

## Chapter One



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 everywhere.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

I make my dwelling in the heart of all: from me stem memory, wisdom, the dispelling of doubt.

—Bhagavad-Gita, 15.15<sup>1</sup>

The argument or, better, the persuasive thrust of both texts throughout their eighteen units is that the Maker, Creator-Destroyer, Final Cause, First Mover, omnipotent and omniscient God, by whatever name or circumlocution, is “really real,” as Alfred North Whitehead put it, and should be striven toward. This thrust or telos of the two books, obscured by differences of society and culture, language and idiom, and historical context—and also by the agnostic bent of most Thoreau critics—is nonetheless ubiquitous and forceful.

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1. Uncredited passages from the Gita are my own translations. For *Walden I* have used Rossi 1992 throughout; see also the references in this volume.

Both poets arise in a context of competing religions or schools of thought, many of which treat of issues widely held to be religious in the colloquial sense of grappling with or at least touching extensively on the supernatural, the soul, creation and destruction, infinity, death, and ultimate ethical and metaphysical questions. The Gita, on the one hand, harks back to the Vedas, particularly the (late Vedic) Upanishads, the logic and systematizing of the Sāṃkhya School and its critique of the limitations of (the study of) the Vedas (2.42, 46), and, finally, popular and early Indo-European and even non-Indo-European religious beliefs and rituals (Zimmer 1969, 379–400). The even more eclectic and syncretic Thoreau, on the other hand, includes, among other things, several Hinduisms, several Chinese poets and thinkers, Islamic mystics, the Old Testament (notably the prophetic books), Greek and Roman “paganism,” Christianity in its Calvinist and, within that, Puritan, Unitarian, and Transcendentalist versions (notably drawing on the Matthew Gospel and the Pauline Epistles), *and* the religions of “simpler nations” (7); within all this stands an absolute respect for the person and the story of Jesus Christ, who is never criticized, mocked, or parodied but, on the contrary, repeatedly set up as an ultimate standard for courage and integrity—as in the sentences outside *Walden* where John Brown is compared to him (see chapter 9 in this volume). The 287 “uses” of the Bible (Long 1979), while partly a rhetorical device to make *Walden* more authoritative, also reflect deeply held personal beliefs. When Thoreau objects to “ministers who spoke of God as if they enjoyed a monopoly of the subject” (103), he means that there is a God and that he is claiming his share in interpretation. As many have noted, Thoreau’s masterfully multivalent and poetic prose enables him to undercut and deconstruct the icons and clichés of Christianity while at the same time affirming many of its basic values through an invigorating reformulation. As West points out pithily, speaking of Thoreau’s punning

use of Matthew’s “men labor under a mistake”<sup>2</sup> (3): “His quotation wrests words from their eschatological context, giving Christ’s advice a worldly twist, yet it invokes Christ’s authority” (West 2000, 436), and later : “In one breath Thoreau coolly distances himself from hellfire Christianity yet also suggests that its sanctions are ignored at their peril by the lukewarm and those committed to such interpretations of scriptural texts” (437). Or as Cavell puts it extravagantly, “He acknowledges his relation to the Christian vision by overturning it, ‘revising’ it. It is his way of continuing it” (1981, 111)—“extravagantly” because Thoreau hardly “overturns” Christianity. Thoreau uses the word “god” or “God” thirty-seven times in *Walden*, sometimes as part of a popular idiom, sometimes with strongly religious meaning: “my hat and shoes, are fit to worship God in” (15), “trees which the Most High God has created lofty and umbrageous” (53), “I cannot come nearer to God and Heaven” (130), “Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open” (147), “the hint which God gives them” (210), and so forth.<sup>3</sup>

The God of both poets is characterized by infinitudes (see also the section “The Infinitudes” in chapter 7). First

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2. The basis of this pun, skipped by West, is the Latin verbs *labor, laborare*, “work,” and *labor, labi*, “to slip, fall” (alluding to the Fall of Man).

3. The often baffling scholarly neglect of the role of Christianity in Thoreau—that he was a thoroughly anti-Christian iconoclast, “no Puritan,” and so forth—owes much to the position of the authoritative Harding (1965) and earlier Thoreauvians. The neglect is instanced by Richardson’s otherwise generally superb book on Thoreau’s “life of the mind,” which rarely if ever mentions Christ, Christianity, or St. Paul! I would say, on the contrary, that Thoreau’s mind was to a significant degree the scene of a lifelong struggle with ideas in the Bible; as Leo Tolstoy said of himself, “God and I are two she-bears in the same cave.” Notable exceptions to the neglect of Christianity include Boudreau, Bush, Cavell, and of course Long (1979) and the authors of the three doctoral theses on which he drew. James Duban (1987) made a valuable contribution to the issue of the Christian component in Thoreau’s religious outlook by defining its “liberal Christian context” and the key role in Thoreau of relating *conscience*, “the divine spark of divinity in man,” to the elevation of *consciousness*.

