

MYSTICAL SENSE AND EXPERIENCE IN THOREAU'S *JOURNAL*;  
OR, THE LIGHT IN THE MIST

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by

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This paper considers the degree and quality of Henry David Thoreau's self-professed mysticism, principally in his *Journal*, in which he uses the term and which features a representative and under-studied mystical experience. I begin by summarizing existing scholarship on the question of Thoreau's status as a mystic, highlighting important ideas to keep in mind and identifying scholarly shortcomings upon which to improve. I then move to the sites of Thoreau's most extensive use of the Chaldean Oracles, in his essay, "Walking," and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and the first notable instance of his association between mist and mystical thought. I conclude with the first five volumes of the *Journal*, leading to March 5, 1853, the date of Thoreau's self-designation as a mystic. Throughout the paper, my enquiry will proceed along three primary thematic lines—sense-experience, time, and reproducibility of observation—as considered in the motif of mist in the *Journal*.

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## PREFACE

Like so much scholarship in the year 2020, the scope and matter of this paper was forced to change. What was initially intended to be a hands-on interaction with Thoreau's papers—in the Harvard Libraries and the Concord Library—has become a far more intimate, digital inquiry. The coming pages will draw on sources held either on-line or in the Hesburgh Libraries, along with those furnished through the inter-library loan system. It is at once a testament to contemporary scholastic infrastructure, the new abilities afforded us by advances in the digital humanities, and the product of an inescapable shift in doing and thinking. Above all, I hope for this work to be a stepping-stone for future research, either my own or that of someone equally as fortunate to study so special a man.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

“I omit the unusual—the hurricanes and earthquakes—and describe the common.”<sup>1</sup> With this brief sentence, a deceptively off-hand remark, Henry David Thoreau essentially summed up his transcendent vision. It was the evening of August 28, 1851, and he was observing a new moon, “visible in the east.” This contemplation of the quotidian, Thoreau asserts, has the “greatest charm” and is the “true theme of poetry”; he does not wish for the “extraordinary,” but wants only the “ordinary.”

My study sits at the nexus of several lines of inquiry related to Thoreau, touching upon themes present in these everyday images. The first is that of his mysticism, which is most clearly established by his own appellation as such, in his *Journal*, in 1853. The second is that of Thoreau’s knowledge of the Chaldean Oracles, a series of Neoplatonic texts from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. which Thoreau cites in “Walking,” *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and the *Journal*. This last work is the final principal element in this discussion. I will use it as my primary site of enquiry, grounding my case for Thoreau’s mysticism in it along three principal themes: time, sense-experience, and reproducibility, as all three relate to the recurring image of mist. These three themes will

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<sup>1</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, eds. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 428. Throughout citations from the *Journal* in this paper, any italicization is original, and any underlining is my emphasis.

be explained more later, but I will show how, together, they function as the primary traits of Thoreau's mystical thought and writings, giving it shape and direction.

This paper began with a question: what does Thoreau's mysticism consist of, and how may we recognize it? It has evolved, over time, to ask more and different questions. What was the relationship between the mystical and ordinary life in Thoreau's mind? How seriously did he use the term "mystic"? To what extent may we describe him as such? What sources or intertexts did he have for his mysticism, whatever it was? Must the "unusual" be included to some degree? Some answers will come over the next pages, but this is not an all-encompassing, all-answering paper. Rather, my hope is to provide new connections which will be examined even further in the future, both in the *Journal* and the rest of Thoreau's oeuvre.

I begin by summarizing the existing scholarship dedicated to this idea of Thoreau's mysticism. This consists of a single book and three dissertations. Although Thoreau is often referred to off-hand as a mystic, those are the only works whose principal interest has been mysticism proper. I will then proceed chronologically, taking his self-designation, and its date of March 5, 1853, as an end-point, through which to retrospectively consider his *Journal*, his essay, "Walking," and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. I ground this discussion in primary quotations, including secondary works as needed, and generally take Thoreau at his word on matters, including himself. My ancillary aim is to provide a working bibliography and a literary first step to a more modern understanding of Thoreau's thought at a cultural-temporal cross-road, with his mysticism as the product.

## CHAPTER 1: EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP

### 1.1 Previous Considerations of Thoreau's Mysticism

Little work has been done on the question of Thoreau's mysticism, and no work has been dedicated to the topic since 1979. From 1963 to then, there appears to have been something of a golden age of consideration of Thoreau as a mystic. In those sixteen years, three dissertations and one book were published, addressing various aspects of the matter. In this section, I will first present the lone book about this issue—William J. Wolf's *Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist*, from 1974—then each of the dissertations. Though they consider similar questions, and the same principal figure, there are enough differences between their methods and substance that each is worth its own review. Lastly, I will present a small group of less-directly-related works which still analyze this same idea. Taken together, all this will serve as a summary of the state of the field of Thoreau studies on the topic of his mysticism. It will both allow the critical work of this essay to proceed and enable future readers to have a single summary of the area. I seek to neither disprove nor discredit any of these works; each makes important observations, and it is only for their existence that the present paper is possible at all. Rather, I wish to refine and complement their arguments, bringing in new sections of text and making new connections.

## 1.2 William J. Wolf's *Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist*

The only published book on Thoreau's mysticism, William J. Wolf's 1974 *Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist* is a slight volume which draws together, as its title suggests, various inter-related strands of Thoreau's thought. Wolf's argument begins with ideas of Thoreau's religiosity and his movement away from clearly defined and organized conceptions of it, emphasizing the *Journal*, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and *Walden*.

One of Wolf's first assertions is that not enough work and attention had, up to 1974, been paid to Thoreau's religiosity. An expressed purpose of his analysis is, rather than to "establish a privileged sanctuary for the theologian by an imperialist rejection of other professional approaches to Thoreau," to just "bid for equal time or minority representation in a crowded field of contenders."<sup>2</sup> The one element of Thoreau's religious thought—prior to any consideration of his mysticism, which Wolf notes did not change over time—was the Concordian's "continuous criticism of the churches and, even more, of their professional leaders, the clergy."<sup>3</sup> He places this observation after elaborating on Thoreau's fractured relationship with his early mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson; Wolf attributes this divergence to style, as Emerson would "make sweeping generalizations in fairly abstract terminology, whereas Thoreau retained concreteness and specificity at all stages." Similarly, their "temperaments" were at odds, and they had "quite different histories of mental and life struggle," with Emerson's "pioneer[ing] movement away

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<sup>2</sup> William J. Wolf, *Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist* (Philadelphia: United Church Pres, 1974), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Wolf, *Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist*, 38.

from the older Unitarian divines” and Thoreau’s relative aversion to precisely “formulat[ing] his theological.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite its prominence in the title of his work, Wolf spends few pages directly addressing the question of Thoreau’s mysticism. He cites Amos Bronson Alcott’s diagnosis of it, that Thoreau is “less thinker than observer; a naturalist in tendency but of a mystic habit, and a genius for detecting the essence in form and giving forth the soul of things seen. [...] His mysticism is alike solid and organic, animal and ideal. He is the mythologist of these last days.”<sup>5</sup> The apparent prominence of Thoreau’s observational habits is notable, as it is the central mechanism by which any of his mystical thought may come to be. The rest of the passage, which Wolf did not cite, may help illuminate this analysis:

Thoreau comes and stays an hour or two. Students of Nature alike, our methods differ. He is an observer of Nature pure, and I discern her as exalted and mingled in Man. Her brute aspects and qualities interest him, and these he discriminates with a sagacity unsurpassed. He is less thinker than observer; a naturalist in tendency but of a mystic habit, and a genius for detecting the essence in the form and giving forth the soul of things seen. He knows more of Nature’s secrets than any man I have known, and of Man as related to Nature. He thinks and sees for himself in a way eminently original, and is formidably individual and persistent.<sup>6</sup>

Several remarkable elements emerge from the fuller text. The common sympathy which Alcott feels is essential to mystical thought as a whole, but to Thoreau’s in particular, as I

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<sup>4</sup> Wolf, *Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist*, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Amos Bronson Alcott, *The Journals of Bronson Alcott*, ed. Odell Shepard (Boston: Little, Brown, 1938), 318 & 350. Wolf quotes all of this passage. Emphasis mine.

<sup>6</sup> Alcott, *The Journals of Bronson Alcott*, 318. The underlined portion is the passage Wolf quotes.

consider his attempts to package and disseminate his idiosyncratic life and observations. The full quotation reveals that Thoreau was not a passive observer, but an all-considering one, who took in Nature's "brute aspects" as much as her beauty. Alcott's note that Thoreau sought, in some way, to perceive Nature in-itself—"Nature pure"—is also remarkable, particularly as distinct from his own "mingled" approach. Implicit in this whole section is the essential role of observation. Potentially a self-evident point, it is crucial to keep in mind the wonder inherent in the idea that nature's true existence—whatever that may be—is, in some way, accessible through quotidian engagement, rather than some abstruse, hermetic ritual which can only take place in one location at one time on one day of the year. It is present all around us, and at all times.

Interwoven with this is a key attribute of Thoreau's thought which Wolf notes: his "down-to-earthness," his attraction to "simple event[s]," which can "charm him into a mystical experience."<sup>7</sup> Importantly, Wolf also recognizes the "common structural feature of mysticism," including in Thoreau's experience: "purgation, contemplation (or illumination), and union." And, later, as Wolf notes, that the "stage of purgation has already been obvious in his writings, particularly in the *Week*, in which he proposed to purify the senses until they would lead him directly to God," and joins many commentators in recognizing the emphasis Thoreau placed on sound.<sup>8</sup> Foreshadowing later portions of this work, two particularly useful citations Wolf brings in are from Thoreau's *Journal* and an August, 1854, letter to Harrison Gray Otis Blake:

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<sup>7</sup> Wolf, *Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist*, 113.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 114–115.

The other evening I was determined that I would silence this shallow din; that I would walk in various directions and see if there was not to be found any depth of silence around. As Bonaparte sent out his horsemen in the Red Sea on all sides to find shallow water, so I sent forth my mounted thoughts to find deep water. I left the village and paddled up the river to Fair Haven Pond. As the sun went down, I saw a solitary boatman disporting on the smooth lake. The falling dews seemed to strain and purify the air, and I was soothed with an infinite stillness. I got the world, as it were, by the nape of the neck, and held it under in the tide of its own events, till it was drowned, and then I let it go down-stream like a dead dog. Vast hollow chambers of silence stretched away on every side, and my being expanded in proportion, and filled them. Then first could I appreciate sound, and find it musical.<sup>9</sup>

Here, what Wolf describes as a “disciplining of the sense, the curbing of instincts in the interest of a higher life, and the pursuit of a simple life-style” function, in his insightful view, as constituent steps in a “preparation for mystical experience” and development into a “higher form,” with “constant rebirth” as the tool to achieve it.<sup>10</sup> This is a particular experience, and a particular moment on a particular day. But it is merely representative. It is one of countless moments which work together, one at a time, to move a man forward and upward. We know this, on a basic level, from the fact that Thoreau wrote multiple works, and had interpreted this same existence various times, and from various angles. Were one clear-eyed, transcendent moment enough to propel a man to the level of God, it would render subsequent works unnecessary, even redundant.

