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Romanticism

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CHAPTER 9

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While Thoreau has sometimes been represented as a provincial figure who traveled relatively little, his extensive engagement with texts from across the Atlantic reveals a much fuller and more cosmopolitan picture of Thoreau, a writer who engaged with Romanticism not only directly, through his careful study of texts by Coleridge, Wordsworth, Carlyle, Goethe, and others, but also indirectly, since Romanticism saturated the Transcendentalist context within which he developed and operated. Thus there is a clear need to understand Thoreau in light of a larger movement: transatlantic Romanticism.¹ Thoreau's awareness of transatlantic religio-philosophical, scientific, and literary contexts is especially evident in his engagement with one particular British Romantic: Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Romanticism furnished "new" ideas from across the Atlantic to counteract conventional thinking, including the German idealism of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling; higher biblical criticism; *Naturphilosophie*; and contemporary scientific research.² Just as Thoreau's university education was ending, a very different sort of education was about to begin: his tutelage in European Romanticism. As Laura Dassow Walls has documented, in the months surrounding his graduation from Harvard, Thoreau "graduated" in another sense – from authors on the university curriculum, such as John Locke, Dugald Stewart, and William Paley, to "the international set of authors at the leading edge of the new philosophy," namely, Cousin, Coleridge, Carlyle, Emerson, and Goethe.³ Thoreau engaged with these Romantic sources through primary texts, as well as his participation along with Ralph Waldo Emerson, George Ripley, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, and many others in the heady intellectual environment of the Transcendentalist Club (also known as the Hedge Club). Thoreau's involvement in these transatlantic conversations reveals what Robert J. Scholnick has called

"an essential truth" about American Transcendentalism: "in both its origins and continuing development, it was transnational."⁴

Thoreau turned to these Romantic sources as an alternative to his Harvard education. In particular, he looked to Romanticism for dynamic and unified ways of seeing nature rather than static and mechanistic views, for ways to champion individual intuition over the rational alone, and for a set of practices that were directed both outward to observe the natural world and inward to the mind's reflective powers. Thoreau's famous statement of identity as "a mystic—a transcendentalist—& a natural philosopher to boot" owes a great deal to Romanticism as an alternative to more commonly held views, as demonstrated by his response to an 1853 questionnaire from the Association for the Advancement of Science:

it would be to make myself the laughing stock of the scientific community—to describe or attempt to describe to them that branch of science which specially interests me—in as much as they do not believe in a science which deals with the higher law. So I was obliged to speak to their condition and describe to them that poor part of me which alone they can understand. The fact is I am a mystic—a transcendentalist—& a natural philosopher to boot. Now that I think of it—I should have told them at once that I was a transcendentalist—that would have been the shortest way of telling them that they would not understand my explanations. (*PJ* 5:469–70)

The term "transcendentalism" came to represent an interdisciplinary fusion of ideas that spanned the poles of the philosophical and the theological, the empirical and the mystical, and the scientific and the literary in ways that were unfamiliar to a wider American audience tutored (as Thoreau himself was at Harvard) in metaphysics that was grounded in Lockean empiricism. Coleridge was a primary source for Thoreau's understanding of what it meant to be a transcendentalist; furthermore, the phrase "I am a mystic—a transcendentalist—& a natural philosopher to boot" may even have been drawn directly from the concluding pages of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* (1825), revealing that Thoreau's famous statement of identity is fundamentally grounded in Romanticism.

The term "transcendentalism" itself is transnational in origin. As Emerson declared: "It is well known to most of my audience, that the Idealism of the present day acquired the name of Transcendental, from the use of that term by Immanuel Kant, of Königsberg" (*CW* 1:206). Kant acknowledged the role of the five senses in furnishing knowledge, but at the same time, he asserted that knowledge did not depend exclusively on experience. In *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) Kant distinguished between what already existed in the mind (*a priori*) and that which is acquired

through the senses (a posteriori). Transcendentalism came to refer to knowledge that "transcended" the senses. This was an exciting new model of the mind; as Frederick Burwick writes, "For claiming a mind-centered universe, Kant termed his transcendentalism a 'Copernican revolution' in philosophy. To a significant extent the subjectivity of Romanticism has its underpinnings in that revolution."⁵

