead, the night the time to recollect experiences and to rest and sleep in order to gather energy and continue the journey the following day.

Saturday

This narrative structure is clearly employed in the book's first chapter, "Saturday", which starts with a lengthy description of the journey's outset and a depiction of the landscape and natural surroundings. The river occupies a great portion of these initial natural descriptions, which include exhaustive passages on the river itself, on fishing, and on the types of fish inhabiting its waters; however, the author's philosophical inclination and delight in establishing correspondences between the physical and the spiritual is never neglected, as seen when he addresses the art of fishing as a "contemplative man's recreation": "His fishing was not a sport, nor solely a means of subsistence, but a sort of solemn sacrament and withdrawal from the world, just as the aged read their Bibles".[30]

Likewise worth mentioning are Thoreau's aesthetical values, explicit in this chapter in his appreciation of the physical beauty of fish, of the river, and of the natural setting as a whole. This aesthetic appreciation, both of natural beauty and of the beauty of spirit and arts, is a device that Thoreau often employs in order to correlate phenomena in nature with the nature of the human being. These correspondences and valuations of human traits are generally of a highly critical character, and testify to one of the book's most important dichotomies, that is, the apparent opposition between what is natural, pure, and divine, and what is human – often stained by human imperfections: "[The fish] Seen in its native element [...], is a perfect jewel of the river [...] and in harmony with the sunlit brown and yellow pebbles. Behind its watery shield it dwells far from many accidents inevitable to human life".[31]

[30] Thoreau, *A Week*, 25.
[31] Thoreau, *A Week*, 28.

Sunday

"Sunday" opens with the respective description of dawn and of the beginning of the journey along the river, and is reinforced with the use of three quotations, including a poem by the author's good friend Channing. If the preceding chapter was mainly intended to give a thorough impression of the natural setting, the intension implied in "Sunday" seems to be the definition of a historical sense and Thoreau's identification of the spiritual values of his society. Thoreau gives an account of the history of Bedford and Millerica towns, particularly of the relationships between English and New England white men and native Indians. Giving an incisive analysis of the psychology and moral conduct of the white man, Thoreau's valuation of his contemporary culture is harsh and critical, in this case towards the arrogance and self-righteousness that white men used in order to lord it over the natives.[32] In the middle of the narrative, however, the intrusion of sailors spotted on the river gives the author the impulse to express once again his melancholy longing for the natural state of purity lost by man, as addressed in the following passage: "As birds fly and fishes swim, so these men sailed. It reminded us how much fairer and nobler all the actions of man might be, and that our life in its whole economy might be as beautiful as the fairest work of art or nature".[33]

Following previous historical and descriptive passages is Thoreau's first digression addressing the world of literature. He commences by touching upon topics such as mythology, poetry, and the search for a higher truth related to the poetical. He then jumps over to theology, giving his first explicit critical view on this issue as related to the society and culture of his contemporaries:

> It seems to me that the god that is commonly worshipped in civilised countries is not at all divine, though he bears a divine name, but is the overwhelming authority and respectability of mankind combined. Men reverence one another, not yet God.[34]

This paragraph introduces one of the most ardent discussions expounded in the book, namely the issue of theology, religion and spirituality. It is important to make a distinction between these three branches of spiritual inquiry, as Thoreau has a strong sense of the purely spiritual as opposed to spiritual speculation (theology) and

[32] See Thoreau, *A Week*, 52-53.
[33] Thoreau, *A Week*, 49.
[34] Thoreau, *A Week*, 65.

spiritual dogma (religion). It is thus that the discussion delves into the nature of Christianity, particularly into the development of the faith in New England society, which according to the author has become too dogmatic, superficial, a mere social convention, bigoted, intolerant and even superstitious.

Thoreau's spiritual openness, expansiveness and deep understanding is revealed through his reflections on the persona of various spiritual figures, such as Buddha and Christ. Here Thoreau shows how, on a spiritual basis, the search for the divine is rooted in the deepest core of human nature, namely the nature of love, in which case matters of cultural or historical implications such as the differences between East (Buddha) and West (Christ) lose their validity. It is worth noticing that as a catalyser, although without mentioning its source, Thoreau makes use of a known quotation out of the Vedas – "God is the letter Ku, as well as Khu" – which evinces Thoreau's affinity with the universality of Vedantic thought:

> I know that some will have hard thoughts of me when they hear their Christ named beside my Buddha, yet I am sure that I am willing they should love their Christ more than my Buddha, for the love is the main thing, and I like him too. "God is the letter Ku, as well as Khu". Why need Christians be still intolerant and superstitious?[35]

Another aspect on which Thoreau gives his stark opinion within this same discussion is the nature of so-called erudition in spiritual matters. Highly critical of the self-imposed authority of the Christian ministers of his society, and echoing his affinity with Hindu thought, Thoreau comments the following:

> Have you learned the alphabet of heaven and can count three? Do you know the number of God's family? Can you put mysteries into words? Do you presume to fable of the ineffable [...]. Tell me of the height of the mountains of the moon, or of the diameter of space, and I may believe you; but of the secret history of the Almighty, and I shall pronounce thee mad.[36]

Following these passages are the first instances in which Thoreau directly mentions and quotes the Hindu sources whose wisdom permeates *A Week*. Thoreau thus expresses his deep appreciation of the scriptures of "several nations", particularly those of the "Hindoos". However, in his discussion Thoreau does not belittle the teachings of Christ or the New Testament, although he repeatedly condemns the

[35] Thoreau, *A Week*, 67-68.
[36] Thoreau, *A Week*, 70-71.

misinterpretations of these teachings within the context of the institutionalised Church. In his discussion, one of the most ardent points is that of direct experience; that is, the fact of directly approaching spirituality and searching for "the kingdom of heaven" in one's own life.[37]

Thoreau returns to the topic of spirituality and religion after some digressions on Greek mythology, relationships between whites and Indians, and poetry. Thoreau's discourse manages, however, to unite this diversity of topics through the underlying thread of spiritual appreciation, and thus speaks about the poetic qualities of harmony, truth, and the artistry both of writing and living: "After all, man is the great poet, and not Homer nor Shakespeare; and our language itself, and the common arts of life, are his work. Poetry is so universally true and independent of experience".[38]

This sense of a universal truth and wisdom thus becomes the value that enables spirituality, religion and poetry to be considered as human endeavours of similar significance. Thoreau then exposes his ideas on the value of books and what he considers to be good reading:

> For books are the society we keep; to read only the serenely true, never statistics, nor fiction, nor news, nor reports, nor periodicals, but only great poems; and when they failed, read them again, or perchance write more. Instead of other sacrifice, we might offer up our perfect thoughts to the gods daily, in hymns or psalms. For we should be at the helm at least once a day.[39]

Thoreau thus proceeds to address the *Bhagavad Gita* (Bhagvat-Geeta) in an explicit manner for the first time, and quotes the passage where Lord Krishna (Kreeshna), addressing his follower and friend Arjuna (Arjoon), tells him that "there are those the wisdom of which reading is their worship".

So the chapter proceeds with various reflections on the nature of reading, study, erudition and scholarship, where the author, despite his strong inherent scholarly inclination, exhorts the importance of practical tasks and hard and conscious work in life. This becomes a part of a reflection on the importance of balance between body and mind, which reveals the author's own consciousness of his train of thought and the disruptive nature of his narrative; the author includes the following

[37] See Thoreau, *A Week*, 71-78.
[38] Thoreau, *A Week*, 95.
[39] Thoreau, *A Week*, 96.

remark about the flow of consciousness: "We should consider that the flow of thought is more like a tidal wave than a prone river, and is the result of a celestial influence, not of any declivity in its channel".[40]

Monday

"Monday" is perhaps the most densely philosophical chapter of the book, and it contains most of the quotations taken by Thoreau from Hindu scriptures. Due to the great amount of quotations and the way in which the author handles and comments on them, they will be treated in depth in the coming chapter of this essay, which deals exclusively with Vedantic thought and Thoreau's assimilation of it. However, it is worth mentioning that alongside the transcriptions and commentaries of the Hindu texts, "Monday" also addresses other issues such as the following: Greek culture, the course of history, the importance of the present day, and the general concept of historical human evolution and progress; the story of a certain Mr. Lowell, who reached the age of 120; a lengthy dissertation on mountains; an account of confrontations between whites and Indians in New England; a poetical reflection on the spiritual and mystical nature of music triggered by the haunting sound of drums heard in the distance (which Thoreau relates to the Hindu scriptures, particularly an excerpt from the *Vedas*)[41]; a passage on Pythagoras and his being attuned to a "certain ineffable divinity, [...] the sublime symphonies of the world, [...] the universal harmony and consonance of the spheres";[42] and the final account of the day's end with the travellers going to sleep.

Tuesday

Contrasting the deeply philosophical nature of the preceding chapter, "Tuesday" mainly contains accounts of worldly affairs. After the expected opening paragraphs on the beginning of the day, the author recounts his hiking trip over the Saddle-Back mountains in Massachusetts, some years previously. Thoreau then focuses his attention on the river and gives a description of the aural and visual characteristics of

[40] Thoreau, *A Week*, 102.

[41] This passage is of particular importance in the present analysis and anticipates the deep reflection on music and silence included in the final chapter, "Friday". See *A Week*, 173-178.