Still in the context of the *Journal*, Wolf notes that, “despite less articular discussion of his mysticism” later in the as opposed that in the first five volumes, which

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<sup>9</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Familiar Letters*, ed. F.B. Sanborn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 230-231. Emphases mine.

<sup>10</sup> Wolf, *Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist*, 116.

run over with more explicitly mystical imagery, “there is evidence of continuity with what went before.”<sup>11</sup> As late as October of 1859, Wolf points out appropriately mystical passages, including: “It is only when we forget all our learning that we begin to know. [...] Your greatest success will be simply to perceive that such things are, and you will have no communication to make to the Royal Society.”<sup>12</sup> I agree with Wolf’s assessment of the trajectory of Thoreau’s mystical life. The only points I wish to refine are tied to timing and motivation, as I believe the Chaldean Oracles are a necessary intertext to consider when establishing both the start and nature of Thoreau’s mystical thought.

Contemplation—the second step, after purgation—will be the primary focus of the *Journal* passages I present later. Part cataloguing, part meditation, they represent an awareness of the surrounding world, with its variations and vicissitudes, which is the first step to any sort of mystical awareness. On this point, Wolf offers the following passage as support:

Nature must be viewed humanly to be viewed at all; that is, her scenes must be associated with humane affections, such as are associated with one’s native place, for instance. She is most significant to a lover. A lover of Nature is preeminently a lover of man. If I have no friend, what is Nature to me? She ceases to be morally significant.

Nature is reported not by him who goes forth consciously as an observer, but in the fullness of life. To such a one she rushes to make her report. To the full heart she is all but a figure of speech.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Wolf, *Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist*, 119.

<sup>12</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. XII, 371.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. IV, 163. Emphases mine.

The key element here, both in my estimation and Wolf's is the role of viewing, the sitting with, and among, nature, for which there is no substitute. Particularly important to Thoreau's contemplation is its activeness. He does not go into woods and simply sit; even if he is resting, Thoreau is looking around, at the birds above, or the signs of animals in the snow, or, as we will see, at rivers and waterfalls, considering his perceptual relationship to them, and what he may learn of himself from them.

The last step in the mystical progression Wolf lays out is that of the "unitive experience or vision."<sup>14</sup> As I will demonstrate later, I believe this is grounded in Thoreau's conception of transparency, both his own and that of the world around him, as they blend, to the point that he feels and describes the world as it courses through him. Although Wolf notes that the "unitive experience transcends time," and that it "overcomes the separations and strangeness of space," it is worth keeping in mind the degree to which time and space are not simply obstacles to overcome. They provide exactly the tools which an individual (or a collective) would need to move past them.

Wolf rightly comments that the "purpose behind the nature of mysticism is to know God and to communicate his revelation to humankind," an observation followed by a brief consideration of the role the senses play in Thoreau's schema. The first sense among them all, Wolf points out, was sound, and silence, "the deliberate suspension of all sound, [...], was the climax of the process of purifying the senses."<sup>15</sup> Emergent from these various observations is the role of discipline, the "curbing of instinct in the interest

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<sup>14</sup> Wolf, *Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist*, 120.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

of a higher life, and the pursuit of a simple life-style,” all quotidian examples of devotion to some idea beyond the everyday.<sup>16</sup> Even if Thoreau’s *Journal* was meant as a private work, it is notable, as we will see later, the degree to which ideas, and even whole passages, from it made their way into his published works and lectures. This fluidity of thought allows us to approach the *Journal* as in-line with, if of a different kind than, the rest of his corpus.

A final point to take from Wolf’s work is his consideration of Thoreau’s self-designation as a “transcendentalist” and a “natural philosopher,” the two descriptors paired with “mystic.” He notes:

Like a true Transcendentalist, Thoreau not merely looked at nature but, in looking at her, looked through and beyond her to richer meanings. He wanted the scientific fact to flower into a moral truth, to become the vehicle for communion with the Maker of nature. Nature for the spiritually awakened person could become a language for expressing what was deepest within people.<sup>17</sup>

Foremost in this quotation, and so prominent as to almost be reductive to mention, is the role of sight, and “looking at” Nature. Wolf does not build upon this element, but it is fundamental in every element of Thoreau’s thought we may consider. For the purposes of his “transcendentalism” or natural philosophy, it, along with hearing, is the primary means by which Thoreau may contemplate or consider any element around him. These two passive senses, as distinct from anything more active, are his first points of contact with the surrounding world.

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<sup>16</sup> Wolf, *Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist*, 116.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 153. Emphases mine.

Taken together, Wolf's work is a neat, efficient, and dense inquiry into various aspects of Thoreau's thought, including its mystical aspect. It's a good first step, but one which can be expanded. A central shortcoming of Wolf's work is its lack of consideration of the tangible experience of Thoreau's mystical thought. Wolf notes small details, such as how the "mystic in Thoreau invokes Silence, with a capital letter," when ending *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, but he omits any consideration of the Oracles, and does not once mention the figure of the mist, which recurs hundreds of times in Thoreau's works and, as we will see, occupies a liminal space in his world and mind.<sup>18</sup>

### 1.3 Dissertations

Three dissertations have been written on Thoreau's mysticism, all between 1963 and 1979. They consider many of the same aspects as Wolf, though not in quite the same three-step process, so I will mention only the unique, salient points of each. None, however, considers the role of mist or Thoreau's use of the Chaldean Oracles.

The earliest dissertation—indeed, the earliest work I have found on this topic—is “The Mysticism of Henry David Thoreau,” and dates to 1963, as part of a Doctor of Philosophy degree Charles C. Kopp completed at Pennsylvania State University. Kopp considered several of Thoreau's creative products, structured around his central interpretation of the Concordian's “assertion that he was a mystic neither as mere sympathy toward mysticism, nor a deep interest, enthusiasm, or knowledge, but as the

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<sup>18</sup> Wolf, *Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist*, 75.

actual living experience of mystical consciousness.”<sup>19</sup> The idea that Thoreau could be invested in mystical thought and experience enough to sustain it as an interest over years, but that he did not have a “deep interest” in the topic, seems contradictory. I will suggest that Thoreau, taking the Chaldean Oracles as a source, constructed his own, idiosyncratic form of mysticism, for which the very name “mystic” was only a short-hand.

A central point Kopp makes is his emphasis on Thoreau’s assertion of a “purely sensuous life.”<sup>20</sup> To Kopp, this reflects the degree to which we must approach Thoreau’s whole body of work, including his mysticism, with his sense-experience front-most in our minds. This life of Thoreau, Kopp notes, was potentially “a mode of mystical apprehension of all creation, all existence”; the Concordian, he asserts “felt as if he could perceive Being Itself in everything that is.”<sup>21</sup> Like Wolf, Kopp notes the prominent role contemplation played in Thoreau’s life and mystical thought, and that his “mind or imagination was instrumental in evoking the contemplative process by which he perceived the correspondence of the divine immediacy of the outer world with his inmost mind.”<sup>22</sup> This is a key point, but Kopp does not detail the means by which the “mind or imagination” took in the material necessary in the contemplative process. That is what my current work will focus on later.

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Calvin Kopp, “The Mysticism of Henry David Thoreau” (PhD diss., The Pennsylvania State University, 1963), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Kopp, “The Mysticism of Henry David Thoreau,” 103.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 106-108.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

A 1977 dissertation, entitled simply “Henry David Thoreau: Mystic,” by Michael R. Keller, of Ball State University, has the deceptively straightforward aim of “construct[ing] a profile of Thoreau as a mystic,” using the *Journal* and his letters, but also with an emphasis on *Walden*, in “an attempt to clarify” its “mystical dimension.”<sup>23</sup> Keller draws from various sources, including a “noted LSD researcher,” on questions of altered consciousness.<sup>24</sup> However, for the substantive purposes of this paper, Keller’s work offers only meagre help, confessing that he focuses on *Walden* and “ignore[s] *A Week* and Thoreau’s other formal writings,” for the sake of focusing on his “temperament,” rather than the “interpretation of his writings.”<sup>25</sup> Keller’s primary contribution to the present study is his consideration of the “cumulative effect of repeated illuminations on Thoreau,” which granted him a “deep trust in himself and a deep trust in life.”<sup>26</sup> As I will show later, Thoreau’s recognition, or admission, of his own mysticism came after more than five years of recorded sense experiences, and considerations of his place within the world (including numerous references to mist, which, I will show, are a central image). Due to its focus on *Walden*, rather than the *Journal* or *A Week*, as well as its distance from an actual interpretation of Thoreau’s ideas, Keller’s work is the least useful dissertation for my present study.

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<sup>23</sup> Michael Robert Keller, “Henry David Thoreau: Mystic” (EdD diss., Ball State University, 1977), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Keller, “Henry David Thoreau: Mystic,” 18.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

The final dissertation on this topic is by Don S. Gervich, from a Doctor of Education at Boston University, in 1979. Gervich's most relevant contribution is his note that Thoreau had "three customs, or methods, for infusing writing with character." It "must be composed exactly at the right crisis," meaning that it must be prompt and spontaneous, even improvisational.<sup>27</sup> Second, it must be rewritten, and, on this point, Gervich cites Thoreau's plea to "write often, write upon a thousand themes" though it is not clear that the Concordian actually meant revision in that statement. Indeed, returning to the source of the quotation—a journal entry from November 12, 1851—it is clear that Thoreau did not mean to revise one's work at all, even if that was his own method: "Write often, write upon a thousand themes, rather than long at a time, not trying to turn too many feeble somersets in the air, and so come down upon your head at last. Antaeus-like be not long absent from the ground."<sup>28</sup> Perhaps Gervich intended "rewrite" in the sense of "write continuously," but that is not entirely clear. In any case, the third element he asserts as part of Thoreau's process is the most relevant to this study:

Thoreau framed his experience with time. His method was to see present things as if they were past or future, to give now a setting and scope. This does not mean events are bare, later embellished by reminiscence. Yet for the writer, especially, experience ripens—it is not completely contained during the time it happens.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Don Gervich, "The Writer and the Mystic: Henry David Thoreau" (EdD diss., Boston University, 1979), 151.

<sup>28</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. III, 107.

