

1-1-2016

Coleridge, Thoreau, and the Transatlantic "Riddle of the World"

Samantha C. Harvey
Boise State University

Rochelle L. Johnson
College of Idaho

Coleridge, Thoreau, and the Transatlantic "Riddle of the World"

Samantha C. Harvey and Rochelle L. Johnson

[T]he benefits conferred by [Coleridge] on this and future ages are as yet incalculable. . . . To the unprepared he is nothing, to the prepared, every thing.

Margaret Fuller¹

When Henry David Thoreau alludes to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" in his epigraph to *Walden*, he situates his Walden Pond "experiment" as a contribution to a transatlantic conversation concerning a central theme in Coleridge's poem – namely, how the self makes meaning of its relation to the world.² In fact, Coleridge's corpus shaped Thoreau's dedicated exploration of just this relation – that between the self and nature. For Thoreau, and for Coleridge before him, this relation involved a third integral category: spirit. While today we tend to separate the human "self," the external world of "nature," and the world of "spirit," Coleridge envisioned these categories as comprising a continuum accessible through the human mind. Hence, he wrote, "Then it is, that Nature, like an individual spirit or fellow soul, seems to think and hold commune with us."³ Thoreau expressed a similar interest in nature, spirit, and self: "My desire to commune with the spirit of the universe – to be intoxicated even with the fumes, call it, of that divine nectar – to bear my head through atmospheres and over heights unknown to my feet – is perennial & constant."⁴ Both writers pursued a notion of spirit as inter-related and integrated with the self and with the natural world.

An analysis of Thoreau's engagement with Coleridge provides three insights. First, the scope of Coleridge's influence on Thoreau has been underestimated. Thoreau's writings reveal that he encountered Coleridge's work as early as 1837; he continued to refer to Coleridge throughout the years before the publication of *Walden*. His reading of Coleridge's still relatively little known "Hints towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life" ("Theory") especially informed

both *Walden* and his ongoing studies of the self amid the natural world. Although Thoreau's reading of "Theory" and subsequent interest in Coleridge's concept of polarity has garnered some attention, no previous scholar has recognized that Thoreau was also influenced by a much larger body of interrelated prose works that Coleridge wrote and that spanned the disciplines of aesthetics and philosophy (*Biographia Literaria*), theology (*Aids to Reflection*), and politics and civics (*The Statesman's Manual*), while also addressing cutting-edge developments in science ("Theory"). These various writings comprise Coleridge's explorations of what he called the "dynamic philosophy," an endeavor that provided Thoreau with both a way of envisioning fluid continuities between the categories of self, nature, and spirit and a model of self-culture aimed at bridging philosophy, theology, science, and literature.⁵

Second, while Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" portrays the uncertain relation of self, nature, and spirit as leading to "dejection," Thoreau's works reveal that accepting this uncertainty can generate hope, anticipation, and even joy. "Surely joy," he writes, "is the condition of life."⁶ Thoreau certainly did not maintain this sort of optimism in all moments of his life, but neither was his view of nature unsophisticated. Even in the face of death and tragedy, he often accepted nature's ways as ultimately generative and beneficial for humanity.⁷ This optimism marks a significant contribution to transatlantic Romanticism.

Third, whereas recent scholars have understood Thoreau's career as divided into two incompatible stages (an early focus on self-culture and a later emphasis on the empirical collection of natural data), his engagement with Coleridge's dynamic philosophy reveals a more unified, sustained inquiry into the self as continuous with the realms of nature and spirit. That is, Thoreau, following Coleridge, saw the study of natural history as the pursuit of human consciousness. He then adapted Coleridge's theory in distinctive ways, finding in it a stimulus to what we will call an embodied self-culture.

Transatlantic Romanticism was motivated in part by an interest in solving what Coleridge called "the riddle of the world."⁸ The riddle itself originated with Oedipus's Sphinx, was revised by Sir Francis Bacon, and in the Romantic era signaled the quest to find meaning by explaining life itself. As Laura Dassow Walls demonstrates, the riddle was both scientific and philosophical in nature, pursuing "the meaning of man" amid "the particulars of the world" – or, "our place in the system of being."⁹ The riddle

of the world represents the perceived – but incompletely understood – relation of humanity to nature and spirit.

