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When the Second Law Study Group got to talking about Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson a couple of weeks ago what came out was a view of nature and the relationship of the human to nature. Sally Humble set out to "bring to life" the three basic principles of the universe, Differentiation, Subjectivity and Communion, through the writings of the Romanticists, and she succeeded wonderfully. I got most of the session on tape.

Differentiation underlined by Walt Whitman from Leaves of Grass:

I believe a leaf of grass is not less than the journey-work of the stars
And the pismire is equally perfect.
And a grain of sand, and the egg of a wren
And the tree toad is chef d'oeuvre of the highest,
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,
And the narrowest hinge of my hand puts to scorn all machinery.
And the cow crunching with depressed head surpasses any statues,
And the mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.

And Emerson finds in Self Reliance an interiority, a Subjectivity that is the spontaneous, intuitive expression of the individual self, that is the grounds for replying on the self. It's not relying only on self but also on the presence of God in each self; in you, unique you, that only entity which was never before and will never be again.

There's another way to think of Subjectivity, Thoreau described it in comparing how a scientist would analyze a book by examining the color and texture of the ink and the paper, counting the words and the letters and thinking of himself as objective: and the poet would read the book for its meaning and its message to his inner self and would think of himself as subjective. Literature springs from people who have an interior life and speaks to people who have an interior life. And that's what Walden is all about. A person says to himself "for a while I am going to withdraw from society and spend long periods of time focussing on the natural world as a symbol of the human spirit" and it isn't that he is just caught up in nature (Thoreau is caught up alright, that's important to him) but it's also that that natural world like every little animal in it, every tree, every body of water is somehow an expression of a human feeling, a human intuition. It embodies and makes concrete all those things that are going on inside of us that we are not aware of because we are not in the habit of articulating what the poet articulates in bringing those things into conscious comprehension.

And here it would be a good thing to interject a few words from a talk by Thomas Berry a couple of summers ago.

It seems to me that concern for the wilderness must stand at the apex of the conservation movement, just as it must stand at the apex of consciousness in any decent culture. Our biological roots as well as our cultural roots are in nature. We began in a world that was pristine and undiminished by anything we had done and at various times in our history the unspoiled wilderness has again imposed itself, charming and forbidding, uninvited, upon our consciousness. It is important that we should preserve this memory. We need places in the reach of every community where children can imagine the prehistoric in beginning history, the unknown, the trackless.

To lose something of the natural world is to lose part of our own being and particularly to lose the great psychic imaginative powers of the human mind. If we had no eagles, no soaring birds, no rivers, no oceans, no trees, no flowers, what would the imaginative life of the human be? If we lived on the moon our minds would be as desolate as the moonscape, our psychic structure as barren. The inner world and the outer world respond to each other. It cannot be otherwise.

That statement reinforces powerfully what Sally Humble said so well. It goes precisely to Subjectivity and says also that Subjectivity does not exist except in its complementarity to Communion. And here we turn to Donald Worster for a passage out of Nature's Economy from a chapter talking about Thoreau.

According to Eric Heller, the Goethean approach to the study of nature took as its first article of faith that there is a "perfect correspondence between the inner nature of man and the structure of external reality, between the soul and the world". That being so, it made no real difference whether one moved from the soul outward or vice versa; all knowledge of physical nature is ultimately true of the spiritual world too, and what one knows of the self can be applied to the non-self. But, as humans are more familiar with their own lives than with those of other beings, it made the most sense to begin there, with the meaning of one's own experience, and then to extend it by analogy to the entire frame of things. Critics might call this the fallacy of anthropomorphism, but for the Goethean naturalist the label literally had no meaning; that man saw the world as a reflection of his own image could not conceivably be a distortion of nature, for man on the other hand also reflects nature's order - the two are inseparably one. Real knowledge of nature, therefore is necessarily an introspective process. To look inward is to see the cosmos, to be "nature looking into nature," as Thoreau supposed. At the same time, all knowledge is profoundly ethical: There can be no true understanding that is not founded on "love" or "sympathy", words used repeatedly by Romantics like Thoreau. Love is the recognition of interdependence and that "perfect correspondence" between spirit and matter; sympathy is the capacity to feel intensely the bond of identity of kinship that unites all beings within a single organism. If he does not come to nature by these avenues, the naturalist cannot make any convincing claim to genuine truth. More than that he violates the moral union between soul and world.

When she got to the subject of Communion, Sally Humble used Walt Whitman's Crossing the Brooklyn Ferry. In that poem the poet makes himself present along with his readers seeing again the gulls, the whitecaps, the sails, the whole scene the reader now takes part in, and "fuses me into you now and pours my meaning into you." What else but the communion of Whitman and me, and what else but the communion of you with me, and you and me with everybody and everything?

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- April 11, 1981 American Teilhard Society Annual meeting, NYC. John and Nancy Todd are the speakers. Call Jim Berry for information.
- April 28, 1981 Study Group. Tom Crowe leads discussion of Gary Snyder's Real Work.