<sup>29</sup> Don Gervich, "The Writer and the Mystic: Henry David Thoreau," 152.

This is a more helpful assertion. The primary adjustment I suggest, considering Thoreau's use of mist, is not that the Concordian "framed his experience with time," but to see his experiences as products of, and manifestations of, time, rather than just saying a certain event took place on a certain day, or in a certain season. He viewed them as single moments in a long progression of thought and history, moments equal to, and yet distinct from, all others. The distinction is perhaps subtle, but it is important nonetheless.

A final note is that none of these scholars considered the figure of mist in the *Journal* as part of Thoreau's mysticism, nor did any of them spend a reasonable amount of time with the Chaldean Oracles. Together, they supply a formidable base of more than a thousand pages' worth of work on this question, but there is still more to say.

## CHAPTER 2: “THE FLOWER OF THE MIND”

### 2.1 The Chaldean Oracles

A major intertext which, I propose, factored into Henry David Thoreau’s conception of himself as a mystic are the Chaldean Oracles. Thomas Taylor—the English translator and scholar, whom the Transcendentalists knew well—provides a rosy introduction when he tells us that they are “not only venerable for their antiquity, but inestimably valuable for the unequalled sublimity of the doctrines they contain.”<sup>30</sup> Taylor explicitly groups them with the works of Plato, and frames them as inspiring him, when he says that “some of them are the sources whence the sublime conceptions of Plato flowed,” while others are “perfectly conformable to his most abstruse dogmas.”<sup>31</sup> The origin of the texts appears to be “Chaldaic,” which may suggest Thoreau’s initial spelling of them as the “Chaldaic Oracles,” rather than “Chaldean,” as he later says. In either case,

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Taylor, *Collection of the Chaldean Oracles* (Kshetra Books, 2015), v.

This introduction (hence the numeral in place of a page number) is a reprint, and a revision of my work would include visiting a library with an original copy, as scans are not readily accessible and, even when they are, the organization of the various publications is irregular. Although much of original 1797 edition of *Monthly Magazine* is available on-line, there are numerous pages which seem to be unavailable, including 508 and 509 in the original, which contain the bulk of Taylor’s introduction. I use this original where possible.

<sup>31</sup> Taylor, *Collection of the Chaldean Oracles*, vi.

the term refers to the ancient region of Chaldea, located in south-eastern Mesopotamia, and which was eventually folded into the state of Babylonia, around the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.<sup>32</sup> The texts come to us as a series of hexametrical verses, which were meant to be performed. It is the combined actions of recitation, speaking, and breathing which are thought to contribute to their ritualistic aspect.<sup>33</sup> They are considered to be the last “important Sacred Book of pagan antiquity,” and an influence on Neoplatonists from “Porphyry to Psellus.”<sup>34</sup> Taylor “arranged” the Oracles into four parts: “The Oracles of Zoroaster”; the “Chaldean Oracles delivered by Theurgists, under the reign of the Emperor Marcus Antoninus”; the “Chaldean Oracles, which were either delivered by Theurgists, under the reign of the emperor Marcus Antoninus, or by Zoroaster”; and “Chaldean Oracles Extracted from the Treatise of Lydus de Mensibus.”<sup>35</sup> Some scholars support simply combining the three under the “Chaldean” banner—itsself a contested term, as “Chaldean” may simply have been a metaphorical appellation, referring to the content or style of the fragments—they have, to this point, always been treated as distinct, and the Transcendentalists seem to have considered them as such, without an explicit author. E.R. Dodds asserts that “much harm” could result from “treating as a ‘fragment’ every passage which shows similarity to an attested fragment,” and

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<sup>32</sup> Georges Roux, *Ancient Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 281.

<sup>33</sup> Ruth Majercik: *The Chaldean Oracles: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1989), 6.

<sup>34</sup> E.R. Dodds, “New Light on the ‘Chaldean Oracles,’” *The Harvard Theological Review* 54.4 (1961): 263.

<sup>35</sup> Taylor, *Collection of the Chaldean Oracles*, Contents.

subsequently using a chain of fragments to construct an argument or arrive at a critical conclusion.<sup>36</sup>

The introduction further states that they were “not forged by Christians of any denominations,” and traces their historical path through the hands of Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino, who believed the work to be the product of “certain Chaldean wise men.” Taylor explicitly joins the fragments with Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus, all figures Thoreau and Emerson knew; Porphyry, he adds, “expressly mentions that certain revelations ascribed to Zoroaster were circulated, in his time, by many Christians and heretics who had abandoned the ancient philosophy.”<sup>37</sup> Taylor concludes by stating that he may “with great confidence” ascribe the texts to “the Chaldean Zoroaster,” ostensibly because of Pico, who labeled the work as “Zoroastrian.”<sup>38</sup>

Following this, there is a “Concise Exposition of Chaldaic Dogma,” by Psellus, the Byzantine monk, which begins with the structure of the world: “seven corporeal worlds,” including one Empyrean, then three “etherial” [*sic*] and three “material.”<sup>39</sup> In this schema, there is “one principle of things,” the “one” or the “good.” There is a series of “fontal fathers,” called the “Cosmagogi,” or “leaders of the world.” They, along with other figures in the world, “venerate a fontal triad of faith, truth, and love,” asserting that:

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<sup>36</sup> Dodds, ““New Light,”” 267.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Taylor, “The Chaldean Oracles of Zoroaster,” *Monthly Magazine & British Register* Vol. 3, Issue 19 (June 1797): 510.

<sup>38</sup> Taylor, “The Chaldean Oracles of Zoroaster,” 510.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 510.

There is a ruling sun from a solar fountain, and an archangelic sun; that there is a fountain of sense, a fontal judgment, a thundering fountain, a dioptric fountain, and a fountain of characters, seated in unknown impressions, [being the] fontal summits of Apollo, Osiris, and Hermes. They likewise assert that there are material fountains of centers and elements; that there is a zone of dreams, and a fontal soul.<sup>40</sup>

This continues for several pages, ultimately serving to illustrate the hierarchy of existence and knowledge, as it flows down from above. The Exposition cites an unnamed Oracle, perhaps the same as the text: “a partial soul is a portion of divine fire, a splendid fire, and a paternal conception, it must be immaterial and self-subsistent essence; for every thing divine is of this kind; and of this the soul is a portion.”<sup>41</sup> Taylor’s voice returns at the end of the introduction:

I add, for the sake of those readers that are unacquainted with the scientific theology of the ancients, that as the highest principle of things is a nature truly ineffable and unknown, it is impossible that this visible world could have been produced by him without media; and this not through any impotency, but, on the contrary, through transcendency of power.<sup>42</sup>

Taylor explicitly establishes this schema as intermediary, as, without such a mediator, “all things must have been like [the One], ineffable and unknown.” A final image, which Thoreau may have found evocative, comes at the very end:

Lines, too, emanating from the centre of a circle, afford us a conspicuous image of the matter in which these mighty powers proceed from, and subsist in, the ineffable principle of things. For here, the lines are evidently things different from the centre, to which, at the same time, by their summits, they are exquisitely

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<sup>40</sup> Taylor, “The Chaldean Oracles of Zoroaster,” 511. Emphasis mine.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 511.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 512. Emphasis mine.

allied. All these summits too, which are indescribably absorbed in centre, are yet no parts (i.e., powers) of it; for the centre has a subsistence prior to them, as being their cause.<sup>43</sup>

It is striking that Taylor described all this as “scientific theology,” and one wonders how Thoreau would have reacted to such a description. The key ideas here, for the purposes of the present study, are those intermediaries. How, to a man walking around Concord, would the transcendent One, the Good, have been communicated? If the ideas are, as they claim and appear to be, universal, how might he, in a radically distant and different time and place, access them? It would have to be through natural phenomena, the only tangible, similar thing in Concord to the ancient Middle East. The culture would not have been similar, nor the food, the dress, not even the climate, entirely. But certain elements, as I propose, were similar enough that these ideas factor into his general approach.

A key issue here is considering how much, or how many, of the *Oracles* Thoreau knew. Thomas Taylor’s “Collection of the Chaldean Oracles” was initially published in the third volume of *The Monthly Magazine*, in 1797, in just that work’s second year of operation. In 1806, the collection was republished in Taylor’s own *Collectanea: or, collections, consisting of miscellanies*, and again in the editions of *The Classical Journal* from December of 1817 and March and June of 1818. The introductory portion we saw above is present in each volume. How Thoreau knew of the works, specifically, is not yet

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<sup>43</sup> Taylor, “The Chaldean Oracles of Zoroaster,” 512.

clear. Ralph Waldo Emerson has various references to volumes of Taylor's work in his library, including one he loaned to Bronson Alcott, but they come from later decades.<sup>44</sup>

Although there have been a few works that consider the presence of the Chaldean Oracles in Thoreau's thought, none has suggested a connection between them and his mysticism. The most substantial consideration comes from Theo Davis, who notes that:

Like Emerson, Thoreau is working out an understanding of the Greek phrase *χρή σε νοεῖν νόου ἀνθει.*, from the *Chaldean Oracles*, a collection of fragments of unknown origin, which were once associated with Zoroaster. The translation of *νοεῖν* that Thoreau gives is 'perceive,' but it is helpful to bring in Heidegger's investigation of the term in *What is Called Thinking?* In Heidegger's reading, the word contains qualities of both perceiving and of thinking, suggesting a thought that is more receptive than shaping. Still, it is not fully recessive: 'In *νοεῖν*, what is perceived concerns us in such a way that we take it up specifically, do something with it... . We take it to heart. What is taken to heart, however, is left to be exactly as it is. This taking-to-heart does not make over what [it] takes. Taking to heart is: to keep at heart.

[...]

Like Heidegger, Thoreau characterizes *νοεῖν* as a perception, which in its cautious care tends to blossom near and resonate with what concerns it. [...] The flower of the mind, then, indicates the refined manifestation of an impersonal mental activity, which is characterized by an appreciative and attending perception. In 'Walking,' Thoreau again quotes the *Chaldean Oracles* on the topic of knowing: "'You will not perceive that as perceiving a particular thing," say the Chaldean Oracles.' Instead, perception will be, in Thoreau's own words, like 'the lighting up of the mist by the sun.'<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume V: English Traits*, eds. Philip Nicoloff, Robert E. Burkholder, & Douglas Emory Wilson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 242–55.

<sup>45</sup> Theo Davis, *Ornamental Aesthetics: The Poetry of Attending in Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 43–44. Emphases mine.