As this concept of the "transcendental" crossed the Atlantic, it warped and shifted considerably from its Kantian origins, primarily because it was filtered through Samuel Taylor Coleridge's eclectic interpretations. His role in transmitting German philosophy to England and then America was so extensive that it is not too dramatic to say, as James Engell does, that Coleridge was nothing less than "a step-parent to American Transcendentalism. Without Coleridge's German connection, that movement would be different, less exciting, and certainly go by another name."⁶ The term "transcendental" was adapted even further in the hands of Coleridge's two most important American interpreters, Frederick Henry Hedge (founder of the Hedge Club) and James Marsh (Coleridge's first American editor); both felt that Coleridge's version of German idealism could revitalize American letters by introducing a whole new vocabulary of distinctions, definitions, and an intellectual method that implied a whole new model of the mind.⁷ Coleridge's interest in the distinctions between the mind's faculties of understanding, reason, and faith greatly expanded the scope of human knowledge and dismantled disciplinary boundaries. These transmissions broadened the definition of transcendental to such an extent that Emerson referred to it as "whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought" (*CW* 1:206). When Thoreau identifies himself as a transcendentalist, he is openly declaring his affinity to these Romantic sources over and above prevailing views.

Many of the key Romantic arguments that constituted the armature of American Transcendentalism – resistance to mechanism, faith in the powers of individual intuition, an interdisciplinary inquiry into the workings of nature and spirit – were derived from Coleridge's prose works, including *Aids to Reflection*, which Thoreau read in 1841, and "Hints towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life," which he read and took extensive notes on in 1848.⁸ *Aids* was Coleridge's most popular work in America. Emerson observed whole "shelvesful" of Marsh's *Aids to Reflection* being sold in a short span at Andover Theological Seminary to discontented students looking for alternatives to ossified debates about religion and philosophy that dominated the curriculum.⁹ While Coleridge advocated individual reflection and inward introspection,

he also pointed outward to the study of nature and the world of "facts" as providing foundations for "a science permanent as your immortal soul."¹⁰ Coleridge's prose works, taken as a whole, attempted (albeit in a fragmentary way) to sketch out a "dynamic philosophy" that blurred the boundaries between religion, philosophy, literature, and science.¹¹ When Thoreau declared himself "a mystic—a transcendentalist—& a natural philosopher to boot" he was following Coleridge in a kind of interdisciplinary self-culture that Thoreau would pursue throughout his life, especially during his time at Walden Pond.

In the final pages of *Aids* Coleridge directly discusses mysticism, transcendentalism (as an alternative to mechanism), and natural philosophy—in that order—as essentially interconnected endeavors. Coleridge articulates a central tenet of the transcendentalist: a criticism of the mechanist who "thinks of his *Mind*, as a *property*, or *accident* of a something else, that he calls a *Soul* or *Spirit*."¹² He condemns "Books of Natural Theology, Physico-theology, Demonstrations of God from Nature, Evidences of Christianity"¹³—namely, many of the sources of Thoreau read at Harvard such as William Paley's *Natural Theology, or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1802).¹⁴ In these pages Coleridge provided, in a relatively compact fashion, a Romantic alternative to the religion, philosophy, and science of Thoreau's early education. Moreover he offers in its place the exciting new perspectives of the transcendentalist, the mystic, and the natural philosopher, possibly explaining how Thoreau came to imagine a conjunction between those three identities.

In Thoreau studies there is a good deal of discussion about his role as a transcendentalist and a natural philosopher, but very little about his claim to be a mystic. However, if Coleridge is indeed the source of Thoreau's statement of identity, then his use of the term "mystic" becomes clear. The concluding pages of *Aids* contain a sub-section entitled "Mystics and Mysticism" in which a mystic is defined in the following way: "When a Man refers to *inward feelings* and *experiences*, of which Mankind at large are not conscious, as evidences of the truth of any opinion—such a Man I call a MYSTIC."¹⁵ Coleridge uses a parable of a pilgrim traveling in the desert under the light of a full moon. He then speaks of "Moonshine" as "the imaginative Poesy of Nature," asking the reader to "Interpret the Moonlight and the Shadows as the peculiar genius and sensibility of the Individual's own Spirit."¹⁶ Thus the strange perceptions occasioned by moonlight are not an error of perception, but a widening of knowledge.