Thoreau was introduced to the riddle through both Emerson and Coleridge. Emerson describes the riddle as “a question” that “the world addresses to [the] mind,” “a question that it *cannot answer*.”¹⁰ Coleridge mentions the riddle throughout his corpus, asserting that “our destiny & instinct is to unriddle the World.” Claiming that a man of “Genius” particularly “feels this instinct fresh and strong in his nature” and “perceives the riddle & mystery of all things,” he defines the riddle of the world as also “the Riddle of Man” – the ultimate secret of humanity’s perceived connection to all things.¹¹

The Romantic riddle was premised on the belief that nature and spirit were interrelated. That this relation was perceivable by the human mind was a foundational assumption of the time.¹² Thoreau’s Journal for March 3, 1839, entitled “The Poet,” establishes nature and spirit as the primary poles of his worldview, with the human mind as the mediating agent between them:

He must be something more than natural—even supernatural. Nature will not speak through but along with him. His voice will not proceed from her midst, but breathing on her, will make her the expression of his thought. He then poeticizes, when he takes a fact out of nature into spirit — — ... His thought is one world, her’s another. He is another nature—Nature’s brother. ... Kindly offices do they perform for one another— Each publishes the other’s truth.¹³

This passage clearly distinguishes three realms of being:¹⁴ first, man (the poet) – “Nature’s brother,” who has “voice” and “thought,” perceives “truth,” and recognizes “a fact”; second, “nature” (from which “a fact” might be taken and which also may “speak” and exercise “thought” – a sort of sibling and collaborator with man in “perform[ing] for one another” “kindly offices”); and third, “spirit” (or, a “breathing,” which evokes the origins of the word “spirit”). Only through breath or spirit can man and nature publish “the other’s truth.” Man does not speak *for* nature (“Nature will not speak through” him); nor does nature speak *for* man (“His voice will not proceed from her midst”). Rather, the third term, spirit, enables the “publish[ing]” of “truth” – whether that truth is the “thought” of man or the “thought” of nature. Thoreau thus refers to the poet as capable of bringing a “fact out of nature into spirit,” working across the boundaries of the “natural” and “supernatural” in a creative act.¹⁵

The pursuit of the relation of self, nature, and spirit arguably describes the underlying motivation of Thoreau’s work, and in *Walden*, Thoreau

would come as near as anyone to articulating an answer to the riddle of the world. There he declares his experience of the "answered question" – his acceptance of self, nature, and spirit as conjoined if not completely understood.¹⁶

Thoreau likely first encountered Coleridge by reading his poetry at Harvard, but Thoreau's corpus soon reveals an ongoing interest. In 1837, he consulted *Letters, Conversations, & Recollections of S. T. Coleridge*.¹⁷ He then also read *Specimens of the Table Talk of the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Aids to Reflection (Aids)*, and *The Statesman's Manual*.¹⁸ On February 19, 1841, he quoted an appendix published in James Marsh's edition of *Aids*.¹⁹ He also refers to Coleridge in 1847 in "Thomas Carlyle and His Works," in his Journal in January and March 1852, and in a draft of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.²⁰ In addition, Thoreau "took unusually careful notes" while reading "Theory."²¹ Finally, Thoreau referred to "Dejection: An Ode" in his Journal in December 1852 and June 1853²² – and, as noted previously, in the epigraph to *Walden*.

Several of Thoreau's Journal references indicate that in Coleridge's writings he found a method for contemplating the relation of the self, nature, and spirit. For example, in December 1839 Thoreau quotes *Table Talk*, describing the individual "soul" or "spirit" as seeking "harmony" with the "accordant" universe. More specifically, Thoreau claims a connection between "the sensitive soul" and the "fixed measure" of the "universe," arguing that the individual is strongest when his body is in tune with both his soul and the "thrilling sphere music" of the cosmos, which he also figures as "all the forces of nature." Thoreau's meditation posits the interrelation in terms of a musical chord: "the sensitive soul" (which he also describes as the "brave man") "compels concord every where[,] every where by the universality and tunefulness of his soul." Put differently, the self seeks the "sympathy" of "nature" by merging his "soul" with nature's own "accordant note." Thoreau then quotes Coleridge on the poet as one who embodies this productive harmony of self, nature, and spirit.²³

Additional Journal references indicate that Thoreau consistently turned to Coleridge as a means of contemplating spirit as important to both the natural world and humanity. On January 19, 1841, Thoreau moves directly from a quotation from *Aids* about the "love of God," to a statement concerning a less traditionally Christian spirit available to humanity through the natural world. This time, Thoreau figures spirit not as musical concord but as a "love" that pervades "nature." This "love" is "afloat" and "declared" through "atmosphere," "bush," "gale," "sun," "shade," "day,"

"night," and "moon."²⁴ Similarly, in a Journal entry of January 24, 1841, Thoreau grounds his own discussion of the relation between "the natural fact," "the spiritual," and "our minds" in a quotation from *The Statesman's Manual*.²⁵ Clearly, Thoreau's interest in spirit was deeply rooted in his historical moment,²⁶ and his early readings in Coleridge served as a catalyst for explaining spirit in relation to both mind and world.

