

Thoreau's Views on Nature : On the Wind

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I. Introduction

Thoreau entered in his *Journal* for August 23, 1852 : "There is something invigorating in this air, which I am peculiarly sensible is a real wind, blowing from over the surface of a planet" (IV 312-13). According to modern science, it is 13,000 million years since the stars in the universe were born, the sun is 5,000 million years old, and 4,600 million years have elapsed since the birth of the earth. Thoreau's statement above makes us think of the immense power or energy of the universe.

Interestingly, Thoreau sometimes uses such expressions as "transparent" and "transparency" to describe "the air." To give a few examples, "the transparent, dew freighted evening air," "the serenity of the air — its coolness & transparency," and "both air and water so transparent" (II 438, 435, J2 70). These two words may connote something similar to what the word "invigorating" in the above-cited excerpt means.

Insightfully, Isao Onodera attempts an interpretation of "the wind" from the standpoint of the Christian idea of the Holy Spirit. He holds that the Holy Spirit is omnipresent in the universe, and that it is, at the same time, the true wisdom that leads people from within (Onodera 111). He explains that the word *pneuma* means "the spirit" as well as "breath" and "wind," and that "the Holy Spirit" in the New Testament is "*pneuma*" in Greek, but its origin is the Hebrew word "*ruah*." This word also means "breath," "wind," or "universe." In Genesis are the words : "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters" (Genesis 1 : 2). Also, in the New Testament are the sentences : "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3 : 8). It is noteworthy that both "the Spirit" and the "wind" in these quotations are equivalent to "*ruah*" in Hebrew, and "*pneuma*" in Greek.

II . Two Types of Winds Observed by Thoreau

If we focus on Thoreau's view of the wind, many kinds of wind we find in his writings could be classified into two types — the wind as a natural phenomenon and the wind that has a special meaning. For an example of the first type, the tenth stanza of four lines in his poem titled "The Bluebirds" describes how the birds begin a long journey when a cold wind blows :

One morn the wind blowed cold and strong,
And the leaves when whirling away ;

The birds prepared for their journey long
That raw and gusty day. (Bode 94)

On the other hand, as an example of the second type, his poem “Walden” calls to mind Onodera’s interpretation of the wind from the standpoint of the Holy Spirit. The poem conveys that the wind, blowing from ancient times, leaves some unseen inscription of deep significance :

O! tell me what the winds have writ within these thousands years,
On the blue vault than spans thy flood —
Or sun transferred and delicately reprinted
For thy own private reading. Somewhat
Within these latter days I’ve read,
But surely there was much that would have thrilled the Soul,
Which human eye saw not
I would give much to read that first bright page,
Wet from a virgin press, when Eurus — Boreas —
And the host of airy quill-drivers
First dipped their pens in mist. (Bode 98-99)

In like manner, the short poem below, titled “I’ve [sic] Searched My Faculty Around,” shows a similar idea though the word “wind” does not appear :

I’ve searched my faculties around
To learn why my life to me was lent
I will attend his faintest sound
And then declare to man what God hath meant (Bode 195)

Obviously, the poet here, presumably Thoreau himself, is seeking in the wind the answer to his quest, trying to hear a “faintest sound,” or an important message from God. In the last line the poet shows his wish to announce the message to the world, which may suggest the same idea as the “chanticleer” in *Walden* whose commitment is to “wake” his “neighbors up” (*Walden* 84).

III. Various Aspects of the Wind as a Natural Phenomenon

Thoreau considered as music the notes of birds, the sounds of owls and cows, the murmur of a stream, and even the sound of a storm. It seems that these sounds were often carried to him on the wind, as the following poem indicates :

When breathless noon hath paused on hill and vale,
And now no more the woodman plies his axe,
Nor mower whets his scythe,
Somewhat it is, sole sojourner on earth,

To hear the veery on her oaken perch
 Ringing her modest trill —
 Sole sound of all the din that makes a world,
 And I sole ear.
 Fondly to nestle me in that sweet melody,
 And own a kindred soul, speaking to me
 From out the depths of universal being.
 O'er birch and hazle [sic], through the sultry air,
 Comes that faint sound this way,
 On Zephyr borne, straight to my ear.
 No longer time or place, nor faintest trace
 Of earth, the landscape's shimmer is my only space,
 Sole remnant of a world.
 Anon that throat has done, and familiar sounds
 Swell strangely on the breeze, the low of cattle,
 And the novel cries of sturdy swains
 That plod the neighboring vale —
 And I walk once more confounded a denizen of earth. (Bode 92)