[42] Thoreau, *A Week*, 176-177.

the surroundings, such as the noises coming from the cargo ships sailing the river, the fog, and other descriptions of the landscape, the townships and the fauna. The narrative then covers topics as diverse as the life of an expeditioner named Cromwell; canal-boats; civil and uncivil manners; life in the mountains; the positive traits and simplicity of life of boatmen, carpenters, and ship-builders, as opposed to the lives of people following other professions; boats and commerce in general; travel-literature; historical incidents with Indians; general reflections on life and death and the inherent tragedy of existence; appraisals of Greek and Latin literature; and, at the chapter's close, before sundown, detailed descriptions of nature, pastures, and animals, all imbued with a sincere tone of sympathy, friendliness and intimacy.

Wednesday

The main topic elaborated in "Wednesday" is that of friendship. These elaborations are deep, lengthy, and in most cases highly metaphorical, and give insight into the author's spiritual and social principles regarding human relationships; they show the deep significance and high regard in which Thoreau held friendship.

> No word is oftener on the lips of men than Friendship, and indeed no thought is more familiar to their aspirations. All men are dreaming of it, and its drama, which is always a tragedy, is enacted daily. It is the secret of the universe.
>
> This is what I would like – to be as intimate with you as our spirits are intimate – respecting you as I respect my ideal. Never to profane one another by word or action, even by a thought. Between us, if necessary, let there be no acquaintance. [43]

Through the topic of friendship, Thoreau manages to touch essential aspects of human nature such as love, purity, truth, virtue, honesty, nobleness, solitude, silence, companionship, emotion, passion, compassion, respect, equality, and spiritual affinity. As seen in the quote above, this spiritual affinity is one of the most important aspects of friendship in Thoreau's view, and in this light he often alludes to the truth, depth, purity and sublimity contained in a spiritually oriented relationship, in contrast to the superficiality, evanescence and temporality of the human bonds that are limited to merely physical and sentimental proximity. At the same time, Thoreau is aware of the risks and costs that striving to establish and maintain such a pure and sublime relationship implies:

[43] Thoreau, *A Week*, 264 & 270.

> Friend is one who incessantly pays us the compliment of expecting from us all the virtues, and who can appreciate them in us. It takes two to speak the truth – one to speak and another to hear [...]. Only lovers know the value and magnanimity of truth, while traders prize a cheap honesty, and neighbours and acquaintance a cheap civility. In our daily intercourse with men our nobler | faculties are dormant a nd suffered to rust. None will pay us the compliment to expect nobleness from us.
>
> The only danger in Friendship is that it will end. It is a delicate plant, though a native. The least unworthiness, even if it be unknown to one's self, vitiates it. Le t the Friend know that those faults which he observes in his Friend his own faults attract.
>
> In human intercourse the tragedy begins, not when there is misunderstanding about words, but when silence is not understood. [44]

Thus Thoreau shows his awareness of the fact that the loftiness, divinity and sublimity accessible through friendship is, however, also prone to limitations and baseness. Thoreau depicts this situation in the paradoxical style which he often employs in various contexts, managing to show the dichotomy of human nature and life in general – the unavoidable fact that all things in creation have a higher and a lower self. For Thoreau, the access to our higher self is a matter of awareness and conscious effort, a search for the inherent beauty and truth and divinity abiding within us. Thus in Thoreau's highly idealised conceptions, true and pure friendship has the capacity to disclose to man his most divine qualities in order to share them with others, enabling men to experience the divine and heavenly essence of our nature on this earthly and human plane:

> Even the utmost good-will and harmony and practical kindness are not sufficient for Friendship, for Friends do not live in harmony merely, as some say, but in melody. We do not wish for F riends to feed and clothe our bodies – neighbours are kind enough for that – but to do the like office to our spirits. For this, few are rich enough, however well disposed they may be [...]. "But sometimes we are said to *love* another – that is, to stand in a true relation to him, so that we give the best to, and receive the best from, him. Between whom there is hearty truth, there is love; and in proportion to our truthfulness and confidence in one another, our lives are divine and miraculous, and answer to our ideal. There are passages of affection in our intercourse with mortal men and women such as no prophecy had taught us to expect, which transcend our earthly life and anticipate Heaven for us. [45]

An analysis of the value of Thoreau's spiritual vision of friendship will be deepened in the following chapter. But apart from the topic of friendship, "Wednesday" includes other elements more directly related to the boat-trip narrative.

[44] Thoreau, *A Week*, 267, 277 & 278.
[45] Thoreau, *A Week*, 266.

The chapter begins with the common description of dawn and of the river surroundings. Other topics touched upon in this chapter include Greek mythology; an appraisal of simple living and humble dwellings; Roman culture; geology and observations on American nature; "The Inward Morning", an original poem addressing issues of spiritual character; a reflection on the nature of the imagination; and near the end, before the closing observation on the nature of dreams, a deep and eloquent reflection on the sublime, faith and truth, mixed with the narrative of the river journey:

> As we sat on the bank eating our supper, the clear light of the western sky fell on the eastern trees, and was reflected in the water, and we enjoyed so serenade an evening as left nothing to describe. For the most part we think that there are few degrees of sublimity, and that the highest is but little higher than that which we now behold; but we are always deceived. Sublimer visions appear, and the former pale and fade away. We are grateful when we are reminded by | interior evidence of the permanence of universal laws; for our faith is but faintly remembered, indeed, is not a remembered assurance, but a use and enjoyment of knowledge. It is when we do not have to believe, but come into actual contact with Truth, and are related to her in the most direct and intimate way. Waves of serener life pass over us from time to time, like flakes of sunlight over the fields in cloudy weather. [46]

Thursday

"Thursday" encounters the travellers on their journey back home. It opens with a poem by Emerson, alluding the nature of the wise man and the wisdom that his own spirit carries as "God's own light illumined and foreshowed". This quotation anticipates the main topic of reflection contained in the chapter, namely that of human wisdom. In this light, Thoreau addresses the superficiality common to the majority of men. He equates wisdom with a capacity for simple, practical and ascetic living. He sees the virtuous man as one who takes the universe as his own sanctuary, expounding on the nature of falsehood, sincerity, honesty, and innocence, and adds, "whatever we do with the utmost truthfulness and integrity, by virtue of its pureness, must be transparent as light".[47] He associates wisdom with a capacity to acknowledge the insignificance of the works of man in the face of Nature's immensity, as well as with a relationship with eternity, which makes the wise man's life extemporaneous as including all time. He relates wisdom with poise, serenity, and depth, qualities which are in close relationship with the perception of the beauty

[46] Thoreau, *A Week*, 291-292.
[47] Thoreau, *A Week*, 310.

of life and the world; he compares the life of the wise man to that of a skilful sailor gracefully following the current of life. He comments on the art of Nature and the art of man, and proceeds to ponder on the nature of genius, artistry, satire, poetry and mysticism under this light, affirming that "poetry is the mysticism of mankind", as it is far beyond analysis and carries a "deeper music than *can* be *heard*".[48]

Interspersed within all these reflections are further passages of the journey's unfolding and descriptions of nature, for example the fog and rain falling at daybreak, the sheep witnessing the brothers' ordeal, the people encountered along the way, and the mere act of sailing until sundown and the time to go to sleep.

Friday

"Friday" is, along with "Monday", a deeply philosophical chapter, an aspect which in this case is reinforced by the fact of it being the closing episode of the book. There are four main topics of reflection identifiable in this chapter which are somehow interrelated: poetry and the poet (being the most prominent one); the search for wisdom, truth, the divine and God (whether in the form of science, morality, philosophy or poetry); the nature of the world as being constituted by an outer, superficial façade, as well as by a deeper and less ordinary one (addressing in this regard our human, sensual perception of the world and its reality and the dichotomy of the worldly and the heavenly); and music and silence (as means of a deeper and truer perception of reality).

In regards to the topic of poetry and the figure of the poet, an underlying concern in Thoreau's thought is the particular search of and access to truth that the poet, through his inner wisdom, genius and effort, can acquire and transmit to others in the form of poetry. In its higher form, the "supreme poetic work" thus becomes a vehicle of a higher and divine truth and beauty, an expansive form of communication, a channel uniting the heavenly and the earthly insofar as the poet's intention is sincere, true and pure, regardless of baser goals, such as popularity and fame.[49] Within these considerations, Thoreau then exposes his views on the figure of the Bard as that of a *seer*, reinforcing his view that the true poet has the faculty of penetrating a deeper reality and acquiring a direct perception or vision of it:

[48] See Thoreau, *A Week*, 328.
[49] See Thoreau, *A Week*, 340-341.

> There are two classes of men called poets. The one cultivates life, the other art – one seeks food for nutriment, the other for flavour; one satisfies hunger, the other gratifies the palate. There are two kinds of writing, both great and rare: one that of genius, or the inspired, the other of intellect and taste, in the intervals of inspiration. The former is above criticism, always correct, giving the law to criticism. It vibrates and pulsates with life for ever. It is sacred, and to be read with reverence, as the works of nature are studied. There are few instances of a sustained style of this kind; perhaps every man has spoken words, but the speaker is then careless of the record. Such a style removes us out of personal relations with its author; we do not take his words on our lips, but his sense into our hearts. [50]

Another crucial point related to the figure of the poet, appreciable in this quote, and one which Thoreau had already mentioned to a certain extent in "Tuesday", is that of life itself as a form of art, and in this precise case, the life of the poet as his truest and most encompassing piece of poetry. This stance shows with particular clarity the scope of Thoreau's lifelong attempt to establish balance between the spiritually and intellectually ideal and the materially and outwardly practical. Thus, Thoreau says:

> The true poem is not that which the public read. There is always a poem not printed on paper, coincident with the production of this, stereotyped in the poet's life. It is *what he has become through his work.* Not how is the idea expressed in stone, or on canvas or paper, is the question, but how far it has obtained form and expression in the life of the artist. His true work will not stand in any prince's gallery.[51]

This discussion on poetry is continued later with an appreciation of Chaucer, including references to Ossian, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Gray and Shakespeare. Thoreau praises Chaucer's work due not only to his sheer genius, wit and general use of language, but also due to its spirit – its trustfulness, affection, tenderness, delicacy and familiarity towards the reader, as well as Chaucer's reverent yet innocent manner of "speaking of his God".