Thoreau's careful reading of "Theory" was key to his developing understanding of these relations. "Theory" suggested the necessity of "a close and detailed study of natural phenomena" and "showed how a program of careful observation was integral to an understanding of nature's essential principles and processes."²⁷ As Robert Sattelmeyer recounts, Thoreau took unusually thorough notes on "Theory," observing its main theoretical claims, the systems upon which it was based, and Coleridge's particular terms for the processes through which all life forms exist: dynamic polarity, individuation, and multiplicity. Thoreau found in Coleridge's "Theory" both a model for understanding all life and a profound justification for a life spent studying nature's particulars.

"Theory" was written at a time when Coleridge explored deeply what he came to call the dynamic philosophy. Its goal was to balance idealism and empiricism as an alternative to mechanism, which Coleridge called a "philosophy of death."²⁸ From 1814 to 1819, Coleridge was intensely invested in harmonizing his religious, philosophical, and aesthetic ideas with recent developments in science.²⁹ This burst of activity began, not coincidentally, at the same time that Coleridge moved in with James Gillman, a man of science. These years of intense writing generated Coleridge's finest prose writings, including the *Biographia Literaria*, the revised edition of *The Friend*, *Lay Sermons*, *Lectures 1818–1819: On the History of Philosophy*, a series of letters about science, and, of course, "Theory."³⁰ Taken together, these works – "coherently conceived, though fragmentarily expounded" – comprised a sustained effort to articulate the dynamic philosophy.³¹

Rather than positing a material world created all at once, then set into motion like a clock and left to run on its own, the dynamic philosophy posited a view of nature as undergoing a constant unfolding process in which spirit continually embodied and evidenced itself. Spirit could be known through its manifestations in nature through law, or in the mind through ideas. Coleridge valued knowledge gained from the senses as well as that which lay beyond the senses; that is, he valued the natural *and* the supernatural. Therefore, in Coleridge's dynamic philosophy, the study of the mind could be combined with the study of the material world.³²

All of the works dedicated to the dynamic philosophy emphasize the centrality of spirit, and through Coleridge, Thoreau was exposed to a view of nature as grounded in spirit. Coleridge believed that nature (the material world observable through the five senses) was opposed by spirit (that which transcended the five senses).³³ Yet rather than dualistically sundering these poles, Coleridge (largely following Schelling) envisioned a principle of unified divine identity, which he would "indiscriminately express by the words spirit, self, and self-consciousness."³⁴ Key was the human capacity to perceive, in an elevated act of knowledge, the "two great Laws" of identity and polarity.³⁵ For Coleridge, all identity was grounded in divine spirit, and polarity was not a way of dividing but of healing division. Coleridge felt that spirit must be integral to any explanation of life: "To account for Life ... we are supposed to state something prior (if not in time, yet in the order of Nature) to the thing accounted for, as the ground or cause of that thing ... And to this, in the question of Life, I know no possible answer but GOD."³⁶ Spirit was at once unified with the self and manifested in the manifold workings of the natural world.

This was an exciting project for Thoreau. He, like many Transcendentalists, was looking for counterarguments to static ideas about nature and prescribed limits on individual consciousness that dominated American intellectual debate. He found many of these arguments in Coleridge's prose. In the notes he took on "Theory," for instance, Thoreau vigorously latched on to Coleridge's idea of polarity, which maintained that the polar opposite of nature was spirit, and that the human mind was the intermediary between nature and spirit. Thoreau would have noted this key feature of polarity because it was integral to the sections of "Theory" that he recorded in his Literary Notebook.³⁷

Coleridge offered further guidance for Thoreau in suggesting that "in social and political life this acme is inter-dependence; in moral life it is independence; in intellectual life it is genius."³⁸ Coleridge thus suggests that the whole span of human endeavor can be harmonized in his theory of life; the social, political, and intellectual – each, of course, an area of great interest to Thoreau – are all gathered under its purview. Coleridge places the human mind as the "conciliating mid-point, or equator" between nature ("the real world, the sympathy and the inter-communion with Nature") and spirit ("the Supreme Will" or "the ideal genius and the originality").³⁹ Nature and spirit could be harmonized through an act of consciousness.

