“May we not *see* God?”: Henry David Thoreau’s Doctrine of Spiritual Senses

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Abstract

This article argues that Henry David Thoreau believed in the essential unity of the five senses and privileged each as a source of wild and divine knowledge, which, when combined, created a full picture that might result in a true approximation of God in and beyond nature—the hallmark of Thoreau’s fundamentally incarnational theology. Thoreau treated each sense not only as a source of divine knowledge but as a site of theological discourse: for touch, the relationship between sin and grace; for smell, the conundrum of an eternal divinity acting in historical time; for taste, the efficacy of sacraments; for hearing, the possibility of continuing revelation; and for sight, the ability for human beings to actually *see* God. The senses were the practical entry point to Thoreau’s theological system, which was concerned with the discovery and redemption of internal “wildness” and reconnection to the mysterious, divine source of that wildness, to the unaccountable in nature.

Keywords

Henry David Thoreau, Transcendentalism, spiritual senses, incarnation, wildness, the Fall

Introduction

For a variety of reasons, people learn to mistrust the reliability of their senses. Henry David Thoreau believed such mistrust was symptomatic of a spiritual condition. “Our present senses are but the rudiments of what they are destined to become,” wrote Thoreau in the closing moments of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. This statement was both a lament and an appeal. Thoreau abhorred the fact

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that people were "deaf and dumb and blind, and without smell or taste or feeling," a fact which "every generation" discovered, realizing that "its divine vigor [had] been dissipated, and each sense and faculty misapplied and debauched." According to Thoreau, the senses, as the sites of engagement with the natural world and the divinity incarnated therein, were operating at minimal capacity, facsimiles of their intended state. "May we not *see* God?" he asked, finally. Although Thoreau did not answer this directly, he hinted at an affirmative answer when he asked, a few lines down, "What is it, then, to educate but to develop these divine germs called the senses?" The senses were weakened and fallen, but they could become strong and whole. Thoreau did not indicate here what form this sort of education would take, but his writings—both private and public—developed an understanding of what it was to train the senses to *see* God, not simply intellectually or intuitively, but physically. A realization of heaven itself, he wrote in this passage, would be, most simply, "a *purely* sensuous life."[1]

That Henry David Thoreau was fundamentally concerned with developing knowledge of nature through his senses is obvious to both scholars and readers of his works. Edward Mooney describes Thoreau as a "philosopher of the senses," seeking "communion" through contact with nature, even in moments when he finds it impenetrable.[2] Quoting Thoreau's poem "Inspiration," David Robinson shows that Thoreau's desire for "new earths, new skies, new seas," which appear to him as he "grow[s] sensible," reflect the poet-naturalist's belief that spirit and matter are one and can be perceived by the awakened seer.[3] And in his eulogy of Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson expressed the common belief that Thoreau, perhaps more than anyone, *was* this awakened seer, in a very literal sense. "His power of observation seemed to indicate additional senses," remarked Emerson. "He saw as with microscope, heard as with ear-trumpet, and his memory was a photographic register of all he saw and heard. And yet none knew better than he that it is not the fact that imports, but the impression or effect of the fact on your mind. Every fact lay in the glory in his mind, a type of the order and beauty of the whole."[4] Although Emerson is perhaps projecting his own idealism onto Thoreau in this final line, his conclusion that Thoreau saw the relationship between sensing observer and object sensed as fundamental to an understanding of divine, natural knowledge is undoubtedly true.

[1] Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 382 (italics in original).

[2] Edward Fiske Mooney, "Thoreau's Translations: John Brown, Apples, Lilies," *The Concord Saunterer* 16 (2008) 59–83, at 59–60.

[3] David M. Robinson, *Natural Life: Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004) 35; Henry David Thoreau, "Inspiration ('Whate'er we leave to God, God does')," in *Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems* (ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell; New York: Literary Classics of the United States; Library of America, 2001) 556–59, at 557.

[4] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thoreau," in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson* (ed. Stephen E. Whicher; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957) 379–95, at 388.

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Others have sought to rank Thoreau's assessment of various senses.[5] Margy Thomas Horton writes of touch as Thoreau's primary sense, since it is the most immediate, and therefore unmediated, of all the senses. He "reverses the traditional hierarchy of the senses," Horton writes, "valuing precisely [touch's] immediate, primordial, emotional qualities."[6] On the contrary, writes Jonathan Bishop, it was hearing that was essential for Thoreau. Sound, in its natural, man-made, or musical forms (the latter often encompassing the former two), is not only expressive of the "language of God" but can bring on ecstatic experience for the attuned listener, confirms Alan Hodder.[7] No, rather it was sight, writes Robert Thorson, remarking that Thoreau was "a visual creature above all else," because while "touch and taste required contact," and "smell and sound required proximity," sight alone "could take him to the distant reaches of earth and heaven."[8] Others might make a case for Thoreau's privileging of smell, which often evoked in Thoreau a visceral memory, or taste, which he employed in a literal "communion feast" of nature's bounty. In the corpus of Thoreau studies, the poet-naturalist's invocation of the senses invites such rankings, because he was never singularly devoted to one. This article aims not to dispute those who argue for Thoreau's privileging of one sense over another but to build upon these interpretations, and, at best, to bring them into accord, by positing that Thoreau's understanding of the senses can be understood best as part of his doctrine of the spiritual senses, themselves a feature of Thoreau's incarnational theology.

Scholars such as Alan Hodder and Rebecca Kneale Gould have argued that simply because Thoreau's theology was not traditionally theistic does not mean that it did not exist.[9] Christopher Dustin argues in his essay "Thoreau's Religion" that Thoreau's theology is entirely concerned with the discovery and redemption of wildness, the connection to which humans have lost—or, more accurately, to the mysterious, most likely divine, source of that wildness, to that which is "unaccountable in nature." Locating and grappling with the source of this wildness was crucial for Thoreau to understand how he related to the natural world and

[5] In doing so, scholars have often used Aristotle's ranking of senses as a foil. It was Aristotle who originated the "fivefold division of senses," which he proceeded to rank: from lowest to highest, touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight. Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, introduction to *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (ed. Paul. L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 1–19, at 8.

[6] Margy Thomas Horton, "Embodiment, Spirituality, and the Tactile Perception of Air in Thoreau's *Walden*," *The Concord Saunterer* 19/20 (2011–12) 223–48, at 227.

[7] Jonathan Bishop, "The Experience of the Sacred in Thoreau's Week," *ELH* 33 (1966) 80–81; Alan D. Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) 66–91, at 76.

[8] Robert M. Thorson, *Walden's Shore: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014) 207.

[9] Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, 132; Rebecca Kneale Gould, "Henry David Thoreau," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (ed. Bron Raymond Taylor et al.; 2 vols.; New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005) 2:1634–35, at 1635.

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how the natural world related to him.[10] In a purely reductionist sense, this *is* theology: establishing a means of understanding how people relate to a force or entity greater than themselves and how that greater force or entity relates to them and to the world. Dustin, and Gould in particular in her examination of Thoreau's influence on modern homesteaders, connects Thoreau's desire to "return" himself and others to their senses and his aim to locate the incarnation of divine wildness out in nature. This search for wildness inevitably involved the senses, particularly sight, as the primary site (no pun intended) of contact between the self and this original, powerful, divine source.[11] Additionally, scholars such as Lawrence Buell and Gould have illustrated how Thoreau may not be "post-Christian," in the sense of being separated from Christian traditions, but is "post-Christian" in the sense that he came of age in a Christian (New England Protestant and Unitarian) milieu, and, while often subverting them, was clearly influenced by Christian theological categories and employed explicitly Christian language, particularly in his work with the senses.[12]

This article argues that Thoreau believed in the essential unity of the five senses and privileged each as a source of wild and divine knowledge. Studies of individual senses will only render a partial picture. The knowledge gained from each sense built on that gleaned by the other four, thus creating a full picture that might result in a true approximation of God in and beyond nature—the hallmark of Thoreau's fundamentally incarnational theology. Further, Thoreau treated each sense not only as a source of divine knowledge but as a site of theological discourse: for touch, the relationship between sin and grace; for smell, the conundrum of an eternal divinity acting in historical time; for taste, the efficacy of sacraments; for hearing, the possibility of continuing revelation; and for sight, the ability for human beings actually to *see* God. Thus, the senses were the practical entry point to Thoreau's theological system, which was concerned with the discovery and redemption of internal "wildness" and reconnection to the mysterious, divine source of that wildness, to the unaccountable in nature.