Throughout his career, Thoreau was very interested in the metaphorical possibilities of moonshine to represent modes of perception that transgressed old boundaries and norms and reached toward new faculties and sensations that bordered even on the unintelligible and fantastic. Thoreau's many references to moonlight can be seen as an acceptance of the Romantic premise that the mind could perceive things that seemed shadowy, intuitive, yet innately true; in this sense, he could describe himself as a mystic in Coleridge's terms. Coleridge is often invoked in Thoreau's many musings on moonlight, including an essay on "Night and Moonlight" that was based on a Journal entry from 1852:

I think it was Dr. Chalmers who said, criticizing Coleridge, that for his part he wanted ideas which he could see all round, and not such as he must look at away up in the heavens. Such a man, one would say, would never look at the moon, because she never turns her other side to us. The light which comes from ideas which have their orbit as distant from the earth, and which is no less cheering and enlightening to the benighted traveller than that of the moon and stars, is naturally reproached or nicknamed as moonshine by such. They are moonshine, are they? Well, then, do your night-travelling when there is no moon to light you; but I will be thankful for the light that reaches me from the star of least magnitude . . . Men talk glibly enough about moonshine, as if they knew its qualities very well, and despised them, — as owls might talk of sunshine. None of your sunshine! — but this word commonly means merely something which they do not understand, which they are abed and asleep to, however much it may be worth their while to be up and awake to it.¹⁷

Moonshine here designates an alternative mode of perception, one that operates at the margins of consciousness. For the uninitiated, it "means merely something which they do not understand." Yet for one who is "benighted" (a word Coleridge used to describe the mystic in *Aids*) the moonlight is a welcome guide. Appreciating moonshine — and the "inward feelings and experiences" of the mystic — were modes of seeing that required effort and open-mindedness and were "worth their while to be up and awake to it." For Thoreau moonlight represented the new kinds of seeing and knowing that Romanticism brought to America.

In addition to finding compact articulations of what it meant to be a transcendentalist and a mystic in the closing pages of *Aids*, Thoreau also found there a compilation of developments in Romantic science that might have given him inspiration to call himself a natural philosopher — a kind of science that was organic and dynamic yet also could be integrated with religious and philosophical ideals. In his response to a request to

speaking at the Young Men's Association in Buffalo in 1860, once again Thoreau reaches for the term "moonshine" to indicate his affiliation with Romantic science:

[The lectures] will not be scientific in the common, nor, perhaps, in any sense. They will be such as you might infer from reading my books . . . [T]hey will be *transcendental*, that is, to the mass of hearers, probably *moonshine*. Do you think that this will do? Or does your audience prefer lamplight, or total darkness these nights? I dare say, however, that they would interest those who are most interested in what is called nature. (*Corr* 584)

Moonshine becomes a coded way for Thoreau to refer to a different mode of thinking he acquired from the Romantics: dynamic, intuitive, holistic ways of approaching nature objectively as well as subjectively. Thoreau sought after a science that was not "common": he shared Coleridge's belief (as Emerson did too) that science might be on the cusp of discovering a unified theory of all life.¹⁸ Such a discovery would finally dismantle mechanism (below glossed as the "Corpuscular School") since it would prove that dynamic forces undergirded all of nature and even drove the development of life, as opposed to a natural world conceived of as a mechanical watch wound up by the Creator and left to run on its own. Coleridge sums up exciting developments in Romantic science that point toward this conclusion:

I am persuaded, however, that the dogmatism of the Corpuscular School, though it still exerts an influence on men's notions and phrases, has received a mortal blow from the increasingly *dynamic* spirit of the physical Sciences now highest in public estimation. And it may safely be predicted, that the results will extend beyond the intention of those, who are gradually effecting this revolution. It is not Chemistry alone that will be indebted to the Genius of Davy, Oersted, and their compeers: and not as the Founder of Physiology and philosophic Anatomy alone, will Mankind love and revere the name of John Hunter.¹⁹