Following the topic of poetry is an extended reflection which covers various topics of similar character in an expansive way, namely, the concepts of truth and wisdom as related to morality, science, philosophy, and religion, with some further references to poetry in continuation of the previous section. The dividing lines between these human disciplines disappear in these reflections, as Thoreau makes explicit a stance that parts from a unitary concept of truth and wisdom, which is in direct relationship with knowledge – moral, scientific, philosophical or religious –

[50] Thoreau, *A Week*, 375.
[51] Thoreau, *A Week*, 343.

being accessible through it but not dependent on it. Once again, Thoreau's conviction of the importance of an integrally developed life, both inner and outer, becomes evident in this discussion, as he states the ultimate value of the practical living that reflects and fosters qualities akin to a truthful and wise character:

> The purest science is still biographical. Nothing will dignify and elevate science while it is sundered so wholly from the moral life of its devotee, and he professes another religion than it teaches, and worships at a foreign shrine. Anciently the faith of a philosopher was identical with his system or, in other words, his view of the universe.
>
> The poet uses the results of science and philosophy and generalises their widest deductions [...] I should say that the most prominent scientific men of our country, and perhaps of this age, are either serving the arts and not pure science, or are performing faithful but quite subordinate labours in particular departments. [52]

The concept of truth is understood from a variety of perspectives, depending on the mode of perception. Thus the validity of these perceptions rests on their inherent nature, whether it be the accuracy of the scientific observation, the beauty of the poetic work, the truthfulness of the moral stance, the wisdom of the philosophical system, or the faithfulness and sincerity of the religious feeling.

Closely related to this view of truth and knowledge is the issue of the perception of reality. Thoreau manifests his belief that the world and life in general are constituted by a double reality, an inner and an outer, the former being the mere surface of an unfathomable universe contained within all things:

> There is only necessary a moment's sanity and sound senses to teach us that there is a nature behind the ordinary in which we have only some vague preëmption and reserve as yet. We live on the outskirts of that region.
>
> This world has many rings, like Saturn, and we live now on the outmost of them all. None can say deliberately that he inhabits the same sphere, or is contemporary with the flower which his hands have plucked; and though his feet may seem to crush it, inconceivable spaces and ages separate them, and perchance is no danger that he will hurt it [...] Why may not our speculations penetrate as far into the immaterial starry system, of which the former is but the outwards and visible type? Surely we are provided with sense as well fitted to penetrate the spaces of the real, the substantial, the eternal, as these outward are to penetrate the material universe. [53]

Being conscious of our nature as sensual beings living in a physical world that is reflection of a spiritual one, Thoreau elucidates with particular poignancy the truth and reality accessible through the perceptions of our senses. He believes that the

[52] Thoreau, *A Week*, 362-363.
[53] Thoreau, *A Week*, 383 & 386.

normal use of our sensual faculties does not enable us to perceive the fullness and fundamental divinity of our existence. He therefore explicitly advocates a *spiritualization* of man which includes his *naturalisation*, that is, a true experience of the inner reality of nature. This spiritualisation implies a purification of our senses and modes of perception, which will ultimately enable man to perceive the divinity of earthly life, or, as Thoreau puts it, to experience heaven on earth and to perceive God with our own faculties.

> Man would desecrate it by his touch, and so the beauty of the world remains veiled to him. He needs not only to be spiritualised, but *naturalised*, on the soil of earth. Who shall conceive what kind of roof the heavens might extend over him, what seasons minister to him, and what employment dignify his life! Only the convalescent raise the veil of Nature. An immortality in his life would confer immortality on his abode. [...] Here or nowhere is our heaven.
>
> We need pray for no higher heaven that the pure senses can furnish – a *purely* sensuous life. Our present senses are but the rudiments of what th ey are destined to become. We are comparatively deaf and dumb and blind, and without smell or taste or feeling. Every generation makes the discovery that its divine vigour has been dissipated, and each sense and faculty misapplied and debauched. The ear s were made, not for such | trivial uses as men are wont to suppose, but to hear celestial sounds. The eyes were not mad e for such grovelling uses as they are now put to and worn out by, but to behold beauty now invisible. May we not *see* God? Are we to be put off and amused in this life as it were with a mere allegory? [...] "Did not he that made that which is *within* make that which is *without* also?" What is it, then, to educate but to develop these divine germs called the sense? for individuals and states to deal magnanimously with the rising generation, leading it not into temptation – not teach the eye to squint, nor attune the ear to profanity. But where is the instructed teacher? Where are the *normal* schools?[54]

Condensing and epitomising the discussion about the perception of the world and the role of the purified senses therein is the theme of music, which Thoreau had already addressed in "Wednesday" within a similar context. For Thoreau, music seems to be the most intense and the most pure medium for the perception of the higher and the more spiritual realms inherent to our human nature and our earthly world. Music becomes synonymous with transcendence; that is, transcendence of the base, ordinary and merely mundane levels of perception and existence: "With our music we would fain challenge transiently another and finer sort of intercourse than our daily toil permits. The strains come back to us amended in the echo, as when a friend reads our verse".[55]

[54] Thoreau, *A Week*, 379 & 382.
[55] Thoreau, *A Week*, 381.

However, Thoreau insinuates that music is likewise a manifestation of the dichotomous nature of existence, in this case an outer reflection of an inner, higher and deeper reality embodied in the form of *silence*. The discussion on silence is meaningfully placed, following Thoreau's reflections on the relationship between body and soul, which at the same time alludes to the previous comparative remarks on the inner/higher/heavenly existence as related to the outer/lower/worldly one. For this purpose, Thoreau employs ideas and quotations whose source is not given by the writer but which strongly echo the voice of the *Vedas*:

> We have reason to be grateful for celestial phenomena, for they chiefly reflect the ideal in man. The stars are distant and unobtrusive, but bright and enduring as our fairest and most memorable experiences. "Let the immortal depth of your soul lead you, but earnestly extend your eyes upwards.[56]

Thoreau's capacity for creating associations and correspondences, which in this quote establish a clear relationship between spirit and matter, heaven and earth, soul and body, is then expanded to cover the nature of human relationships in regards to society (company) and solitude. The passage's conceptual axis is still, however, that of music and silence, where silence is perceived as the ultimate and all-encompassing substance through which the universality of oneness can be experienced. It is still more significant that this topic constitutes the book's closing words, preceding the final paragraph, which describes the happy and serene return of the brothers to the shores of Concord Town. Thus the formal structure of this variety of topics leaves the reader with a sense of the universal, sublime and spiritual, which has all throughout the river journey enriched and deepened the understanding and perception of the physical reality of the travellers that finally return to the shore of their origins.

> As the truest society approaches always nearer to solitude, so the most excellent speech finally falls into Silence. Silence is audible to all men, at all times, and in all places. She is when we hear inwardly, sound when we hear outwardly. Creation has not displaced her, but is her visible framework and foil.
>
> Silence is the universal refuge, the sequel to all dull discourses and all foolish acts, a balm to our every chagrin, as welcome after satiety as after disappointment.
>
> For through Her all revelations have been made, and just in proportion as men have consulted her oracle within, they have obtained a clear insight, and their age has been marked as an enlightened one [...]. For when he at length dives into her, so vast is the disproportion of the told to the untold, that the former will seem but the bubble on the surface where he disappeared.[57]

[56] Thoreau, *A Week*, 391.
[57] Thoreau, *A Week*, 391-392.

3. THOREAU'S SPIRITUALITY IN THE LIGHT OF VEDANTA

> The divine light is diffused almost entirely around us, and by means of the refraction of light, or else by a certain self-luminousness, or, as some will have it, transparency, if we preserve ourselves untarnished, we are able to enlighten our shaded side.[58]

3.1. THOREAU : A PENCIL-MAKER'S SPIRITUAL LIFE

> But how can I communicate with the gods who am a pencil-maker on the earth, and not be insane?[59]

It is now my intention to elucidate the spiritual character and depth of Thoreau's thought, his world-view and his general attitude towards life, through a thematic analysis of the main issues and concepts addressed in *A Week in the Concord and Merrimac Rivers* as discussed in the preceding chapter. What is spirituality for Thoreau and how does he conceive the spiritual in life? In order to fathom the nature of Thoreau's spiritual views, there are five fundamental aspects that are most prominent in the book, from which the present analysis can be drawn: first, the nature of this *spiritual* or *godly essence*; second, the universality and all-pervasiveness of this spirit; third, the totality of life and oneness of Creation as a consequence of this spiritual pervasiveness; fourth, the individual's perception of the spiritual and divine, and the role that the individual consciousness plays therein and in its assimilation into practical life; and fifth, the methods (qualities, demeanours, practices and attitudes) that aid the individual in assimilating the divine, particularly regarding the role of action (works) and inaction (contemplation).