Toward an Incarnational Theology

To get at Thoreau's doctrine of spiritual senses, it is first necessary to understand Thoreau's incarnational theology. Training each of the senses to perceive the divine in nature would help to forge an actual, physical connection to this divinity and would awaken the senses to full knowledge of that wildness, both in nature *and* in oneself. Thoreau's approach to this sacred knowledge exhibited elements of his

[10] Christopher A. Dustin, "Thoreau's Religion," in *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau* (ed. Jack Turner; Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2009) 256–93, at 276.

[11] Ibid., 281; Rebecca Kneale Gould, *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) 60, 128, 224.

[12] Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995) 129; Gould, "Henry David Thoreau," 2:1635; Gould, *At Home in Nature,* 3, 127.

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overtly Christian context, his eclectic reading, his "come-outer" desire to be in nature (so called by Catherine Albanese), his Transcendentalist leanings, and his fiercely independent and self-reflective personality.[13] Yet, from a New England standpoint, the senses were not an obvious place to start in a bid to know God. New England Congregationalism, as the child of Reformed Christianity, maintained a healthy mistrust of human faculties, including the senses. For centuries, Christian scholars and theologians inhabited a world shaped by the Fall. The consequence of Adam's and Eve's disobedience, beyond their banishment from Eden, was the mortification of their flesh and that of all their descendants. In his examination of Augustine, Matthew Lootens posits that as a result of the Fall and transgression of the original pair, human attempts to obtain direct knowledge of or contact with God became fraught with potentially dangerous, if not impossible, obstacles. As originally designed, Augustine argued that God had "configured" the human body "to allow for the proper use of bodily senses"—the fact that human beings were created upright, reaching toward heaven, distinguishes them from animals, who were also capable of sensible knowledge without the ability to reason. Yet, "sin and the misuse of the senses" have had the effect of turning the gaze of the senses toward the ground, thus stunting any sensory ascent heavenward.[14]

Weaned on New England, Unitarian, and Transcendentalist thought, Thoreau arrived at a middle way between idealism and sensualism. He was born into the oldest New England town (Concord) and attended its oldest institution (Harvard). At Harvard, he read the standard orthodox Unitarian fare—John Locke, Dugald Steward, William Paley's *Evidences of Christianity* and *Natural Theology*—which reinforced the view that the universe was rationally designed by God, and harmonious, and, thus, could be understood through the rational human mind. Influenced by the Transcendentalists with whom he was becoming acquainted, he challenged Harvard's moral philosophy by turning to those thinkers on the radical cusp of European philosophy: Victor Cousin, Immanuel Kant, and Goethe, on the continental side, and Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Carlyle on the Romantic, British side.[15] Taken together, the new philosophy gleaned from these various sources emphasized that truth was "not the special province of any particular sect" and that, in fact, it was left to the individual "to perceive this truth on his own, through an intuitive faculty."[16] Thoreau also read Emerson, whose work was an outgrowth

[13] Catherine L. Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 9.

[14] Matthew R. Lootens, "Augustine," in *The Spiritual Senses* (ed. Gavrilyuk and Coakley) 56–70, at 66.

[15] Ibid., 16, 20; Robert Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading: A Study in Intellectual History with Bibliographical Catalogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), and Kenneth Cameron, "Books Thoreau Borrowed from Harvard College Library," in *Emerson the Essayist: An Outline of His Philosophical Development through 1836 with Special Emphasis on the Sources and Interpretation of Nature* (ed. Kenneth Cameron; 2 vols.; Hartford, CT: Transcendental Books, 1945).

[16] Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading,* 21.

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of both European strains. Emerson's *Nature*, in particular, presented to Thoreau the possibility that the natural world was both the site of divinity and the source of self-transcendence, even though Thoreau would later diverge from Emerson in his privileging of the latter, particularly in his later writings. Echoing the Hindu texts Thoreau read, beginning in earnest in the 1830s and 40s, Emerson's notion that one could become absorbed into nature and lose sight of the ego would occupy him as he set out in pursuit of his own spiritual and professional path.[17]

As Laura Dassow Walls and Joel Porte have illustrated, many Transcendentalists emphasized the idea that "true" reality was the universal and spiritual ideal that lay beyond or behind the mundane details of daily life, which science would confirm, not undermine.[18] For Emerson, nature always served a greater spiritual purpose beyond its physical functions in that it confirmed the divine knowledge and capacity of the observer. Humanity *needed* nature. Robinson emphasizes that Emerson framed this need in terminology markedly similar to Christian theology when in *Nature* he equated humanity's estrangement from nature with humanity's "[alienation] from God," positing that humanity's "estranged condition from nature" was "evidence of the fall."[19] Thoreau described a similar sense of ability or proximity lost in a journal entry of 1851, writing how in "youth, before I lost my senses, I can remember that I was all alive, and inhabited my body with inexpressible satisfaction." While in this unfiltered, youthful state, Thoreau wrote, the "earth was the most glorious musical instrument, and I was audience to its strains," a position that prompted "such extacies [sic] begotten of the breezes" and which "brought into my mind and soul an indescribable infinite all-absorbing divine heavenly pleasure, a sense of elevation & expansion," that caused him to wonder "if a mortal had ever known what I knew."[20]

What Emerson and Thoreau meant by the Fall differed markedly in a theological sense from their historical Christian counterparts, but the notion of latent abilities, once fully operational, now waiting for some eschatological moment when they will enjoy such fullness again, was replete in the writings of both Christian and Transcendentalist thinkers. For Transcendentalists, such fullness was thoroughly this-worldly, since God was located both in (or at least "behind") nature and the self.[21] This "Transcendentalist Idealism" emerged in Thoreau's work. Never did he reject the idea that human beings were divine and that the seat of divinity was

[17] Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press) 95; Laura Dassow Walls, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017) 382.

[18] Joel Porte, *Consciousness and Culture: Emerson and Thoreau Reviewed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 164; Laura Dassow Walls, *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995) 27–36, 54–61, 76.

[19] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson* (ed. Whicher) 21–56, at 50; Robinson, *Natural Life,* 15.

[20] Henry David Thoreau, "July 16, 1851," in *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau* (ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen; 14 vols.; New York: Dover, 1962) 2:306–7.

[21] Barbara L. Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007) 49.