among these is the variety of incarnations that, though infinite, never exhaust God: “All states of being . . . proceed from me but I am not in them, they are in me” (7.12, Zaehner); “Higher than me there is nothing whatever: on me this universe is strung like clustered pearls on a thread” (7.7, Zaehner). God creates these infinite manifestations tirelessly: “If I were not to do my work, these worlds would fall in ruin” (3.24, Zaehner). *Walden* and other writings by Thoreau, for their part, not infrequently suggest a totalizing creative power, as in, “Nearest to all things is that power which fashions their being. *Next* to us the grandest laws are continually being executed. *Next* to us is not the workman whom we have hired, with whom we love so well to talk, but the workman whose work we are” (90).<sup>4</sup>

Yet the great creator and maker, typically benign, is also the great destroyer and annihilator, and a cruel one at that: Thoreau at one point cites the long, curved bill of the heron, apt for getting in at the anus of the turtle. The Gita poet sings of Krishna as birth, rebirth, and procreation but also in song eleven as a devouring maw: “I am wrecker of the world’s destruction resolved to swallow up the worlds” (11.32, Zaehner), “I am death that snatches all away, and the origin of creatures yet to be” (10.32, Zaehner). Thoreau speaks of or alludes to the total destruction of death, including the death of the planet (169), while also voicing optimism, even enthusiasm and joy, about life and growth: “Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth!” (139) he exclaims, citing Ecclesiastes. Or earlier: “. . . the same thought is welling up to its surface that was then: it is the same liquid joy and happiness to itself and its Maker, ay, and it *may* be to me” (130). Both poets, then, are acutely conscious of creation and eternity, which they balance with an equally acute orientation to death, destruction,

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4. The Thoreauvian ambiguity involves the workman as creator, but, also, because the *w* is in minuscule, the workman is within ourselves.

and oblivion. This consciousness and its references is the second infinitude.

The Creator-Destroyer as thus conceptualized is suffused with mystery. All the elements of experience—from the most trivial to the eternal questions raised by dawn over Walden or the thousand suns of Krishna’s brilliance—have yet beyond them a mysterious truth. It can be intuited in moments of revelation and blinding illumination, but it cannot be known in an ordinary or rational sense. The divine that inheres in every individual makes possible a highly emotional if partial intuition of the cosmic divine of which the individual is a small but infinitely significant part.

One such mystery of the two works: their divine power is both feminine and masculine—that is, androgynous. In the Gita this is revealed when Krishna describes himself as both the womb of Brahman and the fertilizing seed. Together they generate the world. Or again, “I am the father of this world, mother, ordainer, grandsire” (10.7–8 or 9.17). Seven ultimate values as listed are all grammatically feminine and labeled as such: fame, fortune, speech, memory, intelligence, resolve, patience (10.34). In one of Arjuna’s pasts he chose a female role (in the fourth book of the Mahābhārata). The androgyny that underlies the Gita is masked by an idiom and an ideology that are male-dominated, patriarchal, and warrior-oriented.

The androgynous and feminine stratum in Thoreau is more complex and widely exfoliating, ranging from the mainly female gender of Walden Pond to the entirely female gender of Nature herself (referred to as “she” and “her”), and to the numerous elements of female symbolism throughout *Walden* and his other works: the female spirits that haunt the Walden woods, the mother cats, partridges, and other wildlife, the mortally wounded moose cow with her calf that—especially the mingling of blood and milk—so shocked him in the forests of Maine (Thoreau 1988, 156). A pertinent passage runs as follows: “Many of the phenomena

of Winter are suggestive of an inexpressible tenderness and fragile delicacy. We are accustomed to hear this king described as a rude and boisterous tyrant; but with the gentleness of a lover he adorns the tresses of Summer” (206). Elsewhere, as we note in chapter 4, Thoreau speaks of an “old settler” and a “ruddy and lusty old dame,” paired mythological images of creation and memory with whom he loves to commune on “long winter evenings” (93). In *A Week*, moreover, we read, “A Hindoo sage said, ‘As a dancer, having exhibited herself to the spectator, desists from the dance, so does Nature desist, having manifested herself to soul—. And elsewhere: “Nothing, in my opinion, is more gentle than Nature; once aware of having been seen, she does not again expose herself to the gaze of soul” (*Journal*, vol. 1, 382–83).<sup>5</sup> Aside from the gender issue, this passage reflects an Emersonian view of nature as benign, from which Thoreau distances himself sharply at other points in *Walden* (90) and, even more so, in *Cape Cod*. The androgynous or feminine element, in any case, precisely because of its partial covertness and mysteriousness, binds the Gita and *Walden* in a peculiarly essential way.