A. God: The Universal Soul and Everlasting Something

Regarding the first issue, it does not result in tautology to emphasise that *spirituality* for Thoreau clearly means the presence of *spirit*, and, moreover, its manifestations in myriad forms, whether in matter, feelings, thoughts, or intuitive perceptions. In Thoreau's eyes, the most elemental and at the same time the most encompassing

[58] Thoreau, *A Week*, 352.
[59] Thoreau, *A Week*, 140.

manifestation of this spiritual presence is the essence of that "everlasting Something" which unites the entirety of existence within the same light, the "Universal Soul" for which oneness is the undeniable reality of life.

It is thus that Thoreau perceives and gives various names to this essence of the "One". Quoting the Vedas, Thoreau tells the reader: "God is the letter Ku, as well as Khu". Among the numerous references with which Thoreau later addresses this godly essence are terms such as "Brahman", the "gods", the "divine", "Nature", the "everlasting Something", the "Universal Soul", the "Soul", "Heaven", "Earth", the "endless and river-like flow of life". On a more human and personal basis he refers to the figure of the "avatar", or God manifested as a human being, in the form of "Christ" and "Buddha". Thoreau also includes more abstract manifestations with the frequent use of terms such as "eternity", "immortality", "light" (within and without), "eternal truth", the "voice of wisdom", and "silence". Human endeavours and disciplines are also given a place within his considerations, such as "science", "religion", "philosophy", "art", "poetry", "music", as well as human emotions such as "friendship" and "love", all manifestations of the same godly essence.

B. Spiritual Universality

The universality contained in these affirmations reflects the universality of Thoreau's thought. For Thoreau, the reality of infinite and eternal spirit is indubitable, and its manifestations at the same time are limitless, infinite and eternal. It is therefore that his aspirations to perceive the all-encompassing nature of spirit lead his consciousness and his thoughts and, as a consequence, the narrative of *A Week*, through a far-reaching and universal account of a normal boat-trip. Thoreau's inner cry enables him to experience and testify the presence of the One in the All.

C. Spirituality and the Oneness of Life: Search for the Higher Self

For Thoreau, spirituality means a perception of a divine, universal and eternal essence and truth in the myriad manifestations of life. However, although Thoreau is fully aware of the fact that the totality of creation is an extension of the divine, he is also aware that all things have a "lower and a higher self", and manifest the divinity in different amount, as seen in the contrasts he often establishes between the heavenly

and the earthly, between the superficiality and the depth of human life, between the outer manifestation and the inner essence, between the apparent or illusive and the truly real. Thoreau's quest for the spiritual thus becomes a search for the purest and the most intense manifestations of that "higher self", so it may as well pervade and be reflected through the lower levels.

D. Experiencing and Communing with the Divine.

How to perceive the divine, commune with it and make it a part of our daily life and practical matters thus becomes a main concern for Thoreau. This endeavour leads him through various readings and experiences that mould his personality and attitudes towards life, and which reveal to him the important role that the individual *consciousness* plays within this whole scheme. As seen in several of the quotes included in the previous section, one of the most frequently employed similes associated with the river and its flow, as symbol of the torrential flow of the totality of life and the divinity it contains, is that of the flow of thought and consciousness: "We should consider that the flow of thought is more like a tidal wave than a prone river, and is the result of a celestial influence, not of any declivity in its channel". [60] Thus, Thoreau's thought is depicted in the narrative in a dispersed and all-encompassing way, exactly as the universal divine tide from which it springs, which in his particular use evinces a high degree of self-consciousness.

E. Consciousness: The Role of Action and Inaction

Through awareness of his own consciousness and its relationship with practical life, Thoreau recognises the value that certain qualities and demeanours have in activating in our lives that "celestial influence" and in bringing man closer to the divine. The most frequently mentioned and extolled are qualities such as honesty, sincerity, purity (purity of the senses, purity of thought and of emotion), poise, serenity, peace, and simplicity in life (almost to the point of austerity and asceticism), and demeanours such as the search for truth, diligence in works, practicality in life, the reading of "good books" (particularly scriptures), the development of an artistic and aesthetic sense in life, prayer, devotion, worship, contemplation, meditation, and intuitive

[60] Thoreau, *A Week*, 102.

perception or vision. These qualities and demeanours evince the twofold nature of Thoreau's vision, namely the integrality he sought for through the balanced development of the outer along with the inner aspects of life. This stance implies an inner and outer balance that Thoreau on many occasions addresses as the dichotomy between action and inaction, or works and contemplation, for which he draws considerably on Vedanta, particularly the *Bhagavad Gita*.

This brings us to a fundamental aspect of Thoreau's spiritual search, namely his relationship with Eastern spirituality, particularly with Hindu scriptures and Vedantic thought. Several of the quotes included in the previous chapter testify to the extent to which Thoreau considered Eastern philosophy to be a true source of wisdom, especially in comparison to Western philosophy.[61] The following section will provide an examination of the sources quoted by Thoreau in *A Week*, particularly in the chapter "Monday", in order to proceed with a thematic and conceptual analysis of Thoreau's spiritual views in the light of Vedanta.

3.2. THOREAU'S HINDU QUOTATIONS AND REFERENCES IN *A WEEK*

There are three main sources from which Thoreau drew the great amount of literary material that he alludes to in *A Week*:[62] British and American poetry; histories of New England; and Eastern classics, particularly Hindu scriptures. In their thorough study of Thoreau's use of Hindu quotations, Raghavan and Wood[63] identify a total of eight sources, of which Thoreau mentioned only six, and from which he drew forty-seven quotes, mainly in the chapter entitled "Monday". The following reference gives a detailed account of the sources and translations used by Thoreau (spelled with 18th and 19th century transliteration, as used by Thoreau):

1. The *Veeshnoo Sarma*, and its *Heetopades*: a large collection of fables and aphorisms available through Charles Wilkins's 1787 translation.

[61] See quotes no. 19 & 20.
[62] See Carl Hovde, "Literary Materials in Thoreau's *A Week*" (1965): 76.
[63] Ellen Raghavan, and Barry Wood, "Thoreau's Hindu Quotations in a Week".

2. *Menu – The Laws of Menu with the gloss of Culluca*, or *Institutes of Hindu Law*, an ancient manual on proper ethical behaviour, in Sir William Jones's translation from 1799.

3. The *Bhagvat-Geeta*, or *Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon*, in Charles Wilkins's 1785 translation.

4. The *Vedas*, translated by Rajah Rammohun Roy, 1832.

5. The *Sacontala* by Calidas, or *Shakuntala* (5th century A.D.), in Sir William Jones's translation.

6. The *Veeshnoo Purana*. Edition used by Thoreau unidentified.

7. The *Sankhya Karika*, not mentioned by Thoreau but identified as a source of quotations. 1837 edition by Henry Thomas Colebrooke.

8. The *Dherma Sastra*. Not mentioned by Thoreau. Edition unidentified.

Of the forty-seven quotations employed by Thoreau, the most predominant are from the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Vedas* and the *Laws of Manu*. It is likewise worth mentioning that although the majority of Hindu quotations are condensed in "Wednesday", their essence can be clearly identified throughout the whole book, particularly in the frequent philosophical and metaphysical discussions, but not the least in the narrative itself and in the general turn of mind that discloses the author's consciousness.

For the purpose of the present analysis, it will be most effective to offer not a detailed enumeration of the quotes and sources employed by Thoreau,[64] but a thematic and conceptual analysis of the fundamental Vedantic precepts assimilated by Thoreau according to the fivefold classification proposed in the previous section.

[64] The reader can find such a detailed reference in Raghavan and Wood.

3.3. THOREAU AND VEDANTA: PARALLELISMS AND POINTS OF CONVERGENCE

The Hindu spiritual tradition is founded on three fundamental scriptures: the *Vedas*,[65] the *Upanishads*,[66] and the *Bhagavad Gita*.[67] The wisdom embodied in all these texts shares the self-same essence and is known as *Vedanta*, which in Sanskrit means "end of the Vedas".[68] Regarding the Vedic lore transmitted through the Upanishads, and giving a general overview that addresses their character as a whole, their spirit and significance, Sri Aurobindo states the following:

> The Upanishads are at once profound religious scriptures, – for they are a record of the deepest spiritual experiences, – documents of revelatory and intuitive philosophy of an inexhaustible light, power and largeness and, whether written in verse or cadenced prose, spiritual poems of an absolute, an unfailing inspiration inevitable in phrase, wonderful in rhythm and expression. It is the expression of a mind in which philosophy and religion and poetry are made one, because this religion does not end with a cult nor is limited to a religio-ethical aspiration, but rises to an infinite discovery of God, of Self, of our highest and whole reality of spirit and being and speaks out of an ecstasy of luminous knowledge and an ecstasy of moved and fulfilled experience. This philosophy is not an abstract intellectual speculation about Truth or a structure of the logical intelligence, but Truth seen, felt, lived, held by the inmost mind and soul in the joy of utterance of an assured discovery and possession, and this poetry is the work of the aesthetic mind lifted up beyond its ordinary field to express the wonder and beauty of the rarest and spiritual self-vision and the pofound illumined truth of self and God and universe.[69]

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[65] About the *Vedas*, Sri Aurobindo comments the following: "They have been the reputed source not only of some of the world's richest and profoundest religions, but of some of its subtlest metaphysical philosophies. In the fixed tradition of thousands of years they have been revered as the origin and standard of all that can be held as authoritative and true in Brahmana and Upanishad, in Tantra and Purana, in the doctrines of great philosophical schools and in the teachings of famous saints and sages. The name borne by them was Veda, the knowledge, - the received name for the highest spiritual truth of which the human mind is capable". Regarding the antiquity of the Vedas, scholars have different opinions. According to Sri Aurobindo, "The text of the Veda which we posess has remained uncorrupted for over two thousand years", owing to the transcription and compilation done by the great sage Vyasa. Sri Aurobindo adds, "But there are certain considerations which justify us in supposing of it an almost enormous antiquity", arguably from around 2000 B.C. See: Sri Aurobindo (1956): *The Secret of the Veda*, 3 & 15.