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located in the mind and soul, providing direct access to the mind of God. However, as Sharon Talley highlights, Thoreau believed that the intuitive faculty could atrophy, making it necessary for people to "renew themselves by seeking the spiritual truths available in nature."[22]

Thoreau was undoubtedly steeped in the modes and ideas of Transcendentalist Idealism through friendship and educational pursuit. However, Thoreau's reading reveals another pattern, one that indicates the poet-naturalist's interest in scientific methods and knowledge for knowing nature. Thoreau read widely among those at the cutting edge of science, although contrary to what some scholars claim, he did not lose the Transcendentalist thread as his thought matured (nor did he stop reading so-called Transcendentalist texts).[23] As Robert Richardson argues, "the naturalist, the surveyor, and the statistician were not driving out the transcendentalist," but, in fact, the growth of his "scientific and mechanical interests" produced a corresponding "reawakening of his interest in idealist thought and ethics."[24] Walls summarizes this approach concisely by noting that Thoreau developed "an epistemology of contact" rather than one of "transcendence," whereby the senses were not supplemental but were the primary tools for knowing.[25]

In this way, Thoreau paired Transcendentalist Idealism with a fundamentally incarnational theology: matter was divine, God manifested in every atom of creation. Thoreau distanced himself from the Platonic tendencies of Transcendentalist Idealism, since, notes Walls, "Thoreau's God," was "not somewhere off in space in time," but rather, was embedded in "the reality which surrounds us"—a perspective that would often lead to accusations of pantheism.[26] This immanent divinity included his own material body, a fact he famously chronicled on Ktaadn, shouting "Contact! Contact! Contact!" as the epiphany of his physical connection to awesome nature rolled over him or, in a much more facetious moment that he mused about to H. G. O. Blake, when he asked, "What is *the matter*? *My* fingers ten, I say."[27] Thus, in one sense, training his gaze on the material reality of creation did not divorce him from Transcendentalist self-reflection. He was brought back to himself, and to his own core divinity, through his body and through nature. But,

[22] Sharon Talley, "Following Thoreau's 'Tracks in the Sand': Tactile Impressions in 'Cape Cod,' " *American Imago* 62 (Spring 2005) 7–34, at 7.

[23] Among the scientific texts he read were Lyell's *Principles of Geology,* newly minted Harvard professor Lewis Agassiz's *Essay on Classification,* Agassiz and A. A. Gould's *Principles of Zoology,* Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species,* and more. Walls, *Seeing New Worlds,* 42, 45, 95, 129–30, 145.

[24] Robert Richardson, *Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 205.

[25] Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*, 33, 134.

[26] Porte, *Consciousness and Culture*, 160, 166; Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 97; Walls, *Thoreau: A Life,* 264.

[27] Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 71; Henry David Thoreau to H. G. O. Blake, "November 16, 1857," in *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau* (New York: New York University Press, 1958) 498.

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for Thoreau, nature was also important to know in its own right, not simply as a mirror for the self.

As his scientific gathering accelerated in his later works, Thoreau's bodily boundaries were fortified and he became increasingly aware of his own body in relation to nature, effecting what Dustin describes as a "doubleness" that is evident in his writing: Thoreau knew he was made of the same spiritual and material stuff as nature, but he was also his own being apart from it. Writing in *Walden,* he affirmed that he was "not wholly involved in Nature" and "only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections," which, when encountering nature, illuminated "a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another."[28] Beyond creating a dividing line between himself and nature (and, to a certain degree, between himself and Emerson), Thoreau revealed his conviction that nature had its own set of revelations, which would be experienced differently by each observer, thus reversing the Idealist understanding of the flow of knowledge: truth arose from the particulars of nature, a posteriori, which formed the basis of the greater truths that took shape in the intellect.[29] It was, argues Walls, a "pure sensual experience," then, that would lead him to "transcendence."[30]

The Doctrine of the Spiritual Senses

Although many were convinced of Thoreau's preternatural abilities to sense better than most, none were so convinced as Thoreau that the senses required training.[31] For the senses to perceive nature and its concomitant revelations, not just to appreciate natural beauty, they needed a mind conversant with the methods of empirical observation and attuned to the divine significance of each natural detail. To become trained in the senses was to be the poet-naturalist, who existed at the nexus of science and metaphysics and who knew nature so well that she possessed keen knowledge of the pulsing, universal system behind the budding tree or the runoff of the sandbank—a knowledge of the divine moving the individual, created elements. Yet, being able to anticipate nature, to know empirically and spiritually that the divine moved in each beat of the butterfly's wings, was also a position of faith. Rick Anthony Furtak explains that, by sharpening the perceptual and sensory

[28] Christopher A. Dustin, "Thoreau on the Strange Relation of Matter and Spirit," *The Concord Saunterer* 21 (2013) 53–76, at 53–54; Thoreau, *Walden,* 135.

[29] Walls, *Seeing New Worlds,* 78, 80, 85–86, 90; Brian R. Harding, "Swedenborgian Spirit and Thoreauvian Sense: Another Look at Correspondence," *Journal of American Studies* 8 (April 1974) 65–79, at 73–75; Lance Newman, "Thoreau's Materialism: From *Walden* to *Wild Fruits,*" in *More Day to Dawn: Thoreau's "Walden" for the Twenty-first Century* (ed. Sandra Harbert Petrulionis and Laura Dassow Walls; Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007) 100–126, at 102; Robinson, *Natural Life,* 118.

[30] Walls, *Seeing New Worlds,* 50.

[31] Moncure Daniel Conway, "Thoreau (1866)," in *Thoreau in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates* (ed. Sandra Harbert Petrulionis; Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012) 68–75, at 72; Harding, "Swedenborgian Spirit," 71.

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tools of observation, Thoreau did not relinquish the aesthetic, moral, and religious orientation of his aims; in fact, knowing nature better (and through science) allowed faith, not skepticism or barren objectivity, to blossom.[32] The realization that nature was not always predictable and that he may not be able to record the whole of nature (his "broken task," so to speak) did not shake Thoreau's faith that nature spoke to those ready to perceive it.[33]

Someone with facility in not one but all five senses, Thoreau once wrote in his journal of 1840, was the "true man of science."[34] While Thoreau certainly dispensed with his fear of induction and data collection through the senses, his fear of divorcing the religious, ethical, and mystical in pursuit of scientific aims persisted. Even at this early moment, he presented his view that the use of all five active senses at once, rather than reliance on one or the other, avoided spiritless observation. When engaged, the five senses moved past the "common sense," and became the "transcendental [sense]," which concerned itself not with the past, but with "the prospect of the future."[35] This belief in the power of the combined senses mirrors, to a degree, what Lootens argues regarding Augustine's understanding of the spiritual senses: though Augustine would distinguish "corporeal" from "spiritual" sensing, "the experience of God is characterized by the unity of the senses as God becomes a polymorphous sensory object that fulfills everything that the soul needs and desires."[36] Although Thoreau made no such Augustinian distinction between the bodily and spiritual senses—the bodily senses *were* the spiritual senses—he certainly emphasized that information drawn from each sense brought divine, yet incomplete, knowledge of nature. Further, through each sense, Thoreau engaged with a different theological question or problem, which together seemed to approximate an understanding of how human beings could relate to the divine in their own bodies and in their own time.

A. Touch: Grace after the Fall

In 1866, Moncure Conway remarked that, "[under] Thoreau's touch the smallest, most ordinary facts attain a mystic significance," much like the effect wrought by "the hand of the true priest of nature" in whose hand "the most barren rod blossoms."[37] The reference to "touch" here is most likely metaphorical, referring to the poet-naturalist's ability to find greater meaning in the seeming minutiae of

[32] Rick Anthony Furtak, "The Value of Being: Thoreau on Appreciating the Beauty of the World," in *Thoreau's Importance for Philosophy* (ed. Rick Anthony Furtak, Jonathan Ellsworth, and James D. Reid; New York: Fordham University Press, 2012) 112–26, at 114–15; idem, "Skepticism and Perceptual Faith: Henry David Thoreau and Stanley Cavell on Seeing and Believing," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 43 (Summer 2007) 542–61, at 545; Walls, *Seeing New Worlds,* 172.

[33] Emerson, "Thoreau," 395.

[34] Thoreau, "October 11, 1840," *Journal,* 1:512.

[35] Thoreau, "June 7, 1851," *Journal,* 2:229.

[36] Lootens, "Augustine," 63.

[37] Conway, "Thoreau (1866)," 69–70.