Davis also makes a useful point in the footnote attending this section; namely, that Thoreau's translation "is probably his own, as it differs from that in two available to him, Thomas Taylor's 1817

This is a lengthy passage to reproduce in its entirety, but it contains several relevant points and reveals its own limitations. The first key point is on the use of “perceive,” which Thoreau uses throughout his *Journal* in a sense a bit stronger than “see” but not quite “engage with.” It is, in his work, a deeper looking into, which aligns with Davis’ point of perception “blossom[ing] near and resonat[ing] with what concerns it.” The question becomes, what concerns it? The Oracles themselves, with their emphases on the senses, serve as a useful intermediary, showing what, in ordinary life, may be worthy of perception, particularly if one keeps an eye toward transcendence.

The second key point is the passage Davis mentions, which I will reconsider later. She does not note the degree to which it is a synthesis of earlier ideas Thoreau had, but how it is, for the first time, an example of him putting the Oracles together with his every-day, journal-based observations.

The final point here is Davis’ idea of “taking to heart,” and the notion of leaving the surrounding world “exactly as it is.” Thoreau’s perception is a receptive activity, and he, over thousands of pages in the *Journal* details how he observed and took in the surrounding world, considering, crucially, his position in it. Not as an agent of change, but as a passer-through, as one who sought to understand it and its relation to himself. It is helpful, too, that Davis draws attention to the Heideggerian distinction between perceiving and thinking; however, my current interest lies in the step *before* either of

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edition and the 1835 translation by William Gowan, and includes more of the phrase than Emerson does in ‘The Poet.’”

those may take place, in the moments of apprehension, and the means by which one may either perceive or think.

If it is true that Thoreau's mysticism manifested or operated along sensory lines, and we know that he associated the Chaldean Oracles, at least to a certain extent, with sense *perception*, it is thereby reasonable to believe that the Oracles were a constitutive, if unacknowledged element of Thoreau's self-conception as a mystic.<sup>46</sup> In order to study this point in greater detail, I will now present the textual evidence for Thoreau's use of the *Oracles* in the light of the principal ideas I considered above; namely, that three main elements of his mysticism were the elements of time, sense-experience, and reproducibility in his quotidian life.

I have considered the source Thoreau had for the Oracles, though the exact book through which he learned of them remains unclear, and a subject for future enquiry. Along with this, I have presented most of the scant scholarship which exists on the question of Thoreau's knowledge of the text, as well as an overview of the Oracles' structure and purpose. Moving to Thoreau's works themselves, and toward his self-designation as a mystic, I will consider the degree to which sense-experience—which the Oracles hold up as central to understanding transcendence—along with the two inter-related elements of time and reproducibility, was joined to explicit references and allusions to the Oracles. The product of this combination is a recognition of divine forces

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<sup>46</sup> It is also possible that Thoreau was influenced by the fragmentary quality of the Oracles. Particularly in the weeks and pages after his reference to that "Chaldaic" fragment, he seems to make special use of short, aphoristic sentences. "Music soothes the din of philosophy and lightens incessantly over the heads of sages." And "I should be pleased to meet man in the woods. I wish he were to be encountered like wild caribous and moose." I, 149 and 143. This is conjectural but alluring.

in-the-world, which manifest in everyday moments and which Thoreau was ready and eager to catalogue.

## CHAPTER 3:

### “I AM A MYSTIC”

#### 3.1 The Chaldean Oracles in Thoreau’s Works

In this section I consider Thoreau’s *Journal*, focusing primarily on his self-designation as a mystic. As we will see, the figure of the mist is associated with the Chaldean Oracles early in the text. From that point it is often—though not exclusively—used in a casual, everyday sense, to talk about the weather and similar matters. But it retains a strange, alienating quality. I propose that the mist represents, in the natural world, a similar position which Thoreau sees mystical experience as occupying in the human world: an intermediary. Each is neither entirely of the planet around it nor of another and each is necessarily constricted by time: as mist falls, then returns, so, too, is mystical experience inconstant and periodic. Above all, each experience is available to all people: as anyone can, in the right moment and right light, observe mist on a morning, so, too, is mystical experience available to all, though only some seek or embrace it.

I must first consider the place that Thoreau’s journal occupied in his oeuvre, both for him, as its producer, and for us, as its ultimate readership. Wolfe notes that the journal is “not primarily a diary of the events of the day or of self-analysis, but the recording in tranquil recollection and often in polished literary form of thoughts long after their initial

stimuli had passed.”<sup>47</sup> The work itself is a curious, flowing combination of semi-daily reflections, notes on phases of the moon, sketches of clouds and branches, tales of the area around Concord, citations from Cato to Hindu manuscripts, and everything in between.

Robert Sattelmeyer has noted that the earliest phase of the *Journal*, from 1837 to 1842, reflects “the moral earnestness and high aspirations of a young man with no very sure sense of vocation,” and, perhaps appropriately, it is “stocked with quotations from his reading” and his own “pronouncements” on such grand ideas as “friendship, bravery, and truth.”<sup>48</sup> Crucially, one must keep in mind that, due to Thoreau’s 1841 transcription of the earlier years, there is a chance he “revised and edited it deliberately to portray his apprenticeship in a light of aspirational high seriousness.” It is not until 1850, when the Concordian came to realize his writings were not destined for “very great popular success,” that he began to use his journal to “record” his thoughts and the “details of his study of New England natural history,” causing it to eventually become the “major document of his imaginative life.”<sup>49</sup> It is precisely its location at this liminal point between concrete observation and lived experience, on one side, and transcendent “truth” and ideology, on the other, that this paper is situated. If one is ever to achieve transcendence (or enlightenment, or any state of that ineffable sort) it may only ever be through the concrete and the quotidian, the stuff of daily life, that which is common to all

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<sup>47</sup> Wolf, *Thoreau: Mystic, Prophet, Ecologist*, 15.

<sup>48</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, ed. Robert Sattelmeyer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 446.

<sup>49</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, ed. Sattelmeyer, 446.

people. A person, born on the earth—in, say, Concord, Massachusetts, maybe around the middle of July of 1817—into an unavoidably concrete existence may only seek to overcome that life through that very materiality. A person stuck alone in a pool must swim to the edge in order to grab onto the side and extricate themselves; they cannot simply (for our purposes) get up and walk on the water.

Sandra Harbert Petrulionis has considered the later volumes of Thoreau's *Journal* in dialogue with his "Slavery in Massachusetts," and notes that, as evidenced by his 1851 discussion of the Thomas Sims affair and 1859 notes on the hanging of John Brown, Thoreau "rarely [used] his journal to document important events in his life or community": an event as significant as the publication of *Walden* warranted a mere two lines in August of 1854.<sup>50</sup> Rather, the journal was filled with daily observations and reflections, of varying levels of seriousness and creativity.

Similarly, Jeffrey S. Cramer, in his editor's introduction to selections from Thoreau's *Journal*, makes clear that the work grows our understanding of the man:

In the journal, we come closer to Thoreau, to the Thoreau who traveled around Concord, spending four or more hours a day in nature; who dined with friends, went to the lyceum, visited the libraries of Cambridge and Boston, helped fugitive slaves, led huckleberrying parties, and played his flute.<sup>51</sup>

The everyday, lived aspect of the *Journal* is among its most prominent features; the reader feels as much like a companion of Thoreau, led around by the hand (or eyes and

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<sup>50</sup> Sandra Harber Petrulionis, "Editorial Savoir Faire: Thoreau Transforms His Journal into 'Slavery in Massachusetts,'" in *Resources for American Literary Study*, ed. Jackson R. Bryer and Richard Kopley, (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 210.

<sup>51</sup> Jeffrey S. Cramer, introduction to *An Annotated Selection from the Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, by Henry David Thoreau (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), xvi.

ears), as the reader of a considered, let alone published, work. One cannot make the mistake of viewing the journal as a diary. To this point, Cramer cites a remark from 1857:

I would fain make two reports in my Journal, first the incidents and observations of to-day; and by to-morrow I review the same and record what was omitted before, which will often be the most significant and poetic part. I do not know at first what it is that charms me. The men and things of to-day are wont to lie fairer and truer in to-morrow's memory.<sup>52</sup>

Along with being a remarkable confession, as well as a lens through which to consider the whole *Journal*, this brief excerpt introduces what will be a crucial element of Thoreau's mysticism: time and the metamorphosis of man and thought throughout. A man and his thoughts—*any* person and their thoughts—as a palimpsest, a sentient surface which moves through time, and upon which that ultimate editor writes and erases, revises and modifies. If time was Thoreau's stream for a-fishing, it seems it occasionally splashed back at him.

This is where the present study is situated. Even if Thoreau had, as Sattelmeyer suggests, edited his journal, in 1841, his choices of inclusion, exclusion, and framing still carry weight, and remain part of his intellectual and spiritual progression, both if one thinks independently and teleologically, with his self-designation as “mystic” on the horizon.

Thoreau's earliest reference to the Oracles in the *Journal* is from 14 June 1840. Three days earlier, on June 11, Thoreau had finished his previous journal, and noted,

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<sup>52</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. IX, 307.

“End of my Journal of 546 pages.” The next entry comes from the 14<sup>th</sup>, when he lists a series of passages:

Λόγος τοῦ ἔργου ἄνευ ὕλης.—*Aristotle's definition of art.*

Ὁ χρή σε νοεῖν νόου ἄνθει.—*Chaldaic Oracles.*

Ἐγώ εἰμι πᾶν τὸ γεγονὸν, καὶ ὄν, καὶ ἐσόμενον, καὶ τὸν ἐμὸν πέπλον οὐδεὶς πω θνητὸς ἀπεκάλυψεν.—*Inscription upon the temple at Sais.*

Plotinus aimed at ἐπαφήν, and παρουσίαν ἐπιστήμης κρείττονα, and τὸ ἐαυτὸν κέντρον τῷ οἷον πάντων κέντρῳ συνάπτειν.

Μέλλει τὸ Θεῖον δ' ἐστὶ τοιοῦτον φύσει.—Euripides in *Orestes*.

“The right Reason is in part divine, in part human; the second can be expressed, but no language can translate the first.”—

Empedocles.<sup>53</sup>

The texts with which Thoreau associated the Oracles reveal, to some extent, his opinion of the work; placing a line from them with Aristotle and Plotinus not only suggests that he held them in high regard, but that he considered them in the same general field. Moreover, it is notable that Thoreau chose these as the first words in a new journal volume, only his second.

The work in Thoreau's oeuvre which features the Oracles most is his *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.<sup>54</sup> He begins with an allusion, on “Monday”:

Men do not fail commonly for want of knowledge, but for want of prudence to give wisdom the preference. What we need to know in any case is very simple. It is but too easy to establish another durable and harmonious routine. Immediately all parts of nature consent to it. Only make something to take the place of something,

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<sup>53</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. I, 139.