Thoreau's long transcription from the concluding passages of "Theory" further indicates his interest in the centrality of the human mind. In these

culminating pages, Coleridge states that the individual “has the whole world in counterpoint to him, but he contains an entire world within himself” and says, “In Man the centripetal and individualizing tendency of all Nature is itself concentrated and individualized – he is a Revelation of Nature!” Coleridge’s celebration of individualism culminates in the statement, “he who stands the most on himself, and stands the firmest, is the truest, because the most individual, Man.”⁴⁰ Here the individual human mind has been placed at the center of the Romantic triad, harmonizing the categories of nature, spirit, and humanity, and poised potentially (if not actually) to solve the “riddle of the world.”⁴¹

“Theory” posits a dynamic, holistic method for natural history that accounts both for the distinct individuality of forms in nature and for an essential unity undergirding all creation.⁴² Notably, this unity is grounded in spirit – or “Supreme Intelligence” – and discoverable through individual “genius.” Equally important, given Thoreau’s sensibilities, Coleridge’s ideas – which appeared in his infamously sprawling prose – were easily detachable from specific theological arguments; they were “presented in a warmer guise than metaphysics.”⁴³ Following this understanding, Thoreau’s days of empirical nature study would allow him to pursue natural history as self-culture and self-culture as natural history, as well as empiricism as a sort of theology and the pursuit of spirit as a sort of empiricism. Thoreau took up the Coleridgean model of polarity as not only an organizing theme but also a literary, philosophical, and even scientific method.

Thoreau’s most famous work, *Walden*, best exhibits his engagement with Coleridge’s dynamic philosophy. Sattelmeyer and Hocks have noted the similarity between the so-called “melting sandbank” passage in “Spring” and Coleridge’s “Theory.” In addition, there is a similarity in both diction and argument between the sandbank passage and the concluding pages of *Aids*, both of which note the “increasingly *dynamic* spirit of the physical Sciences.”⁴⁴ The two passages share a number of specific and evocative terms, including, “Artist,” “pulpy,” “energy,” “mass,” “foliage,” “flesh(y),” “blood,” “bone(s),” “principle,” and “organic” (“organific” in Coleridge).⁴⁵ More importantly, Thoreau follows Coleridge in using this common set of terms to lay out three central elements of his argument: a focus on the organic as opposed to the mechanistic; the presence of an “invisible central power” or “unseen Agency” at work through nature; and an evocation of dynamic powers that knit together all life, including the botanical, the animal, and the human.⁴⁶

First, Thoreau adapts terms and processes from Coleridge, who in *Aids* refers to "inherent reciprocal attractions, repulsions, and elective affinities" that work through nature, noting that "herein consists the essential difference, the contra-distinction, of an Organ from a Machine."⁴⁷ Coleridge explains that the "germinal power of the Plant transmutes the fixed air and the elementary Base of Water into Grass or Leaves" and "the Organific Principle in the Ox or the Elephant exercises an Alchemy still more stupendous."⁴⁸ Attention to these organic processes of growth and assimilation are echoed in the sandbank passage, where Thoreau meditates on the complex workings of watercourses on the sand, the shapes they create, and, most vitally, the common spiritual force that might interconnect various material forms.

Second, for Thoreau as for Coleridge, the pursuit of natural history leads to the perception that a divine creator is at work through the material world. Coleridge queries, "But perhaps the material particles possess this combining power . . . and are themselves the joint Artists of their own combinations?"⁴⁹ Thoreau uses the same term, "Artist," also capitalizing it: "I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me . . . No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly."⁵⁰ Thoreau, like Coleridge, emphasizes a divine power at work in and through the sandbank. Coleridge writes, "As the unseen Agency weaves its magic eddies, the foliage becomes indifferently the Bone and its Marrow, the pulpy Brain, or the solid Ivory. That what you see *is* blood, *is* flesh, is itself the work, or shall I say, the translucence, of the invisible Energy."⁵¹ Divine spirit is the essence connecting the animal and vegetable in its creative potency.

Finally, Coleridge fuses categories of inorganic and organic life, just as Thoreau does in the sandbank passage. Like Coleridge, Thoreau sees the watercourses in the sandbank as "exhibiting a sort of hybrid product, which obeys half way the law of currents, and half way that of vegetation."⁵² Thoreau employs the term "pulpy" to refer to the botanical (leaves, vines, lichens, foliage), the animal (leopards' paws, birds' feet, brains and bowels), and the geological (a "cave with its stalactites laid open," and coral, now known to be animal, but a debated category at the time). He later uses "pulpy" to describe the leaf-like shape of the sand.⁵³ Coleridge had used "pulpy" in a similar way to describe how "foliage becomes indifferently the Bone and its Marrow, the pulpy Brain, or the solid Ivory," also interconnecting vegetal and animal.⁵⁴ Coleridge likewise discussed interconnections between geological phenomena and vegetal

and animal formations. In "Theory," he writes of "those vast formations, the tracing of which generically would form the science of Geology." He mentions peat morasses and coral banks,⁵⁵ as does Thoreau in the sandbank passage. Coleridge saw the study of geology as demonstrating "the tendencies of the Life of Nature to vegetation or animalization," a principle that Thoreau clearly puts into practice in "Spring."⁵⁶ Using shared diction, Coleridge and Thoreau both attempt to articulate a life process that spans categories both organic and inorganic.