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the natural world. However, as with most assessments of Thoreau, the reference to his senses is never incidental. In the Thoreauvian universe, skin and its primary sensory mode, touch, was the base point of contact with God. Here, "base" implies two different (yet related) interpretations: base in the sense of crude, brute, even tainted; and base in the sense of first or foundational.

To understand Thoreau's view of touch, it should be read with an eye to the implicit and explicit links between theological prescriptions against tainted touch and his own views on the subject. In the traditional Christian universe, the human body, in general, was fallen and corrupted, but the assessment of human beings as "corrupted in the flesh" implicates the skin explicitly. First of all, biblical references abound that connect humanity's creation to God's literal "cloaking" of human beings with "skin and flesh" (Job 10:10–11, for example). Thus, when God's creation fell, their skin became the visual revenant of status lost. As the sense most connected to the fallen flesh, touch was dangerous. Further, it was contact with the skin and its network of nerves that could draw human beings into impure and immoral acts. Touch invited intimacy; such intimacy experienced with fallen senses was sinful.

Conversely, redeemed touch means holy intimacy with God. According to Boyd Taylor Coolman in his analysis of medieval theologian Alexander of Hales, "to touch God," was "the goal and fulfillment of all spiritually sensuous knowledge."[38] It is touch, so conceived, that enabled one to "delight in the suavity of God," argued Alexander's contemporary William of Auxerre.[39] The term suavity—meaning charm or affability, among other things—is significant, given that it implies a certain relationality. Not majesty, not power, not knowledge—all characteristics God is known to have—but suavity implies that the experience of touch conveys warmth, even friendship—the sensual equivalents of grace. Touch, interpreted from this angle, implies a change in how one feels about God, because he has reached out to indicate how he feels about that individual. Redeemed touch also inoculated oneself and others from the deleterious effects of the Fall. Only Christ or, as would be woven into Christian notions of salvation, those gifted with the grace of God could touch without spreading the taint of sin. In fact, with grace came the lifting of proscriptions against touch; as Paul implored in Col 2:20–22, "If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, 'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!' (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men?" (NAS). This admonition refers broadly to the Christian notion that Christ's life and sacrifice nullified the need to follow the specific laws of the Hebrew Bible; however, it is notable that Paul used the senses, and touch specifically, as evidence of the effects of grace.

[38] Boyd Taylor Coolman, "Alexander of Hales," in *The Spiritual Senses* (ed. Gavrilyuk and Coakley) 121–39, at 134.

[39] As quoted in Boyd Taylor Coolman, *Knowing God by Experience: The Spiritual Senses in the Theology of William of Auxerre* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004) 151.

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Thoreau was fundamentally aware of the deleterious impact of touch in the natural world. In his essay "Wild Apples," he begrudged the person whose hands held an apple only to inspect it for value; such touch had the effect of "rubbing off all bloom" and causing "those fugacious ethereal qualities to leave it."[40] And in the broader manuscript from which "Wild Apples" arose, *Wild Fruits,* Thoreau admonished empirically motivated scientists—and himself, by extension—not to "presume to probe with our fingers the sanctuary of any life, whether animal or vegetable" because "if we do we shall discover nothing but surface still."[41] Those with strictly commercial or strictly scientific motives would sour whatever they touched—literally, in the case of the apple. Thus, while Thoreau did not subscribe to the Christian theology of the Fall, disbelieving as he did that the flesh was inherently sinful, he did believe such consumerism resulted from a fall from wildness and that "graceless" touch was corrupting, to nature itself and to the individual. In *Cape Cod*, Thoreau revealed the effects of redeemed touch. While visiting with the Wellfleet oysterman, Thoreau mentioned holding sunsquall and feeling no deleterious effects, despite the fact that it was a jellyfish.[42] By anomaly or by sensory-spiritual readiness, his skin was not marred by the sunsquall's touch.

In spite of the risks and Thoreau's occasional musings at the majesty of "untouched nature," Nina Baym argues that Thoreau did not believe that nature should not be touched; in fact, the touched, or "humanized landscape," could be "sometimes salvific" even if, in the wrong hands, it was "sometimes despoiled."[43] He also most likely saw touch as both the simplest way of encountering nature and as the sense perhaps most in need of redemption by contact with nature. The flesh's constant, uninitiated, and unavoidable contact with the air mirrored in certain ways the Reformed doctrine of irresistible grace—although, in Thoreau's version, all, not only the elect, were touched. One's skin felt the movement of air—or noticed its stagnation—and the sensation of heat or cold in various degrees without effort and without the ability to shut these sensations out. In *Walking,* Thoreau remarked that there was something in the mountain air that "feeds the spirit and inspires."[44] On his descent of Ktaadn, before the moment of "contact," Thoreau listed "rocks" and "trees" as examples of our daily contact with nature, but it was the "wind on our cheeks" alone that invited extended discussion.[45] The wind, in this moment,

[40] Henry David Thoreau, "Wild Apples," in *Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems* (ed. Witherell) 444–67, at 449.

[41] Henry David Thoreau, *Wild Fruits: Thoreau's Rediscovered Last Manuscript* (ed. Bradley Dean; New York: Norton, 2000) 242.

[42] Henry David Thoreau, *Cape Cod* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 68.

[43] Nina Baym, "English Nature, New York Nature, and *Walden's* New England Nature," in *Transient and Permanent: The Transcendentalist Movement and Its Contexts* (ed. Charles Capper and Conrad Edick Wright; Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society; Northeastern University Press, 1999) 168–86, at 168.

[44] Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in *Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems* (ed., Witherell) 225–55, at 239.

[45] Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 70–71.

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was "the spirit of the universe," reaching out to the reverent communicant. The feel of the air on one's skin provided a semblance of universality to the sensorial experience of nature, making a case for its primacy among the spiritual senses. As Horton writes, con*tact* implied *tact*ility.[46]

B. Smell: Accessing Sacred Time

Experience of the divine through touch was only the beginning, of course. Contact with the divine, with the immaterial and eternal God, could relocate someone in time and space. During moments of intense, sensible contact, Thoreau described feeling time and space "double"—being both in and out of time, in and out of body or space. Quite often, those moments where Thoreau evoked temporal doubling and time-bending specifically were prompted by his sense of smell.[47]

Perhaps no sense is quite as capable of transporting perceivers to their own pasts than smell. Physiologically, this is the case, explains Benjamin Zeller, because smell "is wired into the limbic system," or the "memory and emotional center of the brain."[48] In his journal, Thoreau once exclaimed, "How full of reminiscence is any fragrance!" Further, smell also had the power, like touch, to bring perceivers into mythic time. "To my senses the *dicksonia* fern has the most wild and primitive fragrance, quite unalloyed and untamable, such as no human institutions give out—the early morning fragrance of the world, antediluvian, strength and hope imparting," wrote Thoreau. The smell of the fern enabled Thoreau to time-travel to a moment prior to human touch and invention, prior even to the biblical flood.[49] Smell could also orient one toward a future moment, a world reborn, like the one he envisioned at the end of "Slavery in Massachusetts." Following the high-profile trial and reenslavement of Anthony Burns, Thoreau delivered the essay as a searing critique of Massachusetts's moral bankruptcy and abject failure to do right in the face of evil laws such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. After venting his rage, he chose to finish with a familiar motif: his recollection of a recent walk. At first, the walk was a dismal one, for his "remembrance of my country" had spoiled it. Suddenly, however, he smelled a water lily, which appeared as if to recall to him "what purity and sweetness reside in and can be extracted from the slime and muck of earth." Scent reminded him in this moment to have faith that "Nature" and "man too who is fitted to perceive and love [this fragrance]" retain "integrity and genius unimpaired," even in the midst of an ethical quagmire.[50] Foul smells did not issue from moral, beautiful things, and the lily's scent rescued him from his emotional and intellectual "funk," to remind him that the good (eventually) would prevail.

