

**THE RECUPERATION OF THE LOST PARADISE IN HENRY DAVID THOREAU'S
WALDEN**

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Abstract : The present paper proceeds from the view that H. D. Thoreau's Walden is not the immediate result of a highly personal experience, but a diligently and "painstakingly" crafted literary masterpiece. Themes, motives, symbolic and archetypal imagery, linguistic devices and structural patterns were carefully chosen and exploited so that the author could gain access and connect to the deepest layer of the reader's unconscious, in order to trigger a certain response from his "neighbor". As a "citizen of the world", Henry Thoreau made it his purpose to use his personal experience in an impersonal and imaginative way, as "seed" for a better life, addressing a readership considered as being grounded in a common humanity, irrespective of superficial differences caused by living in a particular time and place. This paper, reading Walden from a religious perspective, argues that, experiencing what Mircea Eliade called the quest for the Lost Paradise, Henry Thoreau attempts a reiteration of - and a return to - the primordial condition of the first man on earth and his way of experiencing sacredness. The discussion identifies the main types of myths and symbolic imagery common to all human manifestations, also present in fairytales, which at an unconscious level, according to C.G. Jung, link man to his roots. Thus, in Walden there are certain elements, such as the focus on timelessness and immortality, closeness to the animal and vegetal realm, flying and ascension, the taming of fire and ultimately connecting with Gods - which, at least in abstracto, recuperate the primordial beatitude and plenitude the pre-modern man enjoyed before the Fall.

Keywords: *Lost Paradise, Walden, symbolism, sacred.*

Bearing several interpretative ramifications, H. D. Thoreau's *Walden* is at its best what Moshe Idel calls an experiential book, a reading which leads man to a sacred world, a world lost to civilization. Although most of the times labeled as an autobiographical writing, the book is much more than that, and there are readers who have turned it into their bible, a bible for the complete man.

In *Walden* the reader is presented with a nameless, - therefore impersonal - character who creates a little world of his own, away from History and time, diving into Eternity. Time is for him abolished, becoming "but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; [...] Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is peebly with stars." (T: 400) As for the artist Thoreau speaks of at the end of the book, time should not be an "ingredient" in the life lived to its full capacities. As long as one has "a singleness of purpose and resolution", and "elevated piety", he will enjoy "perennial youth" (T: 581). In a fairytale land, a sacred dimension opens up to the reader: the place is of a qualitatively different nature. The strange way in which Walden Pond was formed, but also the alternative story of "divining" its sacredness, both alert the reader as to the type of existence he is invited to. Walden Pond is a land of youth everlasting and a site suitable for radical existential change, a place steeped in sacredness, it is the connection between earth and sky, being as old as the world and closer to heaven than any other place: "I cannot come nearer to God and Heaven/ Than I live at Walden even" Thoreau declares (T: 477).

The focus on timelessness and on the sacredness of the place, as well as the centrality of the individual point to a religious apperception of the world, characteristic, as historian of religions Mircea Eliade maintained, to the *homo religiosus*.

The religious spirit in literature and the purpose of storytelling and myth-telling was not a novelty in Thoreau's time. Following Schleiermacher, most nineteenth century transcendentalists believed the Bible itself to be a literary work of a highly dense metaphoric and allegorical quality, (Emerson, [1941]) while the Christian celebratory rites are, according to Mircea Eliade, to be understood as reiterations, at symbolic level, of the bygone times which preserved the sacredness of an individual closer to divinity. On the other hand, in Native American cultures and with most primitive peoples, stories and myths - therefore literature - were charged with powerful healing powers, and had a strong impact upon the hearers. The stories, told in the proper manner and heard repeatedly, facilitated a spiritual connection otherwise impossible to the "profane" man, the man keeping the channels connecting him to divinity "closed". Narration and the listening of myths and rites brings back, for the listener, those very mythical times they speak of. Listening to a myth makes man forget particular limitations and superficial circumstances and projects the listener in another world, in a Universe different from the limited daily universe of the historic man, Mircea Eliade pointed out. (Eliade, 1994, 1: 72) Myth periodically brings to date Time, and in so doing, projects the listeners in a superhuman dimension, above history, which also allows the listener [and reader] to appropriate a Reality which is untouchable in the profane existence. (idem: 73)

