

## **THOREAU'S APPROACH TO NATURE: BETWEEN TRANSCENDENTALISM AND SCIENCE**

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### **Abstract**

Science and spirituality are often seen as separate or even opposing ways of viewing and understanding the reality. However, as illustrated by the works of Henry David Thoreau, a nineteenth-century American writer, thinker, and naturalist, these two seemingly distinct approaches to the natural world are not incompatible but in fact they can be complementary and mutually enhancing. The article traces the development of Thoreau's attitude to nature from Emersonian transcendentalism to his own unique view of nature presented in his later writings, a combination of scientific, literary, and spiritual elements, which led him to a deeper and more innovative investigation of the natural world than that offered by nineteenth-century science. His example may still be an inspiration for contemporary scientists who want to integrate their research with their spirituality and beliefs. As much has already been written on nature in Thoreau's writings, instead of a detailed analysis of specific texts, the article offers a synthetic overview of Thoreau's most important ideas, which can be found in many of his works and which have been identified by scholars and literary critics.

**Keywords:** Thoreau, nature, transcendentalism, science

### **1. Thoreau and transcendentalism**

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was an influential American writer, thinker, and naturalist, one of the forerunners of ecology and of the genre of nature writing. His most famous book is *Walden*, in which he described his two-year solitary stay in a small cabin at Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts. He also wrote about his travels in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, *The Maine Woods*, and *Cape Cod*. His writings on the natural world include hundreds of pages of his journal, his natural history essays (gathered in a collection entitled *Wild Apples and Other Natural History Essays*), and his last manuscripts, which were edited and published posthumously as two books, *Faith in a Seed* and *Wild Fruits* (they appeared only in 1993 and 2000, respectively).

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the father of American transcendentalism, through his writings and his friendship with the younger writer, exerted significant influence on Thoreau, on his attitude to nature and the way he perceived and construed it. According to Emerson, “physical nature could be decoded as a spiritually coherent system of signs. This theory of correspondence ... validated the authority of the inspired creative imagination as the means by which nature’s meanings were to be read” (Buell, 1995, p.117). As McIntosh (1974) observes, Emerson’s principle of correspondence was that aspect of transcendentalism which especially appealed to Thoreau. In Emerson’s view, nature is the symbol of spirit and natural phenomena symbolized spiritual ones; thus, the examination of natural facts and laws leads people to knowledge about themselves. While correspondence establishes a close connection between nature and its observer and offers promising possibilities for a poet or thinker interested in exploring the natural world, at the same time it reduces its role and value, as nature is no longer an independent realm but merely a symbol with no significance of its own, apart from the discovered spiritual meaning (McIntosh, 1974, p.29-30, 32). The goal of Emerson’s *Nature*, which Thoreau read many times, “is not simply to urge a return to nature, but to show how to bring nature under the sway of man’s spirit, so that the universe may at last be entirely spiritual”; in this type of idealism a person “uses nature to rise above it to the spiritual life” (McIntosh, 1974, p.31). Consequently, the study of the material world is a less important task than the personal discovery of the spiritual realm. In later years, however, Thoreau became more and more fascinated with the observation and investigation of the natural world itself, gradually moving from the position of a transcendentalist thinker inspired by the beauty of nature to that of a naturalist interested in how its various parts and processes operated. Even when he observed some kind of analogy between a natural phenomenon and a moral or spiritual truth, the natural fact was not treated as insignificant in itself, as only an image or a figure of speech (McIntosh, 1974, p.34). Nevertheless, the principle of correspondence proved to be a source of inspiration for Thoreau even in his later life.

Although in Emerson’s view the natural world is subordinate to the spiritual realm, nature is “an important teacher, set before us for our illumination, enjoyment, and spiritual instruction” (McIntosh, 1974, p.28). Consequently, people should try to decipher the signs of nature’s language; they are encouraged to observe it and learn “to read God’s uncorrupted revelation imprinted secretly on it” (McIntosh, 1974, p.31). This particular aspect of Emerson’s philosophy continued to exert influence on Thoreau. Even when he no longer looked at nature as a symbol or a source of revelation of divine messages but studied it as a naturalist, he still perceived it in terms of communication and language. According to Robinson (2004), the environment was for Thoreau “a vast and complex web of signals that could be best understood as analogous to a language” and in his view “each element of the natural world, each interaction and process of nature, was some form of expression, and therefore potentially some form of communication”; he perceived nature as “a creative mind at work,” “an expressive, sign-making intelligence” (Robinson, 2004, p.26-27). This attitude was inspired by