The text from the “Chaldaic Oracle” quotation is identical to that in *A Week*: “*which you must perceive with the flower of the mind.*” Throughout citations from the *Journal* in this paper, any italicization is original and any underlining is my emphasis.

<sup>54</sup> I made several of these observations in a 2019 term paper, “Oracles and Senses in Emerson and Thoreau.” They have not appeared or been published elsewhere, and the research behind them has been revisited and revised since that time.

and men will behave as if it was the very thing they wanted. They must behave, at any rate, and will work up any material. There is always a present and extant life, be it better or worse, which all combine to uphold. We should be slow to mend, my friends, as slow to require mending, “Not hurling, according to the oracle, a transcendent foot towards piety.” The language of excitement is at best picturesque merely. You must be calm before you can utter oracles. What was the excitement of the Delphic priestess compared with the calm wisdom of Socrates?—or whoever it was that was wise.—Enthusiasm is a supernatural serenity.<sup>55</sup>

This quotation of the “oracle” comes from the “Collection of the Chaldean Oracles,” originally published in *The Monthly Magazine, and British Register*, volume III, in 1797, by Thomas Taylor. It was republished in *Collectanea; or Collections consisting of Miscellanies inserted in the European and Monthly Magazines, etc.*, in 1806, and was reprinted a final time in 1818, in the *Classical Journal*. The fragment itself is listed as “delivered under Antoninus, or by Zoroaster,” so the authorship is not entirely clear. The text itself reads: “(Damascius in vita Isidori apud Suidam.) Nor hurling, according to the oracle, a transcendent foot towards piety.”<sup>56</sup> The unattributed citation is striking in its incongruity with the surrounding passages. It is also notable that Thoreau includes this quotation from the Oracles in-line with a comment about a “present and extant life,” suggesting, perhaps, that his conception of day-to-day observation and awareness was already being informed, if not yet profoundly changed, by his reading.

Thoreau later references the Oracles explicitly:

Beside the vast and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat-Geeta, even our Shakespeare seems sometimes youthfully green and practical merely. Some of these sublime sentences, as the

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<sup>55</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, in *Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Robert F. Sayre, (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1985), 103. Emphases mine.

<sup>56</sup> Taylor, “The Chaldean Oracles of Zoroaster,” 39.

Chaldaean oracles of Zoroaster, still surviving after a thousand revolutions and translations, alone make us doubt if the poetic form and dress are not transitory, and not essential to the most effective and enduring expression of thought. *Ex oriente lux* may still be the motto of scholars, for the Western world has not yet derived from the East all the light which it is destined to receive thence.<sup>57</sup>

It is remarkable to see an anonymous work from the near East, the provenance of which is unknown, mentioned in the same lines as Shakespeare and the *Bhagavat Gita*. If this was truly the value or import which Thoreau ascribed to the fragments, the connection between them and his *oeuvre* deserves even greater scholarly attention. The key idea here, for the purposes of my argument, is the relationship Thoreau implicitly creates between the value a work has, and which it may retain through translation, and the various linguistic manifestations it may take. The passage suggests that he viewed the language in which an idea was expressed as, in some sense, illusory and reductive. The whole of the Oracles' message escapes any single translation and, perhaps, even the original text.

On "Tuesday" of the week, Thoreau, while discussing the poet, Anacreon, notes that he had "lately met with an old volume from a London bookshop, containing the Greek Minor poets, and it was a pleasure to read once more only the words, Orpheus, Linus, Musæus,— those faint poetic sounds and echoes of a name, dying away on the ears of us modern men."<sup>58</sup> Already there is a subtle playing with time, the bringing of the past into the present; this is not a unique approach, but it is worth pausing on and noting.

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<sup>57</sup> Thoreau, *A Week*, 116.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

The past is, through those works, still highly present, specifically through the medium of communication and the senses. The sounds may be faint, but they have still reached us, and we may still act upon them appropriately. Thoreau continues later:

There is something strangely modern about [Anacreon]. He is very easily turned into English. Is it that our lyric poets have resounded by that lyre, which would sound only light subjects, and which Simonides tells us does not sleep in Hades? His odes are like gems of pure ivory. They possess an ethereal and evanescent beauty like summer evenings, ὃ γρή σε νοεῖν νόου ἄνθει,—which you must perceive with the flower of the mind,—and show how slight a beauty could be expressed. You have to consider them, as the stars of lesser magnitude, with the side of the eye, and look aside from them to behold them. They charm us by their serenity and freedom from exaggeration and passion, and by a certain flower-like beauty, which does not propose itself, but must be approached and studied like a natural object. But perhaps their chief merit consists in the lightness and yet security of their tread [...]<sup>59</sup>

This is from the very first Chaldean fragment, which Taylor renders as:

There is a certain intelligible [immediately subsisting after the highest God] which it becomes you to understand with the flower of intellect.

Learn the intelligible, for it subsists beyond intellect.

The intelligible is food to that which understands.

Eagerly urging itself toward the center of resounding light.

Every intellect understands deity.

For intellect is not without the intelligible; it does not subsist separate from it.

[Thus] You will not apprehend it by an intellectual energy, as when understanding some particular thing, [but by the flower of intellect, the unity of the soul.

[For] It is not proper to understand that intelligible with vehemence, but with the extended flame if an extended intellect: a flame which measures all things, except that intelligible.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Thoreau, *A Week*, 183.

<sup>60</sup> Taylor, "The Chaldean Oracles of Zoroaster," 57.

Striking in Thoreau's adaptation is the sideways glance which he describes as necessary to "consider them," a structure made all the more interesting by his use of visual language in reference to recited words, and their similarity to "pure ivory." The senses, it would appear, have some limit before a sort of synesthesia sets in, and one means of perception spills over into another. Each sense on its own can, at best, capture only part of the totality of some event or object in front of a perceiver. The "flower-like" beauty is especially striking given Thoreau's repetition of the "flower of the mind"; this, too, suggest some limit to the senses, with the added element of reciprocity, or mirrored structure, between observer and observed, between Man and Nature. The beauty which he describes is an intangible, temporary thing, and it must be approached like any other worldly phenomenon.

A second key reference comes from both the *Journal* and Thoreau's essay, "Walking." Although the latter appeared in various guises over several years, it was first delivered, as a speech, on April 23, 1851, a date which makes sense within the schema I will lay out. The speech brings together an earlier *Journal* entry and another fragment from the Oracles:

My desire for knowledge is intermittent, but my desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant. The highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence. I do not know that this higher knowledge amounts to anything more definite than a novel and grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we called Knowledge before—a discovery that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy. It is the lighting up of the mist by the sun. Man cannot know in any higher sense than this, any more than he can look serenely and with impunity in the face of the sun: Ὅς τὸ νοῶν, οὐ κείνον

νοήσεις,—“You will not perceive that, as perceiving a particular thing,” say the Chaldean Oracles.<sup>61</sup>

This portion comes from the same Greek as the section Taylor translated above; his and Thoreau’s translations differ slightly, suggesting that Thoreau worked on the Greek himself. As I showed earlier, Theo Davis considers part of this quotation in her chapter. However, she does not place it in the context of Thoreau’s mysticism, nor does she go beyond acknowledging the sense-perception implications. This section from “Walking” draws directly from Thoreau’s journal entry, dated just two months earlier, February 25, 1851, which I will consider later. The final two sentences are lifted almost directly, with the oracular fragment added after. One may reasonably conclude from this that Thoreau thought of the Oracles in the same context as man’s epistemological reality and the figure of “mist,” as a thing to be “lit up” by the “sun” of knowledge.

Key points to take away from this portion are, again, the role and limits of the senses. Man is limited, and this limitation is even put in highly tangible, reproducible terms: nearly everyone likely knows how uncomfortable and untenable it is to stare directly at the sun, how blinding and overwhelming that can be. The very same sun which may “light up the mist” is also perfectly capable of blinding us; we are able to know it, as we often know elements of nature, through its effects and tell-tale signs of its influence.

A full, in-depth consideration of Thoreau’s entire *Journal* is beyond the scope of this paper. I will, instead, first present the few times when Thoreau explicitly uses the term “mystic,” and then use his explicit self-designation as a mystic, and its date of 5

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<sup>61</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Essays*, ed. Lewis Hyde (New York: North Point Press, 2002), 172.

March 1853, as an end-point toward which I will work through the first years of the *Journal*, from 1837. This will allow for a focused study which also covers enough of Thoreau's development to be representative.

### 3.2 Mist in the *Journal*

In these first volumes of the *Journal*, Thoreau portrays mist as a changing, intermediary entity. It takes on various roles, from a typical snowy mist on a winter's day to a physical representation of the relationship between the earth and the heavens. I will consider Thoreau's motivic use of mist along several lines. First, and most plainly, is its role as a daily weather phenomenon. Quite simply, mist as water hanging in the air, often connected to rain or snow. The second aspect is its transparency, that Thoreau can still see things through it. As I will briefly present, transparency has been a part of mystical thought for millennia, including in the oeuvre of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The third aspect of the mist builds upon this second point, evolving its transparency into something distortive or alienating. This is not a negative, per se, but rather a metaphysical distancing between Thoreau and the world around him, brought on by seeing everyday objects in, or through, a new way. The final element concerns what the mist itself may bring to mind. At several points, it seems a carrier of ideas or sensations from other times and places, brought to Thoreau in this moment purely because he is looking and paying attention.

This consideration of mist follows on from Thoreau's close joining of the Chaldean Oracles and the image of the "lighting up of the mist by the sun," which I presented earlier. The association of the mist with a mystical text gives, I propose, enough reason to consider the mystical role of the mist itself. As we will see, following

on from that Chaldean pairing, the image of the mist takes on its own importance throughout the *Journal*, carrying forward its many implications through thousands of pages of entries.

Importantly, Thoreau does not use “misty” as a general, catch-all term for “evocative,” or even for the actual climatic event. We see this at several points:

Every part of the world is beautiful to-day; the bright shimmering water; the fresh, light-green grass, [...]. The beautiful, ethereal, not misty, blue of the horizon and its mountains, as if painted. Now all buds may swell, methinks; now the summer may begin for all creatures.<sup>62</sup>

Or, later:

The stones and cow-dung, and the walls too, are all cased in ice on the north side. The latter look like alum rocks. This, not frozen mist or frost, but frozen drizzle, collected around the slightest cores, gives prominence to the least withered herbs and grasses.<sup>63</sup>

Although there is not a single way in which to define “mist” in the *Journal*, that does not render it a generic term, as Thoreau also uses, at various points, “dew” and “haze” to suggest similar phenomena, though without the implications of mist.