At a closer reading, Thoreau's text reveals the author's intention to make his reader see, visualize and experience himself the visions he is presented with, and thus, by experiencing them *in abstracto*, shift his perspective and prompt him to live in the awareness of the sacredness of life. The awakening of another of Thoreau's impersonal characters, John [the] Farmer, is revealing for the type of change the reader is expected to undergo: "John Farmer sat at his door one September evening, after a hard day's work, his mind still running on his labor more or less. [...] He had not attended to the train of his thoughts long when he heard someone playing a flute, [the "I" of the book, Thoreau's authorial voice] and that sound harmonized with his mood. [...] the notes of the flute came home to his ears out of a different sphere from that he worked in, and suggested work for certain faculties which slumbered in him. They gently did away with the street, and the village and the state in which he lived." (T: 499) Thoreau is confident that the preservation of sacredness will be achieved if at least an elite go on practicing it: "there is no need that all be good, but that there is absolute goodness somewhere, and that will even the whole lump" Thoreau wrote. This is the idea, also entertained by primitive peoples, that spiritual perfection of an elite exerts a beneficial influence on the rest of society. (Eliade, 1995: 66)

Thoreau's *Walden* aims at investing his stories with the power of awakening and at unconsciously connecting the "literate" reader - defined by Thoreau as the reader who understands the hidden meanings, not merely deciphers words and sentences¹ - to the

¹ "To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, [...] Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written" Thoreau writes in "Reading".

immemorial times of Paradisiacal experience. The music of the flute, the music of words, the Aeolian harp, the chirping of birds, all are meant to awaken, that is, to "open" up man's channels and receive the sacredness of myths life can still be endowed with. The numerous symbols and fables, stories and descriptions send the reader back to the "Primordial Era", the "heroic age" when man experienced closeness to a "forgotten heaven".

In discussing the spiritual signification of rituals performed by professional shamans and candidates, Mircea Eliade emphasizes that, irrespective of the phenomenology of the ecstatic trance, namely of the manifestation of the rites, - purifications of the flesh through fire, bathing, fasting for long periods and so on - they become "nonsense" if one disregards their deep spiritual significance. They are however acts with strong religious undertones, with a powerful ideology behind. They are meant to split man's spirit from his flesh, and ease the connection with the transcendental reality, bring man closer to the divine realm. (Eliade, 2010)

However, Thoreau was impatient at exaggerated shamanic experiences or mystic practices. A true transcendentalist, he believed there were other means of becoming closer to sacredness, and he pursued that path. In *Walden*, every act bears a strong religious undertone and an ideology: farming "connected [the hero] to the earth", while fishing linked him to the sky; bathing was ritual, an emergence out of the amorphous substance of water, therefore creation out of Chaos and at the same time a baptism and rebirth as he bathes in the "pure" waters of the "sacred" Pond. Purification and rebirth thus mingle in a ritualistic performance of reaching towards the divine nature of every man. Building the chimney is an important moment in the economy of the book, and the making the fire is accompanied by an incantation: "Light-winged Smoke, Icarian bird,/Melting thy pinions in thy upward flight,/Lark without song, and messenger of dawn, /[...]/ Go you my incense upward from this hearth,/ And ask the gods to pardon this clear flame." The chant resembles the sacrificial words uttered in mythological tales, but the smoke at the same time creates the link with the sky, it symbolically carries Thoreau's spirit upwards, on the axis of the world. This, and the building of the house become creations of the world, of his "own little universe", whereas being in the centre of this universe signifies being where Gods are, according to Mircea Eliade (Eliade, 2008: 78). Then, the coming out of the woods points to the coming out of the primordial darkness, the discovery, after being lost in the Chaos, of, and emergence to, harmony and balance, to Cosmos, beauty.

Chastity and the predominance of a spiritual life are important elements in *Walden*. While living, at least at symbolic level, a chaste and pure life, in full awareness of the way the Universe is organized, man will shift the perspective through which he sees events and "reality". In Emerson's terminology, he will acquire a "transparent" way of seeing - "I become a transparent eyeball" Emerson wrote in his essay "Nature" (1836). He will therefore come to perceive, beyond reality as appearance, the true Reality - that commonly perceived as "fabulous". What is Real is that Cosmos is divided, and all beings normally live a historic moment which lacks any "transcendental significance" (Eliade, 1994,1: 76). The meaning of the word "reality" is shifted in *Walden*, but the distinction between illusion, the fabulous, and reality is particular to Thoreau. "Let us settle ourselves", Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, "and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris

and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom of facts in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake."