[66] See Sri Chinmoy's explanation: "The Upanishads are also called Vedanta. The literal meaning of Vedanta is "the end of the Vedas". But the spiritual meaning of Vedanta is "the cream of the Vedas, the pick of the inner lore, the aim, the goal of the inner life". In: *The Upanishads*, p. 39.

[67] Although a sacred text on its own, the *Gita* is actually an episode in the sixth book of the great Indian epic, the *Mahabharata.* Its authorship dates from 600 B.C. and is attributed to the sage Vyasa. The story revolves around a rivalry between the Pandavas – led by Arjuna and Krishna – and the Kauravas, two parties of cousins, which is resolved in the great battle at Kurukshetra. About the *Gita*, Sri Chinmoy says the following: "The Gita is the eiptome of the Vedas. It is spontaneous. It is in a form at once divinised and humanised. It is also the purest milk drawn from the udders of the most illumining Upanishads to feed and nourish the human soul". See Sri Chinmoy: *Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita*, pp. 134-137.

[68] See Swami Vivekananda, *Vedanta: Voice of Freedom* (Vedanta Society, California, 1986): 311. See also 42-53.

[69] Sri Aurobindo, *The Upanishads* (Sri Aurobindo Ashram, India, 1971), 1.

Upon reading the preceding quotation, aspects of these sacred texts regarding their spirit, content and style can be identified which resound in Thoreau's work and which evince the first elements from which fundamental points of correspondence can be established. As in Thoreau's case, at the core of the Vedic aspiration lies the **search for eternal Truth**, which in its highest and most luminous sense is equivalent to God, Self, and the whole Reality of Spirit. This search is characterised by a **universality of spiritual thought** – free from all the limitations attached to a mere creed or cult or religio-ethical dogma – which strives for a first-hand **perception or vision of the Divine,** so that It may finally be discovered, possessed, assimilated, experienced and lived. The all-encompassing nature of this search thus enables man to direct his highest aspirations in the form of **pure spiritual practice**, including philosophy, poetry and other disciplines, or even more, in a compound endeavour which nourishes from them all. Sri Chinmoy, in his own highly condensed philosophical and poetic style, explains in his book *The Vedas*:

> Each Vedic seer is a poet and a prophet. In the case of the Vedic poets, it was intuition that gave birth to their poems. This intuition is the direct knowledge of Truth [...]. Poetry and philosophy run abreast in the Vedas. Philosophy illumined the minds of the Vedic seers. Poetry immortalised their hearts. The philosopher is a poet in the mind. The poet is a philosopher in the heart. [70]

In previous sections of this essay, it was seen how these elements can be traced within Thoreau's work, particularly in *A Week*. The trait that, however, distinguishes and sublimates the Vedantic texts, is their systematic structure and approach to the divine, namely the development of a system of *yoga* which, although universal and all-encompassing, is based on sound and systematic methods that enable the human individual to discover and commune with the divinity around and within himself. As Sri Chinmoy explains:

> Yoga is union. It is the union of the individual soul with the Su preme Self. Yoga is the spiritual science that teaches us how the Ultimate Reality can be realised in life itself. What we have to do is accept life and fulfil the Divine in ourselves here on earth. [71]

Yoga, as expounded in Vedanta, is of a universal nature which aspires to discover and assimilate the wisdom, truth and reality of existence. This is the reason

[70] Sri Chinmoy, *The Three Branches of India's Life-Tree* (Aum Publications, New York, 1996) 16.
[71] Sri Chinmoy, *Yoga and the Spiritual Life* (Agni Press, New York, 1974) 55.

for which Vedanta offers both an exhaustive philosophical explanation to the riddle of life, as well as practical modes of conduct which aid the individual in attaining to that wisdom and ultimately to the divine. This twofold approach between the inner and the outer, the spiritual-philosophical and material, is the aspect through which the most striking and evident parallelisms and points of convergence between Vedanta and Thoreau's spiritual views can be established. This will be expounded in the following sections, parting from the Hindu quotations employed by Thoreau in "Wednesday" and the general atmosphere of spiritual inquiry that imbues the book as a whole.

A. Brahman and Atman: The Universal and Individual Soul

> There is, indeed, a tide in the affairs of men, as the poet says, and yet as things flow they circulate, and the ebb always balances the flow. All streams are but tributary to the ocean which itself does not stream, and the shores are unchanged but in longer periods that man can measure.[72]

The figure of the river is one of the most frequent and powerful metaphors used by Thoreau in his book. In the various contexts in which the river symbol is employed the underlying principle is that of flow, as in the case of the flow of thought and the flow of life. A constant concern for Thoreau in the depiction of the symbolism of flow, as can be seen in the quote above, is the sense of belonging to a wider and ever-expanding context, as in the case of the river flowing into the ocean, whose nature is unchangeable and eternal. Through this analogy, Thoreau charges the imagery with spiritual value, where the individual and the universal merge in harmony, where unity and multiplicity are correspondent. It is under this spiritual light that Thoreau is able to allude to the self-same reality from a different perspective, namely that of Nature and its myriad manifestations in regards to the Universal Soul. Not without a tone of satire, Thoreau says the following:

> By the faint cackling in distant barns, I judge that Dame Nature is interested still to know how many eggs her hens lay. The Universal Soul, as it is called, has an interest in the tacking of hay, the foddering of cattle, and the draining of peat-meadows. Away in Scythia, away in India, it makes butter and cheese.[73]

[72] Thoreau, *A Week*, 124.
[73] Thoreau, *A Week*, 126.

Thoreau is perfectly aware of the fact that in Hindu thought these two complementary elements are known as *Brahman* and *Atman*: the Universal Soul that expresses and unfolds Itself in the disguise of individual souls.[74] This calls forth a key concept within the Vedantic vision of life, namely the concept of *Lila*. *Lila* is the Cosmic Game through which Brahman expresses Itself in myriad and even contradictory forms: Its Eternity through temporality, Its Infinity through the finite, Its Unity through multiplicity, the Formless through the form. As Sri Chinmoy explains: "God was One. He wanted to be Many. Why? He felt the necessity of enjoying himself divinely and supremely in infinite forms".[75]

Although Thoreau does not give evidence of having been acquainted with the concept of *Lila*, his writings give testimony of his understanding of the deep spiritual fervour and aspiration which led the ancient Hindus to strive for the transcendence of the life-game, constricted by human limitations, in their search for God and in their aspiration to unite the individual with the cosmic. Thoreau says:

> Their end is an immense consolation; eternal absorption in Brahman. Their speculations never venture beyond their own table-lands, though they are high and vast as they [...]. The undeserved reward is to be earned by an everlasting moral drudgery; the incalculable promise of the morrow is, as it were, weighted.[76]

"Drudgery" here is to be understood as laboriousness, as the conscious effort that the aspirant undertakes in order to strive for spiritual attainment. And such effort is indispensable, for despite the fact that the whole of creation is an extension of Brahman and is fused with the divine light, the intensity with which this light is manifested varies. Therefore, discrimination becomes a fundamental element of the spiritual search, a stage where a higher degree of self-consciousness enables the seeker to perceive the different degrees of luminosity and reality contained in the multiplicity of life, and to direct his aims towards the sublime, as in Thoreau's case.

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[74] See Sri Chinmoy, *The Three Branches of India's Life Tree*, 43.
[75] Sri Chinmoy, *The Upanishads*, 100.
[76] Thoreau, *A Week*, 136.

B. Maya and the Dance of Nature

> A Hindoo sage said, 'As a dancer, having exhibited herself to the spectator, desists from the dance, so does Nature desist, having manifested herself to soul '. Nothing, in my opinion, is more gentle than Nature; once aware of having been seen, she does not again expose herself to the gaze of soul.[77]

According to Vedanta, the way in which Brahman unfolds Itself and Its game of life is as if through a stage where the scenario is set up for all the actors and participants to fulfil their role. This theatre-like scenario is the material existence, namely Nature, which is only the outward, apparent, limited and finite reality of the infinite and unfathomable inner and spiritual essence from which it originates. This effect, known as *Maya*, is the action of self-forgetfulness through which the Universal Soul veils itself within the limits of material existence in the form of Nature, as a part of the game of life. The completion of the game of *Lila* for the individual occurs when the individual consciousness establishes a union with its soul, which in turn, being a part of the Universal Soul, means union with God. Such a union or realisation means the revelation of the inner essence and spiritual truth contained in physical life, which the quote above describes as the end of the dance of Nature and its revelation to the Soul.