Implicit in this discussion is a consideration of sense-experience, in three principal ways: as experience itself (i.e., something which may be jotted down or recollected, as an observed phenomenon), as a product of time (mist is necessarily a transient occurrence, the product of particular temperature, humidity, wind, etc.), and as a reproducible thing, both across time, for Thoreau, so that he might revisit the same

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<sup>62</sup> Thoreau, *Journal* vol. III, 19.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. IV, 436.

moment after the fact, as well as compare experiences across time, and for the reader, whenever and wherever they may be, so that they may concretely and tangibly experience the same effects Thoreau sought.

From the very first pages of the *Journal*, in October of 1837, there are hints of the ideas and structures to come. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of that month, Thoreau noted that, while “searching for Indian relics [...] on a Sunday evening” with his brother, John, they came upon a “feasting ground” of the native peoples. From this, he mused:

How often have they stood on this very spot, at this very hour, when the sun was sinking behind yonder woods and gilding with his last rays the waters of the Musketaquid, and pondered the day’s success and the morrow’s prospects, or communed with the spirit of their fathers gone before them to the land of shades!<sup>64</sup>

A small detail, easily overlooked and potentially of little consequence, is the pairing of time and the senses. It is, to a certain extent, those “last rays” of the day, at the so-called golden hour, which inspired past individuals to reflect about their larger-than-the-present-moment existence. It is at this liminal moment—between light and dark, between warmth and coolness, between the large, single star of the day and the many, small stars of the night—that Thoreau turns his thoughts to what lies beyond and, crucially, projects this onto other people, supposing it an experience explicitly not unique to him. It seems reasonable to conclude that Thoreau would imagine a past person doing something he would not personally do himself; he would likely not describe this Native person pondering nature at this quotidian moment if he had not been in the same position at least once.

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<sup>64</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. I, 7.

November of 1837 featured more comments along these same perceptual lines. On the 5<sup>th</sup>, Thoreau remarked that “Truth strikes us from behind, and in the dark, as well as from before and in broad daylight.”<sup>65</sup> Essentially, then, at any time and from any direction, but, crucially, in reference to one of those conditions: directionally and photically. The 13<sup>th</sup> of that same month brought something of a follow-up: “Truth is ever returning into herself. I glimpse one feature to-day, another to-morrow; and the next day they are blended.” With December came an elaboration on this paradigm:

How indispensable to a correct study of Nature is a perception of her true meaning. The fact will one day flower out into a truth. The season will mature and fructify what the understanding had cultivated. Mere accumulators of facts—collectors of materials for the master-workmen—are like those plants growing in dark forests, which ‘put forth only leaves instead of blossoms.’<sup>66</sup>

From the very start of his journaling, then, Thoreau is attuned to his senses—as both perceptive faculties through which he takes in the world—and as means to understanding some sort of truth. He does not say that he saw a light, and the light was just a light, and there was no more to see in the light. Rather, it is one phase of life, one moment in which “truth” may strike him, as well as part of the vehicle of the communication, literally lighting up the world around him so that he may see it. Any “flowering” requires light as part of its growth, and light invites perception.

In the first four volumes alone, Thoreau mentions mist at least 100 times, and at least 187 times in the subsequent ten volumes; this discrepancy will factor into my

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<sup>65</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. I, 8.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I, 19.

consideration shortly. Mist, specifically, is a surprisingly ideal example for my purposes. With regard to the three themes of inquiry—time, sense-perception, and reproducibility—one sees that mist is an idiosyncratic nexus of all three. It is precisely for that reason, I believe, that Thoreau dwelt on it to such a great degree, and why it became the object of cathexis to him, and in the context of the *Journal*.

Some occurrences of mist are comparatively unremarkable and appear to be Thoreau simply recounting the events of a day. On November 26, 1850, he noted,

A drizzling and misty day this has been, melting the snow. The mist, divided into a thousand ghostly forms, was blowing across Walden. Mr. Emerson's Cliff Hill, seen from the railroad through the mist, looked like a dark, heavy, frowning New Hampshire morning.<sup>67</sup>

Two days later, he noted it again: "Cold drizzling and misty rains, which have melted the little snow. The farmers are beginning to pick up their dead wood."<sup>68</sup> Or eleven months later: "A cloudy, misty day with rain more or less steady," and, a day later: "Drizzling, misty showers still, with a little misty sunshine at intervals."<sup>69</sup> Thoreau establishes an almost meteorological streak in his descriptions of the weather, and his activities as they pertain to it. Occasionally, he goes even further with these scientific descriptions: "There is a mist summer and winter, when the contrast between the temperature of the sea and the air is greatest."<sup>70</sup> Even here, when the description is still purely factual, there is an

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<sup>67</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. II, 115.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II, 116.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. III, 68-69.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II, 344.

undercurrent of notability. On this banal level, Thoreau already portrays the mist as an intermediary, as an entity between two highly distinct, even contrasting, poles; Thoreau's repeated, seemingly reductive descriptions of mist in his world, around ponds and hills, precisely establishes it as an everyday phenomenon. It is not some miraculous happening which is the product of eons of development; it's not even as remarkable as lightning. But he still takes the time to note it, to describe the way it hangs in the world, and occludes his surroundings. It is revealing that he conceived of such an everyday sight in such transcendent terms, that he considered something so ordinary as in-line with divinity.

At one point, Thoreau offers a small, scientific explanation for the role of mist in his perceptions in the woods, which evolves into a meditation of a much different nature:

The trees and shrubs look larger than usual when seen through the mist, perhaps because, though near, yet being in the visible horizon and there being nothing beyond to compare them with, we naturally magnify them, supposing them further off. It is very still yet in the woods. There are no leaves to rustle, no crickets to chirp, and but few birds to sing.

The pines standing in the ocean of mist, seen from the Cliffs, are trees in every stage of transition from the actual to the imaginary. The near are more distinct, the distant more faint, till at last they are a mere shadowy cone in the distance. What, then, are these solid pines become? You can command only a circle of thirty or forty rods in diameter. As you advance, the trees gradually come out of the mist and take form before your eyes. You are reminded of your dreams. Life looks like a dream. You are prepared to see visions. And now, just before sundown, the night wind blows up more mist through the valley, thickening the veil which already hung over the trees, and the gloom of the night gathers early and rapidly around. Birds lost their way.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. II, 119.

There is already more mist coming; the cycle of the world, of night into day, day into night, continues. Tomorrow there will be more to see, and perhaps there will be another observer. The lack of reference-point around the mist is notable, and suggests that it is, to some degree, overwhelming, visually or otherwise. The progression, of the “trees in every stage of transition,” seems nearly like an arboreal Jacob’s Ladder, leading Thoreau from where he stood to some transitional land beyond him, and beyond the trees. There is nothing unsettling or spooky about this sight. It seems perfectly serene, and rich with questions and implications. Thoreau is circumscribed in what he can see at any given moment, no more than “thirty or forty rods in diameter.” There is even an element of constant (re)generation, as the trees, he says, don’t simply appear, but are constantly “tak[ing] form,” as if, while in the mist, they lost something of their actual existence. “Life looks like a dream.” As plainly as that, Thoreau pinpoints precisely what is so uncanny about this forest: we all know it already. We have all likely had similar oneiric experiences, of being in a cloudy, undefined world, wherein we cannot get our bearings, and feel lost. But this is real life. Or is it? The distinction seems more tenuous by the moment.

At times, Thoreau’s descriptions of the mist go from merely descriptive to functional, or relative, as he considers its role in the world, often in the sense of its transparency. With this, there is often a sense of alienation from things seen through the mist. If we consider other traditions of mystical thought, we see that transparency plays a central role, often representing the mystical state itself, or functioning as a model which one should follow. The example closest to Thoreau is that of Emerson, in “Nature”:

Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of

special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear.

[...]

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.<sup>72</sup>

The central connection here is between the being “nothing” and “see[ing] all.” The two are not only *not* mutually exclusive, they are complementary, and work to the same end. Perception, here, is not related to corporeal life or reality. This element of transparency reflects both the intermediary role of the mystic—as a person or figure caught between, and communing with, two worlds—as well as the ultimate state which they and many others seek, of relation with the ground of being, or, in Neoplatonism, unity with the One.

In the mystical experience, “within this One,” all “otherness as opposition immediately disappears.” Things are “no longer distinguished as this and the other.” The illusory nature of reality, of distance between points, of extension, of distinction between up and down, is revealed as two-dimensional. Relationality collapses when one recognizes that all reality exists as a single point. Though this does not lead to the

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<sup>72</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “*The Best Read Naturalist*”: *Nature Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. Michael P. Branch & Clinton Mohs (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017), 76.

conclusion that “all things in the fullness and richness of their individual being disappear,” it does illustrate that “each with each and all with all is identical—one and the same.”<sup>73</sup> We come to recognize, as has been discussed in relation to other mystical works, that when “philosophical-theological inquiry”—which all mystical thought ultimately is—meets moral evolution and poetic thought, it “dissolves conceptual illusion, the distortions in understanding that impede awakening.”<sup>74</sup> Various limitations—“concepts, judgment, and fear”—are suspended, allowing the individual to “mediate an intimation of the infinite in the particular, to deliver the awakening shock of the transcendent.”<sup>75</sup> One ultimately comes to realize one’s own true existence as an “extensionless point, immune to and yet containing as itself all space and time, the horizon and nexus between contingency and self-subsistence.”<sup>76</sup> Transparency, as has been seen in mystical thought for millennia, is a short-hand for this. Rudolf Otto, whom I quoted above, is again relevant here:

We must take into account what is called ‘visio sub specie aeterni’: that is, not only the negation of the usual association of things together in space and time, but a positive ordering of their existence in and with one another in a higher but inexpressible way in the eternal ‘Now.’

[...]

Closely connected with this as the accompaniment of the ‘unification’ of things is what we may call their ‘transfiguration.’ They become transparent, luminous, visionary. They are seen—and this relates to their perception *sub specie aeterni*—‘in ratione

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<sup>73</sup> Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1932), 44.

<sup>74</sup> Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante’s Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 185.

<sup>75</sup> Moevs, *Metaphysics*, 185.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

ydeali' as Eckhart puts it, that is, no in their 'obviousness' but in their eternal idea. [...] And Plotinus says: 'There is the perfected beauty.'<sup>77</sup>

It is notable that Otto, in a consideration of mysticism, draws first upon Meister Eckhart, the noted 13<sup>th</sup>-century German mystic, and Plotinus, the major Neoplatonic philosopher known well to the Transcendentalists.