It is reported that, among the various sounds Nature produced, Thoreau loved the sound of the pines singing in the wind, and that he made an aeolian harp of his own design to enjoy the tunes of the wind. He entered in his *Journal* for December 31, 1853:

The strains of the aeolian harp and of the wood thrush are the truest and loftiest preachers I know now left on this earth. I know of no missionaries to us heathen comparable to them. They, as it were, lift us up in spite of ourselves. They intoxicate, they charm us. Where was that strain mixed into which this world was dropped but as a lump of sugar to sweeten the draught? I would be drunk, drunk, drunk, dead drunk to this world with it forever. He that hath ears, let him hear. The contact of sound with a human ear whose hearing is pure and unimpaired is coincident with an ecstasy. Sugar is not so sweet to the palate, as sound to the healthy ear; the hearing of it makes men brave. (VI 39)

Thoreau's Aeolian Harp, which is now kept at the Concord Museum, is said to have made no sound for as long as 131 years. The word "Aeolian" is, of course, derived from Aeolus, the god of the winds in Greek mythology. The aeolian harp is a string instrument whose strings produce "soft, ethereal chords" when air blows over them. It is so ancient an instrument as to appear in the Psalm: "There on the poplars / we hung our harps" (Psalm 137). The modern aeolian harp, which is placed by a window, is said to be shaped like a zither found in Austria and southern Germany. In the chapter of "Monday" in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* [A Week] appears a poem called "Rumors from an Aeolian Harp":

There is a vale which none hath seen,
 Where foot of man has never been,
 Such as here lives with toil and strife,
 An anxious and a sinful life.

There every virtue has its birth
 Ere it descends upon the earth,
 And thither every deed returns,
 Which in the generous bosom burns.

There love is warm, and youth is young,
 And poetry is yet unsung,
 For Virtue still adventures there,
 And freely breathes her native air.

And ever, if you hearken well,
 You still may hear its vesper bell,
 And tread of high-souled men go by,
 Their thoughts conversing with the sky. (*A Week* 215-16)

Actually, in Thoreau's writings there are numerous descriptions of the wind rustling the leaves of trees. For example: "The early breeze ruffles the poplar leaves," "The night wind rustled through the glade," "through the leaves its music you might hear," "The pines murmured," "the fresh wind that was blowing, the rustling of the leaves" (Bode 217, 164, 112; *J2* 70, 31).

Among the winds as natural phenomena, Thoreau delineates various kinds of winds, such as a warm wind, cold wind, light wind, or driving wind. In his *Journal* published by Princeton University Press, there are very few descriptions of the wind in volumes 1 through 3, whereas in volume 4, which deals with his entries from 1851 to 1852, there are numerous descriptions. This may support McGregor's claim that Thoreau began to concentrate on his study of the natural world after the spring of 1851 (McGregor 3). In his *Journal* for September 4, 1851, Thoreau gives a scientific statement about the wind as a natural phenomenon:

Suddenly the wind changed to east & the atmosphere grew more & more hazy and thick on that side obstructing the view while it was yet clear in the west. I thought it was the result of the cooler air from over the sea — meeting and condensing the vapor in the warm air of the land — That was the haze or thin dry fog — which some call smoke. (*J4* 44)

In *Cape Cod* we find such descriptions as "strong winds" and "the piercing wind." The following are some examples of similar kinds of winds from his *Journals*:

- (1) *The strong winds* blew the sand... (Harding 558)
- (2) *A cool and even piercing wind* blows today... (J4 14)
- (3) *The wind roars* amid the pines like the surf. (J4 14)
- (4) ...*the wind began to howl* around the house... (Walden, 248)
- (5) ...*the wind roars loudly* in the woods... (J4 93)
- (6) There was a *high wind* this night...(J2 70)

By contrast, the examples of soft winds follow :

- (1) I hear & see blue-birds come with *the warm wind*. (J4 382)
- (2) I sailed up a river with a *pleasant wind* ... (Bode 31)
- (3) How could the patient pine have known / *The morning breeze* would come ... (74)
- (4) And *gently swells the wind* to say all's well ... (77)
- (5) *The early breeze* ruffles the poplar leaves ... (217)
- (6) It has gone down the glen with *the light wind* ... (13)

Klages, a German philosopher, refers to an interesting feature of rhythm. He maintains that rhythm, such as breathing or the pulse, is the motion of a living thing, so it is produced by a living thing but not by machine, because no breathing or pulse can be exactly the same as the previous one (Klages 62). It would not be a wonder if Thoreau had sensed such rhythm in the wind. In fact, he wrote in his *Journal* for June 30, 1840: "I could watch the motion of a sail forever, they are so rich and full of meaning. I watch the play of its pulse as if it were my own blood beating there" (*Summer* 264-65).