Thoreau suggests that the processes he observes in the sandbank are key to answering the riddle of the world by referring to Champollion, who deciphered the Rosetta Stone: "Thus it seemed that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature. The Maker of this earth but patented a leaf. What Champollion will decipher this hieroglyphic for us, that we may turn over a new leaf at last?"⁵⁷ Thus, this section of *Walden* enacts the dynamic philosophy, applying the "idea" of Coleridge's "Theory" to the observation of nature.⁵⁸

Other sections of *Walden* similarly demonstrate how nature and spirit harmonize through acts of consciousness in a Coleridgean manner. "Higher Laws," for example, pursues this harmony repeatedly to investigate some higher, over-arching unity – or "laws of the universe."⁵⁹ "Higher Laws" posits "the spirit" as the "generative energy" that helps the individual consciousness understand the way in which the polarities result in a higher state.⁶⁰

In addition, the final pages of "Higher Laws" gesture toward Coleridge's philosophy by echoing the Journal entry of December 1839 (in which Thoreau invokes Coleridge and writes of the harmonious, "accordant," "thrilling sphere music" experienced by "the sensitive soul").⁶¹ In a close paraphrase of that Journal passage, Thoreau claims in *Walden* that "the most sensitive" individuals will hear the unifying law of the universe as "the music of the harp which trembles round the world," the "zephyr."⁶² Thoreau posits this universal music as "[g]oodness" – and if there is one concept that emerges as *the* higher law amid this sometimes vexing discussion of higher laws, it is goodness.⁶³

In discussing the pervasive goodness of the universal music, Thoreau turns to imagery and language he had earlier used to celebrate Coleridge's ideas. In "Higher Laws," Thoreau acknowledges the impossibility of putting "the highest reality" into language: "Perhaps the facts most astounding and most real are never communicated by man to man. The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment

of the rainbow which I have clutched."⁶⁴ Thoreau had written similarly in his Journal on January 1, 1852, in a passage directly endorsing Coleridge's obscurity as necessary to expressing the complexity of his ideas:

I believe it was Chalmers who said, speaking of Coleridge, that for his part we wanted ideas which he could see all round and not such as he must look at away up in the heavens — ... Ideas that soar above the earth cannot be seen all round, but ever have one side turned toward the heavens. . . Very well then . . . but I will be thankful for the light that reaches me from the star of least magnitude. I will be thankful that I see so much as one side of a celestial idea — one side of the rain bow & the sunset-sky — the *face* of God alone.⁶⁵

Both this Journal entry and its echo in "Higher Laws" center on the difficulty of communicating ideas that involve great complexities and inevitable mystery; both use images of light, sunset, stars, and pieces of rainbows. And in both, Thoreau greets with gratitude and even joy an intimation of a higher law he admits he cannot fully comprehend or express — but that originates in Coleridge.

Thoreau revisits his joyful acceptance of the ultimate uncertainty of his place in the universe in "The Pond in Winter" chapter of *Walden*, which arguably offers in its opening paragraph Thoreau's response to the riddle of the world. Thoreau once again embraces uncertainty in "The Pond in Winter," but here the joy that accompanies his uncertainty nearly *becomes* a response to the riddle. Thoreau poses the most profound questions concerning the human relation to nature and spirit — "what—how—when—where," —articulating the human desire to understand its place and meaning in the universe. He then shares his realization that, in contrast to humanity, Nature has "no question on *her* lips"; indeed, "Nature puts no questions and answers none which we mortals ask." Rather, nature *is* — and in its very existence, he proposes, we should find all answers. That is, Thoreau accepts his own uncertain place amid nature as *itself* the answer to all of humanity's questions: "I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight."⁶⁶

This moment represents the ultimate interrelation of self, nature, and spirit for Thoreau. Indeed, he claims, "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads," with the self as the integrating point.⁶⁷ Again meeting obscurity with joy, Thoreau celebrates his own place within "Nature, in whom all creatures live." He seems then to shout, "Forward!" — and proceeds to his "morning work."⁶⁸ This passage suggests that the riddle of the world is something to be worked out in a mode of living that includes observation of the natural world alongside meditation

on higher law – a model that Thoreau had encountered in Coleridge's dynamic philosophy.