That brings us to the final infinitudes. Both poets variously articulate or allude to a supernatural power that is present constantly and infinitely potent. In the Gita this is sung in many ways, ranging from the one primal man to the material cosmos to the total creative power, magical and uncanny, that bridges between them, to the Brahman as the One, to Lord Krishna who includes all of the foregoing: he is the knower of the field in every field (13.2, Zaehner). These manifold claims and forms, which are dealt with seriatim, climax or at least become focused at many

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5. As Hodder (2001) points out, this passage is a conflation of two in the *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā* (four, actually: XLII, LIX, LXI, and LXV; see Larson 1969, 273); the spectator is primal man, *purusha*, who is watching feminine matter, *prakṛti*, the dancer.

points in the idea of the total loss of self absorbed in the One of Krishna, as in this stanza:

Know that through lucid knowledge  
 one sees in all creatures  
 a single, unchanging existence,  
 undivided within its divisions. (18.20, Miller)

Or, in the rendering by Charles Wilkins that Thoreau read in 1845–1847: “That Gnan, or wisdom, by which one principle alone is seen prevalent in all nature, incorruptible and infinite in all things finite, is of the Satwa-Goon” ([1785] 1959, 127).

*Walden* and other works by Thoreau, on their side, frequently speak of or at least suggest a single totalizing and creative power. Most of the things he says about meditation, inspiration, ecstasy, and serenity imply the intense reality of the sort of power, or God, at issue here. “In prosperity I remember God, . . . in adversity I remember my own elevations, and only hope to see God again” (*Journal*, vol. 1, 368). “I am a restful kernel in the magazine of the universe” (*Journal*, 13 August 1838). Other references in *Walden* include “the laboratory of the Artist” (204), “The Maker of this earth” (205), “Even he has entered into the joy of his Lord” (210, alluding to Matthew 25.21, 23), and “The Builder of the universe” (220). There is a marked increase in Mattheian references toward the end of *Walden* (Preuninger 2004).

The One of the Gita and Thoreau is, however, qualified in two fascinating ways. “The Lord is in the heart of all contingent beings,” as we have seen earlier, “twirling them hither and thither by his uncanny power (*māyā*) like puppets on a machine (*yantra*)” (18.61).<sup>6</sup> Thoreau, in addition,

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6. The reading of this as a puppet theater originated with the great Indian commentator Śaṅkara (Minor 1982, 490); a *yantra*, support or apparatus, from the root *yam-*.

adumbrates his omnipotent maker with the uncanny—the loon’s wiliness, his own interplay with a rainbow, and similar well-known instances. In another kind of qualification, however, Thoreau can undercut his sometimes rhetorical or formulaic divinity with delightfully unpredictable caveats, as in the doubled citation of Confucius: “‘How vast and profound is the influence of the subtle powers of Heaven and Earth!’ . . .” but then, “It is an ocean of subtle intelligences . . . they environ us on all sides” (90–91). Like many Indic texts, Thoreau himself entertains a complex supernatural where a transcendent God is counterpointed by a plurality of spirits, intelligences, demons, and the like.<sup>7</sup>

The God of these poets is not only omnipresent and omnipotent but both immanent and transcendent. Their God is immanent, on the one hand, because within all things and emerging through them in divine power. To repeat: “I am the Self established in the heart of all contingent beings” (10.20, Zaehner). The lengthy string of figurative expressions cited in the seventh song of the Gita—“I am the flavor of water”—all unambiguously imply God’s immanence. God is transcendent, on the other hand, because superordinate to all in the realms of the spirit and of the material world. Arjuna: “You are the primal God, the primal person. You of the universe are the last prop and resting place, you are the knower and what is known, the highest home, O you whose forms are infinite, by you the whole universe was spun” (11.38, Zaehner). As for the scholarly concerns in both West and East (e.g., Sharma 1986) over the “fact” that immanence and transcendence contradict each other, in terms of one kind of strict logic, both poets would seem to imply that this is (a weak) instance of the divinity’s more general power to unite the contraries, opposites, and antinomies that underlie

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7. Thoreau’s pluralism, avoidance of conventional closure, and advocacy of a middle way owe something to Confucius and Mencius; for general studies of this neglected influence, see Cady (1961) and Hongbo (1993).



human delusion. Both poets would seem to imply, moreover, that a general position, if it is truthful, will include some contradiction (Bhattacharya 1965).<sup>8</sup> When it comes to the differences between deism, monism, monotheism, dualism, theism, atheism, pantheism, henotheism, and all the rest, neither poet seems preoccupied with theological or even logical consistency in the overall context of the scriptural book (Olivelle 1964, 527–28), as contrasted with a concern for maximizing the truthfulness that inheres in a line or a sentence, a stanza or a paragraph. It can, in any case, be argued with equal logic that immanence and transcendence do *not* contradict each other.