[46] Horton, "Embodiment, Spirituality," 239, 229–30.

[47] Thoreau, *Wild Fruits,* 157.

[48] Benjamin E. Zeller, "Religion as Embodied Taste: Using Food to Rethink Religion," *Body and Religion* 1 (2017) 10–30, at 18.

[49] Thoreau, "May 7, 1852," *Journal,* 4:32; idem, "September 24, 1859," *Journal*, 12:349.

[50] Henry David Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts," in *Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems* (ed. Witherell) 333–47*,* at 346.

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There are also instances in his writing where scent seemed to produce in Thoreau moments of precognition. Thoreau once remarked that scent was more "trustworthy" than the eye, that it revealed "what is concealed from the other senses."[51] For example, while some senses, like touch, imply proximity, smell need not. Further, the fact that smell often heightened the experience of other senses (such as sight or taste) or was required by another sense, specifically taste, to function gave smell a certain supersensory power. Fragrance, Thoreau once remarked, "is the only food of the gods."[52] The divine act of smelling seemed occasionally to trump the experience of taste itself, such as the moment Thoreau discovered that the imagined taste produced by the sweet smell of both wild and cultivated apples exceeded the taste of the fruit itself.[53]

Just as Thoreau's sense of smell transported him to the past and foretold of the future, it also brought him firmly into the present. Thoreau's task of creating a "Kalendar" of nature in Concord—an ambitious endeavor to observe, record, and thus anticipate the occurrence of every natural phenomenon throughout the course of a year—operated in conjunction with all of his later writing projects.[54] From 1850 onward, passages where Thoreau's organs of sensing aided in carving out the annual cycle of birth, death, and renewal were innumerable. His nose, in particular, acted as an internal calendar. In June 1850, Thoreau described walking "to Goodman's Hill," where he found "that the atmosphere was never so full of fragrance and spicy odors," such as "apple blossoms" and "ripe strawberries" (although he remarked "it is quite too early for them"), but it was the "lady's slipper and the wild pink" that announced "summer is begun according to the clock of the seasons." Thoreau's "[f]ieldwork" operated as a "continued testing [ground] of his faith," and smell particularly and consistently linked Thoreau's project of the "Kalendar" to spiritual health, tethering him to the spiritual vocation of his scientific ambitions. In 1852, Thoreau wrote that "nothing but the cool invigorating scent which is perceived at night in these low meadow places where the alder and ferns grow can restore my spirits."[55] His nose helped him carve out his own hallowed time of day, his own holy hour.

It was not only pleasant but also pungent smells that renewed the spirit and kept the observer attuned to the sacred rhythm of the year. In *A Week,* Thoreau lamented the loss, not only of "sweet-scented grasses and medicinal herbs" but of "many odiferous native plants" that "formerly sweetened the atmosphere and rendered it salubrious," martyrs to the expanding industry of agriculture and animal husbandry.[56] The aromas of decay were a natural part of the order of the year—new life could not emerge without the death and decay of old life. For this

[51] Thoreau, "May 8, 1852," *Journal*, 4:38.

[52] Thoreau, "1845," *Journal,* 1:373.

[53] Thorson, *Walden's Shore,* 201; Thoreau, "Wild Apples," 447, 452.

[54] See "Thoreau's Kalendar," ed. Kristen Case, http://www.thoreauskalendar.org/index.html.

[55] Robinson, *Natural Life,* 147; Thoreau, "July 2, 1852," *Journal*, 4:174–75.

[56] Thoreau, *A Week,* 355.

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reason, he touted fall as one of the richest, and therefore most important, times for smells that varied in their strength and level of funk.[57] He found the divine in stench, ascribing to the "universal fragrances of the meadows and woods" words like "fugnacious."[58] Both pungency and fragrance were signs of sacred vigor that brought him simultaneously backward, forward, and consciously present in time.

C. Taste: Healing through Sacrament

"A man may esteem himself happy when that which is his food is also his medicine," Thoreau mused in *A Week*. Given that it is couched in his critique of modern medical "quackery," one could read this statement as a wry chastisement of doctors who recommend different, often opposing, herbal remedies as palliative "cure-alls." However, Thoreau also used this moment to lament the nonexistence of physician-priests, those who were able to "minister to both soul and body at once, that is, to man." This mistaken belief that matter was somehow "independent of spirit" was also "quackery."[59] In this sense, the food that was also medicine should ideally heal both body and soul. It was no wonder, argues Porte, that Thoreau prescribed "the tonic of wildness" for the human condition.[60] Thus, Thoreau located both spiritual and physical healing in the sensation of taste.

Religious healing is the purview of no one religion. Even for the seemingly matter-eschewing New England Protestant tradition that Thoreau absorbed, the physical body and world were constantly impacted by the soul and spiritual realm, meaning that a cure for the former inevitably invoked the latter.[61] In fact, Thoreau's understanding of taste as the physical source of spiritual healing aligned in various ways with Catholic eucharistic theology. Before the Protestant Reformation, the standard position on the Eucharist was that after consecration the bread and the wine were the real substantial presence of Christ. Although the elements still tasted like bread and wine because their accidents perdured, the communicant ate the body of Christ. The Eucharist, writes Coolman, was "the locus of an experiential and, indeed, 'sensuous' encounter with God."[62] In the Orthodox tradition, Maximus the Confessor referred to the consumption of the host as an act of "healing," which, Frederick Aquino argues, when accompanied with proper cultivating of the mind through ascetic practices, enabled the communicant not only to know God, but

[57] Thorson, *Walden's Shore,* 227.

[58] Thoreau, "June 11, 1852," *Journal*, 4:89; James McHugh, *Sandalwood and Carrion: Smell in Indian Religion and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 6.

[59] Thoreau, *A Week*, 257.

[60] Porte, *Consciousness and Culture*, 175.

[61] See David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[62] Coolman, *Knowing God by Experience,* 218–19, 220–22, 229. This, of course, would only be possible for the faithful individual; consuming the host without proper intention and without faith could have the opposite effect than intended: rather than distributing grace, it could distribute condemnation.

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to become divinized.[63] The physical host, then, as the body of Christ and as an extension of God's grace worked upon the soul, marred by sin, and redeemed the flesh of the body. By tasting of Christ, one soothed the bruises from Adam's fall.

The notion that taste has such far-reaching, spiritual power relates to the way taste operates as a sensing agent. "Individuals *taste* with their bodies, and develop *tastes* in their minds," writes Zeller, noting taste's capacity to incite memories (often with the help of its ancillary sense, smell) and to form cognitive "patterns engendered by . . . embodied and sense-based experiences." Taste is also "cross-sensual"—meaning that it is affected and modified by the actions of the other senses. Thus, the body and its sensory context, as well as the "brain" and "mind"—alternatively, the soul—"work together to create and respond to taste."[64] For Thoreau, taste was, first, about bridging the often literal gap between people and nature: by tasting nature's bounty, particularly that foraged by the consumer, one was brought most intimately into contact with nature. Second, taste operated internally, through the mechanism of the soul: by tasting nature's bounty, the soul bridged its domesticated and wild halves. Wildness forgotten, like a repressed memory, came to the surface through taste. Thus, tasting nature was a sacramental act that physically and spiritually healed the breach with nature and within one's being. Writing in his journal in 1845, Thoreau described a fruit as satisfying "much more than an animal appetite." The sensation of eating the fruit was to Thoreau "a sacrament, a method of communion, an ecstatic exercise, a mingling of bloods, and [a] sitting at the communion table of the world."[65] In spite of the occasional carnivorous flight, when describing the sensation of tasting or his taste, the food consumed was almost always plant-based and shrouded in language of healing, spiritual reconciliation, and knowledge. "I have been thrilled to think that I . . . have been inspired through the palate, that some berries which I had eaten on a hill-side had fed my genius." The act of consuming fruits over fowl, like the act of consuming the Eucharist, actually sparked an internal change whereby "the animal died out in him day by day, and the divine was established."[66]

In *Wild Fruits*, the passages that focus description on tasting what he found in nature almost invariably invoked notions of reconciliation with God—the culmination of Christian healing. In the entry "Black Huckleberry," Thoreau emulated the animals who "pluck and eat as they go," who find refreshment in "the cordials, wines of all kinds and qualities" that are "bottled up in the skins of countless berries." Here, eating berries represented a desire for sociality, not only to eat with the animals who eat from the same plant but to "picnic with Nature." To eat huckleberries, was "to eat in remembrance of her," Nature—a clear allusion

[63] Frederick D. Aquino, "Maximus the Confessor," in *The Spiritual Senses* (ed. Gavrilyuk and Coakley) 104–20, at 112.