As Sri Chinmoy explains, *Maya* can be understood as the world of illusion or unreality, for although it is an extension of the infinite divine, it is only a partial manifestation thereof and does not embody its fullness:

> *Maya* means 'illusion'. It also means the unreality of ephemeral things [...]. The world as it stands before our mental eye is a cosmic illusion, a deceptive prison. It is only when true knowledge dawns on us that we will be in a position to free ourselves from the meshes of ignorance and from the snares of birth and death.
>
> *Maya,* illusion or forgetfulness, makes you feel that you are finite, weak and helpless. This is not true. You are not the body. You are not the senses. You are not the mind. These are all limited. You are the soul, which is unlimited. Your soul is infinitely powerful. Your soul defies all time and space.[78]

The realisation and manifestation of the soul is the main objective of Vedanta and Yoga. The first step along this path is, as noted above, discrimination; that is, the recognition of the various levels at which the universal reality is manifested and the acknowledgement of the limitations and unreality (or partial manifestation of the infinite reality) inherent to the physical world. This is something that Thoreau was

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[77] Thoreau, *A Week*, 382.

[78] Sri Chinmoy *Yoga and the Spiritual Life*, 31 and *Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita*, 168-169. See also Swami Vivekananda, 133-144.

well aware of, and which made him adopt the highly critical attitude towards the superficiality and shallowness of society:

> But the lives of men, though more extended laterally in their range, are still a s shallow as ever. Undoubtedly, as a Western orator said, "Men generally live over about the same surface; some live long and narrow, and others live broad and short"; but it is all superficial living. [79]

Behind the world of appearance is the inner world from which the former springs. Thoreau was aware of the meaning of discovering that inner reality; he was likewise highly conscious of the implications of the quest within, what it meant to search for the wealth of the inner world and the authentic reality and truth of being. Thoreau makes the following remark:

> But a steep, and sudden, and by these means unaccountable transition, is that from a comparatively narrow and partial, what is called common -sense view of things, to an infinitely expanded and liberating one, from seeing things as men describe them to seeing them as men cannot describe them. This implies a sense which is not common, but rare in the wisest man's experience; which is sensible or sentient o r more than common. [80]

Far from the day-to-day experience of the common man and his world-view is the "expanded and liberated" world-view of the wise man, which originates in the connection to the inner reality of life and provides the seeker not only with wisdom and freedom, but also with strength and a sound perception of truth. This echoes strongly with the Vedantic concept of the liberated individual who strives to realise his soul and its reality. As Swami Vivekananda explains it:

> The Real Man is one and infinite, the omnipresent Spirit. And the apparent man is only a limitation of that Real Man. The apparent man is only a dim reflection of the Real Man. The Real man, the Spirit, being beyond cause and effect, not bound by time and space, must therefore be free.
>
> The Soul cannot be won by the weakling [...] Avoid weakness and slavery. You are the Soul only if you are free; there is immortality for you only if you are free; there is God only if He is free [...][81]

[79] Thoreau, *A Week*, 304. See also quote no. 51.
[80] Thoreau, *A Week*, 384.
[81] Swami Vivekananda, 173-174 & 142.

C. Vedanta, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the Role of Action

A central issue both in Vedanta and in Thoreau's view of life is the reconciliation between the spiritual and the material, in other words, the assimilation and application of spiritual knowledge into practical life. Sri Chinmoy explains the following, referring particularly to the *Vedas* and the *Bhagavad Gita*:

> To say that the Vedas are badly infected with asceticism and other -worldliness is to betray one's own ignorance. The Vedas are divinely practical and their message is of constant practical value.
>
> The Gita is the epitome of the Vedas [...]. The Gita demands man's acceptance of life and reveals the way to achieve the victory of the higher Self over the lower self by the spiritual art of transformation: physical, vital, mental, psychic and spiritual.[82]

The practical value of spirituality is not exclusive of the Vedas, but is a common trait of the whole Vedantic body of wisdom. It is likewise the crucial issue at stake in the *Bhagavad Gita*, where the dilemma of action as opposed to inaction is posed in regards to the duty of man in life. This is reflected in the case of Arjuna, the story's main character.[83]

This issue is likewise addressed with peculiar zeal by Thoreau, for which he quotes the *Gita* on several occasions. This gives evidence of how meaningful and valuable the *Gita* had become for Thoreau. Here is an example, one of the first entries of *A Week* in which he praises the value of the *Gita* and which runs thus:

> It is unquestionably one of the noblest and most sacred scriptures which have come down to us [...] The reader is nowhere raised into and sustained in a higher, purer, or *rarer* region of thought than in the Bhagvat-Geeta. Warren Hastings, in his sensible letter recommending the translation of this book to the Chairman of the East India Company, declares the original to be "of a sublimity of conception, reasoning, and diction almost unequalled", and that the writings of the Indian philosophers 'will survive when the British dominion in India shall have long ceased to exist, and when the sources which it once yielded of wealth and powers are lost to remembrance'. [84]

Thoreau's interest should not be a cause of surprise, for despite the temporal and geographical distance between the place of conception of the *Gita* and Thoreau's

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[82] Sri Chinmoy, *The Three Branches of India's Life Tree*, 8 & 138. It is worth mentioning in this context that asceticism in India didn't start as a philosophical attitude in Vedic times, but much later, beginning with Buddhism, and in Hinduism itself with the great philosopher Shankara (788-820 AD).

[83] See footnote 67.

[84] Thoreau, *A Week*, 137.

access to it, the book contains perennial truths that, read according to the needs of the times, have universal applicability. As Sri Aurobindo explains:

> In the *Gita* there is very little that is merely local or temporal and its spirit is so large, profound and universal that even this little can easily be universalised without the sense of the teaching suffering any diminution or violation; rather by giving an ampler scope to it than belonged to the country and epoch, the teaching gains in depth, truth and power [...] if we steep ourselves in the spirit of this great Scripture and, above all, if we have tried to live in that spirit, we may be sure of finding in it as much real truth as we are capable of receiving as well as the spiritual influence and actual help that, personally, we were intended to derive from it [...]
>
> This is one of those great syntheses in which Indian spirituality has been as rich as in its creation of the more intensive, exclusive movements of knowledge and religious realisation. It does not cleave asunder, but reconciles and unifies".[85]

As stated before, Thoreau's reading of the *Gita* is particularly acute in regards to the dilemma of duty as posed in the dichotomy of action/inaction, central in the unfolding of Arjuna's drama. Arjuna, the main character of the story and dear friend and apprentice of the spiritual master Lord Krishna, almost fails to fulfil his destiny when Krishna informs him of his *dharma* or duty, this being the slaughter of many members of his extended family in a war for the kingdom in the battle of Kurukshetra. Arjuna's final willingness to fulfil his *dharma* comes only as the result of a colossal explanation in which Krishna reveals to him the mystery of the universe and the three basic paths of *Yoga* through which the aspirant can attain to wisdom, action, and liberation. Crucial in this attainment is the role of both proper action or inaction (in the form of contemplation and meditation). In Thoreau's case, these considerations were not only important in the discussions posed in *A Week*, but became a central issue throughout Thoreau's life, as testified in texts such as *Walden* and "Civil Disobedience". In this respect, Thoreau, quoting from the *Gita* and adding his own reflections, says in *A Week*:

> What is a "man's own particular calling"? What are the duties which are appointed by one's birth? [...]. But they who are unconcerned about the consequences of their actions are not therefore unconcerned about their actions.
>
> What, after all, does the practicalness of life amount to? The things immediate to be done are very trivial. I could postpone them all to hear this locust sing. The most glorious fact in my experience is not anything that I have done or may hope to do, but a transient thought, or vision, or dream, which I have had. I would give all the wealth of the world, and all the deeds of all the heroes, for one true vision. But

[85] Sri Aurobindo, *The Bhagavad Gita*, xii-xiii & xvi.

> how can I communicate with the gods who am a pencil-maker on the earth, and not be insane?[86]

These passages show with striking clarity the conflictive nature that such reflections posed to Thoreau. Thoreau's work, as much as his life, was a conscious search for the true, beautiful and divine, and thus the question of proper action and practicality became central in his demeanour, as seen in the living experiment at Walden Pond. For Thoreau, Eastern philosophy and the contemplative practices associated with it became of paramount importance in this respect, as inner instruments with which to illumine and guide the outer actions. The following passages reflect some of Thoreau's views in regards to the relationship between contemplation and action:

> The Oriental philosophy approaches easily loftier themes than the modern aspires to; and no wonder if it sometimes prattles about them. *It* only assigns their due rank respectively to Action and Contemplation, or rather does full justice to the latter. Western philosophers have not conceived of the significance of Contemplation in their sense.
>
> Behold the difference between the Oriental and the Occidental. The former has nothing to do in this world; the latter is full of activity. The one looks in the sun till his yes are put out; the other follows him prone in his westward course. There is such a thing as caste even in the West; but it is comparatively faint; it is conservatism here. It says, Forsake not your calling, outrage no institution, use no violence, rend no bonds; the State is thy parent. Its virtue or manhood is wholly filial. There is a struggle between the Oriental and Occidental in every nation; some who would be for ever contemplating the sun, and some who are hastening toward the sunset. The former class says to the latter, When you have reached the sunset, you will be no nearer to the sun. To which the latter replies, But we so prolong the day. The former "walketh but in that night when all things go to rest the night of *time*. The contemplative Moonee sleepeth but in the day of *time*, when all things wake.[87]

However important the contemplative practices became to Thoreau, he was well aware of the equal importance of action and of the role given to it in the *Gita*. This attitude evinces another similarity between Thoreau's spiritual views and Vedanta, as neither of them advocate or imply other-worldliness, shunning or renouncing the existence on the physical plane. Quoting from the *Gita*, Thoreau shows his awareness of the spiritual enlightenment inherent to the achievement of poise and equanimity, where action and inaction are both given their due place in life:

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[86] Thoreau, *A Week*, 140 & 139.
[87] Thoreau, *A Week*, 139, & 140-141.