Let me integrate, reiterate, and embellish the aforementioned points by an overview that is admittedly extravagant in Thoreau's sense. The two scriptures advocate a God, be it Krishna or Nature, seen monotheistically in a variously pantheistic, pluralistic, or henotheistic context. This God is immanent in and also transcends both the microcosmic and macrocosmic universes of matter and spirit, universes that are interconnected and analogous to each other in infinite ways. Individual entities are sparks of the divine One, but even in their totality they do not constitute Krishna or Nature, any more than flying sparks constitute the fire from which they come: there is always the unmanifest beyond. Intimations of an all-encompassing God are found in the Gita's song eleven, in particular, but God is humanly immediate and concretized in the form of Arjuna's charioteer. God is likewise realized in Thoreau's all-encompassing Nature, but in a double, Transcendentalist sense: first, his Nature is the "non-I" of many Indic writings (and of Emerson), but, second, she is also the more familiar fauna, geography, human

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8. While this sort of idea is often attributed to Godel (for formal systems), it was also enunciated by Ortega y Gasset and indeed others before either of them. Tolerance of blatant contradictions is also a hallmark of the Koran, and of both Testaments, of course.

character, and so forth. Nature is concretized in Walden Pond. For both poets God is symbolized androgynously: Walden Pond is at times masculine, even with a beard, but is more often feminine, as when her beauty as a woman is extolled. God, essentially mysterious, is both creative and destructive, benign and cruel, albeit primarily the former in both cases, and is present everywhere as the supreme power, knower, and actor. God can be reached through the *yogas* (“disciplines”) of action and engagement, in the quest for knowledge and insight, and, perhaps most powerfully, through faith and love—all three liberate one from delusion and ignorance (see chapter 8, “Three Ways to God”). Both poets, after all their subtleties and complex persuasiveness, advocate an arational, highly emotional, at times ecstatic love and adoration of God. For neither, in contrast, is ethical perfection central. Some of the aforementioned components had come to Thoreau from Homer and the Bible, of course, but his overall meaning of a final cause or mover was singularly modeled on the Gita—one reason he so praised its “stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy.”

Let me conclude with a tropological take. Krishna defines himself by a long string of equations, mainly synecdoches: “I am the self abiding in the heart of all creatures . . . the song in sacred lore . . . the ocean of lakes . . . the procreative god of love . . . the vowel *a* of the syllabary . . . death the destroyer of all . . . the dice game of gamblers . . . the silence of mysteries” (10.20–38, Miller). Although not listed that explicitly or all at once, Nature is defined and essentialized in a similar way seriatim throughout *Walden*, be it the autumnal tints of hardwoods, or the howl of a loon, or the eyes and what’s behind them of an owl or a partridge, the grandeur of the Gita, or the inherent wildness of *Hamlet* or the *Iliad* (see “Walking”; in 2002, 166), or the flavor, purity, and many colors of Walden Pond. Beyond these felicitous examples, everything in the world has a visible and knowable part or aspect, intense and most meaningful, that

symbolizes, emblemizes, and gives us intimations of the worlds without and within ourselves that are but a particle of God, or as put more precisely in the last stanza of the Gita’s divine tenth song:

I support this entire universe constantly  
with a single fraction of Myself. (10.42, Sargeant)

Or, following Wilkins: “I planted this whole universe with a single portion and stood still” ([1785] 1959, 89).

To conclude, “God” in the Gita and *Walden* never means one simple thing. The idea of God just adumbrated should be seen as one of many or at least several that are involved. To limit ourselves to *Walden*, another equally powerful idea involves the devoted search for the truth about oneself and the world around us: indeed, Truth as Thoreau’s God has been cogently argued (Bush 1985). Also contributory were ideas in the Rig Veda (O’Flaherty 1981). A third idea is that propounded by Jesus Christ in the synoptic Gospels, especially the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, which Thoreau “uses” dozens of times (Long 1979). There are many other such ideas of God for a syncretic and polymath believer such as Thoreau, for whom “God” is best seen semiotically as a Wittgensteinian family of meanings expressed in hundreds of intensely meaningful (for Thoreau) words and sentences, all of which, despite their superficial disparity, allude to an awesome supernatural power of some sort.