In addition to greeting uncertainty with joy, "The Pond in Winter" also marks how Thoreau moves beyond the British Romantics by answering the Romantic riddle of the world with a novel kind of embodied self-culture. It is embodied in that it involves modes of engaging physically, as opposed to merely intellectually, with the material world of nature. Rather than "delving in the unwholesome quicksilver mines of metaphysic depths" like Coleridge, Thoreau builds a cabin, plants beans, and watches both rays of light and the creatures around him – in addition to his intellectual meditations, which themselves are spurred most often by concrete experiences in nature.⁶⁹

In Coleridge, Thoreau found a model to bring together "all works of decided genius and true science" with a set of dynamic, organic, vital principles grounded in spirit, legible in nature as higher law working through the natural world, perceivable through individual genius, and expressible through imaginative works of literature.⁷⁰ Coleridge furnished Thoreau with an integrated worldview that championed science and literature as interrelated modes of solving the riddle of the world. He also provided an identity that spanned the realms of the "mystic," the "transcendentalist," and the "natural philosopher," making him one of the most important transatlantic sources for American Transcendentalism.⁷¹

In the twentieth century, many thinkers rejected spirit as unworthy of intellectual pursuit, labeled it "God," and cordoned it off from academic and scientific inquiry.⁷² Thoreau, however, refused to elide the supernatural in his consideration of the natural. To do so would be to sidestep the kernel of the riddle of the world. As Thoreau asked in his *Journal* in November 1843, "When nature ceases to be supernatural to a man – what will he do then?"⁷³ For Thoreau, spirit did not necessitate theology, and the supernatural did not necessitate religion. He once wrote, "I suppose that what in other men is religion is in me love of nature."⁷⁴ Later, he embraced all religions in an attempt to claim spirit: "I do not prefer one religion or philosophy to another. . . I like Brahma – Hare Buddha – the Great spirit as well as God."⁷⁵ Still later, he speaks of "recover[ing] my spirits – my spirituality" by regaining a sense of his own relatedness to the world around him and of "the steady onward progress of the universe."⁷⁶ More pointedly, when an admirer of Thoreau, B. B. Wiley, complained to him about Coleridge's particular religious beliefs in an 1857 letter, Thoreau replied, "I think you must read Coleridge again & further – skipping all

his theology – i.e. if you value precise definitions & a discriminating use of language.”⁷⁷ Clearly, Thoreau took what he needed from Coleridge, husking spirit out of its all-too-common imbrication in a certain deity, religion, or theology. For Thoreau, following Coleridge, spirit signified the vitality and dynamism of the universe for both the self and nonhuman nature.

Thoreau pursued a theory of all life – much as theorists seek to do today, in fact – that acknowledged the complexity of the human relation to nonhuman nature, the impossibility of severing humanity (or culture) from nature, and the ineffable qualities of the more-than-human world.⁷⁸ When seen through the lens of transatlantic Romanticism, Thoreau’s life pursuit was both groundbreaking and part of a larger conversation that occupied many of the great thinkers of his age. It was both literary and scientific. It sought to answer one of life’s biggest questions – the riddle of the world. It reminds us that an answer to a riddle need not be a single response but can be a life’s practice – a grateful acceptance of the perennial, ineffaceable uncertainties of human existence amid an astonishingly dynamic universe.

Notes

- 1 [S.] Margaret Fuller, “Modern British Poets,” *Papers on Literature and Art* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1846), 88.
- 2 *W*, 40.
- 3 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Appendix,” *Aids to Reflection in the Formation of a Manly Character, On the Several Grounds of Prudence, Morality, and Religion*, ed. James Marsh (Burlington: Chauncey Goodrich, 1829), 362.
- 4 *PJ*, 3: 185.
- 5 On Coleridge’s influence on Thoreau, see Richard A. Hocks, “Thoreau, Coleridge, and Barfield: Reflections on the Imagination and the Law of Polarity,” *The Centennial Review* 17, no. 2 (1973): 175–98; Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); William Rossi, “The Limits of an Afternoon Walk: Coleridgean Polarity in Thoreau’s ‘Walking,’” *ESQ* 33, no. 2 (1987): 94–109; Robert Sattelmeyer, “The Coleridgean Influence on Thoreau’s Science,” *Thoreau’s World and Ours: A Natural Legacy*, eds. Edmund A. Schofield and Robert C. Baron (Golden, CO: North American Press, 1993), 48–54; and, most especially, Robert Sattelmeyer and Richard A. Hocks, “Thoreau and Coleridge’s *Theory of Life*,” *Studies in the American Renaissance: 1985*, ed. Joel A. Myerson (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia), 269–84.
- 6 *EX*, 5.
- 7 James Engell, “Thoreau and Health: Physician, Naturalist, Metaphysician,” *The Eudaimonic Turn: Well-Being in Literary Studies*, eds. James O. Pawelski and D. J. Moores (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2013), 81–96.