> 'Perform the settled functions', says Kreeshna in the Bhagvat-Geeta; 'action is preferable to inaction. The journey of thy mortal frame may not succeed from inaction'. – 'A man's own calling, with all its faults, ought not to be forsaken. Every undertaking is involved in its faults as the fire in its smoke'.
>
> 'He who may behold, as it were, inaction in action, and action in inaction, is wise amongst mankind. He is a perfect performer of all duty [...]. He is both a Yogee and a Sannyasee who performeth that which he hath to do independent of the fruit thereof; not he who liveth without the sacrificial fire and without action '.[88]

D. Yoga: The Art of Pencil-Making and the Perception of the Divine

> Free in this world as the birds in the air, disengaged from every kind of chains, those who practice the yoga gather in Brhma the certain fruit of their works [...]. Depend upon that, rude and careless as I am, I would fain practice the *yoga* faithfully [...].
>
> The yogi, absorbed in contemplation, contributes in his degree to creation: he breathes a divine perfume, he hears wonderful things. Divine forms traverse him without tearing him, and, united to the nature which is proper to him, he goes, he acts as animating original matter [...].
>
> To some extent, and at rarer intervals, I am a yogi.[89]

How to attain to spiritual perception and assimilate its fruits in the day-to-day life of physical existence? This issue, central in the structure of Vedanta and instrumental in the development of *yoga*, equally plays an essential role in Thoreau's understanding and assimilation of spirituality. As stated previously, he was well aware of the aid that certain practices, demeanours and attitudes could offer in this respect. For Thoreau was a conscious and sincere seeker of the light, constantly striving for his own spiritual growth and self-culture. This aspiration for perfection is known in Vedanta as self-realisation, which ultimately leads to God-realisation. To this respect, Sri Chinmoy comments the following: "For self-realisation we need only four things. First we need the help of the scriptures, then a spiritual guide, then yogic disiplines and finally the Grace of God".[90]

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[88] Quoted from the *Bhagavad Gita* by Thoreau, *A Week*, 136 & 139. See also Sri Chinmoy's comment: "The truth sublime is: "Action is your birthright, not the outcome, not the fruits thereof. Let not the fruits of action be your object, and be not attached to inaction. Be active and dynamic; seek not any reward (…) Equanimity", says Krishna, "is yoga. Yoga is skilful wisdom in action". In: Sri Chinmoy, *Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita*, 153.

[89] Thoreau, letter to his friend Harrison Blake, 1849. Quoted in Neila Seshachari, 87-88.

[90] Sri Chinmoy, *The Upanishads*, 47.

It can be argued that Thoreau was not only conscious of these four elements needed on the path towards self-realisation, but that he acknowledged their importance and to a certain extent strove to make them a part of his practical life.

The Scriptures

Regarding the role of the **Scriptures**, Thoreau's appreciation of them is frequently voiced in *A Week*, where he particularly extols the depth and the height of the Hindu texts. However, Thoreau's expansiveness and universality of thought enabled him to value the scriptures of other cultures, as he was well aware that the spiritual truth these texts are intended to embody are not limited to space, time or culture. In Thoreau's own words:

> It would be worth the while to select our reading, for books are the society we keep [...].
> The reading which I love best is the scriptures of the several nations, though it happens that I am better acquainted with those of the Hindoos [...].
> It would be worthy of the age to print together the collected scriptures or Sacred Writings of the several nations [...] as the Scripture of mankind"[91]

The Spiritual Master

The guiding role played by the **Spiritual Master** was an aspect that Thoreau was likewise aware of. Thoreau's fate in this respect was, however, rather particular, as the sincerity and intensity that characterised his search did not find the social response that he could have found in a more spiritually fertile society. It can be argued that Thoreau, particularly during his early twenties, found in Emerson the figure of a master or intellectual and spiritual guide, and found a nourishing and supporting community with the Transcendentalist group. However, his over-critical and individualistic nature compelled him to continue his personal search and experiment with the conceptual truths he had found upon his own life, something for which he had to be a pioneer, his quest being unprecedented in his own social environment. This is arguably what drove him to live often in solitude and to carry out the living experiment at Walden Pond. Nevertheless, his searching mind and aspiring soul lead

[91] Thoreau, *A Week*, 95, 70 & 144. Compare also to the chapter "Reading" in *Walden*.

him to the discovery of teachings and teachers that, although not precisely through physical presence, would ever so much guide him and help him in moulding his highly spiritual conception of life. This is reflected in his frequent remarks about wisdom and his search for wise people and wise friends – both human and literary, as he used to refer to books – particularly those who could act as true and sincere guides and pathfinders along the course of life. In a highly metaphorical way, Thoreau expresses his views in this respect as follows:

> The anecdotes of modern astronomy affect me in the same way as do those faint revelations of the Real which are vouchsafed to men from time to time, or rather from eternity to eternity [...]. I am not without hope that we may, even here and now, obtain some accurate information concerning that OTHER WORLD which the instinct of mankind has so long predicted. Indeed, all that we call science, as well as all that we call poetry, is a particle of such information, accurate as far as it goes, though it be but to the confines of the truth [...]. Why may not our speculations penetrate as far into the immaterial starry system, of which the former is but the outward and visible type? Surely, we are provided with senses as well fitted to penetrate the spaces of the real, the substantial, the eternal, as these outward are to penetrate the material universe. Veias, Menu, Zoroaster, Socrates, Christ, Shakespeare, Swedenborg, – these are some of our astronomers.[92]

Yogic Disciplines

Yoga. The fact that Thoreau refers to himself as "yogi"[93] is of great relevance in the present analysis of Thoreau's spiritual views. Through his readings and his own experiments with the wisdom of Vedanta, and due to his own practical inclinations, Thoreau was able to recognise the value of the practical assimilation and application of spiritual wisdom. In this context, and parting from the wider understanding of the art of ***yoga***, Thoreau's practical attitude can be understood as a yogic stance. For, independently from the various paths and methods developed along the centuries,[94] in its most profound and widest scope, *yoga* is not restricted to an exclusive line of discipline, practice, or spiritual thought, but it encompasses all human endeavours

[92] Thoreau, *A Week*, 385-386.

[93] See quote no. 87.

[94] The most traditional paths of yoga as expounded in the *Gita* are those of *karma yoga* (yoga of actions or woks), *bhakti yoga* (yoga of devotion) and *jnana yoga* (yoga of knowledge), several paths have developed throughout the centuries, such being the case as with Patanjali's eightfold system of Raja Yoga which lays great emphasis on physical exercises known as *asanas*, and *kundalini yoga* which focuses on the occult powers related to the *chakras* or energy centres of the human body. See Sri Chinmoy, *Yoga and the Spiritual Life.*

that aspire to bring man closer to his highest self and ultimately to God. This is the spirit of Vedanta, and is clearly presented in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

> There are eighteen chapters in the Gita. Each chapter reveals a specific teaching of a particular form of Yoga. Yoga is the secret language of man and God. *Yoga* means 'union', the union of the finite with the Infinite, the union of the form with the Formless [...]. 'Equanimity', says Krishna, 'is yoga'. Yoga is skilful wisdom in action'.[95]

This "skilful wisdom in action" is also referred to in Vedantic thought as "self-mastery", which implies the progressive transformation of human nature into a divine nature, the transformation of the lower self into the Higher Self. Thoreau was highly aware of the importance of this transformation, and not only made it explicit in *A Week* and his other works, but strove to make it an integral part of his practical living. [96]

Previously it was expounded how important Thoreau considered the fact that our perception of the world be based on the purity of the senses, a "*purely* sensuous" perception.[97] Thoreau is likewise aware of the attitudes, demeanours and practices that can nourish such purity. These can be understood as spiritual qualities when perceived under such light, and bear a close resemblance with the precepts expounded by Vedantic philosophy in regards to the spiritual life.

This is the case with **attitudes** such as honesty, integrity, sincerity, and purity (which includes chastity), and **demeanours** such as simple living, industriousness, and general good-will. The purity of perception that Thoreau so strongly admonished thus finds a personal reflection in the individual of pure character – honest, sincere, simple, diligent, good-hearted – whose integral demeanour is poised and full of wisdom. In his highly metaphoric style, establishing a parallel between the physical firmament and the firmament of the human soul, Thoreau presents these views in the following form:

> We could distinguish the clouds which cast each one, though never so high in the heavens. When a shadow flits across the landscape of the soul, where is the substance? Probably, if we were wise enough, we should see to what virtue we are indebted for any happier moment we enjoy. No doubt we have earned it at some time; for the gifts of Heaven are never quite gratuitous. The constant abrasion and decay of our lives | makes the soil of our future growth. The wood which we now

[95] Sri Chinmoy, *Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita*, 137 & 153.

[96] This can be clearly appreciated in *A Week*, as well as in other of Thoreau's major works, of which the following have been mentioned earlier in this essay: *Walden*, "Civil Disobedience", "Chastity and Sensuality", and "A Plea for John Brown".

[97] See quote 53.