[64] Zeller, "Religion as Embodied Taste," 11, 17, 12.

[65] Albanese, *Nature Religion,* 87; Thoreau, "1845," *Journal,* 1:372.

[66] Thoreau, "Walking," 240; idem, *Walden*, 210, 218, 220.

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to Christ's own directive to eat the bread and the wine "in remembrance of me" (Lk 22:19).[67] This was also an allusion to the nature of New England, pre-European settlement, which Jim Minick emphasizes was covered in blueberry and huckleberry bushes. Just as the Eucharist connected the communicant to the body of Christ, it connected the consumer to the Body of Christ, the community of the Church, past, present, and future.[68] So, for Thoreau, eating huckleberries also connected him to this mythic past and a historical community of people and animals who had consumed the fruit. "It is a sort of sacrament, a communion—the *not* forbidden fruits, which no serpent tempts us to eat," wrote Thoreau.[69] This allusion to Eden was made explicit and complicated when, a few lines later, Thoreau equated the prelapsarian paradise with the biblical promised land, which would be flowing with "milk and huckleberries" (Exod 3:8, originally, land of "milk and honey"). Salvation is often envisioned as a return to Eden, which Thoreau replicated by bringing past and future together in this single act of consuming huckleberries. He could only hope that the "sacramental consumption of wild fruits . . . be taken up by the hundred instead of just the one," which, Lance Newman speculates, might prompt the removal of offending fences and the redemption of "a New England society that [had] modernized itself into an almost total ignorance of nature."[70]

No fruit, argues Hodder, was held in higher regard for its saving and healing properties than the wild apple. Neither was any fruit a more fitting symbol for Thoreau's theological understanding of taste, which bore so many striking similarities to the Catholic understanding of Eden, the Fall, and sacramental healing through the Eucharist, even as he reversed course on the apple's dooming effect.[71] For Thoreau, to eat of the wild apple was to "avert doom, our second fall from Eden," except instead of avoiding the tempting fruit, people must "eat again of the tree of knowledge, the knowledge of the wild." It was for this reason that the seemingly inevitable replacement of the wild apple with the cultivated apple was so dire; for Thoreau, argues Walls, "the loss of wild apples" meant losing "the possibility of harmony between [the] wild and [the cultivated]."[72]

Poor spiritual and physical health came from "intemperate" eating of any kind, but most often by overeating rich foods made from animals or animal by-products.[73] Thoreau's advocacy of vegetarianism was not fussy, but he did believe that the eating of flesh could effect spiritual damage, something he addressed most pointedly in the "Higher Laws" chapter of *Walden*.[74] Simple food, plucked by hand, and consumed with proper, pietistic intention, was the best way to "retain health and

[67] Thoreau, *Wild Fruits*, 52.

[68] Jim Minick, "Picking with Henry," *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 271 (Summer 2010) 1–3, at 1–2.

[69] Thoreau, *Wild Fruits*, 52.

[70] Newman, "Thoreau's Materialism," 113–14, 116.

[71] Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, 114, 116–17, 128.

[72] Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*, 220.

[73] Thoreau, "September 12, 1853," *Journal*, 5:424. This passage is also replicated in *Wild Fruits*.

[74] Walls, *Thoreau: A Life,* 204; Thoreau, *Walden,* 214–15.

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strength," of both physical and spiritual varieties—and to stem the rapid advance of civilization. It would have pleased Thoreau to know, then, that Kathryn Cornell Dolan has speculated on the "prelapsarian diet, believing that Adam and Eve must have been vegetarians." By consuming plants, Thoreau hoped to reverse (and subvert) the effects of the Fall.[75] Only those foods that had been plucked by hand and consumed out in nature were true sacraments; only such foods mended the broken soul. Thus, Thoreau admonished, "Let Nature do your bottling and your pickling and preserving. For all Nature is doing her best each moment to make us well."[76]

D. Hearing: Continuing Revelation

Sound—and its lack—is most directly related to both the experience and expectation of the holy. For Thoreau, the holy was the work of God, often used interchangeably with Nature—the divine force—as he/it created, recreated, and destroyed the universe around him. "Any melodious sound," Thoreau wrote in his journal, "apprises me of the infinite wealth of God."[77] Again in his journal, Thoreau wrote that "the sound of the wind in the woods" caused him to "suddenly recover my spirits, my spirituality, through my hearing." A few years later, he described the experience of hearing the wood thrush as one that "[lifted] and [exhilarated]" him, which acted as a "medicative draught to [his] soul." Both the wood thrush and the "Aeolian harp" acted as "missionaries" who produced "ecstasy" in those whose hearing was "pure and unimpaired."[78] Sherman Paul notes that Thoreau understood sound as "the herald of correspondence . . . the source of inspiration or divine influx." Thus, hearing became the sense that most often required Thoreau to act as "poet-mystic," rather than "scientist," since the impressions of sound required "intuitive leaps," which were revelations in their own right. In this way, both the "soul and nature were harps," in that they waited, taut, ready to vibrate from divine contact, even that which occurred from afar.[79]

Reportedly endowed with a "preternaturally acute sense of hearing," Thoreau's listening to nature began early. His parents took young Henry and his siblings on walks, where they were made to "listen to birds."[80] Brian Harding argues that sound, particularly sound as music, was often the "means by which Thoreau was

[75] Thoreau, *Walden,* 61, 65; Emerson, "Thoreau," 384; Kathryn Cornell Dolan, "Local Beans, Apples, and Berries," in *Beyond the Fruited Plain: Food and Agriculture in U.S. Literature, 1850-1905* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014) 67–101, at 74 and 76.

[76] Thoreau, *Walden,* 215, 173; Walls, *Seeing New Worlds,* 205; Dolan, "Local Beans, Apples, Berries," 88; Thoreau, "August 23, 1853," *Journal*, 5:395.

[77] Thoreau, "July 31, 1840," *Journal,* 1:492.

[78] Thoreau, "August 15, 1851," *Journal*, 2:391; idem, "June 22, 1853," *Journal,* 5:292-3; idem, "December 31, 1853," *Journal,* 6:39.

[79] Sherman Paul, "The Wise Silence: Sound as the Agency of Correspondence in Thoreau," *The New England Quarterly* 22 (1949) 511–27, at 514–15, 517, and 520; Thoreau, *Walden,* 123; Thoreau, "August 10, 1838," *Journal,* 1:53; Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, 88.

[80] Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, 76; Walls, *Thoreau: A Life,* 44.

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able to recapture the ecstasy of youth."[81] Occasionally, music referred to what most would think of as music—as compositions plunked out on instruments—but more often music was a synonym for sound itself, because, for Thoreau, unlike civilization, "nature never made noise," only music.[82] The sound of pebbles on the frozen pond in December, "discoursed pleasant music," prompting him to call this new instrument "the Ice-Harp."[83]

Hearing music was a translocative experience, either because its source was unclear or because its strains "moved" the soul, disorienting the hearer or even causing her to lose sight of herself. After listening to a "series of sounds called a strain of music," Thoreau asked, "What are ears? What is Time?" Music, it seemed to him, could "be wafted down through the centuries from Homer to me," could recall "a passage of the Vedas," and served as a reminder "to trust the remotest and finest as the divinest instinct."[84] As ever, it was the origin of this divine experience—the ears—that tied such moments of translocative ecstasy to a particular location and to the embodied experience of the hearer.