Emerson's approach. However, the process of reading the landscape did not necessarily reveal any spiritual truth or divine message but the knowledge of the natural world itself, its laws and operations. For Thoreau, nature is not merely a symbol or a projection of human expectations and imagination, but an independent entity that wants to establish contact with the human observer, to communicate with him, to express herself and to be understood and appreciated. Moreover, nature needs poets and naturalists, who would discover and translate her meaning into a human language; in this sense, a writer is "her highest creation and her expressive representative" (McIntosh, 1974, p.36). As a result, Thoreau perceived his observation and writing as a natural process, as "an inherent and productive part of the flow of the energies of nature" (Robinson, 2004, p.28). As he wrote in his journal: "A writer ... is the scribe of all nature; he is the corn and the grass and the atmosphere writing" (Thoreau, 2007, p.92). Such a perspective provided deeper motivation and justification for his daily efforts to study and describe his environment.

Apart from the differences between Emerson's and Thoreau's philosophical views on nature, the two men had distinct attitudes to the actual experience of nature in everyday life. For Emerson, a picturesque landscape provided merely a favorable setting for meditation (McGregor, 1997, p.41). The main role of the natural world was to serve and aid personal development, to offer a place where one could "find symbols, receive illuminations" (McIntosh, 1974, p.32). Nature played a much greater role in Thoreau's life than in Emerson's. Unlike Emerson, Thoreau spent many hours a day outdoors. During his walks and in his writings he paid much more attention to the material world he observed around him, to its colors, shapes, sounds, smells, different natural processes and the various species that inhabited his environment.

Emerson appreciated nature's beauty but his interest in it was rather superficial, as "he did not possess the scientific turn of mind ... he was virtually a pure abstract thinker" (McGregor, 1997, p.41). This can be observed in his writings and becomes especially conspicuous when we compare them with Thoreau's texts. Whereas nature is the main focus of Thoreau's journals in later years, those of Emerson "contain almost nothing of the natural world" (McGregor, 1997, p.42). Emerson's essays too are usually quite general and abstract, with few descriptions of nature, not to mention systematic observations of it. Even when Emerson did observe and describe a natural phenomenon, he did not devote much attention to it and immediately moved on to its symbolic interpretation: "Emerson was never able to concentrate his attention on the minutia of nature for very long. Two sentences of botanical observation seemed to him enough to draw a moral applicable to human experience" (McGregor, 1997, p.47). On the whole, Emerson's writings tend to focus on spiritual issues or human concerns, while nature itself is rarely the main subject.

Thoreau, in contrast, was a talented naturalist, constantly taking field notes and sometimes collecting specimens. That "skill and dedication in empirical study ... set him apart from Emerson temperamentally," making him a more "embodied thinker, closer in a practical way to the natural world than Emerson, and somewhat

less ethereal in his imagination and forms of expression” (Robinson, 2004, p.110). Because of his much more extensive knowledge of nature, Thoreau’s texts, unlike Emerson’s, are full of detailed, engaging descriptions of nature as well as various metaphors involving elements of the natural world. Emerson himself was aware of that difference and of his younger friend’s superiority in that respect: “In reading him, I find the same thought, the same spirit that is in me, but he takes a step beyond, & illustrates by excellent images that which I should have conveyed in a sleepy generality” (Emerson, quoted in Robinson, 2004, p.110).

Finally, the two writers also differed in their attitudes to the scientific study of nature. For Emerson, nature and all its elements “existed ... to serve as symbols for the higher, unified world of which the human soul was a part. Each part and portion of the natural world represented this greater spiritual unity with equal perfection” (McGregor, 1997, p.41). If that was the primary role of natural facts, then one of them was as good as any other for that purpose and consequently a person need not know all of them; a single one was enough. Such a view undermined the value of scientific study of nature: “If all of the natural world was merely a symbol ... then all the information collected by the scientific naturalists had little value”; it was “second-rate knowledge” about something that was “mere symbol and perhaps nonexistent” (McGregor, 1997, p.41, 49).