Reality appears more simple, and man is truly free when his mind is void of all the accumulation brought about by ages, and he sees that man is "an ant" among so many others, as well as a God, an Indra among so many others.²

As seen, Thoreau's hero lives in an a-temporal, a-spacial dimension reminding of immortality and first creation: "Both time and place were changed, and I dwelt nearer to those parts of the universe and to those eras in history which had most attracted me. [...] in some remote and more celestial corner of the system, [...] far from noise and disturbance" in "a withdrawn, but forever new and unprofaned, part of the universe." (T: 392) Losing oneself to the world - with its limits of time and place and death, therefore limited by the sensorial and phenomenological - living in a celestial dimension, is another expression of disconnectedness from the mundane and immersion into the a-temporal : "Not till we are lost, in other words not till have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and we realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations" (T: 459). Thoreau symbolically plays the Creator as well as the first man on earth. He thus reiterates the experience of the Paradisiacal state Mircea Eliade speaks of, but also plays a number of roles, a 'play' which is meant to help him integrate the past into present and experience aware wholesomeness. The symbolism in *Walden*, understood from the perspective of the Lost Paradise, makes possible the reading of this piece of literature as a manifestation of the author's attempt to take the reader on a trip to the primordial times of blessed reunion with the gods and recuperation of an Edenic state.

As a means for achieving this, Thoreau attempts to restore the sacredness of life. His turning into a fisher and a farmer is not accidental. On the contrary, as Eliade points out, "agriculture is a rite revealed by Gods or civilizing heroes, therefore being a *real* and *significant* act" (Eliade, 2013: 74; emphasis in original). In a de-sacralized society, agriculture is only a profane activity, focused on material gain. Devoid of its religious symbolism, farming becomes "opaque" and tiresome, it is meaningless and 'closed' to the universal, spiritual world (Eliade, 2013: 74). "Beasts of burden" is what men are, Thoreau clamors, not because they work but because they have lost the real meaning of their work and take it as drudgery instead of going at it lightheartedly, accepting and obeying nature's course and without minding the gains. This is precisely what Thoreau attempts to revert. He tries to make his reader aware of the deeper significance behind the act, of its sacred value: "it was no longer beans that I hoed, nor I that hoed beans" (T: 449) he says. His farming experience is

² The meaning of the references Thoreau makes to Indra and the ants at war episode are better understood if the reader is aware of the identity of Indra. According to Mircea Eliade, Indra was a vain Warrior, the King of Gods, whom Vishnu gave a precious lesson in the difference between Reality and reality, Time and time. While Indra was urging the expenditure of incredible amounts of money and energy to have a huge palace build in his honor, he is shown a file of ants which had suddenly marched in the place where Indra and Vishnu were having a conversation. To Indra's amazement and elucidation, Vishnu explains that the ants are as many previous Indras, just as Indra is a former ant himself. He understands the difference between eternity and history, and becomes aware of the existence of an infinite number of Cosmoses within which the present one is just one among the many. Indra achieved awareness in the illusory nature of existence from an ontological perspective, while it is nevertheless historically real. Without leading to the abandonment of life, awareness shifts perspectives, changes the way he looks at events and works for a purpose higher than mere present fame in historical time. Becoming aware means, Eliade points out, being "redeemed". (Eliade, 1994,1: 73-76; 85)

the reversing of perspectives, he does it to "connect to the earth", because the "profane" dimension of working is unimportant to the hero. In the same manner, he does not fish for food, but to reiterate a sacred work. He performs a mythical act, oriented towards what it does to the soul, not to the pocket or stomach.

The way in which men decide *where* to settle was once a most important, vital, part of existence, as we learn from Mircea Eliade. Thoreau no less acknowledges this and places a significant importance on the place where he dwells. His hero goes to live on the very spot where a hierophany³ had in immemorial times occurred, where a gate between the sky and earth had been opened and remained thus. Many people having died there, their souls animate the place, consecrating it (T: 468; Eliade, 2008: 26). The place is, qualitatively, of a different value than a "profane" one (Eliade, 2008: 26). Perpetuating, by narration, the story, Thoreau perpetuates its sacred dimension, preventing man's 'doom' to a "profane" existence. Thus, the readers learn that the pond had been created where formerly a hill "rose as high into heaven as the pond now [sank] deep into the earth" (T: 468). The reader can imagine an axis, - the *axis mundi* - an invisible vertical line reaching out from the depth of the pond and penetrating heaven. There exists, then, a link between sky, earth, and even, as the reader will discover, the underworld. As the story goes, "anciently the Indians were holding a pow-wow upon a hill here, which rose as high into the heavens as the pond now sinks deep into the earth, [...] and while they were thus engaged the hill shook and suddenly sank, and only an old squaw, named Walden, escaped, and from her the pond was named" (T: 468). Moreover, "Squaw Walden" sometimes resurfaces - emerging from the world of the dead - and drags to the lower world some inattentive worker: "sometimes Squaw Walden had her revenge, and a hired man, walking behind his team, slipped through a crack in the ground down toward Tartarus, and he who was so brave before suddenly became but the ninth part of a man" (T: 557). The other story Thoreau has on the formation of the pond is not less invested with the sacred dimension: allegedly, an "ancient settler" "came here with his divining rod, saw a thin vapor rising from the sward, and the hazel pointed steadily downward, and he concluded to dig a well here" (T: 468-9). Either story sends to a sacred act, and Thoreau's living here becomes, then, the beginning of a sacred journey, while his writing of it becomes experience translated for the reader's benefit.