Not only natural sounds but also human and industrial sounds served as revelatory sources of the divine. In his journal of 1853, he described the telegraph wire as his "redeemer," which brought both "a special and a general message to [him] from the Highest."[85] In *Walden,* Thoreau devoted an entire chapter to sounds (appropriately titled "Sounds"), in which he intertwined the "whistle of the locomotive" with sounds of cows, owls, and other birds. Although the keen of the train was jarring at first, it was soon absorbed into the natural rhythm of the Concord forest.[86]

However, it was the hearing and anticipation of "wild" sounds that seemed most often to open a revelatory connection to the divine. Learning to anticipate sounds usually began with the sounds of animals. While hunkered down for the night on Ktaadn, Thoreau described "listening to hear if the wolves howled," and though he heard none, he described what he might have heard as "unearthly" sounds—those sounds that seemed to transcend the world even though they were born from it. On a later trip in Maine, up the Chesuncook River, Thoreau described what the actual experience of hearing a wild animal was like. The sound, this time from a moose, seemed to enhance the "impression of solitude and wildness" of both their physical surroundings and of themselves. Listening to his Penobscot guides converse in

[81] Thoreau, "July 21, 1851," *Journal,* 2:330; idem, "July 5, 1852," *Journal,* 4:190; Harding, "Swedenborgian Spirit," 69.

[82] Thoreau, "June 15, 1852," *Journal,* 4:106; idem, "November 18, 1837," *Journal,* 1:12.

[83] Thoreau, "December 5, 1837," *Journal,* 1:15.

[84] Thoreau, "October 12, 1851," *Journal,* 3:68; idem, *A Week*, 173–75.

[85] Thoreau, "January 8, 1853," *Journal,* 4:458–59; see also idem, "April 12, 1853," *Journal,* 6:193–94.

[86] Thoreau, *Walden,* 115–27.

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their language, offer the Abenaki names for various fauna, and, occasionally, sing produced a similar feeling in him.[87]

Thoreau wrote often about loud sounds such as the call of a bird or the whistle of a train, of ambient sounds such as the wind or of water flowing over rocks, of quiet sounds such as the rustle of leaves, melting snow, or echoes retreating in volume.[88] Yet he devoted equal time to moments seemingly void of sound. Sound, for Thoreau, always reminded him of the silence underneath them.[89] Thoreau believed that silence was crucial for the revelation of the divine, since much of its work in nature—growth, decay, change—made sounds audible only to the trained ear. Silence could manifest in "stillness," which was "a natural Sabbath," remarked Thoreau.[90] Just as a Sabbath was intended for reflection on God, silence was a reminder of how much about God we do not yet know, both in nature and in ourselves.[91] To Thoreau, writes Jane Bennett, "silence was a celestial sea of eternity, the general, spiritual and immutable; sound was the particular and momentary bubble on its surface."[92] Further, silence compelled one to listen harder, to be "conscious of sounds in nature which [the ear] could never hear," which would, with time and effort, make ears capable of hearing the voice of God. To hear "celestial sounds" like the growth of a tree, for example, would indicate true alignment with the work of the divine in the world.[93] Silence, in other words, was replete with the sounds of creation and destruction, often available only to those whose hearing had been attuned to listen for them.[94] Thoreau, whose ears were so attuned, could "attend to [the] faintest sound" and "then declare to man what God hath meant."[95]

E. Sight: Beholding the Face of God

After catching her young son lying awake late at night, Thoreau's mother, Cynthia, recalled that Henry said he was "looking through the stars to see if I couldn't see God behind them."[96] Years later, Thoreau wrote that one should look at nature only with "the side of [the] eye," that the observer must look "through and beyond her," for to look at her directly was "fatal as to look at the head of Medusa" and would "turn the man of science to stone."[97] It is the preposition "through" that appears to

[87] Thoreau, *The Maine Woods,* 38, 99–100.

[88] Thorson, *Walden's Shore,* 223–24; idem, *Walden,* 310; Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness,* 79–80.

[89] Thoreau, "December 15, 1838," *Journal,* 1:66; Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, 76.

[90] Thoreau, *A Week,* 296, 391–92, 46.

[91] Thoreau, "December 15, 1838," *Journal,* 1:64.

[92] Jane Bennett, "Thoreau's Techniques of the Self," in *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau,* 294–325, at 302–3; Paul, "The Wise Silence," 513.

[93] Quoted in Walls, *Thoreau: A Life,* 128; Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973) 234; Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness,* 85–87, 231.

[94] Mooney, "Thoreau's Translations," 63–64; Walls, *Seeing New Worlds,* 142.

[95] Thoreau, "Inspiration," 567.

[96] Quoted in Walls, *Thoreau: A Life,* 43.

[97] Thoreau, "March 23, 1853," *Journal*, 5:45.

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Transcendentalize these sightings, because in the process, nature becomes reduced to the role of mediator between humanity and God. However, Thoreau, who was both idealist and incarnational in his orientation to the world, trained himself to see the reality of both the phenomena and the divinity that lay beyond. In this way, he learned to disappear as well, only to see and to avoid editorializing or intimating his presence as he reported what he saw. Beyond the professional need for keen eyesight in order to serve as a surveyor, scientific methods of taxonomy and classification depended heavily on the fine details of what one saw.

In his writing, sight becomes the readiest means for Thoreau's beatific descriptions of nature. From the "universal barrenness" of the "shrubby hill and swamp country" of Provincetown in *Cape Cod* to the glorious foliage of October, "the month of painted leaves," about which he rejoiced in "Autumnal Tints," Thoreau saw beauty everywhere.[98] It seemed at times to him that "Nature [had created] this profusion of wild fruit, as it were merely to gratify our eyes!"[99] By the reckoning of some medieval Christian theologians like William of Auxerre, vision was the source of delight in God, since it was through the act of "seeing" that one took joy in the immediate presence of God. Seeing, along this line of theological reasoning, was most closely connected to the intellect, which was what truly knew and perceived the beauty and majesty of God.[100] Observers who gave nature a cursory glance or gazed indifferently at the landscape ignored the clear overtures of God to reach them through the created world. Like Emerson, who articulated the concept of a true "seer" in his essay "The Poet," Thoreau lamented that there were only a few who could "appreciate the naked and absolute beauty of" and morality in "scientific truth."[101]

Sight was also the pleroma of all the senses, since all worked collectively to anticipate nature and to see God. Like Augustine, who, according to Lootens, assessed the ability to see God "face to face" as both evidence of a "pure heart" and the culmination of all spiritual perception, for Thoreau, to see *was* to sense.[102] For this reason, training all of the senses contributed to his ability to be a "seer" of nature. Becoming sensible to the physical facts of each object was the first act of perception, but the seer would catalog these facts, note their beauty, and then apprehend the truth within the created object. Thoreau believed that to "see," truly "see," something was to see it anew or to affect "cultivated ignorance," as Gould describes the process whereby Thoreau would "cease to understand it" as the material "thing" in front of him. This does not mean that it ceased to exist, nor that it lost its distinctiveness, but that by looking at and through the fact itself,

[98] Thoreau, *Cape Cod*, 152; Thoreau, "Autumnal Tints," in *Thoreau: Collected Essays and Poems* (ed. Witherell) 367–95, at 368.