In Kabbalah, too, transparency is regarded as a high-point of mystical thought and experience.<sup>78</sup> The mystic, therein, "refrains from destroying the living texture of religious narrative by allegorizing it," though they do not dispense with allegory altogether; their "essential mode of thinking is [...] symbolical in the strictest sense."<sup>79</sup> With a "mystical symbol," in this tradition, a reality which itself has "no form or shape becomes transparent" and, in a sense, "visible, through the medium of another reality which clothes its content with visible and expressible meaning."<sup>80</sup> (27) Scholem offers the cross as a Christian example of this phenomenon, then continues on a particularly striking, beautiful point:

The thing which becomes a symbol retains its original form and its original content. It does not become, so to speak, an empty shell into which another content is poured; in itself, through its own existence, it makes another reality transparent which cannot appear in any other form. If allegory can be defined as the representation of an expressible something by another expressible something, the mystical symbol is an expressible representation of something which lies beyond the sphere of expression and

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<sup>77</sup> Otto, *Mysticism East and West*, 46.

<sup>78</sup> A recent work briefly addresses Thoreau's relationship with Kabbalah, but it is worth delving into more deeply. The book is "*Live Deep and Suck All the Marrow of Life*": *H.D. Thoreau's Literary Legacy*, by the Spanish scholars, María Laura Arce Álvarez and Eulalia Piñero Gil.

<sup>79</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1995): 26.

<sup>80</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 27.

communication, something which comes from a sphere whose face is, as it were, turned inward and away from us. A hidden and inexpressible reality finds its expression in the symbol.

[...]

For the Kabbalist, too, every existing thing is endlessly correlated with the whole of creation; for him, too, everything mirrors everything else. But beyond that he discovers something else which is not covered by the allegorical network: a reflection of the true transcendence. The symbol ‘signifies’ nothing and communicates nothing, but makes something transparent which is beyond all expression.<sup>81</sup>

The crucial framework here, which I may bring to the present study, concerns the relationship between the present, tangible reality with which we interact and transcendence beyond that. Transparency is a quotidian example of this, as it necessarily relates a thing—a glass, a mist, a person—to everything around it, defining a thing not in terms of itself, which is barren and narrowly-applicable, but in terms of its relations to its surrounding world, which is, ultimately, the key to transcendence.

Returning to the *Journal*, we see, on numerous occasions, how the mist appears transparent to Thoreau, and how, although he sees through it, the mist remains there, as a mediating entity, coloring, distorting, or otherwise rendering foreign that which is normally familiar. There are such moments as when, “The air is filled with mist, yet a transparent mist, a principle in it you might call *flavor*, which ripens fruit. The haziness seems to confine and concentrate the sunlight, as if you lived in a halo.”<sup>82</sup> Or, “beyond a narrow wisp or feather of mist, how different the sky! Sometimes it is full of light, especially toward the horizon. The sky is never seen to be of so deep and delicate a blue

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<sup>81</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends*, 27. Emphases mine.

<sup>82</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. II, 429.

as when it is seen between downy clouds.”<sup>83</sup> Or even when later, he saw “the factory bridge, seen through the mist, is agreeably indistinct, seen against a dark-grayish pine wood.”<sup>84</sup> The mist’s role here is in distancing our Concordian from the world around him, in its function as another object which must be gone through, or overcome, in order to reach the thing which he perceives. This role is psychological and ultimately paradoxical, as the mist does not actually take on any space itself or put any more *physical* distance between Thoreau and whatever he sees through it.

At other times, however, the mist takes on a more alienating role, not just quantitatively distancing Thoreau from the world around him, but qualitatively, rendering what he sees as ostensibly of a different type than he is: “A misty afternoon, but warm, threatening rain. Standing on Walden, whose eastern shore is laid waste, men walking on the hillside a quarter of a mile off are singularly interesting objects, seen through this mist, which has the effect of a mirage.”<sup>85</sup> People walking around Walden were surely not a strange sight for Thoreau, in the years he spent at the Pond. But it is the mist, the intermediary suggestive of another reality, which acts as the catalyst for distancing. The implication here is that, were it not for the mist, the men passing by would not have been “singularly interesting,” or perhaps interesting at all.

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<sup>83</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. III, 467.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. III, 406.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. III, 336.

On one occasion, in April of 1852, Thoreau even stretches the word “mist” grammatically, seeming to appreciate the melody and flexibility it offered him, as well as the multifaceted way in which it affected the world around him:

From this burnt shrub oak plain beneath the Cliff, I see the pond southward through the hazy atmosphere, a blue rippled water surrounded mistily by red shrub oak woods and on one side green pines and tawny grass,—a blue rippled water surrounded by low reddish shrub oak hills,—the whole invested, softened, and made more remote and indistinct by a bluish mistiness.<sup>86</sup>

At other times, the mist functions more explicitly as an obstacle:

Men lie behind the barrier of a relation as effectually concealed as the landscape by a mist; and when at length some unforeseen accident throws me in a new attitude to them, I am astounded, as if for the first time I saw the sun on the hillside. As, when the master meets his pupil as a man, then first do we stand under the same heavens, and master and pupil alike go down the resistless ocean stream together.<sup>87</sup>

The mist triggers a great equalizing, between the man and the pupil, who simply become two beings who perceive, rather than members of some power-structure. The mist does not permanently block anything, it does not damage, it does not denigrate. It merely recontextualizes and reframes what was already present, either a “landscape” or the relation between two people. Occasionally, Thoreau brings the mist back to himself:

I measure the depth of my own being. I walk with vast alliances. I am the allied powers, the holy alliance, absorbing the European potentates. I do not get much from the blue sky, these twinkling stars, and bright snow-fields reflecting an almost rosaceous light. But when I enter the woods I am fed by the variety,—the forms of the trees above against the blue, with the stars seen through the pines like the lamps hung on them in an

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<sup>86</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. 4, 429.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I, 182.

illumination, the somewhat indistinct and misty fineness of the pine-tops, and the finely divided spray of the oaks, etc., and the shadows of all these on the snow.<sup>88</sup>

Even here, the mist functions as a physical intermediary between Thoreau and anything above him. It presumably blocks his physical vision of the sky, but it does not preclude the ruminations of his mind.

The final element to consider here is that of the mist taking on its own nature, in moments when it ceases to simply be an intermediary between Thoreau and his neighbor or Walden and becomes the site of a different sort of illumination. One example I referenced earlier returns here:

Of two men, one of whom knows nothing about a subject, and, what is extremely rare, knows that he knows nothing, and the other really knows something about it, but thinks that he knows all, - what great advantage has the latter over the former? which is the best to deal with? I do not know that knowledge amounts to anything more definite than a novel and grand surprise, or a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we had called knowledge before; an indefinite sense of the grandeur and glory of the universe. It is the lighting up of the mist by the sun. But man cannot be said to know in any higher sense [any more] than he can look serenely and with impunity in the face of the sun.<sup>89</sup>

Several pages later, though on the same day, Thoreau notes:

I feel that the man who, in his conversation with me about the life of man in new England, lays much stress on railroads, telegraphs, and such enterprises does not go below the surface of things. He treats the shallow and transitory as if it were profound and enduring. In one of the mind's avatars, in the interval between sleeping and waking, aye, even in one of the interstices of a Hindoo dynasty, perchance such things as the Nineteenth Century, with all its improvements, may come and go again. Nothing makes

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<sup>88</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. 1, 472-473.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II, 167-168.

a deep and lasting impression but what is weight.  
Obey the law which reveals, and not the law reveals.  
I wish my neighbors were wilder.  
A wildness whose glance no civilization could endure.

He who lives according to the highest law is in one sense lawless. That is an unfortunate discovery, certainly, that of a law which binds us where we did not know that we were bound. Live free, child of the mist! He for whom the law is made, who does not obey the law but whom the law obeys reclines on pillows of down and is wafted at will whither he pleases, for man is superior to all laws, both of heaven and earth, when he takes his liberty.<sup>90</sup>

The “child of the mist” appears to be something of a free spirit, one in touch with the true essence of the world. Thoreau establishes a tension between the “highest law” and the “lawless” man; clearly, they live according to two different codes, a reflection of the distance between our existence and life down here and the transcendent reality to which we may all forge a connection. The question becomes, “Lawless to whom?”

Four months later, a similar idea returns:

I now descend round the corner of the grain-field, through the pitch pinewood into a lower field, more inclosed [*sic*] by woods, and find myself in a colder, damp and misty atmosphere, with much dew on the grass. I seem to be nearer to the origin of things. There is something creative and primal in the cool mist. This dewy mist does not fail to suggest music to me, unaccountably; fertility, the origin of things. An atmosphere which has forgotten the sun, where the ancient principle of moisture prevails. It is laden with the condensed fragrance of plants and, as it were, distilled in dews.<sup>91</sup>

This is similar to the passage with the trees I presented earlier, as it reflects a constant coming-into-being of the world just outside our cone of perception. The “origin of

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<sup>90</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. II, 170-171.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II, 237.

things” is all around us, and is of a power and primality that it, too, blends the senses, overwhelming or exceeding one, such that the visual phenomenon of the “dewy mist” may be—or, perhaps, must be—interpreted just as readily in sonic terms.

Days later, Thoreau notes: “Then let me walk in a diversified country, of hill and dale, with heavy woods one side, and copses and scattered trees and bushes enough to give me shadows. Returning, a mist is on the river. The river is taken into the womb of Nature again.”<sup>92</sup> Again, this mist is a way straight to the heart of reality, of what we perceive. Is it the mist which follows the path of the river, or the river which follows the command of the mist?

A final point, just a month later:

I hear the sound of Heywood’s Brook falling into Fair Haven Pond, inexpressibly refreshing to my sense. It seems to flow through my very bones. I hear it with insatiable thirst. It allays some sandy heat in me. It affects my circulations; methinks my arteries have sympathy with it. What is it I hear but the pure waterfalls within me, in the circulation of my blood, the streams that fall into my heart? What mist do I ever see but such as hang over and rise from my blood? The sound of this gurgling water, running thus by night as by day, falls on all my dashes, fills all my buckets, overflows my float-boards, turn all the machinery of my nature, makes me a flume, a sluice-way, to the springs of nature. Thus I am washed; thus I drink and quench my thirst.<sup>93</sup>

This is nothing short of communion with nature, of the recognition of the ultimate limitedness of humanity, of our collective place in and among the illusory extension of reality. Thoreau is not just washed but renewed on an existential level. He is becoming

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<sup>92</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. II, 260.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II, 300.

one with his external nature, and simultaneously bringing the external world into his body. The mediating entity, his skin, is all but gone, rendered permeable by the similarities of what is on either side of it. The audible rushing of the Brook is both the sound which causes Thoreau's great thirst and the sound which quenches it. This circularity, this cause-and-effect-and-repeat, is remarkable. The river which Thoreau sees outside of him, and his internal body, are equally familiar and alien. One wonders where we may find a brook of this sort.