Hierophanies, Mircea Eliade maintained, discover existential circumstances which are fundamental and provide a considerable enrichment of consciousness. (Eliade, 1994, 2: 8) It is a cosmic recuperation of a sacred dimension which has been obliterated after the triumph of Christianity, Eliade contends. On the spot where a "breaking of ground" occurred, through a hierophany, there also occurred an 'opening' upwards or/and downwards - towards the realm of the dead (Eliade, 2013: 30) - and thus the three cosmic levels can communicate. At the sacred spot, an escape from profane life is possible, the passing through to one or the other dimensions can be experienced (idem: 30-31). Communication still occurs between the underworld, the terrestrial and the celestial, since Squaw Walden - presumed to have eventually died - comes back and acts upon people in the terrestrial realm. Moreover, Thoreau himself, by "fishing for souls of men" in the waters of Walden, replays the image of bringing

³ Hierophanies are defined by Mircea Eliade as manifestations of the sacred in real life. (Eliade, 2010)

souls upwards - according to Jung, another mythical image stored in the collective unconscious, - recycled by Christianity (Eliade, 1995: 159).

Other elements in *Walden* coincide with Eliade's theory on the nostalgia for and reiteration of the Paradisiacal state. There is the issue of building a house - for which rituals used to be performed, in celebration of this reiteration of a greater Creation. Thoreau in fact deplores the loss of this spiritualization of the acts: "Ancient poetry and mythology suggest, at least, that husbandry was once a sacred art; but it is pursued with irreverent haste and heedlessness by us [...] we have no festival, nor procession, nor ceremony [...]. By avarice and selfishness, and a groveling habit, from which none of us is free, [...] the landscape is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives." (T: 454) To repair the loss, he symbolically "performs" for himself and his "virtual" audience, at the time of building the house: "[Patrick] was there to represent spectatordom, and help make this seemingly insignificant event one with the removal of the gods of Troy".

On the other hand, settling a territory, the very act of building up signifies the founding of a world. Any new building of a dwelling place equals a new beginning, a new life, an *incipit vita nova* - beginning which repeats the primordial era when the Universe was born (Eliade, 2013: 46)⁴ and which used to be accompanied by celebratory rites. Thoreau's character is performing this symbolic ritual of building his "new world" as a ceremony, taking his time, making the most of every step of the experience. Besides, spring time - which is the correspondent of the Golden Age, but also of the New Year (Eliade, 2008: 56) the morning of the world and therefore beginning - reinforces the impression of "the creation of Cosmos out of Chaos" (T: 572), of living a first creation, the newness of the world, purity. According to the same Romanian scholar, the building of a new house stands for creating an *imago mundi*, (Eliade, 2013: 35-37; 42-43) reiterating the first creation - thus, cosmogony (Eliade, 2013: 30-35). Thoreau urges that the house be a reflection of the self of the dweller, an *imago* of the self, an outgrowth from the inside,⁵ and thus the building of the house parallels the building of a self. "Better paint your house your own complexion; let it turn pale or blush for you" he clamors. (T: 360) However, Thoreau is aware that "most men appear never to have considered what a house is" (T: 224)

Then, there is the idea of *axis mundi* connecting celestial and earthly. As Eliade contends, a pole, a tree, - and it may be added, a "mast", because Thoreau does create the image of man going through life tied to the mast, "like Ulysses" - symbolizes this central axis soaring towards heaven (Eliade, 2013: 43-44). Mircea Eliade explains the symbolic value of the axis connecting the three cosmic levels, in terms coming close to those used by Thoreau himself when he describes the formation of Walden Pond - precisely through a "breaking of ground".