[99] Thoreau, October 28, 1858, *Journal,* 11:257. This passage was reprinted in *Wild Fruits.*

[100] Coolman, *Knowing God by Experience,* 132–33, 137.

[101] Thoreau, *A Week*, 361.

[102] Lootens, "Augustine," 64–65.

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he realized how a vast world of knowledge could be held in the tiniest leaf.[103] Of course, the danger of focused attention on a given natural fact or phenomenon was that one could look too hard at one object and unwittingly edit out everything else that the eye chose not to see. Such was the plight of his poor fellow surveyor who seemed oblivious to the "heaven" that surrounded him, so occupied in "looking for an old post-hole" that he failed to realize he stood "in the midst of paradise."[104] Such tunnel vision was what Thoreau critiqued in scientists who tended to, quite literally, forget the forest and see only the trees. Lest one adopt the myopia of the scientists, Thoreau reminded the reader to see "wholes." The facts of nature reveal their own divinity while also nodding to the divine source of their creation; so, to see nature, neither can one simply look "*beyond nature*" nor "look *at* it."[105] In and through the yearly "Kalendar" of natural phenomena, God worked, revealing just how much and how little human beings could apprehend of his work. To see nature in its wholeness took tremendous effort and was only the beginning of what one could know about God.

The art of seeing in itself, illuminated and simultaneously reified natural objects. In describing the beauty of wild apples, which he lamented were being lost and forgotten, Thoreau issued the imperative that "they must be seen." He linked the extinction of wild apples—or at least their relegation to a dark and unknown existence—to the fact that they were not often seen by the human eye.[106] The fact that some things were noticed and some things remained unseen had nothing to do with the "amount of light in the world," which was always the same, but with "the modes and degrees of seeing." As light shone steadily from the "heavens," the "eye of the beholder [turned] to stone" by lack of use and by a failure of vision.[107] Darkness could be self-made, in other words, and occurred often when all the profane eye saw was "civility."[108] Thoreau admonished the reader, subtly, through his constant allusions to the light of the morning, that there existed a daily reminder that light fell upon many places in the world, many of which the reader probably had not deigned to see.[109]

Yet, obstructed sight also reminded the seer that divine nature could occlude him: the fog on Ktaadn, the reminder that there were aspects of nature, at its wildest and most dangerous that civilized people could not see.[110] Through sight, or its obstruction, Thoreau (and his reader) was reminded that he was never fully "one" with nature, as it might opt to withhold truth or knowledge, because he was not

[103] Gould, *At Home in Nature,* 58; Walls, *Thoreau: A Life*, 308.

[104] Walls, *Seeing New Worlds,* 172, 174; Thoreau, "November 11, 1850," *Journal,* 2:94–95.

[105] Dustin, "Thoreau's Religion," 259, 272; Christopher A. Dustin and Joanna E. Ziegler, *Practicing Mortality: Art, Philosophy, and Contemplative Seeing* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005) 36, 40.

[106] Thoreau, "Wild Apples," 462.

[107] Thoreau, *A Week,* 157.

[108] Bishop, "The Experience of the Sacred," 86.

[109] Thoreau, *A Week*, 188, for example.

[110] Thoreau, *The Maine Woods,* 65, 240.

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ready or incapable of understanding or, simply, because nature could. This also occurred when the nature Thoreau had been so carefully working to anticipate surprised him, like the sight of raspberries that appeared suddenly, and seemingly earlier than expected.[111] Even while encountering the reality of obstructed vision or unanticipated sights, Thoreau "[held] open" the possibility that the "fullness of visible reality could still be revealed," which compelled him to keep looking.[112]

Still, trying to see as much as possible was a Herculean task; just as the eye could play tricks, so too could the memory. Although Thoreau often spoke of revisiting a phenomenon in his "mind's eye," the mind's reconstruction would pale next to the minute detail perceived by the trained eye. To help him remember what he saw, Thoreau wrote. In writing, the pencil became the extension of the eye. Bronson Alcott wrote of Thoreau that Thoreau never "theorized" about what he saw in nature, but "[saw] only and [described]." Yet, through a "seventh sense," continued Alcott, Thoreau's mind worked upon these facts so that "his page [was] a creation."[113] Through his words, Thoreau brought his poetic sensibilities to bear, making descriptions that moved beyond the data mining of science: he saw with the "eye of the naturalist" and wrote with the "mind of the poet."[114] As Richard Schneider writes, according to Thoreau, seers could read the facts of nature and their "symbolic spiritual meaning contained in the physical," "balance them," and then, through the poetic exercise of writing, "[add] their own insights" in order to "express the meaning of the relationship between the two."[115] As a result, Thoreau became part of the landscape he described, without becoming mystically absorbed. Robinson asserts that Thoreau acted as the mirror for readers to see their own relationship to nature, to become "creative seers and reflectors of truth themselves."[116] It was also through writing that Thoreau acknowledged his own limitations as a seer: this was only his view of nature, as perceived through his senses, at particular moments in time in a specific place. To avoid the problem of "globaliz[ing] the local," writes Walls, the true seer recognized both "the particulars of time, place and temperament" and those "higher laws" that permeated everything.[117]

[111] Thoreau, *Wild Fruits*, 27.

[112] Richard J. Schneider, *Henry David Thoreau* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987) 66–67, 70; Dustin and Ziegler, *Practicing Mortality,* 39.

[113] Amos Bronson Alcott, "Journal and Epistolary Remarks on Thoreau, 1847–1859," in *Thoreau in His Own Time* (ed. Petrulionis) 6–12, at 11.

[114] Conway, "Thoreau (1866)," 83.

[115] Schneider, *Thoreau,* 59.

[116] Ibid., 63; Robinson, *Natural Life,* 25.

[117] Walls, *Seeing New Worlds,* 10.

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The Seer and the Reader

Thoreau had definitively universal aims for his self-consciously local descriptions of nature. This is exhibited in many places, but perhaps none so clearly as those passages where he examines the "mirroring" surfaces of water or the refracting power of their depths. How light reflected on the water's surface fascinated Thoreau, not least of which because it required him to admire nature from another vantage point. At Walden, the water "[multiplied] the heavens" by causing them to appear on the surface of the earth, a phenomenon that shifted his perspective and his means of looking at the natural world. Similarly, seeing "changed" when looking through water, altering shapes and colors. These reflections also recalled him to the fact that to see nature was to see it as both a "landscape" and as a "force or energy," as the movement of the divine itself. The dynamic nature of the water and its power to reflect reinforced the fact that seeing nature was a never-ending process, and no one person could boast to "seeing" nature in its totality.[118] Aware of this flaw in his plan to anticipate nature, he relied, in many ways, on his reader.

Thoreau was ever-conscious of his potential reader. His incarnational theology, which sought to bring people back to nature and to their natural, wild selves, relied upon the reality of the reader to take up the task of sensing God in the world. As he honed his own senses to the divinity incarnated around him, he was most likely thinking of a time when his readers might do the same, not just to see God *through* the wonders around them, but to see *in* the smallest leaf the answers to the great theological questions of the day. Even as it became apparent to him, in the final year of his life, that his life's great work—the anticipation of nature—would be incomplete, the task was not broken. His reader could find in his or herself the "true [person] of science" with that "rare Indian wisdom" who would combine the five senses and, therefore, "smell, taste, see, hear, feel, better than other men."[119] So Thoreau hoped, by writing about what he saw, that readers might commit to seeing nature from their own point of view, through their own trained senses, and become ready not just to look but to see—and later, to record what they see. Perhaps by the collective effort, humanity as a whole could begin to see nature—and God through *and* in it.

[118] Thoreau, "June 26, 1852," *Journal,* 4:150; Thorson, *Sensing Walden,* 212–13; Richardson, *Thoreau: A Life of the Mind,* 265.

[119] Thoreau, "October 11, 1840," *Journal,* 1:512.

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