- 8 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, Vol. 4, pt. 1 (1969), *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, gen. ed. Kathleen Coburn, assoc. ed. Bart Winer, 16 vols. Bollingen Series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964–2002), 109.
- 9 Laura Dassow Walls, *Emerson's Life in Science: The Culture of Truth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 31, 91.
- 10 Quoted *ibid.*, 29 (emphasis added).
- 11 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Marginalia*, eds. H. J. Jackson and George Whalley, Vol. 12, pt. 1 (1980–2001), *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, gen. ed. Kathleen Coburn, assoc. ed. Bart Winer, 16 vols. Bollingen Series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964–2002), 747; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer, Vol. 9 (1993), *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, gen. ed. Kathleen Coburn, assoc. ed. Bart Winer, 16 vols. Bollingen Series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964–2002), 350.
- 12 See Samantha C. Harvey, *Transatlantic Transcendentalism: Coleridge, Emerson, and Nature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), and David Greenham, *Emerson's Transatlantic Romanticism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- 13 PJ, 1: 69.
- 14 Perry Miller, "Thoreau in the Context of International Romanticism," *New England Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (June 1961):150. In his discussion of this Journal passage, Miller identifies just "two poles" of the riddle.
- 15 PJ, 1: 69.
- 16 W, 282.
- 17 Robert Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading: A Study in Intellectual History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 155.
- 18 PJ, 1: 97, 222, 230.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 268.
- 20 *EEM*, 223; PJ, 4: 237, 370; Linck C. Johnson, *Thoreau's Complex Weave: The Writing of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986), 332. Sattelmeyer notes that Thoreau likely read *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, as well: Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading*, 155.
- 21 Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading*, 46. The specific date of Thoreau's reading of "Theory" is not known; most scholars date it to sometime in 1848.
- 22 PJ, 5: 403; PJ, 6: 168.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 1: 95–97.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 222–23.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 230–31. Throughout his Journal, Thoreau equates his empirical natural-history studies with exercises in spirit; see: Rochelle Johnson, "'The Only Real Elysium': Thoreau's Meeting of Spirit and Matter" *Thoreau Society Bulletin* No. 287 (Fall 2014), 6–8.
- 26 Greenham describes "spirit" in this era as a "principle of unity" that "cannot be found in either the subject or in the object but rather in an identity which contains them both" (Greenham, *Emerson's Transatlantic Romanticism*, 73).

- 27 Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading*, 46.
- 28 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White, Vol. 6 (1972), *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, gen. ed. Kathleen Coburn, assoc. ed. Bart Winer, 16 vols. Bollingen Series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964–2002), 89.
- 29 Timothy J. Corrigan, "Biographia Literaria and the Language of Science," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 41, no. 3 (1980): 399. (We might extend this range of dates to 1825, when *Aids* was published.)
- 30 See Coleridge's letter to C. A. Tulk, which refers to "Theory" as the "inclosed scrawl": *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, Vol. 4 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71), 767.
- 31 Owen Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 13. For more on the dynamic philosophy, see Trevor Levere, *Poetry Realized in Nature: Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Early Nineteenth-century Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 220; and M. H. Abrams, "Coleridge's 'A Light in Sound': Science, Metascience, and Poetic Imagination," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 116, no. 6 (December 1972): 467.
- 32 In his desire to combat mechanism, Coleridge invoked elements of Platonic and Neoplatonic idealism, Cambridge Platonism, and Kantian and post-Kantian idealism, along with the theories of the *Naturphilosophen* and an organic view of art and literature; see James Engell, "Coleridge and German Idealism: First Postulates, Final Causes," *The Coleridge Connection: Essays for Thomas McFarland*, eds. Richard Gravil and Molly Lefebure (London: Macmillan, 1990), 153–77. Coleridge also was versed in the older sources of "Liberal Platonism"; see Robert D. Richardson, Jr., "Liberal Platonism and Transcendentalism: Shaftesbury, Schleiermacher, Emerson," *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations* 1, no. 1 (1997): 1–20.
- 33 See Coleridge, *Aids*, ed. John Beer, 80, 250–51, 267 n.; and *Lectures 1818–1819: On the History of Philosophy*, ed. J. R. de J. Jackson, Vol. 8, pt. 2 (2000), *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, gen. ed. Kathleen Coburn, assoc. ed. Bart Winer, 16 vols. Bollingen Series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964–2002), 535.
- 34 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: Or, Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions*, eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, Vol. 7, pt. 1 (1983), *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, gen. ed. Kathleen Coburn, assoc. ed. Bart Winer, 16 vols. Bollingen Series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964–2002), 272–3.
- 35 Coleridge, *The Collected Letters*, 4: 807.
- 36 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Hints towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life," *Shorter Works and Fragments*, eds. H. J. Jackson and J. R. de J. Jackson, Vol. 11, pt. 1 (1995), *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, gen. ed. Kathleen Coburn, assoc. ed. Bart Winer, 16 vols. Bollingen Series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964–2002), 503.