Naturally, there are various descriptions of the wind from the west, east, north, and south in Thoreau's writings. Listed below are some of the examples :

- (1) ... a flood-tide, with a *westerly wind*... (Walden 21)
- (2) *The western wind* came lumbering in... (Bode 52)
- (3) *The north wind* had already begun to cool the pond... (Walden 242)
- (4) Until at length *the north winds* blow... (Bode 196)
- (5) ...then in the night the freezing *NW wind*... (J4 368)
- (6) A *strong wind from the N.W.* is gathering the snow into picturesque drifts behind the walls. (Winter 22)
- (7) We looked in vain for *the south wind*. (J2 31)

These examples indicate that Thoreau was always attentive to the direction and the strength of the wind on a physical level. At the same time, however, he seems to have been conscious of the wind on another level. Of particular interest is the personified Zephyr :

- (1) Come let's roam the breezy pastures, / Where the freest zephyrs blow ... (Bode 116)
- (2) For Zephyr rustled past with leafy tread, / And heedlessly with one heel grazed my head. (97)
- (3) Like two careless swifts let's sail, / Zephyrus shall think for me — (116)

“Zephyr” implies softness, gentleness, and even kindness as the last example above shows. Thoreau was perhaps conscious of the poetic aspect of the wind as a natural phenomenon when he used the word “Zephyr” or “Zephyrus.”

IV. The Wind as Something more than a Natural Phenomenon

On the other hand, there are numerous examples which imply that Thoreau obviously saw the wind as something more than a natural phenomenon. In the following two examples, the wind is regarded as something that conveys some special information :

- (a) So many autumn, ay, and winter days, spent outside the town, trying to hear what was in the wind, to hear and carry it express! I well-nigh sunk all my capital in it, and lost my own breath into the bargain, running in the face of it. (*Walden* 17)
- (b) The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. Olympus is but the outside of the earth every where. (85)

In other instances, it is indicated that the wind gives life or energy to living things :

- (c) These March winds which make the woods roar and fill the world with life and bustle, appear to wake up the trees out of their winter sleep and excite the sap to flow. (III 341-42)
- (d) I am sensible that I am imbibing health when I open my mouth to the wind. Staying in the house breeds a sort of insanity always. (*Winter* 57)

Equally important, in *Walden* there is a sentence, which most probably is quoted from *The Analects of Confucius*, that compares the wind to virtues :

“The virtues of a superior man are like the wind ; the virtues of a common man are like the grass ; the grass, when the wind passes over it, bends.” (*Walden* 172 ; Yoshida 269)

The original Chinese poem does not contain the word “wind” but merely conveys the philosophical idea. That Thoreau deliberately cites this poem in *Walden*, with the word “wind” as a simile, may suggest his deep thought about the significance of the wind.

V . The Significance of the Wind

Thus, we have seen various examples which may suggest that Thoreau regarded the wind as something more than a mere natural phenomenon. Furthermore, of great interest, the following excerpt from his *Journal* for September 12, 1851 manifests that the wind conveys “a message” to him “from heaven” :

At the entrance to the Deep Cut, I heard the telegraph-wire vibrating like an aeolian harp. It

reminded me suddenly, — reservedly, with a beautiful paucity of communication, even silently, such was its effect on my thoughts, — it reminded me, I say, with a certain pathetic moderation, of what finer and deeper strings I was susceptible, which grandly set all argument and dispute aside, a triumphant though transient exhibition of the truth. It told me by the faintest imaginable strain, it told me by the finest strain that a human ear can hear, yet conclusively and past all refutation, that there were higher, infinitely higher plains of life which it behooved me never to forget. As I was entering the Deep Cut, the wind, which was conveying a message to me from heaven, dropped it on the wire of the telegraph which it vibrated as it past. I instantly sat down on a stone at the foot of the telegraph-pole, and attended to the communication. It merely said: “Bear in mind, Child, and never for an instant forget, that there are higher planes, infinitely higher planes, of life than this thou art now travelling on. Know that the goal is distant, and is upward, and is worthy all your life’s efforts to attain to.” And then it ceased, and though I sat some minutes longer I heard nothing more. (II 496-97)