### 3.3 Self-Designation as a Mystic

On a purely textual level, the term "mystic" appears three times in Thoreau's *Journal*. The first, and most notable appearance, comes from March 5, 1853:

The Secretary for the Association for the Advancement of Science – requested me as he probably has thousands of others – by a printed circular letter from Washington the other day – to fill the blanks against certain questions – among which the most important one was – what branch of science I was specially interested in – Using the term science in the most comprehensive sense possible – Now though I could state to a select few that department of human inquiry which engages me – & should be rejoiced at an opportunity so to do – I felt that it would be to make my-self the laughing stock of the scientific community – to describe or attempt to describe to them that branch of science which specially interests me – in as much as they do not believe in a science which deals with the higher law. So I was obliged to speak to their condition and describe to them that poor part of me which alone they can understand. The fact is I am a mystic – a transcendentalist – & a natural philosopher to boot. Now I think of it – I should have told them at once that I was a transcendentalist – that would have been the shortest way of telling them that they would not understand my explanations.

How absurd that though I probably stand as near to nature as any of them, and am by constitution as good an observer as most – yet a true account of my relation to nature should excite their ridicule only. If it had been the secretary of an association of which

Plato or Aristotle was the President – I should not have hesitated to describe my studies at once & particularly.<sup>94</sup>

It is surprising, and a bit amusing, that Thoreau should make such an assertion in so off-hand a manner. Several questions arise from both what he says here and how he says it. Is the tone meant to reflect some self-evidentiary quality of his status as a mystic? To what extent is the term “transcendentalist” interchangeable with “mystic”? What is the relationship between being a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a “natural philosopher”? I will return to these questions with Thoreau’s other explicit uses of the term in mind. This having been said, I take serious Thoreau’s assertion of his own mysticism, even if it was not fully serious, and nearly framed in jest.

The second appearance of “mystic” comes from February 13, 1855, as Thoreau considered a group of partridges in the woods around Walden: “These distinct impressions made by their wings, in the pure snow, so common on all hands, though the bird that made it is gone and there is no trace beyond, affect me like some mystic Oriental symbol,—the winged globe or what-not,—as if made by a spirit.”<sup>95</sup> Here appear two elements which will be crucial to keep in mind: sense-perception and time. In a quotidian moment, Thoreau comes upon a scene which is ostensibly unremarkable: the fresh Massachusetts snow, with the markings of a bird. There is also the “Oriental” aspect, which may be an evocation of the Chaldean Oracles’ origin in the near East, in ancient Mesopotamia.

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<sup>94</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. V, 4–5. Emphases mine.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. VII, 184.

The third, and final, use of the term comes from the afternoon of January 22, 1859, as Thoreau is considering poets by a riverside: “I meet these gods of the river and woods with sparkling faces (like Apollo’s) late from the house of correction, it may be carrying whatever mystic and forbidden bottles or other vessels concealed, while the dull regular priests are steering their parish rafts in a prose mood.”<sup>96</sup> This use of the term is the most casual and incidental, as the term appears to just be another adjective.

The question here becomes: How does Thoreau’s self-designation as a mystic follow from, or relate to, the ostensibly mystical descriptions of the world around him which I have proposed until now? All the details we have read up to this point, of Thoreau observing the world around him, of taking in sounds, seeing sympathy between the mist and his blood, have taken place before his first acknowledgement of any mysticism. This recognition, moreover, was not even a conclusion he reached on his own; rather, it was prompted by that letter he received, from that secretary.

As demonstrated in his cheeky response to the Secretary’s letter, Thoreau did not see the status of being a mystic as mutually exclusive to others in life. It complements being a transcendentalist and a natural philosopher perfectly, and effectively functions as a moderating state between the two. If being a transcendentalist means being concerned with the beyond, or the above, and being a natural philosopher means understanding the scientific minutiae surrounding people every day, then being a mystic bridges the gap between the two. It connects the transcendent to the simplest observations of one’s days, and the seemingly inconsequential mists of a weekday morning to the ultimate reality

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<sup>96</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. XI, 429.

above. The use of “transcendentalist” as a short had for the three parts of Thoreau’s self-description may stem from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1842 speech of the same name, read in Boston. It is also, in a sense, the most distinct of the three, the most readily intelligible. A “natural philosopher” would have been a known quantity, and “mystic,” perhaps, would have been a more complicated term than Thoreau would have wanted to explain. Indeed, he says using the term would have been the “shortest” way of explaining something they would not otherwise comprehend.

I propose that Thoreau was latently aware of his own mysticism; that is, he was familiar with the day-to-day lived experience of it but had not formally designated it as such. The Secretary’s letter was a trigger in his mind, causing him to formulate his conception of himself in a new and different way. In truth, there is nothing revelatory in his admission, and perhaps that is why it feels somewhat anti-climactic. As I have shown, the constituent elements of Thoreau’s mystical thought had been present in his *Journal* since 1847, and had already made their way into his public, published works. His tripartite designation—of “mystic,” “transcendentalist,” and “natural philosopher”—is essentially just a summary of his life, as he, on any given day, had an eye to the ground and one to the sky, with the rest of his body and senses in the middle.

It is also notable, even humorous, that Thoreau, on the day after this significant revelation or understanding, simply continues with his life: “*March 6. Sunday.* Last Sunday I plucked some alder (apparently speckled) twigs, some (apparently *tremuloides*) aspen, and some swamp (?) willow, and put them in water in a warm room.”<sup>97</sup> This scene

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<sup>97</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. V, 5.

evokes the story of Chao-chou's recommendation, from the 13<sup>th</sup>-century *Gateless Barrier*, a collection of Zen koans:

A monk said to Chao-chou, 'I have just arrived in this monastery;  
may the master please teach me something.'  
Chou asked, 'Have you eaten your rice gruel yet?'  
The monk said, 'I have eaten my rice gruel.'  
Chou said, 'Go wash your bowl.'  
The monk comprehended.<sup>98</sup>

Each passage addresses the issue of what one does next in life, what one does after they have received some sort of enlightenment, or reached some level of transcendence, even a low one. They wash their bowl. They proceed with their lives and share the message. Similarly, Thoreau's life is not upended by his acknowledgement of his own mysticism, something which his readers have cherished for decades. Rather, he just goes about his life, just as before, picking up some twigs, perhaps washing his bowl after lunch.

It appears that, over time, Thoreau's mystical thought becomes effectively decentralized. I propose that the relative reduction in his use of the term "mystic"—which is reduced to being a descriptor for a bottle in the woods—as well as a departure from descriptions of mist, and its centrality in his perceptions, reflect an evolution in his thought; namely, that his mystical disposition does not go away or dissipate, but is subsumed in his general world-view, rather than being something held at arm's length. It is the difference between a person saying, "I am going to examine this in a mystical way, and consider its transcendent implications," and the same person manifesting a mystical disposition over the course of years, which a brief consultation of any of Thoreau's more

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<sup>98</sup> Steven Heine, *The Koan Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 39.

mature works (i.e., those after this early portion of the *Journal*, such as *Walden*, *Cape Cod*, and others) shows remained with him throughout his writing life.

## CHAPTER 4:

### CONCLUSION

#### 4.1 A Look Backward

In the preceding pages, I have attempted to illustrate the degree to which Henry David Thoreau's *Journal*, with its repeated imagery of mist, represented his mystical experience during the years from 1847 to 1853. The mist, as I have suggested, functioned as a nexus, bringing together the elements of time, sense-perception, and quotidian reproducibility which epitomize Thoreau's mystical thought and representing, in the observable world, the role of the mystic in the human or religious world. Building upon existing works which address the question, my argument introduced, for the first time, the Chaldean Oracles into the discussion of Thoreau's mysticism. An ancient text which was readily available to him, both in translation and in the original Greek, it appeared throughout his private journal and public works, functioning as a rich intertext which was paired with observations from his own life, namely of the mist.

There are several key take-aways from this work. The first is that, notwithstanding how beloved and well-documented Thoreau's life and works are, there is still more to see in his works. The *Journal*, in particular, seems rich and fertile for future (re)examination. The second is that Thoreau's reading was even more diverse, impressive, and layered than many of his readers believe. Surely, there is even more to uncover on this topic. But his works are fonts which seem always new, each time one returns to them. New readings, methodologies, and contextualizations may surely educe even more from his idiosyncratic works, representative, as they are, of his unique

interests. Most salient, perhaps, is the degree to which we may learn from him, both intellectually and personally. Thoreau's writings straddle the line between the two like seemingly few writers. All the points I have raised above are as readily applicable to a personal life as it is to scholarship. The idea of turning the flower of one's mind toward a light in their own day, is crucial and always contemporary. Particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, this sort of optimism—the idea that there is transcendent truth in any time or place which we find ourselves—is, suddenly, more important than ever, if just as true as it always has been. In new ways, on new days, our own mists are lit up, all by the same sun.

#### 4.2 Next Considerations for Study

There remain as many ways to read Henry David Thoreau's works as there are people to read them. I will briefly a few possible next steps, either for myself or for others interested in this species of transcendence in his thought.

Methodologically, a worthwhile investigation would be applying this Neoplatonic reading to Thoreau's other works, perhaps *Walden* most ambitiously. Elements of it have been touched upon, including in some works I have referenced above. But there has not been a study dedicated exclusively to reading Thoreau as a latter-day Neoplatonist.<sup>99</sup> From the other side, it may be productive to consider Thoreau's use of mist in the rest of the *Journal*, or in other works. This general methodology—of following the development and progression of a single motif across a work—is one I am more familiar with in the

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<sup>99</sup> The closest is Daniel Dombrowski's *Thoreau the Platonist*, from 1986, but it is the product of a different school of thought.

context of Italian studies, and Dante, but it may surely be applied to Anglophonic works, as well. In the *Journal*, Thoreau also references Boethius, the 6<sup>th</sup>-century Roman statesman and philosopher, and another mystical figure with a disposition toward isolation (though, having been imprisoned, his impetus was somewhat different).<sup>100</sup> This is a rich and highly alluring pairing to study, as well.

It is, in a way, reassuring to have a figure like Thoreau speak to us, particularly in a time such as ours now, when the crushing reality of the everyday makes hopes and dreams seem more distant than ever, all while it brings suffering and death to our doorsteps. In his *Journal*, Thoreau, who suffered so greatly in his own time, is vulnerable and unclear, complex and human. He reminds us that transcendence is all around us. We do not always need to be ready for it; it will be there for us, when we are able to turn our minds toward it.

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<sup>100</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. I, 289. This is a connection which I have hoped to find for years, and which, to my knowledge, has not been studied at all. Sir Walter Raleigh also mentioned Boethius in his *History of the World*, which Thoreau knew and cited on at least one occasion.

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