> mature, when it becomes virgin mould, determines the character of our second growth, whether that be oaks or pines. Every man casts a shadow; not his body only, but his imperfectly mingled spirit. This is his grief. [98]

In a similar vein, Vedanta exhorts the fundamental importance of purity of character in the spiritual life. As Sri Chinmoy explains: "There are many warriors of the inner world, but the main warriors are simplicity, sincerity, purity, aspiration, dedication and surrender. These divine warriors help the seekers discover God. Together they fight against bondage-night and ignorance-day. Their supreme commander is faith".[99] These concepts pertain to simplicity in the body, sincerity in the mind, purity in the heart, and aspiration, dedication and surrender in the spiritual quest.

The riches with which these qualities endow man amount to an invaluable wealth in Thoreau's eyes. His stance is explicitly earnest in regards to the importance of honesty and truthfulness in life, based on the parameters previously discussed in the essay. In Thoreau's view, such integrity of character transcends social conventions, as its benefits are to be found in the inner regions of the being, rather than in the apparent and ephemeral phenomena which society generally considers of relevance:

> The boatmen appeared to lead an easy and contented life, and we thought that we should prefer their employment ourselves to many professions which are much more sought after. They suggested how few circumstances are necessary to the well-being and serenity of man, how indifferent all employments are, and that any may seem noble and poetic to the eyes of men, if pursued with sufficient buoyancy and freedom.
>
> How fortunate were we who did not own an acre of these shores, who had not renounced our title to the whole. One who knew how to appropriate the true value of this world would be the poorest man in it. The poor rich man! All he has is what he has bought. What I see is mine. I am a large owner in the Merrimac intervals [...] He is the rich man, and enjoys the fruits of riches, who summer and winter for ever can find delight in his own thoughts.[100]

The other aspect that can support the spiritual development of man is constituted of conscious and **practical endeavours** through which the spiritual qualities can be assimilated and established in the physical life. Such endeavours include practices of an ascetic nature that include solitude, silence and austere living

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[98] Thoreau, *A Week*, 351.

[99] Sri Chinmoy, *The Oneness of the Eastern Heart and the Western Mind, Part 1* (Agni Press, New York, 2003) 102.

[100] Thoreau, *A Week*, 207 & 350.

(which provide the individual with more solid levels of self-knowledge and self-mastery), and other activities such the arts (particularly poetry and music, seen as an aesthetical culturing that impulses the search for beauty and truth and the cultivation of the inner being).

The role of the arts as an invaluable element of self-culture and spiritual growth has been widely recognised in various cultures along the course of history. The Vedantic view conceived art, and particularly poetry, as an instrument of spiritual growth, a means and not an aim in itself, as Sri Aurobindo states:

> [The Vedic hymns are] the living breath of a supreme and conscious Art forming its creations in the puissant but well-governed movement of a self-observing inspiration [...]. For the art of expression was to the Rishis [101] only a means, not an aim; their principal preoccupation was strenuously practical, almost utilitarian, in the highest sense of utility. The hymn was to the Rishi who composed it a means of spiritual progress for himself and for others. It rose out of his soul, it became a power of his mind, it was the vehicle of his self-expression in some important or even critical moment of his life's inner history".[102]

Thoreau's view was likewise highly spiritual and expansive, where he conceived of the entirety of Creation as a consummated work of Art and Nature as God's art. The parallel between the heavenly and the earthly is bridged through God's artistry in the form of Nature, and in the whole scheme man has the heightened role of perpetuating the beautiful, true and divine through his own artistic creations, as in the case of poetry:

> As we have said, Nature is a greater and more perfect art, the art of God; though, referred to herself, she is genius; and there is a similarity between her operations and man's art even in the details and trifles.
>
> Alas, the poet too is, in one sense, a sort of dormouse gone into winter quarters of deep and serene thoughts, insensible to surrounding circumstances; his words are the relation of his oldest and finest memory, a wisdom drawn from the remotest experience. Other men lead a starved existence [...].
>
> Poetry is so universally true and independent of experience.
> Poetry is the mysticism of mankind.[103]

[101] The term *Rishi* refers to the Vedic sages, who were at once seers of the highest truth and supreme poets who expressed their visions in the poetic hymns that gave birth to the Vedas.

[102] Sri Aurobindo, *The Secret of the Veda* (Sri Aurobindo Ashram, India, 1974) 9-10.

[103] Thoreau, *A Week*, 320, 98, 95, 328.

Within this context, the role of music seems to be even more exalted, for in the transparency of its language it can carry a more direct and pure expression of the divine laws that govern existence. In Thoreau's words:

> Music is the sound of the universal laws promulgated. It is the only assured tone. There are in it such strains as far surpass any man's faith in the loftiness of his destiny. Things are to be learned which it will be worth the while to learn.[104]

The special qualities of music within Vedanta are likewise expounded by Sri Chinmoy, where music is not only conceived as a pure embodiment of divine and universal laws, but in itself a language that can unite man with God:

> Music is the inner or universal language of God. If music is played, immediately the heart of the music enters into my heart, or my heart enters into the music. At that time, we do not need outer communication; the inner communion of the heart is enough.
>
> Silence is the source of everything. It is the source of music and it is music itself. Silence is the deepest, most satisfying music of the Supreme.[105]

For Thoreau, music is a means of communication that has access to and is able to transmit messages and truths more subtle and direct than those accessible to other forms of language. This is further expounded in the chapter "Sounds" from *Walden*, where Thoreau establishes a close connection between the contemplative act of listening to music, and the act of meditation:

> I sat in the sunny doorway from sunrise until noon, rapt in revery, in undisturbed solitude and stillness [...]. I realised what the Orientals mean by contemplation [...]. I heard [bell sounds] at the greatest possible distance, producing a vibration of the universal lyre".[106]

Thoreau is aware of the fact that music and silence are directly related and complement each other. It is thus understandable that he could perceive silent contemplation as a means to listening to a more "universal music" that could attune him to the "universal laws" addressed to previously. Even more, Thoreau is likewise aware of the practical value that silence, and, as an extension, solitude, have in daily life and especially in human relationships. In Thoreau's words:

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[104] Thoreau, *A Week*, 174 See also quotes no. 41, 42 & 55.
[105] Sri Chinmoy, *The Source of Music* (Aum Publications, New York, 1990), 3.
[106] Thoreau, *Walden*. Quoted by Stein, "*Walden* and the *Bhagavad Gita*", 50-51.

> There are times when we have had enough even of our Friends, when we begin inevitably to profane one another, and must withdraw religiously into solitude and silence, the better to prepare ourselves for a loftier intimacy. Silence is the ambrosial night in the intercourse of Friends, in which their sincerity is recruited and takes deeper root.[107]

Silence and silent meditation likewise constitute one of the most fundamental and important aspects of Vedanta. As Sri Chinmoy explains, "Silence is the eloquent expression of the inexpressible", and through it the most sublime and eternal truths of our existence can be accessed:

> Meditation speaks. It speaks in silence. It reveals. It reveals to the aspirant that matter and spirit are one, quantity and quality are one, the immanent and the transcendent are one [...]. Through meditation the soul becomes fully aware of its evolution in its eternal journey.[108]

Thus, the implications of Thoreau finishing *A Week in the Concord and Merrimac Rivers* with an extended reflection on music and silence unfold at various levels of meaning. Thoreau, through his acute capacity for establishing associations and correspondences with his use of metaphors and images, invites the readers to find in their own silence the depth and the scope of the inner messages and truth conveyed through the garment of the words fusing in the river of silence.

[107] Thoreau, *A Week*, 272. See also the chapter "Solitude" in *Walden*.
[108] Sri Chinmoy, *Yoga and the Spiritual Life*, 25.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This paper has aimed at examining the spiritual depth and implications of Thoreau's world-view as seen in his book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*; references to other of his main works have also been included to show the far-reaching nature of Thoreau's spiritual views and way of living. The research has specifically aspired to identify the elements from Thoreau's thought which are akin to the spiritual precepts expounded in Vedantic spiritual philosophy. For that purpose, an identification and analysis of the sources and quotes used by Thoreau for the writing of *A Week* has been provided.

The essay's main purpose has been to analyse Thoreau's spiritual conceptions as coherent unities on their own, and then to establish points of correspondence between Thoreau's views and Vedantic thought. It has been seen how influential Hindu scriptures were in Thoreau's life and work – particularly the *Bhagavad Gita* and other Vedic texts – but it has however not been the intention with this research to determine to what extent Thoreau's views directly derived from Vedanta. Such an enterprise would imply a great amount of detailed chronological and biographical exegesis as well as much hermeneutic speculation. For this type of research at a B.A. level, such a project could hardly be feasible, particularly in the case of Thoreau, whose thought and personality were often paradoxical, under constant self-vigilance, and thus in constant growth and evolution, making chronological analyses of his intellectual and spiritual development hard to establish.

This conceptual analysis has shown the high degree of similarity shared by Thoreau's views and Vedantic thought. It has shown that, as Thoreau himself worded it, "to some extent, and at certain intervals", his aspirations were essentially those of a yogi. Thus the study has demonstrated how the philosophical and spiritual foundations of Vedantic thought constitute perennial principles which embody the eternal human aspiration towards his Higher Self and the Divine. Unbound by time and space, this aspiration guides man along the road of eternity, as it did in the times of the Vedic seers of old, as it did in the times of Thoreau, and as it still does at the beginning of a new millennium.

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