⁴ "În contexte culturale extrem de variate, găsim mereu aceeași schemă cosmologică și același scenariu ritual: așezarea într-un teritoriu echivalează cu întemeierea unei lumi" (Eliade, 2013: 39)/ in extremely varied cultural contexts, we find the same cosmology and the same ritual: settling a territory is equivalent to the founding of a world" and "locuința nu este un obiect, [...] ci Universul pe care omul și-l clădește imitând Creația exemplară a zeilor, cosmogonia" (idem: 46)/ the dwelling place is not an object [...] but the Universe which man builds for himself imitating the exemplary Creation of the Gods, cosmogony" (my translation)

⁵ "What reasonable man ever supposed that ornaments were something outward and in the skin merely [...]" (T: 359)

Thoreau's hero identifies with the centre of his own "little world" - to which Walden Pond in turn is the centre (466) because through it an invisible connection with the sky runs. At Walden the connection exists from times immemorial. In building his fireplace, Thoreau creates a new pole, one that is "standing on the ground and rising through the house to the heavens; even after the house is burned it still stands sometimes, and its importance and independence is apparent" (T: 515). Apart from living where a "natural" axis connected earth and sky, he endeavors to build one himself, an enduring one, through which his communication with the sky will be performed. Through it, Thoreau's "I" makes his presence and alertness felt: "I too gave notice to the various wild inhabitants of Walden vale, by a smoky steamer from my chimney, that I was awake. "

Centrality is one of the 'central' concerns for Thoreau in particular and to New England Transcendentalists in general. The centre of the world - from the religious point of view - coincides with "the source of absolute reality", a closeness to the 'gate' which facilitates his communion with the gods.⁶ Being at the centre reveals from the very beginning one of the most profound meanings of the sacred space. Living at the Centre of the World, Eliade discovered, reflects desire to be around the gods, settling in a space which is open towards heights, communicating with the divine realm (Eliade, 2013: 70). Finding the centre requires a personal experience which would enliven in the consciousness certain primordial symbols. This can be performed either literally or mentally, by creating a mental centre (Eliade, 1994, 1: 64-66) - and the latter is what Thoreau's reader is expected to do. The centre will contain him, will prevent "dissipation" (Thoreau; Eliade). Finding the centre becomes of primordial importance in preventing the constant degradation of man, as he will remain focused on the importance and real significance of events, without being lost in insignificant, self-consuming passions. (idem.)

The reader knows that Thoreau's dwelling place was "beyond Cassiopeia's Chair", far beyond earthly limits. The choice of Cassiopeia as reference is not accidental, but further substantiates the suggestion of centrality, and this is only one among many others. The constellation of Cassiopeia is next to the pole star, which is close to the earth's axis of rotation. Thus, the idea of axis, centrality, and celestial. Thoreau sees the world as Cosmos, sees its cosmic implications, and this is, according to Eliade, an attitude specific to the religious pre-modern man. (Eliade, 2013: 72) Modern civilizations have, the same scholar contends, lost the sense of responsibility towards the cosmos, and are only concerned for the preservation of material, economic resources of the globe. Thoreau points out the insignificance of this view. The sacred dimension needs to be integrated in order that the harmony and balance at cosmic - not only global - level be preserved.

We would conclude that in *Walden* Thoreau re-discusses, re-evaluates and creatively re-interprets old myths, rituals, awakens "slumbering" dimensions of the psychic life of the addressee. Therefore, simply reading carefully his interpretation should bring change in the

⁶ "Am văzut că simbolismul centrului lumii [include] și cea mai modestă locuință omenească, de la cortul vânătorului nomad la iurta păstorului și casa cultivatorului sedentar. Cu alte cuvinte, un om religios se află în Centrul Lumii și totodată la izvorul realității absolute, aproape de 'deschiderea' care-i înlesnește comunicarea cu zeii." (Eliade, 2013: 52) / "we saw that the symbolism of the centre of the world [includes] even the most humble dwelling, from the tent of the nomad hunter to the herdsman's cottage and the house of the sedentary farmer. In other words, a religious man is placed in the Centre of the World and at the same time at the spring of absolute reality, close to the 'gate' which facilitates his communication with the gods. (my translation)

mental perceptions. As Eliade contended, in *The Quest*: "creative hermeneutics reveal meanings which had not been seized before and highlights them in such a vigorous way that, after assimilating the new interpretation, consciousness is no longer the same". The symbolic imagery the reader is presented with, experiences narrated become means of enchanting the profane man, of attaching him to the celestial, in order that he transcend and soar to heavens. *Walden* is Thoreau's way of building the relationship with the Paradise, of linking Earth and Sky, and give birth to a new man.

Henry Thoreau suggests primarily a radical shift of perspective in the way the individual places himself towards events and his own acts, restoring, in a de-sacralized world, the sacred dimension pre-modern men celebrated. The sense of timelessness and eternity which Thoreau proposes to a society living according to the railroad schedule, according to a mechanic and imposed rhythm is meant to re-place man, at least at symbolic level, in the primordial state of peacefulness and plenitude. It is a mode of being in the world, of choosing the spiritual and sacred over the profane or material.

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