- 37 See Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Thoreau's Literary Notebook in the Library of Congress, Facsimile Text* (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1964), 359–62.
- 38 Coleridge, "Theory," 1: 551.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 1: 551.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 1: 550–51.
- 41 On the "Romantic triad" of nature, spirit, and humanity, see: Harvey, *Transatlantic Transcendentalism*.
- 42 For an informative discussion of western intellectual history's persistent fascination with the notion of a unified creation and the belief "that to all genuine questions there is one true answer," see Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Knopf, 1991), 209.
- 43 Levere, *Poetry Realized*, 84.
- 44 Coleridge, *Aids*, ed. John Beer, 395. On notable readings of this oft-discussed section of *Walden*, see: David M. Robinson, *Natural Life: Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 212 n. 16.
- 45 Coleridge, *Aids*, ed. John Beer, 398; *W*, 304–309.
- 46 Coleridge, *Aids*, ed. John Beer, 398.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 398. "Elective affinities" echoes Goethe's book of that title.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 398.
- 49 *Ibid.*
- 50 *W*, 306.
- 51 Coleridge, *Aids*, ed. John Beer, 398.
- 52 *W*, 305.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 305, 307.
- 54 Coleridge, *Aids*, ed. John Beer, 398.
- 55 Coleridge, "Theory," 1: 516.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 1: 516.
- 57 *W*, 308.
- 58 Thoreau titled his notes on "Theory" "Coleridge's *Idea* of Life"; see Cameron, *Thoreau's Literary Notebook*, 359 (emphasis added).
- 59 *W*, 218–19.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 219.
- 61 *PJ*, 1: 96.
- 62 *W*, 219, 218, 219.
- 63 *Ibid.*, 218.
- 64 *Ibid.*, 216–17.
- 65 *PJ*, 4: 237–38.
- 66 *W*, 282.
- 67 *Ibid.*, 283.
- 68 *Ibid.*, 282.
- 69 Coleridge, *Biographia*, 1: 17.
- 70 Coleridge, *The Friend*, 1: 457.
- 71 *PJ*, 5: 469. The concluding pages of *Aids* discuss mysticism, transcendentalism, and science, and may have been the source for Thoreau's statement of his identity (see *Aids*, ed. John Beer, 388–412).

- 72 This assertion grows out of a large body of scholarship from several disciplines that traces modernity's rejection of spirit amid pursuits of the industrial, the technological, and the scientific. David Kinsley offers a helpful overview of the influence of Baconian science on the "disenchantment of nature" that is commonly associated with modernity, during which "nature [became viewed] as primarily matter in motion, as mechanical, as soulless" (*Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 130). Other scholars of religion and philosophy provide accounts of what Bruce V. Foltz calls "the disenchanted nature of modernity" (*The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2014], 13). Jane Bennett offers a discussion of "the image of modernity as disenchanted" that "circulat[es] in political and social theory" (*The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001], 3). Also relevant is Nathan A. Scott's discussion of the "strain of vigorous anti-Romanticism in modern theory of literature" ("Poetry and Prayer," *Literature and Religion*, ed. Giles B. Gunn [New York: Harper, 1971], 192).
- 73 PJ, 1: 481.
- 74 *Ibid.*, 2: 55.
- 75 *Ibid.*, 3: 62.
- 76 *Ibid.*, 368.
- 77 Thoreau, *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, eds. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York: New York University Press, 1958), 475, 478.
- 78 We have in mind the recent efforts of theorists across disciplines who seek to mend ideological divisions between humanity and nature, nature and culture, and mind and matter by theorizing all of life as interconnected. As examples, see Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). On New Materialism and Thoreau, in particular, see Rochelle Johnson, "'This Enchantment Is No Delusion': Henry David Thoreau, the New Materialisms, and Ineffable Materiality," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 606–35. Also, as Nicholas Roe asserts, "Coleridge's conviction that 'universal science' might be possible breaks down the rigid divisions between science and other areas of human knowledge and endeavor, in a way that is strikingly appropriate now to modern studies of the nature of human consciousness, of the global eco-system, and of the origin of the universe" ("Introduction," *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Sciences of Life*, ed. Nicholas Roe [London: Oxford University Press, 2001], 14).