This "new" science would be a "revolution" in envisioning nature. Coleridge refers to a host of figures in Romantic science – Humphrey Davy (1778–1829), Hans Christian Oersted (1777–1851), and John Hunter (1728–93) – who represented "the increasingly dynamic spirit of the physical Sciences." At stake, at least for Coleridge and the Transcendentalists, was an attempt to explain life as dynamic, as propelled by ongoing forces through chemistry (Davy), electromagnetism (Oersted), or physiology (Hunter), without entirely abandoning the idea of that divine spirit worked in and through nature. As his very

careful notes on Coleridge's "Theory of Life" attest, these developments in Romantic science were formative for Thoreau as a model for a kind of natural history that was also compatible with his transcendentalist and mystic leanings.²⁰

In the decades leading up to Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, a unified view of nature and spirit that also accommodated evidence of dynamic change would have been especially appealing. While Romantic philosophy was inquiring into the mind's powers to know itself, contemporary scientific discoveries widened the scope of human knowledge in other ways: astronomers were looking into deep space via the expanded powers of the telescope and geologists were looking into deep time by analyzing the strata of the earth. Scientific experiments in electricity and galvanism suggested that powerful dynamic forces – rather than static notions of design – might lie at the heart of nature's operation and perhaps could extend to the human and spiritual worlds as well. Thoreau's work on seed dispersion was already charting dynamic change in nature in ways that anticipate his reading of Darwin in 1860. While some scholars see Thoreau's career as bifurcated between his early Transcendentalism and later natural history, Thoreau found in Coleridge – across his career and spanning the 1850/51 divide – a model of identity that engaged mysticism, transcendentalism, and natural history as interrelated modes of self-culture. His commitment to these Romantic concerns is evident in his most famous work: *Walden*.

Walden

Thoreau was steeped in Romantic texts during the long period of composition and revision of *Walden*. He was reading Wordsworth's newly published epic poem *The Prelude* and declared that the area around Walden Pond will be "my lake country," referring to the Lake District landscape that inspired much of *The Prelude* and led to Wordsworth and Coleridge to become known as "the lake poets."²¹ He praised Wordsworth for living "a simple epic country life" and then imagines his own experiment in living in those terms (*PJ* 2:200–201). One of the most widely analyzed passages in *Walden*, the thawing sand bank, also happens to be one of the passages most influenced by Romantic contexts.²²

Thoreau consciously framed *Walden* as his own original response to a larger Romantic project: an autobiographical account of the growth of

his own mind, told through his intense experiences in nature and self-reflection.²³ A Journal entry written during the revision process reveals Thoreau's engagement with these Romantic themes:

I have a common place book for facts and another for poetry—but I find it difficult always to preserve the vague distinction which I had in my mind—for the most interesting & beautiful facts are so much the more poetry and that is their success. They are *translated* from earth to heaven—I see that if my facts were sufficiently vital & significant—perhaps transmuted more into the substance of the human mind—I should need but one book of poetry to contain them all. (*PJ* 4:356)

It is widely agreed that this “one book of poetry” is *Walden* itself: a project of reading the landscape for the “facts” of natural history, but also for “poetry” — Thoreau links the two by positing that facts are “*translated* from earth to heaven,” suggesting an implicit connection between the empirical and the spiritual. Thoreau uses the terms “heaven” and “earth” dozens of times in *Walden*; this polarity stands in for older theological debates about nature and spirit that he wished not only to refresh but to also to concretize in his project at *Walden*.

However he might channel Romantic models, Thoreau also makes the project very much his own: in the epigraph to *Walden* he writes, “I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up” (*W* 84). This is a direct reference to Coleridge's poem “Dejection: An Ode” (1802). While that poem is set at sunset and night and is marked by the poet's stifled creative impulses, Thoreau poses himself as Coleridge's opposite, a voice of morning optimism, not evening dejection. By choosing this epigraph, Thoreau makes a bold claim that *Walden* will continue or even complete a Romantic project that was left unfinished: to fully investigate the meaning of nature.²⁴ It also clears the way to make this pursuit fully his own, embodied in an environment that is distinctively American. Thus as Romanticism crosses the Atlantic, it is reinterpreted in its new clime. America was purported to be a newer land full of potential and unburdened by a long history. Yet Thoreau assimilated, rather than abandoned, the intellectual and literary sources of the past.²⁵