Again, in his *Journal* for January 9, 1853, we find a similar account. When telegraph wires were laid all over Concord, Thoreau was delighted with the sound the wind made when it blew over them, expressing it as “memorable strains” or “the clearest silver, lyrelike tones,” and called it the “telegraph harp” (III 219) :

The telegraph harp again. Always the same unrememberable revelation it is to me. ... I never hear it without thinking of Greece. How the Greeks harped upon the words immortal, ambrosial! They are what it says. It stings my ear with everlasting truth. It allies Concord to Athens, and both to Elysium. It always intoxicates me, makes me sane, reverse my views of things. ... When the zephyr, or west wind, sweeps this wire, I rise to the height of my being. A period — a semicolon, at least — is put to my previous and habitual ways of viewing things. This wire is my redeemer. It always brings a special and a general message to me from the Highest To-day I hear this immortal melody, while the west wind is blowing balmily on my cheek, and methinks a roseate sunset is preparing. (IV 458-59)

The idea that the wind conveys a message is also found in one of Wordsworth’s poems. In the fifth line of “Book First” in *The Prelude*, the poet calls to the breeze: “O welcome messenger! O welcome friend!” describing it as “the sweet breath of heaven” (Wordsworth 211, 212). Garber interprets Wordsworth’s “breeze” as “an emissary, a messenger, a wind with a mission” (Garber 39). Even though Wordsworth and Thoreau shared the same idea of the wind being a divine messenger, a crucial difference between them is that in the latter’s case a divine message in the wind was received through a telegraph wire, a modern device which was an invention of industry. Thoreau exhibited in his writings directly-opposed opinions on industrial inventions, but concerning the telegraph wire he showed only favorable ones. The important point is that through this modern device of a telegraph wire Thoreau reified the image of a divine message in the wind.

Judging from the two block quotations above, the idea of the wind conveying a divine message

could be related to the idea of the Holy Spirit or “Pneuma” discussed earlier. Thoreau, who was well versed in Greek, must have known that the Greek word “pneuma” and the Hebrew word “ruah” both mean “the wind” and “breath.” If so, and if “breath” is the breath of God, the idea that God’s wisdom is conveyed on the wind is quite understandable. Thoreau’s statement in his *Journal* for June 30, 1840 seems to impart the same idea: “The truth shall prevail and falsehood discover itself as long as the wind blows on the hills” (I 156). On the same day, expressing “the breeze” as “God’s breath,” he entered: “So am I blown by God’s breath, so flutter and flap, and fill gently out with the breeze” (I 155).

Moreover, it seems that Thoreau sometimes uses the words “genius” and “light” to signify something equivalent to “the Holy Spirit” or “Pneuma.” For example, he wrote in his *Journal* for December 27, 1858: “Show me a man who consults his genius, and you have shown me a man who cannot be advised” (XI 379). Also, in “Life Without Principle” [“LWP”]: “Knowledge does not come to us by details, but in flashes of light from heaven” (“LWP” 821). What “genius” and “light” mean in these excerpts is significantly different from their core meanings. Apparently, they represent something more like “the Counselor,” “the Spirit of Truth,” or “the Paraclete” in the New Testament (John 14: 16-17).

VI. Conclusion

Observing March winds, Thoreau remarked: “These March winds... fill the world with life and bustle” (III 341). Along with the word “life” in this extract, the following words in the New Testament cited earlier are significant: “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3: 8). Referring to this quotation, Onodera states:

Thus, the Spirit is the most definite, yet omnipresent existence in the universe, the most unrestricted and free, with the deepest significance. At the same time it is the infinite life, wisdom, and energy that exists between heaven and earth. (Onodera 111, tr. Ono)

Truly, “the wind” signifies “the Spirit” explicated in this excerpt. Thoreau’s remarks about the “telegraph harp” cited earlier also convey the same idea. The wind is indeed God’s breath, and on this account the wind communicates God’s wisdom or truth, giving energy to all living things. To interpret “the wind” in this light, we can understand why Thoreau perceived special significance in “the wind.”

As Confucius said: “If I learned truth in the morning, I could die in the evening,” so Thoreau wrote in *Walden*: “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth” (*Walden* 330). This statement manifests how diligently Thoreau pursued the truth.

Lastly, the following extract from his poem titled “Nature” is notable, for it reveals his aspiration to be a zephyr more than anything else in the sky, universe, or heaven:

O nature I do not aspire
To be the highest in thy quire,
To be a meteor in the sky
Or comet that may range on high,
Only a zephyr that may blow

Among the reeds by the river low.
 Give me thy most privy place
 Where to run my airy race.
 ... (Bode 216)

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