Over the years Thoreau became more and more attracted to natural history, realizing the significance and beauty of the material world in all its details. However, he never renounced transcendentalism and kept regarding himself as a transcendentalist: “I am a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot” (Thoreau, 2007, p.181). Nor did he adopt the scientific approach without reservations. As Walls points out, he “could not accept the idealist move, to reach the universal by annihilating the restraints of the local and particular; nor did he accept the limited and methodically realized aims of the scientist’s method” (Walls, 1995, p.11). While he was aware of the drawbacks of both approaches, he did not reject them but instead attempted to achieve an equilibrium between the two tendencies in his writings: “Thoreau saw his task to be the joining of poetry, philosophy, and science into a harmonized whole ... Thoreau participated in and helped to advance an alternative tradition of romantic science and literature that looked toward ecological approaches to nature” and that attempted “to heal the growing split between poetry and science” (Walls, 1995, p.4-5). As she points out, “Thoreau was not being drawn away from poetry, from romantic or transcendental nature, toward ... scientism that was drowning his epiphanies with facts. He wished his epiphanies to happen *through* facts, through sharp and actual experience with real things” (Walls, 1995, p.124). In a similar vein, Robinson argues that Thoreau’s more empirical approach to nature in later years constituted “a necessary revision and adaptation of Emersonian idealism” and that his later more factual journals and manuscripts are “not the ‘late’ phase of a literary career, but rather the beginnings of a remarkable work of synthesis between philosophy, literature, and science” (Robinson, 2004, p.177).

## 2. Thoreau and science

Initially, Thoreau's more factual writings on the Concord environment, such as large portions of his later journals, his natural history essays and his unfinished manuscripts on the dispersion of seeds and on wild fruits, were not widely read and studied by literary critics, who perceived them as lacking literary qualities and consequently of no interest to them. This attitude changed in the last decades of the twentieth century. It was then that his last manuscripts were at last edited and published. These texts began to be analyzed by scholars, which resulted in "new constructions of Thoreau as a pioneering ecologist" and "a new sense of significance to Thoreau's later work" (Robinson, 2004, p.149). Even though his unfinished and unpublished last manuscripts could not affect the development of science in the nineteenth century, they are nowadays considered as a valuable contribution to the science of ecology (Buell, 1995, p.363). For example, the ecologist and forester David R. Foster (1999) used Thoreau's journal as a source of information about the past condition of the New England environment, which helped him to interpret and understand its current state. If Thoreau had had the time to finish and publish his research on the dispersion of seeds, forest succession and wild fruits before his death, they "would be currently recognized as pioneering works in the field of ecology" (McGregor, 1997, p.4). Thoreau's approach to the study of nature is regarded as proto-ecological because, unlike many other naturalists of his time, he did not focus merely on the classification and description of plant and animal species he encountered. He was interested in the details of the natural world and devoted to the collection of facts, data, observations, but at the same time he realized their interrelatedness and was always on the lookout for larger patterns that could lead to the discovery of laws of nature (Robinson, 2004, p. 101, 178).

Thoreau was critical of the dominant tendencies in the natural sciences, which began to be formed during his lifetime (and which persevere until now), opposing such characteristics of science as doing and presenting research in a seemingly objective, impersonal way or strict divisions between doing research and the researcher's individuality and beliefs, between sciences and humanities, between science and literature. Instead, he proposed a new kind of science, which did not suppress the individuality of the observer and did not impose a strict boundary between the subject and the object of study, between "active" humans and "passive" nature, as well as between science and literature. Thoreau never wished to become a professional scientist and never wrote typical scientific articles or books. His own writings on nature always assume the form of first person narration describing his actions and his personal responses to what he observes. They combine scientific knowledge and observation with mystical vision and poetic means of expression.

Thoreau was aware of the benefits of science: it sharpened his perception of the minute details of his natural environment, taught him to distinguish different plants and animals and helped him to fully appreciate the variety of species inhabiting his surroundings. The precise language of scientific terminology enabled

him to describe the specimens he investigated in a more accurate way. While he had a good knowledge of science and its methodology and made ample use of it, at the same time he was constantly aware of the incompleteness of a purely scientific, reductionist approach to the world, “its potential power to obscure the very thing that it presumably illuminated” (Robinson, 2004, p.180). Thoreau also saw dangers in the use of scientific theories and methodologies, which might actually impede the study of nature as well as strengthen the separation between the subject and the object. Science introduced “an artificial framework of nomenclature and categories between the observer of nature and nature itself,” whereas he advocated “a direct perceptual experience of natural events, unmediated by theory or system” (Robinson, 2004, p.183). He argued in his journal:

It is only when we forget all our learning that we begin to know. ... If you would make acquaintance with the ferns you must forget your botany. You must get rid of what is commonly called *knowledge* of them. Not a single scientific term or distinction is the least to the purpose, ... you must approach the object totally unprejudiced (Thoreau, 2007, p.404-405).