Walden is a new efflorescence rooted in Romantic contexts. Thoreau took the study of nature in new and distinctive directions. While Coleridge might have inspired him to think of mysticism, transcendentalism, and natural history as continuous practices, Thoreau was far more attuned to

the physical particulars of nature than were other Romantics. He was also committed to seeing the transcendent embodied in the real and immediate in far bolder ways than his predecessors:

Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality which surrounds us. (W 96-97)

Thoreau radically asserts that truth is not remote in either time or space but instead was directly present in the “now and here.” It is an essentially mystical statement in its faith that subjective experience can apprehend the “sublime and noble,” but it is possible “only” by observing “the reality which surrounds us” in facts that would concern the naturalist. It is also a transcendentalist statement in that he believes that we can go up and down the rungs of sensory and supersensory perception to gain truth not only about ourselves, but about nature and the divine. Most radically, Thoreau advocated that the transcendentalist should care about not just new modes of thinking, but new modes of living:

In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them. (W 324)

Transatlantic Transcendentalism – defined as a Romantic movement that crossed the boundary of the Atlantic Ocean – was fueled by common concerns and questions about knowing the self, knowing nature, and knowing the divine. It was an experimental mode of thinking that pushed beyond ossified theological, philosophical, scientific, and literary boundaries. While Thoreau was a product of these Romantic contexts, he also surpassed them: he, more than other Romantic writers on either side of the Atlantic, wished to translate these intellectual endeavors into a mode of living. His call to live simply and deliberately in order to make “the laws of the universe” more readable was an attempt to put foundations under his castles in air, marking an original and indelible shift in Transatlantic Transcendentalism.

Notes

- 1 Colleen Glenney Boggs, "Transatlantic Romanticisms," in *Transatlantic Literary Studies, 1660–1830*, ed. Eve Tavor Bannet and Susan Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 222, and Laura Dassow Walls, "Global Transcendentalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, ed. Joel Myerson, Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, and Laura Dassow Walls (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 514.
- 2 Barbara Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 27.
- 3 Laura Dassow Walls, *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 16.
- 4 Robert J. Scholnick, "Boston and Beyond," in Myerson, Petrulionis, and Walls, *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, 496.
- 5 Frederick Burwick, "Transcendentalism," in *Romanticism: Keywords* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2015), 325.
- 6 James Engell, "Coleridge and German Idealism: First Postulates, Final Causes," in *The Coleridge Connection: Essays for Thomas McFarland*, ed. Richard Gravil and Molly Lefebure (London: Macmillan, 1990), 155.
- 7 See Samantha C. Harvey, *Transatlantic Transcendentalism: Coleridge, Emerson, and Nature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).
- 8 See Robert Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading: A Study in Intellectual History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 30, 45. See also Robert Sattelmeyer and Richard A. Hocks, "Thoreau and Coleridge's *Theory of Life*," *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1985): 269–84.
- 9 *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston: Riverside, 1911), 6:266.
- 10 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer, Vol. 9 (1993), *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, gen. ed. Kathleen Coburn, assoc. ed. Bart Winer, 16 vols. Bollingen Series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964–2002), 10.
- 11 See Samantha C. Harvey and Rochelle L. Johnson, "Coleridge, Thoreau, and the Transatlantic 'Riddle of the World,'" in *Thoreau at 200: Essays and Reassessments*, ed. Kristen Case and K. P. Van Anglen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 154–69.
- 12 Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, 395.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 405.
- 14 Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading*, 16.
- 15 Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, 389.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 393.
- 17 Henry David Thoreau, "Night and Moonlight," *The Atlantic Monthly* 12, no. 72 (1863): 579.
- 18 See Samantha C. Harvey, "Emerson, the Hunterian Museum and Transatlantic Science," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Atlantic Literary Studies*, ed. Leslie Eckel and Clare Elliott (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press,

2016), 325–39 and Laura Dassow Walls, *Emerson's Life in Science: The Culture of Truth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

19 Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, 395.

20 See notes 8 and 11 above.

21 Richard Gravil, *Romantic Dialogues: Anglo-American Continuities: 1776–1862* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 104.

22 David M. Robinson, *Natural Life: Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 212n.16.

23 See Bernhard H. Kuhn, *Autobiography and Natural Science in the Age of Romanticism: Rousseau, Goethe, Thoreau* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), and Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 118.

24 Gravil, *Romantic Dialogues*, xvii.

25 See James C. McKusick, *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), and Robert Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).