He wanted to learn about his environment “not through the abstraction of dry and barren systems, but through involvement with it” (Walls, 1995, p.126). The methodology of science was only one of the instruments and techniques Thoreau used to explore the natural world, one of the means leading to a closer relation with nature: “That science was a useful tool, he would not deny. But it was only a tool, a means of attaining knowledge, and not an end in itself” (McGregor, 1997, p.203, see also Robinson, 2004, p.178). Science had to be complemented by spiritual and poetic perception, which provided a counterbalance to its one-sided vision. Thoreau observed the details of his environment as a naturalist but at the same time attempted to establish “a Biblical, poetic touch with things, a sort of contact or touch unknown to present day academic dispassion and specialization” (Mooney, 2013, p.333).

The kind of science that Thoreau increasingly questioned and finally rejected was best exemplified by Louis Agassiz, who regarded himself and was considered by his contemporaries as “a pure, disinterested, objective scientist, confining himself exclusively to observation,” the person “responsible for professionalizing science in America” (Richardson, 1986, p.366). He taught his students “a seeing of such crystalline purity, so emptied of self, that it registers naught but the thing itself, in its purity; the scientific seer will be a pure vessel for the transmission of truth from nature to humanity” (Walls, 1997, p.3). However, such an attitude raises an impenetrable barrier between humans and nature (Walls, 1997, p.9). Moreover, Thoreau was aware of the narrowness of knowledge offered by contemporary science:

A new species of fish signifies hardly more than a new name. See what is contributed in the scientific reports. One counts the fin-rays, another measures the intestines, a third daguerreotypes a scale ... A dead specimen of an animal, if it is only well preserved in alcohol, is just as good for science as a living one preserved in its native element (Thoreau, 2007, p.375).

In contrast to Agassiz, who considered “familiarity with living animals ‘almost an obstacle’ to knowledge” and employed a supposedly objective scientific method of examining and describing dead specimens, Thoreau strove to get to know living animals and even befriend them in an attempt to overcome the subject/object dichotomy (Walls, 1997, p.11-12). Although for some time he used to collect, kill and send specimens of animals to Agassiz, Thoreau soon abandoned that practice and devoted his life to the study of living animals (and plants) and their behavior in their natural surroundings, rather than solely their appearance and anatomy. He argued:

If you have undertaken to write the biography of an animal, you will have to present to us the living creature ... Science in many departments of natural history does not pretend to go beyond the shell; *i. e.*, it does not get to animated nature at all. A history of animated nature must itself be animated (Thoreau, 2007, p.424-425).

The radical difference between the two naturalists, Agassiz and Thoreau, is visible in their research methods and objects of study and in their writings.

Thoreau found an alternative to modern science in the works of old naturalists. For instance, John Gerard’s (1545-1612) descriptions of plants are “greatly superior to the modern more scientific ones. ... He brings them vividly before you, as one who has seen and delighted in them. It is almost as good as to see the plants themselves” (Thoreau, 2007, p.416). Aristotle’s writings on nature too provided him with an inspiring example, “a counterweight to the modern kind of science, the measuring and weighing he associated ... with Agassiz” (Richardson, 1986, p.374). However, Thoreau could see merits of both approaches, which he perceived as complementary rather than mutually exclusive, and which he attempted to combine in his writings on nature: “The old naturalists excelled in description; the new, in measuring. Thoreau would make a serious effort to do both”; for instance, in his last manuscript, *Wild Fruits*, he fused scientific facts with “a prose style marked by admiration and delight” (Richardson, 1986, p.381), with quotations from ancient authors and more recent historical sources and ethnographic accounts.

As McGregor argues, “the attraction of Henry Thoreau is due in large measure to the voice, at once analytical and poetic, which he breathed into the description of nature” (McGregor, 1997, p.3). Thoreau’s original and intentional way of blending his scientific observations and research into nature with a poetic vision and means of expression offers an integral view of the natural world

enhanced by science, rather than impoverished by its reductionism. As Clark points out, “figurative or poetic language can be defended as enacting modes of consciousness otherwise rendered illegitimate in a society seen as dominated by instrumental rationality” (Clark, 2011, p.20). In contrast and in opposition to many of his contemporaries, who perceived and presented the natural world as a collection of elements to be named, classified and described in a dispassionate, objective manner, Thoreau frequently used metaphorical, poetic language in his descriptions of nature (see, for example, Suchostawska, 2015).

Thoreau was aware of the fact that the objectivity contemporary scientists strove for was unattainable. He realized the inability of the human mind to be impartial and detached: “There is no such thing as pure *objective* observation. Your observation, to be interesting, i. e. to be significant, must be *subjective*” (Thoreau, 2007, p.224). Subjective preconceptions and expectations affected observation and knowledge, but this influence was not necessarily something undesirable that one should try to eliminate; in fact, it appeared to him to be the most interesting aspect of knowledge (Walls, 1997, p.3). As he wrote in his journal:

the man of science makes this mistake ... that you should coolly give your chief attention to the phenomenon which excites you as something independent on you, and not as it is related to you. The important fact is its effect on me (Thoreau, 2007, p.344-345).

For Thoreau emotions and the imagination played an important role in the study of nature and might lead to knowledge and understanding which could not be discovered through reason and rational thought alone (Robinson, 2004, p.182-183).

Moreover, the notion of scientific objectivity rested on and at the same time strengthened the separation between the subject and the object of study, the human observer and nature. Thoreau realized that “the division (though not the *difference*) between man and nature, subject and object, was an illusion” (Walls, 1995, p.132), as they were in fact closely related and interdependent, “caught mutually in a web of relationship” (Walls, 1995, p.209). Thoreau’s approach to the study of nature, with its emphasis on direct experience and involvement with the natural world and on the relation between the observer and his environment, was the result of his awareness that humans formed part of the large community of nature:

the study of nature was the recognition of an ever-enlarging network of relations, in which natural objects were defined through their part in a larger system, and thus through the process of their interactions. ... Thoreau believed that this ever-enlarging system of relations also included human consciousness and human agency (Robinson, 2004, p.184).

The vision of the world as an interconnected whole that includes humans questions the division between the scientist and the object of study.



Unlike many other naturalists and scientists, then, he did not consider himself to be separate from the natural world which he observed. For Thoreau, the study of the environment “need not come ... at the price of exclusion from it” (Robinson, 2004, p.27). On the contrary, he hoped that his investigation of nature would bring him closer to it, make him “more consciously and fully a part of that world” (Robinson, 2004, p.180). The detailed knowledge of nature around him “would be a form of participation in it, as the human mind became the consciousness of nature, the means by which nature understood itself” (Robinson, 2004, p.18). He did not merely study botany or zoology but he wanted to get to know more about “beings who occupied the same place that he did, and were governed by the same laws and conditions to which he himself was subject” (Robinson, 2004, p.179). In his view, the natural community included humans as well as animals and plants, which were his “neighbors,” “contemporaries,” “co-inhabitants” of the Concord environment, to which all of them had to adjust in order to survive and thrive.

### **3. Conclusion**

While many literary critics of the past perceived the gradual evolution of Thoreau’s writings from transcendentalism to natural history as a symptom of the decline of his poetic imagination, the subsequent generation of critics saw the same process as the writer’s development, presenting it in terms of overcoming the influence of Emerson’s idealistic doctrine and becoming a more realistic scientist. However, the change need not be seen as either deterioration or progress. Despite the difference in emphasis, throughout most of his adult life Thoreau considered himself both a transcendentalist and a naturalist. Moreover, both approaches to nature can be seen as valuable and complementary. It is the combination of the two attitudes, the spiritual one and the scientific one, that is most original and inspiring in his writings and constitutes an important contribution to both philosophy and science. What makes Thoreau’s perception of nature unique is the effective combination of detailed scientific knowledge of his natural surroundings with a spiritual vision of the world, and though there were other scientists or visionaries among his contemporaries, “there was no one who combined the two very different intellectual achievements so powerfully. America took more than a century to evolve the same environmental concepts that Thoreau thought out in one lifetime” (McGregor, 1997, p.205-206).

Science and technology disconnected from spirituality may lead to excessive exploitation of the natural world:

as long as a religious world view remained a vital regulatory force, the concept of human beings as a dominant force was held in check by a wider ethical framework. With the advancement of a scientific and technological world view, however, the religious constraints have

been cast aside and the ideology of human domination of nature has had an unbridled impact on the environment (Chawla, 2001, p.118).

A spiritual vision of the world, in turn, may form a basis of environmental ethics. For example, contemporary Christian ecological thought inspired by St. Francis of Assisi emphasizes brotherhood and kinship of all beings, humans included, and encourages people to love and respect nature because it is God's perfect creation. Thoreau's ecological philosophy, based on "a mystical sense of the oneness of all life through reciprocal interrelationships" and "a desire for fellowship with all things" (Wolf, 1974, p.147), makes him "the semisecularized latter-day Francis of Assisi, bidding us expand the horizons of our love" and realize that "neighbor love needs to be expanded to include all the creation, inanimate as well as animate" (Wolf, 1974, p.178, see also Suchostawska, 2014, for an account of Thoreau's environmental ethics and its relation to Christianity). Thoreau's writings, which combine the spiritual and the scientific approach to nature, may provide inspiration for the development of contemporary environmental ethics. They may also serve as a provocative source of reflection on modern science, which still shares many general characteristics with nineteenth-century science.

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